

AJ MERLIN

CAMP  
FRIENDS  
ARE  
FOREVER  
FRIENDS

DEAD OF  
SUMMER

# DEAD OF SUMMER

A J MERLIN



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Dead of Summer

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***The first rule of Camp Crestview is to always smile!***

*No matter who's chasing you with an ax.*



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# CHAPTER ONE



“It’s going to be different this year.” I watch lazily as Kinsley takes a long draw of the vape she never goes anywhere without, then take it when she offers it to me. Her lazy smile is enough for me to know it isn’t some of her low-key shit, and I’m a little more careful than usual as I suck in a pull from the container.

“How’s that?” I ask, drawing one knee up to my chest and toss it back her way. “You going to fulfill your spiciest, romantic dreams with Liza this year?” Liza, the gorgeous camp nurse who has never, not once, given my friend more than a raging crush on her by just *breathing* and looking pretty.

Kins’ smile widens. “Absolutely. And we’re going to get you some summer love too. How’s that sound?” Her tolerance is much higher than mine, and she breathes in from the vape one more time before stuffing it in the pocket of her camp-issued shorts. That, plus the bright purple t-shirt with its gaudy white letters printed on the front, proclaim her and I both as camp counselors for Camp Crestview.

I’ve always thought our outfits feel too eighties. I’m *sure* some parents think so, and we’re lucky the kids are too young to remember any campy summer movies from that time period. Otherwise, they’d do worse than turn a deaf ear to our directions or kick us in the shins.

“Summer love?” I snort. “What are we, in some cheesy romance movie? Will we both fall in love and go home, only to think we’ll never see our new loves again?”

“Yep.” Kinsley gets to her feet, pulling her hair back into a high ponytail before dragging me up off the floor of the counselor building.

We're definitely not supposed to be smoking anywhere on camp grounds, but this is the safest place to do it. Here, at least, the kids know they can't enter, so we're left alone, for the most part. And we're certainly not the only ones who've brought what our boss would label 'contraband' to camp. "And then that's when act two starts, and our summer flings show up at our high school."

"Shame we aren't in high school anymore," I remark offhandedly. "Do we need to, I don't know"—I shoulder the door open, and when she steps out behind me to let it close, I hear it click locked once more—"form a gang? With matching jackets?"

A voice calls out to both of us, prompting us to glance up toward the drop off area. It's packed with parents giving their kids a last hug, or trying to shoo them away from the car so their mom or dad can leave and have a ten day break from their little gremlins.

Working as a camp counselor has been eye-opening when it comes to kids.

Namely, how much I don't want any of my own.

A woman with dark red hair and a heavily made-up face smiles at both of us as she waves fervently from across the gravel parking lot. Mrs. Stern, in her too-fancy outfit and her staggeringly expensive car, has made an effort to say hi to us for the past three years, ever since Kinsley and I took this job for some extra money in the summer.

"Hi Mrs. Stern!" Kinsley yells back, cupping her hands over her mouth. "We'll take care of Jonah!" The twelve-year-old in question makes a face where his mother can't see, and hoists his duffel bag higher over his shoulder. He might like camp, but he's never a fan of the scenes his mother likes to make. I'm pretty sure he comes here to get a break from *her*.

"I was wondering if the usual suspects were going to show up," I mutter, eyeing another kid that tried pushing me into the lake last year. He grins at me, showing off a missing front tooth. I fight the urge to flip him off, and instead just wave and motion that I'm watching him.

He only laughs and runs off with his friends toward whatever cabin they've been assigned.

"You heard about Kevin, right?" Kinsley's voice dips lower, so that no one can hear us, and we both watch as Mrs. Stern wrangles Jonah to give him one last hug before she leaves. Half of the reason the drop off point is

so full is because she won't *leave* and her Escalade is blocking more than three other cars combined.

But like hell are we going to say anything like that to her. She's probably rich enough to ruin our lives if she wanted to.

"No?" My brows rise and I look at her, suddenly interested. Whatever love she has for gossip cannot be matched by my obsession with it. "Don't leave me like this. I'll die—"

"He has the little c," Kinsley informs me soberly, leaving me to wonder, for a moment, what the *little c* is.

The big C is cancer, right? So the little c is—

"Kevin Roy has *Chlamydia*!?" Two nearby campers turn to look at us, and both of us turn beaming smiles on the girls until they go away.

"Say it louder." She lifts a brow. "I don't think Mrs. Stern heard you." I only grimace as Jonah Stern runs past me, and we give his mother one last wave before she finally drives away.

It's our turn to leave as well, since we aren't responsible for drop offs. We're just supposed to be walking around, offering the kids any help if they need it. With sixty of them and only ten of us, today is one of the worst in terms of how hectic camp will be for these next ten days. At least until pickup, anyway.

"So. Summer love. I have a target."

"Liza," I fill in as we walk, nodding. A few kids from last year greet us, and we put on our happy, kid-appropriate faces as we ask them how their summers have been going before once again ending up on our own. The camp is larger than the first I worked at, when I was barely out of high school four years ago. And it's a bit of a hike to the pool that's not yet open for this round of campers. "Any specific plans?"

"But *more importantly*, and why I bring up Kevin, is because I have graciously provided you a target as well."

I blink at this information, eyes narrowing in thought. "Can I...pass?"

"No."

"Then I *thank you*, great friend." I give her a mocking bow before adding, "Who, exactly? No matter how many times you steal my blankets or make me nachos, I'm not into women. And I'll just die alone before I step foot near Alec or Daniel." Especially Daniel, though that part goes without saying.

“I’m not that bad of a friend.” She sounds confident enough to make me nervous, and I frown her way as we check to ensure no one opened the deck house door and slipped into the pool area on drop off day. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time, and I don’t feel like playing CPR simulator again this year for a child who’s inevitably going to cough dirty, chlorinated water into my mouth. “Like I was saying about absentee-Kevin, we got a replacement. A replacement who, I think, makes a viable new target for your summer love quest.”

“You mean candidate, right?”

“Sure,” Kinsley shrugs. “Feels kind of casual when you say that instead of target. Like you’re not really *in it to win it*, you know? But you call him whatever you want.”

“Does he have a name I can call him? You’ve managed to avoid that so far.”

“Don’t know it.” She changes direction from where I’d expected we were heading, and instead of taking us to the beach or the dock, leads us into the middle of the camp. It’s where Otter Hall stands like a fortress for dinners, activities, and hot chocolate to take out to the big bonfire. “Liza asked if I’d show him around,” she tells me, sounding carefully casual.

“So you accepted, to get on her good side. Right, this isn’t a surprise,” I agree, not sure where this is going.

Until I do.

“Oh no, you are *not* pawning off Mr. New on me. Especially without even giving me a *name*. No way, Kins. I have enough shit to do without holding the hand of some eighteen-year-old who’s never seen a summer camp before.” My words grow more and more desperate with every stride she takes, and I can *feel* the weed swirling through my veins as it hits me with too much force, knocking away most of my arguments for why I don’t want to do this.

“I am so pawning him off on you.” She opens one of the large doors and ushers me inside Otter Hall, her hand on the small of my back before coming in after me. “And Liza is going to be incredibly grateful. Really appreciate this favor you’re doing for me, Summer.”

My face contorts into a grimace, and my voice is too loud when I say, “So, was all of your ‘summer love’ talk bullshit? Were you just trying to get me on board with doing you a favor?”

Kinsley blinks innocently, smoothing her hand through her dark brown ponytail. “No? Well, not entirely. *I* plan to make Liza my summer love conquest.”

“Wow.” I can barely muster more than an eye roll. “Fuck me if *I* want some summer love, right?”

“Never know.” My best friend lifts one shoulder, then drops it. “Maybe he’s so your type that you’ll fall in love, get married, and join Liza and me on our sailboat.”

“That’s stupid.”

“That’s *summer love*,” Kinsley taunts, and opens her mouth again before pausing, confusion and a touch of surprise on her features. Then she murmurs a very soft, “*Oh*,” and I’m stuck staring at her, more confused than anything.

“Summer love, huh?” The smooth, soft voice from behind me nearly catapults me into outer space, and I whirl around to see what might be one of the most gorgeous humans any God has ever seen fit to put on this earth.

That, or I’m higher than I should be and it’s the weed yapping poetically in my brain.

Maybe both, now that I really look at him.

His dark golden-blond, almost brown hair is pushed back from his face and tousled, like he runs his fingers through it a little more than necessary. It’s longer than most guys keep their hair, the soft curls nearly reaching his shoulders. But it only serves to draw attention to his gorgeous high cheekbones, his full lips, and the fact I’m half sure he uses cherry chapstick on his full lips.

Okay, that part definitely is the weed.

As if he knows what I’m thinking, his lips draw up in a half smile, causing his bright honey-brown eyes to glitter with amusement. “Sorry. Was I, uh, interrupting?” He reaches up to run his long fingers through his hair, and for the first time I realize he’s dressed just like us, but with shorts that reach his knees instead of mid-thigh. He’s certainly not fresh out of high school like I’d expected. Instead, I’d peg him at around twenty-three like I am, if not a little older.

Suddenly, I’d rather these uniforms *be* more like the ‘80s. Short-shorts on guys and all.

“You were not interrupting at all,” Kins assures him, eyes never leaving his face. If she wasn’t two thousand percent into women with no

compromise, I'd say she was into him. But when she glances at me like her new plan is coming into focus, I realize even he can't top the allure of Camp-nurse Liza. "This is Summer." She shoves me forward, and I'm pretty sure she's trying to push me into the new counselor. "She's going to show you around."

"She's—" I break off when I trip, nearly falling into him thanks to the languid relaxation still swirling through my bloodstream. His hands come up, fingers outstretched like he's prepared to catch me, and I pat myself on the back when I don't make an idiot of myself and actually fall into him.

I'd never live that down.

"She's right," I mutter, sweeping my red-brown hair over my shoulder from where it's become disheveled and in the way. "I'm going to show you around. What's your name?" Knowing I either have to ask him now—maybe a little rudely—or call him 'new counselor' until he deigns to tell me himself.

"Kayde." He reaches out a hand for mine, and it takes me a whole three seconds to realize he's waiting for me to shake it.

When I do, his grip is warm, though not damp from sweat. His fingers curl around mine, and his eyes hold my gaze with polite, warm interest. "Kayde Lane."

"I'm Summer," I reply, completely unaffected now that my appreciation for his looks is waning. "Welcome to Camp Crestview. Please don't let any of the kids eat you, because that would be a lot of cleanup for me."

## CHAPTER TWO



**H**e's not my type.

For one thing, the golden retriever type isn't for me. Friendliness oozes out of Kayde's pores as I scuff my feet in the dirt of the well-worn trail that circles around Otter Hall to take us wherever we need to go. Today, that means everywhere. According to Kayde, he'd been brought directly to Otter Hall by Liza and left there until we'd come along to show him around.

It's just a shame I hadn't known about the plan until it was too late. I know why; Kinsley knows me well enough to guess I would've weaseled out of being his tour guide. But with no warning, I'm stuck scraping dirt along the ground and trying not to look too put out by this development.

I'm supposed to have half of the afternoon to myself while the campers in my cabin move in. I'm lucky this year, with kids like Melody Carr bunking under my supervision. She's never caused trouble any of the three times she's been here in years past, and I know for a fact she'll keep the other girls from committing murder or bullying the boys too badly.

Today was supposed to be easy.

Though if I'm being honest with myself, part of my attitude is from the marijuana in my veins that is still making me sluggish and relaxed. I'm jumpy, worried that Kayde is going to realize that I'm high and report me or give me some kind of talking to.

But God, he really is just *so friendly*. Every time a kid comes by, he stops to say hello, and whenever we find another counselor, he wants to introduce himself and be social as hell. For me—who's never had an extra

social bone in her body and barely has enough to get through the day here—he seems to be a fountain of wealth in that area.

I watch him from narrowed eyes as he talks to Darcy Fleming, a female counselor who held Kinsley's attention for a whole two days last year before Darcy revealed her love of raw steak, mountain climbing, and very well-endowed men. I'd never seen Kins so turned off so quickly. Now, however, I can see her interest in Kayde growing by the second. As I watch, she twists her fingers in front of her shorts and steps a little closer to him, until she's in his personal space and breaking all the laws of social acceptability.

*I wonder what he smells like.*

The thought is inappropriate at best. I chase it away as quickly as I can, blinking away the notion to lean in and see if he's wearing cologne. It's none of my business, for one. I like boundaries, secondly. And the third thing?

He's really, absolutely, not my type.

It's a moment before I realize Darcy is walking away. When I catch Kayde's eyes, I can barely hold his gaze, even though he's looking at me like there's nothing amiss. There's no suspicion in his gaze. No question, even. He really does remind me of a puppy, and it couldn't be more of a turnoff to me.

If I'm going to get my *summer love* on with anyone, it's going to be someone who calls me out on my stupid looks. Or, better yet, someone who wouldn't mind pinning me to one of the trees in the camp and not letting me go until my lips are swollen and my eyes are permanently unfocused.

Obviously, that's not Kayde. Or anyone else here, for that matter.

His smile widens, just a touch, and begrudgingly I have to appreciate his high cheekbones, his dark golden hair, and the scruff that adorns his features. He's *gorgeous*, if nothing else. Even I can't deny that.

"I was falling asleep," I admit with a yawn, not trying to sound particularly overly-friendly. "Sorry."

"Must be all that marijuana in your system, hmm?" Kayde all but purrs, his honey-brown eyes dancing. When all I can do is look at him, the smile on his face pulls even wider. "Sorry, uh, was it a secret? The fact you're high? No offense, Summer, but..." He steps closer with a glance around us, and I notice belatedly that we aren't exactly alone. Kayde's voice lowers when he speaks again, and it's close to what I might call *sultry* when he

says, “It’s so obvious. Even if I couldn’t smell it on you when I’m close to you like this. You’re not exactly subtle.”

“I am too.” The words are out before I can stop them, and I pull away from him with my fingers clenched against my palms. “Wait, I mean—I’m not high. I don’t—”

“If you say so.” He slides away from me, like he’s being polite, and that blinding smile is back on his face, no trace of anything sinister under it. “I won’t tell, okay? Why would I?”

I don’t know. Because I know nothing about him, really. But for all I know, he’s a spy for our boss sent to make sure the counselors Mr. Fink hired are doing their jobs and not slacking off in the staff cabin getting high.

Which is exactly what we do when we don’t have any responsibilities or children to put on leashes.

“Maybe you’re a spy.” Yet again, I can’t keep the words in my mouth, and I wish I could just shove my foot through my lips instead. At least then I wouldn’t be able to say any more ridiculous shit. “That came out wrong. I just meant...” I scuff my feet in the dirt and shake my head. “Never mind. That’s the lake, in case it was unclear in any way.” I flick my fingers toward the beach, and then again at the dock that reaches out over the water.

“Is that an island?” Kayde leans down, squinting to see better through the trees. “In the lake?”

“Yeah. It’s off limits to campers, though. Not that they don’t try, and I’m expecting it from a couple of the cabins this year. Which cabin is your responsibility?” I figure I might as well warn him now, in case he’s got one of the more rebellious groups.

“Uh...” He’s still looking at the island through the trees, but straightens at last to say, “Coyote. That’s mine.”

“You’re—” I start to tell him that he’s in trouble. I know which kids are there only because they’re one of the worst groups possible, and we’d fought with Mr. Fink about splitting them up before they could wreak havoc or set the camp on fire.

It would be polite to tell him who to look out for.

“I’m sure you’re fine,” I say instead, shrugging my shoulders noncommittally. No one warned me my first year. Besides, they won’t kill him. Probably.

Most likely... I think.

"The last camp I worked at wasn't as nice as this," Kayde says conversationally, catching up with me on the trail when he's done looking at the lake. "We had to bunk with the kids to supervise them. Well, we had a door separating our room from theirs, but it was a thin door. You could hear all their shit at three am."

I grimace at that, shaking my head. While we all have a cabin of ten kids to supervise, our rooms aren't *in* the cabin. Instead, all the sleeping cabins have a small room built onto the side, with its own separate entrance. It gives us some bit of privacy, at least. Plus, the walls are thick enough that I wouldn't hear the kids, even if they were trying to summon the devil.

Should I tell him that's a possibility with his cabin?

"I don't think I'd like that," I admit, rolling my shoulders under my purple tee. "Pool." I point at the obvious pool with its lifeguard stand, and then to the boathouse before naming it as well.

"You guys have horses?" He looks around, his eyes flicking to the boathouse in interest. "We had horses at my last camp."

"No." My answer comes out with a sigh. "We used to, back when I first started. But there was an incident, and Mr. Fink got rid of them to put in another fire ring and craft hut instead." He follows me silently after that, only nodding or commenting quietly as I point out the other dining hall, the sleeping cabins, and two of the larger bathroom buildings.

"Shower there," I tell him, pointing at the one hidden in the trees on the left. "The hot water is better, and it's a little quieter. Especially before lights out. Most of the kids don't like going that far into the woods when they don't have to."

"But the counselors value any privacy they can get?" Kayde chuckles, catching up to walk in step with me. He's wearing that teasing, sweet-edged smile again, and when my eyes meet his, I see something slightly at odds there.

Like maybe he's not as thrilled about all this as he's letting on. But, well, I can't really blame him. This isn't the world's most glamorous job, and there's usually a reason people are camp counselors instead of, like, Google Interns.

For me, it's because of a lack of direction and lack of cash. Plus a desire to be out of my mom's house for as much of the summer as I can be. It's the one season she doesn't travel for work, and as much as I love her, we're better when we only see each other a few days of the week, or even less.

We're too similar to get along perfectly, in my opinion. Though with this session and one more being the only ones left for the year, I'll have to remember how to live with her and exist in harmony in a month or so.

"Yeah." I laugh, finally feeling a little more like myself now that the marijuana isn't quite so heavy in my bloodstream. The halo around his face has faded, and his otherworldly beauty is becoming, well, *worldly*.

Kayde Lane might be a mortal, just like the rest of us.

I open my mouth to tell him the schedule, since we're nearing the end of this little tour, when a bloodcurdling scream makes both of us jerk around toward the still-closed swimming pool. At first, all I see is an unfamiliar girl screaming, her hands outstretched toward the pool as she yells something over and over again.

And then I see the splashing.

Kayde is running before I am, though I'm only a step behind as my heart pounds just behind my ribs. His long legs eat up the distance, and we're the first two to the pool, eyes fixed on the clear, chlorinated water.

Seconds later my heart plummets, and I swear my eyes connect with the boy's wide, frightened gaze. I watch as he sinks like a stone to the bottom of the pool, his arms and legs flailing independently and doing him no favors. My brain isn't exactly slow to respond, but I don't even get the chance to do anything before Kayde jumps into the pool, diving in perfect form so the water encompasses him like an embrace.

He's at the bottom instantly, wrapping his arms around the boy. In seconds, they're back to the surface, the little boy gasping for air the moment they break through the surface of the water.

"Stairs?" Kayde pants, though his calmness is impressive while he holds onto a squirming twelve-year-old.

"Here." My heart still pounds, but I'm stunned at just how fast the whole thing has happened. I trot to the edge of the pool, not hesitating before I descend the stairs as quickly as I can, the water coming up to my waist by the time I'm done. With outstretched arms, I wait for Kayde and his armful, my eyes wider than they should be as I tremble and scan the boy for any sign of distress.

Kayde doesn't hand him over. Instead, he walks out of the pool with me following, both of us soaked, but my t-shirt is still mostly dry, unlike his. He wastes no time in laying the boy flat on the cement surrounding the

pool, though turns him on his side so he can cough up the water still choking him.

“Are you okay?” I kneel beside the boy, my thigh brushing Kayde’s as I place a hand on the camper’s shoulder. He’s shaking, though he looks more humiliated than anything.

“Fell in,” he whispers in between heaves. “S-sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Kayde murmurs, in that too-friendly voice of his that brings to mind Lassie or a box full of fluffy puppies. “Accidents happen. We just want to make sure you’re okay. What’s your name?”

“Aaron,” the boy whispers, his wide eyes fixed on Kayde. “Aaron Vincent.”

“Well, Aaron Vincent, you’re not in trouble.” Slowly Kayde helps him sit up, looking him over for injuries or any sign that there’s more wrong than shock and his obvious, lingering fear that has the boy’s hands shaking. “But maybe we work on some swimming lessons for you over the next week, hmm?” Kayde looks over at me, his arm brushing my elbow, and turns that winning grin on me. “That girl from earlier was the nurse, right? He’s fine, but maybe we could get her to take a look at him?” It’s less of a suggestion, and more of an order.

But he’s right. And I should’ve thought of it sooner.

Feeling my face flush, I get to my feet with a quick, jerky nod. “Yeah,” I agree, noticing that there’s a small crowd gathered. “I’ll go get Liza.” With quick, measured steps, I move away from him and the pool, mentally mapping out my route as the whispers about Kayde jumping into the water with no hesitation and perfect form travels from camper to camper.

It occurs to me, when I’m jogging down the trail toward the nurse’s cabin, that I’d been completely wrong a few minutes ago.

Kayde isn’t human like the rest of us, as much as it burns my throat to admit it, even to myself. Especially now, with rumors and whispers floating through the air at my back.

To these kids, and probably to my fellow counselors, Kayde is a fucking god.

## CHAPTER THREE



“**Y**ou’re staring again.” From her seat on the bench beside me, Kinsley’s voice is quiet. I have a feeling she’s not even looking at me, as her eyes scan the beach from behind her sunglasses.

“You don’t know that,” I mutter, readjusting my grip around my knees as I stare at Kayde on the lifeguard stand. He’d informed all of us last night that Mr. Fink was quick to hire him for his lifeguard training and CPR certification. While all of us here are CPR certified, as we have to be, I don’t think any of us have a lot of lifeguarding experience outside of glaring at kids and crossing our fingers they don’t drown. “You’re not even looking at me.”

“I don’t need to be. I can feel that weird energy you have. Besides, if I don’t watch our cabins, they’ll drown. *You* aren’t watching them, after all.” There’s a teasing note in her voice, and I roll my eyes with the intent of them to stay stuck in my head, even though the effect is lost on her when she doesn’t look. “Thought you said he’s not your type. What was it you called him? A golden retriever? Lassie?”

“Both of those,” I agree flatly, though it’s impossible to take my eyes off of Kayde in his lifeguard chair. It’s not as tall as the ones I remember from the local pool where I’d gone as a kid, and Darcy Lewis doesn’t seem to mind that at all. In fact, it appears as if she’s trapping him. With her fingers clenched on the metal slats of the ladder where Kayde would need to go in order to get down from his perch.

Or rather, considering the way he’s sitting there, his throne. Kayde lounges like the lifeguard chair was made for him, and carted in just for his

exclusive use. He nods along behind his big, reflective aviators as Darcy talks, mouth pulling in a wide grin that flashes white, pearly teeth. I can't help the soft sigh that leaves my nose, though I do glance back at the kids from our combined cabins splashing in the water.

"If you kill her, Melody, then you won't get to sing in the talent show next week," I call lazily, as one of my favorite problems shoves another girl's head under the water. She makes a face at me but lets her up, earning a sarcastic thumbs up from me.

A loud, braying laugh comes from the lifeguard chair, and my head whips around so I can stare at Darcy. She's trying a little too hard and giggling a little too loudly for any of us to believe she really finds whatever Kayde has said funny.

"I hate it here," I mumble under my breath, and Kins snorts.

"Never thought I'd see you jealous of a man Darcy's trying to hook her claws into." Kinsley sips at her water, and gives a quick whistle to attract the attention of one of her own campers that's probably gearing up for a murder spree. "How sad."

"Whoa, whoa!" I whirl around on her, dropping my legs to the ground under the bench. "Aren't you the one who started up with this summer love shit?"

She nods, sipping more water, and acts just as unfazed as if I'd told her the weather forecast for the week. Which, unexpectedly, includes a nasty storm in a couple of days that I'm sure is going to bring out the worst in these kids. At least for the next morning, since I'm sure most of them will be too afraid of the storm to do much in the dark. "Yeah," Kinsley agrees, still casual. "Summer love for *me* to make Liza fall in love with me. You're the one who said you didn't want a conquest. You're the one who likes to remind me how not-your-type Kayde is." She leans over enough that when she nods her chin, I can see her eyes over her sunglasses. "You want to tell me that there's been a change in the lineup? A new development?"

Instead of answering right away, I turn to look at the lifeguard throne again. Darcy is still there, though her smile has wilted somewhat. Is she not getting the progress she'd expected? Maybe Kayde doesn't love the way she's stretched out her camp counselor t-shirt to show off as much of her chest as she can, though who am I to say? My eyes flick up to Kayde, and while I can't see what he's looking at, I can see the direction his face is tilted in.

It's as if he's looking at *me*. Or trying to listen to what Kinsley and I are saying, though I know for a fact there's no way he can hear us. My lips twitch as I look away, shaking my head. "No changes. He's gorgeous." Anyone with even a little bit of eyesight can see that much. Today his golden-brown hair is up in a bun, though loose strands frame his high cheekboned face like an aura that calls for a chorus of angels.

It's a shame I can't blame my attraction to his features on marijuana today.

"He's still gorgeous. But he's just so...*nice*." My nose wrinkles like I'm using the word as an insult. And maybe right now I am. "I can't do nice. What if I said something stupid, and he cried or got really hurt by it?" I'm great at saying stupid shit. But Kinsley is great at ignoring it, or laughing it off like it doesn't matter.

"Poor thing." Kinsley leans back on the bench. "Well, in better news, Liza and I are going on a camp date. Which isn't a real date, obviously."

"Much like summer love isn't necessarily real love?" I point out, trying to be a little less than helpful. It works enough that Kinsley tips her sunglasses down to glare at me balefully.

"Sorry he's not your type, but I can assure you that over this session and the next one, I'm going to convince Liza to be my girlfriend."

"I look forward to cheering you on."

"And I look forward to these little chats, and getting to see you wince over Darcy's interest in the guy who you definitely, really, aren't interested in." Her scathing grin brings a smile to my lips. Kinsley may be mean enough for the both of us when she wants to be, but I love everything about her and every second of our conversations.

"Mm-hmm." Her gaze goes over my shoulder, and she flashes a smile at Darcy when the counselor strolls past us with irritation on her face. "Oh hey, look. The line's empty." She gestures at Kayde, and I glance over at the lifeguard chair in confusion, only to see that this time, he's definitely looking at us.

Or at Darcy's retreating figure.

"The line?" I repeat, brows jerking up in disbelief. "There's not a—"

"Yeah, there so has been. So come on, Summer. This is your chance to go shoot your shot. Maybe Lassie isn't as kid friendly as he appears." She wiggles her brows suggestively, and I wonder if she even knows what she's implying.

I certainly don't. But I snort anyway, and drape my arms back over the bench to turn and look at the campers we're supposed to be keeping from drowning. "I spent enough time with him yesterday. Pretty sure I know exactly how nice he is, okay Kinsley?" But even through my words, I know for a fact I'll still be staring at him any time he might not notice. Not just because he's easily the most gorgeous man who's ever landed in my eyesight.

But because I'm nosy as hell, and I want to see that at-odds expression on his face from yesterday, just one more time, to see if I can figure out what makes him do that.

My teeth rake along my bottom lip as I stare out over Otter Hall, where all the kids are gathered to finish dinner. After this is campfire time, then bed, and I'm more than a little excited to go to my room and pass out. My hair is damp from the shower I'd taken after my dunk in the pool with my cabin, and I'm happy that I no longer smell like strong chlorine as I had all afternoon.

Part of me is disappointed that this is the second to last summer camp session of the year. I don't hate my summer job. Far from it, actually. The kids can be a problem when they think they can get away with it, but the counselors are mostly my friends, and I love the outdoors.

Being here is the most time I get to spend outside, and the closest I normally get to actually camping. Mom has never been a big fan of it, and she certainly wasn't the type to send me off to summer camp as a kid.

But saying I'm living out my childhood camping dreams at twenty-three sounds weird at best. At worst, I should book with extra therapy sessions when I'm done with camp this year.

"I'll take this if you take them?" I snag Kinsley's plate from in front of her, and for good measure, Liza's, too. The three of us have eaten together all summer, and it's another reason that Kinsley's love for our camp nurse hasn't faded in the slightest. She loves Liza's dinner conversation.

"We'll take them," Liza agrees brightly, smiling up at me. She's always seemed to actually enjoy being here, and she *wants* kids. It's confusing to me, but I'm not here to judge my best friend's summer love target. "Thanks, Summer."

Kinsley smiles up at me with her own silent gratitude. "We won't let Melody kill anyone," she promises.

“Blessings on your hearth.” My words are solemn as I balance the plates in one hand and snag our empty plastic glasses with the other. Liza starts to protest, but I’m far enough away from the table that I pretend not to hear it. This might have been a bit too much of an armful since I can’t stack the plates well due to their contents. But I’d rather have a few quiet moments to myself washing dishes before I go out to a bunch of kids trying to sword fight with marshmallow-laden sticks.

Though the image of the kids doing just that a few weeks ago brings a grin to my lips, and I push my shoulder into the kitchen door easily, cautiously, just in case there’s someone on the other side.

There isn’t. I open the doors to an empty kitchen, and within a few minutes, the dishes have been scraped clean into the trash before being dumped in the sink. Once there, I turn on the hot water, not minding the liquid scalding my hands as I lather up the plates. I love a searing shower, and this is just a miniature version of that in my mind.

Once the dishes are clean, I head for the door again, and I’m surprised when it opens before I can do that for myself. Thankfully, a jumped step backward saves me from a door to the face, though I’m quick to rush forward automatically when Kayde comes in balancing five dishes and a half dozen cups on his own.

“You’re supposed to make *them* do this for themselves,” I sigh, grabbing the cups from him so he can focus on the plates. Deftly, I pour the remaining liquid into the sink before dumping them in as well. Kayde only chuckles, the sound like honey and sweetness, as he readjusts his grip on the overburdened dishes.

“They just looked so sad when they were faced with dishes,” he tells me, moving to lay the plates down on the counter beside the industrial sink. When I go to grab one, he shakes his head. “It’s fine. I offered to do it, so I’ll clean up the mess, Summer.” He says my name blandly, and something in me deflates just a little.

But what am I expecting, exactly? For him to whisper my name like it’s something special?

“It’s okay,” I tell him, shaking my head. “I don’t mind helping—” His fingers wrap around my wrist when my hand goes for the plates again, and this time I pause to turn my head enough to look at his face.

*There it is again.*

It's like his face can't quite decide what it wants to do. Or like he's sending his features mixed emotional messages. The smile that curls on his lips is kind and easy. Though the way his eyes are just slightly narrowed under his long, enviable lashes shows me a different story. There's something there that forbids disagreement; something that tells me to listen to him instead of doing whatever I want.

"Seriously." His tone is soft, the warmth seeming unsure there. "I can do it."

I wonder if he just doesn't like me very much, and it's hard for him to pretend otherwise. That thought sobers me up, and I try to extract my hand from his fingers with a shake of my head. "Seriously," I parrot back at him, making a face. "The faster this is done, the faster you can go make sure Coyote Cabin doesn't set the record for camp incidents again this month."

He finally relinquishes his hold on my wrist and moves to clean up as much as he can while I dump half-eaten food into the large trash bin. "Again?" he repeats at last. "I thought you told me my campers were nothing to worry about."

All I can do is side eye him at that, though I'm sure the small, guilty smile on my lips tells him all he needs to know. "Oops?" I offer at last. "Maybe I feel bad about it and this is me making it up to you."

"I don't think you feel bad about it at *all*, actually." I swear he's closer than he had been, and his shoulder rubs lightly against mine; warm under his t-shirt. "Sort of feels like you wanted me to get eaten, actually."

"I would never." But my lips twitch in a smile, and I hand him the last couple of scraped-clean plates. "Glad to see they haven't killed you yet, though. Darcy would be heartbroken."

*Why did I say that?* I regret the words the moment they're out, but I just smile and try to keep the same expression on my face as I pull away from the sink. "Anyway." God, now I feel awkward. "See you at the fire. Prepare to break up marshmallow sword fights all night."

He doesn't say anything. Not at first, while I'm lingering to give him a chance to respond. It isn't until I've almost gone past him that he turns, surprisingly fast, to grab my elbow in his long-fingered grip that's wet from the sink water.

"Tonight is your night to 'patrol the camp' or whatever, right?" he asks, but I shake my head at the question.

“No. It’s Darcy’s night, actually. I’m tomorrow.” There’s satisfaction in his eyes, though it fades quickly. “You want to trade? She’d probably trade you, if you want a different night. It’s not like the order really matters.”

He shakes his head, his fingers still tight on my arm enough that I glance down at his hand in surprise. Kayde’s wrist and hand are just as tan as the rest of him. As if he spends most of his summer nude, sunbathing on a California beach. It makes me wonder if there are any tan lines on him at all, or if—

No, that’s definitely not a summer camp appropriate thought, and I shut it down before it gets away from me.

“I just wanted to know, is all,” he tells me, cracking a small, genuine smirk of his own. “Anyway.” His grip releases, hand falling to his side. “I’m almost done, so I’ll be out in a few minutes. If you see any of my kids actively killing someone, can you at least dangle something shiny in front of them until I get there?”

“No promises.” I push the door open with one shoulder, then pause.

*Why do you care about nighttime walk arounds if you don’t want to swap?* The question is thick and heady on my tongue, but I manage to swallow it back, though I’m still standing in place as he dries the dishes.

It takes him a second to notice, and when Kayde looks at me again, his brows raise by increments, I only shake my head. “Nothing,” I say, in answer to his unspoken question. “I’m just overthinking stupid shit. See you in a few.”

“See you,” he agrees, and I see him turn back to the sink before I let the door close behind me, already aiming for the quickest way out of Otter Hall and to the large, blazing campfire outside.

# CHAPTER FOUR



**I**t happens sometimes, though I hadn't expected this problem to hit tonight. Not when things have been exhausting since the new kids arrived, not even forty-eight hours ago. Normally, when I'm here at Camp Crestview, I sleep better than I do at home. Even though my tiny room is much smaller than the one in my mom's house. Even though I'm constantly listening, making sure the kids aren't actually performing a seance or planning a murder.

So I hadn't expected to not be able to sleep tonight. Especially to the extent where the room in my cabin feels claustrophobic; the air seems stale even though I have every window open as far as they'll go. The room is tiny, with just a bed, nightstand, trunk, and small table by the door. But over the past three years, I've gained an appreciation for having a private, mostly quiet place to sleep.

Yet tonight I can't even stay in bed, let alone fall asleep.

I pick at my nails, wincing every time the skin of my cuticles pulls in a sharp, twisting way under my motions. My knees are pulled almost up to my chest as I sit on the stairs outside of the door to my room, and I stare out at the trees and the mostly dark camp. The only people up this late are the counselors and any kid that's planning a coup.

I hope when someone does, it's the kids from Coyote cabin. Just so they can make Kayde's first time here *memorable*.

Wincing particularly hard, I set my teeth against the pain in my thumb; staring down at my hand in the dark, even though I know I won't really be able to see the blood that wells on my skin. Tomorrow my fingers are going

to look like I stuck them in the trash disposal. But there's nothing I can do about the way I absently pick at them whenever I can't even close my eyes to stare at the backs of my eyelids while I wait for sleep.

Footsteps crunch on the gravel that runs from one cabin to the other, and I glance up from my thumb with a frown on my face at the bobbing flashlight coming my way. It's not one of the kids. The flashlight is too high for that, and any child sneaking out wouldn't just be walking up to me like this.

But my brows lift by increments when I see Darcy's face, illuminated by the faint light from my cabin as she approaches. "Tell me you aren't just getting started with your walk," I say plaintively, not quite asking. Walk arounds, which are done nightly by one of us, start way earlier than now, when I know it's at least eleven, if not midnight.

Darcy stares back balefully at me, none of the friendliness from earlier at the lifeguard throne on her face. We've never been the greatest of friends, and I doubt her love for Kayde Lane is going to change that this session.

"So what?" Darcy mutters, one hand folding under her chest as she shines the flashlight a few inches under my eyes. It's a little aggressive, and I feel like she's trying to make a point that she *could* blind me, if she wanted to be less kind.

But Darcy really isn't that kind, so when the light jerks upward to burn my retinas, I'm smart enough to see it coming and shut them fast.

"You know you were supposed to start hours ago." My words remain quiet. I don't want to wake up the kids in the Redtail Cabin, and if Darcy does, I'm going to dunk her in the pool and hold her there until the chlorine burns her extensions. "Fink lets us get away with a lot, but—"

"Fine." By her clipped, irritated tone, Darcy isn't in the mood for my shit tonight. I fidget, reminding myself that there are kids only *maybe* sleeping nearby, and I don't want to expand their vocabulary while they're here by telling Darcy exactly what words are itching at my tongue. "You can do it then, if you want to be so anal about it, Summer." She doesn't even give me the flashlight. She drops it to the ground, causing it to flicker.

"You're ridiculous," I hiss, already on my feet. "If you wanted to swap for a different night, why not just ask at dinner?" I swipe up the flashlight from the gravel, brushing it off and returning her earlier favor by shining it straight in her eyes from two feet away.

She squints, chin jerking to the side as she holds a hand up between us to block the light. “Because earlier it was fine.”

“Yeah?” I can’t help how grumpy I sound, but I turn off the light. With the few lights sprinkled around the camp and my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I don’t need it all the time. Mostly just when I’m in the woods. “What changed?”

“I saw Kayde hanging around my cabin with Daniel,” Darcy sighs, rubbing her arms. “Come on. You’ve seen him. Why do I want to do the stupid night walk when he’s still up and apparently looking for something?” She fixes me with a look that I turn away from. Whatever she wants to do with Kayde is her own business. And if he wants to follow her back to her cabin like a lovestruck deer, then good for him.

Shifting my weight from foot to foot, I pretend she isn’t looking at me with a mixture of irritation and pleading. I could tell her no. She’ll do the walk around herself, even if it is rushed and half-assed.

“Fine,” I mutter, shaking my head. “You’re lucky I can’t sleep. Go get your man, or whatever.” If she thinks Kayde is into her, then he probably is, I assume. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be so eager to hunt him down again.

Even if I had been interested in him, I’d forgotten about the primal force that is *Darcy*. No crush of mine could ever stand a chance against her being here to swoop in and get whoever she wants.

But I’m not interested in summer love, anyway. The day I meet my forever-person at a kid’s summer camp is the day I check myself into the psych ward, or figure out how I ended up in a shitty Hallmark rom-com.

Darcy’s grin turns wolfish, and even as she speaks, she’s already walking away from me. “I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow,” she assures me, but I shake my head.

“Do me a favor and don’t.” I take a moment to dip back into my room for my phone, and by the time I’m down the stairs with it in my back pocket, there’s no sign of Darcy. She’s probably running back to her cabin by now, and instead of bothering to look, I set off on the normal route to check the camp for anything out of place, or any kids that should be fast asleep by now.

While this isn’t the most exciting part of my job here, I enjoy walking the campground at night. It’s peaceful, for one, and this is the only time I ever get to say that about Camp Crestview. My flashlight flicks over cabin doors and the doors of the larger buildings in movements that are muscle

memory by now. As per usual, there's no one sneaking around or even out of bed that I can see. Wherever Daniel and the other counselors are, it's nowhere I need to go, it seems.

Most likely, they're getting high at the staff house. Those that aren't asleep, at least. I know for a fact Kinsley is dead to the world, and knowing Liza, she probably is, too. Though she doesn't have a cabin full of kids to watch out for.

Once I've done my circuit of the main camp and ended up back at my cabin, I change direction. Checking on the camp facilities is only half of the job. The second part of this task is walking around the perimeter of the property, close to the woods and the lake. I don't know what anyone would be doing that far out, and certainly any animals that I come across will run away long before I can see them.

But I'm not Darcy. I don't cut my walk short, or forget the second half of it altogether as I traipse down the trail just behind the cabins.

Once I'm in the trees, I do actually need the flashlight. The light from the buildings is faint—when I can see it at all—but most of the time I'm walking through almost total darkness.

It's so *quiet* out here. Quieter than my brain is at any given time. And quieter than both the main camp and my mom's house are. I wish I could keep this calm, and the darkness is definitely an added bonus as a breeze ruffles the leaves of the surrounding trees.

I've always liked the dark.

The flashlight is cursory as I follow the dirt trail, and I use my ears more than my eyes to make sure I'm not creeping up on a bear or a rabid coyote. Not that I've ever seen either. Frankly, I doubt tonight is the time to change that.

Belatedly, it hits me that as my flashlight bounces, it's hitting something that shouldn't be there. Something bobs in the trees ahead of me, not quite sticking to the trail. By my mental map, I know we're close to the lake on the side of the camp with the drop-off zone, but this deep in the woods all I should be able to see is a sliver of reflective water through a gap in the trees. Really, it's mostly just trees and grass and dirt.

"Hello?" I swear the movement looks like walking, though instead of my flashlight catching the familiar design of the garish shirts we wear as counselors, I see a person dressed in a bulky, long-sleeve jacket.

*In July?* My brain protests in horror. I can barely be pressed to put a jacket on when my teeth are chattering, let alone when I'm close to sweating. "Darcy?" I know it isn't Darcy. Even if her plans with Kayde didn't work out, she wouldn't do something to be helpful or responsible.

As my steps pick up and I'm jogging down the path, it hits me that the person in front of me can't be Darcy. They're too tall, for one, and even without the bulk of the jacket, this figure isn't as slim as the ex-volleyball player. "Hello?" It doesn't even hit me to be freaked out until I'm within ten or so feet of the still moving person. "If this is a joke—" My throat closes around a breath I take, and it finally dawns on me that I might be doing something stupid by running up to a stranger in the dark who really shouldn't be in these woods.

But I'm too close to stop now. My hand goes up and out, fingers reaching as they close finally on the slick material of the black jacket that originally caught the light from my flashlight. As I close my grip on the person, I swear I can both feel and hear them sigh in front of me, as if they're resigned to some inevitable fact now.

"Who are—" My words break off just as the hooded figure turns a little, enough for me to see the glimmer of light brown, gorgeous eyes set over high cheekbones and a wide, full mouth made for smiling. "Kayde?" My tone lifts, too high and too loud, but Kayde doesn't respond. He doesn't even fully turn around.

The resignation reaches his eyes, and he glances around us, like he's waiting for someone else. "What are you doing here, Summer?" he asks at last, still twisting away from me. "I thought you said tonight was Darcy's night to walk the camp at night."

"It is—well, it was," I find myself explaining, though my words are as unsure as the churning in my stomach. "Wait, no. Hold on a second. You don't get to ask *me* what I'm doing out here. What the hell are you doing here?! Darcy said you were with Daniel. That's why she pawned this off on me. Did something...happen?"

His low laugh makes my skin crawl, and I can't help but snatch my hand back from his jacket. *Why is he wearing a jacket with the hood up, anyway?*

"Stupid fucking Darcy," Kayde murmurs at last, lifting one hand to rake it through his curly hair and forcing it back. "Can't even trust her to stick to the fucking schedule, huh? And what do you think you're doing anyway,

Summer?” His eyes pin me suddenly from over his shoulder, and I find myself shifting uncomfortably on my feet, like I’ve been caught doing something against the rules.

“Doing Darcy’s walk,” I snapped at last, feeling only the tiniest bit defensive. “What the hell are you doing? I thought you were a—fuck, I don’t know, like—”

“A serial killer?” The way he says the words is...strange. They roll off of his tongue like he’s purring, and he still watches me from narrowed, glittering eyes as he tracks my every movement. “You thought you were reaching out and grabbing the jacket of a *murderer*, Summer?”

This time, when he says my name, there’s nothing flat or dismissive about it. Though when that sends a shiver down my spine, I can’t decide if it’s a good or bad thing. I laugh awkwardly, tasting the discomfort in the back of my throat when I swallow. “Yeah. Something...something like that. Lucky for me it’s just you, though, right?”

The words don’t feel right on my tongue.

His smile turns...strange. Pitying, in a way, and he seems to argue internally with himself before letting out a rough, quick sigh. “Well, I don’t know, sweetheart.” He turns fully, and the light I’m holding falls on the bright, reflective thing he holds in his other hand.

“Feels like tonight might be your unlucky night, actually. Really wish you were asleep right now.” His grip shifts as he turns, and when he stands to face me fully, I find I can’t move a damn muscle.

Not with my eyes fixed on Kayde Lane, and the *ax* he’s holding in the hand that was hidden from me until now.

“Oh, my god.” The words come out as a whisper as all the warmth drains out of me, into the ground below.

“Not quite,” Kayde responds, still with that half-apologetic smile. “And if you’re really good for me, sweetheart, I won’t make you meet him tonight.”

## CHAPTER FIVE



**T**hough his words do a few circuits in my brain, all I can do is stand there and stare at Kayde. Then the ax, which seems like a separate, ghostly entity with the way the gray blade shines in the light from my flashlight.

Then I look at Kayde again, to find that his expression hasn't changed. He's still watching me with those goading, pitying eyes that make me want to throw up.

"Don't...don't fuck with me, Kayde," I whisper, licking my suddenly dry lips. "Why would you say that? You're not a—" My words falter, and for some reason I can't get the last part of my sentence to come into existence between us.

"I'm not...what?" He tilts his head to the side, eyes shining like a happy puppy's as he gives me that sweet, helpful look I've seen him use on every camp counselor at Crestview. "I'm not a murderer? I'm not a serial killer? Oh, I know." My muscles tense when he takes one terrifying step toward me, and hefts the ax in his hands thoughtfully. "You were about to say that I'm not on my way to murder the kids sleeping in their cabins here at Camp Crestview. That's where you were going with that, right?"

It occurs to me that this is fun for him. That he's having a great time with the terror shaking through me, and the way part of me is still so sure this is a joke.

The other part of me is really wondering why I'm not running yet.

"This isn't funny." But I doubt he means it to be. Why would he be holding an ax and dressed in clothes to obscure his identity if it was? My

hands flex, and I wish I had my phone in one of them, so I didn't need to dig in my pocket for it.

Kayde looks down at my twitching fingers, then back up at my face. "I think it's a little funny, but probably not for the reasons you would," he admits, rolling his shoulders in a shrug. "But you know what I think we should talk about, Summer?"

"Why this joke isn't funny? Why you have an *ax*?" I offer; the questions flitting out of my mouth in a sour tone of voice. "Seriously, you could get in a lot of trouble if I tell anyone, Kayde. Fuck, I don't even know where you *got* an ax!"

"Brought it from home, counselor." He gives me a two-fingered scout salute, his grin catching and pulling at his lips. "Thought I'd get to use it for show-and-tell."

"This isn't funny!" I nearly cut him off when I repeat the words, and when he steps forward again, I refuse to trip backward. Instead, I match his step with my own. Though I can't help it when I glance down at the weapon he holds, measuring how close the blade is to my stomach and wondering if I'll have time to get away if he decides to swing it.

*Probably not.*

"Stop...stop fucking around, Kayde." All I can do is fake my bravery and hope for the best. There's no way he's actually intending on—

My brain slams to a halt as images of him kicking down a cabin door and blood flowing down the stairs invade my every thought.

"You know, I have to admit, you're surprising me about all of this." He doesn't move closer, or away, though his grip adjusts minutely on the ax. "I thought you would've run away by now. I thought I would've had to chase after you to stop you. Never thought I'd need to know how fast you run, but fuck Darcy, right?" He says it so casually, like there isn't a barely veiled threat in his words.

*Run?* My brain tries to imagine the scenario of me taking off toward camp. I can see his face contort in my mind, the ax coming up sideways before I've gone more than six inches, and digging in just above—

I cut that thought off too, and glare up at him as my heart beats in a rabbit-like rhythm in my chest. "You can't be serious," I whisper again, the light in my hand barely illuminating his face since I don't have the guts to shine it up into his eyes. "You can't be—"

“Well, if it makes you feel better, I never intended to kill you.” His smile is sheepish when he says it, shoulders hunching like I’ve caught him doing something oh-so-sweet. “I’d thought, maybe afterward, as long as I could keep you in the dark, that you and I could be the only survivors. Thought maybe...” His other hand comes up so his knuckles can trail along the edge of the ax as I watch.

“You know what trauma bonding is, right? It wouldn’t be *my* trauma, but I figured I could pretend for you after everything. When you were all alone and scared and waiting for the cops with me.” His eyes narrow under his lashes, mouth still curved in its pretty grin.

“What about Kinsley?” I whisper, somehow sucked into this terrifying fantasy right along with him.

His smile doesn’t fade. In fact, it stretches wider over his lips as he takes that one *last step* that puts the ax as close to me as possible without it touching my shirt. “Sweetheart,” he purrs, giving a small tilt of his head so he can stare at me with those pretty brown eyes. He doesn’t say anything else, though. Not for a few seconds, as he leans closer until his lips are so close to my ear that I can feel his breath tickling my skin.

When his mouth opens so he can speak, I feel that too. The brush of his lips makes my stomach curl, and for a moment, I think I might throw up all over the ax and our shoes. “You won’t trauma bond with me if there’s not enough *trauma*. I thought I’d leave her in pieces for you to find when you inevitably went to check on her first. Do you know what those pieces will look like after I’ve chopped her apart with this ax?”

My breathing just...

*Stops.*

I wonder if I could die like this, with the air punched out of me and the ax shifting closer, *closer*, until I can feel the cold metal pressing up against the skin of my stomach, pushing my shirt over my hips and out of the way for him.

“So how would you like to do this, hmm?” he purrs, leaning away just enough to meet my gaze. I can still feel the movement of the heavy blade against my skin; it sears my flesh, causing me to shiver and pull away before I can stop myself.

But, naturally, Kayde just follows me. Somehow, the ax stays hooked under my shirt, and every step I take backward is an easy half-step forward for him.

“W-well, it’s all ruined now, right?” I snap, fighting the urge to grab the blade and shove it at him so it’s not touching me any longer. Distantly, I realize we’re no longer on the trail, though it isn’t until my back hits a large, rough tree that I realize just what that means.

Kayde is quick to eat up the last of the distance between us, his free hand pressing to the bark above my head, fingers splayed as he cages me in place. “Elaborate,” he requests, eyes still doing that thing that tells me he knows more than I do and I’m going to find out the hard way in a second.

“You said...you don’t want to kill me. That you didn’t want me to know it was you.” It’s hard to keep my voice from trembling, and I dig my fingers into the bark behind me to keep myself somewhat grounded. “But now I know. And I’m not going to *trauma bond* with you when I fucking know it’s you, Kayde.” The words *trauma* and *bond* taste like ash between my lips, and it pulls my shoulder blades tight as I glare at him.

“So what, then?” he hums, the full blade of the ax pressing heavily against my stomach. “Should I just give up? Shrug my shoulders and disappear into the woods? That’s what you want, right? For me to be a dream or at least disappear like one.”

God, that is exactly what I want. But I don’t give him an answer to a question he knows the answer to. I lift my chin and fight to glare at him, instead of shrinking away and knocking the ax to the side like I want to.

“See, that’s the thing about doing this for a while.” My lack of a response doesn’t seem to faze him. “I have about four backup plans that involve you finding out what I’m doing. Whether before, or during.” There is no *after* included in that. As if he’s so sure I never would suspect him without seeing it for myself.

Maybe I wouldn’t.

“You die in one of those backup plans,” Kayde is quick to inform me, and I can’t help it when my eyes close against the words and my lungs burn around my next breath. “But that’s like, my worst-case scenario.”

“I’ll call the cops,” I promise him, eyes open and wide as I stare at him. “The moment you start walking toward the cabins, I’ll—”

“You’ll *call the cops?*” he sneers, interrupting me. His free hand leaves the tree above me, and before I can even think to stop him, he digs his hand into my back left pocket, fishing out my phone quickly to brandish it in front of my eyes. “Okay, sweetheart. Why don’t you do that for me? Show me how you’ll call the cops.”

My heart pounds, and I finally reach back to touch my pocket, unsure how he knew exactly where to look for it even though he's barely known me for two days. "How did you—"

"Do you want me to do it with you?" That playfully cruel edge is still there, still in his words and the toothy smirk he wears. "Too scared to do it alone?" He bypasses my lock screen that I've never bothered to secure and, while I watch, navigates to the call screen. His thumb quickly taps out the number 9-1-1 and then he hits the call button and speaker in quick succession.

All the while, he watches my face. Waiting for a reaction as I stare back at him. "Wait for it," he assures me, as nothing happens as my phone tries to connect.

"I'm sure it's going to happen soon." His words are coldly amused, and he glances at my phone, still trying to connect, before looking back at me. "Oh, well, we'll just try again, okay? I'm sure we'll get it on the second try. I'm sure *no service* doesn't actually mean *no service* or anything so boring as that, hmm?"

He hangs up, then dials again, before once more putting the phone on speaker after pressing the call button.

"Stop it," I whisper, my eyes on his. Something like frustration thrums beneath my sternum, but my hands are still clutched against the bark and still shaking.

"Stop what?" Kayde's eyes widen in a play of sincerity. "Stop *what*, Summer? Stop helping you call the police? I thought that's what you wanted—"

He breaks off when my arm comes up and I hit his hand, causing my phone to clatter to the ground somewhere near our feet. "You're being *cruel*," I sneer, my heart loud enough in my ears to chase away some of the blinding fear mixed with bitter disbelief. "You know what I meant."

"That you'll walk through the woods looking for service while I murder every kid at Crestview?" His purr feels so strange in the wake of his cruel coldness. "Think you'll be able to hear them scream while you climb a tree, hold up your phone to the sky and beg for even a bar? How long do you think that'll take, exactly? Long enough for me to murder everyone, or just Kinsley and the girls in your—"

"Stop it!" I shriek, hands coming up again to shove him away from me. But of course, he doesn't let me. Kayde doesn't even need to drop the ax.

He grabs my wrists in his other hand, then slams them onto the tree I'm pressed up against. The flashlight ends up on the ground between us, somehow tilted up just enough for me to see his face, to catch his movements and the glimmer of his honey-like eyes.

"Here's what I think you should do." He leans forward while he speaks until his body is pressed flush to my trembling form. I know he can feel it, just as I know that him sliding one knee between my thighs is completely intentional. "I think when I let you go, you should stay right here. You can sit here and wait for me, right here at this tree. I know you'll be so quiet for me, sweetheart. You can cover your ears so you won't hear anything. I don't want to hurt you."

His lips brush my ear, and my stomach twists as I jerk away as much as I'm able to, though my eyes remain fixed on Kayde's. "Please don't do this," I murmur, twisting in his grip. "You don't have to—"

That causes him to bark out a laugh, and he shakes his head, smile incredulous. "Well, of course I don't *have to* do this. No one ever said I did. No, Summer, I *want* to do this. I've been excited about this for days. I just wish you hadn't ruined my after-plans."

Any hopes I'd had of this being just a really bad joke evaporate when his gaze finds mine in the near darkness. A full tremble goes through me, starting at my fingers and ending at my toes that curl into the soles of my shoes. "What's wrong with you?" I whisper at last, like I'm telling him a secret or asking him to reveal his.

I just can't bring myself to ask the question any louder.

"What's wrong with me?" His brows raise just a little, and I see him giving the question some real thought. "Have you ever heard 'The Plaint of the Little Bisque Doll,' sweetheart?" When I jerk my head from side to side, he only leans closer, until he's once more finding the shell of my ear with his lips.

"I've got a pain in my sawdust." The words are soft and faint, and I have to strain to hear them. "That's what's the matter with *me*. Something is wrong with my little inside; I'm just—" he pauses and I can feel his teeth skimming my ear. "As sick as *can be*."

My stomach twists, and if it wasn't empty, I'd be throwing up. The wave of nausea leaves me gasping, even when he lets me go and swings the ax over his shoulder to rest it there. I can hear him whistling, and Kayde

leans down to pick up my flashlight from the ground, though he only turns it off and shoves it into his large pocket instead of giving it back to me.

*He's leaving.* The realization hits me hard, and it's all I can do *not* to slide down the rough trunk of the tree behind me, wrap my arms around my knees, and cry. Ideas and plans fly through my head, even while I hunt for my phone on the ground and shove it back into my pocket. To get to the camp, I'd have to walk by him.

And I doubt he'll let me. I have to assume he's faster than I am, and all it'll take is one well-aimed blow with that ax to make it so I can't tell anyone he's coming. Not to mention, the only place with service in this stupid place is the drop-off lot. Which would also require me to get around Kayde.

Unless I'm willing to take him on physically, there's nothing I can do.

*Except wait for him to kill everyone.*

No. Nonono. Kinsley's face flashes through my head. Then Melody's, Liza's, and a slew of other kids that I know are sleeping in their bunks right now like nothing is wrong. Nausea claws at my throat, and the shaking that I'd managed to keep under control is back in full force.

I need to do something.

I need to do something *now*, before he clears the trees. Even if I scream, I doubt I'll get more than one or two out of my mouth before he's back to shut me up.

"Wait." The word is barely a whisper on the breeze, and is eaten up by the night long before it gets to him. "Wait!" With the tree at my back, I find it hard to push away and support myself on my own feet.

I know he hears me this time, but Kayde doesn't stop. My heart pounds, and I'm surprised it hasn't exploded with the terror coursing through my blood.

If he's not going to stop, then I have to stop him. The idea that I'll be able to do so, and the thought of what I'm going to try, nearly has my lungs paralyzed and my heart hammering frantically against my ribs to escape my stupidity.

Launching off of the tree, I use it to propel myself forward, until my feet find the trail and I'm able to trip the rest of the way into Kayde, who turns in surprise and interest to look at me over his shoulder.

Well, at least he's not already swinging.

“Wait,” I beg, gripping the back of his jacket. I bury my fingers in the slick material, letting my arms slip half around his body as I press my forehead against the spot between his shoulder blades. It isn’t fondness. It’s the fear of watching the ax come down when he inevitably gets fed up with my attempts at stopping him.

My eyes screw shut as well as I fully hide in his coat and am unable to look at anything except the backs of my eyelids. “I’ll do anything,” I whisper, this time knowing he can hear me. “If you’ll please just...stop.”

I expect him to shake me off. To laugh and kick me to the ground, best-case scenario. Worst-case, I expect the ax to bite into my arm or my shoulder before he uses it to shut me up forever. Just like he wants to do to everyone else here.

But, inexplicably, Kayde *waits*. The only sound in the darkness is the breeze running through the trees, and the rustling of the leaves touched by it, as I hold on to him and just *breathe*.

“Well?” He sounds amused, and one hand comes up to brush against my knuckles, where my left hand is nearly wrapped around his chest in my panic of grabbing and holding onto him. “I’m waiting, sweetheart. Pretty patiently, I might add. After all, I’d hate to rush you, but we are on a bit of a time limit here.”

“Let me just...” I trail off, trying to grasp at any straw I can think of.

Though the only one that comes to mind is *bad*. Awful, even, and I know it won’t work, so as awful as it is, it’s obsolete the moment it forms.

But I need to buy myself some time to think of something better, so I blurt out, “I’ll do anything for you. Anything you want, if you just *stop* and, and don’t do this. Please.”

There’s nothing he could want from me that would be worth not killing a camp full of kids and young adults. But hopefully I can shock him into standing here long enough for me to think of something better.

Because, God, there has to be *something* better than this.

“*Summer*.” Kayde’s voice is half groan, half purr, and he manages to turn himself in my arms until my hands are gripping the front of his jacket, my face pressed nearly to his sternum as I jerk back enough to look up at him. “You can’t say things like that to me.”

“Why?” I ask quickly, needing to keep the conversation going.

One of his hands reaches out, and he tilts my chin up so he can survey my face more easily. “Because if you say shit like that, then I’ll have to

believe you. And if I believe you”—his smirk catches and pulls his full mouth wide—“then I’ll make you live up to what you just offered me.”

What? Out of any response I’d expected, this certainly isn’t it. My pulse flutters, and he switches his grip on my chin to curl those long, graceful fingers around my throat instead.

“You weren’t serious.” He chuckles, eyes goading. “But I’m going to make you regret those words, anyway. What exactly are you offering me, hmm?”

There’s a lump in my throat, but I swallow around it before softly, nervously breathing out, “Anything,” into the scant space between our mouths. “I said anything.” I try to will some kind of confidence into my tone, but I’m sure I fail splendidly. “S-so I meant it. Anything.”

“I could make you regret your *anything*,” Kayde promises me, no hesitation in his response. “You understand that, right?”

Quickly, I dip my head in a nod, though I can’t tear my eyes away from Kayde’s face. “Then...” God, my mouth is so dry I can barely talk. “Then make me fucking regret it,” I finally challenge through numb lips as my eyes narrow into something less fearful and, hopefully, more taunting.

He wavers. I can see it on his face, and especially in the way that he looks over his shoulder. “Oh, Summer,” Kayde sighs. “Summer, you’re going to be the death of me here.”

*If only.*

“All right. Okay.” His gaze snaps back to mine, and I find him more serious than he had been a few moments ago. “You want to do *anything* for me? *Anything* to keep me from killing your best friend and those sweet, precious kids you like more than you want to admit?”

A jerky nod is my only reply. I can’t trust my voice to betray how terrified I am, though I’m sure he’s well aware of it by how hard I’m still gripping his jacket.

“Then let’s talk about exactly what you’re agreeing to.” His hand comes up and he cradles my face in his palm. When I try to pull away, however, he gives a soft murmur of dissent, and follows me with his hand. “Don’t you fucking pull away from me, Summer. Not unless you want to end this little chat now.”

“No! I mean—” I stop trying to jerk away, and will myself to move back into the space I’d been occupying before. My cheek finds the warmth

of his palm, and there's a small flicker of approval in his eyes as he cradles my jaw.

"You'll do anything I say, and I don't mean right now, exactly. *Starting* now, you do whatever I want. Whenever I ask or tell you to. Don't worry," he adds, seeing me shift uncomfortably. "I don't like an audience, so I won't have you do anything to expose our arrangement in front of the other counselors or the kids. I don't need them to see or know what you've agreed to with me."

"How long?" I find myself snapping through my teeth. "How long do you—"

"For the rest of camp, obviously," he's quick to explain. "One *anything* isn't enough to stop me, Summer. I'll get bored. You're mine for the rest of this camp session. I get to play with you for eight more nights, and then you'll never see me again. I'll get in my car after Fink pays me for a job very well done, and you'll never see me again."

That seems...simpler than it ever should be. But my stomach continues to curl and twist, my hands still trembling in his coat.

"And you can tell me to stop whenever you want," Kayde adds quickly, his smile turning benevolent. "I'm not cruel, you know?" he most definitely is, but I'm not going to say it. "If you don't like something. If you don't want to do something, you can just tell me to stop, and I'll stop. I'll walk away, and I won't ask you for anything else. Of course..."

Hope rises in my chest, though when he adds on the *of course*, I feel it snuffed out like a newborn flame.

"If you won't play with me, if what I want is too much for you, then we'll be right back here. Only without any promises or deals to keep them safe. Tell me no at any time between now and then, and it ends there. I'll kill everyone in this fucking place, and I'll *make you watch*." He sneers the last words as he leans in toward me, his lips brushing my forehead.

*I can't do this.* That thought runs through my head on repeat. *I can't do this with him. There's no fucking way in hell.*

Yet I can't shake my head, either. I can't pull out of this deal now, when I don't know what else to do.

"Are you thinking that this buys you time?" His hands come up to my side, ax forgotten somewhere on the ground, and he lightly grips my hips in his large hands. "That when I agree to this, you'll just go tell Kins and the two of you will save the day? Hmm?" His face turns so he can nuzzle his

lips against my hair. “That’s a good idea...except you have no proof. And if you do that, then I’d have to teach you a lesson. While you might get the cops out here, I think I can do a lot of damage in the forty-two minutes it’ll take them to show up. You won’t do that to Kinsley, or Liza, or your kids, right? You’d never hurt them like that.”

*Fuck.*

Oh *fuck*. My fingers tighten their grip on his shirt, and for a moment I wish I could do something to him. I want to stab him, to claw out his throat. To throw him off of a cliff and then run back to camp before he can make some unholy reappearance like in the movies.

But this isn’t a movie, and I’m not emotionally equipped to be the final girl of a summer camp massacre.

All I can do is close my eyes hard and nod in quick, short movements that feel like they’re being wrenched out of me.

“Gonna need more than a nod, sweetheart,” Kayde purrs against my temple. “Gonna need you to tell me exactly what you’re agreeing to, so I know we’re on the same page.”

I try. God, I try, and it takes longer than it should for me to find my voice and look up at him with wide, terrified eyes that probably seem a lot like a terrified baby deer’s. “I’ll do anything for you.” Once I start, it’s a little easier to keep going, though I stumble through the words when my eyes meet his. “For the rest of camp. I-I’ll do whatever you want. So long as you don’t make me hurt anyone or make me do anything embarrassing in front of anyone else here.” I probably don’t have the high ground to set parameters for this agreement, but he doesn’t protest or disagree.

“And I agree that as long as you keep your side of the deal, I won’t kill anyone.” He’s a lot less nervous and unsure than I am. He just sounds amused. As if this is an unexpected, yet fun, development to his night.

And, well, maybe it is.

But it’s certainly becoming the worst night of my life.

“Color me surprised.” His chuckle shatters the moment, and I’m finally able to drop my hands and step away from Kayde. “Guess I have to go clean up. I’ve been getting my shit together for this since dinner, you know?” Kayde sounds almost indignant; like I’m making him clean up his toys and come in early.

I let out a breath as I watch him, my hands curling into fists. “Is that—I mean are you—”

“Nah, I won’t ruin the rest of your night, Summer,” Kayde chuckles, knowing what I’d intended on asking, apparently. “Like I said, you kind of surprised me here.” His smile is sheepish and innocent.

Like the mask Kayde wears during the day.

It makes my throat burn to see it; to see the easy shift from *monster* to *beloved counselor*.

“So I don’t have too many planned out ideas of what I want from you just yet. I’ll think of some tonight though, don’t worry.” He flashes a grin at me, and I can only stare back at him with narrowed eyes.

“Then, I can go?” Everything in me begs to get away from him. I want to find my bed and jump into it, then pull the covers over my head like he won’t be able to get me that way.

“Hmmm.” Kayde still sounds so fucking playful and sweet that I clench my hands into fists at my sides and just watch him while I hope that nothing about me betrays how I feel about him.

Not that it’s a big secret. He obviously knows I’m certainly not fond of him.

“Well, since you’ve ruined my whole ‘trauma bonding’ plan, how about you at least give me the best part of it?” He unzips the jacket he’s wearing, and shoves the sleeves up over his toned forearms, until they’re bunched in the curve of his elbows. “Let me kiss you.”

That sounds innocent enough. At least, innocent amongst all the terrible, painful things my brain seems intent on conjuring up. Hell, it’s almost a relief when he asks for it, and I dip my head without even stopping to think.

“Okay.” Not like I could say no, anyway.

“A little more enthusiasm on your end wouldn’t hurt.” Kayde laughs, though he’s already stepping into my space again, his hands coming up to my hips. “I’ve been imagining it, you know.” His voice turns to a whisper as he leans forward, nose brushing mine. “How it would feel. How sweet your lips would be.” His mouth nudges mine; asking rather than telling. He kisses me sweetly, mouth insistent as he asks for entrance between my lips.

I don’t have a choice. I give it to him, my own hands move to press against his chest hesitantly, in case this isn’t allowed. But, well, he’d said *enthusiasm*, hadn’t he?

Lost in my thoughts, I miss the subtle change from sweet back to monster. I miss the warmth seeping out of him, until his hands run up my

sides and one of them grabs my jaw harshly, finger and thumb digging hard into my cheeks.

Letting out a cry of surprise, I try to jerk backward, only for his other hand to wind in my tee and drag me forward across the grass, until our bodies are pressed together, and he's able to tilt my head back to meet his wide, feral grin.

"But like I said...you ruined that part of my night," Kayde growls, teeth very white in the near darkness. "So you get this instead, sweetheart. Open your mouth."

I find myself clenching my teeth together hard at the order, though I wince when that just causes his fingers to dig into the muscle there. When he presses harder, it forces my jaw open, and my lips part around a pained gasp that accompanies the wet burn in my eyes.

Kayde doesn't waste any time. Still pressing hard and holding me in place, he *spits*, and I nearly choke when the liquid hits the back of my tongue and seeps into my throat. Every bit of me burns with disgust and humiliation as he does it, but he doesn't release his grip on me, so there's no way for me to do anything except stare at him in horror and try not to choke.

"Swallow." Kayde's kind enough to loosen his grip enough for me to close my mouth, though when I do, my first thought isn't to *swallow*. Still, the look on his face doesn't exactly give me the confidence to spit out his saliva, so while he grips the front of my shirt and keeps his hand on my face, all I can do is what he says.

I fucking *swallow* the searing saliva in my mouth, shuddering as it crawls down my throat.

"I guess it's good enough for tonight," Kayde allows, dragging me back to him until my back is arched and my head is tilted back again. "Though next time, you're going to stick out your tongue and thank me for it, sweetheart. Understand?" In my position and unable to get away, all I can do is nod jerkily and hope he's joking.

"Good girl." His lips brush mine again, and he chuckles while my stomach tries to double knot itself. "I look forward to finding out if I can break you in the next eight days."

As much as I try, I can't hold back the soft, terrified whine that bubbles up my throat, though I lock my teeth around the sound to keep as much of it back as I can.

But it's not good enough. Not when we're body to body like this. Kayde's smile grows, and his eyes seem to glow in the moonlight that filters through the trees. "That's right, darling," he agrees, like I've given him a real, verbal response. "I've been playing this game for years, and you're just getting your feet wet in the kiddie pool. Poor, *poor* Summer. But I can't feel too badly for you..." With that, he licks a quick, hot stripe up my jaw, and shoves me away from him with a laugh on his lips.

"After all, you fucking *volunteered*."

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# CHAPTER SIX



**S**leeping is out of the question. At least, more than a few snatched minutes or maybe an hour before sunrise as I'm curled up under my blankets, like they'll protect me from the boogeyman.

From *Kayde*, who's as much of a real life boogeyman as could ever exist. The night's events run through my mind on repeat as I lie curled up on my soft mattress. And with my eyes shut tight, I can't help but listen to every single noise outside of my cabin.

*What if he lied to me?*

After sitting out on my steps with my flashlight in hand for an hour after we made our deal, I'd been mollified enough to at least head inside and out of the night air. Surely he wouldn't wait this long to carry out his little plan...right?

But the panic of every sound, every possibility that he's outside instead of it just being the breeze on the cabin window, has me jumping all night long and wishing I'd remembered to close my windows.

Though I know for a fact, neither glass nor blankets will save me from *Kayde*.

Too soon, the sun is up and I can hear the girls in my cabin getting themselves up as well. They're loud enough that I can hear snatches of conversation, though nothing concrete, and I stretch my tired, stiff limbs while I listen.

God, I'm tired. Exhausted, really, and more than anything, I just want to go back to bed. Mentally I scan today's schedule, and with a groan I realize

that it's not going to be a very restful day, like it would be if this was a crafts dedicated day.

No, it's *competitive games* day. Well, round one of it, at least. My morning is going to be filled with the kids swimming, and my afternoon is going to be absolute hell.

But at least this year I know better than to wrap the tug-of-war rope around my arm, even if it's loose.

Unfortunately, I still haven't learned how not to walk up to strangers and not suffer the consequences. A groan leaves me, and I press my hand to my face while wishing I could go back to bed. It would be unfair to ask Kinsley to watch my cabin today just so I can catch up on some sorely needed sleep.

But more than that, I need to be out in the camp today. I need to grab Kinsley and hold on to her, while somehow making it known to Kayde that he cannot, under any circumstances, go after her. I need *help*; or to talk to someone. But that's not possible.

Kayde's made sure that's not possible for me, and the sudden, lonely feeling is...harsh. I find myself rubbing my fingers up and down my arms, and I shiver under the touch.

But I need to change. I need to brush my teeth, too, and hopefully giving myself tasks like this will distract me from all the shit that happened in the woods last night. I suck in a breath, then another, and with my nails digging into my skin, I cross the room to open the top drawer of my dresser.

Snatching the first Crestview Counselor t-shirt I can find, I barely even glance down at the material before pulling shorts and a swimsuit out of the other drawers. Quickly I strip, then yank on the clean clothes awkwardly as my brain continues to misfire in every way imaginable.

*I shouldn't have agreed to anything.* That's the main thought going through my brain, and it causes my hands to tremble as I yank the shorts up to my hips. My mind wants to tell me I was stupid, and rash, and that I'd made an awful decision last night.

Maybe I had, but it meant that no one died. And as far as I know, everyone is still safe from him. But I can't help running my words and his over and over again through my head, like a bad indie film on repeat.

All the while, I pretend I can't feel the burning crawl of his saliva in my mouth, or the way it had tasted on my tongue. I swallow around the sudden

thickness, and remind myself of how he humiliated me about calling the police, and the burning, uncomfortable feeling of that.

Not to mention how he's thrilled to have control of me for the rest of this camp session, and how he's looking forward to trying to break me.

*I can't let him do that.*

Finally, my thoughts slam into cohesion. I feel awake for the first time since his kiss; like I'm finally all here instead of drifting somewhere in the woods waiting to be put back together.

I will *not* let Kayde Fucking Lane break me. No matter what he asks—tells—me to do for the next eight days. I can't deny that I'm terrified of him. I can't pretend to be something I'm not. Absently, I reach up, fingers unerringly finding the scar that splits my left brow. I've had it for years, and Kinsley is one of three people who knows where it came from.

The other two, my parents, were in the room when it happened. One of them, my dad, is the reason I have the scar in the first place. My finger skims the shiny, smooth skin and this, at least, is a memory I'm good at pushing away and down under the moldy, stained carpet in my brain that holds a lot more than the one time Dad fucked up my face.

But I'd survived him, and I'll survive Kayde.

*There's no other possibility.*

That's the feeling I let seep through my bones as I square my shoulders and stare at myself in the full-length mirror on my wall. I look tired, that's for sure. With circles under my eyes and my hair an absolute mess. But my hair is easily fixed by a quick brush and tossing it up into a ponytail. The dark circles will have to stay, and I'm sure Darcy will use them later for ammunition.

Especially if she finds out I met up with her man.

Though, in reality, she should thank me for that.

The shirt I'd found is one from earlier this summer. The once-white material is now rainbow tie-dye, and my shorts sit high on my waist, with the hem ending somewhere around the middle of my thighs. Still staring at my tired face, I slide on my sneakers before shoving my way out the door and into the sunlight beyond.

I need coffee if I'm going to survive the next hour, let alone the whole ass day. My feet drag along the dirt, and I know I'm behind the girls from my cabin when I finally make it into Otter Hall, only to stagger to the table I normally occupy with Kinsley and, lately, Liza.

Both of them are there, and the looks of sympathetic confusion I get aren't lost on me as I fall to my ass in the plastic chair. "Coffee," I mutter. "I need it black and injected into my veins post haste."

"Late night?" Liza sounds empathetic when she says it, and I open one eye just to see her hand slip free from Kinsley's on the table.

Well, I guess I wasn't the only one with an eventful night.

I'm just the one that regrets hers the most.

"Didn't sleep. Took over Darcy's walk around," I groan, and barely notice Kinsley getting to her feet to vanish into the kitchen. When she comes back, though, with a mug of black coffee and a plate of French toast, all I can do is moan my thanks and drag the plate closer to me so I don't have to expend as much effort getting it to my mouth.

"I heard Darcy's pissed today," Kinsley mutters, sitting back in her chair.

"Oh, yeah?" I sit up enough to glance around Otter Hall and breathe a short sigh of relief when I see the pissed off, but thankfully still breathing, ex-volleyball player sitting with Daniel on the other side of the room.

She certainly looks displeased.

"Something about Kayde ditching her, I don't know." I take a bite of the French toast Kinsley so helpfully drenched in syrup for me, and groan in approval. "Sucks for her. Though I don't suppose you ran into a nice surprise on your walk?"

The French toast in my mouth instantly turns to ash, and I choke on the bite I've just started to swallow. My whole body jackknifes upward, and as I choke, tears stream down my face.

"Shit, Summer—" Kins jumps to her feet, and even Liza looks worried as I hack up the suddenly too-sweet mouthful. "Are you—"

Arms wrap around my shoulders, and I'm jerked all the way to my feet instead of being bent over the table. "Swallowing works better when you aren't all hunched over or lying down," a familiar, sweet voice chuckles softly. Sure enough, now that I'm standing with my head not perpendicular to my torso, the food slowly makes its way down my throat, though it burns every inch of the way.

But not nearly as painfully as the sear of Kayde's skin against mine where he's touching me. I fight not to move; not to give any outward sign of discomfort as my eyes continue to stream tears. I can't scream. I can't let them know—

“Are you going to give her the Heimlich?” Kins intones, eyes flitting between our faces. There’s something in her eyes, a curiosity I’d so love to discourage. But while I’m gasping for air, I can’t do much more than signal through uneven breaths that something is very wrong.

Unfortunately for me, she doesn’t quite get the message.

“Nah, I think she’s okay.” He’s back to that teeth-aching sweetness. Back to his *Lassie* persona that once had made me grind my teeth in irritation. Now, I wish more than anything that it was his real face, and not just the mask he wears around everyone else.

I’d much prefer boring, predictable Kayde to what he really is.

Still my resolution from this morning flickers to life in my chest, and I force myself to straighten before pulling away from Kayde with my chin raised. “I’m fine,” I tell him coolly, knowing I can’t start acting like I hate him or as though he’s done something to me.

At least not in front of Liza and especially Kinsley.

*I won’t give him any reason to hurt her.*

He lets go of me without protest, still smiling that sunshine-bright grin in front of my poor eyes. My hand finds the coffee mug and, to my credit, I don’t smash it into his face before stabbing him in the throat with the biggest piece I can find.

Instead, I down the entire thing, my eyes never leaving his. It’s not a challenge or a dare. I don’t even know what kind it would be if it was, but still his eyes darken just a touch, and his teeth sink into his full bottom lip as he watches me.

“I have to wrangle my kids,” I tell him kindly, a smile breaking out over my face as I set the mug down. “Before they kill someone.” But the words fall flat. The joke isn’t as funny today as it had been yesterday or the day before.

Because Kayde really might kill someone this week.

“Hey, it’s uh, competitive games day today, right?” he asks, managing to sound like he really doesn’t know. “Our cabins all fight it out for the trophy, yes?”

“Yes,” Liza supplies, getting her tray together and deftly stacking my empty mug and half-empty plate on top of it. “Starting with tug-of-war at two. Then Capture the Flag after. And don’t think you can get out of it,” she adds, grinning. “Counselors with cabins all have to play as well.”

“Oh, right.” Kayde’s eyes never leave mine, and he tips his chin ever-so-slightly as his light brown eyes gleam. “I’m looking forward to playing.”

And somehow, in some way, I’m sure he doesn’t mean whatever games the campers will play this afternoon.

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# CHAPTER SEVEN



“Do I have to tell you not to wrap the rope around your arm again, Summer, or do you think you can withhold yourself from the temptation?” Liza’s voice is crisp while she watches me count the kids in front of me holding onto their handles attached to the thick tug-of-war rope.

“Would it make you feel better to remind me what happens when I do?” I ask, cracking a grin at her that I barely feel. I’m still keyed up, even though it’s been hours since the coffee incident, and while I haven’t seen Kayde much today, it barely helps.

Because he’s still *here*. Still close enough to do damage, and I can’t decide if not knowing exactly where he is makes me feel better or worse.

Probably worse, somehow. Even though I’d prefer to be on opposite continents from him whenever possible.

“Would it make you feel better for me to remind you how miserable you were last time?” Is Liza’s quick, underhanded response. “Don’t be dumb just to get the victory, Summer. Winning isn’t that important.”

“Sure, sure,” I agree, lifting my hand in dismissal. “Winning is totally not that important, right Melody?” The ten year old has wandered closer to our conversation, hands still firmly fixed around her handle as we wait for the other team to get to their side of the grass where their end of the rope waits.

“If don’t win, we might as well never show our faces to the outside world again,” the girl replied stoically, blinking up at Liza like she’s completely serious.

Liza only looks down at her with something like disbelief on her face, along with a bit of amusement she can't hide. "You're a bad influence," she informs me, one finger pointed in my direction. "Don't let them do anything stupid either, got it?" I salute her, and when the action reminds me of Kayde from last night, I immediately wish I hadn't.

"It's Coyote Cabin," Melody remarks from right in front of me, though I don't turn at her words. Instead, I watch—curious more than anything—as Liza joins Kinsley on the ground outside the small area set up for tug-of-war. The cabins not currently competing sit around to observe the battles, and without hesitation, the camp nurse sinks to her knees beside Kinsley, leaning over to say something in my best friend's ear as she does.

Maybe it's just me, but their friendship definitely seems to have changed overnight. I'll have to ask Kinsley about it later, if I get the chance.

"What?" It takes me a moment to process Melody's words, and I glance across the grass to see that she's right. Coyote cabin is taking their places across from us, the boys looking varying levels of worn out but still fiercely competitive.

"We beat them and we win, right?" Melody goes on, her fingers tightening in the handle of the rope.

"Yeah, umm." I kick my brain into high gear and really, *really* consider wrapping the rope around my arms to get some kind of leverage advantage over Kayde.

But I don't want another scar, or to lose a few layers of skin on my forearms.

He barely looks at me once. Instead, he patiently helps the boys with their side of the rope and gets everyone situated and in line. It takes a few minutes; the boys are rowdy from their previous wins and look at the girls of my cabin like this will be the easiest tug of war match they've played all day.

But my girls are ruthless. It's just a shame they aren't *feral* enough for me to set loose on Kayde so they can tear him apart with their sharp little teeth. Still, it makes for a good fantasy, and when I realize I'm smiling at Kayde and his eyes are on mine with bemusement, I don't look away.

It's too pretty of a picture.

Daniel moves to stand in the middle of the grass and looks over both of our teams, a whistle between his lips and sunglasses covering his eyes. He

waits for a moment, watching Kayde move to grip the handles of the rope, then looks from the blond counselor to me.

I nod, and Kayde mirrors the gesture, giving Daniel a quick, confident smile as his boys fidget and make faces at my girls.

Daniel's whistle is sharp, and he springs backward the moment the sound splits through the air, letting go of the flag that's tied in the exact middle of the rope. My girls waste no time in *jerking* backward, and with some pleasure I see two of the boys lose their footing and leverage, and get pulled along the grass.

"Pull!" Melody yells, taking over in the leadership role she prefers. She glares at me as well, turning her head to meet my eyes with her burning, narrowed gaze like I might not be *pulling* with enough fervor.

"Yes ma'am." I laugh, digging my feet into the grass and jerking backward with a redoubled effort. The flag moves a few inches, getting closer to the line on our side of the grass. All we have to do is get the flag over the spray-painted line in the grass, and we win.

But of course, my life is never this easy. At least not when Kayde is around. I hear the boys yell, and the rope stops its movement as the two boys in front finally get to their feet and manage to put their strength into pulling instead of just being dead weight. The rope wavers, and distantly I hear the other campers and counselors cheering for one team or the other. Melody's voice is the loudest, however, as she instructs all of Redtail to try harder and not let Coyote win.

I'd never say it, but the little monster really is my favorite. She'll probably grow up to be wanted in more than one country, but that's okay. The nuclear weapon screaming insults at Coyote in front of me is perfect in her own way.

"We're almost there!" she encourages, and I pull harder, feet slipping in the grass under me. Falling would be a real problem here; I'm our team's anchor and if I hit my face on the ground, I don't know if we'll still win.

But God, Kayde is strong. Coyote's boys aren't exactly impressive by themselves. My girls have beaten them before. But Kayde adds more strength than Daniel used to, and I find myself unable *not* to scowl at him as I wish I could wrap this rope round my waist and jerk backward.

Damn I wish he'd end up on his pretty face in the dirt.

My mouth opens as I suck in heavy breaths, my team managing to take one more step before we're jerked forward three; bringing the flag closer to

the middle than I'd wish. Kayde finds my eyes over the heads of our kids, and a smile curls at the corner of his full lips.

But it's not friendly. Even in front of all these people, he lets a little of that *monster* in him come out to play on his face. There's cruelty in his features, and I can see the knotted muscles in his arms that prove he's not going to let this go without a fight.

*If I can win this, then I'm one step closer to winning our week-long game.*

The thought is sudden and soft, but I swear strength floods me as sweat runs down my face, dangerously close to my eyes. I manage to take a step backward, then one more, until once again the purple flag tied to the rope dangles dangerously close to our sprayed line in the grass.

That is, until Kayde pulls again, the sun shining off his tightly bunched forearms while he steps a few steps back. He never looks away from me, though I see his mouth move like he's talking to the boys.

Seconds later, I figure it must have been some kind of pep talk. The boys of Coyote send up a yell and start pulling and tugging fiercely, their movements sending my girls off balance and throwing one of them to the dirt.

*Crap.*

I'm forced two steps forward, until the flag is past the middle and dangling dangerously close to their line in the grass, instead. I've never been much of a pep talker, but before I can even think of what I would say, Melody is yelling again, reminding the girls of all the reasons they want to win here today.

She's either going to be a world leader or a menace one day, and I have no idea which one.

But with her words and my camper getting back to her feet, we manage to pull the rope enough that the flag balances over the middle once again. My arms *ache*, and I flex my fingers as much as I can around the rope. If I'm getting tired, I know the girls are, too. The boys most likely as well, but Kayde...

Kayde barely looks like we're asking him to do anything strenuous in the least. But he can't beat all of us by himself, so I add my voice to Melody's, cheering on my girls as I manage to take one step back, then another.

At last, the flag hovers only a step away from our line, and I can see the boys growing frantic across from us. Kayde's speaking again, but anything he's saying is completely lost over the cheers coming from the campers encircling the tug-of-war ring.

"Just one more!" Melody all but screams, and something in my blood demands victory here. Not over Coyote Cabin, exactly, like my girls want.

Over Kayde.

My muscles scream and protest; sweat trickling through my hair to gather uncomfortably on my neck. With all of my strength and a moderate amount of strain I pull backward, putting my weight into the rope as well. It's a bad idea if I get jerked forward; I'd get pulled down into the grass just like so many kids have today.

But I don't. I manage to take one small, tiny step instead, and somehow, that's enough. The girls *pull* and the flag jerks toward us, flying over the line and sending three boys to their faces in the grass.

And, as an after effect, causing me to sprawl backward on my ass as well. I yelp, surprised, as the rope falls to the ground and my girls scream in exhilaration, all the while I shake my fingers out and wince at the soreness already building in my thighs from thumping on the grass so hard.

"Good job, Summer," I mutter to myself with a sigh, drawing up my knees and shaking out my arms. "You almost hurt yourself again."

A shadow falls over me, and a calloused palm appears in front of my face, fingers outstretched. "Congratulations," Kayde purrs, holding it there. "Let me help you up. Your girls are impressive."

"They're terrifying." I want to knock his hand away, or stab it with a blade I don't have. But while those options are enticing to me internally, I know that if I don't take his help, someone's going to notice and then it's going to be a *thing*. "You just had to come over here, didn't you?" The words are out before I can shove them back down my throat, and his smile turns a little less friendly.

"Take my hand, Summer," he tells me in a voice that makes it clear this isn't an offer. "Be a good winner. Look like you don't hate me." Those two things are much harder than just taking his hand. But I let my shoulders fall with a sigh and place my hand in his, just for him to easily pull me to my feet quickly enough that a soft gasp escapes my parted lips, and I nearly topple into him.

It's such a close call that I end up with one hand pressed to his chest, fingers splayed, and I wonder if he's done it on purpose. "I don't like you though," I hiss softly, keeping my face neutral and tone oh-so-soft.

It's so much easier out here in the sunlight, when everyone is around, to talk to him normally like this. To let him know just how unhappy I truly am about this whole thing.

As if he doesn't already know.

His fingers tighten on my wrist just enough to make me press my teeth together and wish I could protest. But when I blink up at him again, trying to gather my thoughts, I see his eyes aren't on mine.

Not exactly, anyway. They're fixed just above my eyes, but still on my face, and I find myself reaching up self consciously, the pad of my finger brushing over the scar I know he's staring at.

I expect him to ask. To say *something*, now that I've acknowledged where his attention is fixed, but then his gaze meets mine for real, and he smiles just a little more. "Congratulations on your victory," he concedes, stepping back just in time for the girls of Redtail to swarm me in excitement over their win.

"I hope you're just as prepared for the rest of the game." His eyes glitter as he says it, and while it sounds normal, innocent, and *right*, I know that it's absolutely anything but. He turns back to his boys, patting shoulders and promising they did amazing, but I still can't tear my gaze away from him.

Not when I'm oh so sure he's plotting some kind of revenge on me for later.

# CHAPTER EIGHT



When the rest of the day goes normally, I can't stop the surprise that bubbles to life in my throat. It's hard to watch Kayde get tackled by Daniel during Capture the Flag without wincing and fearing for Daniel's life.

But it's also difficult to remind myself that this smiling, friendly camp counselor really isn't what he pretends to be.

By the time the day is over and the kids are in bed, my fingers are sore from how much I've cracked my knuckles and wrung my hands together nervously. Somehow, Kins never really noticed how on edge I'd been all day.

But then again, she has better things to care about. Like Liza. I'm happy for her, in a way. But in other ways I wish she was more attentive. I wish she'd noticed, or asked, or—

*Well, it's not like I can tell her anyway.*

No matter how much I want to. Because every time I talk to her, I feel Kayde's eyes burning into my spine. Real or imagined, it's enough to send me on my way prematurely every time, until I've turned into a jumpy, tense mess who knows she won't be able to sleep at all.

"Fuck," I mumble, flexing my fingers with a wince. I've got to leave my knuckles alone for the night, unless I want this aching to continue into tomorrow. But it's hard when all I have to do is stand on the little deck leading up to my side of the cabin and stare out at the darkness like something's going to happen.

*God, I hope nothing does.*

My heart pounds in my throat, and I hesitate. Kayde hasn't asked me for anything. Hasn't told me what he wants, or what I'm supposed to be doing to live up to my side of our stupid, awful, irrational deal.

Should I stay here and wait for him? The thought immediately causes me to recoil, and it's hard not to compare myself to a rabbit caught in a trap waiting for the hunter to come and skin her. It's a terrible thought; a bad analogy I want to forget the moment it occurs.

But I'm not going to stand here all night, either. My hesitation lasts only a second longer before I dart into my room, shove my phone into my back pocket, and grab the small shower bag that sits on the small table by the door. There's a towel slung over the table as well, and I grab it to drape it over my shoulder before leaving my small room once again.

Something tugs at me when I'm at the foot of the wooden stairs. My kids aren't *alone*, really. Bobcat Cabin is maybe twenty feet away, and Darcy—for all that she's irresponsible and not particularly reliable for other counselors—would never let the girls commit murder.

Not without her blessing, anyway.

My hurried steps take me to the further away shower house, the one in the trees where most of the campers are a little too skittish to go after dark. When I want privacy, especially for a hot shower, I always go the extra two hundred feet to get it.

Tonight, while no exception, has me jumping at every single shadow and noise from the woods.

*What if he can't find me?* The thought is both reassuring and horrifying as I step into the empty shower house with its five deep stalls. While they aren't five star luxury, this is a summer camp after all, Fink had enough done to the shower houses a few years ago to ensure we got enough hot water for a long shower and stalls that gave everyone as much privacy as possible.

Selfishly, it's one of my favorite things he's done to Camp Crestview. I slip into the farthest shower stall, it's wide enough for me to almost stretch out my arms without touching the walls, and is separated into the shower itself and a small cubicle with a built-in bench and hooks. My towel goes on the bench, along with my shorts and tee, and by the time I've turned on the shower to let it warm up, I'm shivering behind the closed curtain that blocks me off from the rest of the warmly lit bathroom.

Honestly, I prefer this particular shower stall because it's the furthest from the door, only has one neighbor, and the light doesn't quite reach it. Shadows creep along the white tile, and I know once I'm properly in the shower with that curtain shut as well, everything will be blissfully dim so I can close my eyes and just *think*.

Normally, I would relax. This is my alone time, and some of the only me-time I get all summer.

Normally, however, *Kayde* doesn't exist.

I shudder, arms wrapped around my body as I press my thighs together nervously. Goosebumps break out along the skin of my arms as I wait, staring at the steam starting to rise from the water hitting the tile in front of me.

At least I'm alone, right?

My imminent nervous breakdown would be much more embarrassing with an audience, that's for sure. And the silence of the woods is more comforting than nerve-racking. I've always liked the silence and the dark.

I just hope Kayde's bullshit isn't going to ruin it for me.

Finally, when I'm sure the water is near scalding, I step into the stall and pull the curtain closed, plunging the cubicle into shadow that, while bright enough for me to see everything, is still dim enough for my shoulders to droop and a soft sigh to fall from my lips. The water is *hot*, almost too much, and quickly plasters my long auburn hair to my head and shoulders, the soft waves straightening and stretching down my spine like fingers.

I'm going to have to deal with this. With *him*. After my shower, I should find him before he tears the camp apart looking for me. Maybe, if I prove that I'm more serious than he thought I was last night, I can offset some of whatever he wants from me.

Or maybe he was bluffing the whole time.

*Yeah right*, a voice scoffs in my brain, and I can't help the rueful, humorless smirk that pulls at my lips under the hot spray. There's no way he wasn't telling the truth about his plans or what he'd wanted to do. Not with the ax, the cruelty, and—

My eyes slam shut and I press my face against the cool tile under the shower head, letting the water cascade over my back. I have a while. Thirty minutes before the water even starts to cool, and since the day was such a busy one, I'm sure my girls are dead asleep.

Or summoning the devil in my absence.

The water feels too good on my back for me to move, and the darkness behind my eyelids is safer than any other part of Camp Crestview tonight, so I don't open my eyes. My hands flex, uncurling from my shoulders as I press my fingers against the cold tile as well, hoping to give myself an excuse to stop cracking my knuckles and making the ache building there worse.

*I should hurry.* That thought filters through my head even over the mind-numbingly perfect heat of the water on my skin. I have to find Kayde, to make sure he isn't hurting anyone. To see—

The gasp that leaves my throat is closer to a scream than not when fingers curl over my shoulders, digging into my knotted muscles with friendly intent.

“*Shhh.*” A jaw brushes mine, the sound so close to my skin that I feel it sink into me. “Don't be so loud, sweetheart.” The fingers tighten, until they're just on the okay side of painful.

Not that it makes this any better.

My eyes fly open so I can stare at the tile. Though as Kayde pulls back, I jerk my head to the side, gaze wide as I meet his light brown eyes that stare at me from under long, enviable lashes.

There's no trace of *Lassie* in him tonight, however. No, this is the Kayde from the woods. Not the one from the pool the first day I'd met him.

“What are you—?” I'm too shocked to fight him as he lightly urges me to turn, and only belatedly do I remember I'm fucking *naked* in the *shower*. My arms move quickly, wrapping around my chest as I press my thighs together tightly to hide as much as I can from him.

Not that he seems to share the same sentiment. Kayde stands in the shower completely nude, and I force my eyes to stay on his face instead of allowing them to wander like the macabre fascination in my gut whispers for me to do.

“What am I doing here?” His brows raise by increments, incredulous. “Did you forget about our deal? Did Darcy give you memory loss with that tackle during Capture the Flag?” He reaches out, his fingers smoothing over my cheek where I know I still have the barest hint of an abrasion from today's games.

“I thought—I just—” No. This won't work. He steps closer until he's half under the spray, a look of amusement in his darkening gaze. He enjoys my fear too much for me to let this continue.

Sucking in a breath, I curl my fingers against my palms until my nails bite into my skin. The pain is quick and sharp, and it allows me to take one more breath to ground myself before I lift my chin and let my shoulders fall.

“I didn’t expect for you to be so impatient that you had to follow me into the women’s showers,” I say at last, my tone as cold as I can manage.

If I’d expected, or hoped, for my words to shock him or humiliate him, that flies out the window at the quick grin pulling at his mouth. He reaches out once more, fingers splaying around the base of my neck and pushing me until my back hits the tile.

“You know, Summer. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you’re not a fan of me.” His tone is deceptively mild and strangely friendly, but I don’t give him an answer. “I’d think you’re mad at me, instead of looking forward to our little game.”

“What can I say?” I shrug, my arms still crossed over my chest. “I’m all gamed out after today. I’ve had enough of being on my knees in the dirt.”

“What a pity,” Kayde is quick to respond, like he wants to punish me for my words. “Because I haven’t gotten my fill of seeing you there.”

His words prompt me into inhaling sharply, and I wish I could meld with the wall, or pry off a piece of it to smack him with.

“What do you want?” It’s such a stupid question, but I can’t stop myself from asking it anyway. No matter how dumb it feels on my lips, especially when dark amusement is reflected in his gaze.

“You know what I want. What you *told me* you’d give me,” Kayde replies, voice low in his chest. “We made a deal, and I’ve come to collect, sweetheart. It’s not really that complicated.” He doesn’t say it sweetly, or playfully. His words are cruel and condescending; like I really am an idiot asking stupid as fuck questions.

“Yeah, but I didn’t quite expect it in the *shower*,” I hiss back, hoping I don’t sound nearly as terrified as I feel.

*He could kill me.* That thought bounces around in my skull as he looks me over thoughtfully; not even trying to hide that he’s not looking at my face. Unlike me, he apparently doesn’t care about decency or politeness.

Though unlike me, he knew he wasn’t alone when he stripped out of his clothes and stepped into the shower behind me.

“You should expect me everywhere, Summer.” His hand moves, coming up to grip my chin lightly. “Anywhere you are is somewhere I’d love to

play with you. The shower, your cabin, the woods..." He shrugs, his blond hair straight and plastered to his shoulders as he stares down at me. "I'm sure we could think of lots of fun places to play our game."

More than anything, I want to push him away from me. I hate the way his fingers feel gripping my chin. I *hate* the simmering of his warm brown gaze as he stares at me like there's nowhere else he'd rather be. "I've been waiting for this," he murmurs, dragging my attention back to his face from wherever my fantasies of killing him had taken me.

"What?" I blink, taken aback by his words.

"I've been *waiting* for this," Kayde replies in a growl, stepping closer to make the space between us evaporate. I tighten my arms around my chest, heart pounding under my ribs, and try not to let him see how nervous I am.

How nervous *he* makes me.

"I thought you were adorable during tug-of-war," he purrs, his nose brushing my jaw as I try to take a step back and remember I'm already flush with the cold tile wall. His hands move to skim along my hips, but all I can do is stand there and take it. "You and your feral little campers. Did you know one of them growled at my boys?"

"They do that," I whisper, hating the softness of my voice and the way my arms tremble. "They don't like losing."

"They were so *desperate* to win, weren't they?" Kayde agrees sweetly, as his fingers stroke at my forearms before moving to my hands that are tucked against my sides. "Reminds me of someone, actually." Slowly, but without hesitation, Kayde works to unhook my fingers from around my ribs, prying them off one by one until they're clasped around his hands instead of my own body.

When I expect him to push further, however, he doesn't. Kayde's wicked smile darkens as he moves to skim his lips up my neck, along my jaw, until I shudder and grit my teeth together hard enough for the muscles in my jaw to squeak in protest.

"I'd like to see you desperate, I think," Kayde muses, ducking down just enough to brush his lips to mine sweetly. It's a request, not a demand. And that makes it all the worse.

Because he's giving me a *choice*, even though we both know I have no choice at all.

The second time he brushes my lips with his, my fingers tighten around his. I hear a soft sound from between his lips, though before I can even

guess at its intent, I tilt my chin up just enough for him to see my consent for what he wants from me. My lips part just enough, and when his tongue brushes against mine and a low purr echoes from his mouth to my own, I can't help but sigh through my nose and wish this was anyone else in the entire world.

Because Kayde Lane is a damn good kisser.

Even with his hands occupied under my fingers, he manages to urge me to tilt my head back further for him, his teeth and tongue dominate the kiss easily, and so clearly want more. His hands twitch against mine, and I find myself gripping him tighter where his skin presses against mine, hoping he lets go rather than pushes for something more.

But, really, I should know better than to hope.

When Kayde pulls away, it's with a soft growl against my lips. For one terrifying moment, I'm sure he's going to spit in my mouth again, and it's impossible not to remember the slow slide and burn of it from last night. But when his lips curl up into a smile and his gaze turns taunting, I realize that's not on his mind right now.

"Put your arms down, sweetheart," Kayde murmurs, lips a few inches from my ear and words barely audible over the spray.

*I don't want to.*

The words bubble toward my lips, but I swallow them down before they can make it into the air between us. Still I can't help the small shake of my head, though my eyes close hard as soon as I do it.

"Are you telling me no? You want me to stop?" His tone doesn't change. There's no irritation or impatience in his voice. His fingers still skim against as much of my sides as they can while I hold him tight. "If this is too much for you, Summer, I'll leave you alone. I'll walk away."

*Oh, but if only it were that simple.*

I hesitate for too long, however. He pulls away, extracting his fingers from mine, and without hesitation moves toward the shower curtain separating us from the bench with my clothes and the camp outside of the shower house. But I can't let him go, no matter how much the sudden increase to my personal space makes the knot around my heart loosen.

"Wait." A rush of pride floods me when I don't stutter, and my voice even sounds somewhat steady. "I didn't—"

"I told you I'd leave if you said no at any time," Kayde replies, glancing over his shoulder at me with hooded eyes. "If you don't want this, I'm not

going to force you, sweetheart. It was *your* idea to do this...wasn't it?"

"Yeah," I agree, hot water pouring down my body as I step more squarely into the spray so I can reach out and try to grab him if he moves away. "Yeah, I did. I didn't tell you no. I didn't say *stop*." Though it's not like I'm subtle about how much I want him to go away.

And he knows that just as well as I do.

"Come...come back. Don't leave, okay?" My voice wavers, just when I need to sound like I'm sure of this most. But I try to ignore it, and I reach one arm out to him, wishing it was easier to drop the other one when he's looking at me so expectantly.

"I need more than this," Kayde warns, though he isn't moving toward the door anymore. His hand comes up to mine, and he entwines his fingers with mine as he turns back to me, expectant. "Last chance, Summer. Do I stay or go?"

*Go, I want to scream at him, hating how my fingers shake. Go, go, GO—*

"Stay," I whisper, reaching out my other hand. I won't let him leave if I can help it. I won't *let him* kill anyone. And if this is what I have to do to keep him from hurting Kinsley, my campers, or the other counselors, then I'll do it. No matter how much I don't want to.

Butterflies take off in my stomach as I tug him back to the spray, hating the flush of heat in my neck and cheeks as he finally drops his gaze from my face to the rest of me that he can now see. Unexpectedly, a groan sounds out, and the smile that curls his lips isn't malicious or taunting.

"How could I say no, hmm?" Kayde asks, walking me back into the wall until my back is flush with it again. This time he grips my hips, his fingers digging into my skin, before *dragging* his hands up my sides.

"Can I ask you something?" His words catch me off guard, and all I can do is lift one incredulous brow in his direction. He knows he has the power here. He can ask or tell me anything he wants, and I have to take it without complaint.

"What?" I mutter, when it's clear he's waiting for some kind of verbal acknowledgment of the question.

"Aren't you worried I'll hurt you?" His fingers tighten just a bit more, until I'm sure that tomorrow, the pale skin just above my hip bones will be littered with bruises in the shape of his fingerprints. "Summer..." He leans forward, his jaw brushing against mine and causing my breath to hitch in

my throat before he whispers, so sweetly my teeth hurt, “Aren’t you afraid I’ll kill you? You didn’t make me promise not to hurt you. Not to *really* hurt you, sweetheart.” He drags my body away from the wall, just enough that all the space between us disappears.

Suddenly, I’m pressed flush against Kayde Lane, his hands keeping me anchored in place as he pulls away just enough for me to see the completely manic, terrifying grin crawling over his features. “Why in the world would you agree to play with me without even giving me rules, hmm?”

When he doesn’t go on, I realize it’s a real question. He’s actually asking, though it feels like a rhetorical question to me.

“Because...” *I didn’t think about it* is such a bad answer. Kinsley would scream at me if she knew what I’d done, and he’s right. I could’ve—should’ve—put some limitations on this. “Because if I had, if I’d told you what you could or couldn’t do, would you have agreed?” I ask finally, eyes on his.

Kayde, for his part, just looks at me. His grip loosens just a touch, until it doesn’t feel so bruising, and the terrifying, manic smile fades to something more...thoughtful. For a few moments, the only sound in the shower house is the water cascading down on both of us, running over his shoulders and down to where our bodies are pressed together. Where I’m trying *not to think about*.

“Smart girl,” he murmurs at last, a touch of pride in his voice. “But then again, I wouldn’t expect anything else from you, Summer. Otherwise you wouldn’t be my *final girl*. My little lone survivor who so desperately wants to come out of this without too much trauma. Perfect little *sweetheart*.” What starts as praise turns progressively meaner, though his voice retains the same too-friendly edge.

“But you really should know...” He leans forward again, until his lips brush mine with every word. “I’m looking forward to making you *regret* your lack of rules for our game.” Without hesitation he bites down *hard* on my lower lip, and it’s all I can do to hold back a shriek as blood trickles onto my tongue amidst his chuckling purr. I cross my fingers that this is at least somewhat a bluff on his part.

*Even though we both know it really, definitely isn’t.*

# CHAPTER NINE



My heart pounds in my throat as I try to think of a reply. As I try to figure out if there's a way for me to murder him with the shower head, Kayde just fucking stares at me like he can see every little thought going through my head. And hell, maybe I'm just so readable that he absolutely can.

"Cat got your tongue, pretty girl?" he teases at last, sparking both anger and fear in my chest. My fingers dig into my palms at my sides, and I wish I could burn him with the heat of my hatred. His hands move up my sides, smoothing over my skin, and my breath hitching in my throat is just another betrayal on the list of them for the night.

Sure enough, his eyes flick up to mine at the soft, barely audible sound. For the first time, I let my gaze dip, looking at the planes of his chest and the faint outline of muscles in his abdomen. Curiosity pulls my eyes lower, to the sharp v of his hips that I feel like I could cut myself on, if I'm not careful where I press my fingers.

*Not that I want to touch him.*

We're too close for me to see much more than the trail of blond hair that leads dangerously lower, and seeing his tan skin flush to mine just serves to remind me how little space there really is between us. It's hard not to pinpoint exactly where we're pressed together, but I force my gaze away from his body and back up to his face.

"If your goal is ruining my shower, then you're doing a good job of it," I say at last, my words careful and deliberate. "This is definitely my favorite time of the night, and I have maybe fifteen minutes of hot water left." I try

hard not to shift away from him, or look like I even notice all of the places his skin brushes against mine.

It's horrifying.

*It's intoxicating.*

One of his hands comes up to cup my cheek, his thumb running sweetly over my bottom lip as he just fucking *looks* at me. His eyes are as unreadable as always, and shine with something other than the dark amusement that I always seem to find there when we're alone.

"I'm not telling you no," I add quickly, wondering if that's how my words have come across. "I'm not..." For good measure I reach out to grip his wrist in a loose grip. "I'm not telling you to leave. I'm just—"

"Baby girl, I know exactly what you're doing," he assures me. "It's okay to be afraid of me. I'd be concerned if you weren't." God, I hate how supportive he makes such an awful thing sound. "And don't worry." Again he leans forward, brushing his lips to my forehead as he adds, "I'll give you plenty of reasons to be afraid of me over the next few days. I promise."

My mouth opens, though I have no idea what I'm going to say, but the sound of footsteps draws my horrified gaze upward, eyes wide as I stare at Kayde.

"That you, Liza?" Darcy's voice is bored and irritation laces the edges of it.

I don't answer. I can't answer as both of us listen to the sound of her picking a shower stall and turning on the water. At least, until Kayde's brows jerk upward expectantly, a smirk quirking at his lips. *Answer her*, he mouths, and I hesitate.

I can't *not* answer her. I know that. If I don't, there's a good chance she'll come over to see if there's a dead body in the shower, and then she'll find us.

I can't let her find me like this.

"No," I reply a little too quickly, still unable to move, "it's me."

"Oh." Her disappointment is audible, and it's a fight not to roll my eyes. When she doesn't continue, I breathe a soft sigh of relief, wondering how in the world I'm going to get out of here without her noticing Kayde.

Before I can say that, however, or see if Kayde has an idea for us to leave, I realize his hands are moving, circling my waist until he's pushing me flush with the wall.

*Stay*, he mouths, a grin pulling at his lips. My heart rockets into overdrive, and I shake my head at whatever he's planning.

But it's not like he listens to me. Fingers spread, he strokes both palms up over my stomach, fingers tickling at the space over my ribs, causing me to shudder even in the heat of the shower stall. He cups my breasts, eyes on mine, and only belatedly do I realize I'm still holding onto his wrist, though now with a death grip instead of a loose hold.

Kayde leans in, one knee pressing between mine. I try to stop him by pressing my thighs together, but he just tilts his head to the side with a quick roll of his eyes and *shoves*, forcing my thighs to open around his and letting him fit against my body completely.

"Did you hear me?" Darcy's irritation is palpable. "Summer?"

"No," I tell her honestly, eyes on Kayde. "I'm sorry, uh—"

"I asked if you'd seen Kayde tonight."

A smile twitches over Kayde's lips, and he leans in to brush his lips over my throat, unerringly where my pulse pounds the strongest.

"No," I deny, probably too quickly. "No I haven't. I've been in—" My breath hitches again when his thumb rolls over my nipple. When he does it again, I try harder to become one with the wall, only to fail miserably. "In my cabin," I finish lamely.

"Oh." She goes quiet again, and Kayde gives her a moment before leaning in, his lips against my ear.

"Better be quiet, sweetheart," he murmurs, fingers kneading and cupping my breasts and causing me to squirm against the thigh he has shoved between my thighs. "If she sees us...I'll have to kill her."

Already I'm shaking my head, trying to articulate the words from last night, his promise that he wouldn't do this in front of anyone.

But Kayde doesn't seem to care. He kisses down my throat, teeth nipping and grazing against my skin. With his mouth open, it's easier for him to suck and pull marks against the side of my neck that I know will bloom bright purple by tomorrow, judging by the burn he leaves behind.

And I want to hate it.

I want to hate everything about it, yet I feel myself grinding down against his thigh while his mouth and hands convince me that I don't hate this nearly enough. Heat rushes down my spine, and distantly I hear the sound of another shower turning on, and Liza calling something to Darcy before going quiet again.

Kayde's smile against my throat is obvious, especially when he glances up to show me the sheer amusement on his features. Still meeting my eyes, he nips at my collarbone, lightly at first, until finally his teeth sink into my skin, not letting go.

"Fuck." I can't help the soft hiss that comes from my lips, or the way my hand flies up to grip his shoulder. "Kayde—"

He bites harder, his tongue laving over my skin that he holds between his teeth while his grip shifts so he can more easily toy with my nipples. He takes his time pinching and teasing, until I'm nearly lunging off the wall and breathing normally is a myth.

"Summer?" Liza sounds almost perplexed, and I flinch under Kayde when I hear my name. "I missed you tonight after dinner in the staff cabin. Kinsley said you weren't feeling well."

I can feel Kayde pinning me with his gaze, but I can't look at him. I swallow once, then again, and squeeze my eyes shut tight to give myself the ability to answer. "Yeah, sorry. I don't know, something at dinner made me a little nauseous. I feel fine now, though."

"You probably overdid it today," Liza goes on, and Kayde finally releases my skin just to lick over it again and again. The too-sensitive spot prickles under his tongue, causing me to writhe that much harder against his thigh. "During the games, I mean. You tackling her didn't help, Darcy."

"It's a game, Liza," Darcy replies flatly, as Kayde presses one more open-mouthed kiss to the prickling spot on my chest. As I watch, his smirk turns just a little bit more playful, and he noses at my throat before moving to kiss down my chest again.

"Wait," I breathe, suddenly realizing where he's heading. "Kayde, please—" He doesn't listen. He never fucking listens, and seconds later his left hand is gone from my nipple just for him to seal his lips over the sensitive peak and graze his teeth against it.

My legs jerk, but I'm kept in place by his thigh and his hands on my chest. His left hand goes back to stroking my breast, and he finally shakes off my hands to give himself more range of movement. The whimper that leaves me seems to echo between us, but when his fingers sink into my breasts, pulling and cupping and grabbing me tightly so his mouth can have free rein over me, I can barely even remember to try to keep myself somewhat quiet.

"What?" I nearly whine, realizing Darcy has said my name again.

“Did Kayde say anything to you after your tug-of-war match? He was looking at you weird.” Her voice is carefully guarded, like she doesn’t want me knowing how she really feels about the whole thing.

The subject of her words glances up at me from under long lashes, water dripping down his cheeks as he moves to lick at my other nipple, his teeth once again nipping along my skin teasingly and leaving a soft but sharp pain behind.

I can’t do this. I’ve never had someone do this to me, and certainly not in a room with other people who are in danger of dying if I can’t keep my mouth shut. I mouth the word *please* over and over at him, but Kayde just grins and shakes his head before going back to the task he’s so happily engaged in.

“*Summer?*” Darcy prods irritably. “Are you fucking dead over there?”

“I’m just tired,” I snap in reply. “Jesus, Darcy, this is my quiet time.” My eyes squeeze shut at a particularly hard nip that’s definitely going to leave a bruise, and I tip my head back to stare up at the boring, innocent ceiling that’s nowhere near as sinful as Kayde’s face. Suddenly, I’m grateful for how the shower soaking both of us hides the fact I’m probably embarrassingly wet against his thigh that won’t stop moving against my center, no matter how much I try to shift away from him.

“No, he didn’t. Just congratulated me and said my kids are menaces,” I add, when I realize she’s still waiting for her answer. “We’re not friends, okay?”

“But you can’t tell me he isn’t your type,” Darcy points out. “Come on, Summer. I see the way you look at him when he isn’t looking.”

My eyes close hard, and I sigh against the accusation. I don’t need to look down to feel the amusement rolling off of Kayde in waves. “I don’t like him,” I say once more, voice firm. “Now can you please let me go back to zoning out in the hot water?”

“It’s like he just disappears.” I don’t know if she hasn’t heard me, or just doesn’t care, but Darcy keeps talking anyway. “Like last night. He was with Daniel, so I went looking for him. Then I get there and he’s just gone. Not in the staff cabin. Not in his. What the hell does he do with his free time?”

Kayde pulls away, his touches teasing, and licks the tip of his tongue over my nipple, then languidly laps against the stiff, pebbled bud that’s so oversensitive I can’t help but hiss out a breath and writhe against the wall.

"So responsive for me," Kayde whispers, voice nearly inaudible above the running water. He lunges upward, chasing my lips even when I pull away. His hands fall to my hips, mouth slanting against mine in a demanding kiss that's just as bruising as it is insatiable. "Do you like it like this? When you could get caught?" I barely need him to finish the question before I'm shaking my head hard, whimpering into his mouth.

"I think you do," he disagrees. "Otherwise you wouldn't be grinding against my thigh like a needy little slut, baby girl. Is that what you are, hmm? My needy, slutty little camp counselor?" Again I shake my head, just as vehemently as before. "You sure about that?" There's something dangerous lurking under his tone, and I open my eyes to plead silently with him, begging him not to do whatever it is he's planning.

Because I know I'm really not going to like it.

Before I can even register what he's doing, Kayde drops to his knees in the shower, startling a sharp intake of breath from me as he drags my left leg up over his shoulder, urging me to hook my leg against his back. A whimper leaves me, louder than I intend, and I freeze to see if the conversation between Liza and Darcy falters.

But it doesn't, somehow. And Kayde wastes no time kissing down my stomach, his hands on me to keep my thighs apart and my leg over his shoulder. I want to beg him not to. I want to hit him, to force him away from me, and my hands flutter over him, not touching, as I wish I could do *something*.

Kayde glances up, something crosses his gaze, and seems to take pity on me as he grabs my right hand and guides it to his wet, golden hair encouragingly. He holds my wrist, still kissing between my hip bones until finally, cautiously, I curl my fingers in his mass of curly hair.

That earns me a purr, and a nip against my skin that has me shuddering, before his hand drops back down to my thigh, digging in hard enough to leave more marks.

"It's not that I like his personality." I tune back in just as Darcy starts on her rant about Kayde, and wish I was anywhere but here. "It's that I like his face. I want to sit on his face," Darcy adds, earning a quick sound of disgust from Liza.

Kayde seems to preen under her words, and tilts his head as if he's listening while his fingers stroke up the inside of my thigh, running along the too-sensitive skin there. Lazily he finds my eyes with his gaze, watching

me as his fingers wander further upward until finally they're stroking directly over my slit, teasingly sliding between my folds just enough to make me shudder.

"Kayde..." I whisper, trailing off when I realize I have no idea what to say or ask for. He tilts his head, still stroking along my slit, but all I can do is shake my head, teeth sinking into my lower lip as I resign myself to what's definitely considered inhumane torture.

Sure enough, he leans forward, breath hot against my center as he presses open-mouthed kisses between my thighs. His lips are soft when they trace my slit, and his hand moves to spread my slit wide for him, giving him better access as my hand curls in his wet hair.

The moment his tongue flicks against my clit, my hips buck forward, and I find myself murmuring *Sorry* under my breath, though I don't know if he can even hear me. But if I thought it might have bothered him, the chuckle I feel against my body tells me something completely different. His hands disappear, one of them coming back to wrap around my thigh that's supporting me and holding me in place. The other runs up the inside of my other thigh, just as his tongue licks a long, hot stripe up my slit and nearly makes me scream.

My free hand comes up to my face, and I stuff my wrist in my mouth, biting down the moment I feel his tongue slip between my folds to tease and toy with my clit, again. He doesn't give me any warning, and doesn't even pause as he alternates between scraping his teeth against it and licking soothingly over me.

Instead, my grip tightens, and I lock my arm before I do something stupid like pull him tighter against me as pleasure courses through my veins.

A brush of his fingers against my entrance is all the notice I get before he slides two long fingers into me, barely giving me a chance to adjust to the intrusion before he's curling them forward and rocking them in and out of my body. His mouth doesn't stop as he does, teeth feeling sharp and scorching with every scrape against me.

When a third finger enters me, I bite down harder on my arm, eyes screwed shut and the conversation going on in the shower house overwhelmed by the roaring in my ears. I squirm against the wall, my heel digging into Kayde's shoulder harshly. A soft sob escapes me, somehow going unnoticed, and at a particularly sharp nip to my inner thigh, I find

myself unable to stop myself from looking down at him, eyes wide and begging for help.

Kayde pauses, a smile tugging at his lips. He nods, and releases my thigh to press one finger to his lips. With my eyes on his he leans in once more, but instead of licking or nipping, he unerringly finds my swollen clit once more with his tongue and teeth, seals his lips around it, and pulls.

I nearly come apart on the spot. Especially when his teeth join in and he's sucking and nipping at the most sensitive part of my body, hard enough for me to see stars. Softly I beg him to stop, voiceless pleas mouthed against my wrist that I'm too afraid to pull away from my face in case I need to scream.

But it's quickly becoming too much. My breaths are coming faster, and my chest is heaving, until at last—when I'm sure I'm going to either rip his hair out or scream—Kayde suddenly gets to his feet, hands coming up to cup my face as he crushes his mouth to mine and forces his tongue between my lips. My wrist is knocked aside as he does, and he gathers both my wrists in one hand to shove them into the wall over my head, pulling a sharp breath from my throat.

"Be quiet for me, sweetheart," he purrs against my lips, coaxing them open once more as heat curls in my belly and I fight to stand still. "Can't let them hear you. Can't let them find us..." His fingers slide against my folds again, and he ignores my whimper of protest to shove all three back into me, his thumb sliding hard against my clit as he fucks me on three fingers.

"Kayde..." My voice is soft but desperate, a hiccuping breath as he leans forward to claim my mouth once more.

"No, none of that," he admonishes in a whisper. "Don't be loud. Don't be obvious." His movements pick up, fingers moving in and out of my soaked cunt fast enough that I swear I can *hear* the wet, desperate sounds my body makes for him.

"I can't—"

"Yes you can." He noses at my jaw, urging me to lean back fully against the wall. "Yes you can, Summer. You don't want me to *kill them*, do you?" It hits me that he's turned on by this. By the threat of killing them if they find us. "I'll have to make you watch, sweetheart." There's nothing hesitant in his tone. Nothing resigned, and I hear the tremor of amusement.

"You'll have to watch me kill them. Darcy first...then Liza." His thumb moves across my clit, and I whimper, face falling forward against his

shoulder. “There you go. Use me to muffle yourself. Bite down, Summer. You can’t make a sound if you don’t want to watch me tear them apart.”

I shake my head harder, drawing a breathy chuckle from him. “No, we don’t want that, do we? I’ll make it fast, though. If I have to kill them. I’ll make it fast but Summer, fuck, sweetheart, if you make me kill them because they find you, then I’m going to go further tonight than I’d planned. I won’t be able to hold back with you. Not when your sweet, greedy pussy wants more than my fingers so badly.” I shake my head at his words, trying to deny them over and over in my head. My teeth sink into his shoulder as heat and electricity build at the base of my spine, and a soft whine is all the warning I can really give him.

“Go on and come for me. You’re being so good,” he whispers against my ear. “So keep it up for me. Come for me, Summer. I know how much you want to. Your pretty pussy is fluttering around my fingers and you *need* it, don’t you baby?” He picks up his fingers’ pace, until he’s nearly slamming into me as his thumb rubs and strokes mercilessly over my clit.

But I *can’t*.

*Not for him.*

At least, until his lips brush my ear, his teeth nipping at the delicate skin there before he whispers, barely audible above my pounding heart, “Come for me before I make you scream just so I can fuck you while their blood dries on this goddamn floor, Summer.”

That shouldn’t do it.

It should horrify me and bring me back from the edge I’m hovering over, and *yet*—

With a muffled cry against his shoulder, I stiffen. My release tears through me, drawn out by the thrusting of his fingers and the soft praise against my ear. I can barely hear anything over the rush in my ears, and I can barely think when my brain is trying to go offline with pleasure.

But even as he drags out my release further, I can feel myself becoming overstimulated. Pleasure becomes pain, and I pull away from him to meet his eyes, hoping that I can convey with a look that I need him to *pleasegodstop*.

Seconds later my hands are released, and Kayde shoves his fingers into my mouth, curling them against my tongue with a pointed look that he keeps until I hesitantly flick my tongue against them, tasting my own

release there. “Clean them off,” he tells me, as I distantly realize the other showers have been shut off.

“Like I said, I’m not asking to be his best friend, or his wife,” Darcy is telling Liza, seconds before Kayde shoves me down to my knees on the hard tile. “I just want to *fuck* him.”

His fingers card through my wet hair, his other hand curling around his impressive length that, until now, I haven’t gotten a good look at. But it’s impossible now to look away from the curved shaft or the head that leaks pre-cum against his fingers as he roughly drags his fingers up and down.

“You think he’s that good just by looking at him?” Liza snorts, sounding closer to the door. “I think you overestimate him.”

When Kayde taps my cheek, I don’t need to ask to know what he wants. But I hesitate anyway, until his brows lift just enough to show me he isn’t joking, and his breath hitches into soft, open-mouthed pants.

Hesitantly, I open my mouth, cheeks burning as I stick out my tongue and close my eyes hard against the sight above me that makes my stomach twist and turn, while causing the adrenaline in my veins itch for me to do *something*.

“We’ll see.” Darcy gives a soft chuckle. “I doubt he’s mean or selfish. I doubt he’s into any *weird* shit.” A soft groan meets my ears, and I flinch when the first drops of his release land on my cheek. The next lands on my tongue, and I nearly choke as cum trickles from my tongue into my mouth.

“If you say so.” Liza’s voice echoes, and I hear the outside door open. “Good night, Summer. See you tomorrow.”

“Night,” Darcy adds, just as Kayde’s grip tightens in my hair, forcing my head further back.

It takes me a moment, but I make some sort of noise of assent that must be good enough, because the shower house door swings shut just in time for Kayde’s growl to meet my ears.

“Keep your mouth open,” he orders, voice soft still. I don’t need to open my eyes to know what’s coming this time, either, but I flinch when spit joins the mess of cum in my mouth, mixing with it and causing my stomach to twist in protest. “Good girl, Summer. You know what to do.”

*But I don’t want to.*

Not that he cares, clearly. Hesitantly I close my mouth, eyes opening again as I swallow the mess of cum and spit he’s so kindly given me. Only

then does his grip loosen, but when I try to pull away, his brows raise expectantly, and he doesn't let me go anywhere at all.

“Th—” The words don’t want to come out. I’m so vehemently opposed to them that they *scorch* my throat as I finally manage to hiss, “Thank you,” in a less than convincing voice.

“You’re more than welcome,” he assures me, dragging me back up to my feet. He surprises me, however, when he wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me against him, my face pressed against his shoulder as he supports most of my weight on his chest and smooths a hand down my back.

“You were so good for me, sweetheart,” my ax murderer whispers against my hair, just over the sound of the water. “Just relax for me, baby. I’ve got you.”

Somehow, this is just as bad as everything else. My hands curl against his chest, eyes clenching shut again as I stand there against him, held up like a lover, and shudder with something that’s close enough to revulsion and fear that if it’s something else, I sure as hell can’t tell the difference.

“I hate you,” I whisper against his tanned, perfect skin, breathing in open-mouthed pants. “I hate you *so much*. ”

“I know, Summer.” His hands shift down to my hips, just to wrap around me again and hold me close in his embrace like he really gives a damn. “But if you didn’t, then this wouldn’t be nearly as fun for me.”

# CHAPTER TEN



**S**urprise trickles through my brain when I open my eyes in my cabin to stare at the ceiling. Had I actually, somehow, managed to sleep last night? I must have, given I don't remember the sun rising and I feel more well rested than I would if I hadn't closed my eyes at all.

I turn onto my side, legs curled up to my chest as I glare out the small window that's mostly covered by a slightly dusty, navy curtain. I wish last night had been a dream. A nightmare, to be more accurate, but still...

Whenever I close my eyes, I can't help but see the memory of the showers. I can't help but run through every single *moment* in my head even as I curl even more tightly into a ball under my blankets. I know the second I get up and look in the mirror I'll see the bruises that had already been blooming when I'd stumbled back to my cabin. And any hope that it was a dream will be chased away with the last dredges of sleep still trying to pull me under.

Somehow, I've managed to wake up ten minutes before my alarm. Instead of laying on my pillow until the last possible moment, I swing myself to my feet and stretch, arms linked above my head and going on tiptoe to work the kinks out of my muscles. Sure enough, the small look I get of my side in the mirror shows me that Kayde left as many marks on me as he could.

As if he *wants* me to squirm and be uncomfortable when remembering last night.

*As if he wants to make sure I can't forget.*

“I hate it here,” I murmur in a sing-song voice, changing out of my oversized tee and boyshorts. From my dresser I pull out another Camp Crestview t-shirt from the mountain of them I’ve collected over the years, and I shake out the bright red fabric before slipping it on over my head. Thankfully, by the time my black running shorts and sneakers are on, I’m more awake and not as dragged down by the memory of last night as I had been when I first woke up.

At least...not until I give myself a once over in the large mirror near the foot of my bed. My fingers wander up to my throat, stroking over the bruised flesh above my collarbones. Anyone with eyes will know that the bruises are hickeys, and I don’t have any makeup to cover it.

“God,” I sigh, closing my eyes hard. I can already hear Kinsley’s questions, and if Darcy finds out, then I’ll be deader than I’ll probably be at the end of this summer camp session. No, I have to do something about them before that can happen.

And, unfortunately, Band-Aids turn out to be my only option. I slap three of them over my throat, covering most of the bruising even though some of the lighter, mottled red and purple still shows around the edges. But the bandages obscure the shape enough to give some doubt about what they are, and there’s no way I won’t be able to explain it away to anyone who asks.

I just hope no one asks.

*What will Kayde think?*

The thought bounces around my head suddenly, causing me to freeze in place even as I hear the girls in my cabin talking as they get ready. They’re better at getting up on time than I am, and I know I can’t let them have too much independence if I don’t want them setting something, or more likely someone, on fire.

“Please kill Kayde this week,” I mutter, putting that out into the universe just in case something is listening. “Please, Melody, if you’re going to turn the other girls feral and commit your first murder, please let it be Kayde.” It’s not like I’d miss him. Hell, if he is what he says he is, I don’t know if *anyone* would miss him.

Once my hair is up, I leave my cabin and close the door behind me, then stride to the door that leads to the girls’ bunks and knock on the wall. “I know you’re up,” I call, hands on my hips. “Ready to go raid the dining hall?”

The words are barely out of my mouth before the door is slammed open, nearly bouncing back on its hinges and causing me to give a sympathetic wince. Naturally, Melody is out first. The pack of girls that follow her always seem to bow to whatever innate dominance the girl possesses as she marches them toward the dining hall with a giggle in the ear of one of her friends.

I follow behind them, glancing toward the other cabins to see if any other kids are headed the same way just yet. Admittedly this is a little early for us. But this morning, I don't care. I'm wired, as much as I hate it, and it's hard for me to limit myself to clenching and unclenching my hands in my pockets.

"What?" I blink, realizing the girls are talking to me, and when I glance at them, I see they're all clustered around me, keeping me from going further. "Did you say something?"

Judging by Melody's look, it was her. Sure enough, she frowns like I've inconvenienced her by not giving her my constant attention, then taps the side of her throat. "What happened to your neck, Summer?" she asks, eyes wide with a concern I almost believe.

"Umm..." I hate how observant she is, and I reach up to brush my fingers over the Band-Aids. "Yeah. I fell," I lie lamely, not knowing what else to say.

"On your *neck*?" Clearly, Melody doesn't believe me in the least, and I roll my eyes at her incredulous look.

"Not exactly, but close enough. It was outside after you guys were *hopefully* asleep. I fell, my neck found the rocks, and boom. Bruises." I wiggle my fingers in front of me like jazz hands, trying to use my own sarcasm to push the point past being argued.

She doesn't believe me. That's clear by the look on her face, and the way she narrows her eyes shrewdly, like she's trying to catch me in a lie. But I'm used to Melody by now, so I just narrow my eyes right back and will her to start heading for the dining hall again.

Thankfully, she just shrugs, apparently losing interest in my spontaneous injuries before trudging towards the food and *coffee* I desperately need right now.

My feet scuff in the gravel as we go, and it's hard not to look like a pouting child when I make my way into the dining hall behind my cabin of

girls. I swipe a mug and quickly fill it with black coffee topped off by the smallest amount of cream.

It's not enough. Especially since I've finished the searing liquid by the time I have my plate in hand and I'm striding for one of the counselors' tables.

The one without Kayde, naturally. It doesn't surprise me that he's already there, and it shocks me even less that he's a social fucking butterfly with the counselors sharing his table. Thankfully, that doesn't include Kinsley, who sits at the other one with Liza on her far side.

It feels almost like I'm intruding, since it's clear they each harbor an equal crush on the other. I slow my steps, looking at the way Liza and Kinsley sit close together, and a pang goes through my chest when Kinsley giggles and shifts just a little closer to the camp nurse.

I'm *jealous*.

Safe in my own thoughts, I can admit the shock that travels up my spine is pure jealousy at its finest. Not specifically of Liza; I don't have a crush on either of them and Kinsley has assured me that while she thinks I'm 'cute,' I'm not her type either.

I'm just jealous of this thing that's building between them. It's new, and delicate, but sweet and I mentally cross my fingers and toes that it works out. Kins has been crushing on Liza for a couple of years now, and while I have no idea what finally gave her the confidence to take things a step past friendship, I'm thrilled for her. She deserves this.

But apparently *I don't*.

No, I deserve Kayde fucking Lane, who trapped me in a shower stall last night. *I* apparently deserve a serial killer dead set on breaking me and murdering the entire camp for shits and giggles.

Instead of hand holding and sweet smiles, instead of being oblivious to the people around me, I get *him*. And God, I'd take anyone else. Except, maybe Darcy. But that's just personal preference and because her face irritates me when she's trying oh so hard not to say something nasty and failing miserably at it.

"Everything good, Summer?" The voice that drifts into my left ear and halts my mental rambling is soft, and I swear I can feel Kayde's warm breath on my skin as my fingers tighten on my plate. "You're kind of just staring off—"

“I’m fine,” I lie, cutting him off before he can finish. I don’t need to look at him to know how close he’s standing, or that his attention is solely fixed on me. My stomach twists, hunger being replaced by a low simmer of nausea that slowly bubbles up my chest. “What do you want?”

“What do *I* want?” He leans away a little, and when I risk a glance his way, I see his eyes are wide in mock hurt. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay. And to see if you knew you were staring at them like you’re about to cry.” There’s something under his words that I don’t look into, though I do give him a more direct glance as my lips quirk down into a frown.

“I’m not going to cry.”

“Are you jealous of their little romance?” The guess is so accurate that I rock back on my heels slightly, my face falling and giving him exactly what he’s looking for.

The honesty that I’d planned on keeping from everyone. Kins included.

“Oh...” His face falls into bemusement, like I’ve truly surprised him. “You actually *are*? You want that?” He tilts his head subtly in their direction, eyes glittering with something like mild shock.

“So what if I do?” My chin rises in challenge, and one of his brows raises incredulously. “Is it such a bad thing to want something like that? Where they don’t care if anyone is looking, or about anything other than each other for a few minutes?” My mouth runs onward without my permission, and I hate how I feel like I have to squirm under his piercing gaze.

“Hmm.” He looks at them again, both of my friends still oblivious, then back at me with a shrewd, sly expression replacing the bemusement. “Well all you had to do was say so, Summer. I can adapt.”

I can *feel* the shock on my face, and the way I almost drop my plate at his words. “No, I don’t—I mean we’re not—”

“You don’t have to be embarrassed,” he cuts me off smoothly, like I’m not even fucking talking. “We all have our guilty pleasures or things that we want in a relationship.”

“We’re not in a relationship.”

“Oh, sweetheart. We are in the *best* kind of relationship.” For just a moment I see the flash of his true self under the Lassie facade, and my heart plummets to the floor in a futile escape attempt. “You should eat.” His eyes flick down to my plate, then back up to my face. “Someone said we’re

doing the obstacle course today, I think? Seems like you'll want to be on top of your game for that.”

While I don't have an answer ready, I find my mouth opening anyway, and I'm sure I'll insult him in a way that will get everyone killed including me. But then Kinsley's voice carries my name across the ten or so feet separating us, a question in her voice.

Both Kayde and I turn to look at her, and I immediately school my face into neutrality. Really, it's the best I can do, given the circumstances, and I must succeed since neither of them look suspicious.

“Sorry, Kins,” Kayde apologizes, speaking before I can. “I didn't mean to steal her from you guys. Make her eat, okay?” He laughs and tilts his head at my plate. “She's trying to tell me she can just live off of coffee, and that seems super unhealthy.” Playfully he nudges my arm, and the touch makes me want to both shiver and scrub at my skin until all trace of him is gone. “Later girls.” He barely gives them time to return the sentiment, before Kayde is striding off into the kitchen, plate and glass in his hands.

“...Summer?” Kinsley's voice is careful this time, and she glances at me like she's finally understanding that something might be wrong. “You going to sit down?”

*I should tell her.*

The thought quickly sours and I shake my head to clear it before sliding into the seat opposite her. “I'm all good,” I lie, trying to assure them of the falsehood. “And before you start in on me, I swear I'm going to eat.” I laugh, flopping back in my chair after resting my plate on the table. “So don't give me that look, Mother Liza.”

The nurse smiles, holding up a hand in surrender as she sips her coffee. “I would never *parent* you into better health, Summer,” she promises with a laugh. “I'll just keep extra bandages around for when you inevitably injure yourself doing something stupid like swinging from the trees by a vine.”

Kinsley laughs at the accurate assumption, but I just make a face and bring my second mug of coffee up to my lips, prepared to down it just as quickly as the first.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN



If there's anywhere that Liza's prediction of self-induced injury will come true, it's definitely on the obstacle course. As Mr. Fink's favorite part of the camp and the part of it he's probably put too much work into, the obstacle course could probably be used for army recruits, as well as feral ten-year-olds.

Small obstacles dot one side of the clearing, most of them just requiring the person on them to balance or jump or maybe cross some monkey bars while dangling a few inches over the ground. But the other side of the clearing is dedicated to the rope course. Bridges, knotted climbing ropes, and even a small zip line are attached to both the ground and the trees, and I know the kids are eyeing the course with excitement and fear on their faces.

Some of them probably remember me snapping my arm here last year when I'd made the questionable choice of going across the bridge without a harness on. Whatever Tarzan-fantasy had been living in my head that week was quickly snuffed out the moment I'd cracked my wrist on the hard ground. If I needed any more discouragement from doing it again, Kinsley's lecture while I'd gotten my arm splinted definitely did it.

This year, I'm already wearing my harness. The bright pink straps criss-cross over my clothes as I fold my arms over my chest, hip cocked to the side while I watch Kinsley's cabin scramble over the ground obstacles. It's not timed, exactly. Though each cabin gets a certain amount of time on both sides of the clearing and the goal is to get them confident in what they're doing before the end of the day.

Half of my cabin doesn't have that problem. Melody has, of course, rallied the girls into a shivering, soft excitement. And they'd all put their harnesses and helmets on without complaint. Sometimes they terrify me, and I seem to be the only counselor who got lucky enough to get the kids that want to be the best at any cost.

At least they haven't killed anyone yet. Though, by the way they've been eyeing up a couple of the boys in Kayde's cabin who had the audacity to mock the high-pitched voice of Sophie, a girl who's new to Camp Crestview this year, I'm not holding out hope that it won't happen.

Maybe they'll accidentally murder Kayde instead. Surely even if they just injure him, I can't be held at fault for that. After all, I can't be *everywhere* or see *everything*. Though, the fierce protectiveness that bubbles in my chest at the idea of Kayde hurting them surprises me a little, and I find myself glancing over at the counselor who's currently waiting for the rope course with his boys.

It's a good chance to study him. Even just for a moment. He isn't looking at me, as he calls encouragement to the boys already on the course. He's wearing a black harness over his clothes, and the way he'd handled the straps and buckles make me think he's definitely done this before, even if his stories about being a counselor somewhere else are fake. Not that I know they are for certain, but...

Well, why would a serial killer *actually* want to be a summer camp counselor? The only reason he's here is for murder. He doesn't give a damn about these kids, and seeing him there, acting like he does, causes my skin to itch and gooseflesh to break out over my arms. Unconsciously I rub at my arms, fingers digging occasionally into my skin as I stare at him, unable to tear my gaze away from his profile.

He really is, unfortunately, gorgeous. The sounds around me seem to fade a little, and the memories from last night flood back to me. How the tile had felt on my knees. How his cum had tasted in my mouth.

If asked, I would say without hesitation how much I'd hated it. That I'd gone back to my cabin and forced myself to vomit to get any trace of Kayde off of me and *out* of me.

But that's...not quite the case.

When I blink, I realize Kayde is looking at me. Not straight on, and I wouldn't notice it if not for the tilt of his chin and the way one of his brows is quirked just so. I doubt anyone else knows his attention is somewhere

other than on the obstacle course, and before I can stop myself, I stride over to stand beside him, smiling like anger and fear aren't swimming to life in my chest.

"You're staring," he murmurs, still keeping most of his focus on the boys on the course as they finish up. "Is it because you like looking at me, sweetheart?"

"No," I assure him, hating that I *do* like how he looks. "I was just thinking, is all."

"What about?"

My smile becomes absolutely beatific when he meets my eyes, and in the sweetest voice I can muster I say without stopping to think, "About the likelihood of you falling off that course and snapping your neck on the ground."

He's quiet for long enough that I worry he's actually mad. My lips part again to make some kind of apology, to keep him from going on the murder rampage he'd promised that first night if I didn't agree to this fucked up game.

But he cuts me off with a soft laugh before I can speak, shaking his head as he finally gives me his full attention. "I love it when you surprise me with your backbone, Summer. Most people wouldn't want to upset me given our"—he looks around dramatically, then back at me—"circumstances. But not you. You just can't help yourself, can you?" He reaches up, glances over my shoulder, then drops his hand to his side. "You're lucky I'm nice," he informs me, as the last boy clammers down the ladder. "Darcy's looking, and if I touch you, she might kill you. Since I don't want to lose my favorite toy..." he trails off, but I get the point.

"Gosh, but you're just so wonderful," I reply, still in that dandy, friendly tone. "Glad you're looking out for me."

"I know you are," he replies, just as sweetly. "Just a word of warning, Summer?"

"If it's to actually clip my harness to the line, I've got that covered—"

"Don't start something you don't want me to finish later. Night isn't that far away, and I don't have to be as *nice* as I was in the shower." His smile is winning and bright, and he winks at me before striding away, giving his campers his full attention while answering a couple of quick questions.

I just suck in a breath and watch him go, wondering if I've made a mistake in how bold I was. But at the same time, knowing that nothing in

this world will keep me from opening my mouth when I shouldn't.

Not even a serial killer, *apparently*.

With my eyes glued on Coyote cabin, I barely notice when the other side of the clearing, the side with the ground obstacles, is free for my girls. It takes Melody poking my arm, something that makes me squeak in surprise and pain, before I look over to see that she and the other girls are chomping at the bit to get on the course.

"Sorry, sorry," I sigh, throwing my hands up in surrender. I shoo them onto the course, not that it takes much, and follow behind them across the first obstacle, a series of low posts sticking out of the ground that need to be hopped between.

For me, the distance is minuscule enough that I can take long steps between them without actually hopping. For my girls, who are a good foot shorter, it's an actual hop. Melody makes it on the first try, though two of the girls return the beginning, red-faced and frustrated even after I remind them it's not a race.

Though telling my cabin this isn't a competition is a worthless endeavor when *everything* is competitive to them. Including making s'mores, somehow. So instead of cautioning them to slow down, I try to prevent any long lasting damage or murder of another cabin as they complete the ground obstacles before pausing in the area before the rope course.

Sure enough, Kayde is just finishing up with his cabin when my eyes find him halfway up a tree, strapped in his harness and coaxing the last boy down the handholds nailed into the trunk. There's no danger for either of them, with their harnesses clipped and strapped, but even some of the counselors get woozy on the higher obstacles.

I watch as he wraps an arm around the boy, who shakes like a leaf and buries his face in Kayde's shirt, before the blond counselor slowly works them both down the tree, being careful not to let go of his camper.

It looks so...*sweet*. He seems helpful like this, when he's playing at being the counselor he isn't. Even when they're on the ground he gives the boy a few seconds to get his bearings before releasing him, prompting him to see they're on solid ground. Deftly, he unclips the boy's harness, then his own, before walking him back over to the rest of the cabin, where his friends wait.

Even *they're* being supportive, which is something I don't always see from the boys here at Crestview. And, frankly, sometimes the girls too. My

cabin, for all that they're a united force allied to hunt down any opposition and snuff it out, would probably kick a weak link off of the proverbial island if it came down to that or winning something they've decided is a competition.

"It's not a *race*." My eyes land on Melody, the ringleader for Redtail. I've been her counselor long enough to know that if I can convince her, I'll convince everyone of that. Or at least if she's too intimidated to do something stupid, the others won't either.

But she hasn't been intimidated by me since she was nine, and today is no exception. With a grin on her lips and a mock salute in my direction, she clips her harness onto the safety line with practiced ease and barely waits for me to check it before she's scrambling up onto the first platform, ready to walk the rope bridge to the other side. That's if she doesn't just lunge the distance instead.

"I don't think she's listening," another girl, who's spending her first year at Camp Crestview, whispers as I check her harness.

"It's okay," I tell her, a crooked smile on my lips. "She never really does. Just, you know, don't follow in her footsteps, okay? No need for you to go swinging like Tarzan your first time up there."

The girl smiles, nervous, and takes a deep breath before she heads up the ladder to the platform with the others, obviously determined not to be left behind.

Not that I can blame her.

With my attention fixed on the light rope burns on my hands that could've definitely been prevented if I had been smart enough to wear my gloves instead of stuffing them in my pocket, I don't notice the footsteps until a twig cracks right behind me.

I jump, twisting around on my log seat in front of the snapping fire with suspicion bubbling up my throat. The sun is setting, and I'm sure after today Kayde is just *salivating* for his chance at making my night miserable. If sneaking up on me is how it starts, then it's definitely going to be bad.

But the person who sits on the log beside me isn't Kayde.

It's Kinsley.

She offers me a soft smile and wraps her arms around her knees, drawing them up to her chest as she stares at the small campfire outside of the staff cabin. It's not nearly as big as the ones we build for the campers,

and we rarely cook anything here other than trash. But the light from the flames plays over her face, casting harsh relief on her expression and making it look almost sinister in the dimness.

“Hi,” I greet, dropping my hands to my lap after one more flex. “Your camper okay? The one who tripped off of the log jumps?”

She makes a face at that, and leans into me with a groan. “I really thought she broke her arm,” she admits. “But Liza says it’s fine, and Tara, that’s my camper, says it doesn’t hurt anymore.” I feel her shrug, and her sharp sigh against my shoulder. “I owe you an apology, though.”

“Me?” My eyebrows jump for my bangs, and I turn to look down at her. “For *what*? If you mean Melody being in my cabin again, I think it’s just fate that I get the little murderer-to-be—”

“I mean that I’ve been distant for the past few days,” Kinsley is quick to interrupt. “I’m your best friend, and I’ve been kind of shitty. I didn’t even ask what happened to your damn *neck*. I had to find out from *Kayde*.” She looks at me with a pinched, apologetic expression as I swallow back my horror.

*Kayde* had told her what had happened to my neck?

“What did he say?” I keep my voice as level as I can, and watch her grimace with guarded hope. Surely if he’d been honest, she’d be freaking out right now.

“That you fell when he startled you last night. Said you guys came out of the showers around the same time, he called your name, and you tripped in surprise.” Her eyes find mine, still glinting with apology. “I should’ve asked this morning. I’m a bad friend.”

“You’re not a bad friend.” My heart flutters in my chest, and I lean against her the same way she leans on me. “You’re my *best friend*. And you’re in love. How’s that going, anyway? You guys were adorable this morning.”

From the corner of my eye I can just make out the red staining her cheeks courtesy of the fire light, and Kinsley shifts nervously against me. “I like her more than I’ve ever liked anyone,” she admits softly. “I didn’t think I’d be this nuts for Liza.”

“Seems like she’s just as nuts for you?”

“Yeah.” Kins bites her lip, then reaches out to grip my hand in hers. “You’d tell me if something was wrong, right? Even though I can be a little oblivious and stupid?”

“You’re in your *summer love* phase,” I tease her gently. “You’re not stupid.” My fingers curl around hers, and the words I so want to tell her bubble to life in my throat. She’d help me. She’d do something stupid, probably, like commit a crime. But together we could get out of the situation I’ve gotten myself into.

*Or Kayde would kill her.*

My brain takes that moment to conjure up the idea of her dead, chopped to pieces, and strewn around the camp for me to find. My heart picks up, stomach turning along with it, and I suck in a deep breath to try to fight back the sudden nausea.

She must pick up on something, because Kinsley sits up. There’s a question in her eyes as she leans her shoulder against me so we’re using each other for support while sitting on the log. “Is something wrong?” she asks, searching my face for an answer before I can really give it.

I hesitate, and God, I need to tell her no. I need to tell her that nothing is wrong, because if I don’t, if I say something else—

Footsteps bring both of our eyes up, and my gaze falls on a figure walking past the staff cabin. It doesn’t take long for the firelight to define his blond curls, wet as they are from his shower, and Kayde turns to glance at us, a small smile on his lips as he gives a quick wave. “Hey girls,” he greets, not stopping. “Sorry to interrupt. Just heading to bed.” His eyes find mine for a moment, just a short second, but I don’t need words to convey what he’s thinking.

*Don’t do it, Summer.*

It’s enough for me to sit back, trying not to stiffen as he continues walking toward his cabin. Thankfully Kinsley doesn’t notice my abrupt shift, though she does throw her head back onto my shoulder with a groan.

“He’s too pretty for his own good,” she mutters when he’s far enough away he won’t hear. “Too bad he’s not your type though, right? Though I guess if he was, you’d be fighting Darcy for him.”

“She can have him,” I whisper, wishing that I was anyone else, anywhere else, and this wasn’t real. Dread builds, pulsing in my stomach, and finally Kinsley takes notice.

“You okay?” she asks, putting a hand on my arm. “Is your brain doing shitty, neurospicy things today? Because just in case you need to hear it, you’re a good human and your brain is wrong about you. Though...” She

digs in her pockets, trailing off, and finally produces a small white plastic container.

“You could stand to be a little less, I don’t know, standoffish? You do that thing where you take the world’s problems personally and try to solve them. Maybe don’t.” With a squeeze she pops the container open, showing it’s still half full of edibles.

“What flavor are these?” I ask, reaching out and picking one up between my fingers. “Strawberry or pomegranate?”

Her grin tells me all I need to know, and I palm the edible instead of eating it right away. Depending on how my night goes, I might need it. Or, worse, I might need to *not* take it. The pomegranate edibles are stronger, and will without fail get me high until the only things that sound good are snacks and snuggles.

I definitely don’t need to be in *snacks and snuggles* mode with Kayde. But if he doesn’t want much, if he goes away quickly, I could eat it a little later to sleep.

“I should go to bed as well,” I admit, getting to my feet reluctantly. “It’s Daniel’s night to do the walk around, right?” It’s an offhand question, but when Kinsley shakes her head, I pause.

“Not anymore.” She scrunches her nose, rising to her feet and pocketing the white container. “I traded with him. So I’ll be your fierce defender tonight. Don’t worry,” she adds, looking mock-solemn. “I won’t let in any monster, rabid bears, or ax murderers.”

It’s hard not to flinch at the last one, with how close it hits to home, but I manage to laugh anyway at her joke. “You forgot snakes. You know how Darcy is about snakes.”

“Yeah. Would be such a shame if I managed to Pied Piper a bunch of snakes into her cabin, huh?” Kinsley groused, rolling her eyes. “Anyway, guess I’ll go. Try to sleep for once, okay? You look like you need it.”

“I’ll *attempt* it,” I promise, making a face at her. “See you in the morning, Kins.”

“If I’m late for breakfast...” Her eyebrows wiggle as she walks backward, away from the staff cabin campfire. “Know that I’m in the best hands.”

All I can do is snort at that, and Kinsley gives a quick cackle of her own as she turns to walk away. Her flashlight clicks on and leaves me in the light of the fire with nowhere to go but to my least favorite monster.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE



I don't know where to go.

The confusion sinking into my bones causes me to meander, and somehow I keep the small, sugar-coated edible clutched in my palm instead of pocketing it or just eating it. While going back to my cabin is probably exactly what I should be doing, this is the second night in a row I'm terrified Kayde won't be able to find me and will think I'm hiding from him.

And tonight of all nights, Kinsley is out doing her walk around the camp and would be an easy target for him, if he wanted to really fuck with me. The thought propels me away from my cabin, onto one of the trails that leads around the other cabins, as well.

There has to be a better way of doing this than just wandering around and hoping he'll sneak up on me like he did last night. But without him giving me a meeting time or place—because of course he'd never be that helpful—I'm left to just...wander.

And worry.

My feet scuff along in the gravel, kicking up dust I can barely see as I walk. It's too late to wish I hadn't done this. Especially when making this deal and playing this game saved not only the kids in Camp Crestview but also my best friend. I refuse to let myself feel regret, or to think about what I could've done better.

Even though there are definitely things I could've done better in that situation. Probably.

*Like what?* I ask myself, replaying the conversation in the woods from almost forty-eight hours ago. What in the world could I have done differently that wouldn't have ended in the deaths of way too many kids and other counselors? Kayde hadn't exactly been vague about his plans. And I meant it then when I'd vowed not to be the Camp Crestview Massacre Final Girl.

I could definitely never recover from that.

My steps come to a halt and I glance up, not really surprised when I find myself looking at the steps of Coyote Cabin. The lights are all out, something I can't accomplish before midnight at Redtail, and in the darkness I see a figure sitting on the steps adjoining the tiny deck that holds the door to the counselor's side of the cabin.

"This is unexpected." His soft voice carries across the open space, and he gets to his feet gracefully, stretching with his arms up over his head like he isn't in any hurry. "I didn't think you'd come find me." It's hard not to watch his strides that eat up the ground between us, but Kayde doesn't touch me. He doesn't do more than stand in front of me, though I can feel his gaze on me while I look anywhere but at him. "I figured I'd give you a few more minutes then come find you."

"What if you couldn't find me?" My voice is as soft as his, and I can't help the words that spill from my mouth. "You never tell me where to meet you. Or what time. What if you can't find me, and you think I'm purposefully hiding from you or some shit?" Finally I tilt my head back to look up at him, though all of the hatred I can muster is overshadowed by my anxiety, I'm sure.

Kayde just tips his head to the side, eyes narrowed in thought. "You're not very hard to find, sweetheart," he purrs at last, his voice changing from his daytime camp counselor tone to the one reserved for me during the night. It sends a shiver down my spine, and I look away from him, unconvinced. "Are you asking if I'll take it out on someone else? Someone who's doing her walk around tonight?"

I flinch at his words, and I know in that instant he has me pegged. He's always so fucking good at that, and I hate it more than anything else in my life.

"Just don't hide from me," he chuckles as he says it, like it's the most obvious answer in the world and the easiest thing ever. "Not hard, Summer.

Just"—he reaches out, fingers wrapping lightly around my throat for only a moment before falling to his side—"don't ever hide from me. Understand?"

All I can manage is a quick nod, but his growl tells me that's not good enough for him. "I understand," I say finally, forcing myself to meet his eyes instead of spontaneously trying to drill a hole into the ground to hide in with my gaze alone.

"Good girl." The wave of something that tingles down my spine is confusing at best, questionable at worst. But I push it out of my mind and frown at him to show every ounce of disdain I can muster. "Since you were nice enough to come to me instead of making me look for you, we don't have to walk back to your cabin." He says it like he's doing me a favor, but fear rises in my throat, causing a burst of nausea to follow. "You're okay." His words are edged in a soft, purring chuckle, like I'm a terrified kitten he's trying to coax out of the woods. "Come on, Summer." His hand finds mine, the one clenched around the edible, and before I can stop him, he pries my fingers open and his brows furrow at the feeling of what I'm holding.

"It's—" I break off when he palms the edible and brings it up to see it in the scant light.

"Planning on drugging yourself to sleep through this?" he only teases, and doesn't give it back as he tugs on my hand again, until I'm following him up the few stairs, across the creaky wood, and into his cabin.

"No," I snap, probably too sharply as I stumble over the doorframe and into the small space beyond. He closes the door and locks it with ease, then holds up the gummy again in the light, as if to contradict my statement. "Kinsley gave it to me right before I came here. I *haven't* taken it already because..." My voice is soft as I wave my arms around in explanation. "Because you."

"Did she give it to you for any reason, or...?"

"She said I look like I haven't been sleeping." My answer comes after a short hesitation, and I shove my hands into the pockets of my shorts. "She knows they make me sleepy, and said I looked like I could use a good night's sleep for once. That's all, okay?"

"How long do they take to kick in for you?" Kayde sounds curious, instead of mad, and I search his face in the light from his bedside table for a moment before answering.

"About an hour, give or take. That's when I start to feel it. Normally I last another thirty minutes or so before I'm actually sleepy, though."

"Okay then." He holds it out to me, his palm flat as he stands there, waiting. "Go on and take it."

I blink, sure I've misheard him. My brain is definitely turning against me, because he has to know what he's offering me. "I umm. I'm not exaggerating," I tell him slowly, shifting my weight from one foot to the other. "It'll knock me out, Kayde. Or at the very least I'll be a sleepy mess who you won't get much out of."

"I know what being high is like, sweetheart." Kayde chuckles. "So take it."

This feels like a very bad idea. Still my fingers inch forward, especially when his eyes narrow just slightly enough I know it's not a kind offer or a suggestion. If he's telling me to do something, I have to do it.

Including this, though at the moment it feels like it's for my benefit, not his.

My fingers curl around the small gummy, and I pop it in my mouth while he watches. In seconds I've swallowed it, though the edible seems to slide down my throat slowly, without any rush, and threatens to choke me.

"I'll admit I'm kind of selfish, though," he adds, once my mouth is empty. "I want to see what high, sleepy Summer looks like. And how she responds when I play with her."

Suddenly, I wish I could vomit on command. My stomach twists, trying to reject the THC infused gummy, but it's no use.

*I really should've fucking thought this through.*

But it's too late to do anything other than feel the bone-aching regret that flickers through my body, and I distract myself by looking around the small, minimalist room that's so similar to mine. The only difference is the extra blankets piled on his bed, and I tilt my head to the side, eyes slanting his way. "You making a nest?" I ask, before I can tell my stupid mouth to stop it.

"Hmm?" He follows my gaze to the bed, and grins wolfishly, a tinge of something like embarrassment shining in his eyes for only a fraction of a second. "Something like that." He chuckles. "I just like sleeping with a lot of blankets, I guess."

It's almost *endearing*. Not that I'm ever going to say that. It humanizes him in some way, though I keep that thought locked in my brain and behind

clenched teeth. How can I treat him like a boogeyman, when he does something so...normal?

*Easily*, I remind myself. *Because he's a serial killer.* Even though I don't know that for certain, I know he was at least planning on it.

I jump when his hands find my throat again, though he only pulls me against him, my back flush against his front as he sighs happily. "The shower was so much fun," he purrs against my ear, slotting his hips against mine until there's absolutely no room between us. "But sweetheart, all it really did was make me want to *fuck you* so badly I could barely think about anything else today. You want that? You want me to fuck you? Fill up your pretty cunt and leave you begging for more?"

I should be able to stop myself by now. I should have a better handle on my nerves, my anger, and my disdain for the man behind me. But I don't. That's clear enough when I lean back, my head on his shoulder, and turn slightly so I can look at him. He gazes at me expectantly, and a beatific smile cracks across my lips.

"I wanted..." I begin, and his mouth ticks with either amusement or annoyance. "For you to fall out of that tree today and break your neck." I say it just as sweetly to him, feeling his grip tighten on my neck and where his other hand is wrapped against my waist. "But, as they say, you can't always get what you want."

For a moment, Kayde Lane just stares at me. I can't read his expression; it's somewhere between incredulousness and bemusement, though I don't know which he's really leaning toward. I know I shouldn't have said it. That was clear the moment it came out of my mouth. But if I'm going to die, or if Kayde's going to break me like he says he wants to, then I'm absolutely going to speak my mind about it.

"Well, they also say if you want something done right, you should do it yourself," Kayde points out, lifting his hand to slip his fingers under the waistband of my shorts. "So I think, Summer, if you want me dead that badly, you're going to have to do it yourself."

Before I can reply, Kayde walks me forward, not stopping until my knees hit the bed and he can shove me forward. Not that I get a chance to do more than bounce against the old bed before he's manhandled me onto my ass instead, so I have to look up to see his face.

"But what would you even do, hmm?" he asks, shucking his shirt over his head and tossing it to the top of his dresser. Just like last night, it's

impossible not to look at the perfection of his upper body, or the way that it's clear he doesn't spend the rest of the year lounging on a sofa like I do.

Still, I refuse to let my eyes dip to the sharp v of his hips that points downward in a way that, on anyone else, would make my mouth water. *Fuck*, it's unfair that God let him be so attractive.

The lord should be positively ashamed of himself, frankly.

"Would you stab me?"

"Without hesitation." He kicks off his shoes as I answer, and rewards me with a flick of a smile in my direction.

"What would you stab me with?" Kayde reaches out, his hands on my shirt as he tugs on it pointedly. I can only hesitate for a moment; I know this game well enough by now, after all. Lifting my arms feels so difficult though, and he doesn't remark on how I tremble as he pulls my shirt over my head and throws it over with his.

"Anything." I keep my voice hard and try not to let him know that my heart is beating rabbit-fast in my chest. "A screwdriver is on my mind tonight. Think it would hurt?"

"I think it would be positively agonizing." Kayde is quick to agree, and to my surprise, he takes a step back. "Take off your clothes for me, Summer."

Yet again, it isn't a question. And it's not a request, though I still hesitate. "Unless you don't want to?" The words are soft, silky, and oh so gentle that it makes my teeth ache.

"I would just love to." I would rather do anything but. I'd rather do *anything* but this, and we both know it. "Any preferences? Fast or slow? Up to down, or—"

"Careful," Kayde breaks in, chin lifting. "If you keep talking to me like that, I'm going to punish you for being such a *brat*, Summer."

I look away quickly, chin whipping to the side way too fast to be anything but obvious as I try to hide just what that does to my insides. My stomach curls, warmth suffuses my body, but I still take a deep breath and try to look unaffected.

But of course, it doesn't work.

*Why would it?*

Kayde grips my chin and jerks my face up to him, a smirk sitting wide on his mouth. "No." He chuckles, obviously surprised. "Really? That's what

you are, sweetheart? *That's* what finally gets a reaction from you? Calling you my spoiled little brat who can't keep her sweet mouth shut?"

"Stop," I whisper, reminding myself over and over that I am *not* into this and I do *not* like any part of what we're doing. "I didn't—"

"Oh, but you do." God he's just so delighted that it should be illegal. "But what is it exactly that you like about this? Do you like being a brat just with me? Trying to prove some little bit of control and saying things you think will needle me for a reaction? No..." he trails off, looking me over thoughtfully before adding in a velvety tone, "That's not it, is it?"

"I literally have no idea what you mean—"

"You want to push me, yes. But you want me to *push you back*." The grin that curls over his lips is every bit as feral as the growl he finishes the words in, and Kayde steps back with a look of absolute delight on his features.

*Fuck.*

"Then please, by all means, be as much of a brat as you want. I'll indulge you." I hate the way he says it. I hate his delight and his fucking arrogance. "I'll show you every consequence for being a brat you'd never dare to dream about, baby girl. Even in your darkest fantasies." I can't tell if it's an offer or a threat, but to be safe, I'm marking those words as an absolute threat.

But all I do is stare at him, sullen, before standing up enough to kick off my shoes and wiggle out of my shorts. His smile widens, and he steps forward before I can sit back down, running his knuckles over my cheek. "Such a brat," he repeats affectionately. "Too bad you're too afraid to be honest and go all out for me, hmm?" He tilts his head to the side, and the amusement in his eyes, the way he looks at me like he genuinely likes me, makes my stomach roll and twist.

"I knew I picked right when I decided you were mine. My *final girl*," he teases. "And you just keep proving me right, over and over." He reaches out to gently ghost his fingers over my hips. "Thought I told you to take your clothes off."

"Well I would, if you would stop touching me for half a second," I snap back, hating that even this is playing into his fantasies.

He doesn't deign to reply this time. But he does step away, going to the nightstand and opening the top drawer to rummage around in it.

But I still hesitate, despite the bravado of my words about him just needing to stop touching me.

“You’d better be naked by the time I turn around, sweetheart.” His voice drifts softly through the dimly lit room, and I force myself to strip completely, my arms coming up to wrap around my chest, though he’s seen and touched it all before.

*But that doesn’t matter.*

I shift uncomfortably where I stand, thighs pressed together as tightly as I can manage and trying not to shiver. It isn’t cold in here, especially with the window closed, but gooseflesh still ripples over my skin, and I have to steel myself against the shakes that travel up my spine.

When Kayde turns, I can’t see what he’s holding. My eyes dip to his waist, trying to figure out what I’m seeing, but he’s smart enough to obscure the items with his body as he looks me over. “Oh, we’ve got to get you past this, don’t we?” he murmurs, setting whatever it is back down and reaching out to trail his fingers down my throat, to where my arms are clenched tight. “I’ve seen you, gorgeous. You don’t need to hide from me.”

“I’m not hiding,” I snap, fear making my voice higher than I want it to be. “Especially not from you.”

“Then drop your arms,” Kayde is quick to reply, his tone a challenge. “If you’re not afraid of me, if you aren’t hiding from me...” He tugs on my wrist. “Or do you need a little help?”

I have no idea what he means by that, unless he’s just going to pry my arms away from my body. But I give him what has to be a confusion filled look that only fuels the wolfish grin crossing his lips. “Yeah, that’s all right, Summer.” I hate how he’s *crooning* to me. I hate that it does something to my stomach that it really shouldn’t.

“I’ll always help my favorite, self-destructive sweetheart.” He guides me back to the bed, pushing me to sit down, and at his urging I end up near the head of the bed, sitting just under his pillows. “Lie down for me, okay?” he murmurs, and waits for me to do that, though I’m sure I look every bit as uncomfortable as I feel.

“Give me your hands.” I have to remind myself, over and over, that it’s not a request. That I don’t have a choice, even though he makes it seem like I do. My arms tremble, and I clench my hands into fist in a sad attempt of hiding it, before reaching up to him to give him my hands.

And that's the moment I see the handcuffs. He's too fast for me to move away completely, and before I can do more than gasp, my wrists are cuffed to the headboard, taking advantage of the vertical slats that run along it and the wall.

"Kayde—" I can't help it. I *jerk* against them, yanking my arms down towards my face, to no avail. "Kayde, I can't—"

"Yes, you can," he murmurs. "You can do it for me, baby. Be good for me, just a little. Just enough we don't wake anyone up, hmm? Unless you absolutely need me to *stop*—"

"No!" I hiss, too loudly. "No, I'm not—" But I still jerk on the cuffs like a deer caught in a trap. It's quieter this time, as my arms shake and my wrists twist in the metal cuffs.

"Then take your time," Kayde invites. "You can fight it out a little; figure out they're not going to hurt you and that you can't get away." He turns away to go back to the drawer, leaving my full attention on the cuffs and how much give they allow me.

It's not until the bed dips near my thighs that I look back at him, and more importantly, to what he's playing with in his hands.

The metal from the wicked-looking hunting knife is an almost ghostly shade of grey, and glints in the low light. But he doesn't seem to notice. Not when his eyes are on me, and my renewed struggle.

"N-no," I whisper, trying so fucking hard not to scream. "Kayde you said—I thought—"

"Sweet girl, I'd like to remind you that you didn't give me any limits on what I could or couldn't do to you," the blond points out, putting down the knife just long enough to sweep his hair into a bun to get it out of his eyes. "Remember that? Remember how you told me that you'd do *anything* for me, in order to save these kids?"

His fingers grip my ankle, massaging it in a way that would actually be soothing if it wasn't *this* situation. "Are we regretting that now?" I hate how his voice sounds. How empathetic and perfect he manages to be. "Do you think, maybe, they're not worth it?"

I force myself to suck in deep breaths, shaking my head to deny his words. His grip on my ankle tightens, and all I allow myself is a soft whimper as he pulls my leg straight, then moves to kneel between my thighs in the space he's created.

“They’re always worth it,” I tell him, keeping my eyes shut hard. If he’s going to kill me here, like this, then I’m going to try to deprive him of *some* of my fear. Though the fact that I’m shaking so hard the handcuffs rattle against the headboard probably isn’t helping my cause.

“Are they?” His voice is close to my face, and yet I still refuse to open my eyes. “Aren’t you going to look at me, sweetheart?”

“If you’re giving me a choice, then absolutely not.”

“Summer, you always have a choice.” His voice is so soft, it feels like we’re trading secrets. “Every single time...every single move I make, you have a choice of whether you *let me*.”

“Stop doing that.”

“Stop doing what, exactly?” He knows what he’s doing. And he knows what I mean; I hear it in his voice.

Slowly I crack my eyes open, just enough to stare up at him through my lashes. “Pretending you were ever giving me a choice.”

His predatory grin is quick to appear, and I see him try to swallow it back, only to fail once, then twice. Finally he shrugs, and seems to embrace it, leaning over me with one hand holding himself up. “If you want,” he agrees at last. “If that will make you feel better.”

“Like I said.” My reckless smile isn’t as authentic as his. “The only thing that’ll make me feel better is—”

“To kill me, right?” he cuts me off enthusiastically, and his other hand appears, bringing the knife close to my face. “You want to take this from me, Summer?” I shy away from him, but he follows me, until he can stroke the flat of the blade along my cheek.

The metal is cold, and I can’t help the soft, defeated whimper that bubbles out of my throat. He’s going to kill me here, in his cabin, in the middle of the second to last camp session for preteens.

He’s going to slit my throat and I won’t be able to do a damn thing about it.

“Hey. Don’t go away on me. Stay with me, baby.” He turns the knife until the edge is stroking along my cheek. “Don’t want you spacing out, so just breathe, Summer.” He sucks in a slow, deep breath and lets it out, tapping my cheek with the knife before doing it again.

With a flinch I mirror him. My eyes are locked on Kayde’s as we both pull in deep breath after deep breath, letting them out after a few seconds of holding the air in our lungs.

I hate that it works enough that I'm no longer spacing out.

*I hate that he's good at this.*

"There you go. Just breathe for me, okay? In..." He waits for me to take a breath, then says, "And let it out. Slow it down, baby. You're okay."

"I hate you," I whisper, unable not to.

"I know," he assures me. "Like I said before, that's what makes this so much fun." But he glances to the side when he says it, his eyes narrowing just slightly, almost unnoticeably, like something he's said bothers him.

But I can't focus on that when he drags the knife along my face, stroking it over my bottom lip and bringing a shiver to my body once again.

"Open your mouth for me." It's absolutely not a suggestion—nothing with Kayde ever is—but it still takes me a few tries before I manage to part my lips and unclench my teeth, though that feels like torture in itself.

"Don't bite down." There's a note of warning in his voice, and he sits back enough that he can slip his other hand under my jaw, as if to hold my mouth open. "All you'll do is cut yourself, Summer. Do you understand me?"

My jerky nod must be enough for him, because he murmurs something that might absolutely be, *good girl*, before the knife is back to stroking against my bottom lip.

"Stick out your tongue."

The trembling in my arms increases, and my cheeks feel warm as I do what he's said. I don't want to die like this, with a knife between my teeth and Kayde between my thighs, but I also can't risk saying no to them.

Maybe if he kills me, he'll still keep his word.

Unfortunately, I can't exactly ask. The knife moves when I stick my tongue out, and I remain as still as possible when I feel the blade against my tongue, flat side down.

"Lick it clean for me."

My heart has never beat so fast in my life. I blink, warmth spilling down my face again, and as I finally manage to meet Kayde's eyes, I run my tongue along the flat of the blade, being careful not to nick myself.

"It's such a shame, isn't it?" he asks, turning the knife so I can do the same to the other side. "That you're so close to the tool that could get you out of this, but you have no chance at all of turning the tables here, sweetheart." He slides the knife deeper between my lips, ignoring my soft whimper as he traces the curves of my teeth while I remain absolutely still.

I don't even swallow, though I can feel the saliva building under my tongue.

"Are you going to start drooling for me?" Kayde teases. "All because of a knife?" I hate the feel of it against my teeth, and I shudder when the tip catches lightly against my gum, reminding myself to stay still.

"You're already crying for me, after all. Might as well let yourself be a complete mess."

*I'm crying?*

My hands jerk in the cuffs as I momentarily forget I can't move them, but some confusion in my eyes must be obvious, because Kayde's other hand leaves my jaw slowly, moving to the side of my face where the rush of heat against my skin had been obvious moments ago.

"You didn't know, baby? You didn't know you were crying for me?" He swipes his thumb through the wetness, and brings it up to show me the glistening of my tears in the light. "It's so fucking hot, Summer. I love it when you cry for me. You know how much I want to make a fucking mess out of you?"

I whimper, fingers clenched hard against my palms, and he shoots me an apologetic grin. "Not a murdered mess," he tells me, like that's a comfort. "Why would I kill you? That would be like throwing out my favorite toy that I'm always playing with. No, that would be such a waste when you're so fun to play with like this. But maybe..." The knife leaves my mouth, and I click my teeth closed seconds later, hoping to God he's done.

But of course, I can never be that lucky.

He drags the knife down my chin, twisting it until I can feel it pressed to the place my pulse flutters under my skin.

"I think you'd look good in a little bit of red. I'll try not to slip, Summer, I really will. But..." He sucks air through his teeth, dragging the blade down further until he's sitting fully back on his heels. "It's really hard, you know? You have to be so still for me so I don't mess up and nick you. But even if I do, you'll be so quiet for me, right sweetheart?" His eyes dart to the shared wall with his campers, then back to me.

*"Right?"*

I nod quickly, teeth still locked together. It's not just the fear of the knife on my tongue again. No, it's the fear of making noise that will alert someone, and send all of this crashing down in the worst way possible.

*I can't let him hurt anyone.*

But the knife causes me to shiver, especially when he traces my collarbones and slides the tip of it along the swell of my breasts.

"If I did...slip," he goes on, still talking in that mesmerizing tone I can't block out. "Where should that happen, do you think? Do you want something visible again that you have to hide? It won't be anything deep. Nothing Liza has to take care of for you. I'll take *good* care of anything like that, I promise. Should it be up here?" The knife is back to my sternum, where he traces the divots in my skin.

I close my eyes again, unable to watch him, and this time I'm aware when the tears slide down my temples.

"No, you're right baby. We don't want someone asking questions. Darcy would sniff it out if she could see it. What about here?" The knife disappears, only to reappear as he circles my nipple with the edge, pulling a desperate sound from my lips. "What do you think? Would that be too uncomfortable? I promise I'll take such good care of any slip ups. You wouldn't mind one, right? As long as I took care of it for you? Just a little bit of blood, a little bit of pain..." He lets the tip dig into my flesh, then drags it down my stomach, leaving a searing path in its wake. When I can't help but squirm, the knife is snatched away, and a low sound of warning grates in his throat.

"Don't you move, Summer," Kayde warns. "I don't want to cut you unless it's *deliberate*." I hear him shift again, but I'm still too afraid to look at him, even when he lifts my knee until my foot is pressed flat to the bed. His lips find the inside of my knee, and he skims his mouth lightly over my skin.

"What about here? That would be a little less sensitive..." The knife tip comes up to run over my skin, just above where his mouth had teased my skin. "Well, maybe." The confession prompts him to drag it further up my inner thigh, and as he teases it along the incredibly sensitive skin, I can't help the sound that leaves me, though it's still quieter than it could be.

Still, feeling the knife so *close* to my center does cause my eyes to snap open, and I stare at him with desperation burning my face. "Please don't," I beg him, my eyes finding his. "Please, Kayde, *please*."

"Please what?" he whispers, the knife trailing ever closer. "Please... *what*, Summer?"

“Please don’t do this.” I can’t help that I’m crying, and I can’t help the way my hands jerk at the cuffs every few seconds, my arms twisting. “I don’t want—”

“I know what you want, baby. You want to stab me. You want to be a brat. Where’s that energy now, I wonder?” He lifts the blade to tap it against his own lip. “It’s not because of this, is it? Just my little knife here against your skin?”

I can’t answer. I don’t answer, because it’s clear he’s taunting me and I can’t think of a single answer that won’t make this worse. But I do give another soft, anguished noise when the knife is back, the tip sliding against my folds and causing me to freeze.

Every muscle in my body goes so still that I ache, muscles knotted, and I swear I don’t even breathe as I look at his face, at his concentration while he drags the blade up and down, then repeats it.

“You’re so good at following directions,” he murmurs at last, eyes flicking up to mine for a few seconds before going back to what he’s doing. “So good at being so still for me. My good fucking girl. Do you want me to fuck you?” The shift in topic nearly gives me whiplash, and my brain is working at such a low capacity all I can do is stare at him.

“If not, that’s okay. I like this game too. We can keep playing, though my hand might get tired. I really might slip and...” He shrugs. “We never did decide on a place for that to happen, did we?”

“No,” I whisper, shaking my head. “Kayde—”

“*Do you want me to fuck you, Summer?*”

I’m not spaced out enough to not understand what he wants. Worse, the reality of this game sinks into my chest like a stone thrown out onto a lake. Has this been what he wants all along? To present me with the *choice* of whether I’ll beg him to fuck me?

There’s no real choice involved, he knows that. I wish more than anything I was brave enough to deny him, to shrug this off and tell him to do what he wants. The words even bubble up my throat tantalizingly, tingeing my mouth with the copper of blood.

*Do what you want*, is what I want to say. I want to shrug, to look away, and just sigh, like this is the most boring thing in the world.

But I can’t. He fucking knows I can’t, and the pleased look on his face tells me he probably has a pretty good idea of where my thoughts are heading. One day, in another life, I hope some higher power sees fit to

reincarnate Kayde as a beetle and me as an elephant so I can stomp him out of existence.

My heart flutters, my throat working convulsively to swallow the response that burns and claws its way up my throat. Hands shifting in the cuffs, I close my eyes hard and whisper, “Yes,” with as much conviction as I can.

But of course it isn’t enough.

“Yes, what?” Kayde purrs, the knife still tracing along my hips. “Be more specific—”

“I want you to fuck me.” The words are numb on my lips, and my skin tingles.

“You’re not very convincing.” He strokes the knife along my folds this time, and I feel the well of tears against my eyelids, the burn of saline that begs to fall and stain my skin in a desperate attempt to get him to feel bad for what he’s doing. To get him to *stop*. “I think you’d rather me do this—”

“Please, Kayde.” I open my eyes, blinking away the tears that cascade down the sides of my face. “Please, I *need* you to fuck me.” It’s so hard to let my thighs fall to the sides from where they’ve been in the air, shaking, as I wish more than anything I can press them together and keep him out. “I wanted—” I swallow hard, fixing my gaze on his. “I thought about it when we first met, you know?” Though I hadn’t. Not really.

*But I can be convincing.*

“You were so fucking pretty, and I was so goddamn high. I thought maybe we’d get lost in the woods and you’d pin me to a tree and fuck me. Thought you’d be really good at it, and imagined what you’d sound like.” My words never falter, and his grin grows slowly until he looks completely psychotic. Which, in my opinion, is exactly what he is.

“You know, my favorite thing about you is how much you surprise me,” Kayde admits, once more sitting back on his heels. Approval glitters in his gaze, and when he reaches out to stroke up my thigh, it’s with his fingers instead of a blade. I relax, just a touch, and I swear I see his eyes flick up to my face for a singular moment before he goes back to pressing my thighs wider, his hands warm on my skin.

“Who taught you to lie like that, hmm?” he purrs. “Who taught you to be that convincing when we both know you’re just so scared?” His fingers drift further up my thighs, pressing between them until he’s spreading me with one hand and pressing the other flat against my hip.

“Not a lie,” I protest through gritted teeth, even though we both know it isn’t true. “Want you—”

“Sure, baby. I’m just so sure you do. Crying like that and shaking because you thought I was going to cut you, and you actually want to convince me you’ve *wanted* this?” I don’t need to meet his eyes to know he’s giving me the look that means he sees right through me.

“If you’re complaining about my lack of excitement”—I bite down on my lower lip when I feel his thumb brush over my clit—“then I invite you to start the night over but lose the knife.”

“Nah, I’m not complaining about anything,” Kayde assures me. “Sweetheart, I have all the time in the world to convince you to enjoy this. And your reactions to a bit of knife play were perfect. Gorgeous.” He leans over me, nose brushing mine. My eyes flick up to his, and I search his face as he holds himself still over me.

“Perfect, Summer,” he whispers, kissing me softly before I can say a word. And yet again, his words and actions bring that squirming, confused feeling back to the surface, causing me to press my thighs together around his hand for completely different reasons than fear.

But he’s just so good at this. I can admit that. I can admit that while I hate him, and I really would like to see him topple off of a five story cliff, he’s gorgeous as fuck and apparently blessed by the sex gods to be some kind of prophet amongst mortals.

Which sucks for me, quite frankly.

“But we wouldn’t be here if you weren’t everything and more.” He’s quick to sit back again, and while a big part of my brain whispers that he doesn’t actually care about me or how I feel, that he just wants to fuck me for himself, I can’t help the confused tilt of my head when he moves back enough to kneel between my thighs, his lips brushing over my left hip in an almost-kiss.

“Don’t look at me like that.” He chuckles, even without meeting my gaze. “If you’re not enjoying it when I fuck you, if I can’t make you come apart on my cock, then what’s the point?” His lips skim my skin, moving closer and closer to the apex of my thighs.

My heart pounds, and now I can’t help but remember every little thing from the showers.

Like how good his mouth had felt.

*And how hard he’d made me come.*

Tonight is just as much of a good thing as it had been last night. Physically, at least. He licks over me, his tongue finding and stroking over my clit before dipping back down again. Within a minute he's tasting every bit of me he can reach, his tongue plunging into my body and his eyes closed like he really, genuinely enjoys this.

For my part, I can't keep still. I writhe and squirm in his grip and the cuffs, unable to tear my hands free to grip his hair like I had last night. It makes me feel more vulnerable than in the showers, especially when it's so easy for him to hold my hips down and keep me mostly still.

"Kayde..." I squeak out his name when the fear ebbs, warmth flooding me as he adds two fingers alongside his tongue.

"What's wrong, baby girl?" my psychopath purrs, pressing a kiss against my inner thigh. His fingers continue, unwavering as he thrusts them in and out of me.

"I just—" God, was I really just calling his name for the hell of it? That's embarrassing as hell. "Never mind, I just—" My words aren't getting any better, and I feel heat crawling up my neck to stain my face for him to see my embarrassment.

"That's okay. You're being so good for me, aren't you Summer?" He adds another finger, scissoring them and drawing a whine from my lips. "Good girl. So good at taking whatever I want to give you. Aren't you just the most perfect little thing?" His words make my head spin, and if I could change any detail about this, it would be for him to stop talking.

I can't handle the pleasure *and* what his words do to my squirming insides.

His tongue flicks over my clit once, then again, before his teeth graze along the sensitive bud instead. It pulls noise after noise from my open mouth, though I somehow remember there are kids in the next room and I refuse to wake them up and let them get hurt.

"Do you think you can be quiet for me?" he asks, sitting up once more with his fingers still thrusting lazily into me. "You really can't be loud here, unfortunately. As much as I want you to scream, that might be bad." He glances at the shared wall, then back down at me.

"I know I have to be quiet." I say the words quickly, eyes on his as my hips rise to meet his fingers and my hands twist in the cuffs.

"Can you?"

I definitely don't know how to tell him I'm not sure. It's embarrassing as hell, for one. And I don't need him doing something drastic like cutting out my fucking tongue.

But my silence must be answer enough. Kayde moves, standing up and leaving me alone on the bed before he's rummaging around in his nightstand again. The same one he'd gotten the handcuffs and knife out of.

"Please tell me you don't have a drawer full of BDSM gear at a kid's summer camp," I can't help but hiss at him.

A smile flickers on his lips, and he doesn't look at me. He only murmurs, "Okay, I won't." Then lifts up a leather strap attached to—

My brain slams to a halt and I shake my head. "I changed my mind. I can stay quiet."

"Mhmm." He kneels on the bed between my thighs again, holding the gag in one hand and sliding his other hand up my thigh. "Of course you can."

"You're not putting that in my mouth," I tell him sharply, glaring at the pink silicone bone that makes up the other part of the gag.

"Pretty sure I am," he argues with me sweetly. "But you can bite down as hard as you want. You won't break it."

"I'm gonna break you," I snap automatically, unable to keep my mouth shut as my heart flutters fearfully in my chest.

He only rolls his eyes at that, before pinning me with the incredulous, disbelieving look of his that I hate. "Say that again when you aren't handcuffed to the bed and wet as hell from my tongue and fingers," Kayde invites, leaning up with the gag in one hand. "Open up, Summer. Don't make me get the knife."

That does it. The threat knocks the bravado right out of my chest, and I sag against the mattress, fingers flexing. "You..." I don't know what I'm going to say. I don't know how I can argue, especially when he taps my cheek gently, obviously waiting.

"Just for a little while," he promises, sliding the pink silicone *dog bone* between my lips and deftly buckling the gag behind my head. The bone slides between my teeth, and when I bite down experimentally, it has just enough give that I don't feel like I'm being choked.

"Just so you don't disturb anyone. How are you feeling, by the way?"

My glare doesn't exactly cause him to spontaneously combust, but it has to be a near thing. Kayde smiles sweetly, stroking his fingers down my

thigh. “I know you think that’s a threat, but your little looks are kind of doing it for me,” he admits, pushing my knee up so he can pull my leg up over his shoulder. Sometime in the past minute or two, he’s discarded his shorts, leaving him completely naked between my knees.

And he’s just as gorgeous to look at as ever. His cock is a little intimidating, if I’m being honest with myself, though I can’t help but dart looks down to where it curves against his stomach, tip already glistening.

“What? You thought I did all of that just for you?” he teases, like I’ve actually said something. “No, baby. I get a lot out of playing with you. But I’ll admit, it’s been really hard today not to just drag you into the woods and do this.”

He moves forward just enough that with a fist around the base of his cock, he can drag it through my wetness, never actually entering me while teasing me with the possibility.

“But I didn’t want it to just be quick and over with just like that. I wanted to take my time. I always find myself wanting to take my time with you.” He repeats the drag against my body again and again, pulling a gasp from behind my gag when he pushes into me, just a little, before withdrawing and repeating his teasing.

“You’re going to be so tight for me, aren’t you sweetheart?” he hums, apparently content to carry on a one sided conversation. “I know you can’t be a virgin, but sometimes I wonder...you’re just so easy to tease and get worked up. Like no one’s ever played with you before.”

Well, no one’s certainly ever done this before. I’m *not* a virgin; he’s right about that. Though my experiences with sex can be counted on one hand and aren’t exactly my most exciting memories. They were mostly just...boring. Half-drunken hookups at a frat house. A boy from high school who had no idea what he was doing.

Never anything like *this*.

My breath catches when he pushes a bit deeper, and I know he’s staring intently at my face, wanting a reaction, when instead of pulling out, he just slides deeper into me. His length is a dull, aching stretch between my thighs.

“I fucking knew it,” he hisses, and gives a quick, sharp thrust that draws a soft yelp from me and leaves him flush against my body, as deep as he can possibly go. “You’re so tight. Summer, baby, it really feels like you haven’t had anyone fuck you in forever. Were you waiting for me?” His tone is

teasing, and he's just so in control as he pulls back—until he's just barely still inside of me—before *slamming* into my body hard enough that my hands rattle against the headboard.

I bite down hard on the gag, trying my very best not to make a noise. I plead with my vocal chords to just turn off for a while, even as my soft whimpers meet my ears when he does it again. This time, instead of staying still, he continues to fuck me with smaller, less punishing thrusts as one of his hands grips my hip and the other presses flat against my stomach.

“You were so worth waiting a couple nights to do this,” Kayde hisses through clenched teeth, reaching up to shove loose curls out of his face. I look at him from under my lashes, watching the way he fucks into me effortlessly. Like it’s the most natural, easiest activity in the world.

And I try *not* to focus on how good it feels. Especially when he shifts enough that he’s rubbing over the spot inside of me that really makes me want to scream. He shouldn’t be so good at hitting it *exactly right*. He shouldn’t be so good at any of this.

But within minutes he has me throwing my head back against the pillows and biting down hard on the stupid pink bone in order not to make any noise. It doesn’t help that he’s still talking to me, murmuring filthy compliments and promises that cause my blood to race through my veins.

When his fingers find my clit, I nearly scream anyway, and my hips jerk off of the bed just as he presses me back down harshly.

“No, sweetheart. You’re perfect where you are. Right there, full of my cock. You know how pretty you look all fucked out like this? You’re about to cry again.” I don’t want him to be right, but I can feel it too. The heat stinging at my eyes that I wish I could wipe away with my bound hands.

Instead, I can only whine in protest, my hands twisting in the cuffs over my head. When Kayde leans over, I expect him to wipe the tears away. Instead, I feel the warm wetness of his tongue at the sides of my screwed-shut eyes as he laps at the tears, his movements soft and almost affectionate.

Almost, anyway. Kayde isn’t *affectionate*.

Another whimper drags up from my lips as Kayde picks up his movements again, and it takes everything in me to not make more noise than the absolute minimum.

“Oh, you’re so close, aren’t you?” Kayde murmurs, not even having the decency to sound out of breath while I gasp around a pink silicone *dog*

*bone.* “Come for me, baby. I know you want to. Just be quiet, okay? Bite down and try not to make a lot of noise.”

For some reason, it’s the talking that does it. His crooning against my ear, and the whispered *sweetheart* that follows the rest of his words. My body stiffens, and a heel hooks against his shoulder to pull him closer to me as I come, my eyes shut hard.

Somehow, I don’t scream. Even as he drags out my orgasm by fucking me through it, I keep my teeth clamped hard on the stupid gag and refuse to do more than whimper, no matter how good it feels. His fingers on my clit drive the pleasure back up for longer than it should, and when I feel wetness at the corner of my mouth, I barely have the wherewithal to feel ashamed.

“Good girl, perfect Summer,” Kayde continues, his movements becoming disordered and erratic. I can feel the tremble in his hand on my thigh, and the way he’s holding himself back. “You’re taking birth control, right?” he asks, and before I can even think of why he’s asking, I find myself nodding automatically.

*Wait*—My brain screams the word, telling me I should probably stop to question that. I let out a whine, trying to form a question that I can’t manage around the gag. Especially with spit running down the side of my face.

“What’s wrong?” Kayde purrs, darting close and lapping at the trails of saliva running from my forcibly parted lips. “Told you before, didn’t I? Gonna wreck you, Summer. I’m going to fill up this pretty cunt over and over until I’m satisfied. Sweetheart. Gorgeous *girl*.” The praises drop from his lips like rain, and at last I close my eyes once more, knowing I can’t stop him from this.

And maybe, deep down, some part of me doesn’t want him to stop. I can still admit that he’s good at this, better than anyone has any right to be, while hating him and plotting a grim demise for the serial killer who wants to kill the kids at Camp Crestview.

But I can also admit to myself, in the silence of my own head, how fucking *good* this feels. Even though that thought twists in my stomach like something vile.

*I’m so fucked up for this that there’s no excuse for my behavior.*

That thought, the guilt and shame that rushes through me, causes another rush of tears to cascade down my cheeks, though Kayde licks that up too. He groans at the taste, and finally his hips slam into mine and he shudders, going still except for a few small movements of his hips. My

whines turn to whimpers, and I turn my face into Kayde's as my head swims.

He just fucking grins. I can see it, even through the tears, and when he reaches up to stroke along my face, I flinch away from him slightly.

"Such a good girl," he sighs, content. "Just like I knew you would be. So sweet when I have something in your mouth, aren't you? So willing when I have your wrists cuffed." Finally he moves, getting to his knees and sitting back before pressing my leg back to the bed. He strokes along my thighs, eyes never leaving my face as he just touches me, like it should be a comfort.

I finally realize that I'm shaking. My whole body trembles under him, and yet Kayde just wordlessly runs his fingers up and down my thighs. "You're okay," he murmurs, reaching out to unbuckle the gag. I suck in a breath, trying my best to calm down enough that I stop shaking.

But no matter how hard I try, I don't succeed.

"I'm not afraid of you," I grit out between clenched teeth, eyes screwed shut again.

Kayde chuckles and shifts over me until he can undo the cuffs from my wrists. My arms drop to the bed instantly, hands curling in the pillow over my head. "Well, that's a bit of a lie. You're terrified of me," he disagrees sweetly. "Give me your hands, sweetheart."

I don't. It doesn't even occur to me I should be listening to him, as per our game. Our stupid agreement that keeps the kids safe. But instead, my muddled brain only lets me stare up at him, half in a daze, until it occurs to me the edible is kicking in faster than I would like it too. "Shoot," I mutter, blinking at him to keep Kayde in focus. "This is unexpected."

"You're high," Kayde observes, picking up my hands and running his fingers over my wrists. He lays them back down across my chest, seemingly satisfied, before getting to his feet and going to the nightstand once again. This time he drops everything back into it, before turning back around and leaning over me with a soft, small washrag.

"I'm so high," I agree, letting him move my knee and jumping when the cloth rubs over my inner thighs. "Fuck, this is a bad time. I need to go back. Unless you want—"

"You're not going anywhere," Kayde interrupts, though it isn't threatening, exactly. It's almost possessive. Almost *affectionate*. But as I'd

established in my brain a few minutes ago, Kayde and affectionate do not go together.

“Then what am I doing, oh, ax murderer of my nightmares?” I sigh, finding it hard to keep my eyes open with the mix of THC and post-orgasm sleepiness.

Kayde doesn’t answer. He moves around the room for a minute or so, and when the lights turn off, I blink up at the dark ceiling. Seconds later, the bed dips, and Kayde gently pushes me onto my side, tugging the blankets out from under me.

“What are you doing?” I ask, trying to sit up and instead getting tugged back down. Kayde’s arm goes over me, and he drags me back to him under the blankets until my back is flush against his body.

“What does it feel like?” Is his easy response, and my fingers clench in the sheets under us. He’s so warm, like a radiator at my back, and the weight of the blankets feels more relevant than they should.

“Feels confusing,” I whisper, eyes on the wall. My fingers flex, and it really is a good thing I’m high, I suppose, so that I don’t do something stupid like try to kill him with a pillow.

“Good.” Kayde nuzzles my ear. “That’s how it’s supposed to feel.” His fingers trace over my arm, and as I drift between sleep and just being spaced out, he doesn’t say anything.

Finally, a question bubbles to my lips, unbidden, and even my clenched teeth can keep the question at bay. It isn’t a good question to ask. Not of Kayde, anyway.

But at this point, when I have no idea how long it’s been or if Kayde is even still awake, I can’t stop myself.

“Would you have really done it?” The words come out softly, barely more than a whisper.

I feel the ghost of Kayde’s lips against my shoulder, and he pulls me more snugly against him with a sigh. “Would I really have done what, sweetheart?”

“Killed the kids here.”

He nips at my shoulder blade, a soft purr on his lips. “Yeah,” he answers, no sign of hesitation in the word. “Yeah, Summer. I would’ve killed them all, except for you.” He rolls his hips against mine, though it feels like it’s just a tease. “Every single one except you. You’re my final girl. You’re too good for what I was going to do to all the others.”

The soft whimper that leaves my throat is soft in the darkness, but he still shushes me softly, mouth on my shoulder. “Go to sleep,” he says finally, forehead pressed against my skin. “You’re not going anywhere tonight.”

“Can’t sleep here,” I murmur, though my eyelids are heavy and I swear I can already feel myself slipping away. “Can’t sleep with you.”

His chuckle is dark and grating, and his grip becomes just a little bit more punishing as Kayde says, sweetly, “Well I’m not giving you much of a choice, Summer. And you need to sleep if you’re going to spend all of tomorrow planning my death and telling yourself you should’ve gotten up and walked away.”

He’s right. He’s more than right, and I want to say something scathing, something sharp. But the words fade every time they shape themselves in my head. So with an aggravated sigh, I close my eyes and stop trying, determined not to fall asleep.

No matter how much my body wants to do otherwise.

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# CHAPTER THIRTEEN



For all of maybe three seconds, I don't know why I'm awake. My brain screams that it's too early to open my eyes; that the kids aren't up yet, so I don't need to be either. A big part of my brain tries to tug me back down, demanding we finish out the night's sleep.

That is, until Kayde's growl shudders through my ears and his hand gripping my thigh shifts. "You actually awake, sweetheart?" he hisses, strain in his voice. "Thought I'd get to wring another orgasm out of you before you really woke up. You're so *relaxed* when you're high, baby."

That brings a whimper from between my lips, and I try to focus in the darkness as I realize I'm no longer on my side, but my back. Dimly I see Kayde's silhouette, as I realize *what* he's doing.

"You are not fucking me while I'm asleep," I moan, throwing my head back against the pillows when a wave of pleasure courses up my spine. "Fuck, Kayde, there are names for that."

"Yeah," he agrees enthusiastically, and maybe a bit savagely. "Somnophilia. We can call it somno for short, though. Not quite as much of a mouthful. And you haven't been completely asleep. You're just so delightfully high that you've been drifting. It's adorable." He thrusts into me, hard, before the rest of his words really sink in, and my hands twist in the sheets under me.

I'm still high, so it can't have been that long since I fell asleep. An hour, maybe two at most. Any longer and the high would be fading more than it currently has. "Fuck," I gasp, my fingers tightening in the sheets. I realize my body is oversensitive, almost sore, and my muscles feel worn out.

*How long has he been doing this?*

“How long—how many—” I can’t phrase the question right, and I pant through my parted lips, clenching my eyes shut again.

“On and off for maybe twenty minutes.” His reply is sharp and heated; he sounds so proud of himself as he fucks into me, though I can tell he’s closer than he’s trying to let me believe. “I played with you for a while. Had you come on my fingers and you were so fucking cute. Whining and writhing. I think you begged me for more. And you said my name. Wanna make you say it again.”

“Maybe I got you confused with someone else.” I can’t help the quip, and Kayde smacks my hip hard enough to make it sting, pulling a soft yelp from me.

“Maybe you didn’t,” he growls. His tone is different, almost frustrated. Though this isn’t anything worse than telling him I wish he’d die.

So why does he care who I think of when he’s fucking me?

Any other words are lost, locked behind my teeth when he unexpectedly tips me over the edge, dragging a gasp from my throat when his fingers lock just under my jaw. Kayde doesn’t squeeze. He doesn’t cut off my air whatsoever. He just holds my throat in a possessive, almost cradling grip while I come.

“Oh God, that hurts a little,” I whine, bringing my thighs up so my knees press against his sides. “Fuck, Kayde—”

“Well, you have come at least three times tonight,” my psychopath points out lazily, still fucking me through my too-bright orgasm. “So yeah, it probably feels like it’s too much, sweetheart. But you’re still doing so good for me. Even when you were out of it, your pussy gripped me so tight. Do you know how much your body wants me here? How much you’re clearly begging me to *fuck you* full of cum and keep you in my bed?”

“Have to get up in the morning,” I remind him, staring up at him from under my lashes. “People will come looking and get suspicious.”

His grip on my throat twitches, tightening just slightly as a low, purring growl fills my ears. No one has ever *growled* while fucking me before, and it’s hard not to think that I could get used to the possessive sound that makes my thighs twitch around him.

If only it wasn’t coming from Kayde Lane.

I feel him stiffen, and his movements become less controlled. Then his breathing picks up seconds before he slams into me, hips flush against my

body as he comes and stays there, not making any noise apart from his harsh breathing as his fingers flex around my neck.

“Didn’t know you were into choking,” I mutter at last, needing to break the too-intimate quiet. The stupid part of me doesn’t want to piss him off. That part of me wants to drag him down and kiss him, like I would with a guy I actually *like*. That part of me wants to keep him inside of me and pull him back under the blankets to sleep the rest of the night away.

But that part of me is definitely still high, and stupid as hell.

“I’m not choking you,” Kayde chuckles darkly, moving back on his knees and leaving me empty. I can feel the wetness that stains my thighs, and I’m sure that I’m an absolute mess.

The touch of a damp rag rasping against my inner thighs makes me jump. But Kayde just shushes me softly and presses one hand against my stomach, holding me there as he cleans me up in the dark. “I do like it, though. Maybe tomorrow night I’ll show you how much fun it is to come when you’re almost knocked out from oxygen deprivation.

“I’ll pass.”

“Sure you will.” It takes a few more minutes for him to finish up, and afterward he falls back down on the bed beside me, wrapping his arm around my waist before I can move away. I’m still high enough that sleep is absolutely a possibility, and I sigh, defeated, instead of trying to pry him off of me.

“You done then?” I ask, trying to sound flippant about it. Kayde just chuckles, and curls closer against me, kissing my shoulder almost sweetly.

“Yeah, sweetheart. We’re done for now. Go back to sleep, okay? I’ll try my hardest not to play with you when you start making those cute little whimpers in your sleep.”

If the lights were on, it would be adamantly clear how hard I’m blushing. As it is, I turn my face away from him, closing my eyes hard. “Whatever,” is all I can mutter, and I pull the blankets higher over my body, feeling vulnerable without any clothes on.

Not that it stops me from falling back into a deep, dreamless sleep that I question how I’ll wake up from.

**S**taring at the bright, sparkling water of the river that feeds into the lake has never done anything for me.

Especially when I’m in a kayak.

Not being the greatest kayaker known to Camp Crestview, I can never help the prickles of anxiety that go through me whenever we take the kids along the river for a few miles. Naturally, the day is split up for different cabins to kayak without overwhelming the counselors with their sheer numbers, but there's something different this year.

Something I don't like.

And for once, it has nothing to do with Kayde.

Normally, I tandem kayak with Liza or Kinsley. Preferably Liza, as she's the more confident and knowledgeable buddy to have in this situation. No offense to my best friend, but having someone who knows how not to let us tip has been a lifesaver for the past few years.

I rub my arms, skin prickling as I stare down at the single-person kayak I was given. This year we need most of the tandem ones for the kids, and somehow, I'd ended up as one of four counselors who are going solo in kayaks we don't normally use, since tandem has proven to be safer for all of us.

While Liza, Kayde, and Daniel also have their own kayaks, none of them seem particularly put out or nervous about it. Liza checks hers over deftly, and casts a quick, worried look in my direction as if she can read my mind.

"You good, Summer?" she asks, her voice carrying enough that Daniel and Kayde look up at me. Daniel isn't surprised by my trepidation; we've done this job together long enough that he knows how nervous I am about kayaking in tandem, let alone solo. But Kayde just looks confused until Daniel leans over and whispers an explanation in his ear.

Even then, Kayde's expression just turns...bemused. Maybe a touch surprised, and I scrunch my nose in distaste at him knowing I have a weakness.

"I'm fine," I lie, pushing the kayak closer to the water with my foot. Getting wet isn't something I'm worried about. I'm dressed in clothes that are old, and I expect them to get soaked.

I just don't want to *drown*.

"We can figure something—"

"No, I'm really okay," I lie, flashing her a smile hopefully filled with confidence I don't feel. "You've been saving my ass for, like, four years now. Surely I've learned enough from you to keep myself afloat, right?" I laugh with the words, and Liza's expression softens somewhat.

“If the kids can do it, so can you,” Daniel points out, in his own version of encouragement.

It’s not particularly helpful, though. Not when I’m now thinking of how embarrassing it’ll be to flail around in this kayak for the next hour.

“Absolutely,” I agree, a smile ready on my face for him as well. Then I turn, pinning Kayde with a look and raised eyebrows to invite his *opinion* as well.

But he only smiles, not looking malicious in the least, and goes back to checking over his kayak. Clearly he knows what he’s doing, and while I have no idea what he’s looking for, I can appreciate that he knows his way around this.

If only I did too.

Still, I shove the kayak into the water after Liza does the same, and try to remember the steps she’d taught me to make this easier.

*Feet in the kayak.*

*Lean on the paddle.*

*Get a good grip and lower myself decisively into the seat.*

*Don’t fall out.*

*Really, don’t fall out.*

Somehow, with only a moderate amount of flailing, I end up drifting into the river in my kayak and relatively dry. My hands tremble just slightly, and I reacquaint myself with the paddle in my grip as I steer myself in a small, measured circle near Liza.

I can do this. It really isn’t that bad, and most of the river is shallow enough that I won’t be in any danger of drowning unless I’m really, really stupid and forget how to stand up.

Once I’ve relaxed a little, even I can admit that while this is nerve-racking, there’s a lot about it that’s relaxing. The sun is warm against my skin, and the dark fabric of my tank top sucks in the heat that then sinks into my upper body. With my hair up in a messy bun to keep it out of my way, I can feel the sun against my scalp and the back of my neck.

Though, thinking of how rushed and messy I must look only reminds me of this morning. Of waking up with my nose pressed to Kayde’s chest and him just *staring* at me like I’d been doing something interesting.

And fuck, had I been sore. Somehow he’d known that too, and he’d handed me a couple Tylenol while I’d dressed in a whirlwind, citing the fact I needed to get *out* of his cabin before anyone could see me with him.

He hadn't exactly been as worked up as me over it. Hell, he hadn't been worked up at all as he'd watched me frantically running around his cabin from his spot on the bed. It was only when I'd been about to leave that he dragged me back to him and nipped at my throat enough I'd been sure he was going to leave a mark.

I close my eyes and sigh in the sun, ignoring my name being called by Redtail cabin's feral occupants. "What?" I ask finally, looking around at them and steering my kayak closer to my girls. Unlike me, they all get to use tandem kayaks, and I'd carefully paired the confident girls with the lesser confident or newer ones.

It's worked out, from what I can see. Melody sits protectively behind a smaller blonde girl who seems scared of her own shadow. But since Melody 'adopted' her the first night of the week, she's been doing steadily better with everything.

My favorite camper is nothing if not inspiring, after all. Even if she is the one most likely to become a murderer when she's older.

"Are you okay?" Melody asks bluntly, dipping one side of her paddle into the water to stay facing me. "You look upset."

"I've never been better," I lie, flashing her a quick grin.

"Is it because you're kayaking alone?" another of my long-time campers asks, her eyes wide as she looks me over, like she's also afraid I'm going to get dumped into the shallow river at any moment.

"Well, I've been kayaking with Liza long enough that surely some of her skill has rubbed off on me. So no, I'm not nervous." None of her skill has rubbed off on me, and there's not an ounce of confidence sticking to my bones today.

Part of me would rather go another round with Kayde than do this kayaking adventure in a single kayak. But that part of me deserves to be smothered out of existence, quite frankly. Still, I take another deep breath, trying to look something other than terrified, and cautiously steer myself closer to my cabin as Liza explains the rules of kayaking and the route we'll take. Also giving the campers a few minutes to get used to using the paddles without tipping themselves into the water.

More than anything, I know it's going to be a long fucking day.

**D**isaster waits to strike until the worst possible time, naturally.

It takes a little while for me to get comfortable, and I have more close calls along the river than I'd like to admit, though I manage to laugh all of them off like they haven't happened. The river opens up, becoming deeper and wider the closer we get to the lake, and I know this is the point where I need to keep my eyes on the campers. The river is a little rougher this year than we prefer, and if someone falls in, a counselor will most likely have to go in after them.

For all that I'm a good swimmer, I'm also pretty sure that I'll look like an idiot dragging a twelve-year-old to the shore. Not to mention, it's not high on my 'enjoyable' list of activities that can happen during summer camp sessions.

It's hard to focus on my own kayak and watch my girls, but thankfully, most of them have been here enough times to know what they're doing. They're able to follow Liza through the deeper water toward the shore and the small dock, where they'll be able to step out and drag the kayaks to land. My girls haven't been a problem at all, and I'm not worried about a spontaneous change to that now.

"Hey! Justin, Bryan, *stop!*!" Daniel's sharp bark from somewhere behind me barely registers in my brain. I'm deaf to other counselors reprimanding their kids, but when something taps against the back of my kayak, I look back, startled, to see the two boys splashing each other with paddles and generally not paying attention.

They don't respond to Daniel's words, and I roll my eyes where they hopefully can't see. Daniel always was a pushover, and his kids' behavior reflects that. None of my girls would be stupid enough to have a water fight with paddles, nor bump into someone else if they can help it.

Belatedly I use my paddle to push against their kayak, creating some distance between us and ending up parallel with the boys. "Enough, you two," I snap, still barely paying attention to them. "At least wait until we're on—"

I only see the paddle out of the corner of my eye, and I definitely don't see it in time to react with more than a pang of fear that chokes me. The boy in the back swings the paddle around, trying to slap his kayak partner with it or splash him with whatever water he can thrust out of the river.

Unfortunately, his friend ducks, cackling, and the momentum brings the paddle further in my direction than it should, until it collides with my cheekbone hard enough that I see stars and pitch to the left.

In doing so, I tip my kayak, and all the flailing in the world isn't enough to keep me out of the water with a throbbing, spinning head and an open, surprised mouth.

Honestly, it's the worst luck I could have. The rational part of my brain that's not freaking out tells me, oh so helpfully, that this is the worst possible situation to be in, and at the absolute worst place because the current is stronger and the water is deeper.

*My lungs are burning.*

Not to mention I can barely think around the throbbing in my face and the stars I swear I see winking in and out of my vision. I flail—my best attempt at swimming upward—and with my eyes open, I can see the sunlight reflecting on the surface of the water that seems way too far away.

At least, until a dark shape obscures the light above me. It gets larger and larger in my vision until arms wrap around me, stopping me from flailing, before dragging me up and up through the heavy, ice cold water.

My head breaks the surface and I suck in a breath, lungs and nose burning as water mixes with the tears streaming from my eyes. "I'm fine," I cough, the words probably slurred and barely heard. I try to help my rescuer, attempting to paddle my way toward the shore so that I'm not just dead weight in the water.

Not that they seem to mind.

"Stop, stop," a voice that is definitely Kayde's growls in my ear, his arm locked around my body. "You're not helping like you think you are. I've got you."

"I don't need—" The words are out of my mouth automatically, my brain pushing back against getting help from the boogeyman.

"Sweetheart, you do. Now shut up for me." He doesn't sound angry, but I still can't get a good look at his face. The moment my foot brushes the bottom of the river, Kayde stands, sweeping me up into his arms like I weigh as little as one of our preteen campers.

*I'm never going to live this down.*

Not when I'm being carried, bridal style, out of the river while three cabins of kids watch and Liza keeps my girls from killing the boys that dunked me.

Not when I can't do much more than clutch at Kayde' shirt, my face throbbing and my head still spinning.

I will never, in all of my life, live down Kayde Lane saving my life in front of a third of Camp Crestview. *Fuck.*

Gently, Kayde kneels, letting me slide to the ground in front of him before he brushes my hair back from my face.

“I hate you,” I manage to wheeze, just loud enough for him to hear. My hands flex against his shirt, where I’ve left them, and for some reason I can’t extract my fingers as my hands tremble from the adrenaline setting in.

“Oh, I’m sure you do,” Kayde assures me, just as softly. “I just saved your life in front of how many people, again?”

“Fuck off.”

“Nah, I’m not done being your *hero*, sweetheart.” He leans over me, checking my face, and his fingers are gentle along the painful edge of my cheek that still smarts. “Did you hit your head?” he asks, waiting for me to answer silently before moving on in his examination. “Did you inhale a lot of water? Your mouth was open when you went in.”

I open my mouth to tell him no, but instead turn just in time to gag, river water spilling onto the dirt from my throat.

*Fuck.*

“I will take that as a yes,” Kayde murmurs, clasping my hand that’s still clutching his shirt, though he doesn’t make me let go.

Noise to my other side heralds the arrival of Liza, and she drops to her knees in the dirt, paying no attention to the water sinking into the ground near my face. I cough again, body shuddering, and manage to gag out another mouthful of foul-tasting water.

“Are you okay? Did you hit your head at all?” Her hands replace Kayde’s on my face, and she opens my eyes to check my focus, her brows drawn together. “You swallowed a lot of water, huh?” I can only nod vigorously at that, and nausea roils in my stomach, making me groan. “Can you carry her back to the medical cabin?” she asks, glancing up at Kayde even as I give another argumentative groan.

“I can walk—” I protest, which only makes Kayde snort derisively and causes Liza to give me *the Mom look*.

“You cannot,” she disagrees, getting to her feet. “Daniel is going to take all the kids to the beach where a couple other cabins are already. He can handle that much.” Though she gives Daniel an unfriendly look over her shoulder, like it’s his fault his campers decided to knock me into the river.

"I really can," I still argue weakly, trying to sit up at the very least, though I use my grip on Kayde's shirt to manage any progress I do make.

Which isn't a lot. And it doesn't last longer than a few seconds before Kayde gathers me into his arms again, his now-soaked shirt cold against my body. I can't help the shiver that goes through me, and it brings a concerned look from him and a small quirk of his lips into a frown.

"She's cold," he informs Liza, holding me closer. "Really cold."

"I was in the river," I point out dryly, rubbing the gooseflesh breaking out along my arms. "Of course I'm fucking cold."

Kayde doesn't give me an answer. He sets off after Liza at a fast walk, as if my weight really doesn't inconvenience him or his ridiculously toned arms. The only saving grace to my day, I realize, is that I'd accidentally left my phone in my cabin when I'd stopped by in my frantic whirlwind. Otherwise I'd be mourning that loss, and I definitely don't have it in me to buy another new phone this year.

I groan again, tugging on Kayde's shirt and turning my head away from him as another wave of nausea climbs up my throat. In seconds I'm gagging up more river water, but Kayde doesn't drop me in disgust or even act like he minds. He just stops and helps me sit a little straighter in his arms, not saying a word about my death grip on his shirt as I wretch, eyes streaming once more.

"You're okay," he tells me when I'm done, a low moan leaving me as I try to get myself to stop shivering. I'm not a cute puker, and my body tends to make more of a deal over it than is strictly necessary. By quite a lot, if I'm honest with myself.

"You could let me walk and keep my dignity," I implore him as we breeze past the volleyball court and the pool. "That would be like, super cool of you."

"You'd fall over," comes his too-sweet reply. "Then you'd look even more pathetic *crawling* to Liza's cabin and retching every few steps. God, can you imagine? You'd never live that down. At least here you just look desperate and a little in love with me—"

"I do not."

"Darcy is certainly going to think so."

Darcy will most likely murder me the moment she finds out about this, if she hasn't already seen me in the arms of her dream man.

Liza's cabin looms in my vision, and the small groan I let free is one of relief that we're finally done with this whole thing. Kayde, finally, can go the fuck away.

That's what I want, anyway. But when he sets me down gently on the bed closest to the wall, he thumps down in the seat beside it while I glare at him, willing him to *go* or spontaneously combust.

Either will do.

"Here you go." Liza appears with towels, one of which she drops onto me and the other that she hovers with, until Kayde takes it. I don't realize what he's doing until the towel finds my hair, and with surprisingly gentle movements, Kayde wrings the worst of the water out of my long, soaked and clumped auburn mane.

Clearly he's just waiting for his moment so he can suffocate me with the towel.

I take the other one and work on drying off the rest of myself, not bothering for modesty as I shuck off my shirt, leaving me in my camp appropriate, star patterned swim top. My shorts, being water resistant and slick, aren't nearly as bad, so I don't bother with them or my flip-flops. I do shudder from the cold again though, hating that my teeth start to chatter.

I shouldn't be *that* cold, but something tells me it's more from shock than the actual water.

"Fuck," I hiss, closing my eyes and trying to will myself to get some kind of control. "I'm being ridiculous. This really isn't a big deal, guys."

"You're getting a nasty black eye," Liza points out dryly, running her fingers over my cheekbone. "I'm going to get you some ice for it." She walks away quickly, leaving me with Kayde, who still works to dry my hair.

"I'm going to escape while she's not looking."

"If you do, I'll just kidnap you to my cabin and tie you down with blankets and soup. You're killing me with the teeth chattering, baby girl," he admits, his voice quiet in the cabin.

Startled, I look his way, brows rising incredulously. "Don't lie to me. You were absolutely cheering them on. I'm surprised you didn't just let me drown."

Kayde takes his time, and shrugs when he finally meets my eyes. "What can I say?" he asks, checking to make sure Liza is still on the other side of the cabin. "I don't like losing my toys. And more than that? I can't stand when other people touch what's *mine*." The way he says it, the way he

growls the word *mine* only a few inches from my face, has me frozen in surprise and confusion.

How in the world do I respond to that?

Thankfully, the door crashing open saves me from saying something stupid, or worse, thanking him. I hear a familiar intake of air between clenched teeth, and look up just in time to see Kinsley, her eyes wide as she asks, loudly, “What the fuck happened and why is everyone saying Kayde had to fish Summer out of the damn river?”

All I can do in response is groan, bury my face in my hands, and wish I could sink into the floor where no one can see me.

*I'm never going to live this down.*

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# CHAPTER FOURTEEN



The way Kinsley and Liza have me wrapped in a blanket in front of the campfire will never not be embarrassing.

Though I'd told both of them, over and over, that I'm fine, they hadn't exactly taken it as gospel. After being forced to hang out in Liza's cabin in a dry change of clothes, I'd finally been *allowed* to attend charades night around the campfire with my cabin.

I refuse to mention that I'm grateful for the blanket, as my body still takes random opportunities to break out in gooseflesh and I give little shivers that have nothing to do with the air itself.

If I had to guess, I'd assume the cold is from Darcy's accusatory looks that she throws me whenever she thinks Kayde isn't looking. Like I purposefully got dumped into the river so he'd have to carry me across the camp to Liza's cabin.

I'd love to tell her just how untrue that is. And just how much I'd rather be anywhere but in Kayde's arms. Though by the look on her face when I slant my gaze in her direction, I doubt she'd believe me.

Melody nudges me and I turn to look at her, unsurprised to see the small bruise on the side of her chin. According to her and the other girls in my cabin, she'd 'slipped' and accidentally taken down the boy who hit me with a paddle.

With her fist.

According to *Daniel*, though he'd been sheepish when he'd said it, the kid had deserved it. He'd thought it was funny that he'd knocked me into the river, and funnier still that Kayde needed to fish me out. The boy was

telling everyone at the beach about it, before Melody's little 'accident' knocked him into the lake, off the dock, and into the arms of some very unsympathetic girls who wanted to see how long he could hold his breath.

"You're a menace," I tell her fondly, tapping my chin and nodding in her direction. "Your mother is going to kill me when she sees that."

"She's not going to kill you," Melody replies confidently. "She'll understand. And he deserved it. You didn't hear what he was telling people, Summer. He said—"

"I don't need to hear what he said," I assure her, before she can get any further. Really, whatever insults the kids fling around aren't that important to me. Though I'm sure they're creative as all hell when the kids are mad enough. "I was okay. You didn't have to try to drown him."

"If I'd wanted to drown him, he'd be *drowned*," Melody mutters, almost too quietly for me to hear. But I choose to pretend I hadn't heard a peep out of her.

"Who's our person to act out the card?" I ask, knowing the girls took the time to decide amongst themselves who would guess and who would act.

"Ari," Melody replies, pointing at the skittish blonde from her kayak. She smiles gently at her new friend, who looks like she's close to shaking herself apart and blowing away on the wind. To me, it seems like there are better choices. Like Melody herself. But my girls are their own little democracy and I wouldn't dare interfere in their governing style or decisions.

I value my life too much for that.

Still, I cheer with my campers when it's our turn and Ari nervously gets to her feet before heading toward the fire and plunging her hand into the bowl of folded up papers that will tell her what she's acting out.

Judging by her face, she's been told to play a serial killer. Her face pales and she glances at Melody, wide-eyed, like she's asking for help. But Melody just smiles and nods confidently, drawing her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them.

"You've got this, Ari," I call, a smile on my face as well. Kinsley sinks down beside me, silent, and I bump my shoulder happily against hers before she returns the gesture.

Even after leaving Liza's cabin and being strictly informed to let her know if I come down with symptoms of anything like shock or a cold or the

plague, Kins walked me back to my cabin and stuffed me into bed under my blankets.

*After telling Kayde to get lost.*

And even with all the fear and trepidation I'd felt for her wellbeing, I hadn't been able to deny how impressed I was at how she'd talked to him. Though I'd watched his face for any sign of more than bemusement, and finding none, breathed a soft breath of relief when he left.

I just have to make sure he isn't plotting revenge for her at a later date. And now that the sun has set...

Unable to help myself, I glance across the fire to where Kayde sits with his boys. They're in the lead so far with five correct guesses, followed by Kinsley's cabin with four. He's not looking at me, though. Instead his lips move rapidly as he speaks to Darcy, saying something I'm nowhere near close enough to hear.

Whatever it is, she doesn't like it. I can see her bristle from here, and her fingers sink into her thighs as she glances away from him. Her foot taps on the grass in front of her, and when she whips her head back to look at Kayde, it's accompanied by her eyes narrowing and a hiss of something that seems unfriendly.

Certainly unfriendly enough that Kayde's smile lessens, and some of the warmth in his eyes cools just enough to set me on edge. She's really upsetting him, if I had to guess. Though I have no idea what she could be saying to piss him off enough that some of his mask has fallen off his face. Not that he seems to notice, given the fact he still watches her, with a muscle in his jaw ticking like he's close to saying something incredibly unfriendly.

"Hey." Kinsley nudges my arm, pulling my attention back to this side of the fire. When I look at her, she nods toward Ari, who's flapping her arms and looking more and more upset with each passing second.

I feel awful for her, and my heart twists in sympathy. While I know that helping her will result in us not scoring, I'm also not going to let her stand there, embarrassed, while all of her peers watch.

"Go help her?" I murmur, leaning over to Melody on my other side. The little girl nods fiercely and jumps to her feet, going to Ari and glancing at the paper clenched in her hand.

Then Melody does something I don't expect. I'm sure that whatever is being acted out, there has to be a better way to do it so we can guess

something other than ‘dying pelican,’ but Melody doesn’t bother to try. She flaps her arms along with Ari, making the same motions as she stares expectantly at her cabin, who can’t figure any of it out.

Ari, for her part, relaxes a little, and I see some of the tension ease out of her as Melody does the same, exaggerated motions without a care in the world on her face. She doesn’t care if people make fun of her. Hell, I’m pretty sure most of the campers are too afraid of her to say something out of turn.

Finally, by some stroke of a miracle, one of the girls from my cabin guesses ‘flamingo,’ though it’s not until Ari lifts one leg and bends it awkwardly, flapping her ‘wings’ and nearly overbalancing.

“Finally!” Melody throws her hands up and takes the paper from Ari before coming back to our side of the fire. She hands me the paper, though I’m sure she knows this doesn’t actually count as a point.

But I’m okay with pretending it does. It’s not like we’re in competition for first, anyway. Not with how long guessing ‘flamingo’ took.

We do end up with one point, before our time runs out, and by the time Kinsley’s cabin has gone, Ari isn’t looking so embarrassed and instead sits with her knee touching Melody’s, probably seeking the reassurance that I know she’ll give her without question.

Melody really is the best twelve-year-old of the bunch. And the worst, depending on the day. Tonight I couldn’t be more proud of her, however, and I reward her with a quick, genuine smile before watching Kinsley’s girls act out an otter, a groundhog, and a kite without missing a step.

She ties with Kayde in the end. The two of them accept the ‘trophy’ for their cabins, the one that we’ll end up re-using for the next summer camp session. But the kids don’t care about that. They’re just happy to have won, and the mixed herd of winning boys and girls yell and cheer for themselves, hopping around the campfire while making sure not to get close enough to be burned.

“I’m sorry,” I hear Ari whisper, but before I can answer, Melody hugs her fiercely.

“Don’t be,” she replies stubbornly. “We just have bad guessers in our cabin. And the worst counselor for charades in the whole group.”

That makes me snort, but not because she’s wrong. I really am awful at both acting out whatever is on the paper and guessing what it is.

“You guys did good,” I tell them, getting to my feet and draping the blanket over my shoulders. “Flamingo is *hard*. And you were the one who figured out to go up on one foot, not Melody,” I remind Ari, who gives me a soft, nervous smile.

“If you say so.” She doesn’t sound convinced, and I wish I knew what to say to make her happier with herself and her efforts.

“Man, flamingo was *such* a curveball, huh?” Kayde’s sweet, gentle chiding reaches my ears and I glance up at him, unsurprised to find him in my orbit. “You did so great standing on one foot. That’s what did it for your cabin, you know,” he confides in Ari, standing beside me with his hands shoved in his pockets.

Ari brightens just a little at that, and glances at me for my opinion. I nod vigorously, agreeing with him and the words I’d just said.

“Are we dismissed to go get our shower stuff?” Melody asks, watching the other kids stream away from the campfire.

“Yep,” I tell her, gesturing toward our cabin. “Just don’t kill anyone on the way there. Or in the showers. Or on the way back.” Melody mock salutes me, rolling her eyes, and leads the girls back to Redtail to pick up their shower gear before heading out again.

I silently watch them go, my head tilted to one side as curiosity bubbles up my throat. Finally, when I can’t take it anymore and there’s no one in earshot, I say, “You and Darcy seemed to have a lot to talk about, huh?”

I expect a laugh. A joke. His normal brush off filled with humor and telling me it was nothing at all. But instead Kayde sighs, sharply, and folds his arms over his chest as if I’ve reminded him of a particular irritation.

“Yeah,” he agrees darkly. “She certainly wanted to make her feelings known. Pretty sure you’re not her best friend, by the way. Just in case you thought she ever had your back.”

“Oh, no,” I assure him, shaking my head. “No, I’ve never thought that. She dislikes me a lot.”

“I’ve noticed. She made sure to bring up all of what she thinks are your bad qualities. Told me a cute little rumor about you and Daniel, too. Then insinuated you’re in love with Kinsley and jealous of Liza.”

The snort I give is undignified at best, and at worst, I’m surprised I don’t choke on it. “What did you say? Did you assure her you’re unattached? That she still has a chance? For her to keep trying, and that I’m not a threat—”

“I told her I didn’t appreciate her talking about you like that.” He cuts me off smoothly, and I feel his gaze on me, though I don’t look up. “I told her if that’s all she wanted, then she could fuck right off. That if she can’t keep your name out of her mouth, then she can run it to someone who gives a damn.”

*He...did?*

I finally peek up at him through my bangs, and sure enough, Kayde is staring down at me with a heated, confusing expression that I can’t read. I shift uncomfortably, pulling at the blanket, and realize I have no idea what to say.

“You didn’t have to,” I mumble finally, hoping the darkness hides the heat spreading over my cheeks. “She’s just being Darcy.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t like it. I don’t care if she’s *just being herself*.” His fingers tug playfully on the blanket as well, and he shifts just a little closer to me, so our arms brush whenever I move.

“...Thanks.” It feels wrong to leave it unsaid, though the word is dragged from my throat like unwilling prey.

“Anytime, sweetheart.” He checks around us, then leans down and playfully nips the tip of my ear, pulling a yelp from my throat. “Meet me here in two hours,” Kayde purrs, still close enough that I can feel his breath against my skin. “We’re doing something a little different tonight.”

Before I can ask what he means, or why in the world we’re meeting by the campfire, he’s gone; following his campers back to Coyote Cabin at a jog. I hear his fading voice reminding them they’re just showering, not going on a picnic in the shower house, so no, they don’t need snacks.

But all I can do is stare at his retreating figure and wish he wasn’t so good at confusing the hell out of me at every turn.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Two hours pass both incredibly quickly, and agonizingly slow. It shouldn't be possible for both those things to occur at once, but somehow it happens. I shower while time ticks by, the water warming me up and sinking deep into my muscles to finally chase away the cold from the river.

I'm *tired*, though I shouldn't be. I haven't done more today than any other day, except for my accidental and unfortunate dunk in the river. But by the time the hour rolls around for me to meet Kayde, I find I'm yawning less, and the chill is back in my bones in a way that I don't think I can chase off with a shower or blankets.

Instead of my usual camp counselor tee and shorts, I opt instead for leggings, sneakers, and a long-sleeved henley that I push up to my elbows automatically. It's probably too warm for all of this, especially given it's mid July in Tennessee. But something in me craves the warmth, even if it's too much, too hot, or too oppressive.

Because it's also strangely *comforting* to be this warm, like I can convince my brain the chill isn't real and this night won't be that big of a deal. I'm just too tired to play Kayde's game tonight, and the river's lasting chill isn't going to make that any better.

At the embers of the campfire I sink down onto one of the large logs, head in my hands and a low sigh leaving my lips. This far away from the cabins, the camp is devoid of any human noise. Instead I can hear the crickets and the frogs near the lake when I close my eyes.

I've always loved how things feel out here.

The log shifts just slightly, and I open my eyes to slits to see the figure beside me, sitting with one knee drawn up and the other stretched out to the empty fire pit.

Tonight, Kayde hasn't bothered to put up his hair. It hangs in damp ringlets to his shoulders, still managing to shine like gold in the dim light from the further away buildings. I can't see the warm honey of his eyes, but I can see him gazing towards the fire, as if remembering the blaze from earlier.

"Hi," I greet, hating that I can hear the tiredness in my voice even with that one word. "Long time no see. You enjoying the night air too?" The usual edge of sarcasm and taunting is absent, and I pretend that I don't see the way he turns just enough to look at me, just enough to survey my face if he wants to.

I know he's staring at me, though I don't know what he's looking for.

"Yeah," Kayde murmurs at last, shifting just a touch closer to me so our legs press together at the thigh. "It really is nice here. And a nice night. You look cold." The accusation is casual, inoffensive, and light-hearted coming from him.

"I am cold." Hesitating before I reply, and I speak quietly like it is a secret. "I've been cold all damn day. It's ridiculous."

He scoffs softly at that and gets to his feet with one hand outstretched toward me. "We have a bit of a walk, so it might warm you up."

I frown, nose scrunched in disgust as I get to my feet without his help. "I really hate exercise," I gripe, eyes on his face. "Where are we going? Up a tree? It would be a shame if you fell out of it and, like, died or something."

"Thought you'd be a little more grateful to me after today." He shoves his hands in the pockets of his jeans, and for the first time I notice he's not dressed like a camp counselor either, though I have no idea why. There's also a backpack over his shoulder, though it's empty enough that it sits flush against his body, which made it harder for me to notice.

My steps drag as worry flickers through my chest. He doesn't look like Kayde the Camp Counselor tonight.

He looks much more like Kayde the Ax Murderer.

Kayde only notices when the distance between us yawns wider, becoming feet instead of inches as I reluctantly follow him into the thicker

trees. I can't run away from him. I can't tell him no. But I sure as hell don't have to march happily along to what I'm terrified is going to be my doom.

He stops and twists to the side, looking at me over his shoulder in the dark, lit only by the moon and stars in the clear sky above us. "Are you sore from the river?" he asks, like that could possibly be the reason that I'm lagging behind.

"No." I rub my arms, gooseflesh breaking out even under my long-sleeved shirt. "I'm fine."

"You're quiet." He doesn't move, and I stop as far from him as I can while still able to see the sharp line of his cheekbone. I'm not out of following range; he doesn't *need* me to walk beside him like a dog.

"I'm tired," I admit, sighing out a breath along with the words.

"You're afraid of me." I hate that he's right. I hate that I have no idea how to refute the claim when I'm standing here with a distance between us wondering if he's going to go back on his word and kill me like he wanted to kill my campers.

"You're not exactly trustworthy." I rub my arms harder, dragging my sleeves down to my wrists. "And God, I'm so *cold*. Tell me this won't take long so I can find a blanket or twenty."

He doesn't answer right away. To my horror, he backtracks, moving until he's standing right beside me, close enough that I could reach up and choke the shit out of him if I wasn't so nervous about this whole thing.

"Would you feel better if I told you where we're going?" he asks finally, reaching up to gently curl his fingers around the base of my throat in a move that's not so much threatening as it is *possessive*.

Though I still can't figure out what there is to prove here to me. If he's telling the truth, then this will last another few nights. That's all. Then he'll be gone, and then I'll hopefully be able to get high enough to chalk this up to a nightmare or continuous hallucinations.

"Maybe," I allow, meeting his gaze in the darkness. I can't really tell much about his face. He's looking at me, I know that, but anything else is lost in shadow. I can't read him anyway, so it's not like the lack of seeing his expression is a big loss for me here.

"The night you stopped me, I had to come up with a solution of what to do with my gear. So I hid it in the woods," Kayde explains smoothly, easily, like he's just telling me about running errands. "Probably a bad idea if any of the kids find it on tomorrow's big hike, don't you think?"

Yeah. Yeah that would be bad. I know for certain he'd had an ax, and none of the kids, especially Melody, needs that in their hands.

"That's all?" The words come out before I can stop them, and I wish I could shove them all back into my mouth and swallow them down where Kayde can't remember them, like they never existed in the first place.

"Yeah, eager little sweetheart. That's all for tonight. Contrary to what you obviously think about me, playing with you when you've had a rough day and you're clearly worn out isn't really something I'm into. I like it when you're feisty. Not when you're shivering." At that, he runs his hands down my arms, palms warm even through the fabric of my shirt as he moves them back up. "So we clean this up, and then you can curl up in all the blankets you can find. Deal?"

I open my mouth with the intention of agreeing. That's what he's asking for anyway, and it's not like I'm really giving him anything. Instead, what comes out is, "You're not dragging me out into the woods to kill me?"

Kayde doesn't move. He's quiet for long enough that my stomach starts knotting nervously, and my hands clench at my sides as his still on my shoulders. "You think I'd bring you all the way out here to kill you, Summer?" he asks finally, disbelief in his voice. "Why would I do that?"

"So you don't get caught?" *God*, I wish I knew how to shut up.

A derisive scoff is the answer I get first, and I see Kayde shaking his head in bemusement. "Really? You think I care about that? You think I *hide* my kills? I wasn't going to hide any of those kids' bodies, remember? It would've been all over the news and everyone who showed up here would've been able to see what I'd done. No, I don't need to *hide* anything. Not your body, not anyone else's."

"That feels reckless." *Isn't that a quicker way to get caught?*

But if he doesn't care, then there's certainly no reason for me to, either. He just shrugs his muscular shoulders and strokes his palms down my arms again. "Not gonna kill you," he purrs in a voice that shouldn't be so fucking hot that my fingers clench tighter against my palms. "You're fine, baby girl."

I should definitely hate it when he calls me that. It should not be growing on me in any capacity, and I groan under my breath in what I hope he thinks is irritation. Though, judging by the way he leans forward to press his lips to my forehead, I might be overestimating that. Without another

word, he tugs on my wrist, apparently tired of me trailing behind him as he leads me through the dark woods to some unspecified location.

Even when he stops, I have no idea what I'm looking at. It's a clearing, barely, with a couple of stout, old trees taking up most of the space. It's far enough from camp that no one would be out here, but definitely not far enough that we won't end up passing it when we hike tomorrow.

"My stuff's under the trees here," he tells me, nodding toward the two trees with their exposed, arching roots. "Grab what you find from that one." With a quick flick of a gesture at the left-most tree, he sets off to the one on the right, dropping to his knees in the dirt and digging at the soft earth with his hands.

"Should've brought a shovel," I gripe, heart sputtering nervously in my throat. But I go where he'd directed, finding the spot in the dirt that looks a little different from the rest in the moonlight.

I don't really have to dig. Just a few swipes from my palm has me uncovering a small, jacket-wrapped bundle from near one of the large, exposed roots. Curiously, and after making sure Kayde is still wrestling with his larger bundle, I unwrap the jacket from the items, unable to stop myself.

A flashlight.

A lighter.

A knife.

Only three items, but my hands tremble as I get to my feet with my prizes, reaching into the bundle that I cradle in my other arm. I mean to grab the flashlight. I really do, since it'll be useful when navigating to wherever the hell he wants to take all of this stuff.

But instead, my fingers curl around the hilt of the hunting knife, and I bring the unsheathed blade up and out of the jacket so the moonlight shines on the ghostly gray blade.

I've never seen a knife like it. Not even the one Kayde ran along my skin last night. One side is deadly sharp and wickedly curved at the end. The other, which should be the safer, duller side, is serrated near the hilt, and the sharp curves march up to the middle of the blade before they stop.

Even the top edge looks sharp, and I turn the blade over in my hands without immediately realizing Kayde has gotten to his feet, his backpack no longer flat and the handle of his ax sticking up past the zipper.

“You can give me those, Summer,” he invites, standing in the middle of the small clearing between the two trees. He stretches one hand out to me, his tone completely friendly and not an ounce of worry in his posture.

“Aren’t you worried?” I ask, turning more to him with eyes wide enough I’m sure he can see the whites of them in the moonlight.

“Of what?”

“Of what I could do? You’re not holding the ax, and I don’t have to be good at this to...” I trail off, still cradling the other objects as I survey the perfectly spotless knife. The handle is heavy in my hand, and warming to the temperature of my skin quickly.

*I could kill him with this.*

“To...?” I can almost imagine the smug arrogance on his face. Even when I step closer and offer him the other items in his jacket, though I keep the knife in my hand and pulled away from him. To my surprise, Kayde takes the flashlight and the lighter, shoving them in his backpack along with the slick jacket, before straightening to look at me once more. “Whatever it is you think you’re going to do, you won’t. Give me the knife, baby.”

I really need to give him the knife before his amusement turns to something else. He’s probably right; I don’t think I could kill him, even if he wasn’t most likely just as dangerous without a weapon in his hands as he is with a knife or ax.

And yet my fingers tighten on the hilt, and I find myself taking a step back. “You were going to kill everyone here,” I remind him, as if he’s forgotten. It’s so stupid of me, but with the rush of blood in my ears and the pounding of my heart in my chest, I can’t stop myself. I can’t stop this strange, emerging part of me that wants to hold *some* kind of power in this game between us.

Even if it’s ephemeral and fleeting; given to me only by the knife in my hand.

“We’ve established that,” Kayde murmurs. “You’re going to hurt yourself, you know.”

“Maybe I want to hurt *you*.” I throw the words at him like a challenge and regret it the moment he tilts his head to the side, like a curious predator observing the stupidest rabbit ever born.

“Do you?” He strides toward me gracefully, unerringly, and doesn’t hesitate until my hand is up and the point of the blade is just pressed against

his t-shirt. “Do you want to hurt me, Summer? How badly?” He doesn’t make a move to stop me, or to grab for the blade.

“I don’t...” I hate that my confidence falters, and it’s hard to meet his gaze, even in the mostly dark clearing. “I don’t know.”

“Give me the knife.” His voice is soft, but not quite so gentle. There’s a dangerous, silky undertone in his words, that promises me I’d rather *give* him the knife than have him take it. “Give me the knife, before you get hurt or I have to do something not very nice.”

“You’re never that nice.”

“Baby girl, I’ve been so nice. But if you’d rather that change, if you’d rather me show you something different, then I invite you with every ounce of my being to not give me the knife. Take a swing at me. Try to cut my throat.” He mimes the action with his own fingers, then taps a spot on his chest. “Stab me. Slide that blade between my ribs and find my fucking heart.”

“I don’t think you have one.”

“I think you might be right. You gonna give me that knife?”

Though I open my mouth to say something, no words come out. Instead, my grip on the knife shifts, tightens, and I shift my feet in the dirt to something I feel is more balanced.

“Oh, that’s such a *bad* girl. I didn’t think you wanted me to be mean, baby.” Before I can react, he grabs my wrist, quick as a snake, and his finger *presses* into a spot just under my palm. It makes me yelp in surprise and pain, and my grip goes lax against my will.

He doesn’t let the knife hit the ground. He grabs it in midair, yanking me to him in the next moment until we’re pressed almost together and somehow, the tip of the knife has found its way up and under my chin, the point digging into my skin as I pant open-mouthed in fear.

“Bad girl,” he growls again, not moving the knife away. “You could’ve hurt yourself with this. I thought you didn’t *like* a blade on your skin, hmm? You were certainly against it last night.”

For the first time since all of this began, I can’t speak. I’m too afraid to do more than breathe as I stare up at him, my fingers knotted in his shirt as I stand stock-still and try not to shake.

“Don’t you have something to say to me?”

It clicks after a few seconds. He wants me to *apologize*. To eat my pride and say I’m sorry. He knows I’m terrified, and wants me to do what I can to

writhe out of his trap, even if it means chewing off my own arm. My fingers dig deeper into the thin fabric, until I'm sure I'm stretching it, and I can only stare sullenly at him, words dead in my throat.

"You don't?" There's genuine surprise in his voice, and something else that I don't like. Something that sounds *pleased*. "You won't beg me to forgive you, baby—"

"No." I don't know where that flash of defiance comes from, but the blade stroking down to my sternum makes me regret it almost instantly.

"Fine. Then I don't forgive you." He twists the blade before pulling it away, though the lasting sting that pulls a gasp from me is enough for me to know he's actually nicked me with the knife. "I don't forgive you *at all*." He sounds almost feral as he says it, even though his calm and collected movements as he puts the knife in a sheath at his belt read as anything but.

"Does that mean our deal is off?" I can't help the tremor in my voice, or the way I pull him closer, like I'm afraid he'll sprint back to camp and murder everyone on principle.

"No." Kayde reaches up, his now-free hand gripping my jaw and keeping my face turned up to his. "It just means I'm going to make you regret not slitting my throat when you had the chance, Summer."

Before I can say anything. Before I can come up with something to tell him or force an apology from my lips, Kayde releases me and brushes past, heading back toward Camp Crestview with no interest in whether I'm following or not.

And I've never wanted to run away from here more than I do in this moment, knowing that Kayde is nothing if not true to his word.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Every time it rolls around, I remember that Hiking Day is both my favorite and my least favorite day during the week-long summer camp sessions. To an extent, I love hiking. I like hiking *alone*, certainly, or with Kinsley. I'd probably even like hiking with Liza.

But with a hike that takes up most of the morning and makes me need to be up and moving earlier than usual, it's not always easy to remember how much I enjoy hiking these woods.

Especially with sixty-odd kids to protect from nature and the elements.

By the time I've picked through my breakfast and eaten a little over three-fourths of it, I'm slightly more awake than I'd expected and looking around to see how the kids are feeling about today. Sometimes campers beg to get out of it, so we've started offering camp activities as an alternative to hiking, though it's mostly crafts and swimming in the pool. Still, it gives the less hiking-inclined campers something to look forward to, instead of dread.

I prefer it this way. As a kid who'd gotten bullied for her non-athletic-abilities, I know how it feels to be embarrassed and self conscious about an activity.

As my eyes wander around the dining hall, I check to see if Redtail is almost finished eating. I'll need to wrangle them when they are, since I know they're excited as hell to get on the trail. Last year we'd seen the bird we're named for, and they're sure an elk.

I'm still sure it was just a very buff and tall deer, though I won't ruin their illusion about it. Especially since it means my repeat campers are

looking forward to this instead of dreading it. Even Ari hadn't asked to stay behind, though half of me had expected her to.

"We're not together," Kinsley whines, sitting down beside me with her plate of food. She throws me a biscuit and a small packet of blackberry jam, and I realize that I'm not as full as I'd thought. But then again, who can turn down a biscuit?

"I know," I sigh, pulling it apart and distributing the blackberry between the halves. "I'm with Kayde and Daniel again today. Looks like whoever made the schedule decided not to swap cabin groups around like we usually do." I doubt it was Fink. He barely ever plans things here, and certainly doesn't show up to check on how everything is going after the first couple weeks of summer.

If I had to guess, I'd say Daniel made the schedules. And then copied them over and over so he could get it done as quickly as possible. It's definitely a Daniel thing to do.

"Please don't let his kids try to kill you again. Or at least, I don't know, dodge whatever projectile comes toward your face?" She glances at me, her eyes searching my face. "God, that looks painful."

I grimace at her words, fingers inching up towards my black eye that I hadn't really bothered to try to cover. It's not worth wearing makeup I'm just going to sweat off, and who the hell would I be fooling? Every single person at Camp Crestview knows what happened yesterday, and that I got one hell of a bruise from it.

"Yeah, it's not like my favorite face decoration," I admit with a low sigh, my fingers inching higher over the black eye until I'm rubbing the scar that bisects my eyebrow. That, of course, won't go away in a few days like the bruises will.

And I wouldn't want it to. The scar proves I didn't die, that I *survived* my father, just like I'll survive Kayde.

If Dad couldn't break me, a camp counselor with an ax certainly won't get the honor of it. Flashes of last night flicker through my brain as my teeth sink into another piece of biscuit, and I can't help the way my eyes rove around the dining hall until almost involuntarily. Then I find myself looking at the back of Kayde's head.

He's not sitting with Darcy today. She'd been his normal meal companion since camp started, but today he's just with Daniel at a small

table near the corner. Darcy is sitting with Liza and Shawn, and I swear she's shooting daggers at Kayde whenever she gets the chance.

I guess she really is still pissed about last night at the campfire. Whatever specifics he'd given her seems to have cooled her love for him.

But I doubt it'll last. Darcy is nothing if not as tenacious as a cockroach. She'll decide it's my fault in another few hours and be back all over him, thinking she can sway his feelings in her favor.

*If only she knew that it's better that he doesn't like her.*

Shoving the last piece of biscuit into my mouth, I get to my feet with my finished plate and mug of coffee in my hands. "See ya," I mumble around my mouthful, heading to the kitchen to dump and clean my plate. It only takes seconds, and I skirt past Darcy on the way out, who throws a look my way that tells me I was right.

I just should've accelerated my time table for her shift.

Her look gets returned with my sweetest smile, but I don't bother trying to look friendly as I head to my kids' table to gather up the girls buzzing with excitement. Already I hear the word *elk* whispered reverently, like a soft plea for the same miracle they swore they saw last year.

I won't ruin it for them.

"You guys ready?" I ask, shoving my hands into the pockets of my joggers. It doesn't matter how hot it is outside; I'd rather sweat than get ticks crawling up my legs. Instead of my normal sneakers, I'm wearing my old and beautifully worn-in hiking boots laced up to my ankles, and a snug tee exposing my arms is the only mercy I give myself to the late July heat. Though, I do wear bug repellent bands on both of my wrists in an attempt to keep myself free of insect bites and problematic guests accompanying me back to camp.

All the girls get to their feet instantly, their plates and cups already cleaned and in the sink. They stream outside as I follow, heading for the small empty area beside the front of Otter Hall to wait for the other cabins joining us. My girls mill around, clearly impatient, until the doors finally open again and both Kayde and Daniel stroll out with their boys to meet up with my girls.

The other three cabins will start hiking in another thirty minutes or so, and they'll start at a different part of the trail. Though we won't cross paths, we'll get back around the same time for lunch, then give the campers free time for the rest of the afternoon.

Most of them will end up taking naps or hanging out at the beach, but not swimming. Even twelve-year-olds that enjoy being outdoors get tired from a three-hour hike in the hills.

"I'll take the lead if you're okay with that, Summer," Daniel asserts with a smile. He's always the first to volunteer for anything that makes him look important, and I don't care enough to argue with him. If he wants to lead our train of marching campers up and down hills as they look for black bears that would run before they could be seen, so be it.

It just means I get to pay more attention to Melody to make sure she doesn't go after her two new mortal enemies in Daniel's cabin. That idea solidifies when I see her and another girl eyeing the two of them up, and I nearly groan at the idea of having to make sure they don't *shank* a boy.

"We can do whatever you want," I reply with a small smile. The look doesn't travel to Kayde, and I find my skin prickling at the idea of even looking at him. "I can take up the rear with my cabin." That would leave Kayde to kind of range along the middle, making sure no one tries to run into the forest and never return.

Apparently, Daniel only cares about being in the lead, though. He gestures for everyone to follow, barely acknowledging me as he heads toward our side of the trail. The twenty-four kids follow him, their excitement growing as we head for the heavier trees. This is the one time they really get to explore the woods close to the Smoky Mountains while we're here; they have a right to be happy at the adventure.

To my absolute lack of surprise, Kayde falls into step beside me, as the distance between us and the campers yawns to about six feet. "Good morning, sweetheart," he murmurs, his elbow bumping mine. "Did you sleep well when you got back? I know you were cold and looking pretty worn out. The eye is impressive."

*Did I sleep well?* That's certainly not what I was expecting. I turn to glare at him sullenly, mulling the words over in my head as I try to think of an answer for Kayde.

"Yeah," I admit at last, offering him the truth. "I did sleep well after I got back. Wrapped up in way too many blankets and all that. You uh, you sleep well too? Once you..." I wave my hand dismissively, trying to gesture my meaning instead of saying it.

"Slept like a damn baby. Definitely could've been better, though. Want to know why?"

I'm really sure I don't. But Kayde doesn't seem to care about my lack of affirmative response. He slings an arm over my shoulders and drags me close, like there aren't twenty-four kids and *Daniel* in front of us. Hell, I'm pretty sure that Darcy is somewhere watching; judging by the searing heat I'm pretty sure I feel drilling holes into the back of my head.

"What are you doing—"

"Would've been a hell of a lot better with you in my bed and just *fucked*," he purrs in my ear, too quiet for anyone else to hear. "Won't make that mistake again, sweetheart. I promise you that." His words have the effect I'm sure he's looking for. A tremor works its way up my spine, and I clench my fingers tight against my palms.

"I sleep like shit in your cabin," is the only response I can think to give him, especially without getting louder or like, kicking him in the balls.

God, I really want to kick Kayde Lane in the balls.

"Well..." Kayde fixes me with a look, still keeping his arm draped over my shoulders. It's casual, friendly even. But when I try to sidestep him, the muscles in his biceps flex and his fingers hold just a little tighter in warning. So I stop, choosing not to make a scene as he sings out that stupid, bitchy word. "That's not exactly true. I know you want to have this big and tough exterior. Totally get that and don't blame you for it, Summer. But you slept like the *dead* wrapped up in me. With your sweet little murmurs and your lips pressed against my collarbone—"

"Did not," I mutter, being oh so mature about the situation. "I don't remember any of that. You were dreaming."

"I was not." Kayde's low, purring chuckle knocks me for a loop, and my stomach twists in what I convince myself is revulsion. "I stayed up a little longer than I should just to watch my sweet little girl sleep. You begged me for it, you know. Begged me to hold you, to *touch* you—"

"There are kids in front of us." My voice trembles as I force out the words, and I cast him a sideways glance. "Can you not?" Especially now that I see Melody drifting back toward us, obviously wanting to say something.

Kayde, thank God, drops his arms when he notices as well, and just falls back into step with me as Melody edges closer and closer.

"Did Summer tell you about last year?" Her excited gaze fixes on Kayde's, and I wonder again how a muscled up deer could have possibly

become such a *thing* that all the campers are dying for any glance of it again, sure that it's an elk.

"No?" Kayde glances at me, bemused. "What was special about last year?"

"We do this hike every year, you know," she explains, making sure he knows the basics. Kayde nods. "Well, last year, this kid fell behind. He didn't get lost or anything, but Summer pulled us back to wait for him. It was on the ridge at the middle of the trail. So we waited there, and then this *elk* came out of the woods." She whispers the word *elk* like a small prayer, like she's hoping the God of the forest will come bless her again.

I stare at Kayde, mentally willing him not to tell her that an *elk* is incredibly unlikely around here. Especially just wandering fifty feet from a bunch of eleven-year-olds that could barely keep themselves from breaking into happy screeches.

Thankfully, Kayde just tilts his head, eyes widening in what definitely seems to be genuine interest. It's his *Lassie* mask, though, and I've started to notice the cracks in it after spending the last few days with him.

The way the expressions take just a second too long, as if he has to manufacture them instead of having them appear naturally.

The way he never quite seems to be *listening* when the kids or other counselors are saying something he finds boring.

Sometimes, he slips up enough that his mask doesn't quite reach his eyes. Those are the times I think someone else is going to notice that Kayde is a monster, not the perfect golden retriever who has now jumped into two bodies of water to save a counselor and a camper.

*But no one ever does.*

"That's really cool," he breathes, going for understated excitement. "Seriously. Maybe we'll see it this year on the ridge too?"

No, we definitely won't. There are no elk around Camp Crestview, and he sure as shit knows it, too. Melody agrees, carrying on a conversation with him that lasts a couple of minutes while we crunch through the leaves on the trail. It's marked plainly with blue ribbon tied to trees about every thirty feet, and the path is clear enough that I could follow it with my eyes closed. It should be impossible to get lost, but in reality, that's my greatest fear.

"So what would we do if someone got lost?" It's as if Kayde reads my mind after Melody drifts back to her spot in the swarm of campers. "Would

we send everyone else back and have counselors out looking for the kid?"

"Don't worry," I say, before I can stop myself. "I'd make sure you got left at camp on babysitting duty."

That startles a laugh out of him, and I glance sidelong at Kayde as he grins, his mask falling and leaving him looking like the feral thing I have to deal with at night. Only now he's as amused as he is unhinged.

"Well, that's pretty smart of you," Kayde concedes, moving toward the middle of the group of kids without another word. It hadn't sounded like the end of a conversation, but I'm happy as hell to see him go. Hikes should be savored and enjoyed in as much solitude as I can pretend that I have with twenty-four children just looking for their chance at disorder.

But at least the birds sound nice today, and with Kayde halfway up the child-swarm, I can pretend that he isn't here and enjoy my morning.

I can't help the smile on my face as I watch the kids stream to their cabins, completely worn out. This might be my favorite thing about hiking day, other than the hike itself. The kids are always exhausted after the hikes we do, and the water balloon fight combined with a few games of flag football we let them play after. It really is probably the most physical day of the session, and to make up for it, tomorrow is an easy crafts and chill day. The kids can swim, or relax, or hang out on either of the big fields that serve as sports areas. Most of them will most likely nap and chill, which is perfect.

"Another successful hiking day," Kinsley tells me, slinging an arm over my shoulders. I can feel the tiredness in her, and I turn to smile at my best friend. For once, I don't feel so exhausted. Thanks to last night's rest and my lack of involvement in flag football, I feel like I could go hiking again, if the situation called for it.

Though in reality, I'm definitely going to end up chilling in my cabin for as long as Kayde will let me. Naturally, my brain can't stop replaying last night's mistakes over and over in my head, and I try not to grimace at Kinsley as I hear him whisper *I'll make you regret not slitting my throat* so clearly that he could be standing right behind me, one hand going for my neck.

Thankfully, he isn't. But I still give a small shudder that seems to go unnoticed by my exhausted friend. "You should get some sleep," I tell her, trying not to sound like I'm in a hurry. Whatever downtime I can get will be welcome, and it's still early enough that I figure I have an hour or so before

Kayde comes knocking. Plus, I intend to be snug in my cabin by the time he wants something; so he can be the one that comes to me tonight, instead of me marching my ass anywhere for him.

After all, he hadn't given me any instructions on where to meet him, or when.

"I know." Kinsley yawns, covering her mouth belatedly with one hand. "God, I know. But Liza wants to hang out, so..." She gazes forlornly at Liza's cabin on the edge of camp, causing me to snort.

"Then go sleep with your girlfriend." Gently I walk her in that direction, unsurprised when she doesn't exactly protest or try to go anywhere else.

Finally she's walking on her own, and Kinsley turns to reward me with a smile and a soft wave, before falling back into her normal, rushed pace as she walks toward where her girlfriend is probably waiting for her.

*I'm totally not jealous*, is what I tell myself forcibly.

*You really, definitely are*, is how my brain chooses to respond.

But that part of me is not wrong. I *am* jealous of her. At least a little. I want what she has; the sweetness and the obvious, genuine affection. Still, I try to shake those thoughts free from my head as I pivot toward my cabin, happy that in the darkness, I can pretend as long as I want that I'm not looking as miserable as I suddenly feel knowing Kinsley really has achieved her current relationship goals and I haven't had a boyfriend in three years.

And even that was...disappointing at best.

Before I've managed five steps toward my cabin, something grabs my wrist, jerking me to a stop. A yelp bubbles up my throat, slowly evolving to what promises to be a very impressive, horror-movie worthy scream.

At least, until Kayde's palm seals itself over my mouth, and his low, warning growl meets my ears. "Don't you dare," he warns, his face mostly obscured by shadow. "You're coming with me, sweetheart. And you will *not* make a scene about it. Understand?"

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



I don't scream. My throat seems to close in on itself, so I doubt I could—even if I wanted to—as Kayde drags me through the darkness of Camp Crestview.

Belatedly, it occurs to me we aren't heading for his cabin, and I immediately throw on the brakes, dragging my feet as well as I can. When Kayde turns, his hand pulling away just enough, I jerk free of his palm and whisper, "Where are we going?"

"Doesn't matter unless you're telling me you're *not* going," Kayde reminds me, his voice free of any amusement or patience. "I gave you a lot of leeway last night with the knife, sweetheart. You've used it all up."

"I'm just asking—" He lunges at me and I gasp, reaching up to cover my face, terror coursing through me.

In the dark, when I can't see his face, Kayde reminds me of my dad. Of the way he'd come at me, copperhead fast, to strike before I could save myself.

I've stained my mom's living room floor with my blood enough times to know how much it hurts, and this time I tense, waiting for the pain.

Only, it never comes. Kayde pauses, and I can't tell if that was his intention all along, or if my reaction—the way I hid my face from his blow—surprises him.

"Oh," he murmurs finally, and when he reaches out, it's more deliberate this time. "We're going to have to talk about this."

"I don't want to talk about it," I hiss into the dark space between us, made darker by the way my eyes are crammed shut. "I'm not—" But he

doesn't give me a chance to finish. Kayde grabs my hips, yanking me up and off of my feet quickly enough that it pulls a small yelp from my throat.

But he doesn't carry me bridal style like before. No, this time Kayde slings me over his shoulder, and the breath leaves my lungs in a gasp as I come down against his shoulder. "Fuck!" I shriek, my hands scrambling against him for some kind of purchase.

"Don't you dare kick me," Kayde warns, an arm wrapped around my thighs to pin me against him. His fingers roam—of course they do—as he walks, and his other arm pins my ankles to his chest as if he thinks I won't listen.

"I'm not kicking you!" I protest, though the muscles in my legs protest the lack of doing so. "I'm just trying t-to—" Well, it's not like *getting comfortable* is a real option. But his hand around my ankles moves, until he's dragging my arm over his other shoulder where I can bury it in his t-shirt with some kind of confidence.

"There. Happy?" I doubt he's really asking, since he hasn't stopped walking. And his fingers haven't stopped moving until they're kneading against the bare skin up my upper thighs and causing me to tense for an entirely different reason.

"Where are we going?" I whisper, watching the cabins get smaller and smaller. It's hard to tell, though I *think* we're heading for the lake. If he's going to drown me, why wouldn't he have saved himself the trouble and let me die in the river yesterday?

"Shouldn't matter much." His voice is sharp, the amusement I usually find there missing. The answer makes me fall silent, any other words dying before they can make it out of my mouth. But I hold him tighter, hating that it makes me feel just a touch better when he's the reason for all of my problems in the first place.

It's a good five minutes before I hear the lapping of water against the dock, and I stiffen in his arms. "Kayde..." My voice is soft, so soft he may not hear me, but Kayde doesn't stop. He doesn't even slow down as I hear a door creaking open, and I realize where we are.

### *The boathouse.*

It's off limits to campers, and even counselors rarely have a reason to be here unless we're dragging out the kayaks and paddles. The rest of it is empty space, or storage, and because of that, most of us steer clear.

Except for Darcy, when she'd been in love with Daniel one summer.

And I'm pretty sure I've noticed Liza and Kinsley sneaking out of here in the afternoons when they don't think anyone is looking. Too bad my jealousy is just that prominent that I do, in fact, notice. And maybe, just slightly, I've had my own wishes about having someone that I'd want to be here with. Someone to whisper with about our secret plans to come to the boathouse and spend a few stolen minutes away from preteen campers and judgmental counselors.

But God, Kayde is not the partner I'd had in mind for those fantasies. Not even close.

I'm dropped to my feet without notice, and my knees would've buckled if Kayde didn't have an arm around my shoulders to hold me upright. My teeth lock around the words *thank you* to prevent them becoming real, and I step back from him the moment I feel like I'm able to do so.

"What are we—" A *click* cuts me off, and I see the flare of an electric LED lantern as Kayde sets it down on a nearby shelf. "What are we doing here?"

Kayde just fixes me with a look and turns on another, less bright lantern. But the orange light seems to mesh with the bright white, until this mostly empty side of the boathouse is well-lit enough for me to see every twitch of his expression, and for him to see mine.

"What do people normally do when they come here, Summer?" he asks, flicking back a tarp to reveal a stuffed black backpack in the corner.

"I wouldn't know." Even through my fear, it's impossible to keep the sourness from my tone. "No one has ever asked me to come here. Or thrown me over their shoulder, caveman style—"

His sudden grin is anything but nice as he steps forward into my space. "Am I going to break your boathouse cherry, then?" he purrs, his hands coming up to my shoulders. "What a fucking honor."

"Why here?" I ask, glancing around the small room. The wood floor under me creaks as I step to one side, and I look down at the planks in alarm as if they'll break and send me plunging into the cold lake below. Two pillars stretch from the floor to the ceiling, and I know for a fact they continue every few feet in the other area of the boathouse too, the side where we keep the kayaks.

"Because I wanted a place where you could be a little louder." Kayde busies himself with his backpack, unzipping it and fishing a few things out before dropping it back to the floor. "I worry about you in one of our

cabins. You're not so good at control, sweetheart. Besides..." When I look back at him, I see he's tying a rope around one pillar, at about head height for him. He uses one of the pillar's horizontal pegs to make sure the rope won't slip, tugs on it, and moves to do the same to the other pillar.

"Gotta teach you a lesson, don't I?"

"*What?*" The way the word leaves my throat is more of a rush of air and fear, instead of a real word. I take a few steps away from him on the creaking planks, curling my fingers into my palms. "No, I'm not—"

"I do like it when you tell me no," Kayde muses, working on tying the other rope into place. "I like your little rush of panic when you realize I'm going to do something outside of your comfort zone." His wolfish smile finds my wide eyes, and he drops to one knee, another rope appearing in his hands from his backpack as he ties it to the base of the pole. "We should do safe words. What's yours?"

"What's my..." I stare at him like he's grown a second head. "I don't have a *safe word*."

The look on his face as he pauses to look up at me is, in a word, rather unimpressed. His brow raises dismissively, and his mouth twitches in a frown before he states, "That's very unsafe of you, baby girl. You really need a safe word when you're going to play—"

"I never did this before you!" I throw my hands up in exasperation, stomach rolling as I pace along my side of the room like a trapped tiger. My heart flutters in my chest, and I'm sure I'm absolutely going to vomit. "I never *needed* a fucking safe word before—"

"Sounds boring." He cuts me off effortlessly, without raising his voice. "Pick a safe word. That'll let you say 'no' and 'stop' all you want, and I'll know you don't really want to stop. Say your safe word, and everything stops. And...well you know." He smiles at me, though any humor there is dark and mocking.

"I hate you," I breathe out, still clenching my hands so hard my fingers seem to creak with the effort.

"You did this to yourself. I asked you so many times for the knife. But you made me take it from you. I warned you, Summer."

*I haven't felt like this in years.*

The feeling bubbles to life under my ribs, sparking to life in long-forgotten spaces buried under muscle and scars.

*You did this to yourself, Summer.*

*Stop avoiding it, Summer.*

*The more you run from me, the worse it'll be.*

My father had been tall and imposing. His eyes were the same blue-gray as mine, though so much colder than I could ever manage. He always told me the punishments would be worse the longer I avoided him, or the longer I stayed out of his grasp in some way or another.

The time I'd told my teachers had been the worst. I can't help but reach up to finger the only visible scar he'd left me, the one reaching from my brow up towards my bangs.

“...Summer?” If I didn’t know better, I’d say Kayde is concerned when he gets to his feet, his slow stride bringing him closer to me. He seems confused, like I’ve grown a second head, and even his touch is hesitant when he brings my hand away from my face, uncovering my left eye and the scar above it. Somehow, something seems to click into place, an understanding he has no right to and certainly no knowledge of.

Even Kinsley doesn’t know the extent of what my dad did to me before my mother managed to get him out of our house.

“Don’t say that to me,” I whisper finally, my eyes flitting upward to find his. I refuse to show him how afraid I am. I *refuse* to let him know that every part of me seeks any escape possible, no matter how unlikely.

“Don’t say what?”

“Don’t say...” I swallow hard, the words curdling in my throat. “Don’t say *you did this to yourself*. I can’t—I don’t—”

“Fine.” Kayde cuts me off decisively, drawing me with him across the room. “I will never say those words in any order ever again, sweetheart. So long as you stand here and be a good girl for me, instead of trying to claw my eyes out. You think you can do that?”

*Not really.*

But before I can shake my head, he makes it obvious he isn’t really looking for an answer. Kayde’s fingers run up my sides, dragging up my tee with them until he can pull it and my bra over my head. But he doesn’t seem to be in a rush. He kisses me then, his tongue insistent and begging as I finally open my mouth to him.

My reward is a soft, sweet purr from his lips. The kind that would make me melt if I wasn’t considering strangling him with *his* shirt.

But then his fingers tug at the waistband of my running shorts that I’d changed into, and I can’t help the whimper of protest as he slowly drags

them and my panties over my hips, pushing them down my thighs until they're pooled on the floor below me.

"Good girl," Kayde murmurs, sounding like he actually means it. "Don't fight me, baby." He reaches for my left arm and tugs it away from where I'm covering myself, pulling it up near my face before looping the rope around my wrist and tightening.

I try.

I try not to fight him, because I know all he has to do is make the threat he holds over me and I'll have to suck it up, anyway. But I can't help the soft sounds that pour from me; the ones I won't admit are *please* or *don't*. I don't trust him to tie me up. Especially here, where no one really could hear me if things went poorly.

"You should be coming up with a safe word," is his only response as he secures my other arm to his makeshift rope restraints. Before I can dignify that with a response, Kayde drops to his knees, pressing his mouth to my hip as he urges me to step out of my shorts so he can throw them to the wall with his backpack. I hate how afraid I am of him; how my arms tug in the restraints and even now I can't help but watch him with wide, terrified eyes.

"I don't know," I mutter, shrugging jerkily. "Fuck, I don't know what a *safe word* should even be."

"Something you wouldn't normally say during sex," Kayde advises, pushing my ankles wider until he can tie them to the poles on either side of me. When he's done I shudder, the feeling of being *exposed* and *vulnerable* setting hard into my bones.

"And *stop* doesn't qualify?"

"Not when we're playing." He runs his hands up my sides, making me squirm, though it really just proves how little I can move at all.

He has me trapped, and I can't do anything to get away from him. The thought brings another whine bubbling past my lips, one that Kayde chases with his lips eagerly. "Safe word," he urges, hands on my hips. "Now, Summer—"

"Darcy," I say without thinking, causing him to pull back. He stares at me, bemusement etched into his features, before his lips pull into a genuinely amused grin.

"Darcy," he repeats, the edge of a chuckle in the words. "Yeah, okay. That's appropriate. Never met anyone who's as much of a turnoff or a boner killer. I'll take it. Now..." He runs his hands up my sides, not stopping,

until one grips the base of my throat and again I pull at my arms, wishing I could will them free.

The other keeps going, moving until he's cupping my cheek and still going higher.

But when his fingers touch the scar on my brow, I jerk away as hard as the ropes will let me, eyes wide at the searing feel of his touch where I want it the least. "What happened to you, sweetheart?" he murmurs, stepping just a little closer so I really have no escape from him. "Who did this to you? Who said those words to you first and ruined them for you, hmm?"

"I..." This is an angle of attack I hadn't been expecting in the least. "Kayde, I'm not going to tell you—"

"Why?" He actually seems confused, and a little bit curious. "They can't hurt you anymore, can they? Surely they can't be scarier than *me*."

And that, of all things, drags an incredulous laugh from my throat as I tilt my head back, his hand slipping around to the nape of my neck and cradling me in his hold. "Oh, Kayde," I mumble, eyes shut hard. "If only that were true."

The confusion is as genuine as it is expected. His hand doesn't tighten on my throat, though he thumbs the scar a few times, causing me to feel queasier than I had a moment ago. "Stop, please." I murmur, knowing it isn't my brand new *safe word* but wondering if it would even count for something as non-sexual as this.

"Does it hurt?"

"Not physically."

"Will you tell me?"

A slow smirk crawls over my lips, and I gaze ruefully up at Kayde, arms twisting in the ropes holding them just over my head. "What will you give me if I do?"

His confusion fades, replaced with his own grin. His hand moves lower, until he can stroke the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip almost affectionately, though I don't know how in the world I'm supposed to tell him anything if he keeps his hand there.

"I'll let you stop something once without breaking our deal," he murmurs at last. "Just for tonight, because I know you won't like how I intend to play with you. Not at first, anyway."

"Anything? Any part of it, you'll stop?"

“Well.” His grin turns a bit sheepish as he drags his hand back up to cup my cheek. “Anything except fucking your sweet little cunt. Come on, Summer. You can’t take that away from me.”

I snort, considering it. He really is giving me a *choice* right now. It’s rare for him, I suppose. I can either tell him and receive a ‘get out of jail free’ card for later, or refuse to tell him now and forsake it.

*Is telling him really that bad?*

“I don’t suppose you’ll let me tell you some other time?” I ask, wiggling my arms. “And still give me the pass? No offense, but this isn’t exactly how I enjoy having my heart to heart confessionalists.”

His grin never falters, but his eyes do glitter. “Not a chance, baby girl. You could lie to me and make something up later.”

“I could make something up now.”

“If you do...” He leans in close, jaw brushing mine before he murmurs against my ear, “Then you better not let me know it’s a lie.”

*That’s rather terrifying.*

And definitely a threat.

Taking a deep breath, I twist my hands in the rope that I can reach, and close my eyes hard for just a second before letting them flick back open. If I’m going to tell him, then I won’t hide from him.

“So my dad was a piece of shit...” I begin, a humorless grin curving over my own lips. “And like, I mean that with every bit of disrespect possible.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Kayde's gaze doesn't waver. He pretends not to notice my squirming, though he keeps his hand on my throat, thumb stroking over my collarbone like he's trying to reassure me through this. Though, if that's the case, someone should tell him he could do it *without* the threat of me being strangled. I blink, refocusing, and breathe in a deep, unsteady breath.

"I hope it doesn't offend you, but I was more afraid of him than I've ever been of you," I admit, still unable to hold completely still. But I hadn't been able to back then, either. I would writhe and twist in my dad's grip, trying however I could to get away from him.

"Tell me what he did to you," Kayde murmurs, not rising to the barb. His voice is unreadable, and even his face provides nothing for me to go off of. "Tell me why you're so afraid of him." Present tense, not past. But I don't think it's a slip up on his part.

"He started with my mom." Something about being here makes it a little easier, in a place that feels disconnected from the outside world. The mix of orange and white light blends together on the wall behind Kayde, and I wish to *God* I was still wearing my shirt, at least. "He started small. Just little things he'd say to her. He never *hit* my mom," I'm quick to clarify, like Kayde gives a damn.

"He hit you." It's a statement, and Kayde's voice is still just so strange.

"He hit me a lot," I agree, my words a whisper. No one else can hear us, but that doesn't change the fact I can't say this any louder. "God, he was so mean when he drank. And after he drank. And when he was upset with

Mom. She didn't know at first. He hit me where the bruises would be under my clothes and told me I couldn't tell anyone or he'd hurt Mom, too."

"And you didn't, because you have a self sacrifice kink and a savior complex." His mumble seems irritated, and I see him roll his eyes. "God, Summer. I thought this was a onetime thing."

"Guess not," I snort. "Kinsley said something about that too when I took the blame for a classmate's fuck up in high school choir."

"Why'd you take the blame?"

I shift, leaning my weight to one side and resting my face against my upper arm as I survey his face. "Because she was crying," I say at last, getting only a look of incredulous disdain in response.

But he doesn't say anything. Not that his expression doesn't say it for him. So I take a breath and go on, feeling more and more uncomfortable with every word. "It got worse. *He* got worse. He stopped caring if people noticed. I even told my third-grade teacher. She..." I swallow hard and duck my head, no longer able to look at him. "Well, she tried to help. Didn't go so well. But Mom found out soon after that. She confronted him about it. He..."

*I'm not afraid of him anymore.*

I refuse to be afraid of my father now, when he's far away and hopefully dead as hell. Still, I won't hold my breath on that point. Dad's always had the tenacity of a cockroach.

"He grabbed me in front of her. Demanded to know if I'd told my teacher. Mom tried to stop him, but he had a glass. He shattered it." I try to move my arm to show him, but realize I can't when my arm just jerks against the rope. "Well, he shattered it on my face. Opposite cheek. There are a few tiny scars, but they're not really noticeable."

"Let me see?" Kayde moves, releasing my throat and tipping my chin up so he can look at me in the light. He turns my head so my prominent scar is away from him, and I'm expecting him to announce at any moment the scars aren't visible. I only really see them because I have to look at myself every morning and I know exactly what I'm looking for.

"They're like stars on your cheek," Kayde breathes, prompting a wave of shock to shiver up my spine.

"You can see them?"

"Now that I know what I'm looking for, sweetheart." His free hand strokes along my cheek, touching my skin in four different places. "Looks

like I could map out a constellation right here.”

I’m clearly in need of mental assistance, because that sounds way too affectionate to come from *Kayde*. Especially regarding me and my scars. “When did he do this?” His hand moves, and he so gently strokes along the scar that forces a separation into my brow.

“The same time.” The words leave me hastily. This is my least favorite part. Especially here, where I can’t hide from him or pace or curl in on myself like I want. “He took the glass while my mom screamed and tried to stop him. He told me, ‘*Summer, don’t you fucking cry. You did this to yourself—*’” My words cut off almost involuntarily, my throat closing hard. Everything in me rebels at saying this, when I’ve never, *ever* explained it this clearly out loud. Not even to my therapist.

“That’s enough for tonight, baby girl.” Kayde must read me and see I can’t go any further than this. “You did what I asked, even if you are still in *so much trouble*.” His smirk turns somewhat rueful, and he strokes his fingers down my cheeks, following the path the tears that I blink back would likely take. “If something’s too much for you tonight, say your safe word. You can use it once and I’ll stop. We’ll change what we’re doing. Understand?” He cradles my face while I nod, back to the shifting and wishing I could pull free of these ropes.

“Why am I in trouble again?” I breathe, my eyes wide. “Pretty sure I didn’t do...much wrong.”

“Oh?” His brow arcs incredulously. “You don’t think so? Holding on to that knife and not giving it to me when I asked?” He scoffs. “Babe, I gave you so many chances to just *give me the fucking blade*, but not you. Not *you, Summer*.” His hand finds my throat again, and he crowds me as his fingers slip under my jaw to press tight against my pulse point.

A whimper leaves my throat, and my hands tug on the ropes again, twinging enough that I know I’m going to have rope burn in the morning. “Will it help if I apologize?”

“Depends,” Kayde hums, leaning close enough that our lips brush when he adds, “Will you mean it?”

But my apologetic, slow-spreading grin must be the only answer he needs, because Kayde snorts and pushes away from me, his hand remaining on my throat.

“I knew you wouldn’t mean it anyway,” he tells me, his fingers pressing just a bit more tightly. “Have we talked about choking?”

“Doesn’t seem like a very fascinating or deep conversation,” is my quipped reply as I stare at him, still unable to stop my hands from moving like I’m trying to find a weak point in the rope. Though, I know that’s beyond unlikely and I’m not going to find a damn thing.

“Maybe not. But fuck, I want to make you come while you’re on the edge of passing out. When your eyes are all unfocused and you’re barely holding on. Wanna *fuck* you so I can feel your body fighting me on instinct. Doesn’t that sound—”

“Horrifying,” I breathe, willing the twisting, squirming feeling of my stomach to be one of *fear* and not *interest*. I will not let myself be interested in that with Kayde. Sure, maybe someone else. Maybe someone I’m not still half-convinced is going to murder me.

But not *Kayde*.

“Oh sweetheart, don’t lie to me,” Kayde purrs, coming close once more. “And you’ve lost your right to give input for tonight, anyway. After you wanting to stab me last night, I don’t feel very sympathetic toward your fears of me. I’ve been so nice, you know?”

“I wouldn’t call you nice—”

“Pretty patient, too. Especially considering what you make me put up with.”

My brows jerk upward, my mouth falling open with disbelief. “*Me?*” I hiss, shocked. “You’re talking about *me* making *you* put up with shit? Kayde, I don’t know if you just don’t remember, but you were going to slaughter an entire camp full of people!”

“Except you.” He points it out lazily, his fingers loosening from my throat. “Wouldn’t have killed you, like I said.”

“Just traumatized me into the next century.”

“Nah, not that long. A few years maybe. Could’ve made you so dependent on me like that. Could’ve made you *love me*.” He leans in close to drag his lips up the side of my throat. “You would’ve loved me eventually, you know.”

“You really think so?” I close my eyes hard. “I think I’d rather love the ax you were going to kill them with.”

He pauses with one hand on my waist. For a few long, terrifying moments, all I can hear is my sharp breathing in the small space of the boathouse. His fingers twitch against my skin, hand moving around until he

can grip my hip with more force than is probably necessary, but not enough to bruise.

*He's upset with me.* A shiver travels down my spine, and considering our closeness, I know for certain that Kayde feels it. There's no way he can't.

"Tell you what," Kayde purrs, his face still pressed to my cheek. "I'm going to give you some free advice from the goodness of my heart." There is no goodness in his heart, but this time, I don't open my mouth to poke the proverbial bear any harder. He nips at the line of my jaw, and sinks lower to mouth the side of my neck teasingly. "You really need to work on insulting me. Or anyone. You're so good at being so mouthy, aren't you, sweetheart? You just say whatever comes to your mind. But then you regret it. You look at me with horror in those pretty eyes, or you shiver like you think I'll slap you. If you're going to insult me, if you're going to mouth off to anyone..."

He tilts his head back up to whisper in my ear, "Then you better not give any signs of fear, *Summer*." Quick as a snake, he strikes, his teeth sinking into my neck, just over my pulse point.

I can't help it. I scream. It can't be as loud as it seems as the sound echoes in the small storage area of the boathouse. "Stop, stop!" I beg, aware of his teeth sinking impossibly deeper, like Kayde is trying to bite my throat clean out. The pain flicks white hot through my brain, and I grip the ropes more tightly as Kayde holds me in place with one hand, the other tangled in my hair. Not that I can really go anywhere.

When he does finally pull away, the burning sting lingers, and Kayde tilts his head up to the light just to fucking grin at me.

And shows off that his normally perfectly white teeth are tinged with pink.

"You—" I jerk my arm, forgetting that I can't move it properly. "You broke skin? You fucking—"

He kisses me hard, slamming his lips into mine firmly enough that his teeth click uncomfortably against my own. He nips at my bottom lip, threatening to do the same there as he had to my still-burning throat, before forcing his tongue past my lips so I can taste the coppery bitterness of my blood in his mouth.

"Best way to make sure it leaves a mark," he purrs finally, pulling away and mouthing down my throat until he comes to the bite once more. I whimper, half over-sensitive and half in fear, but instead of biting down

against the wound he's created, Kayde laps his tongue over it like a wolf trying to get as much blood from a kill that it can.

The comparison only makes me go up on my toes as I seek any escape from the burning, wet, *tingling* feel of his mouth on my throat. The pain ebbs under his attention, just enough that when he licks over my skin again, the feelings that shoot from that spot aren't nearly as unpleasant or unbearable as they had been.

But my head starts to spin and I whine again, begging him wordlessly to *stop*, to give me a fucking minute, at least. Not that Kayde seems to know what that concept is. He kisses down my shoulder, licks just above my collarbone, and peeks up at me with a narrow-eyed, excited look that makes my stomach flip.

"N-no," I beg, trying to pull away from him. "Don't bite me like that again, please—" He only looks away as his teeth sink into my skin and I shriek yet again, though the pain is duller this time, not quite so bad, and it occurs to me he isn't trying to break skin there.

*Yet.*

The hand in my hair shifts, then leaves completely, but it's hard to focus on anything other than his mouth. The searing, stinging heat of his attention is all-consuming and has me writhing without much input from my brain as I both try to get away from him and find some semblance of balance in the rope binds he has me in.

I barely even feel it when his fingers first stroke over my folds. It's teasing, ghostly even; until he does it again with more intent, and this time my whine is something else entirely that I won't ever admit to making.

Especially with Kayde stroking my clit while he sucks a mark onto my shoulder that won't fade for days. More than anything, I wish I could move my arms. Though whether that's so I can push him away and shove him into a wall or drag him closer and bury my fingers in his hair, I'm not sure.

*I hate this.*

Well, mostly anyway.

Words and pleas and sounds fall from my lips as he bites me, marking me twice more on my left shoulder before moving to my right and starting from the outside in. When he does, he slides two fingers into me, curling them and fucking me on them languidly as he pulls another bruise to the surface of my skin.

“So responsive for me,” he praises, his words appreciative. “So loud. Good thing we won’t be heard out here, right, sweetheart?” Without waiting for an answer, Kayde marks up my right shoulder, then licks over the side of my neck that mirrors where he’d bit me the first time.

I choke off of a breath, eyes wide as he looks at me. “Please don’t,” I beg, chest heaving as I pant and try not to shake, though I’m not doing a very convincing job of it. “Please—” I know what he’s going to do. It’s clear in his eyes and the small smile that curls at his lips.

“Baby girl,” he murmurs, straightening to brush his lips over mine before continuing. “It only hurts for a moment, right? Before you like the ache of it? Don’t tell me I’m wrong. Not when...” He slides a third finger into me, and fucks me with them pointedly for a few seconds, his eyes never leaving mine. “Not when your body is more than willing to tell me how much you love me doing this.”

Closing my eyes hard, I bite off a moan. “I don’t,” I promise, telling myself that he’s just justifying it for his own pleasure. “I don’t like it when you make me bleed.”

“Funny, because that’s my favorite part.” He pauses and reaches up with the hand not currently driving me crazy to sweep my hair back from my face. “Look at me, Summer.”

It takes a moment, but I crack open my eyes to stare at him, though I’m sure I look more like a terrified animal in a trap than anyone remotely enjoying this. “Do you want me to *stop*?” He says the word pointedly. Reminding me of what I can do tonight, if I want to.

*Do you want to skip this?* Is what he’s asking. Giving me the chance to use my get out of jail free card.

I open my mouth to say yes. I can’t take him biting me like the first time. Not again. Not when my entire chest and shoulders ache and sting with all the bites he’s lavished against my skin.

*But...*

My stomach twists as it slams into me what I’m about to say. I should be committed, surely. At the very least, I should seek therapy, because there’s no way I can say I didn’t hate that first bite as much as I should’ve without also admitting I’ve lost my mind in the boathouse tonight.

Somehow, Kayde seems to know what I’m going to say before I do. His eyes narrow, delight and affection shining in them for just a second before they’re chased away by something darker and much less friendly.

"No," I tell him, and the way it comes out as a challenge is unintentional, probably.

Hopefully.

"Oh, Summer..." His eyes flick down to my throat, then back up to my face. "I knew you wouldn't disappoint me." This time, he doesn't surprise me with a quick, sharp bite. No, it's worse, I think, as he kisses down my jaw, across my throat, until he can lick over the spot over my hammering, desperate pulse.

My fingers tighten again in the ropes over me. For all my false bravado, I can't help the way my stomach flips and knots itself up or the soft, pleading whimper that leaves my lips unbidden. I don't know if I'm begging him to do it, or begging him to stop.

*I'm also not sure it really matters.*

"Shhh, baby," Kayde murmurs, cradling my face in his free hand. "Gonna be so pretty with my marks on your throat. Think Kins will ask about them? Ask who marked you up like this?" He presses his lips to my throat and adds, "They won't scar, they're too shallow. But *fuck* if that wouldn't be so hot."

I barely get a chance to work that thought through my barely working brain. I *barely* notice that his thumb has found my clit before he's sinking his teeth—that feel too sharp and too dull at the same time—into my throat, biting down past the pleasant ache and into a white-hot-burn.

This time I keen. I can't move, and my mind has no idea how to process the pleasure of his fingers fucking me, his thumb rubbing mercilessly over my clit, and worst of all, his teeth in my throat. I swear I can *feel* when he breaks skin, when his teeth find that extra little bit of give that lets him sink past where he should be forced to stop.

It *hurts* and *burns* and I can't fucking stop making noise as I arch into him, my mind going blank—

My release hits me harder than if someone had punched me in the nose. It short-circuits my brain and I can feel my thighs tremble as I come on Kayde's still-thrusting fingers, my entire body seeming to be on the verge of shaking apart in his hold.

But if anything, that only encourages him. He doesn't release my throat as quickly as he had the first time. He continues to finger me through my orgasm until I can feel the telltale warm wetness of tears creeping down my cheeks. My keening becomes sobs, and it's then that he finally withdraws

just enough, the burn fading *just enough* so that when he laps over my skin soothingly, a shiver of pleasure mixes with the sharpness of the pain.

Belatedly, I realize he's talking to me, though it's a monumental effort to turn my brain back on enough to hear and understand him.

"You're so perfect, sweetheart. Made for me, weren't you?" He slurs the words against my skin, like he can't bring himself to pull away. His fingers are moving lazily inside me, his thumb barely twitching against my oversensitive clit, and I'm grateful. Especially since without the ropes, I doubt I could hold myself up.

He seems to realize it too. His fingers withdraw, and if he ever asks about the low sound of disapproval that escapes me, I'll deny it on pain of death. Kayde's arm goes around my waist, supporting me, and he moves just enough that I'm leaning against him, my weight on his chest as he holds me up enough that I'm not hanging my tied arms.

"You like it when I bite you that much?" he rasps against my hair. I can feel him shift and when his other hand goes between us, but I have no idea what he's doing, since his knuckles only bump against me occasionally. "Fuck, I didn't think you would. Thought you'd make me stop. Baby girl, you're making it impossible to do anything else but fuck you."

"There was something else you wanted?" I groan, my eyes closed where they're pressed against his shoulder.

"Yeah, absolutely." His chuckle is low and rueful. "Told you, didn't I? You were so fucking bad last night and I'm teaching you a lesson. The biting was just the foreplay. I maybe just got...carried away." When he moves again, I open my eyes, surprised that he's stepping away from me.

At least, until I see his jeans are unbuttoned and he's fisting his hard length in a hand that slides lazily along his length.

"Figured there's nothing better for that than to make you count out loud while I spank you, babe." His words are just so...easy. So casual, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. But when he grins and shows off his too-white teeth, I can only groan and roll my head back on my shoulders.

"You're killing me," I complain, half aware of him circling around behind me. His arm circles my hips, dragging me back against him as far as the ropes will allow.

"Nah," Kayde denies, resting his chin on my shoulder and turning to kiss my cheek. "If I killed you, that wouldn't be any fun." He leans forward, sliding his cock teasingly against my slit once, then twice. When he moves

to do it again he shifts, just a little, and this time he presses into me, not stopping until he bottoms out, his thick length filling me up just as perfectly as it had two nights ago.

I can't help the soft, needy sounds that pour from my lips. Especially when he rolls his hips into me, his rhythm languid and lazy. "Couldn't kill you, Summer. Couldn't that first day and now? When I've realized I've definitely done something *right* since you're made so perfect for me? Would never kill you, Summer—"

"You could talk about something *other* than killing me if you want," I manage to say, cutting him off. He reaches up, one hand still around my waist, while the other curls around the base of my throat, pressing against the bites he left and dragging a whimper from my lips.

"What would you like me to talk about?" he hisses, picking up his pace. It feels like he doesn't have much patience for more teasing tonight. There's something desperate in his movements, like he needs this just as much as I do.

"The weather."

"Sweetheart." The word is more of a growl against my ear than anything else. "So mouthy with me when we'd just gone over that. Are you asking for more, Summer? Are you asking me to hurt you?" I can't shake my head, not when I'm trapped against his body, with his hand around my throat.

He squeezes his thumb and middle finger, pulling a gasp from me before letting go. "I'm not done with you," he promises. "You haven't turned me sweet just yet, I promise. If you're not begging me to let go with the little air you have left, then I'm not doing it right."

"Don't want to—"

"You don't know what you want." He *slams* his hips into mine, though before I can make a sound, his fingers press tight again, cutting off my air. Black spots dance in my vision, and seconds later he lets go, only to do it again.

And again.

"Stop," I whimper, jerking hard on my arms. "Can't breathe, can't—" My words come to a stop when he presses down *hard* on the sides of my throat, completely cutting off my air in that one movement.

"That's the point," he reminds me, panting. "Your cunt gets so tight when I do this. Did you know that?" He's taunting me, considering he

knows I can't answer or deny him. "Fuck, but you just love this so much."

*He still isn't letting go.*

I gasp for the air that I need; my lips parted and head swimming. When he finally releases the pressure, I can barely hold myself up. I can *barely* do anything but breathe and lean against him, fingers curled in the ropes over my head.

*Stop*, I want to tell him, though no other word even comes to mind. Somehow, my body is responding to him, to this, even though it should be in fear and survival mode.

I shouldn't want this. Not at *all*. But it's hard to focus on anything other than the lightheadedness when he cuts off my air, the blackness, and the way it causes me to want to scream in something other than fear.

"*Kayde*," I gasp out his name, aware that my entire body is trembling. "*Kayde*, please, I'm gonna come. Please let me—"

He turns my face enough to kiss me hard, his mouth filthy and demanding against mine. He ends it by licking up the tears spilling from my eyes, and my eyes find his wolfish grin seconds before it clicks.

"I know," he tells me, and cuts off my air again. He shifts, his other hand splayed against my lower stomach so he can drag me back against him as tightly as he can. His thrusts are as brutal as Kayde himself, and I see stars every time he slams into my pussy.

Though, that could also be from the lack of oxygen.

I gasp and writhe, mouth forming begging pleas while fresh tears run down my cheeks, hot on my skin. The black spots return, bringing a fuzzy darkness to the edges of my vision when he still doesn't *let go*.

*I'm going to die.* Or at the very least, pass out. There's no way I can do this. No way I can stay conscious. I'm going to—

He releases his hand the moment that I come. My orgasm nearly tears me apart, especially as I draw breath into my screaming, burning lungs. It should hurt and burn and feel all around miserable, yet I'm sure I've never come so hard in my fucking life.

It continues, going on as he fucks me through it, and my abused airway finally gets unobstructed airflow. My chest heaves, and seconds later Kayde snarls a curse against my throat, biting down on one of the worst marks and making me cry out as his hips collide sharply with mine one last time.

I swear everything he does just makes me come harder. I hang onto my last bit of thought, my resentment toward the serial killer in my camp, but

it's not enough. Not when my release is dragged out by his, and seems to want to take me down with a vengeance.

“Kayde...” I breathe, something scathing on my tongue.  
Only, it never makes it to his ears.

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# CHAPTER NINETEEN



“Come on, Summer. I’d really like you to wake up for me.” The low, concerned voice is strange and unfamiliar, and for a moment I’m sure I’ve died and gone...somewhere probably not Heaven.

But I groan in response, especially at the firm tapping against my cheek. I’m definitely dead, I think, as consciousness seeps into me slowly. Because when I was alive, I’d been tied to two wooden poles in the boathouse. Now, however, I feel like I might be in bed.

Unless I’ve spontaneously managed to teleport, that definitely can’t be true.

“There you are, baby.” The rasp of Kayde’s voice is soft in my ears, and I murmur something unintelligible that I doubt was even words in the first place. “Can you open your eyes for me?”

Slowly, I drag my head from side to side, eyes still firmly closed. I’m met with a surprised huff that might be a chuckle, if I really look into it. “Okay, well, sorry to disappoint you, but I really need you to open your eyes for me.”

“What will you give me?” I slur, flexing my sore wrists that are laying on my stomach. Feeling is slowly coming back to me, and if I were to say the ache in my body isn’t first and foremost pleasurable, I’d be lying. “If I open them.”

“Well, I’ve already untied you and carried you to your cabin without anyone thinking I’m hauling around your corpse,” Kayde replies, bemused. “Figured you’d want your bed more than the boathouse floor or mine. And I’m about to rub aloe on your wrists and ankles so they don’t burn. You sort

of did a number on yourself. I didn't realize how hard you were pulling. Next time, princess, I'll get you fur-lined handcuffs."

"Better be *expensive* fur."

"I'll consider it if you open your eyes."

I do, halfway through his words. My bedside lamp is on, casting a dim orange glow throughout the small cabin. He doesn't expect it so soon, I think, otherwise he wouldn't be looking at me with something that seems like a mix of concern and adoration.

*Kayde Lane* certainly doesn't adore me. Not in a sense that I'd find normal, at least. The look fades as I stare up at him, and he strokes his thumb over my lip. "Hello there, sweetheart."

"I didn't use it, you know." I don't know why that's the first thing that comes to mind, and confusion furrows his brow. "My safe word; I never asked you to stop."

Yet again, that unreadable expression comes over him, though he never stops the movement of his thumb on my lip. "I know you didn't," he agrees at last. "I thought you would. You proved me wrong."

As more of my brain reboots, I find myself less able to speak my mind. He *terrifies* me, I remind myself. As much as I don't like to admit it or show it, he's an ax murderer and I'm just a camp counselor trying to save everyone here like it's my job.

Too bad I'm not getting paid for it.

Wordlessly, Kayde shifts, picking up my hand and uncapping a small bottle with a flick of his thumb. As I watch, he lets some of the thick gel drip onto the back of my hand, just above where my skin burns slightly from the ropes.

"I can do it," I sigh, still feeling like I'd rather go back to sleep.

"I know," Kayde assures me as he rubs it in on one wrist, then the other. I can't really do anything but watch as he does the same to my ankles, and belatedly I realize that while I may not be wearing my bra or underwear, he's dressed me back in my tee and shorts. My shoes are somewhere else, presumably on the floor, and I sink back to the bed when he's done, unable to take my eyes off of his face.

"You could take the day off," Kayde suggests, standing and dropping his backpack to the floor. "Are you feeling okay, though? You aren't dizzy or short of breath? How's your throat?"

“I don’t take days off,” I mumble, turning on my side so I can watch him walk around the small room, as if it’s his, and he’s busying himself with straightening up.

As if he feels *awkward*.

“I feel okay. I’m just tired, not dizzy. And my throat...” I swallow experimentally, and frown. “Well, you certainly choked me, huh?”

He only chuckles in response before returning to the bed and sinking down onto it. His hand comes back, stroking through my hair once, then tugging on it when I think he’s going to do it again. “Well, at least you’re better at being mouthy when I’ve fucked all the fear out of you, huh?”

I look away from him instead of giving him an answer, gaze sliding up to my ceiling instead of at his handsome face.

“Seriously, consider taking a sick day. Darcy did it for *hiking* yesterday. Surely you can cough a few times, put on a good act, and get out of whatever tomorrow is.”

“It’s just a free day for the kids, mostly,” I admit, knowing that if there was a day that I could take off, it would be tomorrow. Kins and Liza would take care of my girls, if needed. Especially since I’m sure they’ll want to spend it either at the lake or playing volleyball. They’re not crafters, unless it’s something questionable, so most of the time they’d rather relax, swim, and have a good time than do anything incredibly physical like hiking or more kayaking.

“Then call in sick.” Kayde’s words are firm, and he tugs again on my hair before getting to his feet. “You need the sleep, for one. And you look...” His eyes skim over me, from my face to my feet, then back up again. By the time he’s once more looking at my face, his eyes are dark, his lips parted slightly.

“I look what?” I ask, confused. If he’s going to insult me, he might as well do it.

But Kayde just shakes his head and heads for the door, his steps quicker than I expect before the door is closed between us, and I hear his retreating footfalls on the stairs outside.

Leaving me confused, concerned, and exhausted.

The banging on my door sends me skyrocketing out from under the blankets. So instead of just nearly falling out of bed, I crash to the floor with a groan and an undignified yelp of surprise.

“Summer?!” Kinsley’s panic is clear in her tone as she shoves the door open, holding it with her shoulder as she steps inside to look at me on the floor. “Please don’t tell me you fell out of bed...” she trails off, her eyes widening as she stares at me. “Holy shit.”

“No,” I groan, dragging myself back onto the mattress. “I don’t want to hear it. Especially if it’s about—”

“Is that from *Kayde*? ”

I’m so shocked by her question, I nearly fall out of bed again. But I manage to sit up by my pillows, legs curled under me, and look at her with enough functioning brain cells to see she’s carrying a tray laden with a plate, a mug, and a glass of what looks to be orange juice.

“Why in the world would you think it’s from *Kayde*? ” I demand, though I know Kinsley is all too aware of the telltale signs of a lie from me. It’s not my fault my best friend can read me like an open book; I usually have no problem with it, but today it’s definitely a little inconvenient.

“Oh my god it is, isn’t it? ” She sits down hard, setting the tray between us on the bed. It’s full of my favorites, including a pile of hash browns with a slice of American cheese melted on top, biscuits with gravy on the side, and two maple sausages.

My best friend really is perfect. Especially since she grabbed me a handful of creamer for the coffee on the tray and salt packets for the hash browns. All I want in life is a guy to do the things my best friend does for me when I’m not feeling well.

“Why do you think that? And God, Kins, you’re the *best* best friend ever for this, ” I add gratefully, pulling the tray toward me after she swipes the cup of orange juice so I don’t spill it. “You literally got everything I could’ve asked for. And getting the cheese on the hash browns? I think I love you.”

“Well, umm.” Kins clears her throat, looking suddenly sheepish. “I’d love to take credit for this...” she trails off, watching as I stuff a wad of hash browns into my mouth. “But I’m just the one to deliver it. I didn’t, uh, put it together for you.”

“Who did? ” I mumble around the cheesy, salty hash browns that are still warm from the kitchen. Surely Liza would’ve given me something healthier, and I doubt she knows my preferences.

“It was *Kayde*. ”

In my surprise, I nearly choke on my hash browns. My eyes water, and I swallow quickly to avoid a catastrophe. “How the hell does *Kayde* know what I eat in the mornings?” I demand, eyes wide with disbelief. “You’re joking, right?”

But she’s shaking her head before I finish, an apologetic smile still in place. “No, and I don’t know. He came up to Liza and me with all of this and said you were exhausted. Said you were taking the day off in case I didn’t know. Which, I told him I did thanks to your five am text. And he asked if I’d bring this to you before it got cold.”

All I can do with that information is stare at her, eyes wide and unblinking. Well, and take back my little prayer to find a boyfriend to do this for me.

Because *Kayde* is not boyfriend material.

Not whatsoever.

*Hello, God?* I think, casting my eyes upward and feeling rather dramatic even in my own head. *Me again. I take it back. I’ll make my own breakfast.*

Though the thought somehow makes me feel...unpleasant. Like I’m fighting off some stupid but undeniable fact regarding this whole thing.

But maybe I’m just too much of a chicken to really work out and accept what that thought is.

“So...” Kins gestures to her own neck, and I stare at her balefully before showing her my shoulders as well. It brings a small gasp from her I can’t help but enjoy, and certainly not because I’m preening with *Kayde*’s marks on my body. “That must’ve hurt though, right? Summer, he broke skin!”

“Yeah, hope he doesn’t have rabies,” I mumble around the half of biscuit I jammed between my teeth. “That would suck for me.” I don’t mention that it could be possible, considering how rabid *Kayde* is.

“Darcy is going to end you—wait. No, I don’t want to talk about Darcy. Will you tell me about it? Was it good, at least? Shit, Summer, I didn’t think you were into”—she gestures wildly at my neck—“whatever that is. Those are literal *teeth marks* in you!”

“Yes, they are,” I agree blandly, dunking my remaining biscuit in gravy. Somehow, I hadn’t known until now just how hungry I am. But now that I’ve started eating, I can’t stop. I’m ravenous after last night, like my body had used up all of its reserves while surviving *Kayde*.

Or surviving the most mind blowing orgasm I've ever experienced in my twenty-ish years on this earth.

"Hold up." She reaches out, grabbing onto my arm and dragging it closer to survey the fading red mark on my wrist. "What the hell is this?"

I don't answer. I don't even know how to, truth be told. So I slam back another mouthful of biscuit and chase it with scalding coffee to distract myself, or at least die before I have to answer her questions.

When Kinsley shakes my arm, however, and refuses to let go, I realize I don't have much of a choice. It's either tell her or learn how to meld with the walls and disappear until she forgets what she asked.

But she's relentless and I finally sigh, waiting until my mouth is empty before drawing my arm back from her to gently touch the fading marks from the rope in the boathouse. "Apparently...Kayde's into bondage," I mumble, knowing that my face must be a mess of red and heat. "He, uh, tied me up last night—"

Kinsley's shocked gasp just draws a *look* from me, and I pin her with it until she stops squirming. "Oh, don't even *try* to act like that. I know what you're into. I've seen your browser history, and I'm sure that's a big reason you're into Liza. Does she tie you up too, Kins?"

Suddenly my best friend is the one who's looking embarrassed. She stares down at my bed, her eyes wide and face as red as mine. "Did he hurt you?" she asks finally, gesturing to my throat. "You're not sick. But...if he hurt you, I can kill him for you. Free of charge or judgment. We'll wrap him in a garbage bag and tie rocks around him before we throw him in the lake. Liza would help, you know. If he hurt you—"

"I'm fine," I promise her, a touch of amusement curling my lips upward into a small grin. "We got a little carried away." I'm pretty sure *he* didn't. Kayde did exactly what he wanted to me and I'd just been along for the ride. Though I guess, in retrospect, I'd been a very loud and willing passenger on that ride. "I'm just exhausted and haven't been sleeping well."

Kinsley's eyes narrow suspiciously at that, and I can't decide how I feel about having to lie to her about Kayde.

But I certainly can't tell her the truth.

"Haven't been sleeping well...as in, not just last night?" she asks, curiosity and accusation edging her tone. "I thought you didn't like him!"

*I don't.*

I think. No, I *know* I don't like Kayde. Realistically, I can't like him. It'd be the same as liking the robber breaking into my house, or the murderer bearing down on me with a knife. But when I try to summon the feelings of hatred and disgust, the ones I'd felt at least in the beginning, I find that particular well empty.

But obviously, it's just because I'm exhausted. When I've gotten more sleep and I'm able to focus better, I'll find the hate and the fear and the *disgust* that I have for him.

Not just these confusing, convoluted feelings that are too transient for me to even really focus on, let alone name. It's just the breakfast doing this to me. That and the way he'd carried me here, stayed to make sure I was all right, and rubbed aloe into the rope burns on my wrists and ankles. Delicately, I stroke my fingers along the rope marks again, until Kinsley makes a sound like she's doing her best impression of a gagging scoff.

"Summer, please. I'm going to leave if you keep doing that."

My eyes snap up to hers, brows furrowed in confusion. "Doing what?" I ask, completely bewildered by her accusation. All I'm doing is sitting here.

"Whenever you think about him, you get this faraway look and start touching the marks on your wrists. Even I'm not that bad for Liza. You've got to get a hold of yourself before tomorrow, or whenever you plan on coming out of here. If you walk around looking at Kayde like that, everyone is going to notice. *Darcy* is going to notice." She blinks, looking thoughtful. "Darcy doesn't know, does she?"

Slowly, I shake my head, a frown touching my lips. "There's nothing for her to know. It's just sex. It's just..." The words die on my lips, and I huff out a sigh. "It's just something that'll last this week, Kins. He's not staying for the last summer camp session. He'll be gone three days from now. *Three days* is all I need to put up with him for, and only two nights. He hasn't managed to break me yet, and I sure as hell don't intend to lose the game this close to its end.

Kayde Lane is not the scariest thing I've ever dealt with. That honor will always go to my father.

"And yeah," I add, feeling a little cheeky. "I haven't been sleeping well for nights. Plural." I can't help wiggling my brows at her, especially when her face crumples in disgust.

"Please, God, spare me the details," she requests, holding her hands up in surrender. "I don't want to hear anything about his dick, or I might

vomit.” But she hesitates, eyes narrowing. “Okay, but for science’s sake. Does he have a nice dick?”

I nearly snort out my coffee at the change in direction, and I can feel my cheeks burning once more. “Yeah, Kins,” I cough at last, eyes watering from the coffee burning my throat. “Yes, he has a *very* nice dick. I can describe it for you—”

“No! No, no, *God*. Please, I wouldn’t last. I’d vomit all over your breakfast. But...” She reaches out and grips my hand, carefully dodging the still-irritated line around my wrist. “You’d tell me, right? If something was wrong or if you don’t want this? I’m not afraid of him, Summer.”

*She should be.* The thought rings in my head, though I don’t say it out loud. How can I?

“Literally nothing about Kayde is scary except that he’s apparently a little feral and maybe gave you rabies last night. Seriously, that’s a little intense, don’t you think? You’re going to have to cover those with Bandaids, or the campers are going to think you got attacked by a werewolf.”

“It would give them something to talk about,” I point out wryly, but she doesn’t see fit to comment on that.

“If he’s hurting you, if he’s forcing you or coercing you or whatever, just tell me. I’ll kill him for you. Hell, I’ll go have the shotgun talk with him right now if you’re okay with it.”

“No, oh, please, no,” I say, holding up one hand in surrender. “Please, *Dad*, spare Kayde the shotgun threats. I don’t think he could take it.” Without retaliating, anyway.

Her look softens, and she nods a few times, obviously mulling it over. “Okay.” Kins gets to her feet, stretching, and looks around before snatching something off my dresser and tossing it to the bed. “But maybe put this on your wrists, okay? So you don’t look so fucked up when you come out of here. And don’t worry. I’ve got your cabin for as long as you need.”

“Thanks, Kins.” My smile is wide and genuine as she walks backwards toward the door. “You’re the best.”

Her only response is a dramatic salute, and my best friend leaves my cabin with much less fuss than she’d entered, leaving me alone with my breakfast that *Kayde* got together for me.

And I hadn’t even asked her to thank him for me.

Guilt stabs at my stomach as I grab the object she'd thrown my way, turning it over in my hands until I can see what it is.

Kayde's small bottle of aloe rests in my palm, and it occurs to me he must've left it here on purpose, for me to use if I need it.

And that just makes the guilt cut a little deeper.

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# CHAPTER TWENTY



**B**y the time the sun is setting, I'm too restless to stay in my cabin for any longer. The marks on my wrists have mostly faded, at least enough that they won't be visible in the darkness. And the bandages I used to cover the first hickeys from the shower are just as effective for the bite marks and are close enough in location to be mistaken for the same ones I'd worn before.

As long as I don't wear a tank top or swim top, I can hide the rest of the marks as well. At least for now, from the kids, and definitely from Darcy.

I don't want to *die* after all.

With one last yawn, I pull open the door to my cabin, striding in my loose, long basketball shorts and camp counselor t-shirt toward Otter Hall. I figure at the very least, I can join my girls for dinner, sit with Kinsley, and talk shit with her and Liza.

While staring at Kayde when he's not looking, of course. But that had gone without saying, since observing him and trying to figure out what to do from here is definitely my highest priority.

*But I'm so fucking close it's unreal.*

Two more nights, and he'll be gone. As long as he keeps his end of the bargain, Kayde Lane will be out of my life in just under forty-eight hours.

I couldn't be happier.

Except, I can't figure out why my stomach twists unhappily at the thought of him leaving. Surely I'm not *that* desperate for good sex, and if I was, then I'm sure I can find it somewhere else. Hell, anywhere else. Anyone else is a better option than him.

So why can't I convince myself of that fact? And the fact I'm better off when he's far, far away.

Pulling open the door with a little, mostly silent groan, I'm hit with the noise of the kids in the dining hall, and let my eyes roam over the room. As I'd expected, my kids are mixed in with Kinsley's, and sitting at a large table near her and Liza.

No one really takes notice of me as I head to the little window in front of the kitchen, where food is still steaming and ready for anyone to pick up. Deftly I make myself a plate, taking a grilled cheese and bag of queso flavored chips. Then I hesitate before letting my hand dart out to grab a small container of ranch to dunk my grilled cheese in.

Is it healthy? No. None of this is. But it's going to be *so good*. Especially with the can of soda I snag from behind the counter, where the kids can't reach them. While we don't deprive the kids of sugar, if we allowed them free rein on sugary drinks and carbonation, none of us would ever get any sleep.

Ever.

When I turn around, I gasp and nearly drop my plate, not expecting to see Kayde right there. "What the *fuck*?" I breathe, nearly climbing onto the ledge of the window behind me. "God, Kayde, I didn't even hear you."

His neutral expression changes, a sly, arrogant grin sliding across his full lips. "Figured," he admits, tilting his head to the side. "You were really into that ranch and hunting for a soda." His eyes flit downward so he can scrutinize my plate, and I swear I see his lips twitch in bemusement as he looks at my dinner of champions. "That's so unhealthy," he points out, and steps forward until we're almost pressed together. We would be, I think, if I hadn't been holding the plate that I'm now clutching for dear life.

"What are you doing?" I murmur, staring up at his face as he rummages for something behind me.

"Bothering you, obviously," Kayde points out, withdrawing to plunk an apple onto my plate. "You don't eat oranges, right?"

"Citric acid bothers my stomach." The reply is instant, like it always is. But I'm more surprised that he's noticed, yet again, what I do and don't eat.

Almost automatically, my gaze goes over his shoulder, scanning the rest of the hall. Most of the kids and counselors don't seem to notice anything is amiss. They don't look up, and aren't looking at me. Even Kinsley only spares me a quick glance, winks dramatically, and leans sideways to

whisper something in Liza's ear that has her looking my way with raised brows and a small smile.

*Great.* I'm going to hear all about that later, I'm sure.

But they aren't what makes my heart skip a few beats. No, that honor goes to Darcy and the look on her face as she watches me. Or, more likely, watches Kayde.

My fingers tighten on the plate, and I look up at the blond to find him studying my face. "Your girlfriend is staring at us," I tell him quietly, even though there's no way she could hear me even at normal volume over the din of voices in Otter Hall.

"My..." His brows knit, and he looks at me like I've grown a second head. "My what?" Kayde repeats, patience forced into the words.

"Your girlfriend. My safe word," I repeat, unable to keep the small, almost unfriendly smirk off of my face. I don't look at her again. I definitely don't need her knowing that I'm watching her, even though I don't find it to be that offensive of a crime.

But any good humor falls from Kayde's face at my words, and he rolls his eyes while letting out a low, exasperated groan. "Don't call her my girlfriend," he requests, shifting his shoulders like he's now aware of Darcy's stare burning a hole into his back. "You know she's not."

"Does she know that? Because judging from the way she's staring at us, she thinks I'm some kind of home-wrecker ruining her happy life with you. Too bad she doesn't know what you're really like, huh?"

"Yeah." He lets out a sigh and shakes his head. "Too bad she doesn't know, huh? But I don't think she'd be as into it as you are, Miss *screams* when she's bitten."

Oh. *Oh,* that's kind of embarrassing to hear, and humiliation floods my cheeks with heat at his words. Some amount of self-satisfaction comes back to his face, and it somehow serves to make him familiar again.

The monster I know, instead of the Kayde that looks at me in ways that I can't quite figure out and maybe make me a little unsure.

"Eat your apple, sweetheart," Kayde purrs, rolling his shoulders back and straightening. "Wouldn't want you to pass out in front of Kinsley. She might think I did something wrong." As I watch his kind, *Lassie* face falls back into place, and he whirls around to stride away from me, heading in the direction of Darcy and Daniel.

I don't watch him. Not openly, at least. Though I do eye him as I walk to my best friend and her girlfriend, balancing my plate in one hand. He breezes by Darcy but sits next to Daniel on his other side. I see Darcy's lips move, and her chin jerks in my direction.

Whatever it was, Kayde doesn't even look at her, let alone give her some kind of answer. Her face falls, but when she looks at me, I give no sign of noticing. Instead, I slide into a chair across from Kinsley and sigh, my back hitting the plastic of the chair heavily while I let my plate and soda slide to the table in front of me.

"I couldn't sleep anymore," I admit, though I crack a yawn a few seconds after the words leave my mouth. "I was getting bored and missing my feral children."

"They've been talking about you all day," Liza admits, sitting back against the arm Kinsley has draped across the back of her chair. They look so comfortable like this. Cozy and sweet. Like they care a lot for each other and not just in a romantic sense.

Yet again, I'm *jealous*.

"They think you're still messed up from the boys almost drowning you," Kinsley adds, finishing off her sandwich. She scoots a stick of celery around on her plate, and I watch her mess with it while peeling the foil lid off of my ranch.

"Please tell me they didn't try to summon a demon to seek revenge on Daniel's cabin," I sigh, tearing my grilled cheese into pieces so they're more easily dunkable into the ranch. Something churns in my stomach, and it might be guilt that I *still* haven't thanked Kayde for sending Kinsley to my cabin with breakfast for me.

It makes me feel like a bad person, and no amount of reminding myself that Kayde is a monster, a murderer, and two-faced, serves to make that feeling go away.

"Oh, they totally did. I broke up their little seance circle this morning," Kinsley assures me, though from the tone of her voice, it was just another Thursday for her. My kids going feral and attempting to summon the devil for revenge barely makes her blink. "Melody is becoming a little monster, isn't she? Should we, like, talk to her parents and tell them they might be raising a budding serial killer?"

"Nah," I mumble around a mouthful of toasted bread and melty cheese. "I think she's much more of a soon-to-be vigilante than a serial killer. That

girl protects the others like it's her life's calling. She'll kill a man or ten one day, I'm sure. But she'll do it for a good reason." I chew thoughtfully, dunking another piece of grilled cheese into my ranch and eating it before adding, "Well, I think so. Maybe something will happen that could trigger her uh, villain origin story. Then she would be a real menace to society."

Not that she already isn't.

I'm halfway through my chips and eyeing my apple when Liza's words make me nearly choke on my food. "The last I heard, you weren't into Kayde." She sounds more curious than sly or critical. She folds her hands under her chin, elbows resting on the table, and I just sit back in my chair to think about what she's saying.

"Uh huh," I agree at last. "It's just..." I pick up the apple Kayde placed on my plate, scraping at the sticker before pressing it to the plate under my hand. "I don't know." My shoulders rise and fall with a hard sigh. "I really didn't like anything about him. I guess I thought he wasn't my type? Especially with how friendly and, I don't know, naïve he acts sometimes. I'm looking for a boyfriend, not a golden retriever."

He's not either of those things, but at least the lie is becoming a little easier, since this is now the second time today I've had to pretend I'm dating Kayde instead of just going along with his game so that he won't kill everyone here.

"What changed?" Kinsley is enraptured by my words, and it makes me look away, my eyes fixed on the wood grain of the wall.

What changed was our deal. But that's not exactly what she's expecting to hear.

*I could tell them, the little voice in my head whispers. If I told them, they could help. I won't have two more nights with him. We can stop him. Get him arrested—*

My brain screeches to a halt, instantly putting a stop to those thoughts. Something in me is stupidly opposed to telling my best friend and her girlfriend, and no matter how I try to spin it, I can't believe it's for their safety.

But there's no other reason that I can't tell them. I *should* tell them, really. Even if he doesn't kill the campers here, he could very well go find another place to carry out that fantasy.

*So why can't I fucking open my mouth to tell them what's going on?*

Instead, I think of the gentle touch of his aloe-drenched fingers. The way he'd sent me food he knew I'd enjoy.

How he'd stayed in my cabin last night until he knew I was okay.

"Sex," I lie, my grin wolfish. "Dude, the sex is mind blowing. He's—"

"Stop, stop!" Kinsley puts her hands up in surrender, just as Liza gets to her feet with a snort. "Please, just, don't. I didn't mean it. You're going to ruin the campfire for me, and I'm dying for a s'more."

"Uh, huh..." I follow Liza, getting to my feet and taking a bite out of the apple. "Yeah, okay. I won't hurt your delicate sensibilities anymore, promise Kins."

"Good," Liza states, walking beside me toward the kitchen. "Because I don't need her being fascinated by whatever he did to your throat and wanting to try it out back at my cabin."

The admission is so unexpected that I can't help my giggle, though I stuff my hand in my mouth, trying to muffle it, only to fail miserably.

"Please, there are much worse things than this," I assure her, touching one of the Band-aids. "Barely even hurt."

Liza just fixes me with a look and takes my plate from me to dump both of them in the trash. "Somehow, Summer, I don't believe you in the slightest."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



The warm wash of heat from the large fire in front of me is nice. Without much of a breeze, there's no dodging embers, and the kids are too buzzed in their little groups to plan for tomorrow's talent show to really cause problems.

I just hope Redtail cabin's 'talent' isn't going to be murder, a murder plot, a seance, or something illegal. Knowing Melody, though, things can go either way. Keeping my eye on them from time to time, though, I'm relatively mollified they're just going to put on some kind of play or magic act.

With my luck, they'll try to saw a boy in half.

Across from me, on the opposite side of the fire, I can just see Kinsley and Liza sitting close on a small log, with their thighs pressed together casually. They don't look inappropriate, or anything so dramatic. They look like best friends who are really...*really* close. Honestly, I doubt any of the kids realize they're dating, since Liza is decent enough not to hang on Kinsley in front of them or leave any problematic marks like the ones scattered around my shoulders and throat.

The log I'm sitting on shifts, causing me to have to rebalance with my feet on the ground in front of me. Expecting Kayde, I look up into Darcy's face, who's staring at the fire with narrowed eyes instead of at me.

"I don't get it," she mutters, her face blank. "I *really* don't get it, Summer."

"The meaning of life?" I ask flatly, knowing what she wants. Hadn't I predicted that she'd blame me for her inability to land Kayde? Even though,

really, she's the lucky one between us. Kayde's a monster, and I doubt Darcy would've been able to stop him that night.

Hell, I doubt she would've even tried.

"You said you weren't interested. You acted so uninterested in him, like he was beneath you. And now he's, what, pulling you out of the water when you fall in?"

I hadn't exactly fallen in, but she's just trying to needle me into anger. I know her game, and it's very different from Kayde's. Plus, about ten times more pathetic. Instead, I just roll my shoulders in a shrug, eyes on the snapping twigs and embers that fizzle out in darkness of the sky above the large campfire.

"I saw you guys at dinner. How close he got to you? And he's the reason for the stupid fucking Bandaids, *right?*"

My jaw aches with the desire to tell her she's my safe word, because there's nothing that's more of a turnoff in this world than fucking Darcy. But I lock my teeth against the thought, still refusing to give her any bit of an answer. She's not worth it, and I refuse to sit here and argue about Kayde.

"You're pathetic." Her voice is soft enough that no one else can hear. "Are you just competing with Kinsley? Or is this you staking some kind of claim on any new counselors? He doesn't love you, you know. Or anything as special as that." Her tone seethes, and I know my silence bothers her, given how she just keeps going on with her insults. "You're not special, you know? So I don't get what Kayde sees in you."

Footsteps crunching in the grass catch my attention, so I turn my head just enough to see a pair of sneakers heading toward us, and I've seen Kayde's shoes enough to know it's him. But now I definitely don't say anything, because if I'm going to have it out with Darcy, I really don't want it to be about Kayde. Especially where he can hear me.

"If you say so." I shrug, and from the corner of my eye, I can see her winding up again, with something that will probably hurt way more than anything before this moment. I can't help it; my shoulders tense, as if I can brace myself against some physical effect of the blow that's coming.

"That's kind of mean, don't you think?" Kayde's voice is light and mostly friendly, though when Darcy jerks around to stare up at him, her mouth falls open at the sight.

“I—” Darcy jumps to her feet, nearly tripping, and even in the firelight she looks pale. “I wasn’t—”

“Yeah, sure you weren’t. Except you sort of were, Darcy.” He steps closer, until they’re almost touching, and a thrill of alarm flickers up my spine. I wonder if I should get up until Kayde glances my way for half a second, at best, and his fingers flick at me dismissively.

He’s telling me not to, and I don’t have it in me to disobey. Especially when it comes to Darcy. I doubt he’s going to stab her or throw her into the fire. Not while people are looking, anyway.

“She’s...” Darcy looks down at me, her eyes anything but friendly. “I don’t get it,” she murmurs at last, closing that last bit of distance between them. “You liked me when you first got here. You were all over me that first day, Kayde. What the hell changed?”

Kayde’s smile is much less friendly now. There’s too much of the real him to be safe, and I fidget again where I sit. “What happened?” he taunts, grinning wolfishly so his white teeth are on display. It makes my neck ache in a way that’s not quite bad, and I fight not to run my fingers along the bandages. “Nothing *happened*, Darcy. You just mistook me being nice for whatever you wanted to see it as. I was never that interested. Especially after I met Summer.”

*Oh.*

*Oh, fuck.*

My stomach flips, trying to escape my body entirely, and my wide eyes are full of the shock I feel when Darcy glares down at me like I’ve done something wrong. Like I’m the one that’s said those words.

“Don’t look at her.” Kayde’s voice cracks like a whip, irritation whispering at the edges. It does the job, and Darcy’s attention rivets back to the blond. “She didn’t do anything, so don’t you fucking look at her and plan what you’ll do when I leave.” His voice is a soft croon, quiet enough that no one other than us can hear him. “This is all on you. I don’t want you because you’re not my type. You’re hurtful and petty. You’re immature.” His words are too soft to feel like real insults, though they make my stomach curl and writhe, even though I’m not the target of them.

I can’t imagine how Darcy feels.

“You’re a jerk,” she whispers, hands shaking as they ball at her sides. “You’re such a fucking jerk, Kayde—”

“Don’t curse in front of the kids,” he cuts her off, chastising her like a disappointed parent. “Not in a voice they can hear. Come on, Darcy. This isn’t your first summer camp.” The look of disgust and dismissal he gives her is cold, and I can’t imagine being her right now.

But apparently, she can’t imagine taking more of it, either. Darcy hesitates, wavering, and she starts to look at me one more time before a low sound in Kayde’s throat stops her.

“Fine,” she hisses, stepping over the log and creating distance between them. Though she kicks it on the way, nearly knocking me off balance. I recover, just in time to see her storm away, running into a group of boys, eagerly running to Daniel with something like a pool noodle in their hands.

That can’t be a good sign for the talent show tomorrow.

Kayde’s sigh draws my attention back to him, and without hesitation, he drops onto the log beside me, taking over Darcy’s spot. He rubs his face with the heels of his palms, taking his time, before finally turning to look at me with a baleful, almost apologetic grin. “That was pretty dramatic, don’t you think?” he asks in that sweet, harmless voice of his.

“A little more than dramatic,” I point out, tapping my heels on the dirt in front of me as a particularly loud twig snaps in the fire and sparks flutter upward like a bunch of glowing butterflies.

I’ve always loved campfires. And the embers, as long as they aren’t making a break for my face and causing me to dodge all over the place to avoid getting burned.

“You hurt her feelings pretty badly, you know,” I add, dragging my knees up to my chest and wrapping my arms around them. That feeling is back; the guilt of not thanking him earlier. Though right now doesn’t seem to be the best time to bring that up. “She’s not going to come out of her cabin until the kids go home after that.”

“She doesn’t deserve for you to feel sorry for her.” Kayde’s words are mild, though I hear the derision in them. “It’s not your fault she couldn’t let it go. I’ve talked to her twice about this. She should’ve gotten the message before tonight.”

“She likes you,” I can’t help but point out. “She’s been swooning for you since you got here.”

“Sucks for her then, huh?” There isn’t an ounce of pity in his voice.

I pick up a marshmallow from the plate on my other side that I’ve had sitting on the ground by my feet for a solid fifteen minutes. I’ve also

squirreled away one of the longer forks the kids tend to have sword fights with, but I plan on using it for its intended purpose. At least until it gets stolen the moment the kids realize I have it and my back is turned.

“So.” I lean forward on my seat, resting my weight on the balls of my feet so I can get the marshmallow close enough to the fire to get melty on the inside and golden brown on the outside, instead of charring it to a crisp the way most of the kids do.

Hell, most of the other counselors don’t have the patience to toast a marshmallow the way my mom taught me how so many years ago when she and I went camping at the lake in a small tent and no electricity.

*Fuck, I miss those days.*

“Have you ever gone tent camping?” It’s not what I mean to ask. But still I glance sidelong at Kayde, who looks bemused by the question. “Sorry, I just...” I bite my lip, and then continue. “I don’t know. I was thinking about it, and—”

“A few times,” Kayde interrupts smoothly, cutting off my apologetic ramble. “What about you?”

“All the time when I was a kid,” I admit. “Things were really great after —When it was just me and mom,” I amend, really not wanting to even bring up my dad tonight. “She would take me to the lake and we had this little tent that barely fit our sleeping bags and my dog. His name was Jake,” I add, knowing Kayde really doesn’t give a damn. I let out a breath, turning the marshmallow over in the fire once I can see one side bubbling and toasted to perfection. “I loved it.”

“But you don’t go anymore?”

My only answer is a shrug. “Mom doesn’t have time. I don’t think she really wants to anymore, actually. Plus, I come here every year for way too many weeks out of the summer to babysit kids whose parents want them to do something in the great outdoors. And, well. Then there’s you. Maybe I’ll be soured on camping after this year, too.” I’m mostly joking, though for the first time, I’m actively looking forward to the week being over.

At least, I think I am.

Kayde’s quiet, and his lack of an answer is unnerving. Though when I glance his way again, he’s just watching the fire and marshmallow mildly, his eyes half-closed like he’s on the verge of falling asleep.

“Do you like s’mores?” I don’t know why I ask. Hell, I don’t know why I don’t just take the win of Kayde being silent and move on, but here I am.

He blinks, turning just a little so he can look at me as he says, “Yeah...I guess? Yes. I don’t really make them, though.”

“Because you’re too cool?” I assume, mostly joking. The marshmallow is done and I pull the long fork back to rest the cool side against my legs, while I ease off the marshmallow from the end of it and onto one of my prepared s’mores bases.

“Because I don’t have your patience or skill with a fork, apparently.” There’s a chuckle in his words as he watches my small movements, and when I look his way, he’s grinning in spite of himself. “I mostly just char marshmallows, and the taste of burning got old about ten years ago. My dad certainly wasn’t going to make me one, and I just never learned how to sit down and do it right. So...” he trails off with a shrug. “I don’t have them much.”

“Sucks to be you,” I snort, before picking up my perfectly made, five star s’more. But I don’t take a bite of it. I’ve known for the past minute or so what I’m going to do, and before I can really think about it, I grab his wrist, tugging for him to let me have his hand.

With a small sound of surprise, he does. I turn his hand over, tapping his fingers until he opens them and exposes his palm to me. Then, before he can ask why, I carefully set the s’more in his hand and give as much of a flourishing bow as I can, given that I’m sitting down. “Your perfect s’more,” I announce, a slightly self-conscious smile curling over my lips.

But when I look up, Kayde is just...staring at me. He barely holds the s’more, and only enough to make sure it doesn’t fall to the dirt between us. That, more than anything, causes a spike of doubt to stab through me, and suddenly, this feels like an awful idea.

I totally should’ve asked first, at least.

“It’s just—” I feel like I’m backpedaling, and embarrassment heats my face. “I should’ve asked if you wanted it. I just thought...” I suck in a breath, then go on in a rush, “All day I’ve been wanting to thank you for this morning. Kins brought me food, and I really thought she’d put it together, since it was all the things I eat and literally nothing I don’t like. But she told me you made it. And, okay, I’m wondering if maybe you’re a bit of a stalker, actually. Seems like you might be.”

“Uh huh.” Kayde sounds amused, at least, and as I keep going, more and more flustered with every word, he reaches his hand up and takes a bite from the s’more.

“Yeah. Yes. So this is me thanking you. And gifting you the most perfect s’more you’re ever going to eat before—”

He cuts me off the moment he swallows by leaning toward me and pressing his sticky-sweet lips to mine. It isn’t demanding, or particularly inappropriate. It’s just...*sweet*. In every sense of the word.

Shocked, I can’t do anything but sit there, my brain helpfully supplying that I could be a pal and lick off the marshmallow from his lips.

*Not gonna happen*, I tell that part of myself, beating her off with a proverbial stick.

“Stalker, huh?” Kayde comments, after he’s polished off his s’more and I’m roasting two marshmallows on my fork. Somehow it’s still in my possession, but I can *see* the girls of Redtail eyeing it up once in a while. And frankly, I think Melody could take me if she really wants it. “Not usually what I’m called.”

“Only because people aren’t dumb enough to say it out loud, I’m sure,” I remark offhandedly, spinning the fork slowly like a rotisserie.

“Well, I don’t think so.” He leans over, bumping his shoulder against mine to whisper in my ear, “Normally people don’t see me before I do what I’m there for. Or if they do see me, it’s as someone completely innocent, with a perfectly believable alibi.”

*Oh.*

Well, it makes sense, since he hasn’t been caught.

“First time for everything?” I ask, turning to him as I pull the marshmallows off of the stick. Instead of a s’more, tonight I really just want the sticky, melty sugar of a marshmallow to glue my mouth shut.

“First time for everything, since you appeared,” Kayde agrees, taking the fork from me and bumping our knees together as he slides them off onto my plate. “No s’more for you?”

“Not in a graham cracker mood tonight. I just want the sugar,” I tell him, a wry grin on my lips.

“Gotcha.” Before I can stop him, he scoops one marshmallow off the plate and holds it up for me, prompting me to stare at him, wide eyed. “Open up, baby girl,” Kayde purrs, much too quiet for anyone to hear.

Tentatively, I do so. His fingers slip in alongside the marshmallow, and he drags the pad of his thumb over my tongue before pulling away. Chewing quickly, my face burns and I *feel* the pressure of someone else staring at us.

Across the fire, Liza and Kins definitely aren't being subtle. I meet their gazes with a mouthful of melty, perfect marshmallow, only to see the surprise and fascination on their faces.

God, I feel like I'm in a soap opera. My flush deepens, and when he sees my expression, Kayde follows my gaze. A small laugh leaves him, but he doesn't move away. If anything, he slides closer to me, an arm draped around my shoulders as I pick up the other marshmallow.

"Split this one with me?" I request, raising one brow. "You know they're staring at us, right? Daniel's probably documenting all the shit he can go tell Darcy, too—"

Kayde's movement cuts me off. He grabs my hand in an unrelenting grip and brings it up to his face, where he nips at the marshmallow playfully before taking half of it between his teeth and leaving me with the sagging, melty remains. Not that I waste the other half, of course. It goes in my mouth, and if part of me wishes I could taste Kayde's mouth on it, then I'm definitely burying that part of me in the morning, because that's *wrong*.

Besides, he'll be gone the day after tomorrow. And even with my confused feelings, there's a strong sense of relief in that. Sure, he can be cute as hell when he wants. He's attractive, and so good at everything that happens at night that it makes my head spin.

But more than that, he's a *murderer*. He wanted to kill the kids here, and only playing a stupid game with him saved my campers from his ax.

I do not, in any circumstance, want Kayde Lane to stay around for longer than the next thirty-six hours.

When he gets up, I blink in surprise, letting him have the disposable plate so he can chuck it into the fire. "I'll see you later, okay?" he murmurs, though he doesn't look at me as he speaks.

It feels...strange. Though I can't pinpoint why.

"Later *where?*" I ask, because that's important even if he doesn't think it is.

He hesitates, but when Kayde looks at me, it's with a grin that's wolfish in its very nature. "Your cabin," he promises. "Don't worry about waiting up for me. Just leave the door unlocked and I'll come wake you up."

I don't have the chance to tell him how ominous that sounds. Not when he turns and walks away, one hand in the pocket of his jeans as he heads for what looks like the lake, though it's definitely too late for any kind of swim.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



**I**t takes longer than I want to get back to the cabin, but the reason for that is no fault of mine. Not when Kinsley and Liza appear on either side of me, taking over the space on my log and pulling me back down when I try to escape.

“Oh no you don’t.” Kins laughs, though the sound isn’t exactly friendly. There’s a feral light in her eyes, and I groan before hiding my face in my hands.

“I know you saw all of that,” I tell both of them, having felt their piercing gazes on me the whole time I was with Kayde. “I don’t know what you’re going to ask, but you saw it, so I feel like I should be allowed to go. Or I’ll invoke my uh, sixth amendment right?” I squint, feeling like that’s not right.

“Fifth,” Liza corrects. “If you don’t know which it is, you don’t get to use it. And we have questions.”

“Thought you didn’t want answers. Neither of you are interested in, what’s the word again...Oh right. *Dick*.”

Sure enough, Kinsley looks offended at the word, and I take a little bit of pride in that when she’s trapping me on the log with her. If she’s going to ask me uncomfortable questions, I’m going to make this worse.

Naturally, both of them grill me. On the s’more, on the marshmallow. On *Kayde*. But I fend off most of their questions and finally end up on my feet, managing not to pitch over into the fire. “I’m going to bed,” I announce to both of them, hands on my hips. “My kids are in bed, it’s time for me to sleep so I can get up and stop them from murdering the talent

show competition in the morning. If I'm not out and at breakfast when you guys are, assume a child killed me. Come look for me, and set me out on the lake in a Viking style funeral."

"I'll shoot a flaming arrow onto your kayak to set your body ablaze as you cross over into Valhalla," Liza agrees easily, as Kinsley tries to think of something else to ask me.

"Hey." Before I can cement my escape, Kins reaches out and grips my wrist, staring at me with wide eyes. "Really quick, okay? You'd tell us, right? If Kayde was doing something you don't want him to do?"

I look between them, surprised to see a matching amount of concern in their eyes. I have no idea where it's coming from, or why, but it is touching to have both of them asking like this.

Too bad I can't tell them the truth. Too bad I didn't have the balls to tell them the truth five days ago, before any of this happened. Surely we could've figured something out. We could've stopped Kayde and either chased him away, gotten him arrested, or killed him.

Though now my stomach twists, screaming at me that we are *not* killing Kayde, and I can't help but agree. I can't kill him now. Not unless he breaks his side of our bargain. Even if that were the case—*no*.

No, I'd kill Kayde before I ever let him hurt anyone.

But I certainly can't let that show on my face.

I grin maniacally at the two of them, and dip my head in a nod. "I'd tell you," I tell them, crossing my fingers behind my back as I add, "I *promise*. And we'd go all *Goodbye, Earl* on him, but I do need someone else to make the black eyed peas since I think they're nasty no matter how you cook them."

"I'll put bacon in them," Liza assures me. "He won't be able to taste anything except bacon and salt."

"I'll dig the hole and uh, bash him over the head if the poison doesn't take," Kinsley promises quickly.

"Then we're all set. I'll let Kayde know that there's a contingency plan for if he lays a hand or tooth out of line." I hold my hands up in surrender, already inching toward the cabins.

"Don't stay up too late," Liza advises, though she doesn't exactly sound disapproving. Especially when she wiggles her brows as I glance her way, and snags an arm around Kinsley. "Not that we'll be following my advice."

Kinsley kisses her cheek, and I can't help the warmth that blooms in my chest looking at them. I have no idea if they'll last, but if I could wish for anything right now, it would be for Liza and Kinsley to find their soul mates in each other. God, I really want that for them.

After all, I've never seen my best friend more head over heels for someone. While I'll never tell her, I also think she'd underestimated how hard she'd fall for Liza. But that, in my opinion, just makes it more perfect for them. "Love you Kins." I wiggle my fingers at her, then at Liza. "My affection for you grows daily, Liza."

"As does mine for you," she promises me, kissing Kinsley's temple. "Now go sleep." Again with the brow wiggle, and it makes my eyes roll up in my head as I skirt the fire and head for my cabin.

Obviously, I don't fall asleep. No matter what Kayde said—and the fact that I'm surprisingly not afraid of him actually walking in on me while I'm unconscious—I don't *feel* tired enough to sleep. But that's probably because I slept most of the day, in lieu of getting up and playing ultimate frisbee with my terrifying campers.

So instead, I change into my pajamas; a black tank top and shorts patterned on one side with creepy smiley faces and solid lavender on the other leg, and hop into bed with my nightstand lamp on. In my top drawer, I rummage around until I've found one of my books, and I snort at the cover of it before leaning back on my pillow.

Is it cliche to read a horror novel set in the woods, in a cabin, while I'm dealing with a murderer at my summer camp? Or is it just bad timing?

My fingers stroke the well-worn cover, over the spine that's bent in too many places, and I smile fondly at it. This is one I'd dug out of my mom's keepsakes, from a box she'd said was okay to throw away. But then I'd found this, and she'd admitted that she'd read it over and over as a kid, along with *The Black Stallion*, which also sits in my nightstand.

And okay, yeah, maybe tonight, that would be more appropriate. Especially with the way my skin prickles and every noise outside feels like it might be *Kayde*.

Even though it never is, no matter how many times I jump and glance at the door expectantly.

Finally I do switch books, pulling out the yellowed copy of *The Black Stallion* and opening it carefully to the beginning. Though I've read the

whole series enough times that I can quote more of it than I'd like to admit, and I could open this book to any page and instantly know what's going on.

But it's the nostalgia that I really care about. When I want something old and comforting, something that reminds me of home, I read these two books and remember the first time my mom read this to me. They way her voice trembled and her eyes flicked to the door like she'd been afraid Dad would come back at any moment.

I'd been so scared back then. I'd still been sore from him hitting me with the broken bottle, and tears had stained my face that night even after we'd gotten home from the emergency room where they'd stitched up the cut across my brow and pressed a couple of neon pink Bandaids to it.

Absently, I touch the scar, flipping to the next page as I slowly drown in a story I've read a million times before.

Even though I was sure I'd know when he's coming, I jump in surprise when my door opens; Kayde forgoing even one knock to let me know he's here. He pauses when he closes it, eyes on me as he takes in my wide-eyed surprise and the book in my hands.

"You're reading?" he asks, kicking off his shoes by the door and striding over to sit on the bed like he owns it. "*Reading?*"

"Yes," I tell him slowly, one brow rising as I gear up to say something mocking. "You should try it sometime. They say it's good for you. Maybe it can be your hobby, instead of, you know." I lift one arm and make dramatic chopping motions while Kayde watches, completely flat-lipped at my stupid display.

But it's not like I'm trying to be serious or realistic in my movements. Though judging by Kayde's face, I've offended the Order of the Ax Murderers. "Sorry," I snort, moving to rest the book on the nightstand.

Before I can, however, Kayde reaches out, his fingers closing gently on the paperback and giving a soft tug. But I hesitate, biting my lower lip. "Be careful, okay?" I request, finally letting go of it. "It was my mom's. She gave it to me a long time ago and..." I trail off, not wanting to trauma-dump on him or tell him my whole damn life story. He's definitely not interested, and I'd just look pathetic at the end of it.

I definitely don't need that tonight.

"So it's special?" He's more careful than I could ever expect him to be as he turns it over and reads the back, blinking in what might be amusement

or surprise. “Didn’t take you for a horse girl,” he drawls, handing back the book a second later.

“Oh, no I’m not. I don’t really ride or anything anymore. Though, I absolutely wanted a black stallion of my own as a kid and nothing Mom said would ever convince me otherwise. Anyway, it’s just...memories, you know? I’ve read the whole series. Mom has them all in her office. But she gave me this one and it’s”—I turn the book over in my hands, fingers stroking the cover—“just really special.”

I reach over and put the book back into my drawer beside the horror novel I hadn’t been in the mood for. That one can wait until the boogeyman isn’t sitting in front of me, or occupying the same camp as I am.

When I look back at Kayde, I draw my knees up to my chest, wrapping my arms around them so I can rest my chin on my kneecaps and stare at him expectantly. “Okay, so, what now? There are people up around here, so if you’re going to throw me over your shoulder again and drag me away to your secret hideout, you might have to be a little more careful.”

His smirk twitches at his lips, eyes sparkling with amusement at my words. Well, if nothing else, at least I’ll be able to list on my resumé that I can amuse a serial killer. That has to be worth something. “Is that what you want me to do?” he asks, sliding toward me on the bed until he’s crowding up against my legs and the glint in his eye is darker, more predatory. “Would you like me to carry you back there and tie you up again?” He reaches a hand up to my throat, peeling off the Bandaids before I can even consider stopping him.

My hands itch to reach up and rub the marks, but it’s clear he wants to look at them. Clearer still when he runs his fingers lightly over them, then cups the back of my neck to drag me forward and off balance. It takes some maneuvering, but I finally end up on my knees, one hand braced on his thigh and the other on his shoulder.

It’s nothing if not incredibly awkward.

“I still think I should get a reward for not safe wording last night,” I breathe, feeling bold when he’s not being particularly frightening. “I went above and beyond, you know?”

“I know, baby girl,” Kayde assures me, eyes never leaving mine. “Sit on my lap for me. You look...incredibly uncomfortable, if I’m being honest.”

Well, obviously I look that way because I absolutely am. This is far from the most comfortable position I’ve ever had the displeasure of being

in, and my lips twitch at his words. “Do I get a please?” I ask, wondering if I’m pushing my luck.

Obviously, I am. Kayde huffs and grabs my hips, *dragging* me over him until he’s arranged me across his thighs, my arms resting tentatively on his shoulders. My breath hitches in my throat, and he purrs approvingly, the sound reverberating throughout his shoulders and into my arms. I curl my fingers against his shirt, watching him as the smile falls from my lips.

In my mind, this is always where things get dangerous. When he decides he’s done letting me mouth off, when he’s done letting me pretend to have any pull here. That’s when things always flip, and I have a feeling that shoe is about to drop as it has almost every night this week.

Because Kayde is not one to let me stay ‘in charge’ for long.

“If you’d let me talk instead of trying to get the last word, you’d know I do intend to reward you,” he tells me, his words easy and casual. I, however, can’t believe what I’ve just heard. Kayde *giving* me something? *Admitting* I did something well?

Okay, so, yeah. He has a lot of praise for me during the times he’s buried in my pussy, about to come, or when I’m sobbing and coming apart around him. But that’s not real. That’s not exactly a confession outside of the heat of the moment, and not one I can believe. Except in the moment, of course, with Kayde breathing against my skin and calling me all the names that make my stomach curl and my thighs clench together in a silent plea for him to fuck me.

But he really never needs to know that.

“I’m willing to let you pick, sweetheart,” Kayde goes on, once he’s sure he has my attention. “I’ll let you do anything you want with me tonight. So long as I get to fuck that sweet, pretty pussy of yours.” One of his hands curls in the waistband of my shorts, before both move down my thighs, pushing the fabric up as far as it will go.

Which is all the way up to my hips, given how loose my pajamas are. And as per usual, I’m not wearing anything under them. But I’d figured that there was no point since I knew Kayde was showing up. Why put more on when I’m sure he’s just going to rip it off?

And he certainly isn’t complaining. I pause with my hands pressed to his chest as I study his face. “Are you being serious?” I ask, head tilting to the side as I survey his face for any sign of mockery. He doesn’t seem to be

taunting me. He doesn't seem like he's about to laugh, tell me I'm an idiot, and tie me down with a hand on my throat.

Not that I'd really complain about it, if he did. How could I, when the ax murderer in my bed is the best I've ever had?

*God, that really says something about me.*

"I'm being deadly serious, sweetheart," Kayde promises. He shifts, moving slowly enough and with a hand on my hip so I'm not dislodged from his lap. But by the end of his moving under me, he's reclining against my pillows and I'm on his lap, hands still on his chest.

He looks so...pliant like this. So sweet as he gazes up at me earnestly.

"Stop that," I murmur, reaching up to touch his bottom lip without thinking. Before I can pull away, he nips at my fingers, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Stop what?" he asks, when he's finally bored with what he's doing and the tips of my fingers are tingling from his playful nips and licks. "What did I do, Summer?"

"This." I reach up slowly, dragging my fingers cautiously down his cheek. "This isn't, umm, you." I don't know how to phrase it without sounding like a maniac. "Don't lie to me when you're here. Please." I can handle anything he throws at me. I've decided that, or at least, I hope I can. But I can't handle the mask he uses on everyone else being used on *me*.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do." Frustration builds in my throat, and I try to swallow it down. "You lie to everyone here and show them this face, making them think you're earnest and friendly. You show them what they want to see; what you *think* they want to see," I amend, sitting back on his hips with a little more confidence than I'd felt when I'd started this.

At least he hasn't thrown me off of him and gotten mad.

But the way he's looking at me, like he's seeing something new in my face, is almost worse. "You think I lie to you?"

"I think this is how you look at people when you want them to like you and believe you aren't an ax murderer. When you want them to think you're, you know, *nice*." I end the sentence flatly, unamused. "Kayde, I know what you are. I don't need the Lassie face. That's...totally what I call it, by the way."

Kayde barks out a sharp laugh, his eyes darkening and expression becoming shrewd as he sits up on one elbow. "The *Lassie* face?" he chuffs.

“That’s sort of ridiculous and maybe a little perfect?” He squints, glancing at my nightstand as he thinks about it. “We can call it that. The *Lassie* face.”

Unexpectedly, Kayde picks up my hand again, nipping at my fingers once more. “But I don’t think I’m Lassie-facing you,” he goes on, surprisingly serious. “I don’t need to, remember? You know what I am.”

“Yeah? Well, you’re looking really *friendly* right about now. Or, you were,” I amend. “You’re not that friendly.”

“Or maybe...” He kisses my fingers, then lets go of my hand before sinking back onto the bed. “Maybe you just don’t know me that well, hmm?”

“I know you better than you think,” I mutter conspiratorially, and because maybe he’s right about my desire to always get the last word. But I switch my focus instead of trying to argue further with him; my hands drag down his chest until I can hook them under his shirt and pull it upward. He gets with the program and yanks it off over his head, letting me toss it down to the floor beside the bed.

But then I just...look at him. It’s strange to be here, with only his hand on my hip to steady me and his eyes open and not full of his normal predatory vibe. He’s just waiting for me to make a move, and all I can do is shift my hips over his and feel awkward about this whole thing.

“Are you just feeling uncreative tonight?” I ask finally, words snappy like I’m hiding my own confusion. “So you’re wrapping it up as a gift and saying I get to choose?” It’s not that I really believe my words. Honestly, I barely know what I’m saying until they’re out of my mouth.

But Kayde’s eyes narrow ever so slightly, and a less-friendly grin twitches at his lips. “Are you trying to provoke me, baby girl?” he asks teasingly, shifting once more until I feel his knee at my lower back. He must have his foot pressed against the bed, instead of laying flat, though I have no idea. “I’m telling you to take what you want...but if taking what you want is really just taunting me until *I* take you, then I can do that, no problem.”

The silence stretches out between us as my teeth lock around any treacherous answer I could give.

“Or do you just not know how to take it, hmm?” Kayde purrs, sitting up so we’re pressed flush together. My hands slide from his chest, only to find purchase on his shoulders while he wraps an arm around my hips. “Did

“none of your boyfriends teach you how to take charge?” I hate the way he goads me on, and the way it makes heat thrum through my veins.

Well, I’d *like* to hate that part of it, anyway. But in reality it has me squirming and trying to look anywhere but at Kayde, so he won’t see the confusion and anxiety on my face. He’s spot on, after all. The only boyfriend I had sex with was very traditional and certainly would never have let *me* take charge.

Not that he was particularly good at it, either.

“I don’t think everyone *likes* their partner taking charge when they’re not good at it,” I point out, wincing internally at the slight bit of self depreciation that I can’t help.

“Then you should’ve just said so, baby. I can teach you how to take what you want. I’ll even be your willing volunteer to practice on.” His words are quiet, though they’re rough as hell around the edges. “But let’s figure out what you want first, hmm? We can start easy tonight. Do you want to ride my cock, Summer? You can push me down on your bed and keep me right here, taking me how it feels good for you instead of for me.”

*Fuck*, that shouldn’t be so hot.

“Yes.” The word is out of my mouth before I can even think to stop it, or to say something else. Hell, I don’t even hesitate, and my wide eyes remain fixed on his face in the light from my lamp.

“Good girl.” The praise is soft, but no less potent in the way it sends a ripple of heat down my spine. “You want me to walk you through this?”

With my thighs on his hips and his smirk lighting up my nerve endings, it’s really not that difficult to figure out what I need to do to get what I crave from my psychopath. I nod once, then again, more confidently, without looking away from his face.

Because God, I love to see the little expressions twitching across his features when he’s thinking, or preparing for what he’s going to do. “Talk me through it,” I breathe, my attention never wavering.

“If that’s what my baby girl needs from me...then I’ll talk you through anything, Summer. Take off your clothes for me.” It isn’t quite a demand, but I find myself scrambling to comply just the same. Tugging off my shirt is first, and before I can do more than hook my fingers in the waistband of my shorts, Kayde’s hands are running up my sides slowly. Appreciatively.

“Sorry.” He chuckles, though he certainly doesn’t sound sorry. “I just can’t help touching you and getting my hands all over you.” With a flourish,

he drops his hands to his chest. “Please proceed.”

“Thanks so much for your blessing,” I deadpan, standing up just long enough to shimmy out of my shorts and drop them onto the floor. “What would I have done without—”

“Get back on the bed and stop running your mouth, sweetheart.” Kayde’s growl is quick and cool as he shoves his own shorts off and away. It’s hard for me not to look at him—at *all* of him. He’s perfectly, gloriously tan everywhere, and the only reason I hesitate at the side of my bed, brow raised, is because at heart, I really do enjoy defying him where I can.

“*Summer.*” His tone is absolutely withering, and he props himself up on his elbows to stare flatly at me. “Darling, get on the bed. Especially if you want to continue our game. If you make me get up, then I’m going to pin you down by your throat and wreck you. You won’t get a say, and the only thing you *will* be doing is begging me to let you come.”

That, really, shouldn’t be as enticing as it is. He must see it in my face, because he rolls his eyes but can’t help looking pleased with himself. And he doesn’t hide that little arrogance from me as I watch him, arms crossed over my chest like I’m suddenly self conscious.

And, well, maybe I am. This isn’t how things normally go. It’s different to be the one setting the pace, in theory. Though I don’t doubt that his words aren’t an empty threat. If he wants to, or if I take too long, Kayde would have no problem taking control and doing whatever he wants.

Not that it’s ever been a problem.

Sucking in a breath like I’m about to do something a little bit terrifying, I crawl back onto the bed, straddling his hips once more. “This better?” I ask, poised just above his stomach and holding myself up with my knees.

“Not quite,” Kayde muses. “Sit *down*, baby girl. You’re not perching like a bird.” He jerks my hips down, hard, until I’m sitting flush against his hips. I can feel his cock swelling against my ass, and it takes everything in me not to grind my hips back against him, just to see what he’ll do.

“Your last boyfriend ever have you ride his face?” The purred question nearly makes me choke, and my look must be enough of an answer, because Kayde snorts out a laugh. “Nah, I didn’t think so. Come up here then, *Summer.*”

“You don’t need to,” I point out, feeling more awkward than I should. Other people do things worse than this.

I just don't want to be bad at it. Not right now, with *Kayde* in the room with me.

"I know I don't *need* to," *Kayde* agrees. "No one ever said I did. Get up here for me. I promise you'll love it, and if you don't..." He glances away, looking thoughtful. "Hmm, I don't know. I'll do something for you, I'm sure." He tugs on my thighs, not relenting until I finally lean forward and let him guide my legs further up his sides.

"This feels awkward," I mumble finally, with my thighs bracketing his face. Gently, I reach down to smooth my hand through *Kayde*'s hair, hating how my fingers shake. It's more than awkward, and I'm sitting up as much as I can so that I'm not actually doing what he wants.

"It feels awkward because you're making it awkward," *Kayde* replies sweetly. "God, sweetheart, just stop over thinking this, okay? Just trust me on this?"

*I don't trust him on anything.*

My lips part, no doubt so I can say something I'll absolutely regret, but *Kayde* isn't really interested in my words. His hands stroke up my thighs and when his fingers dig into my flesh, he wastes no time in *jerking* me down until I'm gasping and gripping his hair hard to keep myself from falling over like a dumbass.

"*Kayde*—" His name is all I get out before *Kayde* kisses my inner thigh, then turns to lick a strip up my folds, ending at my clit. He does it again, then once more, but on the third time swirls his tongue over my clit instead of moving away immediately.

His hands curl, loosening some when he's satisfied I'm not going to move. His grip becomes comforting instead of overly tight. He strokes his palms up and down my hips, eyes on mine when I look down at him.

"Fuck," I murmur, feeling heat staining my cheeks. He's so hot like this it's unreal, and I know the blush on my cheeks is probably all across my shoulders and throat by now. Whatever he sees in my face must amuse him, though, because I *feel* his chuckle against my folds as he licks into me again. But this time, his tongue plunges deeper, as if he's trying to taste every inch of my pussy that he can.

My thighs tremble at the new, pleasurable feeling, and I shift, straining to keep most of my weight off of him as I gently scrape my fingers against his scalp. It's the only thing I'll allow myself; despite everything, I don't want to hurt him.

But something I'm doing clearly isn't to his liking. Kayde's eyes narrow, and he jerks my hips backward so his face is unobscured by my body. "Sit the fuck *down*," he growls. "And stop treating me like porcelain."

"Aren't you the one who quoted the Little Bisque Doll thing to me in the woods?" I can't help retorting sharply. "You're the one implying you *are* porcelain."

Something like surprise crosses his face, but it's gone too quickly for me to figure out what it is. He scoffs and turns his face to nip hard at my thigh.

"Ow. Ow!" I squeak when his teeth dig in so he can suck a mark onto my skin. "Fuck, Kayde—"

"Stop being so careful." He doesn't sound like he's asking, or suggesting it. "I won't break, Summer." Without letting me answer, he jerks me forward once more, causing me to topple forward and for my hand in his hair to grip harder.

He doesn't give me a chance to hold my weight away from him this time, though. Not with how tightly he grips my hips and drags me down to him, until my folds are pressed flush with his face and he can lick into me deeper than before.

"Oh shit. Oh goddamnit," I curse, my fingers unintentionally tightening in his hair. My other hand goes to the headboard, and I close my eyes hard at the feeling of him fucking me with his tongue. It feels better than it had when I was focusing on keeping myself supported on my spread out knees.

It feels better than I ever could've imagined it would. Whimpers fall from between my lips, and I screw my eyes shut harder. Though at Kayde's growl, I look down at him sharply, a jolt going through me when I see his hazy gaze on my face, waiting for me to take notice of him.

When I do, I can't look away. Though I can only see his eyes, somehow there's more than enough expression in them to keep me occupied and keep me guessing. My mind spins as I stare at him, my eyes wide while my nails scrape hard against his scalp.

But he never stops what he's doing. His jaw *has* to be aching. Especially when he encourages me to grind against his mouth, my hips rocking in his grip. I breathe deeply, trying not to let the butterflies in my stomach rush me to an early end. And he never stops changing things up. He fucks me on his tongue for a little while, then goes back to licking and teasing at my clit.

Sometimes he licks deep, others it's shallow, teasing laps with his tongue that have me begging.

"Kayde, Kayde," I whine, my voice as soft as I can make it so I don't wake up the girls next door. "You gotta—you gotta stop. I'm going to come." Whatever I'd thought about how this would go, me finishing embarrassingly fast thanks to his tongue wasn't it.

He chuckles against me, and just holds me tighter. It's a clear sign of what he wants, as is the way his hands encourage me to grind harder against his lips and tongue.

One more purring, taunting growl is all it takes. The way it feels rippling through me just feels so *filthy* that I lose my grip on my reactions with a gasp, coming on his tongue.

But that just seems to push him on. He licks harder, devouring me as best he can as my orgasm tears through me with the aid and taunting of his tongue. It isn't until my fingers tighten in his hair and I throw my head back with a whine of protest that he finally, slowly, lets his movements slow.

Though by the time he's flipped me on my back, with my thighs around his hips, I'm shaking and staring up at him like he's personally responsible for the stars in the sky.

*His face is wet.*

The thought goes through my brain over and over again as I stare up at him, my legs falling open at a nudge from his knee. I reach up to him, smearing my finger through the wetness on his lips only for him to nip at my thumb, a growl in his throat.

"You taste so good, Summer," he purrs, his voice a little rough around the edges. Somehow, that's what has me whimpering under him, my body jolting back to life.

"Fuck," I breathe, staring up at him and unable to look away. "Is this where I ride your cock?"

"No," he laughs, a little apologetically, as Kayde leans down until his lips brush mine. "Well, it should've been. But I can't help myself." There's a soft snarl in his voice that sends a shiver down my spine. "I need you like this, pinned under me while I fuck your sweet pussy."

He doesn't even wait to finish talking before his hand is at my thigh. I feel the brush of his cock against my folds, but all I can do is take a quick, hitched breath before he's thrusting into me smoothly, not stopping until his hips are flush with mine.

“Hey.” One hand snakes up and he grips my chin, forcing me to look at him. “I said you taste good, didn’t I?”

I nod, though he barely lets me make the movement. Frankly, I’m too focused on the rocking of his hips against mine, and the way my body is so quick to respond, even though he’d just wrung an orgasm out of me.

“Then it’s cruel of me not to share it with you.” My brain barely registers what he means before Kayde’s mouth is on mine, demanding entrance with teeth and tongue.

I give it to him, because there really isn’t anything else *to* do. I can’t seem to help myself as he kisses me; forcing me to taste myself on his tongue.

It’s so *filthy*. It makes me writhe, causes me to feel like my veins are on fire as he keeps my mouth hostage. Finally, I can’t help but sob against his lips, my lips chasing his as the overstimulation from my first orgasm becomes desire for a second.

“Greedy girl,” Kayde teases, pulling away just enough to slam into me even deeper. “Greedy, *perfect* girl. Are you going to fall apart on my cock, Summer? So greedy that one orgasm from my mouth wasn’t enough?”

“I’m not praising you just to boost your ego.” I laugh a bit incoherently. “You’ll have to try harder than that.”

His low sound might be a growl as he dips down to nip at my throat, just over the mark he’s already left. I yelp, hand flying up so I can tangle my fingers in his hair as he bites me. “Kayde—!”

He doesn’t stop. He just changes his angle, pulling my leg over his hip so he can nail the part of my body that makes me see stars. My other hand comes up to loop over his neck, and I can barely register the soft, slurred pleas that fall from my lips.

When I do come, Kayde seems to be psychic about that too. He crushes his lips against mine once more, nipping and tugging at my lower lip as his movements lose their rhythm; becoming frantic. Soon enough he’s stilling, with a curse swallowed between our lips as he comes inside me while I clench my thighs tightly around him and continue to ride out my release.

Minutes later, I find myself on my side, my eyes on the wall with his arm slung over my hips. “It’s still your night,” Kayde murmurs in my ear, lips brushing the soft skin under it. “Is there anything you want me to do, Summer?”

*Stay.*

I swallow, hard.

*Stay with me. Don't leave this time.*

Taking a deep breath, I ignore the way my heart flutters in my throat in anticipation.

*Let me turn around and pull me in closer. Stay like this with me, please.*

“No,” I tell him, never taking my eyes off of the wall. “I can’t think of anything.”

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



**T**here's no way I should be up this early.

It has to be a mix of getting to sleep for almost the whole night and all the sleeping I did yesterday. There's no other explanation in my mind, and no other reason for me to be this wired, with electricity dancing under my skin.

Though I wish I wasn't the only one up.

Normally I like the silence. I enjoy being alone to get work done that slips through the cracks when the kids are here and taking over everyone's focus.

But today, something's different. I'm not desperate enough for company that I'm willing to throw a rock at Darcy's window or something else as equally suicidal, but I wish any of the other counselors were up. Even just seeing someone else in camp would make me feel that much less lonely.

Though I suppose I *could* go throw a rock through Kayde's window and run away, then act innocent when he inevitably comes barreling out to see what in the world happened.

That also seems a little suicidal, however, and I'm not looking to be drowned today. Especially by the man who had so graciously let me sleep instead of taking up most of my night or doing something that had me knocked out for hours from exhaustion and adrenaline.

Rubbing my eyes, I wince at the tenderness under them, where the boys' paddle connected with my face. It's not the worst set of black eyes I've had, but I've forgotten about them enough that I end up digging into the tender bruise a few times a day and reaping the soreness straight after.

A door opens, and I glance up across the lawn where I'm picking up trash from the night before. The kids don't really mean to make such a mess. I know that. But especially last night, when they'd been planning and writing and doing whatever for the talent show, things had happened and the normal amount of trash post-campfire had tripled.

Not that I'm mad. It happens. They're just kids, and this is part of what I get paid for.

Liza climbs down the stairs from the nurse's cabin, her eyes on me. I can feel the confusion emanating from her all the way across the grass, but I lift a hand and wave before shifting the trash bag to my other side and picking up a few more pieces of paper from the ground.

It's not really that bad, and I'm already half done.

"You're up incredibly early," Liza remarks, bending to pick up a few stray pieces of trash. She walks over to me and I hold open the bag for her, while giving Liza my widest smile.

"Couldn't stay in bed any longer," I admit, shrugging one shoulder. "I don't know, I'm just kind of wired this morning. Weird, right?"

"Maybe weird for you," Liza allows, continuing to pick up litter where she finds it. She also tosses sticks toward the large fire pit, throwing them either in the pit itself or onto the large pile of wood nearby, depending on their size. "But I'm always up this early. Daniel usually is, too. I figured you were him, actually."

"*Daniel* gets up this early?" My brows flick upward in surprise. "That's shocking. I always figured he slept until the last possible moment and his boys had to get him up in the mornings." It's not an insult, and I'm not trying to be mean about it. But Daniel has never inspired confidence in me of his ability to get up and take care of shit if he needs to.

Maybe I'm just a hypocrite.

"Usually," Liza says with a quick nod. "You slept okay, though? I thought maybe you'd be up all night." She pins me with her gaze, but I give her the same baleful look back.

"Oh yeah? *I'm* the one who was in danger of being up all night?" There's a teasing, goading edge in my voice, and I wiggle my eyebrows at Camp Crestview's nurse.

She, of course, doesn't look phased by what I'm implying. If anything, her grin turns sly, and Liza tilts her head to the side as if she's considering

my words. “What makes you think I *wasn’t* up all night with a certain best friend of yours?”

Oh, Liza is better at this than I am. I stare at her, just a touch flustered, before my grin widens to match hers. “Maybe I never went to sleep, and that’s why I’m up this early,” I reply with my own suggestion, though it’s far from the truth.

“Where’s Kayde then?” she asks with a tilt of her head. “Surely he didn’t let you just leave your bed without him.”

“Where’s Kins?” I retort, hand on my hip. It’s fun to debate with Liza this way, and new. I’ve definitely never had someone to talk so freely with, other than my best friend, and Liza is nothing like Kinsley. Not that it’s a bad thing, under any circumstances.

More and more lately, I’m realizing that Liza isn’t *just* the friendly camp nurse who patches me up after a questionable decision made on my part. She’s kind, funny, and I’m sure I’d like hanging out with her outside of here, if Kinsley and her last that long.

God, I really hope they’re in it for the long run. I’ve met Kinsley’s girlfriends before this, and while I’ve liked a few of them enough, none of them were like Liza.

When Liza starts speaking, I realize I’d asked her a question, and I pull myself out of my thoughts to listen, gaze finding her soft, affectionate smile.

“Kins is in her cabin. She wanted to stay all night with me, but I don’t like waking her up early by accident. She’s *such* a light sleeper,” Liza laments, a worried frown touching her lips. “And she has kids to look after, unlike me. So I try to let her sleep when I can. At least some.” Her smile turns heavy with double meaning again, and it just prompts me to roll my eyes, a scoff leaving me.

“So kind of you to let my best friend shut her eyes at *some point*,” I can’t help but tease. My eyes scour the surrounding grass, and I pick up a stray stick to toss into the fire pit as Liza had. By now, we’re closer to when the kids wake up, though I doubt any of the girls in Redtail are conscious yet, unless they’re planning something nefarious.

But today is an easy day, in my opinion. With the talent show happening tonight, the kids get free time in the morning before they’ll take the afternoon to plan what they’ll do, create props for it, and run through their act. With the prize being an actual trophy and t-shirts that declare them

Camp Crestview Talent Show Winners, they always put more effort into the talent show than I expect them to.

Secretly, I'm begging for my girls to win this year. In my opinion, we were cheated out of the win last year when I had part of this same group of girls. Plus, I know for a fact Melody won't take the loss two years in a row without a fight.

Or murder. Depending on who we potentially lose to.

"Nice of Kayde to let *you* shut your eyes at some point. Should I ask him how much sleep he let *you* get?" Her teasing words confuse me, since I can't figure out if she's going to just waltz up to him in the middle of the day to ask if Kayde let me *sleep*. It seems random, at best.

Until Liza nods over my shoulder in the face of my confusion.

I turn, nonplussed, until I can see Kayde casually striding up from the direction of the lake, dressed in a pair of loose fitting sweatpants and a *Camp Crestview* t-shirt. Like me, he'd probably been given a lifetime supply of them from Mr. Fink, who prefers us to wear them while we're here in case any of the kids need a trusted adult.

Not that I think the kids would have any problem identifying a counselor, since we're double their height, more than double their age, and usually the ones giving orders or speaking the loudest when something's happening. But I've never argued with Mr. Fink's 'wisdom' and never really plan to. Not when he mostly leaves us to run the camp as we see fit.

"Kayde?" I can't help but ask, the word slipping out before I can stop myself.

Kayde, apparently having no idea that we were here until this moment, snaps his head up to look at me, eyes wide. He stops walking, hands curling and uncurling at his sides, and in this entire week I've never seen him look so...*flustered*.

Like we've caught him at a bad time and he's embarrassed over it. But it's not like he's doing anything wrong or humiliating. Is he?

"Summer," he breathes, then turns his head to nod at Liza as well. "Hey Liza," he greets, some of his normal mask flooding back through his expression. "Aren't you two up a little early?" He directs it to both of us, but his eyes are fixed on mine when he asks, brows knit together.

"Summer says she got a full night's sleep." Liza is quick to reply before me, and the undertone of wicked teasing is heavy in her words. "I told her I was surprised and thought I'd ask you if she's lying to me."

Kayde's head tilts just a touch, just enough for me to see the question in his eyes as he steps closer. Close enough for me to see the dark circles under *his* eyes, and the way he looks like he hasn't slept at all.

A stab of worry goes through me, but I'm quick to strangle it and toss it down into the abyss of inappropriate feelings where it belongs. Had I done something wrong last night, or something to upset him?

Or had *he* done something during the night that's going to upset me today?

Fear creeps upward in my gut, and I can't help but check him surreptitiously for weapons under my eyelashes. Though I'm pretty sure the handle of an ax would be hard to miss without something more substantial than sweatpants and a t-shirt.

"Well, I wouldn't say a *full* night's sleep," Kayde replies, a little bashful and a little teasing, as he answers Liza's insinuation. "But I try not to keep her up all night. Judging by the sounds coming from your cabin though, I'd say you weren't so considerate to poor Kins, were you?" His gaze is both direct and taunting, but I'm still trying to figure out where in the world he's been so that he looks like he's come straight from the lake.

*God, I hope he wasn't disposing of a body.*

They trade a few more teasing barbs, and before I know it, Liza is tugging the bag of trash out of my hand and heading toward Otter Hall to start breakfast. Her grin in my direction is confusing, and I wonder what I've missed in my moment of panic, since there's definitely *something* I'm not getting.

Kayde shifts closer to me, and with a jolt, I realize he's no longer four or five steps away. Instead, he's right in front of me, fingers tipping up my chin. "Would you like to stop checking me for blood and weapons now?" he purrs softly, all hints of that sweet, golden retriever facade gone with the trash in Liza's hand.

"Hmm?" I ask, eyes wide and innocent as I look up at him. "Me? No, I—"

"Baby girl, you're so easy to read." His voice is sharper than I expect, and I blink in surprise as he continues, "You think I've killed one of your precious goblins and sunk them in the lake. Would you like to check me a little more thoroughly for blood?" He casts a glance around before tugging me toward the trees, his grip on my wrist tight. By the time we're not so

easily noticeable from the cabins, Kayde has his shirt rucked up in one hand, and presses my palm against his skin with the other.

“Didn’t do anything to break our deal,” he breathes, dragging my hand over his chest, his stomach, and down to his hip. “Didn’t kill your kids, Summer. Stop looking at me like that.”

My nose scrunches in irritation, and I glare at him while sinking my nails into his hip, just to be petulant if he’s going to keep dragging my hand all over his warm, sun-kissed skin.

“Where were you?” I ask finally, searching his gaze. “Did you not sleep? You look—” He cuts me off by surging forward to kiss me, his lips forcing mine open before he thrusts his tongue between my teeth. It’s uncomfortable at first, with his unexpected aggression and the way he turns the kiss filthy in seconds. My hands find his shoulders, fingers digging into his shirt as I whimper my protests against his teeth.

One arm circles my waist, keeping me pressed to him with nowhere else to go. But then again, if I’m honest with myself, I’m not exactly fighting to get away. Not like I should be, anyway.

When Kayde pulls back, it’s only so he can gaze down at me, studying my face as he strokes a finger along my lower lip. “It’s none of your business where I was, sweetheart,” he murmurs at last, leaning forward to bump his nose affectionately against mine. “The more you know, the more dangerous it is for you.”

Goosebumps trail over my arms, and a shiver travels up my spine.

“I wasn’t being—”

“You’re so nosy,” he croons playfully. “It’s what got you into this mess in the first place.” He seems more like the first time I’d met him, instead of the Kayde from last night, and it’s unnerving as hell that he can switch between personas so easily.

It makes me wonder which is the act, and which is the truth.

“Kayde—”

“No more questions, nosy thing.” He laughs lightly. “Open your mouth for me.”

I do as he says without thinking, only for him to tilt my chin up and spit like he had that first night, when we were standing in the trees and I’d just promised him I would do anything to save the kids of Camp Crestview.

I can’t help the soft whine, or the way I flinch away from him as his saliva pools thickly on my tongue. This feels so *strange*. It always has. Like

he's placing some claim on me and making sure I won't forget it, or him, or this deal.

"Close your fucking mouth and swallow it," Kayde murmurs dangerously quiet. Nostrils flaring, I do so, never looking away from him until he grips my jaw and forces my mouth open, as if he needs to check to ensure I'd done what he asked.

"And what do you say, Summer?" he goes on, shaking my face almost like I'm a dog.

Distaste bubbles just under my skin, along with something hotter that I refuse to name. "Thank you," I hiss resentfully, and the memories of last night's Kayde are chased away, replaced by the feeling of him spitting in my mouth and making me *thank him* for the humiliation.

"Good girl," he taunts, finally letting go. "Now go turn tail and run back to your cabin, baby. Before I decide I want to spit somewhere else."

I can't decide what the strange, hot feeling that floods my body is, but I just look at him, a blush staining my cheeks, I'm sure. His brow jerks upward, eyes darkening, and I can feel my humiliation growing in the seconds before he smiles.

"No, really?" He chuckles, reaching out to grip the base of my throat. "*Seriously*, Summer? You're going to stand here and get all hot and bothered imagining me spitting on you? On your pretty little pussy or your—"

"No," I hiss, sure my face is beet red. "No, I'm not—" I shove away from him, nearly tripping and falling flat on my face. But he lets me, only watching me with bemusement on his face. "Fuck you, Kayde," I snap, before I wheel around and march back toward my cabin, refusing to listen to his soft, purring laugh behind me.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



“**Y**ou can’t kill anyone,” I remind Melody, only half joking.

The twelve-year-old fixes me with a *look* from eyes that feel older than twelve, and she folds her arms over her chest to glare up at me. “We’re not going to kill anyone,” she promises me patiently, as if she’s the adult and I’m the feral child. “Glow stick necklace, please.” She holds out a hand expectantly, and I hand her both the glow stick necklace and the regular glow stick she can use to cheer on the other cabins. Not that she will, I think. Melody is only a team player for *her* team.

“No violent exhibitions,” I go on, hand on my hip. “No fighting. Fake, or otherwise.”

“Mhmm.” It’s not worth having this talk with the rest of my kids as the sun sets and everyone gathers around the biggest campfire. Tonight, instead of ranging around it in a loose circle, we’ve dragged the logs over from other areas to create ‘rows’ of seats, and whichever cabin is doing their talent will have the whole ‘stage’ area in front of the fire itself.

Well, not too close to the fire. None of them needs an opportunity to fall into the flames. The last thing we need tonight is a hospital trip, which is why I’m having *the talk* with Melody now.

“Can I have a different one?” Melody lifts the necklace off of her shoulders and as I lean down for another pack of them, she tosses it over my head unexpectedly. “Pink is way more your color.”

I snort but don’t argue, instead thumbing through until I can find a light blue one while kicking myself for not planning which one to give her earlier. Melody is *not* a lover of pink, and I should’ve remembered. “Sorry,”

I murmur, giving her the blue one instead. She smiles, grateful, and slips it over her head before patting my hand.

“It’s okay,” she promises. “We all make mistakes. I won’t kill anyone, hurt anyone, or set anything on fire, in case that’s where this is going next.” She rolls her eyes, and it strikes me again how mature she is for her age. Though with her, I’m never sure if that’s a good thing.

Melody is insanely intelligent, yes, but there’s something about her I don’t quite understand. Something in her eyes unnerves me and always makes me itch.

But it’s probably just the arrogance of being twelve and having a cabin full of kids willing to follow her to the ends of the earth.

She grins once more before walking off in the direction of the Redtail girls, probably telling them I’ve shot down their dreams of sawing one of Daniel’s boys in half and only announcing later it’s not a magic trick. I’m so distracted by my concerns that it takes Kayde clearing his throat beside me for me to even notice, let alone jump.

“You in a better mood?” I can’t help but mumble, shoving my hands in my pockets.

“Was I ever in a bad mood?” he’s quick to ask, but the smooth, amused edge is back in his voice, instead of whatever was there this morning.

I turn to look at him, brows raising just enough for me to show how incredulous I am at his words. “You’re joking.” It isn’t a question, and I nervously shove my hands into my back pockets.

“Am I?” He blinks and tilts his head down to me, a small smile on his face. “Why do you think I was in a bad mood, babe?”

*Babe* is a bit of a new one, or at least one I’m noticing now more than before. I don’t understand it, for one. Why refer to me with this kind of affectionate nickname outside of our nightly deal time? Is it some extra part of his game? Or another way to humiliate and embarrass me in front of everyone?

I bite my lower lip thoughtfully, aware of Kayde’s eyes on my face while I think. I want to ask, I think. But I’m also not sure I want to sour his mood by digging into his business. Asking where he’d gone this morning, or where he’d been, already pissed him off enough.

Even if he isn’t willing to admit it now.

“You just weren’t nice,” I mutter, and instantly regret the words. Kayde is *never* that nice. Why should I consider this morning any different from

Kayde's usual crap?

"Poor thing. Poor *baby*." There's heat in his words, and they aren't nearly as cruel as they could be. Especially when Kayde wraps an arm around my waist and tugs me to him. "Why are you wearing three glow stick necklaces?" he asks, his other hand coming up to touch the pink one around my neck.

"Because three of the girls wanted different colors." I sigh, knowing I'm much more of a pushover than most of the counselors here. But I want my girls to be *happy*, and if that means being a glow stick necklace display for the rest of the night, then that's okay. There are worse things than looking like I'm heading to a rave.

Kayde turns to look at me fully, studying my face with slightly narrowed eyes. I know what he sees. I know he's finally taking in the smears of glitter over my eyes and across my cheeks. The way I *really* look like I'm trying to stand out in some camp-themed nightclub. But it's not my fault, and I wasn't about to tell the girls I wouldn't get glittered up by them to match whatever it is they're doing.

After all, I'm nothing if not supportive of my feral goblins.

"What are you supposed to be?" he asks, one hand coming up to hover near the glitter. I pull away so he can't smudge it, shooting him a warning frown. "A disco ball that lights up?"

"I'm *supportive*," I inform him flatly. "Of the kids. They wanted to put glitter on me, so..." I show him my arms, which are also just as glittery. My hair, too, shimmers when I turn, and I really am a disco ball, now that he's said it. "So I let them."

"Cute." I can't tell if he's taunting me, or looking for a rise. "So I wasn't nice to you this morning? Would you like me to *apologize*?" His smile turns just a touch dark, his white teeth flashing.

"No. I don't need an apology," I assure him. "But I wouldn't mind some *honesty* without the *aggression*."

The smile fades, and he watches me, waiting for me to go on. So I do, not expecting this turn of events from him, and suck in a breath before admitting, "You looked...rough this morning. You weren't really doing something terrible, right?"

"Haven't you counted the kids? Made all the counselors check in?" His voice is flat. Emotionless. It's hard to tell what he's thinking at the best of times. This is not one of them. And clearly, I've pissed him off again.

I just give him a look from under my lashes, not dignifying it with a response. He's right. I *have* done all that. But I'd hoped for an answer from him, instead of whatever this is. "I was just asking," I murmur finally, pulling myself out of his hold.

Or at least, that's the plan.

Kayde curses softly and hooks a finger in the back of my denim shorts, using that to *drag* me back toward him. Somehow, no matter how I try to escape, he's still so easily able to slot my body against his in the corner of Otter Hall, where no one can *really* see us unless they're actually looking.

"Wait," he sighs against my hair, holding onto me by my pocket. "I didn't mean to piss you off, baby girl. Stop taking things so personally."

"Oh yeah? Then tell me where you were," I can't help but challenge, heat rising to my cheeks. It's not from embarrassment this time, though. It's irritation and frustration. I hate when he talks to me like this. No matter the context.

"Nah, I don't think I will. But keep asking me," my psychopath invites with heady enthusiasm. "Love how mad me saying *no* gets you. Will you slap me next? Or just stare at me like that and hope I feel bad?"

"I will sacrifice mosquitos to the forest god daily in hopes you feel like shit," I promise him between clenched teeth. "And maybe, in ten years or so, he'll take pity on me and you'll feel a *twinge* of regret for something."

"Probably not." Kayde chuckles, releasing me. "But keep trying, babe."

There it is again. *Babe*. An affectionate nickname, like we're more than enemies who fuck because of a deal I made. "My girls are going to destroy your boys at the talent show," is the only thing I can think to say, and I know how lame it is the moment the words leave my mouth.

Kayde grimaces. "Yeah, probably. Their little demonstration is, umm... not that inspiring. But we'll see." He gives a huff and glances towards the boys with something like fondness on his face, though I know it's all for show.

After all, he was prepared to murder them a week ago. But I don't remark on that. Instead I reach up, touching the necklaces and running my fingers along them before pulling one off of my neck—a green one—and slipping it over Kayde's head instead. "Show some solidarity," I tell him, reaching into my pocket for one of my glow sticks and pressing it into his hand. "Cheer for them no matter how much they suck. It...it'll mean a lot, okay?" I avert my eyes from his face, insecure at how he's looking at me as

if he's never seen me before. "Even if you don't like them, you can pretend for the night."

"I suppose," Kayde murmurs, catching my fingers before I can pull away. "But only because you look so cute when you blush like that."

I don't dignify that with a response. I pull my hand away and turn around to find where my campers have gone before following after them, needing to make sure for a twelfth time that they aren't about to burn down the campground or murder one of Daniel's boys.

*Please, God, I think, crossing my fingers. Don't let them be planning a magic show.*

Of course, my girls have planned a *magic show*.

Melody is even dressed for it, in a sparkly shirt and black leggings. They've made a hat for her out of construction paper, and I can't help but feel impressed at their creativity in that and the painted stick she's using as a wand.

And at first, things mostly go well. They don't threaten anyone. Melody's card tricks actually work, surprising their fellow campers, and her 'assistants' are as flawless as a bunch of twelve-year-olds armed with craft supplies can be.

But I sit on my log beside Kinsley and keep my fingers crossed anyway, knowing how quickly this can go from innocent, to something worse when Melody is involved.

"And for my final set of tricks," she announces with a flourish, causing me to cross my fingers even harder.

*Please, God, don't let her announce that she's sawing someone in half,* I beg, my eyes fixed on her in front of the snapping fire. Apart from us, Coyote cabin is the only one to not have gone yet. And unless they're truly spectacular, I think my girls have a pretty good chance of winning. At least, if this last trick isn't a giant failure. The other kids would never let them live that down, and a bad finale will tank whatever good will they gained during the rest of their little magic show.

*Please don't saw someone in half,* I beg again, still watching Melody with rapt attention. *Anything but that, kid.*

"I need a volunteer." The words make me wince in trepidation, and in a move of self sacrifice, I throw my hand up from my spot in the front row, eyes fixed on Melody as she looks around the log seats with dramatic flair.

She narrows her eyes, making a show of looking as about ten kids try not to jump out of their seats in their efforts to get noticed by her.

Kayde taps my shoulder from his spot too close behind me, and without waiting for me to acknowledge him, leans forward to whisper in my ear, “What are you doing? Why are you volunteering?”

“Because I’m scared she’s going to saw someone in half. Only, it won’t be a magic trick,” I hiss, refusing to underestimate Melody or her ability to do something insane. Do I think she’s managed to find and obtain a saw somewhere on the grounds of Camp Crestview? Absolutely not. No way in hell.

Do I think if she wanted to, she and the other girls of my cabin could *make* a saw out of like a rubber band, a leaf, and a crushing desire for bloodlust? Abso-fucking-lutely.

“Oh.” Kayde actually sounds mollified; like my explanation makes total sense. “Yeah, okay. That tracks.” He settles back, but I don’t turn and look at him. I’m still transfixed on Melody, trying to glare her into picking me for her demonstration.

She sees me. I know she sees me, though her eyes skim right over me as she goes on tiptoe. “You!” She jabs her finger at me, then lifts it, to make sure I know it’s *not* me she’s asking to be her volunteer.

Shit. I know Daniel’s cabin is somewhere behind me, and I don’t want to have to make a scene. No, she’s probably not going to saw one of them in half literally. But she could embarrass or humiliate anyone if she puts her mind to it. Especially in front of the rest of Camp—

Kayde brushes by, stepping over my log and glancing down at my surprised face to wink at me. My mouth falls open, but at least I don’t have to worry about Melody hurting or humiliating him. He turns his grin on Melody as he stands next to her, hands shoved in his pockets as she announces she’ll be using him for a few different tricks to prove to her audience they’re all real. Naturally, her ‘assistants’ are ready with whatever she needs, and I settle back to watch, at ease now that I know we’re not in danger of a fight.

Melody and my other campers take Kayde through three card tricks, a disappearing coin trick, and a trick where an egg is squeezed but not broken. All in all, it’s pretty tame. Though I can’t help but be begrudgingly grateful that Kayde plays along with her instead of acting like all of it is below him.

“Thank you so much again for being a volunteer!” Melody’s voice carries, and I’m sure if she wanted to, she could be heard from across the lake. She takes her magician hat, which is still somehow held together by tape and sheer will, and fishes around in it dramatically, like she’s Mary Poppins.

“Before you go, we’ve got something for you to take back to our counselor, since you were such a good sport.” Melody pulls her arm back with a dramatic flourish, and shows in her hand a slightly crumpled but still manageable bouquet of wildflowers that look like they were picked today.

Then her words register in my head, and my face falls. Kinsley elbows me in the side, but all I can do is watch Kayde, confused and utterly at a loss.

Kayde is obviously just as surprised, but he recovers quickly, accepting the flowers with a fancy little bow, then strides toward me purposefully.

*Don’t make a big deal out of it,* I beg silently, never looking away from him. But his smirk grows, eyes darkening just a touch, and I know for a fact he’s going to make a big deal out of this.

“For you, my lady,” he announces in a voice that’s way too similar to Melody’s confident drawl to be anything but intentional. He drops to one knee and holds the flowers out to me, bowing his head so his curls fall over his shoulders, free from his usual ponytail or bun tonight.

“T-thanks.” I know my face is red. I know I’m squirming as I reach out and take the flowers from him before sitting back, and I’m *fully* aware Kinsley and Liza are both staring at me. As is Melody, with a wolfish, self-satisfied grin that makes me want to bury my face in my hands and go straight to my cabin.

Kayde murmurs something under his breath that sounds suspiciously like, “*Of course, baby girl,*” But I refuse to even look at him as he steps past me to go back to his log. But I clutch the flowers in my hand, a little bit touched that my cabin of girls had obviously picked these for me.

I just wish they’d chosen *not* to embarrass me with them in front of the rest of camp. And God do I wish Kayde hadn’t been so keen to play along.

“That was adorable,” Kins hisses in my ear, causing me to groan as I trail my fingers over the flowers. “Seriously, that was so cute—”

“That was humiliating.” I sigh, my face in my hand. But I can’t help the small smile curling at my lips, even as I want to stomp on the part of myself

that agrees. It *was* cute. From both my campers and Kayde, even though I know he was just playing along.

A few minutes later, after Coyote Cabin has crashed and burned—almost literally, when one of them tripped dangerously close to the fire—Liza pushes to her feet and heads to the fire, grinning at all of us in the warm way she's so good at.

"That was amazing, you guys," she tells the campers, looking around at them. "Seriously, this was probably my favorite talent show all year." Pretty sure she says that every time, but the kids believe it, anyway. "But as you guys know, we can only have one winner. So I'm going to ask the counselors to line up for their cabins and we'll pick a winner from there."

This isn't new, either. I push to my feet and stride up to stand beside Liza, and quickly realize I'm one of the few counselors with more than the one obligatory glow necklace. Somehow over the past few hours, I've acquired two more necklaces, putting my total up to four with the one I'd given Kayde, and three glow sticks tied to the loop of my denim shorts. Combined with the glitter on my face, arms, and hair, I'm sure I really do look like a damn disco ball up here.

And it can't be that attractive of a look. But when Kayde settles into the space beside me, I can *feel* his eyes on mine, though I don't turn to meet his gaze. After all, one of us has to be a little less obvious about...whatever this is.

*Nothing*, I remind myself, stomping down the other part of myself that wishes it was *something*. There is *nothing* real going on between Kayde and me. Nor should I want there to be. Any part of me that *wants* something to happen with Kayde is clearly ill, beyond medication, and should be abandoned at the first possible opportunity.

But that doesn't make it any easier to let go of some of the thoughts I let play through my head after Kayde does something sweet, romantic, or so fucking hot I feel like I need to excuse myself for a freezing cold shower.

Kayde nudges my arm and I realize it's my turn to raise my hand for Redtail Cabin to get their cheers. I jerk my hand up, glow sticks in my palm, and the roar of applause from the other campers is enough to tell me we've most likely won. Poor Kayde gets only a smattering of polite applause, but after what Coyote had put forward as their 'talent,' I'm not exactly surprised.

Sure enough, we win. Liza calls up my campers as the other counselors head back to their seats, and Melody knocks into me hard, a grin on her face as she reaches out to accept the trophy that's hers as the leader of our little group. Liza gives medals to the others, and I wrap an arm around Melody's shoulders, proud of her as she congratulates the others.

She really is the best and worst camper I could ever ask for.

The celebration continues for a few more minutes, before Kins and Daniel arrive with marshmallows and s'mores kits. It's enough to change the focus, and even enough to pull Melody away from me where she preens and thanks people who compliment her on her act.

But she *should* be proud. In my humble opinion, my kids had put much more into this than most of the other cabins. They deserve to win.

"You're smiling like an idiot." Kayde stands beside me as I watch our cabins line up for their s'mores kits, and I don't move as he shifts to stand close enough to me that our arms are pressed together, his skin warm against mine.

"I'm proud of them," I reply, sliding my eyes up to the part of his face I can see. It isn't enough to see his full expression. Especially in the growing darkness now that the sun is below the horizon. But even if I could, I doubt I could figure out what he's thinking.

His face is unreadable, for one.

"They're not *your* kids," he points out, then adds. "Do you even want kids? You don't strike me as the type."

I snort at that, smile turning rueful. "Fuck no. Me, have *kids*? No, never. I certainly am not getting pregnant. And I don't want to raise kids. This is enough for me. Besides, I'm pretty sure Melody has scared me out of ever wanting kids."

"Because she's a sociopath?" Kayde's voice is soft; inaudible to the others at the campfire. But I don't reply. I can't reply, when he's put to words my fears about the girl who seems too mature, too worldly, and a little...off sometimes.

"Why do you say that?" I ask at last, studying the flowers in my hand. Kayde reaches out to slide one free, his fingers trailing over the small, delicate blossoms.

He takes his time, and I watch him as he strokes the flower thoughtfully. "Because, sweetheart." Carefully he hands the flower back to me, then

ducks in close to whisper against my ear, “It takes a sociopath to spot a sociopath.”

I’m too stunned to answer. I’m too stunned to react when he kisses my cheek and walks away toward his boys, whistling under his breath like he hadn’t just dropped that on me like it means nothing at all.

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



I swear it's a coincidence.

When I open my cabin door and see the frame filled by a surprised, blinking Kayde with one hand up like he's reaching for the doorknob, I just stand there and stare at him.

Which is exactly his reaction to me as well.

A small smile curls up over my lips, and I tilt my head to the side as I look at him. "I'm psychic," I tell him, before he can say anything. "Your superpower is being a sociopath; mine's being psychic. That's totally hot of me, right?"

He gives the most dramatic eye roll I swear I've ever seen, and I watch the small changes that flit across his expression as he clearly tries to think about what he wants to say. "Was I interrupting you? Were you going to *run away?*" he finally asks, one brow jerking upward. "*Please* tell me you're going to run away and break our deal so I can do something terrible tonight."

My smile slips from my lips, and I break first. Stepping back, I gesture him into the cabin theatrically, sweeping him a graceless curtsy as he strides inside like he belongs in my cabin more than me. "I was going to go shower," I admit, rubbing my arms as I shove my hip into the door to close it. "Which feels like it's more to your benefit than mine. I'm sweaty."

"You're hot," Kayde sighs, sitting down on my bed and kicking off his shoes. As I watch, he makes himself comfortable, looking like nothing in the world is wrong.

Only, this isn't quite how this normally goes. Ever. At all.

It feels suspicious. This is *never* how Kayde approaches me or starts out our nightly game. Gooseflesh prickles along my arms, and I rub my palms over my skin before walking up to him and kicking off my flip-flops beside his sneakers. “What are you doing?” I ask finally, trying to look anything other than *anxious*.

Not that I’m succeeding.

“Well, I believe”—he reaches into my nightstand and pulls out the old horror book that he flips through curiously, being careful of the yellowed pages—“that we have one more night to play.” He doesn’t say anything else, just leaves me standing there, feeling incredibly awkward about the whole thing.

“Unless you don’t want to,” he adds after a good thirty seconds of me just staring at him like a weirdo. “Say the word, sweetheart. Literally, I’ve never liked hearing Darcy’s name, but if you say it tonight, I might get the shivers. Isn’t there something climactic about making it to the final night only to—”

I don’t know why I do it. Something sparks in me, just like that first night, and I fall onto the bed, straddling him a little awkwardly. The action cuts off his surprise as I sit back on his thighs, my own legs folded under me. “I never said that,” I breathe, catching and holding his gaze with mine. “I just wanted to know what you were doing.”

“Reading.” He gestures to the book he’s holding, then lays it on the nightstand. “Better question though, Summer.” He tips his chin upward, in a challenge, and his eyes darken until they’re deep blue pools that glint with mischief. “What are you doing?”

I have no idea what I’m doing. I’m half-terrified of him tonight, and my skin seems to tingle at this terrible plan that rivals the one from my first night. But I still meet his smile with a crooked grin of my own, take a breath, and lean forward to fist my fingers in his shirt, then yank him to me to crush my mouth against Kayde’s.

Somehow, it surprises him. I hadn’t expected it to. I always think he knows what I’m going to do before I do it. But I feel him stiffen under me. I *feel* the way his hands flutter for a few moments, before one rests on my hip and the other comes up to wrap softly around the base of my throat.

“Sweetheart...” he murmurs, pulling away and holding me in place with his hand on my shirt. “Baby girl, what in the world are you doing?”

*Shit.* Shit, okay, I hadn't thought he wouldn't like it. I thought his surprise would melt into something else. I thought...a lot of things that aren't true, apparently.

A questioning noise makes itself known from between my parted lips, and I can feel the confusion on my face as I search his for any sign of what I *should've* done instead. Only...he doesn't look mad, exactly. Not how I would expect him to, at least. My fingers unclench and I pull as far away as he'll allow, suddenly feeling self conscious about making the first move to surprise Kayde.

"I'm...kissing you? Is that not what we normally do?" I ask, trying to retain some of my bravado.

"I don't think we have a *normal*." Kayde chuckles, eyes still glinting. "Oh, I see...I *see*. You think I stopped you because I'm upset with you. Don't you?"

I'm flustered and humiliated. I can feel embarrassment staining my cheeks, and I cast my eyes to the side instead of answering. It's not like he can't see the answer all over my skin, anyway.

"No, don't do that," Kayde coos sweetly. "Don't get all shy with me. I've had you tied up naked in the boathouse, baby girl. I've had a knife on your skin. Don't turn shy on me now, Summer. Come back here." He uses his hand on my hip to drag me forward until I'm flush against him and his other hand can more easily wrap around to tangle in my hair. "I stopped you because you seem a little...desperate tonight. Are you thinking of how much you'll miss me when I'm gone?"

My not-so-nice smile comes back instantly, and I will the heat to go somewhere other than my face. "I'm thinking of the party I'll throw tomorrow night when you're no longer here. I was *just* thinking that I need to pick up some hot dogs and probably some more edibles."

"Oh, yeah?" He doesn't sound put out by it, and I wish I knew why he was looking at me as if I'm missing out on some kind of joke. Unless the joke is that he's going to kill me tonight, then kill the campers, then, for good measure, kill Mr. Fink.

Though I suppose the *real* joke would be if Darcy were to be the one to survive all of this shit.

"You're not invited," I'm bold enough to tell him, and his soft scoff is confusing, at best. But he doesn't reply, exactly. Not for a few seconds, as he watches me sit on his lap like one of us is about to make a move.

"We're feeling bold tonight, aren't we?" he asks at last, stroking one hand up and down my bare thigh and pushing my shorts up a little more every time he does so. "Is it because this is the last time you'll see me?"

"Probably," I tell him readily, bringing my hands back to his shirt more carefully. "Doesn't it seem like it?" I swear I'm asking him that and it's *not* the part of me that doesn't want him to leave. But even if I was willing to acknowledge that part of me, it wouldn't really matter. Kayde *has* to go. I can't beg him to stay, when all that would mean is I'll end up with a bunch of dead kids.

*I can't let him kill anyone.*

That's the whole reason for this arrangement, after all.

"Maybe I should feel insulted," he hums, leaning forward to touch his nose to mine. "Maybe I'll take my plans and *go*." I know what he means when he says *go*. I know what he's less-than-implying. But I bite my lip, refusing to rise to the bait of his taunt.

At least, until he reaches up and presses his thumb against my bottom lip, or rather, just under it. "You always look so adorable when you're confused," he admits. "I like it when you have no idea what to do around me. When you're second guessing everything. Would you like to know what I'm going to do with you tonight, sweetheart?"

"The fact you want to tell me instead of surprising me with it feels... suspicious," I admit, my eyes narrowing at him. He's so pretty in the dim light of my cabin; his wavy blond hair is up in a bun, pulled back from his sharp cheekbones and beautiful blue eyes. He really is the definition of 'sun-kissed,' and I can't help but think that his looks are the apology from genetics for handing him the *sociopath* gene.

Not that he seems upset about that, exactly. Is it a coincidence that he's so gorgeous? That he takes care of himself so well that there's no way any girl wouldn't be into him? Or is it part of his act, to make sure that no one thinks anything of him except how much they want his attention?

If it's intentional, it's so smart.

"You're suspicious of me?" he taunts. "*Me?*"

"Every single time you open your mouth." I'm still not convinced he won't stab me in the throat tonight and then go on his murder spree, anyway. "Are you...surprised?" I ask, unable to help myself.

"Of yourself?" He catches on way too quickly.

I nod.

“Of the fact you’ve never told me to stop?”

I nod again, and Kayde’s grin widens.

“I don’t know,” he muses. “Maybe I was in the beginning. I thought that night in the shower you’d *break*. I thought you would beg me to stop, and I’d get to play my game with all the kids and... Well, you know how that was going to go. But you didn’t. And you’re always so interesting, so it’s not like I’ve been *bored*.”

That feels like a compliment, though it’s one I’m definitely not sure how to take. My fingers twist in his shirt lightly, and he reaches one hand up to cover both of them, stopping my movements. “So, do you want to know now what I’m going to do with you tonight, baby girl?”

My heart speeds up to hammer in my chest, and I swallow around a lump in my throat before dipping my chin in a sharp nod. I *do* want to know. Even if it’s awful or violent or terrifying, I want to know so I can try to prepare. Or at least try to think of a plan to murder him if things go wrong.

Not that I think that’s a very valid option, given how I froze that night in the woods when I’d been the one with the knife and some kind of leverage. Well, perceived leverage, maybe.

Lost in my thoughts, I almost miss his eyes darkening. I don’t miss the way the smile falls just a touch from his face, and confusion sets in when I feel his muscles tense under my thighs. “Summer...” he purrs, and it hits me too late that there’s a threat in his voice.

Too quick for me to prepare for, Kayde rolls us over, pinning me beneath him with my legs wrapped around his hips and his hand at my throat. He grabs both of my wrists in his other hand as I gasp, surprised, and slams them to the pillows over my head.

“You’re going to give me your *attention* tonight,” he growls, only a few inches from my face. “I know you drift and get lost in your thoughts. But not tonight. You’re going to look at *me*.” His grip shifts until he’s cradling my jaw tight in his hand and I really can’t look away.

“You’re going to look at me, and you’re going to thank me when I spit in your mouth to remind you whose you are tonight. And then?” He swoops down until his lips brush my ear. “Then I’m going to fuck you like I’m your boyfriend. And you’re going to *thank* me for ruining you for any other man you ever even think about looking at. Understand?”

A whimper isn't an answer, but when I open my mouth, that's all that comes out.

Kayde doesn't seem to be upset about it, though. His harsh grin returns as he pulls away from me, eyes searching mine. "Don't close your eyes," he reminds me sharply. "If I see you with them closed, or hiding your face from me—" He lunges down again, and his teeth close over my lower lip, harsh and *biting*.

It drags a squeal from me, as I writhe under him and try to pull away. But he has all the leverage, and all the control. His teeth sink deeper, until finally he pulls away, his lips dotted with my blood, that he licks away instantly.

"I'm sure I can find a thousand places to bite you where Kinsley won't see tomorrow," Kayde promises darkly. "I'm sure I can make it hurt worse than that, too. Now open your fucking mouth, baby girl. And stick out your tongue."

I know what's coming. It's impossible not to, but also impossible to keep the small hitch out of my breath as my ribs contract around my heart. I hate this.

I think.

Well, I should definitely hate it. And while I hesitate for half a second before doing what he'd said, the breath I take through my open mouth has a lot less to do with hate and a lot more to do with the burning anticipation that floods between my thighs.

I really, really should hate this more than I do.

He takes his time. Instead of just spitting like he normally does, he makes a show of it, collecting saliva on his tongue and letting his tongue roll out of his mouth, heavy with it. But when he finally lets his spit drip from his tongue to mine, it's with his grip still tight on my jaw, and not letting me close my mouth at all.

I wince as it lands on my outstretched tongue, but I can't swallow without him letting go. I can't do *anything* except lie underneath him, my wrists twisting in his grip as I whimper a wordless question.

"No, baby, you can stay like this just a little longer. You always look so embarrassed by this." Kayde chuckles. "Don't know why, though. All I'm doing is making sure you know what you are."

*What am I?* I want to ask, the question whispering through my head. I'm not sure if I'd ever have the ability or confidence to ask him that out

loud. I don't know if I want to know the answer.

*Who am I kidding? I'm burning with the need to know what he means.*

Kayde must see that too. His cold grin widens, and he leans down just as he releases his grip on my jaw. I can finally pull my tongue comfortably back into my mouth, his saliva burning on my tongue as it seeps down my throat.

Except I barely get the chance to swallow. Kayde's mouth is there, worrying at my lips, demanding entrance to my mouth. I whine, unsure of what he wants, but let him in without argument so he can explore every bit of my mouth he can in a filthy, long as hell kiss that leaves me breathless.

The moment he pulls away, I open my mouth to say something, only for him to spit sharply again, stopping me.

"Swallow it," he reminds me, when I stare at him in shock at how much more crass this one had felt. How much *filthier* in its own way.

Though it's certainly not bad. And no less enjoyable, though I refuse to admit that to anyone other than myself.

"Thank—" My throat closes around the words, and I curl my fingers into his, nails pricking at his skin. "Thank you." That's the hardest part. I sure as hell don't want to thank him. My mind is still spinning from his words, from his 'threat' of fucking me like he's my boyfriend.

"You have three more seconds to ask me what you *are*," Kayde tells me mildly, fingers flexing at the base of my throat.

"Tell me." I don't mean to say it. I don't know *how* I open my mouth and breathe the words up at him. But somehow, that's what comes out.

"Gladly, sweetheart." He leans back down again, his lips only inches from mine and his eyes holding my gaze. "I'm just reminding you that you're *mine*." With that, he licks a stripe up my jaw, up over my cheek, and pulls away just to do it again. "Marks will fade. You could wash your face to get rid of any trace I've been here. But when I spit in your mouth and make you swallow it? When I come in your cunt tonight and pin you down with my cock still in your pussy so my cum doesn't go anywhere? Well..." He kisses me again, just as harshly.

"You can't get rid of those so easily. And maybe I'll be gone tomorrow, but you'll have to wake up with my cum dripping out of your cunt and the taste of me staining your mouth. Doubt you'll forget it anytime soon once I'm done with you. I'll make *sure* it's enough to hold you over for a bit." He

leans down to lick at my still-bloody lip, while my head spins and I try to figure out what he means by *hold you over*.

Fuck it, I think at last, as his hands tug at my shirt. Him trying to confuse me, trying to distract me, isn't going to work so well tonight. At least not yet. Though I can't say for certain how long that will last when he's kissing me like he's forcibly trying to drag me out of a coma after eating a poisoned apple.

"You're awful," I murmur when he pulls away. "But I don't get..." I trail off, hating that the words have come out before I could stop them.

And now he's curious. I can *feel* it in the way he looks at me and the soft growl he produces when his lips run up my jaw. "What don't you get, sweetheart?" he breaths against my cheek. "Let me enlighten you."

I really shouldn't let my mouth move faster than my brain. Not that I know how to stop it, really, when I've always been like this. My hands twist in his grip again, fruitlessly. When I proceed to moan about it, Kayde just fixes me with *the look* and squeezes his hand around my wrists. Not quite painfully. Just...reminding me I'm not going anywhere.

"Use your words, baby," he says, still close enough that I feel his breath on my lips. "Gonna need you to tell me what you're confused about—"

"It's about what you said." I can't help how flustered I am, and I certainly can't help how I squirm in his hold like I've been caught doing something bad. He makes me feel incredibly vulnerable, and shy, and inexperienced all at once. It's ridiculous. It's *stupid*.

It's hot as fuck.

"What about it, hmm?" He nudges my jaw with his nose, and lets go of my neck to drag my thigh further up over his hip. "I don't know what I've done to confuse you, baby."

If he calls me that one more time, I'm going to do something incredibly stupid that'll make him leave faster than any safeword ever could. But I lock the words behind my teeth and swallow hard, trying not to get lost in the haziness of how flustered I am and how new this is.

My brain just seems to be along for the ride, and for a few moments, all I can do is stare at him like he's hung the damn moon.

*Get a hold of yourself*, I chastise myself, blinking hard. "I don't understand how fucking me like you're my boyfriend is any different from how you normally fuck me," I mutter at last, feeling like an idiot who's missing something obvious.

But his grin widens on his lips, and he brushes a kiss over mine. “You’re so nosy. And you have no patience,” he informs me, thankfully not using the *b* word again. “Why can’t you just wait and see, hmm? Why can’t you be patient for me? Don’t you want to be good?”

Scratch that. This is much worse than him calling me *baby*.

My brain does that thing where I’m pretty sure it’s short circuiting, and my stomach flips. I’m squirming under him again, but it’s less me trying to escape and more of me working out some of the nervous energy that vibrates through me.

Naturally, Kayde catches it all. His eyes darken and he looks me over like I’ve done something interesting, when in my opinion, I’m just a mess. “I’m going to go out on a limb, baby,” he begins, sending a shiver up my spine that I’m sure he feels in my wrists. Sure enough, his smile widens, and he moves to sit more comfortably with my legs hooked over his hips. “You’re not very experienced with kink or its terms, are you?”

Unsure if I should be embarrassed, I shake my head.

“So if I ask you about subspace, you won’t know what I mean?”

I hesitate, trying to remember if I’ve ever heard the term before. No, I definitely don’t think I have. But then again, he’s right. I don’t have a lot of experience with kink outside of Kayde. Finally, I shake my head and take a quick breath before asking, “What is it?”

“What I *think* you’re headed for right now,” he responds slyly. “I’m just trying to figure out what’s done it for you. You haven’t been like this with me before.”

“Is it a bad thing?”

“No, baby, not at all.”

*He’s got to stop doing that.* My hands flex in his grip, and I know something in my expression must have changed, because Kayde’s eyes narrow just slightly, like that’s the clue he needed, before his grin curves once more over his full lips. “I see,” he murmurs, hand curling around my throat again. “But it can’t just be that. Hmm.” He casts his gaze to the side, still thoughtful, and anxiety gnaws at my stomach. There’s no way that look is a good thing.

“You like it when I talk to you this way, don’t you? Not just calling you my sweet baby girl. I bet you like it when I have to remind you to use your words. When I have to drag them out of you like you’re just trying to be a

brat who wants me to work for it. Is that what you're trying to do, baby? Make me work for everything?"

Fuck, he's doing it on purpose now. And he knows the effect it has on me, clearly, from the way I can barely stay still under him, or focus on anything other than his face.

"I hate it," I mumble petulantly, feeling the heat staining my face. "I hate it—"

"Do you?" Before I can really register he's moving, Kayde tugs at my shorts, pulling them off one leg, then the other; leaving me in just my t-shirt. "So good for me, baby," he praises, running his hands up the insides of my thighs. "I love how you don't wear panties at night anymore when you know I want to come play with you. Such a *good girl*." His words are wicked and I groan, tossing my head back and closing my eyes hard trying to get a hold of myself.

But that's an even bigger mistake.

A sharp pain makes me squeal, though I clamp my teeth together to muffle the sound as sharp pain explodes at my inner thigh. When my eyes open wide, I see Kayde watching me, waiting for just that, his teeth buried in the soft skin of my leg.

"Told you, didn't I?" he purrs, pulling away and licking over the bruise already blooming on my pale skin. "Better keep your eyes open, princess."

God, that nickname isn't any better.

"Unless you're just trying to be a brat for me. Unless you *want* me to do something about it." The purring, soft tone is enough to nearly drown me all over again, and my mouth falls open as I finally realize my arms are free, thanks to him needing both to take off my shorts.

But he realizes it too, and his hand is back around my wrists, slamming them down to my pillow before I've gone far. "Stay," he murmurs against my temple. "Stay right there. Don't fucking move them, okay? Don't make me tie you up because my baby girl couldn't keep her hands where I put them."

Another whine that sounds embarrassingly turned on leaves me, and when I try to clamp my thighs together, I can't. Not while he's still kneeling between them. "Fuck," I mumble, pressing my hands together on the pillow. "Kayde, you're killing me here."

"Nah, sweetheart," Kayde disagrees, hand pressed flat to my stomach as he sits up to look at me. "Like I said. I'm just ruining you for any other guy

in the world.”

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



The words do nothing for my mental state. My breath hitches, and I don't move as he takes his time. Kayde kisses up my inner thigh, tongue laving over the bite he left there. My brain feels a little cloudy, and it's not a bad thing.

It's just...different.

"Did you like riding my face the other night? Did you like it when I buried my tongue in your pussy?" Kayde coos, his fingers stroking up my slit to tease my clit. "Come on, baby. You can't go nonverbal on me. Not when I love hearing you struggle to find your words."

Sucking in a breath doesn't help much, but something is better than nothing, so I do it again before staring down at him, eyes wide and thighs trembling in his grip. "Yes," I whisper at last. "I liked it." Because there's no point in lying to him.

Not when he can see it so easily.

"I liked it, too," he tells me, a smirk curving over his lips. "I love the taste of you, sweetheart." As if to prove his point, he swipes his tongue up through my folds, stopping to lap at my clit until I'm writhing under him.

It's hard not to look away. And harder still not to reach down to curl my fingers in his wavy blond hair. But he'd told me to stay, and told me to look at him. Plus I know for a fact he's more than willing to bite me to point out when I've done wrong.

*Not that I dislike it.*

"I like it when you're like this," Kayde admits, getting to his knees and dragging his fingers along the path of his tongue. Without warning he

shoves two into me, causing me to choke on a gasp as I try not to make noise. But my hand flies to my mouth, and I bite down on my wrist, eyes wide and on his as I try not to shriek. It's not too much, exactly. The stretch is pleasurable, though it burns as he fucks me with his fingers without being that gentle.

But I don't hate this either, and that's such a problem.

"Look at you, already greedy for my fingers. Poor little baby, were you waiting for this? Were you just waiting for me to come here and fuck you? Too bad this is the last night of our game, hmm? I'd love to see just how easy it would be to keep you wet and needy for me all day long. Do you think I could? Think I could have you so turned on that I could just grab you whenever and wherever, shove my cock into your pretty pussy, and breed you full of my cum?" His words are hot and sharp, and I can feel his eyes on my face as I writhe from them and his fingers.

I'm definitely going to die from this. From *something* Kayde-related. That's turning into a sure fact.

"I..." I know he wants a reply. I know he wants something from me. But my brain seems to be short circuiting again, and I can barely remember where I am, let alone what he's asking me. My mind is too foggy, too hazy, and too fixated on the movement of his fingers between my thighs.

"Oh, poor thing. Poor *Summer*." Kayde leans over me, bracing himself on his free hand as he shoves another finger into me. I can only whine at that as well, and his crooked grin widens. "Are you going all dumb for me, baby girl?"

That certainly doesn't help reboot my mental systems. I stare up at him, lips parted, and a thrill goes through me at the insult. But...that's wrong, *isn't it?* I shouldn't be so turned on by him calling me *dumb*.

"You're just a needy little thing, aren't you?" he goes on in that taunting, too-sweet voice. "My needy, sweet girl. Can't even string your words together because of how much you want me to fuck you. Is that it?" His fingers twist, dragging a gasp from my lips, and it occurs to me that he's purposefully making it harder to answer.

"I'm n-I'm not—" But I can't get out more than that. I don't think I *can*. "Kayde..." I have no idea what I'm even trying to say, but Kayde chuckles softly as his thumb grazes my clit.

"Yeah, baby, you are," he taunts. "But that's okay. You're *perfect*." He sits back, fingers sliding free, before I can do more than whine at the loss,

his fingers are pressing between my lips, dragging against my tongue. “Clean off my fingers, Summer. Be a good girl for me.” My stomach twists pleasurabley, and before I know what I’m doing, I’m sucking the taste of myself off of his fingers without hesitation.

“Good girl.” Every time he says it, I drown a little more. “That’s my perfect sweetheart.” He removes his fingers to stroke my face, smearing spit across my cheek. “Can you turn over for me, Summer? Get on your knees for me?”

Somehow, that gives me a moment of clarity, and I eye him flatly before mumbling, “That doesn’t feel very *boyfriend* of you.”

“Doesn’t it?” He tilts his head to the side, bemused, and moves enough to urge me over onto my knees. Not that I really argue, and I certainly cooperate when he shoves a pillow under my hips. Smoothing his hands down my thighs, Kayde says, “What better way to ruin this pretty pussy for anyone else than to keep it full of my cum, hmm? I doubt you’re going to look for anyone else so long as you can’t stand without it dripping down your pretty thighs.”

My breath catches in my throat, and Kayde reaches out to splay his hand between my shoulder blades, applying just enough pressure that I fall forward on the bed, face in my pillow. “Right there, Summer,” he praises. “That’s perfect. Let me take care of you. Be a good girl for me, all right?” His words just seem to goad the fuzziness in my brain onward, until it feels like my mind is stuffed with cotton.

God, I’ve never been so...*happy* during sex. Happy, I mean, to let him do what he wants. I feel like I’m sinking into the bed, and it’s easy for Kayde to drag my thighs back around his, until I can feel the slide of his length against my folds.

A soft whimper leaves me, though I only wrap my arms around my pillow and try to look back at him from where I’m laying.

But his hand stops me, still pressed against my shoulders. Smoothly, Kayde lines up with my entrance before thrusting into me. He only stops when I feel his hips flush to mine, and at my soft noise he leans over me, murmuring soft praises where I can just hear them. His hand on my back shifts, moving to curl in my hair so his nails scrape against my scalp.

“You’re so *perfect*, Summer,” Kayde intones, pulling out just to slam back into me, though he stays there once he’s back to being pressed against me. My questioning sound must make sense to someone other than me,

because he gives a soft chuff of a laugh and scrapes his nails against my skin. “I just like feeling you sometimes. Just like this. Just so perfect for me, baby.”

But for my part, I have no idea how to take this side of Kayde. I can’t figure out his game, or his angle. I can’t figure out his plan to break me with this.

Though I’ve certainly never felt so...vulnerable with him. Not even when I was tied up in the boathouse and struggling to breathe around his hand. Something in his voice, in his words, and the way he’s both so caring and so fucking effortlessly in control has me reeling tonight.

*I’m drowning.*

It’s a real problem.

He thrusts into me again and I gasp, back arching as Kayde finally starts fucking me. He doesn’t build up to something fast and punishing, however. He takes his time, slamming into me like it’s the most relaxing thing in the world.

When I start to squirm under him, I hear his soft, breathy laugh and his other hand grabs my hip, holding me in place. “What’s wrong, baby?” Kayde purrs. “Do you need something?” When I don’t reply right away—my brain is still too fuzzy—his fingers tighten in my hair and around my hip. “Use your words.” His voice is firmer when he says it. “I know you’re a little stupid for my cock right now but if you want something, you’ll have to tell me.”

“I want more,” I mumble, not even considering how fucking desperate that sounds. “Please, Kayde, I need more.”

“Do you deserve more?” he taunts, voice sickly sweet. “Do you think you’ve *earned* more than this? Because I’m having a great time playing with your pretty pussy, Summer. I don’t see why you need anything other than what I want to give you.”

“I can’t...” Frustration rises in my throat, and I try to buck up against his hands, only to be pressed right back down.

“Can’t what?” God, he knows exactly what I’m going to say. I can hear it in his satisfied cooing. “What can’t you do?”

“I can’t come just from this.” It comes out whinier than I mean it to. Less of a demand, more of a plea. “Kayde, please—”

“Why not? Why can’t you come like this?” His words are kind, but I know that’s not the mood he’s in. But then again, Kayde is never

particularly kind. “Tell me why, Summer.”

“It’s not enough...” I try not to sound desperate. I try to hiss the words, instead of whimper them. Ultimately, I’m not so sure it works.

“Not enough?” I hate that he’s playing dumb when he’s only doing it to hear me whine. But somehow, that thought doesn’t bother me as much as it should. “What’s not enough?”

“I just need more.” I squeeze my eyes shut, humiliation burning my cheeks. “Please, Kayde. Please—”

“What more do you need, exactly?” There’s a roughness in his voice that wasn’t there before. “Be specific. I can only give you what you want if you tell me what that is.”

*As if he doesn’t know.*

“Harder. I need you to fuck me harder. *Please.*”

“Oh? Are you sure? I thought you were my sweet little princess. I was being so nice to you tonight. Thought I’d treat you so delicately.” The roughness is still there, mixed with the goading sweetness. “Are you telling me you’d rather be fucked like a needy, desperate slut?” When I don’t answer, he pulls out entirely, settling back on his heels. “If you can’t tell me yes or no, you won’t get anything at all.”

“Kayde!” I still can’t go anywhere. Not in his grip. He hovers over me, leaning forward enough that I can feel his hips against mine and his now-slick length sliding between my thighs.

“Tell me you’re desperate for my cock,” Kayde purrs. “Tell me you’re my desperate, needy little slut and that you’re all *mine.*” Before I can even think to consider what he’s doing, Kayde moves enough that he can flip me over, his hand pressed just under my collarbone as the ceiling spins in my vision. His other hand grips his length, and he rubs it teasingly against my slit. “Come on, baby. Don’t you want to be good for me? Don’t you want to do what I say?”

It’s such a problem that I do. Any other time, I wouldn’t do this. I wouldn’t even consider telling him what he wants to hear. But with my fuzzy brain spinning like the fan on my dresser, I can barely remember what day it is, let alone why I’m against giving Kayde what he wants.

Not that his teasing helps.

“I’m...” It hits me how embarrassing this is, and I can feel my humiliation heating up my face. Kayde’s grin tells me he sees it too, and his

eyes never leave mine as I struggle for the words under him. “I’m sort of desperate for your cock,” I mumble, adding in my own little flair.

His brow quirks upwards towards his bangs, and his lips curl into a smirk. “Sort of?” he chuckles. “I think you mean *completely*. Try again.”

“I’m sort of *completely* desperate for you,” I reply, a wry smile twisting my mouth. “But you’re going to make me say the rest too, aren’t you?”

Kayde winks theatrically at me. “You know me so well already, sweetheart.”

His thumb gently teases my clit, though it’s not enough to do more than make me squirm. I suck in a breath that catches at the slide of his length against my entrance. “Kayde...” I close my eyes hard, but don’t open them when his hand moves to grip the base of my throat. “I can’t look at you and say it.”

“Yes, you can. Summer, you can open your eyes for me. And you can say it, I promise. Know why?” I shake my head, not opening my eyes, and a moment later I feel his lips brush my ear. “Because I already know how fucking desperate you are. How much of a slut you are for me.” His fingers tighten sharply just under my jaw. “And I already know how much you’re *mine*.” He nips at my ear once, then harder, before turning to sink his teeth into my shoulder.

I yelp at the sharp pain, my eyes flying open as my hand comes up to grip his hair. He doesn’t push me away, though he does lean upward just enough to meet my eyes, making this so much worse. “I’m desperate,” I pant, gaze wide as my cheeks flare with heat. “And I’m...definitely maybe *sort of* a slut for you. Specifically you.”

Heat floods his gaze when I say it, and he sucks in a breath between his teeth like I’ve burned him. “And the last part,” he growls, his voice sharp-edged. “Don’t stop, baby.”

“I’m *yours*.” They’re just words. Just words to get him to fuck me and give me what I want.

*So why do they feel like so much more?*

Kayde lunges forward, capturing my mouth in a kiss as he slams into me, unfaltering as he sets a fast, unsteady rhythm that has me immediately seeing stars. I whimper into his mouth, biting against his tongue as it sweeps alongside mine.

And when I fall apart, it’s with his name on my lips and tears cascading down my cheeks. Kayde reacts to them instantly, ignoring my soft keening

moans as he laps at the tears on my face. “Shhh, shhh baby,” Kayde purrs, his voice tight with strain. “But you can cry all you want. I love the taste of your tears.”

There’s something undeniably scorching about that, and I hiss under him as his fingers on my clit drag my release out for longer. My brain goes offline, I think, and all I can do is keep my hand clenched in his hair like it’s an anchor and ride out the dizzying pleasure of my release.

Kayde groans in my ear as his movements become erratic, and it barely takes a few more seconds before he’s thrust into me once more, biting my shoulder as he does. He keeps his teeth in my skin, holding himself there as he rolls his hips and rides out his orgasm that causes his shoulders to shake.

“So perfect,” he breathes in my ear, rolling onto his side and pulling me with him. “And you’re all mine.”

“For now,” I mutter, because I can’t stop myself. “Just for now.”

“Sure, princess,” Kayde agrees, as I close my eyes against his shoulder and he holds me against him, his cock still inside of me. With how his arms are locked around my shoulders and hips, I know I won’t be moving away from him until he wants me to.

“Just for now.” There’s something in his voice that I can’t quite figure out, but I’m already too far gone to even think about figuring it out. In seconds I feel myself drifting, and if I inhale against his skin to get a lung full of Kayde’s scent mixed with the smell of sex in the air of my cabin, then I’m going to pretend in the morning it was an accident.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



When I roll over on my small bed into the space where Kayde had pulled me against him and I'd fallen asleep, I expect...something. But what I get is a whole lot of nothing.

That brings me to wakefulness in an unfortunate way, and I hate the way my stomach sinks, my heart tanking along with it. I should've expected him to be gone. He never stays the night, really. And why would he? For all his talk last night about ruining me for anyone else and fucking me like he's my boyfriend...he isn't.

And our game is done now. So why in the world should I have expected him to stay? Still, in the dim morning light, there's no one to see me press my face into the pillow he used and inhale the traces of his cologne and the scent that's uniquely his.

God, I am so fucked up for this man. I suppose in a way he has ruined me, and that's a real shame, given what Kayde is.

And the fact he's making it pretty clear this was just a game for him. Just something to pass the time and give him some amusement while we waited out the week.

My heart shouldn't ache.

I shouldn't want to cry.

Because Kayde doesn't, and will never, love me. So I won't let myself have any kind of feelings for a fucking *murderer* who was intent on slaughtering the kids of Camp Crestview for fun.

He wanted to kill Kinsley.

*But not you, that unhelpful little voice in my brain whispers wickedly. He was never going to kill you. He wanted to keep you.*

That really shouldn't make it better whatsoever. And it shouldn't make my heart twist even more in my chest as I shove myself upright to blink at the room around me.

Only to find, like I thought, that Kayde isn't here.

*He never is,* I chastise myself, dragging my body out of bed and changing into shorts and a tee. I'm sore, I realize with a wince, and my teeth grit together as I press my palm to my lower stomach. Yeah, okay, I did not expect to be this sore today.

But I can't really hate it. Will Kayde notice? Will he *care*?

Part of me thinks he might be thrilled at that fact. Like a little parting gift as he leaves; to know he's made me so sore I'll feel this for days.

I can hear the kids in the cabin next to me by the time I'm toeing on my shoes, and as I open my door to my little deck, I see Melody push open the main door and start toward Otter Hall.

"So cruel to leave your devoted counselor behind," I call, catching up to her easily with long strides. I bet they're all packed by now. And I'm sure half of them are counting down the minutes until their parents start showing up.

But I find I'm a little sad. This has been my favorite group of campers all summer, and I'll miss Melody most of all. Even if she is a little sociopath like Kayde had labeled her.

When she smiles slyly up at me, I can't help but wonder what it is about her that makes him so sure. Unless he'd been joking with me, Kayde had said with confidence that Melody is a sociopath like him.

*Takes one to know one*, had essentially been his words. As Melody looks at me with eyes clearer and more mature than most twelve-year-olds I've ever met, I can only say for certain that she's different from the other kids. I'm not one to guess further than that, though, and I only smile back at my favorite problematic twelve-year-old. "You excited to go home?" I ask her, surprised when she shakes her head.

"Not this year," Melody sighs, world-weary and disappointed. "I'm not looking forward to school starting. We moved," she adds, explaining her reasoning before I can ask. "I don't like being the new kid."

"Really?" I tilt my head to the side, my hands shoved in my pockets. The closer we get to the already full dining hall, the more my heart flutters

in my chest. I hadn't expected Kayde to stay the night, sure, but I also can't help but wonder what his expression will be when he sees me.

I wonder what he'll say.

"Really," Melody repeats, hopping onto the small path that leads up to the double doors. "I have to make new friends, navigate social circles. Figure out who's in charge..." She shakes her head, lamenting the amount of 'work' she'll be doing. "But it'll be fine. It always is."

Oh, my brain helpfully kicks in before I ask what she means. Melody's mom is in the army. From what I've heard, she's pretty used to being moved around. And yet every year, her mom still makes sure to send her back here, no matter where she's stationed in the States. With how much Melody loves camp, I'm happy her mom does that much for her. I can't imagine how difficult it would be to move around enough to not have a concrete set of friends, or have to get used to leaving them behind.

I'd give her a hug if I didn't think she might stab me with a fork.

Holding the door open for my girls gives me a chance to scan Otter Hall, and my eyes find the boys of Coyote Cabin quickly. They look... glum, in a way, even though they're mixed with Daniel's boys. To me, that should mean that they're happy. Both cabins are *problems*, and they love getting together to make things worse.

Daniel looks just as put out, though that might be because he hasn't had his morning cups of coffee yet. He's sitting with Darcy and Shawn, who I rarely talk to and never seem to be in the same 'cabin group' as me.

After two years of it, I've started to think that Shawn Torres—counselor extraordinaire—doesn't like me very much. His eyes find mine and he leans over to whisper something to Darcy, who also turns to look at me with something strange on her face I can't read.

Then she gets up, and before I can get to the small window to pick up my plate of breakfast, she's in front of me and walking into my space quickly enough that I step back, effectively waylaid from my goal.

"It's a bit early for whatever this is," I point out, eyes narrowed as I cross my arms loosely over my chest. Nothing in me wants to deal with Darcy this morning. Especially when she looks almost happy about... something.

Again, I cast a quick look around the dining hall, knowing that if Kayde sees her, he's probably going to start something that might not end well. But

he isn't here. Not near his kids, or Daniel, or even Kinsley and Liza when I spot them with Kinsley's cabin against the other wall.

"I just wanted to see your face when I asked what happened." Yeah, Darcy is definitely thrilled about this, though I can't tell why. Still, my attention drifts back to her, and I tilt my head just enough to be curious, one brow raised.

"What happened...?" There's no way that she'd heard Kayde and me in my cabin last night. No way in hell. But the thought that she could've sends a rush of embarrassment through me that I fight to push down. "You're going to have to be more specific. This has been a long week, and I haven't eaten yet."

"He left."

The words don't quite make sense to me as I stand there, blinking at Darcy and trying to figure out what in the world she means. *He left?* Who the hell is *he*? It's certainly not a child, or we'd have search parties out. Camp Crestview does frown on kids just taking off into the wilderness, after all. "He?" I ask, and Darcy's eyes widen.

So does her fucking grin.

"Oh, you don't know," she asserts, stepping even closer. "Poor thing. You really—" She looks around the dining hall in the same way I had. "You were looking for him." The glee in her voice is undeniable, and my heart suddenly plummets.

She means *Kayde*, I realize, and I can't help the expression on my face, or the hurt I'm sure is there.

*He left.*

*Kayde* left. That's what she means.

Schooling my features into disinterest proves to be impossible, so I just shrug my shoulders. "Okay, yeah, I didn't know. When did he leave?"

"Early," Darcy tells me happily, like I'm making her day by asking for details. "Before sunrise. He asked Daniel to watch his kids until they're picked up, and was on the phone with Fink, apparently. Said he had to go *in a hurry*. God, Summer." She rocks back on her heels, smile turning vicious. "You're really something. How the hell'd you fuck that up, huh? Did you tell him some sad sob story about your past?"

The accusation twists something in my stomach, and I fight hard not to give her a reaction. I don't want to do more for her than I already am, so I shrug again. "What sad sob story are you talking about, weirdo?"

“Come on,” Darcy scoffs. “I’ve heard you talk to Kinsley about the scar your *daddy* gave you. Did you unload all that on him? Did you want him to make it all better, and he freaked out from how needy you are?” She couldn’t be any further from the truth, but she’s hit on enough of it, and on my self-consciousness about the scar, that I can’t really bring myself to say anything.

“Don’t talk about stupid shit, Darcy,” I finally mumble, rolling my eyes at her and leaning back on the table behind me. “And I don’t know what *this* is?” I gesture between us. “But if you’re coming onto me, you can, like, stop. I’m not into girls. But even if I was, and you were the absolute last living creature on earth, I’d rather chew my own arm off.”

With her malicious grin only widening, Darcy steps closer, crowding me against the table. “Seriously,” she murmurs under her breath. “Can’t you just tell me? It doesn’t matter anyway since he’s gone. What the hell am I going to do about it?”

Make my life miserable, probably.

“What did you do to fuck it all up, Summer? Are you just that bad in bed...or is being a shitty partner just bad genetics?”

For a moment, my vision seems to blur. I forget where we are as I lunge forward, hand coming up to backhand her for the words that now repeat themselves over and over in my head.

*What did you do to fuck it all up, Summer?*

All I want is to wipe the grin off of her fucking face, but the moment before I can hit her, my hand is caught and wrestled down hard. Darcy’s face falls open in shock a second before Liza slips between us, pushing her back gently but firmly.

“Stop,” our glorious camp nurse says flatly. “Stop being a bitch, Darcy. The kids can see all of this, and you’re making a scene.”

My face reddens at that, even if the words hadn’t been directed at me. My hands flex, then relax, and I turn to see that Kinsley is still holding my hand in her grip, looking worried. And beyond her, the girls from my cabin are starting to look a little murderous, like they’d be willing to dogpile onto Darcy just to show some solidarity for their cabin counselor.

But I won’t let them start a fight in Otter Hall, an hour before they get picked up. I allow Kinsley to tug me back to a table where I bury my face in my hands and wonder why I want to cry.

“Sorry,” I whisper, hating how shaky I feel and sound. But more than that, hating that *Kayde* has done this to me.

I should be relieved, not sad.

I should be laughing and toasting Darcy, telling her I’d *absolutely* made him leave, instead of getting so upset at the accusation that I’m ready to throw her in the lake with concrete boots on.

“Don’t be.” Kinsley wraps her arms around me and pulls me in for a hug. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Burying my face in her shoulder, I shake my head and refuse to let her see me cry.

Because I refuse, above all else, to cry for *Kayde Lane*.

“**D**on’t kill anyone.” My eyes still burn from this morning, and I know I look like a mess with the fading black eyes and tearstained face. But Melody, bless her, ignores all of that and slams into me hard with a hug around my waist. I return it instantly, knowing I’ll miss her more than all my other campers combined.

“No promises,” she tells me softly, smiling up at me toothily before stepping away. My heart twists in my chest, and I feel too sensitive after... everything. The pleasurable soreness low in my body is no longer a wickedly hot reminder of last night, but is instead a reminder that *Kayde* really, absolutely never gave a damn.

So I suppose, in the end, he won. He broke me enough for me to care about him leaving, and now here I am, feeling like crap.

There’s no way he should’ve been able to do this to me.

“You’ll be okay, right?” Melody asks cautiously, reaching out to take my hand. “Without me?”

My grin widens, and I can’t help the small, surprised laugh that slips free from my lips. “I will miss you all the time, Mel. But yeah. I’m fine. And last time I checked, I’m the adult here. I’m the one taking care of *you*.”

The withering look she gives me clearly proves what she thinks of that. But instead of saying anything, she only hugs me again before picking up her duffel bag and heading for her mom, who stands waiting patiently outside the rental car that will take them to the airport.

She waves at me, and I wave back, smiling hard as the last few campers get picked up and leave Crestview as quiet as it ever is.

Footsteps on the gravel make me tense until Kinsley rests her head on my shoulder with a sigh. “I’m exhausted,” she murmurs, eyes slipping closed. “I’m dying, in fact. Literally dying of exhaustion. We should get high.”

“We should clean,” I remind her. “Unless you want to be cleaning Otter Hall at three am.” She groans at my words, telling me what she thinks of that, and I force a soft snort in reply.

“Okay, but we could go get high for a bit. Go to the infirmary and sleep on the nice, comfy medical beds. Doesn’t that sound nice? Just for a couple of hours? I bet we could make puppy eyes at Liza sp she’ll help us with the dining hall later.”

It does sound...nice. Especially the getting high part. Anything to make me feel not so *raw* today. And anything to make me stop imagining throwing Darcy into the lake. “Okay,” I whisper finally, closing my eyes as well. “You’re right. Edibles now, clean later.” It’s unlike me, but Kinsley doesn’t remark on it. Nor does she ask more than she had this morning, when I’d cried against her chest and told her what Darcy said.

I’ll let myself have this, just this once. And just for now. It’s not *just* Kayde, I think. It’s Melody, it’s Darcy. It’s *me*.

It’s the fact that I let him do this to me, and the fact that I have no idea how to turn this hurt in my chest to hatred.

But damn it if I’m not going to *learn*.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



**B**y day three of my week-long mini vacation between camp sessions, I'm bored as hell and ready to resort to illegal methods to have a good time. Nothing major, probably. Unless driving five miles above the speed limit is considered major.

With my mom on a work trip—as per usual in the summer—our big house in Wears Valley, a suburb of Gatlinburg and a pretty great place if you ask my mom, is all mine.

Well, all mine and the cats'. Plus the housekeeper, who comes every morning when we're gone to make sure the cats haven't gone crazy and all three of them are fed.

As if they know I'm silently badmouthing them and thinking about how they're manipulating my mom into feeding them way more than they need, one of the Siamese cats saunters into the living room, her eyes fixed on mine as she gets closer and closer. Sure enough, Mint doesn't hesitate before hopping up onto my chest and digging her claws into my skin under my shirt hard enough to make me wince.

“Ow. Ow,” I mutter, reaching up to unhook her claws. “This is a little much, Mint. If you’re pissed at your boyfriends, go take it up with them.” Since Yarrow and Parsley aren’t here, I have a feeling they’re locked in mock-battle somewhere else in the house. Meaning Mint is bored of them and seeking someone else to inconvenience.

And without Mom, her clear target is me.

She proves this when she starts purring, her green eyes fixed on mine as she kneads her claws into my shirt and skin. Out of the three of them, Mint

is probably the cutest. Though she's a little cross-eyed, if you look at her long enough. But to me, that just makes her that much more adorable.

My hand comes up, finger extended to scratch behind her left ear. Immediately, Mint's eyes narrow, and her purr gets louder as I stroke her favorite spot. She's needy, sure, but uncomplicated at least.

But I'm still bored as hell, even with her on my chest and the television at low volume playing some random summer camp horror movie that seemed like a good idea to put on an hour ago.

Instead of watching though, I find myself replaying the events of the past week through my head over and over again. It's impossible not to think about Kayde, about Melody. About *Darcy*, though my thoughts towards her aren't exactly positive. If I'm lucky, she'll break a foot or get the consumption before Sunday, so that I won't have to deal with her for one more week before schools start picking up and I have to go back to the real world.

Not that I really know what I'm going to do now that summer is almost over. I'm not like Kinsley, who has it all figured out. Or, at least, *did* have it all figured out. According to her, she'd made a very concrete plan to move to Pigeon Forge, get a job at her cousin's coffee shop, and finish up her finance degree. It seemed—and still seems—like a great idea. She'll be able to save money, finish school, and probably get just about any job that she sets her sights on.

But now I wonder if Liza will change all of that.

"Must be nice," I mumble to the cat on my chest, feeling myself sink into another self pity party. "You know? To have someone that you might want to derail your plans for. Do you think it's nice?" My cat doesn't answer, but she does continue to purr in satisfaction at the feeling of being scratched.

"I'm not jealous." I let my head fall back onto the pillow, refusing to look at the coffee table where my trash from the last couple of days is starting to accumulate. If I let her, our housekeeper would totally clean it up for me while I lay here like a lump that's starting to assimilate with the couch. But thanks to my guilt complex and a lifetime of being afraid to inconvenience others, I'd rather die than let Elena anywhere near the trash that I could and should take care of myself.

"I'm really not." Seriously, I have no idea who I'm talking to as I sit up slowly and push Mint down onto my lap. She prowls away, only to curl up

on my blanket where my legs had been until now. “It’s fucking Kayde.” My hands inch for my phone on the end table, and I bring it to me before collapsing onto the sofa again, this time with my legs drawn up so that I don’t bother Princess Mint where she’s currently trying her best to ignore me on my blanket.

Right where I want to put my legs, of course.

Without hesitating, and refusing to think about how fucking obsessed I must seem, I type Kayde’s name into my phone’s internet browser. Figuring that he’d either given me a fake name or that he, like the serial killers I’ve seen on tv, is smart enough not to have any kind of social media presence, I’m not expecting anything to come up.

But clearly I’m overthinking things.

Especially when multiple entries with his name and picture pop up, and my eyebrows shoot toward my brows as I bury myself into my blanket burrito once more.

*Star High School Basketball player only survivor of mountain bus crash.*

*High School Star Kayde Lane, of Warsaw, Arkansas, presumed dead.*

There are more of them, but I click on the first article and skim through it, noting that the date is from six years ago.

Holy shit.

It’s certainly not what I’d been expecting, and I find myself completely obsessed and absorbed in reading about the bus crash in the mountains that had taken the lives of all of Kayde’s swim team.

He’d been the only survivor.

*But he’d also been out in the woods for eight days before he was found.*

No article talks much about what had happened after, and while I find small entries about his swim times when he’d been in high school, I can’t find anything at all for *after* the crash. Had he quit swimming?

Is this what had turned him into a murderer?

There’s no point in wondering, I know. Not when he’s gone to look for some other camp to terrorize and is out of my life forever. But I still skim a couple more of the articles before getting to my feet with Mint in my arms to trudge to the kitchen and forage for food.

Armed with potato soup from my favorite restaurant that had been waiting for me in the fridge and a glass of soda, I make my way back to the living room, settling on the couch. With my freshly microwaved soup in

hand, I inch for my phone once more, oblivious to the cat hopping up to burrow into my blanket again.

There's nothing more to find out about Kayde Lane. And not only that, there's no reason to. If I was really that interested, I should've looked him up during the week at camp. At least then, if I'd had the balls, I could've actually asked him about what I'd found.

...Not that I think I would've had the courage to bring it up to him.

Nothing gives me much more than the first article had. There are a few scattered details, such as his family wouldn't respond or comment and neither would Kayde himself. One article states Kayde had seemed 'suspiciously quiet' about the whole thing. Especially when his teammates had been brought up.

But part of me thinks that isn't suspicious. After all, if my best friend had died, hell if I *had* been the only survivor of the hypothetically averted Camp Crestview massacre, I don't think I'd want to talk about anyone that had died. And I definitely don't think I could've talked to anyone about Kinsley. Not if she'd died and I had to live with that.

My stomach clenches around the spoonful of soup, and I close my eyes to stop myself from retching or chucking it all up. That would be such a waste of really good soup.

With my stomach settled, I skim through articles again, landing on one that had been from his local paper, and focused on Kayde as an up-and-coming swimmer in his high school. He'd been made swim captain junior year, and everyone had expected him to go to college on a swimming scholarship.

Now I wonder if he made it to college in any capacity, since it seems he certainly didn't go on with swimming, if these articles are to be believed.

A picture of him from when he was seventeen catches my eye; he had just finished a race that had set his team up for the championships. He's smiling at the camera, golden curls bouncing, and his caramel eyes are warm, filled with mirth, and nothing like I know them to be now.

He looks so...different. So fucking *young* it's unreal, and just happy to be there. Really, it's nothing like the Kayde I know, and I feel as if I'm looking at a doppelgänger, or a twin of *my* Kayde.

*Not mine*, I remind myself, my voice small and hesitant in my brain. *He was never mine*. Hadn't he proved that by just leaving without a word? Without waking me up to say anything?

But that was surely his plan all along. And the fact he'd left me wishing I'd gotten something more is enough for me to know that in the end, he really did win our game. I couldn't maintain my aloofness. I couldn't keep hating him.

No matter how many times a day I went through it in my head. No matter how many times I *tried* to hate him over and over again. I don't love him, sure. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't end up with some kind of feelings for him after all was said and done.

*Did he know?* I wonder, blinking down blankly at my soup. *Had he been able to tell?* Maybe that's why he'd left the way he did.

Maybe that really was his goal and his plan all along. Even though he didn't stick around to soak up his victory at my hurt and my feelings from being abandoned. I take another bite of soup and try to swallow that and the feeling that's gnawing at my insides, though I know I'm not doing anything other than consuming cheesy, perfect carbs. Still, aren't carbs the cure for being sad? I refuse to say I have a broken heart, or anything so dramatic as that.

After all, I was not and never would've been in love with *Kayde*.

Settling back on the sofa, I let out a sigh and dump the last of my soup into my mouth, forgoing the spoon and instead just upending the bowl. My movie is maybe halfway through, I think, though if forced to answer to save my life, I honestly really have no idea what's going on in whatever's playing on my television.

But I try to pay attention. It's not like I have anything else to do, and I'm on *vacation* for a few more days before going right back to Camp Crestview for the last session of the year. As the summer's sessions go by ages, this will be another group of twelve- and thirteen-year-olds, compared to the eight-year-olds we end up with in the beginning of the summer. Personally, I prefer the older kids. At least their brains work a little better, and they tend to have more personality than the younger kids.

When I hear the sound of the door opening, I barely even blink. Elena comes at three on the dot once a week on Wednesday, and today is no exception. But when she sees me, our housekeeper blinks, her smile widening and expression warming.

"I forgot you'd be home this week," she tells me, coming to the couch and leaning down a little awkwardly so that she can hug me in a tight, reassuring embrace. I hug her back just as tightly, because Elena has always

been like a second mom to me, even when she was first hired when I was thirteen. She'd taken one look at me, my nervousness, and my shyness around her, and had made it her mission to make me feel more at home.

"Just until Saturday," I admit as she pulls away, only to sit beside me on the couch after she evicts Mint from her spot. Not that I mind. Talking to Elena is sometimes the best part of my week. Especially when it's been a rough one.

And God, last week really had been more than a little rough.

"This is your last week of being a camp counselor for the summer, right?" she asks, letting Mint climb into her lap and stroking the Siamese cat absently. Mint stares up at me as she does, as if to make a point, and her eyes cross a little more as she relaxes and starts to purr.

What a traitor.

"It is," I tell her. "Then I'm doing...something. Guess I gotta figure that out, huh?" Even if it is a little late to figure out my post-summer plans when it's already the end of August. But I refuse to admit, even to myself, that I've really put this off and will most likely end up with some boring job as I camp out here in the house I grew up in.

And maybe literally camp out in the backyard, if the tent in my closet is still in one piece.

"You'll figure it out," Elena promises, getting to her feet. "We have to get you out of the house, though. At least sometimes." She picks up a few of my empty bottles before I can stop her, and Elena smiles blithely at me as I self-consciously try to pull my mess away from her. Though, when I discover I have an armload of trash, I get to my feet and follow sheepishly after Elena to dump all of it in the kitchen trash under her watchful, approving eye.

If I didn't know better, I'd think this was her plan all along. She gestures for me to sit at the table, and as I watch, she goes to the cabinet and gets out her cleaning supplies before continuing with her explanation.

"You need to meet someone," Elena urges. "You seem so lonely in this big house when your mother is away." She's not wrong, but I do duck my head and stare at my hands while she starts with the counters. I always feel so awkward when she's here cleaning and I'm not doing anything, but she really is the second mother I never had, and sometimes is better at putting a bright spin on things than Mom is.

“Maybe I did meet someone,” I say, not really meaning it. But Elena stops and looks at me, the surprise on her features making me scrunch my nose. “Okay, you don’t need to look so surprised.”

“I just thought the only way you’d end up in a relationship is if your mother takes me up on being your matchmaker,” Elena admits casually. “Never thought you’d take that step all on your own. Who is he? Is it a he? Did you and Kinsley finally admit your love for each other?”

That makes me snort, and my smile turns genuine. Kinsley loves Elena, and from what I know, the feeling is mutual. Especially when Elena brings over homemade brownies, which are absolutely Kinsley’s favorites. It helps that Elena saves the corner pieces for Kins, knowing she can’t resist them.

“Actually, Kinsley has met her soul mate. And it isn’t me,” I say, then tell her about Liza, thrilled to see how happy Elena is for my best friend as she smiles and nods along. “I want them to be *it* for each other,” I admit, sitting back in my chair. “I want them to get married and I totally want to be in the wedding. Pretty sure I’d make such a good flower girl.”

Elena appraises me with one raised brow. “You’re a bit old,” she tells me dryly, prompting me to snort. “Now tell me about this boy of yours. You can’t leave me here with just ‘I met someone,’ Summer.” She almost sounds like she’s chastising me, though I recognize the gleam in her eyes and the way her mouth quirks in a grin.

But I find myself deflating in my chair, and I sit back with a soft huff. “Yeah, that’s the thing,” I admit. “I don’t know how I feel about him. Felt about him. It wasn’t worth bringing him up.”

“Why’s that?” Her face falls to one of concern, and my heart twists hard in my chest, protesting even talking about this.

“Because he left.” *Me*, I almost say, before I swallow the word hard. “He—he left before camp was over. He was a new counselor. I thought...” I trail off, shrugging my shoulders. After all, what the hell *did* I think?

That he liked me?

That he wanted to actually be my boyfriend?

That Kayde the murderer had *fallen* for me?

What a fucking joke.

Abruptly I get to my feet, mood soured, and huff out a sigh. “Sorry,” I tell her, hating that all of my negativity from the week is back after I’ve tried so hard to beat it back with a mental stick. “I’m just a little sore about it. Forget I said anything about meeting anyone. He clearly didn’t think I

was worth sticking around for, so he doesn't exist anymore." God, I wish I could so easily write him off in my head.

I wish he wasn't so good at making me remember him.

Before I can register what she's doing, Elena wraps her arms around me, drawing me into a hug with my head against her shoulder. "You're worth sticking around for, Summer," she murmurs, rocking me slightly in the best mom-hug I've had since I came home. But that's probably because Mom's schedule meant I haven't seen her in about three weeks, or else I'd be getting my daily fill of mom-hugs.

Still, I can't help but bury my face in her shoulder, eyes closed hard. "Thanks Elena," I whisper, wishing I could muster up some kind of rage or anger toward Kayde, instead of the gnawing sadness and soft fear that Darcy is right, and maybe I'm really *not* worth sticking around for.

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



It always feels different when I come back for the last session of the summer. There's a finality to it, a bitter sweetness that I both love and hate.

Though this year, I'm struggling to not just hate it. I don't want to be here, at the place that reminds me of the stupid, terrifying, *high stakes* game I'd played with Kayde for a week. I don't want to be at the place that reminds me of *Kayde*.

Because fuck him, quite frankly. And not in a cute or sexy way.

*Fuck Kayde* for making me want him to stay. For making me want him to be more than just a psycho ax murderer intent on breaking me or killing all the kids at Camp Crestview.

And while I'm at it, fuck Darcy for making the week long break back at home miserable with the thought and promise that *I'm not worth it*.

I'm not worth staying for.

And I'm certainly, very clearly, not worth changing for.

My nails dig into the skin of my wrists as I sit back against the tree I'm sitting in, staring out at the mostly empty summer camp. I try not to climb trees when the kids are around, since it gives them dangerous ideas. But for now, when it's just me and Daniel and maybe Liza setting up her cabin, I don't have to worry about that.

It's just *me* and the pathetic pity party I'm still insistent on throwing myself, even though I should be long over it by now. If my mom had seen me over the week-long break, and she'd known I was letting myself get like this over a boy, she would've jumped into action. There would've been

stern talks, delicious dinners, movie marathons, and probably some off the wall activity like bowling or *skydiving* to take my mind off of this.

And of course, the lectures would have reminded me that I am better than this. That there's nothing about a man who I hadn't even been dating to cry about or to make myself miserable for.

But then again, my mom has always been an incredibly practical woman. Even after my dad, she hadn't let herself stay a victim. She pulled herself out of the depression, the anxiety, and was mom of the year for every single year of my childhood.

And she still is, quite frankly. Even if we don't *always* get along as well as we could.

Dragging my knees up to my chest causes the bark to scrape and bits of it to peel off under my feet. It rains down to the ground ten feet below me, though I barely pay attention or give it much thought. Maybe I'll break my own rules this session and come up here to sit when I can. Darcy's not always smart enough to look up, and most people don't expect to find me ten feet up in a *tree* when they're looking for me.

It works out in my favor, as long as my kids don't start getting ideas about climbing trees and swinging from them like monkey bars. I'm sure that would lead to me getting a *very* unpleasant call from Mr. Fink, I can already hear the chagrin in his voice and see his pinched face at the mere thought of a kid breaking their arm, leg, or skull from a tree fall.

But surely I deserve *something* after getting bashed into the river a week and a half ago by Daniel's boys.

My feet scrape along the bark again and I lean my head back against the tree trunk, closing my eyes with a soft sigh as I let one knee rest against my chest, while my other falls so my foot can hang in the open air. I love being up in my tree. There are about five around camp that I prefer to climb, and this one has to be my favorite.

Especially so long as no one finds me, since they don't know where to look. If Daniel needs me, he can find literally anyone else. If Liza needs me, she knows my number. I'd get down out of my tree for her, probably. Well, I'd be likely to consider it, anyway.

Approaching footsteps don't make my eyes open. I barely notice them, and only bring my hanging leg back up to the large, thick branch of the tree that I've always known will hold my weight and probably that of someone else.

Not that Kinsley is the climbs-trees type. I don't think Liza is either, for all her danger warnings and safety precautions. The only person here who's ever gotten into a tree with me was Daniel, and that was back when we were more like friends and less like acquaintances.

"Figured you'd be in the last place I checked." Kinsley's wry tone pulls my attention from the backs of my eyelids, and I glance down at her in surprise. The crooked grin on her face is just what I'd been expecting, and I match it with a hesitant one of my own that isn't quite heartfelt.

But the least I can do is try.

"You could've texted me," I remind her, leaning back on the trunk and staring down at my best friend with interest. She looks like she's just gotten the best sleep of her life, and there are a few hickeys sticking out from the collar of her shirt that she can't quite hide without either a scarf or a really obvious Bandaid like I'd used last time. "I see we're still in love, huh?" I tease, happy at the thought that she and Liza so far aren't just a one and done thing.

Now they just need to last the rest of the summer and into autumn, before I can start taking bets on who will propose to who.

Secretly, I think it'll be Liza proposing. For all of Kinsley's bravado, she can be a bit naïve at times and gets bouts of random shyness when it comes to super serious shit. And yeah, Liza is definitely in the category of *super serious*.

At least, I hope she is anyway.

"I could've," she admits, reaching up and rubbing her fingers over the marks that show just above the neck of her tee. "But that would be boring and probably not that productive, given the fact service here is an absolute joke."

"Not if you're in a tree," I tease, swinging both legs over the same side of the branch. It's a bit too high for me to just jump down, but one of my favorite things about this tree are the stair-stepping branches that march downward at angles I can use to go up or down easily. I hop to one, then the other, and when I'm about four feet from the dirt, I jump down easily to land on the balls of my feet beside Kinsley.

"I hate when you do that," she admits, glancing up at the tree. "I'm always afraid you're going to fall and break your neck. Even Liza can't save you from that, you know."

“You sure? She’s a damn good camp nurse.” I laugh, brushing off my legs. “What are you doing here so early, anyway—” At the flush that creeps up her face while I speak, I realize the answer to my question long before I’ve finished. “Oh.” I sidle closer, wiggling my eyebrows. “Did we arrive with Liza? Have we been here for *a bit*?” I can’t help but let my words end up a little teasing, a little taunting. But it’s not like Kinsley minds. She’d do the same to me, given the chance.

“Maybe,” Kinsley sniffs. “Are you going to help me set up the cabins or not? Thought we’d do ours together, so it takes less time. And I have new edibles so we could, you know, go die in the staff cabin for a while?”

“God, I’m so in,” I mutter, setting off across the campground toward Redtail and Dormouse cabins. I can’t help but angle my head toward Owl Cabin, which is always Darcy’s, and I frown when I see both doors open. Yeah, okay, so I hadn’t gotten lucky with Darcy not showing up early this time. A fact that’s confirmed when I see her in her small cabin, putting her long, dark hair up in a thick ponytail.

As we pass, she turns to me, and our eyes connect for just long enough that I can see a small, cruel grin on her features before she turns back to the mirror over the armoire.

Well, if I’d needed a sign that Darcy is going to make this week as awful as possible, that had been it. My heart sinks, and Kinsley moves just enough to gesture not-so-politely towards Darcy, her eyes just a little narrowed and her shoulders just a touch stiff.

“You don’t need to do that,” I murmur, shaking my head slightly. Kinsley’s hand reaches for mine, and I let her tangle her fingers with mine as we walk. “Seriously, she’s just Darcy.”

“She’s a bitch,” my best friend snaps. “And if she’s going to act like that or try to say shit to you, then I’m going to hit *her* with a kayak paddle and knock her into the river this time. And there won’t be any tanned, responsible lifeguard around to—” She stops, eyes going wide as she looks at me. “Shit, I’m sorry Summer. I didn’t mean to—”

“No, it’s okay. You’re all good.” I give her a wan smile, tugging her toward our cabins and swinging our entangled hands like we’re much younger and much less laden with responsibility and, in my case, bitterness. “It is what it is. He didn’t come back, he didn’t show up. He didn’t *stay*.” The words burn between my lips, leaving my tongue tasting bitter and feeling raw.

I hate the words and how they burn, almost as much as I'm finally starting to *hate* Kayde Lane.

And that's a good sign, right? That some of my sadness, some of my hurt from him leaving, is finally turning into the hate that it should've been all along.

I don't need Kayde in my life, or at Camp Crestview. I *certainly* don't need him around a batch of kids that he would end up wanting to kill or maim or whatever.

And I don't need to figure out if me making a deal twice in a row would be just as successful as it had been a couple of weeks ago.

"Let's start with your cabin, yeah?" I ask, veering off toward Dormouse. "Yours is always easier."

"Because your kids are feral, no matter what session it is," Kinsley mutters in response, but grins happily and falls back into step with me after one last glance toward Darcy, as if she wants to make sure to get in any final threat that she can.

We don't always do a campfire the night before the kids get here.

Sometimes everyone is too tired from cleaning and prepping for the campers, though that's usually the first few camp sessions of the summer. Especially the very first one in May, when we're cleaning out the mess left by any stray animals that had somehow made it into the cabins. Not only that, the amount of dust in the halls is always pretty impressive after going nine months of the year with no one here except Mr. Fink, who barely does more than a drive by.

But tonight, the embers crackle high above my head as Daniel talks about something that happened during our week break. I'm not that interested, especially in something involving sports and drinking, and my brain tunes in and out of the conversation.

Until Shawn, my second least favorite counselor but in close running with Darcy, says, "Wonder who Fink will get for Coyote cabin this late in the year." He'd wondered the same thing before Kayde, mentioning at our fire that he'd heard it was some guy from Arkansas.

But this time there's something other than curiosity in his tone.

This time, I don't need to look up to know his eyes are on me, along with Darcy's. I tap my fingers on my knees, eyes fixed on the fire instead of them.

“Maybe if someone hadn’t—”

“One more word.” Kinsley speaks before I can, and her voice is anything but friendly. “One more word, Darcy, and I’ll make sure Fink gets a list a mile long of all the shit you pawn off on Liza and Daniel. Do you fucking hear me?”

Darcy’s surprise is audible, even in its silence. My gaze flicks up to meet hers, narrowed, and I find that, at the very least, I’m not afraid of whatever she has to say. Instead, a slow smile crawls across my lips so I add, “Did you ever think that infantilizing Kayde is what made him so turned off by even *looking* at you, Darcy?” My words are oh-so-sweet, and she jerks back, confused by them for a moment.

“I mean, you’re sitting here implying that *I’m* the reason he didn’t stay. That *I* chased him off or whatever. Seems to me you think he needs someone to be his mommy to tell him what to do. Seems to *me* you’re just a little upset you didn’t get to *be* that mommy to tell him he should be here, instead of wherever. Didn’t know you were into that. But honestly?”

My smile widens, though there’s nothing friendly about it. “Guess it’ll surprise you, then, to know that Kayde is more than able to make his own decisions without Mommy and Daddy around to do it for him. Sorry he left without you getting to fuck him like you were *begging* for. Which, by the way, was probably just as much of a turnoff as your Oedipus complex—”

She jerks to her feet, her mouth open, but Shawn grabs her before she can lunge across the fire and try to strangle me.

“But stop blaming me for you having one less dick to ride this summer, m’kay? Judging by Shawn over there trying to sound like you, he’d be *more* than happy to replace Kayde. Who you never had a chance with.”

Kinsley stirs beside me, eyes wide as she glances my way. Even Liza seems a little surprised by my words.

But some of my longing turning to hate has made this much easier to stomach, and my eyebrows lift slowly at the display of Darcy still standing, still being held back by Shawn. “Something you want to say?” I press, drawing my knees up to my chest. “Something you want to *add* to this conversation?”

“Shut up,” Shawn mumbles, rolling his eyes as he forcibly tugs Darcy back down. “Just shut up and fuck off, Summer.”

“Wish it was you gone instead of Kayde,” Darcy murmurs, slamming back down onto her log and not bothering to hide her glare or her derision.

“Same to you, babe,” I promise her, a reckless grin on my lips. “I can promise you that the feeling is *extremely* mutual.”

I watch as Shawn leans over and whispers something to her, and it’s impossible not to notice how Daniel looks a little uncomfortable with whatever it is they’re saying.

But I’m certainly not afraid of Darcy, and while I may be a little unsure of Shawn, he doesn’t frighten me, either.

They’re not Kayde, or my dad; and while words may hurt my feelings, nothing these two can do could ever hurt me physically.

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# CHAPTER THIRTY



I guess I shouldn't be surprised that I'm back in one of my five favorite trees. Without the distraction of Kayde or the kids being here, sitting in trees is one of my preferred things to do.

Especially now, with my feelings in disarray, to put it lightly.

But like yesterday, more and more of my hurt and longing have turned to hate for the *ax murderer* that wanted to break me, kill Kinsley, kill the kids and everyone else. It's supposed to feel this way, I remind myself, one earbud firmly in my ear and my arms around my legs as I lean back against the trunk of the tree.

I'm supposed to hate him. Not long for him.

Deftly I put my other earbud in, checking my phone one last time to crank my volume up higher and check the time. I have another twenty minutes or so before the first kids start showing up. So I can sit here for maybe ten more.

Or maybe nineteen and a half.

One of my legs drops off of the side of the branch, foot swinging back and forth in the air seven feet over the ground. This tree is harder to hide in, since my branch only sits around six feet up instead of ten. Though I suppose, on the bright side, if I were to fall out of this one, I might not die or break my collarbone.

As "Talking in Your Sleep" blares in my ears loudly enough that I couldn't fall asleep even if I'd wanted to, I lean back and glance up at the sky. Or at least, what I can see of it between the dense leaves of the trees.

There are very few places outside of camp or the lake where I can see the sky unobstructed here, but that's always been okay.

I like the dark. I like the *moonless* dark in the trees, when I can barely see anything further than a few feet in front of my face.

Songs change, blending from one to the next, and it's not until I'm halfway through "Bad Moon Rising" and considering getting down that I realize I'm not alone here.

Though, Shawn's method of getting my attention leaves a lot to be desired, as the quiet counselor grabs my ankle that swings through the air and *yanks*.

My eyes fly open, and I drop my other leg to balance with my thighs on the branch, looking down at him as a gasp leaves my throat unbidden. "What the *fuck*, Shawn?" I snarl, fingers digging into the trunk of the tree. Then I yank the earbuds from my ears and shove them in my pocket, though my attention never leaves him.

Especially with his hand still on my foot and a smile on his lips.

"Kinsley's looking for you," he tells me in that quiet, sly way of his. With olive skin that always seems to hold a tan and wavy black hair cut around his ears that somehow makes his green eyes look impossibly bright, I'm not above admitting that I'd had a crush on him my first year here.

Until I'd really talked to him, anyway.

Shawn is unnerving, and that's the best compliment I can think of to give him. Anything else sounds suspiciously like an insult in my head, and certainly will on my tongue.

"So you thought you'd drag me out of my fucking tree, you psycho?" I yank my foot away from him, bracing it back up on my branch.

"I figured you weren't in any danger." He shrugs, putting his hands in his pockets. "You're the one climbing trees and jumping down from them all the time. Come on." He tilts his head to the side, still eyeing me shrewdly. "Are you going to go find Kins or not?"

"Why don't you, I don't know, take a few steps back first?" I retort, preparing to jump down. Though I'm certainly not going to jump right now, while Shawn can do something to make it worse or make me fall.

Shawn shrugs and takes three steps away from me, deliberately, with his hands up in surrender. "I'm not the one who hates you at this camp, Summer," he reminds me, watching as I jump to the ground before he shoves his hands back into his pockets.

“Oh, yeah?” I push my phone into mine, making sure my earbuds are still there before I straighten. “Well, you certainly don’t *like* me much, huh?”

At that, Shawn tilts his head to the side, studying me. “You don’t think so?” he murmurs, and for some reason, the hairs on my neck stand up in both anticipation and something else that I don’t love.

But I refuse to be afraid of *Shawn*.

“I think if you do, you have a shitty way of showing it,” I mumble, rubbing my hands along my arms that have broken out in gooseflesh. “Where’s Kins?”

“Well, maybe I do have a poor way of showing it if you’re going to stand there and try not to shake,” Shawn teases, stepping forward. “But I’m not the one who sat at the fire last night and tried to embarrass—”

“I didn’t start it,” I’m quick to cut him off, my eyes narrowing in warning as I glance up at him. Then I close the last of the space between us before he can, meeting his gaze and refusing to look away. I am *certainly* not afraid of *Shawn*.

No way on this earth would I ever fall that low.

“And I don’t know what this is...” I gesture between us before dropping my hand. “But I definitely didn’t start it either, Shawn. If you want in Darcy’s pants so bad, I can name about six better ways—”

“You don’t ruffle my feathers like you do hers,” Shawn admits with a chuckle. “So I don’t need this bravado of yours. Like I said”—he tips his head to the side, toward the cabins and the rest of the camp—“Kinsley is looking for you. Think she wants your help with drop off.”

He’s so...*strange*. That’s the best I can really do in my mind, given my feelings for Shawn. But he’s right that I did promise to help Kinsley, though I hadn’t needed him to remind me. If anything, he’s only delayed me that much more.

“Whatever,” I mutter, shaking my head and walking past him. “See you later, I guess.” Or never, is what I would wish for if I had that option. But I have one more week of Shawn and Darcy before the summer is over.

One more week before I can figure out what the hell I’m going to do with the rest of my year.

The rest of my life.

The rest of *whatever*.

The trip back to the drop off area isn't long., but I jog to cut down on time, sweat prickling at the back of my neck as the sun peeks between the trees. Then, finally, beats down on my back with all the force of late-July summer.

I'm late, I suppose, but only by a few minutes. A few cars are in the loop, dropping off a couple of kids I don't recognize. Kins is there already, talking to their parents and doing her best to look inviting, friendly, and responsible.

Another car pulls up and I take it, soon falling into a cycle of greeting parents, then greeting kids and waving them off with the more nervous kids. I recognize a few of the campers, though not many, and greet them just as happily as I do the new kids.

Even if a few of them did try to break into Bobcat Cabin last year to terrorize some other boys. Though without a criminal mastermind, like Melody, at the helm, they hadn't exactly gotten very far.

The first hour crawls by, just as I knew it would, with me only being able to exchange a few quick words with Kinsley as kids filter in. The drop offs slow down about midway through, but pick up again as the clock ticks closer to noon. It's always this way. Most of the time, parents either get here right at ten am on the dot, or closer to noon, if not a few minutes after.

I'm used to it, and I've learned to predict when any 'rushes' will be. Though, with only about 50 kids max in each camp session, it's not like there are lines and lines of cars with parents begging to get their kids out of the front seat so they can drive away for a week of peace.

Sure enough, an influx of cars arrives just as my phone flips to 12:01, and I let out a quick sigh as I walk toward a sleek, silver car at the front of the line. The door opens even before the car has finished rolling to a stop, and I hear a squawk of protest from the driver just as a shape shoots out of the open door and arms wrap around my middle, nearly knocking the air from my lungs.

"Melody?" I squeak, surprised and lacking oxygen. My arms flutter before landing on her shoulders, and I watch as Melody's mom gets out of the car with her daughter's bag, apology clear on her face.

"Melody, please don't kill Summer," her mom quips dryly, walking over to drop her duffel onto the sidewalk beside us. "I'm so sorry, Summer," she adds, a sympathetic grimace on her lips. "She was really excited by the idea

of coming back, and Mr. Fink said there was an opening, plus she's in good standing with you guys, so..."

I won't tell her that 'good standing' is certainly...a term for it. Though I peek down at Melody to see that she's looking balefully up at me, as if daring me to say something to the contrary.

Not that I would dare.

"She's always welcome here, as far as I'm concerned," I admit, knowing that I'm pretty close to letting Melody get away with murder. Especially if I don't like whoever her target might be. "Lily's here," I add to Melody, knowing they'd become fast friends last year. "She's in my cabin. Guess you are too, aren't you?"

Melody flashes me another smile and shows me the little Red-tailed hawk pin on her shirt. All the campers get them when their welcome packets are mailed out to them, and I hook an arm around her shoulders when she turns to look at her mom.

"I'll see you in a week?" she asks, then darts forward to hug her mom around the waist. "Love you."

"Love you, too," her mom assures her, and beams at me. "Don't let her walk all over you, okay? I swear you won't die if she hears the word no."

"She's *perfect*," I lie, though I would do no less for any of the parents. Especially for any girl in my cabin. In my opinion, they're all absolutely perfect. Even if they are feral, terrifying creatures willing to burn down the nation and topple the patriarchy for their own amusement.

Her mom reaches out to hug Melody one more time, gives her a quick, stern look as she usually does, and with one last smile in my direction, gets in the car to pull away from the curb and presumably head back to the airport.

"She only let me come back because of the move," Melody admits quietly. "She knows this is my last year, and wanted me to have a good end to the summer."

My heart twists with pity for Melody, and when she moves to hug me one more time, I embrace her with both arms. "We'll make it the best week ever, okay?" I promise, looking her in the eye.

She hesitates, then nods. "Is Kayde here again?" she asks, brightening. "He told me he'd teach me a few different swimming styles when I said I'd kind of like to try out for the team next year."

My stomach plummets to the ground, and I feel a little nauseous as my mouth falls open to give her an answer I don't have. "Umm. I don't think so. He was just filling in," I tell her awkwardly as she grabs her duffel bag, clearly disappointed.

*Me too, Mel*, I think to myself, checking to make sure there are no more kids waiting for help.

There aren't. Melody had been the last, and I steer her toward Kinsley while I fix a grin back on my face before either of them realize there's something off.

"Hey, look who's back!" I call, causing Kinsley to turn. She grins and walks forward, kneeling down to hug Mel just as I had.

"My favorite problematic camper," Kinsley cackles. "Guess you won't be gracing my cabin this time, huh?"

"Sorry, Kinsley!" Melody squints and looks up at me. "But I can't betray Redtail like that."

"Dang right, she can't," I agree, watching as Kinsley gets to her feet.

She starts to say something as the sound of another car floods my ears, but her face falls just as Melody tugs on my hand.

"Is anyone else here from last year?" she asks, while I watch Kinsley's face in confusion.

"Umm..." I blink, trying to remember. "No, not from our cabin, I don't think. Just you and Lily." I try to catch Kinsley's eye, confused about why she isn't moving. If it's another camper, she would normally be the one to greet them, seeing as I have a Melody attached to my leg, and all.

But she just...stands there. Confused. Perplexed. And finally, when her eyes slide back to mine, she looks...concerned.

"Summer..." she murmurs. "I think—"

"Hey Summer." The familiar, warm voice makes every muscle in my body stiffen, and I can feel my eyes widen just as my mouth falls open so I can take a deep breath.

I turn, heart thumping in my chest, and every emotion in the world seems to go through me; from fear to relief to a few things I refuse to name.

Kayde stands behind me, his duffel bag over his shoulder and mirrored sunglasses concealing his eyes. His blond hair is up in a bun, and he's wearing a new *Camp Crestview* t-shirt in bright red, with a pair of black shorts under it. His smile widens as I look at him, though I can only imagine the shock on my face, compared to the amusement in his.

“Did you miss me?”

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# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



**D**id you miss me?

The words ring around in my head, pinging off the inside of my skull like a tennis ball. I stare at him, from the aloof grin on his face to his swept back hair. Then I move down his body, to the duffel bag he shifted into his hand.

But I can't find anything to do other than, well, *stare*.

Melody is not as troubled. She launches off of my hip and wraps her arms around Kayde, grinning up at him ferociously as he matches her enthusiasm.

And, yeah, okay, it's definitely looking like there's some kind of weird, creepy connection between them. Like they recognize the sociopath in one another and love everything about it.

Maybe he's right about her, and Melody really is going to grow up just like him.

*I wonder if her mom knows.*

"You came back!" Melody's voice is full of glee, and she twists to look at me like I've personally offended her. "Summer, you lied," she accuses flatly. "You told me he wasn't coming back. Even though I told you, Kayde promised to teach me to swim faster."

"I..." God, I have no idea what to say. The hatred is unfurling, petal by petal, though I clamp a metaphorical hand over the core of it to keep some of that hatred intact.

I'm glad to see him.

I'm horrified to see him.

*I'm confused as fuck to see him.*

"She didn't know, Mel." Kayde chuckles, his eyes leaving mine to flick down to my favorite camper. "I actually wasn't sure I'd be coming back. I had to work out some shit."

"Well, that's crappy of you," Melody is quick to tell him, a frown touching her lips. "I bet Summer was sad when she thought you weren't coming back. I bet—"

"Summer wasn't sad." The words are too quick, too slurred together, and from the look in Kayde's eyes as he glances up at me again, I know for a fact he doesn't believe me. But why should he? I'm certainly not telling the truth.

"Summer *definitely* wasn't sad." Kinsley sounds a lot more convincing than I do, at least. She takes a step forward, reaching out to grip Melody's shoulder. "Can you take your duffel to Redtail cabin for us, please?" she asks her, forcing a smile onto her face. "Kayde's going to help us get finished up here."

Melody looks between us, her face full of calculation. Whatever she sees in my expression, which she studies the longest, must convince her that Camp Crestview isn't about to implode, because she shrugs her shoulders and swoops down to pick up her bag. "I suppose," she sighs heavily. "But you'll help me this week, right? You *promise* they aren't going to chase you off?" Her words are directed at Kayde, but she glances at me as if I'm the threat in this situation.

Frankly, I'm just doing my best not to cry, pass out, or melt into a puddle of ooze under Kayde's stare. And as I haven't done any of those things, I'm considering today a success so far.

"Promise," Kayde tells her, bringing up a hand in the scout's salute. "I swear, Mel. I'll teach you whatever you want to know and there's no way you won't get on the swim team when you start school this fall."

That mollifies her, at least somewhat. Melody marches off in the direction of Redtail, though we have to all maintain our smiling faces when she glances back more than once, like she's afraid Kins and I are going to go on the attack.

But I barely notice. I'm too busy staring at Kayde, my mouth still hanging open as I try to figure out what's going on and what in the world I'm feeling right now. Surely I'm not relieved to see him.

Not when—

*Oh god.* My stomach plummets, and I clench my hands around my elbows where I'm holding onto myself as if I might shatter on the spot.

If he's back, it has to be. He still wants to—

"Why'd you leave if you were coming back?" Kinsley, still in front of me, is not having the same internal crisis as me. She looks aggressive, if anything, and steps into his personal space even though I give a soft sound of protest. "Why'd you do that to *Summer*?"

I'm worried for her.

Especially out here, where no one can really see us unless they purposefully come back to the drop off area for some reason.

Kayde's eyes meet mine, and he gives a quick, dismissive motion of his hand, as if he's telling me it's *fine*.

But it isn't *fine*.

And Kinsley doesn't know. I force myself not to panic as Kayde focuses on Kinsley, his head tilting to the side as he studies her. "What did I do to *Summer*, Kins?" he murmurs, and I wince for him.

Kinsley does not like when anyone other than her friends shorten her name, and if she doesn't punch him, I'll be surprised.

Her hands ball into fists, and I make another soft noise of dissent. It must register, because she glances back at me, her frown clear and her eyes troubled. "You left her. Worse? You left her to *Darcy* after you fucking walked out on her and your cabin of kids."

"*Darcy*?" Kayde looks between us. "What do you mean 'left her to *Darcy*'?" There's something in his voice that reminds me of that first night in the woods, and I wonder if letting this go on is only to make things worse.

It definitely feels like things are getting worse, not better, with every word that Kinsley gives him.

"*She* was the first one to know you'd fucked off. And she knew *real quick* that you hadn't told *Summer*. What the fuck, *Kayde*?" She steps closer until they're almost pressed together. "What the *fuck*? You couldn't tell *Summer* you were leaving, at the very least? Couldn't, I don't know, explain it to *someone*? She thought you cared about her."

I flinch at her words, and Kayde is the one who sees it. Something changes in his eyes, though I'm sure I don't like whatever that means for me.

And I definitely don't like the way Kinsley is winding up. Kayde may be patient, to a point, but he's also a murderer. He's *Kayde*, the man who had planned on murdering all the kids here at Crestview, and chop Kins up in as many pieces as he could.

I don't think yelling at him is good for her continued health and wellbeing. My hands clench and unclench around my elbows, and before she can get herself in deeper shit with Kayde, I make myself step forward to push between them.

"Can we talk?" I don't even look at my best friend. I'm too insistent on getting Kayde's attention and focus on me, not her. On *my* face, not the way she's spitting words of dislike and disapproval.

"Summer..." Kinsley reaches out to touch my arm, but I ignore her with a shake of my head.

"I'm fine. Can we *talk*?" I ask again, eyes still on Kayde and refusing to go anywhere else. There's something like the twitch of a grin on his lips, but it's gone when I blink, and he dips his head in a nod.

"Yeah, Summer," he murmurs. "Of course we can talk. Figured that was kind of a number one priority—"

"If it's such a priority now, why wasn't it before you left?" There's Kinsley again, and this time I see the twitch of Kayde's eyes, and the way his head tips just enough to show he's paying attention in the worst way.

He's not thrilled with Kinsley. He's making that more than clear now.

"It's fine. We'll *talk* about it." I force myself to reach out, to grip the hem of his shirt to keep his attention on me instead of Kinsley. "Please, Kins," I add, turning to look at her sidelong.

She hesitates. I see the indecision clear on her face as I silently beg her to just walk away for now. Before Kayde really does turn his attention on her instead of me. "Fine." She's very clearly not happy about it and turns to me with worry on her face. "Fine, Summer. But come find me later. Please." There's worry in her voice and in her eyes, and she bites her lip as she hesitates with her decision.

"I won't hurt her, Kinsley," Kayde purrs under his breath, his smile looking less and less genuine with every word. "We're just going to talk. That's all." But the look he shoots my way tells me that might not be the most true thing in the world, if he has his way.

But I am *not* inclined to let him have his way.

Kinsley hesitates for one more second before walking in the direction Melody had taken, though I don't move until she's looked back at least twice before disappearing behind the cabins as if she's heading to Otter Hall.

Or, more likely, heading to Liza's cabin to tell her all about this incident so they can ambush me later.

"We're not going to stand here, right?" Kayde murmurs, as the Uber he'd taken up here zooms off. "Because this is out in the open, and—"

I whirl on him, eyes narrowing even though I can feel myself shaking. "Why did you come back?" I demand, trying to keep the fear out of my voice. "Why—why did you—" My words cut off as my throat closes, and I suck in a breath. "You're right. Anyone could spy on us; like fucking *Darcy*. She had a goddamn field day with you leaving, you know?" Tears prick hotly at my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall.

Instead, I drag him away from the pick-up and drop off area, taking him toward the nearest clump of trees where, coincidentally, one of my five favorite trees sits between two huge maples. Kayde follows me, not seeming to mind my hand still in his shirt. Hell, he's barely said anything, and this is so unlike him, I wonder if this is going to go sideways faster than I can imagine.

I have to do something.

And I have to do it *fast*.

Once we're at my tree, I turn on him, letting go of Kayde's shirt as I open my mouth to launch into a tirade of threats, anger, pleas, or whatever else will get him out of Camp Crestview before he can murder any of my kids. There's no other reason for him to be here. No other point to his presence except that he's here to finish what he wanted to start two weeks ago.

I have a plan. I have things I want to say to him, and threats I want to make. It's a shame I don't have a knife on me, I think, moments before Kayde grips both of my arms, duffel bag forgotten on the ground.

He jerks me forward, and I have just a *moment* to panic before his lips slant against mine, hard, pulling a whimper from my throat. Kayde presses me against the tree at my back; the one I could totally climb to get away from him if I could just get a little bit of space.

But it's hard to want that space, or to focus on anything else, when Kayde is...*Kayde*. I sigh into the kiss, unconsciously parting my lips for his

tongue to slip against mine, begging to taste every part of my mouth he can. A soft whine leaves me, though he swallows it eagerly before pulling away.

“You can’t...be here...” I pant, shaking myself to pieces in his arms. He doesn’t let go of me. He just *stands there* with his hands gripping my elbows and refusing to let me go anywhere. “You *left*, you—”

“Tell me what happened with Darcy.” His friendly facade is gone, and he steps forward, pushing me harder against the broad tree trunk. I really can’t move at all now. “What did she say, sweetheart?”

I haven’t heard the pet name in over a week, and somehow it makes something in me crumble. I feel tears in my eyes again, hot and heavy, but I squeeze my eyes shut in an attempt to make them go away.

I fail, of course. They fall, sliding down my cheeks in burning streaks, only to leave uncomfortable, sticky coolness in their wake. I reach up to wipe them away, only to be stopped by Kayde as he leans forward, pressing his tongue to my cheek and following the line of one, then the other.

And God, I can’t help but *shudder*.

“Don’t do that,” I beg, trying to pull away from him. “Fuck, Kayde, I can’t do this again. You *left*. You were *gone*—”

“Which we’re going to talk about,” Kayde promises flatly. “I’ll tell you, Summer. Explain why I left, where I went. I’ll even tell you where I was that morning when you caught me coming back from the lake. But...” His grip tightens on my arms, and he shoves me against the tree firmly, one thigh pressing against mine so that I’m barely balanced on the balls of my feet and he’s supporting a good portion of my weight.

“Tell me what the fuck Darcy said or did. Now.” He doesn’t yell. He doesn’t raise his voice as he leans in to press his lips under my ear. But the way he speaks makes me shudder, and my spine feels like it’s being shocked with a thousand volts as he runs his mouth over my skin.

“N-no.” I close my eyes, reminding myself that while Darcy is absolutely a bitch, she doesn’t deserve the wrath of Kayde. Probably. “No, you’ll do something awful. You’ll hurt her. I *know* what you’re here for, Kayde.” Putting all the accusation into the words that I can, and my fingers flex in his shirt. “I don’t know how, but I won’t let you. I wouldn’t let you last time—”

The barking laugh that leaves him as Kayde stands straight cuts me off, but it also surprises me. So does the incredulous look on his face as he stares at me, surveying my expression. “*I see*,” he chuckles, still grinning

like he can't believe it. "I didn't think..." He glances away, shaking his head. "Let me see if I'm understanding correctly." Kayde shifts, though not enough for me to go anywhere. His hands move, one of them pressing to the base of my throat so his fingers can curl around as much of my neck as possible.

The other grabs both of my hands before I can stop him, and he presses them over my head against the roughness of the bark. "Let me be adamantly clear about this, baby girl." Kayde leans close once more, his eyes on mine. "As clear as I *possibly* can. I did not come back to Camp Crestview to kill the kids you value way too much."

I shift, confused, and I find myself unsure if I can believe him or not. "You didn't?" I ask finally, bewildered. "But then why come back? What else is here that you want?" Surely it isn't Darcy.

Kayde just stares at me. Emotions flicker across his face before finally a bemused grin crosses his features. "I came back for *you*, Summer," he says at last. Slowly, gently, like he's talking to a frightened animal that might bolt.

And, admittedly, if I could, I definitely would.

But I'm also sure I misheard. I bite down on my lip, watching Kayde's eyes flick down to my mouth before coming back up to my eyes. "You... what?" I ask at last. "That's not funny, Kayde. That's not—"

"It's not funny at all," he agrees savagely, tightening his grip on my hands and my throat to cut off my air. "Baby, it's not funny because it's not a fucking joke. I came back here *for you*—"

"You came back because of the—"

"I came back because I'm in love with you, Summer Walsh. And you'd better understand real quick that I'm going to make sure you feel the same before these kids go home. No matter what I have to do to make that happen."

# CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



I 'm sure I've heard him wrong.

There's no other explanation, except that his hand on my throat has been there longer than I think it has and the lack of oxygen is making me hear shit that's not actually being said. I blink once, then twice, and my eyes slide to the side before back up to his face.

"...Come again?" I ask, voice barely audible. "I'm sure I didn't—"

"I can say it in as many ways as you like," Kayde promises, pressed against me with no room for me to even *breathe*. "You're mine. You'll always be *mine* now. I've never been in love with anyone." His grin turns a little feral and he chuffs softly under his breath. "I didn't even know that's what was happening. The day you caught me coming back from the lake? I was out on that little island, trying to figure out what the fuck was wrong with me. The reason I left early? I had shit to clean up back where I'm from. I needed to tie up everything so I could come back here to *you*. Now." He presses his forehead to mine, eyes closing. "Baby girl, you're going to tell me what Darcy said to you one way or another. Or, alternately, if I have to go ask Kinsley, I'm going to be a lot less pleased about it."

I whine, twisting in his grip, and find that something in his voice makes my vision go hazy at the edges, just like it has in the past. Though normally, when he makes me go fuzzy, it's when he's fucking me. Not threatening me and probably lying to me.

*He can't be in love with me.*

"I..." I twist in his grip, writhing back and forth like I've been caught doing something wrong. "Can we go back t-to what you—"

“To me telling you I’m in love with you? To me telling you that from here on out, Summer, you’re mine? We can put a ring on it, if you want—” A thrill of *terror* shoots through me, and I look up at him, eyes going wide. “Or we don’t have to. Doesn’t matter to me, as long as you know you are *mine* and never forget it.”

“I’m not...” I shake my head hard. “Kayde, I don’t know if this is a joke, or a prank, or if you’re just trying to throw me off of you being here again—” He cuts me off with another searing kiss, his fingers squeezing around my throat until I see stars.

Only when I’m gasping does he let go, and I don’t even try to stop the trembling in my body. “I *hate* you,” I whisper, looking up at him. “Kayde, I despise you. More than *anyone* in this world. You...you wanted to kill the kids here. And you tried to break me, then you *left me* without saying a fucking word. You’re the literal worst—”

This time, I see his kiss coming and I bite at his lower lip, sinking my teeth in and getting a growl in return before he pulls away. “If that makes you feel better, sweetheart, you can bite me,” Kayde croons. “Scratch me to pieces and get my blood under your nails. Do you want my knife back? Do you want me to show you where to cut?” He rocks his hips into mine suddenly, pulling a gasp from my throat. “Tell me you hate me,” he urges, not stopping.

“I hate you,” I repeat. “I *hate* you Kayde!”

“Want me to die? Want me to drop dead right here?” He moves the hand on my throat to press his palm flat against my stomach, rucking up my t-shirt as he drinks in my expressions and reactions. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want you to fall off the nearest cliff.” It’s easy to gasp out the words, even with heat staining my face as I stare at him. My struggles seem forgotten until I remember them again, and I redouble my efforts to break free of him. “I want that stupid, mythical elk the kids think they saw to *eat you*. I want you to get hit by a fucking semi truck.”

“Only if you’re driving it.” Kayde chuckles, slipping his fingers up until he can trace the edges of my bra.

“You can’t be in love with me.” The words leave me in a rush, and I pull away from him the few inches I’m able so I can meet his gaze fully, eyes wide. “Seriously, you *can’t*.”

“And why is that, sweetheart?” he murmurs.

“Because you met me two weeks ago! You—we—you were going to kill everyone here and so I made a deal to make you *stop*. You manipulated me. You blackmailed me and...” I lick my lips, brain scrambling. “And you haven’t known me long enough to be in love with me.”

“Someone hasn’t done her sociopath research, has she?” Kayde chuckles, teasingly. He hooks a finger in my bra, then slides his hand free to curl his fingers around my throat once more. “It took me all week to realize it. But by day three, I was in love with you, sweetheart.” My heart jumps into my throat, where I’m sure he can feel it pounding away like a drum. “Like I said before, I needed time to figure it out. You know why I wanted to fuck you like I was your boyfriend?”

He leans close—like it’s a secret, as if anyone is around to overhear—before purring against my cheek, “Because I *am* your boyfriend. And I wanted to make sure I was ruining you for anyone you might meet in the week I’d be gone.”

“You’re not my—”

He kisses me again. So hard that his teeth click against mine. I whimper, trying to pull away, but Kayde will have none of it. His hand tightens and loosens around my throat, seeming to know when I need to breathe before passing out and giving me just enough air to keep kissing him.

But all I can do in those moments of oxygen is *sob* against his mouth, as tears of overstimulation roll down my cheeks, only to be licked up by Kayde.

“I’ll do whatever I have to do to make you feel the same,” he murmurs against my mouth. “You want to stab me? You can stab me. You want to tie me down and fuck me, baby? Use me as your own personal fuck toy.” He grinds his hips against mine at the words, promising what his mouth is offering.

“Want me to kill Darcy for you?” His soft, secretive croon makes me shake my head, and I refuse to entertain the possibility. “I’ll do it for you. And maybe a little bit for me.” He turns to lick at my tears again, making a quiet sound of appreciation.

“Don’t kill anyone,” I beg, my fingers tight in his shirt. “Kayde, you can’t kill anyone. Not Darcy, not Kinsley, not the kids—”

“Don’t wanna kill them anymore, Summer,” Kayde interrupts. “Don’t need to. They’re not like you. They don’t hold my interest like you do, sweetheart. Tell me what you want from me. Tell me what will make you

love me like I love you. Summer, tell me how to make you *mine* in your mind and not just my own.”

“Get hit by a semi.”

“Like I said, baby girl, only if you’re behind the wheel.”

I can’t help my incredulous scoff, and I stare at him as he pulls away, a wolfish grin on his lips. “You can’t fucking kill anyone.” Trying to put as much anger as I can into the words. “I’ll tell someone this time. I’ll kill you—”

“You’ll try,” Kayde agrees. “I won’t kill anyone if that’s what you want, all right?” He holds up his fingers in that stupid scout salute again, and I roll my eyes. “Okay? Will you tell me what she said now?”

I shouldn’t believe him. There’s literally no reason on the face of this earth to believe *Kayde*, of all people, when it comes to murder. Not after what brought him to Camp Crestview in the first place.

“She thought I knew you were gone,” I say at last, and tentatively tell him all of what she’d said then, and after that, the comments at last night’s campfire.

And somehow, Kayde just stands there. His jaw works, though, like he’s fighting not to speak, and his eyes turn to cold chips of topaz. His hands on my throat and wrists don’t budge, however, and I still feel his thigh rubbing against the apex of my thighs with a promise I can’t think about right now.

“You know no one would miss her, right?” Kayde asks, closing his eyes hard. “You understand I could make it look like an accident.”

“She’s upset. She’s *jealous*,” I whisper, gripping as much of his hand as I can with my fingers. “Kayde, you can’t kill her—”

“I can’t?” He leans forward again, some of the irritation melting out of his face. “You sure about that?”

I shake my head, then nod quickly, realizing what he’d asked. “You can’t,” I say flatly. “Or I’ll tell someone what you are.”

“Then do me a favor, hmm?” His grin curls over his lips, causing my heart to thump in my throat. “One thing, okay?”

One thing is never *one thing* with Kayde, but I dip my head in a nod, anyway. “What?”

“Do something for me. *Distract* me from how much I want to hurt Darcy for what she said to you.” He lets go of my throat and tilts my chin up. “Did she make you cry?” he murmurs, gaze searching my face.

I can’t answer.

I *will not* admit to crying over him.

“Anything I think you’ll like? Anything to distract you?” I whisper instead of an answer. He barely hesitates before dipping a quick nod, and my breath leaves me in a huff as my brain screams at me for what I’m about to do.

But if this won’t distract him, then I don’t know what will.

With my eyes on his, I open my mouth, tilting my head back just enough to make it clear what I’m doing. Then I let my tongue fall from between my parted lips, never looking away from his eyes.

And it has the exact result I’d been hoping for. He inhales sharply, surprised, before his eyes darken and he glances down at my mouth. “Sweetheart...” Kayde breathes, reaching up to grip my face instead of my throat. He tilts my chin further upward until I’m leaning back against the tree with my throat fully on display for him.

“Gorgeous, perfect girl. You’re ruining me, you know?” His voice is almost a coo, almost a fucking lullaby with its sweetness and its gentleness. My fingers tighten around the side of his hand as he leans forward, crowding me, and Kayde opens his mouth, poised about twelve inches over mine.

But he doesn’t spit in my mouth like I’m used to. He lets the saliva gather on his tongue before sticking it out in a mimicry of me. The result is that his saliva drips from his mouth to mine, landing on my tongue and sliding toward my throat. But it feels different this time. Not as aggressive as usual.

Not to mention that instead of pulling away, Kayde follows the broken string of saliva until he can kiss me, tongue licking against mine until my mouth is full of the taste of him. It’s only when he pulls away that I realize I’m panting, and that his hand is back on my hip while he rocks his hips against mine over and over again.

“Thank you,” I whisper, just as he opens his mouth to speak.

It results in a groan from Kayde and causes him to throw his head back as he ruts against me. “Fuck,” Kayde growls, not stopping his movements as heat builds between my thighs. “You’re going to fucking kill me, Summer.”

Recklessly, I grin at him, leaning into the movement of his thigh. “Good,” I tell him without stopping the word from leaving my mouth.

“That’s the fucking plan if you do anything that you shouldn’t. I’ll *end you*, Kayde. Some fucking way, I swear. No matter if I have to—”

He cuts off my rambling monologue with another kiss, and suddenly the hand not around my wrists dives between my thighs, dragging the waistband of my shorts down with him. I whine a protest against his lips, wriggling in his grip, only for him to ignore it completely as two fingers sink between my folds.

“I believe that, baby girl,” Kayde taunts, pulling them free and holding his fingers up between us so I can see the wetness that glistens on them. “I really do, I promise. But next time?” As I watch, he brings his hand to his mouth and slowly, languidly, licks his fingers clean with his eyes never leaving mine.

“Next time, maybe your threat would be more believable if your pussy isn’t so fucking soaked for me. But that’s okay.” He leans forward again and kisses me, forcing me to taste myself on his tongue before adding, “I’m sure you’ll get plenty of practice this week.”

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# CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



“I’m not pouting.” My words are quiet and grumpy. While neither Kinsley nor Liza have said a damn word about the faces I know I’m making, I can feel their eyes and their judgment on me.

And I’m really not here for it right now. I shift in my plastic chair, eyes on Kayde as he lounges in the seat next to Daniel. He’s smiling, Lassie persona in place, but now that I half know what I’m looking for, I can see that not everything is right on his face.

Plus, I don’t think he’s exactly paying attention to his friend. The two of them have been thick as thieves since Kayde showed up two weeks ago, though I can’t be sure if it’s a true friendship on Kayde’s part, or merely a cover up to make him not look so suspicious.

Frankly, it could be either.

“You’re pouting,” Kinsley sighs, shoving half of her brownie in my direction before settling against Liza’s arm that rests on the back of her chair. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but since you’ve brought it up now...” She shrugs. “Why are you pouting?”

I take the brownie with a groan of thanks, shoving it into my mouth and making my cheeks puff up like a chipmunk’s.

Which, of course, is the moment Kayde’s eyes find mine across Otter Hall. He pauses, brows rising just a touch, and he almost appears incredulous, if not incredibly amused. His lips move, and seconds later his eyes flick back to Daniel as he replies to something the other counselor said.

“I’d like to know too,” Liza admits, reaching up to dig her fingers lightly into Kinsley’s hair. My best friend sighs and leans back into the scalp massage, eyes going half lidded. For a moment, as I look at them, I wonder if there’s anyone, kid or adult, in Camp Crestview who *doesn’t* know they’re dating.

Surely not. It would take someone blind, deaf, and in a coma not to see it with how obvious the two of them are in their absolute adoration of each other.

It’s adorable.

It’s enviable.

And no, it’s not something I’ll get from Kayde.

But after watching them, I can’t help but look back at him, who’s watching me again, this time with something like curiosity on his face. God, I hate when he’s curious, or interested. It usually means I’m going to regret it later.

*No, you won’t*, that treacherous little voice in my brain whispers. *You’ll love it later, you just don’t want to admit it*. But I shut her down, drowning out the voice and reminding myself that there is no *later* because this is not the same as two weeks ago. There’s no game, no deal, no nothing.

Except my trepidation and anticipation of Kayde that continually wars in my chest to see which is in the lead at any given moment. I suck in a breath and look away, eyes going to Liza and Kinsley.

Of course they’re staring at me. They know where I’ve been looking, I’m sure, but at least they’re decent enough not to say anything about that.

“I’m pouting over Kayde,” I mumble, glancing down at my mostly empty plate. “Okay?”

“What did he say to you?” Kinsley sounds unsure of the question, and quickly adds, “I don’t want you to think you *have* to tell me. If it’s personal, or if you’d rather not—”

“He explained why he left,” I admit, shrugging my shoulders as thunder rumbles overhead. I glance up at the gasps of some of the kids, though Melody just looks thrilled at the prospect of a storm hitting tonight.

Admittedly, a lot of the kids look forward to them. Even if they are terrifying for the campers sometimes, there’s something about a thunderstorm at summer camp that hits *different*.

Somehow, it feels special. Like an event, instead of just weather patterns in the mountains. It isn’t raining yet, as far as I know, but a second

rumble of thunder follows the first. I doubt we'll be having a campfire tonight, at this rate. It'll likely end up being game night here, then an early night with a softer bed time than usual, since the kids will probably be up with the storms for a while.

"He said..." I can feel the flush staining my cheeks, and I fight the urge to reach up and press my cooler palms against the heated skin of my face. "Well, he wants to make it up to me. He wants me to feel the same for him as he does for me." That's as close as I can come to the actual conversation, and I'm still squirming in my seat at just this much of the truth.

The two trade a look, and I can see the silent conversation that passes between them. Finally, Liza reaches out to clasp one hand over mine, and pulls my attention up to her with a tap on the back of my hand before she speaks. "Do you *want* to give him another chance?" she asks, no trace of judgment or condescension in her voice or her face.

"Yes." I don't mean to say it so quickly. Kayde is...well, he's Kayde. "But I'm so mad at him. I hate him a little. But I also... Umm. Well, I don't hate him *all* the way." God, I must look so embarrassed. I feel the urge to kick a chair into Darcy's path, just for fun, just to do something unkind and get the attention off of me.

Plus, I'm still upset with her. I despise her, and I'm dying to hear about her reaction to Kayde coming back.

If she has one, anyway. I'd expected her to join him at Daniel's table, Shawn in tow, like always. Yet she and Shawn are sitting in the far corner of the dining hall, neither of them even looking at anyone else other than their kids occasionally.

"So do you want me to punch him in his pretty face?" Kinsley definitely sounds a little too eager at the idea, and she shifts in her seat, eyes on mine as I pull my hand back from Liza to sit back in my chair.

"No," I assure her, holding a hand up for mercy. "No, I like his face as it is. And I'd love to complete this week without any bruises."

Both of them fix me with a look, and when it dawns on me what they're referring to, I feel a new rush of heat in my face all over again.

"Okay, okay," I hiss, closing my eyes hard. "You know what I mean. Violent bruises. From getting hit with kayak paddles and nearly drowning or, like, getting punched in the face. I don't mean *other* bruises."

Because if Kayde does anything, it'll probably result in bruises littering my throat and shoulders. I'm certainly not naïve enough to think I hate him

enough that I don't want him. At the very least, on a physical level.

And, well, more than that, if I'm completely honest in my own thoughts.

I glance toward him and Daniel again, only to do a double take when I realize Daniel's now the only one there. When he sees me staring at him, he tilts his head to the side, eyes following as if pointing me in the direction that Kayde's gone. And sure enough, when I follow his look, I see Kayde prowling toward Darcy, though the latter doesn't realize it until Kayde has crowded her casually against the window where the dishes go.

"Gotta go," I mumble, jumping to my feet and scooping my plate and glass up in my hands. "I'll, umm... I'll talk to you guys later." I can feel Liza's and Kinsley's confused looks on me as I rush toward the open window into the kitchen, my eyes glued on Kayde.

But I'm not fast enough. He whispers something in Darcy's ear moments before I reach them, and she whirls around, her face pale as she looks up at him with wide eyes. I open my mouth, prepared to say something to diffuse the situation, just as Shawn grabs my wrist, yanking me to a stop.

"What the *fuck*?" I hiss in his face, eyes wide. "Get off of me."

"Tell your boyfriend to fuck off, Summer," he murmurs under his breath, his narrowed eyes unfriendly, to say the least. "She didn't do shit to you, no matter what you told him. And if this is about your *feelings*—"

"I can't stop him from being an ass if you don't stop fucking talking, asswipe," I hiss softly, making sure none of the kids can hear. But I refuse to look afraid or upset. I refuse to give the kids something to look at. Well, at least more than we already are.

Shawn hesitates, his eyes going from me to Darcy, before his grip on my wrist relaxes and I jerk free, turning again toward the other two.

Only to run right into Kayde. Darcy shoves past me, and Kayde's hands come out to steady me as he watches over my head at either Shawn or Darcy. I don't know which. But judging by the cold, shrewd way his eyes narrow, I can assume he's not really fond of whoever it is.

Then again, maybe he doesn't like either of them.

"Kayde," I hiss, glaring up at him and dragging his attention back to me. "What did you say to her? What were you *doing*?"

He looks surprised for half a second before an unfriendly, arrogant smile crawls over his lips. "I was telling her what I think of what she said to

you,” Kayde purrs, pulling the plate and glass from my hands and setting them in the bins behind him. “We were just having a conversation, babe. Nothing to get upset about.” Without another word, he moves past me, walking toward the doors at the end of Otter Hall.

I barely hesitate before I’m rushing after him, blood pulsing and heart thrumming against my ribs. It’s not *his* call on what I get upset about. It’s not *his* call to confront Darcy for what she said to me. “I don’t get you,” I hiss, hot on his heels as he pushes open the door. It’s started to drizzle, but Kayde slips around the back of the building to remain under the overhang to prevent himself, and me, from getting wet. “Can you stop?” I can’t help the way my voice raises, the way I’m nearly shouting at him. “I’m trying to talk to you! Kayde, I’m serious—”

He whirls around suddenly, *slamming* me back into the wall of Otter Hall. “Yeah, baby girl, I hear you,” he murmurs, face impossibly close to mine and lips brushing my jaw. “Had to get you away from where anyone could hear your shouting first. Now, you want to tell me what’s wrong? Why you’re looking like you want to rip out my throat?” He reaches up to stroke his thumb over my bottom lip, and my breath stutters in my throat.

“You—” My words sound strangled and unsure. “Because you were saying shit to Darcy. Don’t lie to me. You weren’t being *nice*.”

“I’d never lie to you, gorgeous girl,” Kayde cuts me off swiftly, eyes narrowing. “Don’t insult me like that. Told you, didn’t I? That I’m in love with you?” His grip seems to tighten on me as he says it. “Why would I lie to you if I want to make you feel the same way, hmm?”

There are a lot of answers to that question, and I don’t feel like offering up any of them, so I stay quiet.

“You’re right. I *wasn’t* being nice to her. Why in the world would I be *nice* to her, Summer?” he scoffs. Thunder sounds behind him, making me jump, and that gives him pause.

“I’m not afraid of storms,” I’m quick to tell him, my fingers curled in his shirt. Belatedly, I notice his thigh slotting between mine, and it feels like this is becoming his favorite position when he’s pushing me into things. “I’m just jumpy sometimes.”

“I know you are, baby,” Kayde agrees. “Now, is there something else you want to chastise me for? Something you’re mad about? Or are you really, truly, just that worried for *Darcy’s* wellbeing?” he spits the word like it tastes bad in his mouth, and I can’t help but snort.

“Yeah, okay? I don’t want you to rip her to shreds.”

“Why?” He trails a thumb over my lip again. “She’d throw you in the river and leave you for dead if she thought it might impress me, Summer. Surely you know that.”

“Well...” I grin at him, the crooked smile probably forced. “I like to think I’m a better person than *Darcy*, okay?”

Kayde’s grin turns wicked, and he leans in close like he’s going to kiss me. “Well...” His lips brush mine, and he lets out a soft huff of a chuckle against my lips. “It’s a damn good thing I’m not, huh?” Before I can answer, his lips slant against mine, causing whatever reply I might come up with to vanish before it can really form.

After all, I really can’t focus on anything else when it’s *Kayde*’s mouth on mine, and *Kayde* pinning me to the wall while lightning flashes over his shoulders to paint him in an eerie, promising light.

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# CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



**A**s I'd predicted, the storms don't pass quickly or quietly. By the time we've herded the kids into the cabins, rain lashes against the windows and slatted roofs, and most of the kids are at least varying degrees of nervous worrying about whether they're going to get blown away in the night.

Well, except Melody, of course. She doesn't seem to mind at all, and tells her cabin mates that she knows for a *fact* nothing will happen, so they should enjoy the storms.

Naturally, I'm pretty impressed with her. But I always am when she shows the kind of maturity that's beyond her years.

The kind that makes me wonder if Kayde is right.

The wind moans against the outside of the cabin as I sit on my bed, thumbing through the old horror novel that I've read ten times before, at a minimum. Though if I'm honest with myself, it's more like twenty.

And, as per usual, I can't get *Kayde* out of my head. It's stupid that he occupies this much of my time, rather physically or just in my head, and I'm starting to think that I'm the one who's fucking obsessed. Or at least, obsessed right along with him. But that's a problem in itself, because I am *nothing* like Kayde Lane.

At least, I hope I'm not. If I am, then that definitely requires some closer inspection, and I curl my toes into my sheets at the prospect. Another peal of thunder rolls by overhead, and I can't stop the way my shoulders stiffen, just a touch, before I relax again.

I really do like storms. But I can't help the startle effect that thunder has on me when it's loud enough to shake my entire being and I feel it in my very soul.

Somehow, the door opening doesn't elicit the same reaction from me. I flip another page in my book, one knee up to my chest, as I see Kayde's familiar shape striding through my cabin door before closing it behind him.

I barely even blink. Not when he locks the door quietly, and not when he slips out of his wet shoes and socks.

"Shirt too," I sigh, thumbing past another page. "You're fucking soaked, Kayde." I'm not even surprised. How can I be? He's been pretty clear today about his intentions, and whether they're true or not, I can't exactly tell.

But I know he tends to orbit my cabin at night, whether that's with the intention of kidnapping me away to the boathouse or to just stay here and keep me pinned down on my bed.

Though my toes curl at both options, and I can't help but glance up at him as he surprisingly acquiesces to my request without complaint. His shirt joins his shoes on the floor, and when I meet his eyes, he hooks a thumb in his shorts, obviously offering to take them off too.

But I just give him the most withering glare I can manage and let out a breath. "You want something. Is this where you tell me your grand, villainous plan? Your idea for The Camp Crestview Slaughter Round Two? It's gotta be new and improved, right?"

"Wouldn't really need to be," Kayde points out, crossing the small distance and sinking onto the foot of my bed. He moves to sit against the wall, perpendicular to the way I'm sitting, and without warning, drags my legs into his lap.

I can't help but watch him, my attention completely pulled from the book I could read with my eyes closed. Not that Kayde seems to mind my attention, if he even notices. He presses his fingers against my ankles, slowly moving up my calves before I realize he's working his fingers into my muscles to relieve any knots or stress.

A massage was definitely not what I was expecting tonight. Not in any way, shape, or form. It's enough to make me stare at him blankly, unsure of what to think or do. I definitely don't have it in me to pull my legs away from him. Not when this feels so damn good.

"There wasn't exactly a lot of opposition before," Kayde points out, eyes flicking up to mine under his long lashes. "Just your desperation."

“It worked,” I point out, twisting just enough to gently put my book back in the top drawer before I close the nightstand and settle back against my headboard once more. “You didn’t kill anyone.”

“It didn’t work because you were threatening.” Kayde’s voice is sticky-sweet, and he switches to my other calf, obviously catching my soft sigh of approval and appreciation. He’s way too good at this. Especially when he flexes my ankle in his grip slowly, carefully. “You were just *desperate* and really hot.”

“You think desperate is hot?”

“Nah.” His grin widens, going a little predatory. “I just think *you’re* hot, sweetheart.” Lightning forks outside of my window, followed closely by a long, loud crash of thunder that has me tensing on my bed.

“I’m not afraid of storms,” I repeat, refusing to look away from him. “I just jump easily.”

“I know,” Kayde assures me. “Seriously, you’re not telling me anything I wasn’t aware of before.”

But I make a face at him anyway, before mumbling, “You could at least pretend that you don’t think I’m a coward.”

“Oh, no. Not at all.” Kayde’s words don’t *seem* mocking, but that doesn’t really tell me anything. His mask is impeccable, and I doubt even I can see through it when he’s really trying. It’s only when it slips that I can actually notice. And that’s not very often. “I don’t think you’re a coward, babe,” he goes on, getting to his knees. “Want to lie on your stomach for me?”

“No,” I reply blithely. “That feels dangerous.”

He just snorts, his eyes rolling with fond exasperation. “Well, fine. But I wasn’t exactly asking. You’ve been clenching your shoulders and rolling your neck all day like it hurts. So roll over.” When I still don’t move, Kayde’s smile gets that mocking-sweet edge to it, and I know I’m in trouble. Sure enough, before I can go anywhere, he drags me down the bed, making me flail as I pull my phone out from under my leg and toss it onto the nightstand before it can be in any danger.

Kayde chuckles under his breath, and a moment later I’m flipped over onto my stomach, his warm weight resting on my lower back and hips.

It’s...hotter than it should be, in all honesty. I groan at him, trying to sound annoyed, but my heart flutters in my chest and I pull my pillow down to bury my face in it in order to avoid looking at him.

“Moan a little louder, baby.” Kayde laughs softly. “Let me know how you really feel.” He shoves my shirt up and up until he can manhandle me enough to get it over my head. “No bra? Does that mean you’re not wearing any panties for me, either?”

“I’m sleeping,” I remind him, voice muffled. “Why would I wear anything under my clothes to *bed*?”

“Don’t know.” His fingers skim down my spine, drawing a shiver from me that has nothing to do with the roll of thunder outside. He drags at the waistband of my shorts until it’s very clear that I’m not wearing anything under them. “I think you should stop wearing anything to sleep in period, if you want my opinion.”

“I don’t.”

“Well, you get it anyway.” Before I can respond, Kayde’s warm hands land on my shoulders, and he smooths them down my back, before pushing the heels of his palms into my muscles and dragging them back up.

*Fuck*, he shouldn’t be so good at this. “This is where you stab me or something,” I mutter into my pillow. “Or, like I said, villain monologue at me about round two of the Camp Crestview Massacre.”

His sigh seems...frustrated. It makes my scalp prickle as he leans over to brush a kiss against my shoulder, before nipping punishingly at my throat hard enough to draw a soft yelp from me. “Not going to kill anyone unless you want me to,” Kayde murmurs softly, just after the next roll of thunder outside.

“Why?” It’s definitely the wrong thing to ask, and I make a face against my pillow at my inability to keep my damn mouth shut. “No, forget i—”

“Because I don’t want to.” I can feel his shrug as he situates himself on my hips once more, and it’s so hard to think about anything other than how close he is to, well, everywhere I want him.

It’s been a week and three days since I’ve fucked Kayde, and normally I wouldn’t even give a damn or be counting the days, weeks, or months since I’d last had sex. But somehow, Kayde’s gotten me addicted to him. And I have yet to find the cure for him, though I’d like to keep him in the dark about that for as long as humanly possible.

“I don’t need to,” Kayde admits, after a few beats of silence broken only by the rain. “Where’s the fun in killing kids who can’t fight back when it’s much more of a challenge to make you love me? By the end of the week, I want to see it on your face. I want to know that while you might not feel the

same things for me I do for you, that you know you're stuck with me and you're thrilled about it.”

My stomach twists, and I turn my head just enough to look at him over my shoulder. “Is that all it is this week?” I find myself asking; my mouth betraying my thoughts. “A challenge before you leave again?”

Kayde hesitates, his palms freezing on my skin. But as he searches my eyes, he leans down enough to brush a ghost of a kiss against my lips. “Summer, the challenge is the icing on the cake. And I don’t know how many times I have to tell you that you’re stuck with me forever.”

“Says you.” I twine my ankles, knees coming off the bed just to thump back down sullenly. “Pretty sure you can’t stop me from dating someone who isn’t you.”

“Pretty sure I could kill anyone you try to date,” Kayde replies quickly, his voice too sweet.

“That’s...not funny.” My stomach twists again, coldness tingling up my spine. “You shouldn’t make jokes like that, Kayde. Even if they’re not true.”

“Who says they aren’t true, Summer?” He stops with another sigh, and taps my shoulder to get my attention once more. “I was going to kill a camp full of kids because I was bored,” he reminds me, a grin curling on his lips. “What in the world makes you think I wouldn’t kill any man who laid his hands on what’s mine?”

“I’m...” I lick my lips, half at a loss for words. “I’m not a possession, you know.”

“Of course you’re not. But you’re still *mine*, Summer.” His fingers dig deliciously into my shoulders and he leans over me to press harder against my tense muscles. “All mine, for the rest of your life. I don’t really believe in an afterlife, by the way. But if there is one, you’re mine there as well.”

“What if we go to separate places in the afterlife?” I ask, scoffing a low laugh. “Last I checked, heaven isn’t for murderers.”

“Then I’ll just have to drag you down to hell with me.”

A shiver shoots straight down my spine to the space between my thighs that I’m trying to ignore, and I know there’s no way Kayde doesn’t feel the way my thighs clench under his weight.

“Oh yeah?” he purrs, confirming my worries. “Sweetheart, you’re going to have to stop being so perfect for me eventually, you know. Or don’t. I don’t mind drowning deeper in you.”

“You’re being dumb.” It’s the only thing I can think of to say, and I shift under him as much as I can while his palms massage into my back. “You’ll get bored of me.”

“I would’ve already.”

“You’ll find someone who likes murder.”

“I’m not a fan of competition.”

“Yes, you are—” I stop myself mid sentence, but the damage is done. Kayde’s hand pauses on my back, and he walks his fingers up my spine expectantly.

“Go on.” There’s a warning in his voice. Somehow, I worry that he knows what I’m going to say before I can even get it out of my mouth.

“Do I have to?”

“You’re the one who started it.” He strokes his fingers down my spine, then walks them back up again. He doesn’t massage my muscles like he’d been doing, but he does seem content to repeat that strange, tickling motion over and over again. “So *finish it*.”

I hate it when he sounds like that. I hate the subtle threat, the promise, and the arrogance in his tone that he seems to be able to turn on at will. My fingers flex in the pillow and I shift to look at him again, eyeing as much of his face as I can see in the dim light of the night stand. “Can I turn over first?”

His smile curls into something just a touch crueler, and one of his hands buries itself in my hair, obviously holding me in place. “Nah, I don’t think so,” he tells me, after a moment of theatrical contemplation. “You can stay right where you are and finish what you were going to say.”

I know I could lie to him. Not that he’d believe me, since that’s one of his stupid super powers. But I could try, or try to distract him.

Or I could if he’d let me *move*. But it dawns on me that maybe it’s all part of his plan. If he keeps me here—uncomfortable and squirming and unable to do something that might pull his attention from the words I’d stupidly spoken—then I really do have no choice but to tell him.

“Promise you won’t get mad first,” I demand, heart fluttering in my throat. I’m not sure this is going to go well, since I’d basically spied on him and looked into his past without his permission.

“I could never be mad at you, sweetheart.”

“Not even if I ran you over with a semi?”

“Stop trying to drag this out.” His fingers scrape against my scalp, his other hand still on my lower back with his fingers splayed.

So I suck in a breath and close my eyes, not wanting to see his face. For good measure I bury my face in the pillow, knowing it’ll be harder for him to understand what I’m saying. “I looked you up,” I mumble, my words half-obscured by the pillow and the rain. “During the time between camp sessions.”

“Oh yeah?” he massages my scalp rewardingly, like I’ve done something good. “What did you find?”

“You know what I found.”

“Maybe,” Kayde allows, humming thoughtfully. He removes his hand from my hair, both of them going back to smooth down my spine before he massages my tense muscles once more. Seriously, he shouldn’t be so good at this. “But sometimes new articles pop up about me. It takes a little while for my dad to get the take down notices to go through, if they’re bad enough. So maybe you read something unflattering about me.”

“Like your swim times?” I quip, looking at him over my shoulder just as lightning flickers through the room.

That draws a barking laugh from him, though he bites down on his lip with a grin to muffle the sound. “You know how to go for the throat, don’t you, babe? My swim times were immaculate, thank you very much.”

“So why’d you stop? The articles all said that you were amazing, and that you were being scouted for a college team. I saw one said you were the best swimmer in the *state* and you could’ve gone to any college on a scholarship. But you...didn’t,” I trail off lamely. I have no idea why he didn’t, only that he simply stopped swimming, according to the internet.

For a long few moments, Kayde is quiet. “What else did you find?” he asks, voice rough around the edges.

“That you were in a bus accident with your team. That it took *days* to find you, and that you were the only survivor. Did you...No, I’m sorry. It’s none of my business—”

“Did I see their bodies? Yes, Summer. Did I have anything to do with the crash? No, absolutely not. Now, ask me what you really want to know.”

My mouth opens, then closes. I bite my lip and work the question around in my mouth before I finally get the nerve to whisper, “Did you kill anyone?”

Kayde leans down, the line of his body slowly pressing against mine. “Yes,” Kayde murmurs in my ear, one arm wrapping around my shoulders so he can lightly grip my throat. “Yes, Summer. I killed my best friend. How fucked up is that?”

“I don’t—Why did you—”

“Because he begged me to. Because he was dying and there was nothing anyone could have done about it. Because he wouldn’t have made it past that first night, and he was in so much pain that he couldn’t stand it anymore. So I found a piece of glass and I slit his throat.” He kisses the side of my face lightly, and I feel myself relaxing into the pillow. That’s not...as bad as I was expecting. If anything, it was a mercy to his friend, and—

“Now ask me who else I killed that day, baby girl.”

My breath catches, oxygen choking off in my lungs as I turn just enough to look at him. Thunder rumbles again, just as lightning strikes close enough, I swear I can feel it in my bones. The light on my nightstand flickers out, plunging us into complete darkness.

“N-no,” I stammer. “I don’t want to—”

“Ask me who else I killed.” His free hand moves, going between us and shoving my shorts down my hips. When they’re closer to my knees, he presses flush against me again, and I realize instantly that his shorts have disappeared somewhere as well. He presses my thighs apart, sliding his fingers against my slit until he finds my clit, where he focuses enough of his attention to make me whine.

“Please don’t fuck me while you tell me about killing someone,” I protest, turning enough to grip his hair and sink my fingers into it. “That’s tasteless, Kayde.”

“I killed my co-captain.” He’s obviously ignoring me, and as he talks, he slides one finger into me when he’s done stroking my clit. “He was such a good swimmer. An amazing athlete. He was the only one in the state who could come close to beating me, and he would’ve had a great career in college too, if he’d wanted.” He sounds like he’s off in a memory, and I close my eyes against the blackness pressing against them.

“Why would you kill him? Wasn’t he your friend?”

“No, baby, he wasn’t my friend.” He adds a second finger and I whimper, surprised at how easy it is for him to fuck them into me. “I hated his fucking guts. So I dragged his insides all over the clearing where the bus crashed and made it look like a horrific, terrifying accident.”

My mind races with that knowledge, and I barely realize he's pushed another finger into me until he's fucking me on all three, as whimpers and soft sounds falling from my lips with abandon. "What did he do to you?" I ask finally, forcing the words out of my mouth. "H-he had to have done something, right? To make you kill him?"

"Yeah, sweetheart," Kayde huffs in my ear, his fingers suddenly leaving me and causing me to hiss at the loss. "He did something to me, all right." Kayde sits up just enough that he can slip my shorts the rest of the way off, and when he kneels between my thighs, my breath catches at the feeling of him sliding against my inner thigh.

Deftly Kayde tugs one of my pillows free from the head of the bed, and shoves it under my hips before his fingers dig into my thighs, dragging them apart. I don't have time to protest, or really do more than grip the pillow still in my possession before Kayde slams into me, dragging a soft shriek from my mouth that I muffle with my pillow.

"He beat me in a race," Kayde growls in my ear before pulling out until just his tip still spreads me open, then slams into me again, nearly shoving me up into the headboard as he fucks me. "He *lived* instead of dying in that fucking crash." His laugh is harsh in my ear, and I twist enough to keep my grip on his hair, surprised he doesn't mind at how harshly my nails dig into his scalp.

"Stop," I breathe, trying to see his face in the dark. When his movements slow, I make a noise of derision in my throat and pull his face closer to mine. "Not that, you ass. Stop telling me about your fucking co-captain."

"But you brought it up." His voice is full of savage glee, and lightning illuminates his face to show me the look of delight on it. "You're the one that asked. You were the one who *looked me up*."

He has me there, and I whimper softly, burying my face deeper in my pillow as his hand slips around under me, fingers going back to tease at my clit.

I'm not going to last long when he's so good at fucking me. He knows just what angle drives me crazy, and how I like it when he plays with my clit.

And he's definitely aware of my newfound appreciation for his fingers around my throat. The storm seems to egg us on, getting louder and fiercer around us, though it might be all in my head. Especially when all I can do is

focus on the feeling of his cock thrusting into me, his fingers on my clit, and the way he cuts off my air just when I need it the most.

Though I'm also trying to block out the words in my ears that he won't stop hissing against me, as if he *needs* me to know how it happened.

*I took a piece of glass, Summer.*

*The same one I used to kill my friend.*

*He begged me not to die.*

*I begged him to make it look good.*

"There's something wrong with you," I choke out at last, from beneath his restricting fingers, just as my release swells and nearly breaks hard enough to send me into orbit. But even as I clench and shudder around him, falling apart on the next crash of thunder, I can't miss the soft giggle in my ear as he slams into me once, twice, and then presses himself deep into me, fingers tightening in my throat and not letting go.

"I've got a pain in my sawdust," Kayde croons in my ear, sending shivers down my spine as I remember the first time he'd said that to me. "That's what's the matter with *me*." He punctuates it with a particularly sharp, although short, thrust that has me choking around his fingers.

"Something is wrong with my little inside...And I'm just as sick as can be." He collapses onto his side, rolling me with him and keeping me pressed flush to him. Kayde repeats the words, and more that might be another verse of the song that never fails to freak me the fuck out when it comes from Kayde.

"Kayde..." I whine beneath his fingers, the echoes of my orgasm still rattling through me. "Please, I can't—" He lets go just as I see black spots swimming in my vision, and I take a deep breath just as he drags me to his chest as close as he can, a peal of thunder making me shiver.

"I've got you, Summer," he murmurs, as if part of the reason I'm shaking isn't because of him and all the things he'd said.

"I've got you, baby. And I promise, I'll never let you go."

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



When I roll over and find Kayde gone, I'm not that surprised. Not when I remember him murmuring in my ear something to the effect of him leaving. Or kissing my cheek, my nose, and finally my lips as he'd pulled me close to him one last time.

The memories are foggy, but there. And at least he isn't around to see the way my fingers trail over the pillow he'd commandeered for himself, or the way I close my eyes and take a deep breath once I've rolled over to bury my face in it.

I'm the only one around to know, and that makes the internal burn of shame a little more bearable.

Getting up makes me groan, and I wince at the soreness low in my body, stopping to splay my hand over my stomach with a sigh. Once again, Kayde had done a number on me. Though when I check my mirror, I see that the only bruises to be found are the ones on my hips from how tightly he'd held me while he'd fucked me into the mattress. Even my throat is unmarred today, and I wonder if he'd held back on purpose when he knows exactly how much it takes to leave a bruise.

Or he should, anyway. With how much practice he'd had a couple weeks ago.

My spine tingles, and a low simmering *want* makes itself known between my thighs. Mentally, I slap that part of myself and scrunch my face at my reflection. "No, down. Stay," I tell myself, voice a little rough around the edges with sleep. "This is not the time to daydream about Kayde." It's never the time to daydream about him.

Especially after last night.

*He'd killed someone after the crash.* His words go through my head on repeat, even though I slam my eyes shut and wish I could beat them out of my ears and mind with a proverbial broom.

*He begged me not to die.*

I don't understand how he can say stuff like that so easily. So... normally. Like it isn't a big deal that he'd killed someone at seventeen. Someone he'd known, who had been his teammate. And from what I can see, Kayde doesn't feel the least bit bad about it.

"God, Summer," I tell my reflection, a frown touching my lips. "You're so fucked. And not just the good kind of fucked. You are *fucked*, fucked. Like..." I wave my hands dismissively, blinking away the tiredness still dragging at me.

Kayde really is a problem, and now it's looking like it's one I won't be getting rid of.

*Do you even want to?* The snotty little voice in my brain really should be put to death, or at the very least, into permanent exile. She's not right, because I refuse to let her be. My hands flex at my sides, and I stare at myself for only a few more seconds before finding my clothes for the day and putting them on over my swimsuit.

If the phrase '*I wonder if Kayde will like it,*' goes through my head ever in the few minutes I take to get ready, I'll certainly never admit it. Not even under penalty of death. But coincidentally, this is my favorite swimsuit I own, with a black top that's tied with a thin, cute bow, a border of turquoise under it, and turquoise and black shorts that I'm wearing under my longer, slightly baggy running shorts.

From the room next to mine, I hear my girls getting ready, and time it so I end up on my little deck just as their door opens, revealing all eight of my girls dressed in shorts and *Camp Crestview* t-shirts.

I smile at that, and the way they all assemble in a line on their deck, with Melody at their head, of course. They're like a little legion, and I'm the only thing keeping them from taking over Crestview to rule with an iron fist.

I can only imagine what their flag would look like, should the day of a coup ever become reality.

"You girls look ready to conquer the day. Any plans I should know about?" I ask, trudging along the wet path toward Otter Hall. It's a good

thing that the plan for today is swimming instead of something like the obstacle course.

Not that I'd let any of the kids near the obstacle course while everything is slippery. Harnesses or not, that would be absolutely asking for it.

"We're swimming today, right?" Melody asks, Lily at her shoulder with her eyes trained on me. While she's definitely not my favorite, like Melody, Lily is a constant. Plus, she's dependable enough that I know she won't try to kill anyone, break anything, or run away.

At least, as long as Melody is in charge. Quite frankly, I doubt any of my girls would step out of line with Melody here. But on the flip side of that, Melody is excellent at riling up her peers when she wants to do something spontaneous or ill-advised. So while none of the other girls will do anything on their own that makes me have to go track them down, if Melody wanted to get all of them in on something, I'd have eight girls to worry about, instead of one.

Pushing open the door to the dining hall, I'm unsurprised to see that apart from Daniel's cabin, we're the only ones here. It isn't my choice to be up this early, but I certainly don't mind being one of the first. Not when it means my girls can swarm the window where the food is laid out without competition and get themselves seated rather quickly.

I wait for them to do so, then swoop in for my usual eggs, one whole sausage link to say I ate something with iron in it, and a biscuit smothered in gravy. Then I grab coffee, a glass of water, and waltz over to the table for four I share with Liza and Kinsley on most days. Though neither of them are here yet, I sink down into my chair by the wall, my eyes on the eight girls slowly waking up now that they've been given sustenance.

Another cabin of boys filters through the dining hall next, heading to the window and slowly, sleepily fixing themselves plates. They're not Daniel's, obviously, and I don't know enough of the newest boys to really place them.

At least, until Kayde sits down beside me, one arm draped over the back of my chair. "Good morning," he murmurs, leaning in to kiss my cheek just as all of my girls turn to look at us. Naturally.

With my eyes on them, I can see their looks of delight at Kayde kissing me, and a few of them cover their mouths to giggle, while three others, including Melody, put their heads together to whisper conspiratorially. All

the while staring at me, of course, so there's no doubt of what's gotten them going.

"They're going to be making jokes at my expense for the rest of the week," I sigh, but I settle back against his arm. "You know that, right? We're going to have to hear 'Kayde and Summer sitting in a tree' until our ears bleed."

"Too bad," Kayde murmurs in my ear, just as he turns to grin and wave at my cabin. This sets off another rumbling of conversation, and when his boys join my girls at the large table, I see them all leaning in to talk to one another, shooting glances at us when they can.

Too bad they aren't very subtle about it. If they even know the definition of the word, or give a damn.

I don't really think they give a damn if we see them or not. All of our combined kids are too busy looking like they've caught us doing something illegal or that they've found out some hush-hush secret.

By the end of the day, I have no doubt we'll be the center of Camp Crestview gossip. Especially since the newness of Liza and Kinsley has worn off and everyone in the camp knows they're dating.

But this with Kayde? Yeah, it's going to be an *event* all day long, I'm sure.

My eyes catch more girls filtering in and heading up to the window with Kinsley in tow, just as Liza sits down across from us, a question in her eyes as she looks at Kayde. "Will you be joining us often now?" she asks, crossing her arms and leaning back like she's staging an interview for the position of Fourth Seat at the table.

"Am I allowed?" Kayde chuckles under his breath, reaching out to my plate and snagging the sausage link. I certainly don't mind. I probably wouldn't have ended up eating it anyway, after all.

"Depends. If you're going to take the few sources of iron that Summer deigns to put on her plate, then you are not." Her voice is crisp as she looks at him, seeming unimpressed.

"I'll get her another one," Kayde assures Liza, getting to his feet. "Do you want anything?"

Liza shakes her head, still eyeing him up and down as he strides toward the window. "So," she remarks, watching as he sidles up to Kinsley and accepts a plate from her. "Should we assume this is an official thing now? Certainly all the kids are convinced it is."

I grimace at that, stabbing my eggs and shoving a forkful of them into my mouth. “There’s nothing to *be* official,” I grumble, dragging one knee up onto the chair and sitting sort of awkwardly on my calf. It’s not the most comfortable thing, that’s for sure. But sometimes I like sitting like this where I feel smaller or, alternatively, like I could spring out of my seat at any moment.

Though in this position, I’d probably manage to just smash my face into my plate of eggs.

“He certainly got back late last night,” Liza goes on, as if I’m not looking mightily uncomfortable. “His cabin is next to mine, in case you didn’t know that.”

“Oh, I totally knew that.” I stab more of my eggs as I eye her, attention flicking between Liza and Kayde at the window. “Will you be keeping a timetable of when Kayde goes to bed this week?”

Liza’s grin is a little slyer than I expect, and she can’t help a soft snort as she shakes her head. “I’m just surprised he isn’t staying with you in your cabin, is all.” Kinsley sits down beside her right as she says it, Kayde following a step behind as he sinks down in the chair at my left.

“She won’t let me,” Kayde sighs dramatically, dropping two sausages and more eggs onto my plate. “You should eat those, by the way. Your body will *like* iron. I promise.” His voice is sickly sweet, and I roll my eyes at him dramatically, making sure I go slow enough that there’s no way he can miss the message at any point.

“I have never, not once, kicked you out after—” I break off as he fixes me with an interested look.

“After...?” Kinsley leans forward, one elbow on the table. “I don’t want to hear about the sex stuff or anything, but if you guys are trying out any new kinks that we could appropriate—”

“I hate you. And we—”

“Sometimes I try to expand her horizons,” Kayde interrupts easily, being so conversational that we could be chatting about the weather. “Last night I was just happy to see Summer, so I was a little boring. I gave her a back massage, though.” He glances at Liza, one brow raised. “This is probably the part where we compare night activities.”

“No, it’s not,” I’m quick to amend. “Liza, don’t you dare. Kins, I’ll divorce you.”

“Might have to do that anyway,” Kinsley sniffs. “Kayde doesn’t seem like he wants to share.”

“I am a little selfish,” Kayde agrees solemnly. “I’ll send you a gift box in apology, Kins.”

I grumble under my breath at him, and surreptitiously try to slide the sausages back onto his plate, only for Kayde to smoothly block me with his fork. “Eat the protein, sweetheart,” he says without looking at me, his eyes on the kids we’re still supposed to be supervising. “It’s good for you.”

“I hate you,” I only sigh, and mime stabbing him in the hand with my fork.

With my feet in the water and my sunglasses firmly in place, it’s easier to keep my eyes on all thirty-six kids in the pool from where I’m sitting than it would be from the chair where Daniel looks half asleep. Kinsley sits beside me, her toes wiggling in the water, and I can clearly see Shawn in the lifeguard’s seat. Though since he’s also wearing sunglasses, I have no idea exactly where he’s looking.

“We should go camping this fall,” Kinsley muses, kicking water up into the air lightly.

“Because we don’t get enough of that here?” I point out, brows raised over my sunglasses. “Or are you just a masochist?”

“*Tent* camping,” Kinsley amends. “We haven’t gone tent camping in the mountains in years.”

I don’t answer her right away. But I do consider it. We’d spent a lot of summers in the Great Smoky Mountains as kids, pitching our cheap department store tent in our little camping spot with my mom in the RV close by in case we needed anything. Or in case it rained.

“We really haven’t,” I agree, my tone thoughtful. “You’d want to go again?”

“We should get a dog. Not just for, like, tent security. But because I want a dog.” Kinsley turns to grin at me, tapping her fingers on the cement under her.

“Does Liza want a dog?” I ask, half-teasing.

Kinsley’s grin turns sly. “We may have talked about it, yeah.”

“And how many kids does she want?” My grin widens, and it seems my dreams of being a maid of honor for Kins and Liza are getting more and

more real by the day. Especially if they're already talking about buying a dog together.

God, they're so adorable it's unreal.

"How many kids does *Kayde* want?" Kinsley snips back, her own smile growing just as wide and feral as mine. "Does he like dogs, or cats? Where *will* you two be buying your first place, hmm?" as she speaks, I can feel my bravado fading, until finally she's taunted me into silence.

So all I can do in response to her tirade is huff and admit defeat.

"Summer!" The fact that Melody sounds like she's full of irritation when saying my name makes me think this isn't the first time she's said it. Though it's certainly the first time I'm hearing it.

"What?" I ask, turning to look at her. "If you killed someone, Mel, I'm not bailing you out of jail."

The glare she gives me is withering, at best. She rolls her eyes, hands on her hips in the water. "We want to have a chicken tournament." she demands, rather than asks.

Kinsley shifts beside me, frowning. "Fink said no more chicken tournaments," she points out, earning a glare from Melody that could melt steel.

"Fink also says no weed," I mumble, not looking at her and instead studying my fingernails as Kinsley turns her glare on me. "Not like we've ever gotten hurt during chicken."

"You're as bad as them," Kinsley informs me. "Give me one good reason to agree."

Smiling, I lean over and whisper to her that I'll take over her walk around tonight in order to give her more time to spend with Liza.

Which is how, fifteen minutes later, she and I are the last remaining team standing for the girls, while Daniel and Shawn circle us in the pool. I brace myself, grinning, on Kinsley's shoulders as she turns slowly, my arms going back out in preparation for slapping at, or maybe punching, Shawn. Daniel is, maybe, better at being the lower half of the team than Kinsley is. He's steady in the water and never seems to falter or lose his balance.

As they come in closer and Kinsley moves to meet them, I hear the kids in and around the pool cheering and taunting us on. I push at Shawn, who shoves back at me, and for a moment, my irritation with him is forgotten.

After all, this is just a game for *fun*. A way for all of us to blow off some extra energy and jitters from the rain. I laugh as Kinsley reels backward,

both of us nearly falling into the water as she chuckles as well.

“Kick him!” I laugh, tapping Kinsley on the head. “Go for his knees!” She laughs as well, turning back around to get us into a better position for me to slap and shove at Shawn.

When she leans in and I meet Shawn’s eyes, my grin wide, I pause.

He doesn’t look right. Something on his face looks off, but I don’t have the time to convey that to Kinsley before she’s tipping forward, putting me in range of shoving at Shawn once more.

Only Daniel seems to have forgotten how to balance in the water. He tips forward, Shawn careening toward me with his arms outstretched like he’s looking for something to hold on to in order to right himself.

Except what he manages to grab is *me*, and I’m not exactly in a place to help either of us. Shawn’s weight throws me backward, and under me I hear Kinsley yelp as my legs slip from her shoulders. Shawn comes with me, both of us falling into the pool just as I take a breath that, unfortunately, is pretty poorly timed.

The water in my mouth and throat is a quick punishment, and I flail under water as Shawn’s weight pushes me down to the bottom of the pool.

All I have to do is stand up, as my lungs burn and I try not to cough and hack.

But Shawn is still there, still flailing, still pinning me under him in the water. My leg is tangled with his, though I can’t figure out why, and my heart pounds in my chest as I try, and fail, to surge upward.

*All I have to do is stand up.*

Fear darkens the edges of my vision as my lungs *burn*. This reminds me too much of the kayaking incident for me not to freak out, and I make a noise through my open mouth as I grab at Shawn, trying to signal to him that I need him off of me. I need *help*.

But all I get is a foot in my stomach, nearly causing me to wretch as the rest of my precious air is forced from my lungs and I cough into the water, dragging more of it into my abused, screaming lungs.

*All I need to do—*

I grab for Shawn, unwilling to play nice, and *wrench* until he’s off of me, no longer pinning me in the water with his grip or his weight.

*Is stand the fuck up.*

My feet find the bottom of the pool and I propel myself upward, gasping as my head breaks free of the water.

“Summer!” Kinsley grabs me under the arms, dragging me to the edge of the pool. “Holy fuck, are you okay? You weren’t coming up, and—”

“Can’t breathe,” I gasp weakly, lungs burning. “Really can’t breathe.”

“Fuck, okay.” Kinsley hauls herself out of the pool and yells for Daniel, and in seconds both of them are dragging me out of the pool while I do my best impression of a crash test dummy. Once I’m on my side on the cement, I cough loudly, trying not to sound like I’m dying as I choke up some of the water that had made it into my lungs.

At least it’s not as bad as the kayaking incident. A minute or so goes by and I shove myself up to my knees, huffing out a breath. “The pool water is gross, in case anyone is wondering,” I announce, eyes closed as my arms shake.

“Yeah, uh, none of us were planning on drinking it, sweetie,” Kinsley informs me weakly, sitting down hard.

Shawn kneels beside me suddenly, hands flailing. “Shit, Summer, I’m so sorry,” he hisses, rubbing his sluggishly bleeding knee cap where he must’ve scraped it on the bottom of the pool. “I was trying to get off of you. I don’t know what had us pinned.”

“It might’ve been me,” Daniel admits quietly, sounding sheepish. “I think we were all just tangled up real bad. Sorry you got the worst of it, Summer.”

I glance up at Daniel, at the apology clear in his face, before turning to glance sidelong at Shawn.

He...doesn’t look as apologetic. But instead of letting my hackles go up, I smile weakly at both of them and flap my hand dismissively. “No worries, Daniel. I think this summer any body of water isn’t my friend, is all. Really hope the third time’s *not* a charm in this situation.”

“We are *not* going to let you drown,” Kins scoffs. “Even if Daniel and I have to drag you out of every river, lake, stream, and puddle.”

Again, I glance sidelong at Shawn. Instead of nodding fervently like Daniel, who’s still trying to apologize, Shawn just watches me, as shrewd as ever, and I can’t help noticing how unconcerned he is.

But then again, I remind myself, that really is just *Shawn*.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



With my feet crunching through the underbrush as I wave the flashlight around in front of me, I'm definitely not as aware of things as I could be. That's what I tell myself, anyway, when I realize that the extra sounds I'm hearing aren't just weird echoes, ghosts, or monsters in the woods.

*Please don't be Shawn,* I find myself thinking, just before I whirl around and point my flashlight up at face level. I'm not sure why or when he's become the winning member of my 'who I don't want sneaking up behind me' list, but sometime in the past twenty-four hours, he's surpassed Kayde's position there.

Though not by much. So when I see curly blond hair and slow blinking caramel eyes squinting in my flashlight, I scowl and drop the light to my side immediately. "You've been following me." It isn't a question, and I glance around us like Kins or Liza or a werebear is about to pounce out of the woods. "For a bit, right?"

His head tilts to the side, thoughtful, before answering. "Yeah," Kayde admits, his voice neutral and unreadable. "For a bit."

"Hmm." That doesn't quite make sense, but only because I know him well enough to know he can sneak up on me whenever the hell he wants. The shower had been proof of that, and with how much noise I've been making, I'm definitely not at my most observational tonight. "But you were making noise on purpose so that I heard you." I flick the flashlight back up in his direction, as if inviting him to take his turn with the words.

Since I'm not willing to blind him at the moment, I can't see the slide of expressions across his face that I would normally use to gauge his mood. Instead, I just have to wait, in the relative silence of the breezy night around us, for him to grace me with an answer.

"If I agree, then doesn't that seem a little...sad?" Kayde asks at last, crossing the distance between us and crunching the leaves under his feet.

"Why?" This close, and with the light at my side, I can see just enough of his face to see the curl of his smirk.

"Because if I've been following you for, say, twelve minutes now and making all the noise that I can think to make, and it took you *this long* to notice me, then you really should've stayed in bed after the incident in the pool you didn't tell me about."

*Whoops.*

I definitely don't feel bad about not telling him. In my defense, we hadn't seen much of each other for the rest of the afternoon or evening. Even at the campfire, Kayde was occupied by a few members of his cabin starting a fight, then babysitting them in Liza's cabin until their parents could come pick them up for bad behavior.

So frankly, I'm not at fault here. But I might be the only one who agrees.

"I don't need to be in bed," I sigh, whirling on my heel and setting off on the small path through the trees again. "I'm *fine*. And it was an accident, not an incident." That's what I tell myself, anyway, though the words feel sour on my tongue.

"Was it?" His hand brushes through my hair, a ghost of a touch, before falling to his side once more as he walks beside me. "Who had you pinned under the water again?"

He already knows the answer. I don't need to confirm it for him.

"Besides," I sigh, not looking at him as I move the flashlight around to see everything. It's just routine at this point. I don't expect to find anything other than maybe an owl if I'm lucky. "I told Kins I'd take her walk around tonight so she could spend the night with Liza."

"And you're *really* going to tell me, with all honesty, that she didn't try to take her walk back after what happened?" His voice is a low rumble in his chest, and he sounds certainly less than pleased.

"No. I won't tell you that. Not since I can take a very educated guess who told you what happened today." I finally glance at him, offering Kayde

the flashlight. “Here. You want this? Since you’re so determined that I am a weak and delicate maiden who can’t walk or carry a flashlight after being dunked in the pool.”

“Sweetheart.” He pushes my hand away, then digs in his pocket and comes up with a small flashlight that he turns on. It’s brighter than my big chunky one, and I grimace at the bright LED light, pulling all the color from anything it illuminates. “You were more than *dunked*. According to Kinsley, you were sucking in air when you went under, and you were under for a good twenty seconds.”

*Had it really been that long?*

It hadn’t felt like it, with my lungs burning and my brain clouding over with panic. It had seemed like both an instant and an eternity. But that sounds stupid as hell, so I’m definitely not about to say it.

“So you came out here to follow me around and make sure I don’t fall into a puddle?”

“I follow you around more than you think. I just don’t normally let you notice.”

The words are so...honest. Well, as honest as they are *shocking*. I come to a stop, nearly tripping over my feet as I stare at him. “I’m sorry, *what*? ”

“You’re really surprised?” He flicks the flashlight in an arc around us, before turning to glance side-long at me. “You’re *actually* shocked about that, Summer?”

“Well...yes?” *Because I never knew*. Though if he’s as good as I assume he is, as I’m sure he is, at following people, then how in the world would I ever know? “Do other people know you do it?”

“Not at all.”

“*Why* do you do it?”

He doesn’t speak. Not for a few seconds as he stares at me in the darkness. Even when he starts walking again, clearly deciding he’s in the lead of our little stroll now, he still doesn’t say a word.

The silence stretches long enough that I’m uncomfortable with it, but just when I’m considering saying something else on my own, Kayde speaks.

“*Because I can’t not* follow you around.” There’s honesty in his words, along with a touch of frustration and maybe, possibly, bemusement. “That’s insane, right?”

“I don’t know.” I yawn, covering my mouth. “You’re pretty insane, so it probably tracks.”

Kayde whirls suddenly, one hand coming up so he can press his thumb and forefinger to the base of my throat. My heart leaps to the space between his fingers, though it feels less like an escape response and more like I’m starting to crave this sort of touch from Kayde.

Though I *definitely* ignore the way my body wants to lean into the hold, to make him press harder to my neck around my pulse points.

“Careful, baby girl,” Kayde sighs, though there’s no real threat in it.

“Or you’ll hurt me?” It’s easier to be bold in the dark, when I can barely see the looming, blond consequences of my words glaring down at me.

“Or I’ll pin you to that tree about six feet behind you and fuck you until you can’t walk. Doubt you want to get back to camp with me carrying you. Just think of how we’ll have to explain things to Kinsley and Liza when I go get you an ice pack or a heating pad for your soreness.”

“Is that—” Somehow, I cut myself off. “Never mind.”

“No, come on,” Kayde leans closer, cooing. “I want to hear what risky, *bold* thing you were about to say to me.”

Well, *fuck it*, I suppose.

“Is that a threat?” I lean into his hold, staring up at him. “Or a *promise*, Kayde?”

For a moment, I think I’ve broken him. My psychopath stands there, completely still, like his brain is trying to reboot and remember how to run the Kayde program. I think I see him blink, and his fingers flex around my throat seconds before he barks out a laugh and drops his hand.

“I don’t know what I want more,” he admits, starting to walk again. “To fuck that attitude out of you, or let you keep going until you’re so deep in shit with me you’ll never get free.”

*Aren’t I there already?*

It certainly feels that way.

“I can’t leave you alone,” he admits again, picking the conversation back up from where we’d left off before...Well, my mouth got in the way. “I *can’t*. Especially when you’re so damned good at getting yourself hurt. I know I can’t tie you up and keep you in your cabin all day. Kinsley would come looking for you eventually and I don’t want to deal with her mad at me. But...”

I see him shake his head again, as if to clear it. “Guess I’m just too in love with you, Summer. That’s the only answer.”

I don’t know how to tell him that people in love don’t stalk each other. Maybe in his world, in his *mind*, they really do.

*Wait a second—*

“I’m sorry, back up.” My voice is sharper than I intend, and Kayde turns, head tipping like he’s a confused golden retriever. “Are you telling me that the *only reason* you have against tying me to my bed in my cabin—”

“Probably my cabin,” he muses. “Melody would probably break in and get you out of yours.”

“Whatever. Is that you don’t want someone *else* finding me, breaking me out, and being pissed at you?” Surely I’m mistaken and he’s just forgotten to mention how much of an inconvenience to me it would be.

“Uh, yeah. What else should I worry about?” Kayde’s footsteps crunch in the leaves, and he cracks down on a stick that sounds like a gunshot. “I’d feed you. You wouldn’t starve or dehydrate. I’d even give you bathroom breaks.”

“You should worry that *I, Summer*, might take offense to being locked in a damn cabin,” I tell him flatly.

“You think I couldn’t keep your mind off of it?” His tone is wicked when he asks the question, and I nearly stumble over a root. “You think I couldn’t entertain you, baby girl?”

God, okay, I’ve made a mistake, clearly. Instead of answering, I just snort at his words and lengthen my steps, walking off of the path and further into the woods like I’m going to go get lost just to free myself of his company tonight.

Though evidently, with his admission of stalking me, that might not be an option. “You’re insane,” I call back over my shoulder, feet kicking up forest debris as I stumble over a rock. “You know that, right? It’s not normal to just casually talk about stalking, or kidnapping, or imprisonment —” My foot collides with something big and heavy. Something that isn’t a stone or root.

I go down, arms wheeling at my sides and my flashlight hitting the ground hard enough that it flickers before steadyng once more.

“Fuck,” I hiss, hearing Kayde coming at me through the underbrush. “Fuck, that was smart, Summer. What in the hell...” My words trail off as I

grasp the flashlight to look at what I've fallen over.

Only to find an open, black duffel bag with metal pieces shining up at me dully. I move my legs off of it, aware I only have a few seconds before Kayde is within range to see it as well.

My hand reaches out, fingers groping around in the shadowy bag, only for me to yelp and jerk my hand back to stare at a small slice in my finger that wells blood like a paper cut. "What the heck?" I whisper again, aware I'm repeating myself.

By the time Kayde is on the other side of the duffle bag, his flashlight pointing down on it, my hand is back in the bag, more careful this time. "Summer, don't—" His protest dies on his lips when I pull out a long, wicked-looking knife.

One that's pretty similar to the knife I'd threatened Kayde with. The knife that was *his*.

"Kayde..." My heart hammers in my chest, and I can't help but stare up at him, the knife in my hands. "Kayde, you said...you *promised*." I feel like crying. Maybe he didn't promise in so many words, but fuck, he'd sounded like he meant it.

He'd said he meant it, that he wasn't here to kill anyone.

*But there's no way to mistake this.*

Not when the bag is filled with ropes, a lighter, a small bottle of gasoline, and two more knives. Not when the duffel bag is black and had been half hidden in leaves before I accidentally uncovered it.

"Summer." Slowly Kayde kneels next to me, never once looking down at the bag. In the light from my flashlight that's still on the ground, I can see the furrow in his brow and the frown touching his lips. "Listen to me." There's a note of urgency in his voice. Something I don't understand, but I'm not willing to listen.

I shake my head back and forth, legs curled up under me, though I don't get to my feet. "You *said*," I whisper, feeling like I'm going to cry. He'd lied to me.

He'd fucking *lied*.

"You *said*—"

"Summer *stop*—"

"You *said* you wouldn't kill anyone!" My voice is too loud, and seems to echo through the surrounding trees. Kayde looks up, a frown on his lips, and looks around as if he's afraid someone can hear us.

As if he's not the only danger here.

"You said you were here for me, n-not—" I break off with a broken, frustrated laugh and fight not to cry in humiliation and shame. "You fucking said—"

"They're not mine." Whatever patience he has with me must be fraying, judging by the way he hisses out the words. "Summer, *that's not fucking mine.*"

"I can't believe I believed you—"

"SUMMER!" Kayde lunges forward, gripping my chin in his hand. "Sweetheart, I need you to look at me, and I need you to listen." He doesn't go on until finally, after a few seconds, I drag my eyes up to his.

And I'm shocked at the earnestness I see there. Along with the touch of worry.

"Those. Aren't. *Mine.*" He points with his other hand down at the duffel bag, and the knife in my hand, before pointing at himself.

But still my brain, that's working on overdrive, isn't keen on listening. It takes me longer than it should, with panic building in my chest until it's ready to overflow. Until the words finally kick in and my brain takes notice of them.

*Those.*

*Aren't.*

*Mine.*

"...What?" I murmur through numb lips. "Are you kidding me? You expect me to believe—"

"I expect you to remember that knives are not my first choice. And knives like these?" The hand that isn't gripping my chin darts into the duffel bag. He pulls out the other two blades, sheathed, and holds them up to the moonlight. "I've never had anything to do with them. With anything like this. Remember my knife? The one you held against me?" He drops the two knives in his hand, then gently tugs the one I'm holding out of my hand. "Look at this one, baby girl." He holds it up to, and I see finally that there are some glaring differences between this sleek, almost butcher knife, and the hunting knife he'd had in his duffel.

"These aren't my weapons, Summer. Not my ropes, my gasoline, or anything else. None of this is *mine.*" He stares at me, willing me to get what he's saying, but my brain just isn't there yet.

Until it is.

*Oh. Fuck.*

“No. No, you can’t expect me to believe that, what, there’s another murderer at Camp Crestview?” I scramble to my feet, shaking my head as I pull free of him. “Kayde, that’s fucking ridiculous. You can’t think—”

He steps over the duffel bag, closing in on me again. “I think that I’m not nearly the scariest thing out there. Or the quietest,” he breathes, face close to mine. “And you should remember that, too.” His eyes blaze a warning that finally sinks in, and I bite my lower lip.

*Do I believe him?*

That’s the million dollar question I can’t stop from running through my head on repeat.

“Do you think I believe you?” I don’t know how I expect it to come out. Kinsley would be offended if I ever asked her that.

But Kayde...isn’t Kinsley. He searches my face in the dim light, then reaches up to stroke his knuckles down my cheek. “No,” he sighs finally, a wry grin on his face. “But I think you want to. I can’t DNA print that duffel bag for you to prove the shit inside isn’t mine. All I can do is tell you that it isn’t.”

I can’t know that for sure. But he’s definitely right about one thing. I *want* to believe him. Hesitantly, I reach up, my fingers grazing his chin. “Tell me again,” I demand, panic still thrumming in my veins.

He reaches up and grasps my wrist lightly, leaning in until his nose brushes mine. “That shit is not mine, Summer,” he promises quietly. “But it’s someone’s. And I’d like to be far from here when they come to get it.”

Belatedly, I realize that we’re at the farthest point from the populated areas of Camp Crestview that we can be while still on the property, and that’s the only saving grace to finding this. Though, that’s not really that much of a good thing, if I consider all the details.

And I have to decide now if I’m going to believe Kayde or not.

“If you’re lying to me, I’ll kill you.” The words aren’t teasing. They aren’t meant to be cute or funny or provoke a heat-fueled reaction from him.

They’re just a promise.

“I’ll tell Kinsley if I have to. And *we’ll* kill you before we let you touch any of our kids.”

“I know, baby girl.” His wry grin returns, and he presses his forehead to mine. “But I’m not lying to you. I *promise*.”

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# CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



I should feel trapped and uneasy.  
*I shouldn't believe him.*

Being in a car with Kayde, which is *his car* though he won't give me an answer about why he Ubered that first day of this camp session, should absolutely make me feel like I'm a victim being kidnapped.

*I shouldn't believe him.*

But the comfortable silence is broken only by the music filling the silence between us. So with my window cranked down and my sunglasses jammed over my face, I lean back against the headrest of the truck with a sigh.

God, I really shouldn't believe him.

*But I do.*

“This song choice is abysmal,” I mumble, my eyes closed as the wind whistles in through the window and blows against my face. “Like, if this is coincidence, it’s probably fate telling me something.”

Kayde chuckles, the sound barely audible over the words of “Psycho Killer” circulating through the car before being snatched away by the wind. “It’s a coincidence,” he assures me, and reaches out to touch the screen of the console to skip the rest of the song.

Not that “Tainted Love” is much better. I snort and turn my head to face him as my brows climb toward my bangs. “Really?” I ask, voice deadpan. “Did you make this playlist just for today?”

“This is my usual playlist. Not my fault it’s out to get me today.” He pulls into the parking lot of the general store, just inside town, and I

straighten in my seat. We aren't far from camp, and I've made this trip before in Kinsley's car. Once or twice a summer, we normally end up underestimating our supplies of something, like marshmallows, and end up here to grab another case of them.

It's just luck that this year, we needed them and it worked out for us. That's what Kayde had said, anyway, when he'd aggressively volunteered us to go into town this morning at breakfast. I'd tried to protest, only to get a sharp pinch to my thigh.

Later, in private, Kayde had explained that he and I were the best ones to ask around about any new faces or suspicious interactions, so we should take the opportunity fate provided.

"You think we did the right thing?" I ask, not for the first time. "Telling Kinsley and Liza that we think there's a stranger stalking around?"

"I think leaving out the bag of weapons was the right thing, yes," Kayde tells me. "Where did you put it?"

*It* being the duffel bag that I'd run back to grab at the last minute. Kayde hadn't been a huge fan of the idea, but I'd told him I wasn't going to leave a bunch of weapons lying out there for a killer to use or a kid to find.

Especially for a kid to find. Boys would stab themselves playing stupid games that involve running with knives.

My girls would stage a coup, I'm deadly certain about that. The world doesn't need Melody at its head just yet; and neither does Camp Crestview.

"Under the bed," I admit, a bit sheepishly. When Kayde gives me a very unimpressed look, I hunch my shoulders self-consciously. "Where else would I put it? Should I hang it on the door?"

"Under the bed is the first place any idiot would look."

"Well, then, let's hope he's not an idiot." The words earn me another flat glance, but I just beam at him in response.

And I certainly don't miss the twitch of a smile on his lips that he tries to smooth away before it can grow.

"So I'm thinking you go in and get the marshmallows." Kayde shoves his door open and jumps to the ground, his black boots making almost no noise on the asphalt. Today is the first time I've seen him out of camp counselor attire and it's, well...

Well, if I hadn't been drooling over his looks before, I would be now. Kayde had swaggered up to my cabin in distressed jeans over dark, worn boots. His black tank top looking newer than the jeans, and a necklace with

some kind of pendant hanging below his throat, obscured by the collar of his shirt. I've never seen him wear it before, but I'm not about to be nosy and ask him what it is, when he's clearly got it in his shirt for a reason.

Well, not yet, anyway. But the day is still young, and my curiosity knows no bounds. His hair is loose and mostly dry now. It was wet from the shower when he showed up at my cabin, and some stupid part of me had been a little put out that I hadn't gotten to join him.

It's a thought I normally would've smacked and shredded until I could hide it in the back of my mind, under a rug labeled *Inappropriate Kayde Thoughts*. But now I let myself have them, and I let myself sometimes dwell on all the things that cross my brain when it comes to Kayde.

It's troubling, really, how often I think about him railing me. Sometimes it's memories. After all, sex with Kayde is hard to forget, and he is sure to remind me how much I love it pretty frequently. Sometimes, though, it's ideas of what I'd love for him to do to me, and where.

Like the boathouse, again.

Like, frankly, *anywhere*. Against a tree in the dark plays in my fantasies quite often, but with finding the duffel bag last night, some of that dream has withered and died at the thought of being in danger in the woods outside of camp.

"Hello?" I blink, and realize I'm staring straight at Kayde's pecs, which have materialized in front of me. Or rather, *all* of Kayde has appeared in front of me, and I realize that maybe I've been spacing out, lost in thought. Kayde reaches up to tap my forehead, a soft, amused smile on his lips. "My sweet little overthinker." He chuckles. "What in the world am I going to do with you?"

"Fuck me?" I ask, before I can stop myself. But at the very least, my suddenly burning cheeks aren't quite as obvious as the way his brows jerk upward and his lips part for him to take a deep, hissing breath.

Well, I hadn't meant to say that out loud. But now that it's between us, I grin wryly and gaze up at him from behind my sunglasses.

"That's not very public appropriate, Summer," Kayde chides at last, though he doesn't make a move to step away from me. His hand comes up, and he presses two fingers under my chin to tip my face up to his. "But I love it when you speak your mind, so you won't find me complaining. Even if half of it is you just needing the last word, huh?" Before I can reply, he leans down just enough to kiss me lightly on the lips.

It's chaste and sweet.

And it's nothing I want from him. But it would probably be inappropriate to toss him in the back of his truck to ride him, or to demand he eats me out again like he had the first week of camp when I'd ridden his face—

Now really isn't the time to be doing this to myself. I feel the blush staining my cheeks even more, and I press my hands to them, still meeting Kayde's eyes behind my sunglasses.

"Are we trying to start something we can't finish, sweetheart?" Kayde is better at reading me than he should be, and he finally shows me a genuine smile before kissing my forehead. "Later you can mouth off all you want to me, okay babe? I'll make you pay for it like you clearly want."

"What?" Shock trembles down my spine, and I rear back. "That's not—"

"Marshmallows, and check with the store manager about anyone he doesn't recognize coming in lately," Kayde tells me firmly. "I'm going to wander around a little." His hand brushes my hip before Kayde turns and ambles in the other direction, looking like a heartbreaking bad boy from some vintage movie with a cult following.

Though in Kayde's case, in these jeans, that cult following would be solely dedicated to his ass.

"He says he's in love with you," I remind myself under my breath. "There's probably nothing morally wrong in staring at his ass." It takes me longer than I'm proud to admit to tear my gaze away from him, and then I almost walk into the door of the general store like a dumbass before dragging myself into the air-conditioned building.

It definitely hasn't changed much over the years. I'm always so amazed at how little gets refurbished or remodeled in 'Dan's General Store' every year that I end up here. Inhaling, I taste the familiar scent of gasoline and cleaning products in my nose, though I've learned that just covers the scent of slightly too-ripe fruit and cigarettes.

The floor has its sticky places, but overall the cement is inoffensive on my shoes as I stride up to the counter and knock on the old, chipped laminate to draw the man's attention from staring down at his phone through behind thick glasses.

"Yeah?" Dan grunts, still not looking up as a cigarette dangles precariously from between his lips. When he finally does look up,

recognition jolts into his expression, and he stands up with a sigh. “You’re from the camp, right? What do you need this time?”

“Marshmallows again,” I admit, shooting him an apologetic smile. “I don’t know what’s wrong with our math, but we always seem to underestimate how many we need.”

He chuckles dryly, sidling out from behind the counter and heading further back into the store. The brick building is set up in aisles, though it’s hard to move through the store without going through the aisles in the way Dan intended. We pass pickles, olives, bread, candy, and the few spices he sells before we make it to the baking section, which is mostly just s’mores ingredients and canned cherry pie filling.

I’ve never understood why *cherry* is the one flavor he carries, but I definitely don’t mind. I grab a can as he moves half-empty cases of marshmallows out of the way, until he can finally grab and shoulder a full, unopened cardboard case from the back. “You’re lucky I remembered to order these,” he tells me, his boots thudding on the floor as he makes his way back to the front. “This is the last week of camp, right?”

“Right,” I confirm, setting my cherry pie filling on the counter. Tossing him the twenty for the case that I’d taken out of our camp funds jar, I dig in the pocket of my denim shorts for the bills and quarters I’d jammed in there when I’d learned we were coming into town.

“Nah, don’t worry about paying for that.” Dan waves me off. “I’ve got too many cans of it, anyway.”

My tongue itches to ask why the hell he keeps ordering it, and why it’s the one flavor he does carry, but instead I smile gratefully at him. “Thanks. I’m going to hoard it and eat it at night after the kids have tried to stage a rebellion.”

“With all those kids there, I have no doubt you need all the help you can get.” He takes the twenty and presses a few buttons on the old cash register before tossing the bill in and slamming it closed. I’d used to think he was just aggressive, but I’ve learned that if he doesn’t slam it, the drawer won’t stay shut. “If it were me, I’d be smoking a pack a day and hiding a bottle of Jack anywhere I could.”

“They aren’t *that* bad,” I protest, still smiling. “Oh, hey, before I go. Quick question?” Dan nods, but his attention is back on his phone and he puffs on his cigarette so the end glows orange.

I don't know how to ask him tactfully. I'm not like Kayde, with a good mask and sly cunning that makes it so no one suspects me of wrongdoing.

But I am determined, and innocent of actually being a murderer. Surely those count for something, even if I've never tried to gather information like in the movies.

"Have you seen anyone new around? We had someone come up to the camp, but I have no idea who it was. Wasn't sure if you'd seen anything... memorable?" That's as well as I can put it, I think, while being somewhat subtle.

Dan thinks about it, then shakes his head before giving a slightly apologetic grunt. That seems to be how Dan mostly communicates; in grunts, sighs, and rolling of his eyes. It's admirable, and I hope when I'm old and crotchety, I can learn the language.

Though I'd like to do so without the constant cigarette dangling from my lips.

"Must've been just us getting unlucky then, I guess." I laugh, like I'm dismissing the whole thing. "Thank you again. The kids won't riot tonight, and that's the main thing." Dan just nods, and I wrap my arms around the case of marshmallows before heading to the door, my can of cherries perched on top.

Thankfully for me, Kayde had left the truck unlocked. He isn't back—I hadn't expected him to be—but I'm able to shove the marshmallows in the back of the truck and set the cherry pie filling in the back seat, like it's a passenger, before backing up enough to close the door again.

Immediately, however, I stop. My whole body pauses, and I narrow my eyes at my reflection in the large side mirror, holding my own gaze.

*Why do I feel so strange?*

I rub my arms absently where gooseflesh has broken out, and study my surroundings in the mirror with curiosity. There's nothing wrong. Nothing has happened. And unless I've developed a sixth sense for...something, then I really can't figure out why I suddenly feel so uncomfortable.

*So vulnerable.*

The hair on the back of my neck rises, and I fight not to turn around and look for someone staring daggers at me. I don't need to. I shouldn't, at least. There wasn't anyone in the parking lot when I'd walked out here, and surely no one has popped up since I've been leaning in the truck.

But I give in anyway and turn quickly, as if I can catch something out of the corner of my eye if I move fast enough.

All I end up with for my trouble and near whiplash, however, is a view of an empty parking lot backed up by the woods beyond.

Something snaps in the trees, and while I know that it's definitely just the sounds of nature, I still let my steps take me closer to the woods, eyes narrowed.

There can't be someone there.

Every shadow seems too dark. Every slightly waving limb makes me want to jump into the air as I close the distance between me and the edge of the trees. Maybe if I just get a bit further, I can convince myself there's nothing there. Maybe if I—

A hand on my shoulder *does* make me jump, and I yelp in surprise as I whirl around, only to see Kayde behind me, concern on his face. "Hey, hey!" he raises his hands in surrender. "It's just me, okay?" But he looks past me, into the trees, as the breeze picks up to rustle the leaves. "Something out there?"

"I..." I turn with him, and find myself automatically leaning into his chest as I still clutch my arms. "No, I guess not." One of his arms snakes up around my shoulders, pulling me closer to him. "Did you find out anything?"

Kayde doesn't reply for a few long moments. He just watches the trees while the breeze catches his curls and pulls them forward around his face. "No," he murmurs finally, letting out a sigh. "Nothing at all."

# CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



With my feet crunching on dead leaves and grass, I can't help but feel like every small noise I make is amplified by ten times what it should be. I make myself jump on more than one occasion.

"I don't know how you walk like that," I call to the stalking, shadowy figure behind me that manages to make absolutely no noise.

Even Kayde's soft chuckle seems muted in the dark, though he closes the few feet of distance between us and lets his shoulder bump against mine. "I'll teach you," he promises, murmuring the words into my ear. "Then maybe you could sneak up on a deaf old lady with some kind of success, instead of letting everyone and everything in a ten-mile radius know exactly where we are at all times, hmm?" He says the words sweetly, kindly, but they're too much of a taunt for me to do anything but scrunch my nose and glare at my psychopath.

"I can't believe you're still snippy," I tell him with a sniff, my strides lengthening like I'm trying to put distance between us. I'm not, of course. Not really. And it's not like Kayde would ever let me, anyway.

Sure enough, his steps eat up any distance I could even attempt to create, and he slings an arm over my shoulders with a soft sound in his chest. "I can't believe you *demanded* to come out here with me," he murmurs, pressing his cheek to mine as he shakes his head. "Seriously, Summer. This is ridiculous. Can't you just—"

"I totally saw the ropes and the handcuffs," I reply crisply. "You're just upset I didn't fall for your 'invitation' for a little after dinner dessert so you could tie me up in your cabin and do this alone."

He doesn't even deny it. But maybe that's one thing I like most about Kayde. He doesn't lie to me. Especially not anymore, since I can see through the Lassie face and he's committed to making me believe in his honesty. Or so he says. But he also doesn't deny or dismiss what he's done; doesn't look for reasons for his actions or try to explain them away.

He just takes responsibility for his choices and owns up to them. It's... refreshing, I suppose. In some ways more than others. Tonight, I can't help the touch of irritation at his dazzling grin and the way he really does seem to think his plan was a good one.

"I'm not upset," Kayde assures me. "Maybe just a little miffed, but nowhere near *upset*. You should let me do this for you, sweetheart. Let me take care of whatever's going on so you don't have to get your hands dirty or tarnish those pretty morals of yours."

*Of yours*, because obviously, he doesn't share any of the same morals he's convinced I have in spades. The only problem is, sometimes I'm not so set on them. Not so *attached* to them when it comes to Kayde existing in my space.

"I want to know. I want to see," I murmur, unable to stop myself. When he wraps an arm around my shoulders again and slows our steps just a touch, I let him.

"Be a little more mindful of how you step," he advises, gesturing at the ground in front of us. "Look at where you're walking versus where I am. I'm not trying to up your stalk game, but even you can do better than crashing through the woods like a bear."

"A bear is probably quieter," I admit with a scoff, though I try to match the way he walks, mindfully, as if I really am searching for the best place to put my feet amongst the grass and leaves.

Unfortunately, it's harder than it looks, and Kayde really is just better at the whole thing than I am. I spend the next few minutes at it, and it takes longer than it should for me to realize that Kayde isn't saying anything.

Normally, he would be. Especially now, I think, when he's trying to teach me something that he deems important. Like better ax murderer skills that I have no intention of ever needing. "You should teach Melody this," I mutter, half without thinking. "She seems like she might need to be able to do the stalking-thing at some point down the road, or whatever."

"What makes you think I haven't?" Kayde chuckles, though there's something distracted and distant in his voice. I glance up at him, eyes

narrowing, only to see that he isn't looking at me. He really must be thinking of something else, and I wonder if he's even really heard my question.

But somehow, when his arm tightens just a little bit around my shoulders and he pulls me to a stop to press his forehead to mine, I don't have it in me to ask. We're further away from the camp than we ever go for walks, that's for sure, and the breeze ruffles thick bunches of leaves in the trees that block our view of the night sky.

It's mostly dark here, except for the slivers of moonlight that fight their way to the ground between the trees.

*Is he going to kiss me?* It feels too creepy to be romantic, I think, but a shiver runs down my spine at the light touch of his fingers on my arms. "Just don't freak out. Okay?" he murmurs, and even in the near darkness, I can feel his gaze on mine in warning.

"Freak out?" I breathe, my voice at the same volume as his.

"And trust me."

That's the harder part. Or, well, it should be anyway, but I'm not doing so well at keeping up my boundaries when it comes to my psychopath. Or my better judgment. My fingers come up to grip his shirt, and Kayde shifts just a bit, his stance almost aloof as he looks up with a crooked grin slashed across his lips. "Are you just going to follow us and hide behind trees?" he asks, his voice raised enough that anyone around us could hear him. "Or are you going to come out and say hello?"

His words cause my pulse to ratchet up a few notches, and I reach up to grip his shirt, hands tightening in the fabric. It's hard not to freak out about the implication of us not being alone. And for a few tense seconds, I'm hoping that for once, Kayde is wrong. That there isn't someone in the trees around us watching and waiting for us to do...something.

But then footsteps sound in the dead leaves, and a stick snaps just as movement from my right side catches my eyes. I whirl around enough to watch the man, eyes narrowed as he hops up onto a large, downed log and falls into a comfortable crouch.

"Well, I wasn't going to say anything." The man looks to be maybe twenty, at most. His dark hair curls around his ears, and his grin is just as wide as Kayde's, but full of authentic amusement. I can't see his eyes in the darkness, but he certainly doesn't look upset from where I'm standing.

He looks thrilled.

A quick glance over his body shows me no weapons of any kind, though I don't know how much to believe my own perceptions of this man. For all I know, he's hiding a knife in the back of his jeans and just waiting for me to fuck up so he can make his move.

"What are you doing here?" I pull away from Kayde, forcing myself to unclench my fingers from his shirt. He murmurs what might be a warning or encouragement, but the blood rushing in my ears and my focus on the man at the edge of the small clearing drowns out anything else. "Why are you so close to Camp Crestview?"

"Oh! Crestview!" The man claps his hands together, suddenly looking relieved. "I've been trying all day to remember what it was called. I kept wanting to call it Crestlake, but I knew that wasn't right. Thank you *so much*—"

"Still not answering my question," I snap, with Kayde's presence a solid weight at my back. Hopefully, if something were to happen, Kayde could stop him. But then again, in a perfect scenario, Kayde being here will keep this man from doing anything at all.

The man tilts his head to the side, and his eyes narrow shrewdly in the light from Kayde's flashlight. "What do you think I'm doing here, *Summer*?" he asks, in a voice that has me fighting back a shiver.

"Pretty sure she didn't tell you her name." There's a warning in Kayde's voice, even though he sounds casual and not at all uneasy.

"Yeah," the man agrees with a nod. "She probably didn't. But you say it so much that it would be impossible not to know. Are you glaring at me because you think I'm *rude*, Kayde? Oh, you didn't tell me yours. But I didn't need her to tell me who you are."

I glance back at Kayde, confused about what exactly that means, but Kayde's bored gaze just remains fixed on the man in front of us. He leans back against a tree, arms crossing over his chest as he just...waits.

Well, if this is a stare off between them, I'm already uncomfortable.

"What's your name?" I ask, stepping between them like I can break this stand off just by breaking their line of sight of each other. The man blinks and tilts his head the other way, surveying me as if he's just now seeing me.

"Why do you want to know?" he counters, still with that shit-eating grin on his lips.

"Because you're rude as fuck and know our names," I grit out, nails cutting into my palms at my sides. "So tell me yours, unless you want to be

‘that stupid fuck in the woods’ to anyone I talk to.”

His brows jerk up at that, and he cranes the other way to look at Kayde, as if to ask him if I’m serious.

But I don’t let him.

I sidestep, keeping my gaze on his, and preventing him from sharing a look with Kayde. He doesn’t *need* to. Not when I’m talking to him. And while I might be fighting not to shiver or run or go back to Kayde right now, that doesn’t mean that I’m about to fold.

“She’s not playing around.” Kayde chuckles from behind me. “Might as well tell her.”

“It’s not that interesting.” The man gives a loud, theatrical sigh. “You’ll be disappointed. It’s nothing so cool and cliche as *Summer the summer camp counselor*.” There it is again. The cocky, shit-eating grin that he tries on me once more.

“I’ll lower my expectations,” I assure him, arms folded over my chest.

“Thanks.” His grin turns wolfish, and he moves to sit on the log with his legs hanging from the side closest to me. “I’m Grey.” When I only blink in response, unimpressed, he barks out a sharp laugh and adds, “Told you it’s not that great.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Probably looking for my stuff someone took.” His answer is sly and quicker than I expect. Some of the amusement seems to leech away from his tone as he says it, and his eyes find mine in the near-dark. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you? I mean, you don’t *look* like a thief or anything, but who can know for sure?”

*His stuff.*

*The duffel bag.*

*Kayde really had been telling the truth.*

Something uncurls inside of me. Like a fist clenched around my ribs and compressing my heart between the sharp bones that I’d been ignoring. Kayde hadn’t lied to me.

And that means a lot more than I’m willing to admit right now.

“That’s a real shame. Maybe your stuff is just somewhere else,” I allow, folding my arms more comfortably around myself. “These woods are pretty dangerous, you know. Especially for someone who maybe shouldn’t be here.”

“Are they?” His soft voice is full of fake shock, and Grey slides to his feet in one graceful movement. “Jeez, I never knew. Does get a little weird around here at night, though.” As I watch, he strides toward us, though stops at a warning sound from Kayde behind me. “Do you ever get scared out here at night, Summer?” he asks, eyes glittering. “Do you ever worry that you might not make it back to your cabin if you go too far into the woods?”

Before I can answer, arms wrap around my chest and I’m pulled back just as Kayde rests his head on my shoulder. From the corner of my eye, I can see his wide, white-toothed grin that looks more predatory than friendly.

“She doesn’t need to worry,” Kayde promises, his hands splayed over my stomach and just under my throat. “Because she knows nothing would happen to her out here. I’d kill any little animal that thought it had a chance with her. You understand.”

To my surprise, Grey takes a step back. Something crosses his face, and he looks between us with a shrewd expression twisting his lips. “All right,” he chuckles at last. “I wasn’t trying to be *rude*, or anything.”

“Yeah, you definitely were. You can find someone else to play your games with, or you can feed the local wildlife population.” Kayde shrugs, still holding onto me, and it’s hard to not focus on the warmth of his hands or the absolute turn on that is the way he’s talking right now.

*Fuck*, it really isn’t fair for Kayde to exist.

“Maybe I’m having fun on my camping trip.” There’s a hint of a whine in Grey’s voice, and he edges a step closer, like he’s trying to taunt Kayde into action. Sure enough, Kayde’s hands tighten on my body, and he pulls me back as much as he can until I’m flush against his chest.

“Maybe you should end it early,” my blond psychopath suggests.

“Oh yeah?” I don’t expect it when Grey takes another step forward, until he’s only inches away from me. He ignores the clear warning on Kayde’s face, and the way his hand on my stomach drops to his side instead. “What happens if I don’t end it early? What happens if I want to stay?”

This time, I instantly find the words on my tongue. I suck in a breath, prepared to tell him just where he can *stay* if the mood strikes him, just as the snap of twigs and crunch of leaves pulls my attention to the space behind us.

Kayde is momentarily distracted too. Which I realize when Grey scoffs and a flurry of movement catches my eye. By the time I've reached out like an idiot to stop him, however, Grey is already back over the log, and glances at me with a Cheshire grin on his lips before disappearing into the woods.

And quickly becomes invisible in the darkness around us.

"Down," Kayde hisses, jerking me to the ground and shutting off the light. He pulls me against Grey's log, hiding us in the shadow of it, as the steps come closer, following the same path we'd come out here on, it sounds like.

Though there's no real reason for anyone else to be out here except us.

*Especially not Shawn.*

Suspicion stirs in my gut as I watch him walk by, and I hold onto Kayde with narrowed eyes as Shawn ambles down the trail without a flashlight in his hand and whistling softly under his breath.

"He shouldn't be out here," I murmur, confused as hell, once I'm sure that he's too far to hear us.

"It's his night to walk the camp," Kayde reminds me, though there's confusion in his voice as well.

"Yeah, okay," I agree, but shake my head. "But why is he out *here*? Do you think Liza and Kins told him about the stranger? Maybe he had the same idea as us?"

Kayde doesn't reply. But I don't need him to. I can feel the disbelief radiating off of him as Shawn disappears along the trail, and I wonder what Shawn has done to lose Kayde's underwhelming trust.

Something tells me, it has a lot to do with *Darcy*.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



I t's hard not to wince when my teeth close on the skin of my cuticle and pull. Blood beads around my thumb, and I finally realize what I'm doing enough to *stop*. At least for now, as long as I'm actively aware of what I'm doing. Though I'm sure in five minutes or so, another nail and the skin around it will fall victim to my anxiety over everything.

Especially everything to do with *Grey*.

I wince again as I bite at my nail again, just as a hand grabs my wrist and yanks it away from my mouth. "Oh my god, please, Summer." Kinsley's moan is one of pure horror and begging. "Stop doing that. You're going to get blood on your shirt, on me, and, I don't know, all over the camp."

"That's dramatic," I tell her from my spot on the stump I've occupied. It's still a bit wetter than I'd prefer for an obstacle course day, but nothing bad has happened, at least.

Well, nothing except the usual splinters, whining, and near-fights. My girls stand near me in their harnesses, ready to take on the tree course that the kids either love or hate. This round of campers is the bravest I've had, and I give about fifty percent credit for that to Melody, who really is the queen of encouragement and enthusiasm for our cabin.

But when I glance her way, I notice Melody is uncharacteristically quiet. That in itself is strange for her, and when I see her glance my way with a furrowed brow and a worried look on her face, my senses of unease tingle.

Melody *never* looks unsure or uncomfortable. The other girls? Sure, I'd believe it. But something about the look on her face and the way she keeps glancing around makes me think that something is wrong. And if she's too nervous or unsure to approach me about it, then I will absolutely make the first move to figure out what's going on.

*Please, God, don't let her have killed someone.* I send up a quick, silent prayer and push myself to my feet, my stinging fingers forgotten as Kinsley looks my way in confusion.

But I'll tell her after I figure out what's wrong. *If* there's anything wrong. It could just be Melody. She could just be having a day.

And yet...I really don't think that's the case. Something in me knows that isn't the case, and that Melody wouldn't be looking so unsure if everything was fine in the world of Camp Crestview.

Sure enough, when I come to stand beside her, Melody looks up at me with that same unsure, worried expression that brought me over in the first place. She shifts, messing with her harness that will make sure she only dangles from the course instead of falling, should things go poorly. But then again, I've never seen Melody fall.

"Are you okay?" I ask, keeping my voice quiet so no one else hears us. Melody nods, then shakes her head, and finally lets out a sharp breath.

"Can we talk?" The words are a quick, low mutter that send a shiver through me, because it's not a tone I've ever heard from Melody before.

Something is definitely off.

"Yeah, of course." We walk away from the group, into an empty part of the clearing that's close to the big, anchoring trees of the woods. These aren't technically part of the obstacle course, but multiple ropes are wrapped around them to keep other parts of the course anchored and steady. I sit down on one of the high, exposed roots, arms on my knees as I try to ignore the blood on my fingers and the way the skin around my nails stings like a real bitch. Flexing my fingers helps a little, and if Melody notices, she doesn't say anything.

Frankly, I don't think she notices.

"Something's weird today," she tells me in a rush. "I don't know what happened, or anything. Not *really*." She throws a glance my way as if to see if I believe her, and I just meet her eyes levelly. I doubt it's true that she doesn't know what's going on, or why things are weird. She just doesn't

want to get in trouble for doing something slightly problematic on the level of starting the nuclear apocalypse.

“You’re not in trouble,” I promise her. “I know you, Mel. I know you probably didn’t do anything that bad. At least without cause.” God, I hope it’s with reasonable cause in case it’s illegal.

*Please, God, don’t let her have killed someone and convinced Kayde to help her hide the body.* He hadn’t been in my cabin last night, so he really could’ve been anywhere.

Like hiding a body with Melody.

“It’s not me. Not...all me,” she admits hesitantly. “Some boys were acting weird this morning. They were acting all nasty and trying to start fights. When it started to affect Redtail, I asked one of them what his problem was. He wouldn’t tell me. But he kept mentioning...I don’t know. Something about a knife.”

A knife?

My heart hammers in my throat, and I stare at her, partly horrified. “Who? And where’s the knife, Mel?” I ask softly, hoping that she’s wrong or that there’s at least nothing to worry about.

“I don’t know if there is a knife. I don’t know—I didn’t want Redtail around that. Even if they were just being full of shit.” God, I really can’t blame her for that. “And it wasn’t too long ago. Just before we got our harnesses.”

“Who was it?” I force myself to ask the question calmly, even as my eyes rove around the clearing as if I can pinpoint who’s missing.

“Two of Shawn’s boys. I don’t know their names, I’m sorry. They didn’t want anyone to tell. They—”

“Thank you.” I lunge to my feet, one hand on her shoulder. “I’m going to go find them, okay? Thank you for telling me. You’re not in trouble.” I toss the words over my shoulder as I bolt back into the clearing, eyes on Kinsley and Liza.

It only takes a few seconds and words to convey my worries to them, and the two of them bolt off in opposite directions just as fingers close around my wrist. “What’s wrong?” Kayde’s voice is sharp, and I only falter for a moment at how quickly he’d realized something was off.

But then again, by his own admission, Kayde is always watching me. So why the hell should I be shocked? “We think one of Shawn’s boys got a hold of a knife,” I tell him quickly. “Melody told me. I have no idea which

kid, but Shawn's cabin is *definitely* missing a few boys." I point over in their general direction, where five boys mill around, looking bored.

"Yeah," Kayde agrees. "Okay." Without another word, he takes off as well, heading into the woods in a direction that neither Kins nor Liza had gone.

Before I can follow them, however, my wrist is grabbed again, and Melody glares up at me with determination. "Come on," she tells me, like she's the one in charge of making sure this doesn't end badly.

"Melody, I have to look for—"

"Come *on!*" she demands, and proceeds to drag me over to the place where Shawn's cabin, Bobcat, is still hanging out after their run on the obstacle course. "Hey!" Her voice is loud enough that they hear her, and two of the boys look absolutely petrified of my little monster. "Where's your friend?" she demands, finally dropping my wrist. "The one talking about the knife?"

Two of the boys trade looks, and as one opens his mouth with an unfriendly smirk on his face, I step between him and Melody. "Tell me or you're all going home today with letters to your parents that you aren't allowed back," I inform all of them quietly. "Tell me *now* if this was a prank, or a lie, or what—"

"Shawn doesn't know." The small, dark-haired boy stares up at me with wide eyes and two of his peers turn to scoff at him. "I can't get sent home," he snaps at them, shaking his head. "They were snooping around in Shawn's room before breakfast. They found a knife. It-it's one of those Swiss Army Knives, you know? With all the tools?"

*Why in the world was Shawn leaving shit like that around for kids to find?*

"Where and who?" I ask, eyes still on them. "Now." I don't have time to be nice right now. Not with my body vibrating with nerves.

"Alec. Umm, he has brown hair and glasses," the boy tells me, glancing around at his friends. "We don't know where he is, though."

"Wouldn't tell you if we did," a blond boy sneers, and that prompts Melody into lunging forward, her hand going out to grip his shirt.

"Listen, fuck-face—" she hisses, right before I cut her off.

"Whoa, *whoa* Mel. Language." Though, the words only get me three withering looks and Melody dragging the boy forward.

"Where is he?" she demands, eyes boring into his.

I'm about to tell her to stop. I'm about to say that he clearly doesn't know when all of a sudden, under the weight of her gaze that holds the same kind of threat as Kayde's, the boy visibly wilts. "He went back to the cabin with Nolan," he whispers at last. "They were going to see what else they could find in—"

I don't let him finish. I set off at a run, meeting Daniel's eyes and signaling for him to take charge of the kids. Between him and Darcy, I'm sure they can handle everyone for a bit. His surprise is clear, but he nods when he sees the urgency in my face.

I'm halfway to Bobcat before I realize Melody is still with me, the clips on her harness jingling with every step. "Go back!" I pant to her, tearing down the path. "Melody—"

"I'll go back once you find them," she interrupts, meeting my eyes with her own stubborn gaze. God, I hate this kid sometimes. But I can recognize a fight I'll struggle to win, so I shake my head and stop protesting.

I don't have the mental bandwidth to worry about something else, anyway. Bobcat looms in front of me, and just as my feet hit the boards of the deck, I hear a yelp from inside, followed by a shriek.

*Oh fuck.*

The door slams against its hinges as I shove it open, and the first thing I see are two shocked faces as the boys of Bobcat stare up at me, shocked. One of them, who isn't holding the knife, sways a little, his face pale.

"What are you—" My throat closes when I see the blood on his hands, pooling along the side of his thumb. "Fuck. Melody!" I whirl around, blocking her from coming in.

*Not that she hasn't seen it before*, as Kayde would probably say.

But Kayde isn't here right now.

Her gaze snaps up to mine and I see her hands clenching and unclenching, as if she's dying to do something instead of just stand here. "Go get Liza. Now. Tell her to meet me at her cabin. Then, umm." I blink hard, thinking.

"Then tell Kayde and Kinsley?" Melody asks, a little unsure.

God, she really is the best twelve-year-old to have in a crisis. I nod jerkily, my stomach twisting. I need to figure out how badly this kid is hurt, but I'm half-terrified to turn around.

This is definitely something I've never dealt with before. "Yeah. Yes. Do all of that, please." She takes off without another word, and that has me

spinning back around, my long strides taking me into the cabin as the not-bleeding boy jumps to his feet, the knife clattering to the floor.

“I didn’t mean to,” he stammers, backing away with his eyes on his still-silent friend. “It was an accident. We were trying to cut a belt and—”

“Towels. Get me *towels*.” I don’t need his explanation. Not with the blood roaring in my ears. I kneel and pocket the bloody knife, making sure the blade is tucked away before I do. Then, I have no other choice. My eyes find the short, sluggishly bleeding wound on his hand, and I can’t help the tremors in my fingers as I pull his hand to me to figure out how bad it is.

Well, at least he isn’t bleeding to death.

His friend returns seconds later with hand towels and beach towels, so I choose one of the former and wrap it around the wound, tightly enough that he yelps. “What’s your name?” I ask quietly, hating that I’m hurting him to staunch the flow of blood. “Are you feeling dizzy?”

“Nolan,” the boy whimpers, eyes on the white towel that’s slowly turning red. “N-no I’m not—I’m just nauseous. I’m sorry. We didn’t mean—”

“I know. It’s okay. You’re okay.” It’s not really okay, but I need them not to freak out. For a moment I consider asking him if he can walk, but between the way he sways, and the blood draining from his face even as I watch, makes me reconsider that real fast. “You’re okay,” I tell him again, getting to my feet just to bend back down and pull him into my arms.

I haven’t had first aid or camp counselor classes in a bit, but I at least remember to lift with my legs instead of my back. And it helps that Nolan is a pretty scrawny twelve-year-old.

“What do I do?” the other boy, who must be Alec, whispers. “Am I—”

“We’re going to Liza’s cabin. All of us.” My voice is firm, and it’s hard not to sprint across the grass toward my destination. But I certainly don’t want to trip and have Nolan get hurt further, even though my heart is pounding in fear against my ribs.

“He’s okay, right?” Alec’s voice is so small, and I can hear the tremble in it, so I flash him a smile that I hope seems believable.

“He’s totally okay. You’re okay,” I promise Nolan, Liza’s cabin coming into sight just as footsteps herald the arrival of Kayde at my side.

“Let me take him,” he murmurs, reaching out to me. I don’t even hesitate. Kayde is bigger than me, and obviously more used to carrying

people, because he slings Nolan into his arms quickly and easily before taking off with long, quick strides toward Liza's end of the camp.

"I'm so sorry," Alec whispers, and when I glance down at him, I see his eyes are clenched shut hard. "I really, *really* didn't mean to, Summer."

"It's—" I swallow, and force myself to smile as we follow Kayde to the infirmary. "It's okay." Even though it's not. It's *really* not, and this could have been so much worse. "But hey, can you tell me something? Where's Shawn?"

When Alec just stares blankly up at me and shrugs, I have my answer. But it's a shitty one. "You don't know?"

"He was feeling pretty off today," Alec explains. "He told us Daniel would take us over the obstacle course, but he needed to go see Liza and, uh, puke. Food poisoning, he said."

My brows knit in confusion, and maybe the barest hint of concern for Shawn, but the moment we hit the steps, I shake that off and shove it to the back of my mind for another time.

I don't have time to worry about Shawn's delicate tummy when Nolan is bleeding through a towel after being cut with a knife neither of them should have been able to find.

"But I thought you guys found this *in* Shawn's room," I have the forethought to say, turning once more to look at Alec as he climbs the three stairs to the cabin. "Didn't you?"

Alec nods, looking nervous. "We were looking for Shawn," he admits carefully. "And Nolan found it in his nightstand. In a big bag full of weird stuff."

I open my mouth, then close it, as Alec bolts across the room to where his friend sits on the edge of a bed, swaying, while Liza examines his hand. There's nothing else for me to say, or ask. At least not right now.

Not when everyone except these two boys knows that there's going to be a trip to the hospital and calls to parents that definitely won't end well.

And I'm *sure* I'll be the one explaining how in the world someone's kid got a hold of a knife.

*What a shitty way to spend the rest of my day.*

# CHAPTER FORTY



**I**t takes a moment for me to realize why I'm awake, even as I stare up at the ceiling of my small cabin. My bed is cool, especially with the blankets kicked down to my feet and my shorts riding up. The wind rattles the frame of my window, and for a few seconds, all I can really do is space out and wake up.

Until my door shuts softly, and I hear a soft breath before it's locked.

"You'd better be Kayde," I murmur sleepily, still not really awake.  
"And if you are, you should know I'm barely awake."

"You high, baby girl?" It sure as hell is my psychopath, and as I make room for him on the bed, he slides in behind me, one arm around my waist as he drags me back to him.

My brain unhelpfully reminds me of the last time we'd had sex, two nights ago, when he'd gotten off by telling me about murdering his co-captain and promised to drag me to hell along with him so we'd never be apart.

It isn't romantic.

*No matter the arguments my brain is trying to make.*

I groan a protest that I barely feel, and my brain registers some shock when I realize he's already shirtless.

"I'm so high," I assure him, finally rolling over in his grip. "So sleepy. I was stressed earlier. After Nolan and Alec and..." I make a dismissive gesture at my hand, and thankfully, Kayde doesn't ask questions.

A beat of silence goes by, then I murmur, "He's okay, right?"

“More than okay. I talked to Fink after you and Kins went back to the girls. He said Nolan needed a few stitches, but everything is fine. His parents got to the hospital earlier, and Alec’s mom picked him up just after dinner.” I know these things. But hearing Kayde say them softly, in his voice that holds no questions, somehow makes it better.

“I don’t get why he had a *knife*,” I admit, feeling his hands at my waist sliding upward. With the heat of the day, I’d forgone a shirt, and I’m sleeping only in a sports bra that leaves most of my torso bare. And Kayde seems pretty thrilled about that. “Especially somewhere the kids could get it.”

“Because Shawn’s an idiot,” Kayde reminds me smoothly, hooking his fingers in my bra and pulling it up and over my head before it disappears from my bubble of existence. I’m too high and much too sleepy to know where he’s tossed it, or care. My shorts go next, and it feels like they’re on one moment, and gone the next. Clearly, Kayde has some kind of clothes-removal super power to go with all the others he so unfairly possesses.

“I don’t like you,” I sigh, not realizing quite how that sounds.

“Oh. yeah?” Kayde sounds amused, more than anything. “Why is that, sweetheart?”

“You’re good at too many things. It’s unfair and not...cool.” God, I know I have to sound like such a dumbass, but I really can’t help it. “Makes it hard to hate you.” I definitely don’t mean for that part to come out, and his answering chuckle makes that doubly clear in my head.

“Poor thing.” He doesn’t sound at all apologetic. “Poor *baby*.”

“I’m going to go back to sleep,” I warn him, opening my eyes to glare up at my ax murderer. “Seriously. I’ll go back to sleep and leave you to talk to yourself.”

“Go back to sleep,” Kayde agrees, rather enthusiastically. In the glimmer of moonlight from my window, I can see his eyes darken, and the predatory smirk on his lips. “By all means. If you’re sleepy, you should sleep.”

“That feels too easy.”

“Does it?” he leans forward as my eyelids droop, nose nudging mine. “Or did you just forget that I love fucking your pretty little cunt while you sleep, hmm?”

Oh. Well, I hadn’t forgotten, exactly. But it’s hard to think through the haze of sleep and the THC that’s still thrumming gently through my nerves.

“I’ll be awake soon,” I promise him, eyes already drifting closed. “I took it a few hours ago. It’ll wear off.”

“Don’t push yourself on my account.” I’m already half out of it again when I feel Kayde push me onto my back, and even the feel of his fingers against my slit isn’t enough to keep me from dozing off again.

Maybe I really should’ve taken half an edible, instead of a full one, if I can’t convince myself to wake up for Kayde to fuck me.

Or maybe I just find the idea of him wrecking me while I’m asleep that much of a fucking turn on, and my brain isn’t in the mood to admit it. Either way, between his soft, sweet touches and the murmur of his voice in my ear, I don’t stand a chance. My brain powers down just as quickly as it had come online, and with a sigh I decide to just say *fuck it* and let myself drown in the suffocating blackness of THC-aided sleep.

The sounds in my ears are embarrassing, at best. Soft whimpers and pleas that sound like someone else, and only when Kayde shushes me softly do I realize that the embarrassing, shaky noises are coming from *me*.

“There you are.” Kayde’s voice is just a little bit strained, and when he sinks into me again until his hips are pressed to mine, I realize why. “There’s my sweet girl. Are you back with me, baby?” He tucks my hair back behind my ear, his fingers stroking my cheek. Sometime in the last... however long it’s been, he’s rolled me onto my stomach, and my cheek is pressed into my pillow, hips up and braced on another as he fucks me.

“How long was I out?” I murmur, unable to stop a full body shudder when it hits me how close I am. “Fuck! Fuck, Kayde—”

“Not so loud.” Kayde chuckles in my ear. “Or your little campers are going to come incinerate me. Just take it for me, baby. You’re doing so well. Don’t you want to come again?”

*Again?* I have no idea how many times I’ve come already, but now that he says it, I feel like everything in me is on fire. I whimper, fingers clenching the sheets, and bury my face in the pillow under me to try to prevent any louder noises.

“I’m happy you’re awake,” Kayde admits, one hand on my lower back as he fucks me. “I love hearing you whine when I breed your pretty pussy.”

“*Fuck,*” I hiss, though it’s muffled by the pillow. My body seems to tense when he says shit like that, and suddenly I’m closer than I had been, thanks to the words.

It's unfair how good he is at this. At knowing what will make me come, and what I want to hear. That, or I'm just fucked up enough that I'm into all the things he is, too. And that's a sobering thought, if not a completely shocking one by this point.

"I'm gonna come," I tell him, the whining edge still prevalent in my voice. Without thinking, I try to move, trying to sit up like I'm going to do something other than just take it.

But Kayde's hand moving from my lower back to between my shoulders ends that attempt very quickly. He presses down, fingers digging in firmly as he pushes me back to the bed under me. "Then you can come right there, writhing on my cock," Kayde informs me sweetly. "You don't need to go anywhere, sweetheart. Just let me wreck you, okay? Come for me, Summer." His voice turns just a little cruel, and his other hand slides along my slit, sinking into me alongside his cock.

"Oh fuck, oh *shit*." I've definitely never had someone do that before, and the feeling is new, to say the least. I can't help the whine from building in my throat, nor can I help the way my hips rock against his. Especially when he slides his finger free and instead strokes the pad of his finger over my clit. He swirls over it a few times, before suddenly, sharply, pushing down harder between my shoulders and increasing his already unsteady pace.

That, along with the increased force of him teasing my clit, throws me headlong into my release. Belatedly, I clench my teeth around part of my pillow, eyes screwed shut as I come around his cock while he fucks me. A few soft sobs leave me, and I can feel tears soaking into my pillow seconds before Kayde pulls out, grabs my hips, and flips me over on the bed before resettling himself between my thighs.

And it all happens fast enough that I can barely catch my breath, let alone recover, before he's sinking into me again. This time, he doesn't work up to it. His body slides against mine, his chest and face slick with sweat as he fucks me. The movements drag out the echoes of my orgasm, and all I can do is stare up at him from under my lashes as my pussy flutters around his cock and he fucks me like he'll never get to again.

"Fuck," he hisses at last, his movements becoming unsteady. He squeezes his eyes shut and reaches out, one arm hooking under my knee and pulling my leg over his shoulder. I barely manage to muffle my cry on his next deep thrust that slides against something in me that makes me see

stars, and his grin widens. “Come again for me, baby,” he purrs, a dark edge to his voice. “I want to make this cunt all sloppy. Don’t want you thinking I could’ve done something better or leave you wanting more.”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” I whimper, twisting my fingers in the sheets. “Kayde, please. It’s too much, I need—” I choke off a scream when his thumb circles my clit once, teasingly, then rubs against me in earnest to push me past the brink of overstimulation.

“Come for me again.” His voice is a low growl, and that only serves to push me higher up the metaphorical cliff.

“Why don’t you?” I mutter, a bit poutier than I mean it to be as my chest heaves with the air I’m sucking in to keep myself alive.

“Oh, I’m going to. Again,” Kayde assures me. “But you’re going to earn it first. Stop fighting me, baby. Stop trying to hold out. And don’t look at me like that unless you want me to make you come twice more before I let you have a break.”

That definitely shouldn’t be as much of a turn on as it is. Yet here I am, moaning at every thrust of his cock and every swipe of his fingers on my clit. When he reaches his other hand up to tease my nipple, I can’t do it anymore. Not when I’m already fighting off so many differing sensations from him.

I shudder through my orgasm, thighs shaking from how hard my muscles are clenched. My heel digs into his shoulder, dragging him closer to me while I fight not to make any noise to alert the girls a room away.

Distantly, I hear Kayde curse. His hand leaves my breasts, though he continues to tease my clit as I ride out the overwhelming waves of my orgasm. Instead, he splays it on my stomach, holding me in place as his rhythm falters.

“God, Summer.” I hear him pant, his movements becoming labored and strained. “You’re just so fucking”—he slams hard into me with a snarl—“perfect.”

My toes curl as he comes, and I’m sensitive enough that I swear I can feel it even more when he presses down over my lower abdomen, mirroring where he’s still seated deep in my body.

“Not really,” I mumble, barely noticing when he drops to his elbows over me, his body pressed to mine. “I’m just Summer.”

“Well, just Summer.” He dips down, and the shock of his tongue trailing up my cheeks to lap up my tears makes me jump under him. “I don’t care

what anyone says. You were made for me, and you're mine. You get that, right? That I'd never, under any circumstance, let another man fuck you?"

"I think that's called being overly possessive. At least, to make threats about it," I point out, feeling more awake and clear-headed than I have since he'd entered my cabin. Kayde chuffs and rolls over onto his side, then gets up to rummage around in my nightstand drawers. Not that I really care. Especially when he brings back a soft towel that he uses to clean me up.

"Call it what you want," he invites easily, wiping the towel over himself before tossing it to the floor. Seconds later, he's back in the bed with me, his arm slipping around my waist. "I'll be your monster, if you want. Your psychopath, your ax murderer. I'll be anything you want me to be, as long as you can be one thing for me."

"That sounds like a loaded proposal," I can't help but quip back in his direction, though I definitely don't regret it when he sinks his teeth into the soft flesh of my shoulder with a growl. "What do I have to be for you, Kayde?" My hands come up to stroke his forearm, and he holds me tighter in response.

"Easy," Kayde tells me, and I feel the smile against my shoulder. "I just need you to be *mine*, Summer. All mine, no matter what. Think you can do that for me?"

I don't answer at first. Not when I'm so conflicted and still harboring some fear and resentment from...well, everything. "I'll think about it," I whisper at last, settling back against him with a small shiver. In response, Kayde tugs the blanket up over us, and nuzzles his face against the mark he's undoubtedly bitten and sucked into my shoulder.

"I'll accept that, for now. Do you want me to stay?" The question surprises me enough that I don't speak, but my hands tighten on his wrist, even though I don't mean for them to. In response, I hear his soft breath, and a purr of what might be approval. "Okay, Summer," Kayde whispers in my ear, drawing me back against him with both of his arms around mine until he can situate us so I'm half lying on his chest.

"I won't go anywhere. So long as you at least consider not running me over with a semi, should you get the chance."

"No promises," I reply, glad he can't see the grin on my face as I close my eyes and breathe in his scent mixed with sex. "But I'll get back to you when I decide."

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# CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



**H**e stayed.

That's the first thought that crosses my mind when I open my eyes into the very early, mostly still dark sky outside of my window. I can't see the sun, but strips of pink paint the dark sky through the trees above the cabin.

And around my waist, warm and heavy, rests Kayde's arm. Nervously, I pick up my hand to stroke my fingers along his tanned skin that makes my olive complexion look pale in comparison.

He isn't awake, but when he shifts behind me and lets out a breath against my shoulder, I pause. Kayde shifts a little, burying his face against me, and murmurs something that doesn't sound like a real sentence.

"Yeah," I agree in a whisper anyway, wondering how deep of a sleeper he is. "I agree."

Kayde shocks me with a tired chuckle, and kisses my shoulder. "Do you?" he purrs, voice just as soft. "I'd think you most certainly would not agree with me, Summer."

Somehow I manage not to jump, or stiffen, or startle even the least bit. I suck in a breath and lean my head back a little, putting my ear close to his lips. "So what am I agreeing with?" I ask, still chasing sleep from the edges of my brain. I can feel the pleasurable soreness in my lower abdomen, and as if he can read my mind, Kayde's arm shifts so he can splay his fingers against my stomach.

"I said I love you," he tells me after a moment, his hand pressing me back against him.

And while him being awake hadn't startled me, nor had the fact that he's still here, this does it. My breath catches as my throat closes in surprise, and I stare up at my window with wide eyes while having no idea what to say. "Oh," I murmur at last, feeling hyperaware of every small move of his body against mine.

"Yeah." Kayde chuckles and nips at my shoulder. "I have to go, baby girl."

"Why?" My brain clearly isn't working at full capacity, since I can't figure out why in the world he's going to deprive me of his radiator-like warmth.

This time Kayde nips my shoulder lightly, and draws away a second later before sighing, "Because if we walk out of here when the kids are up, or the other counselors, it's going to get back to Fink. You know how they are. We're already Crestview's worst kept secret, apart from Liza and Kinsley. But even they try not to let anyone realize they're sleeping together." That seems stupid to me, since everyone knows they *are*. But he's right; a bunch of preteens learning about our nightly activities would be... probably not great for us. And I certainly wouldn't get invited back to be a camp counselor here again.

If I'm even coming back next year.

I know for a fact Kinsley won't be. She has too much going on in her life, and with Liza now part of the deal, she has no reason to come back. Any job she's been offered will net her more money than this, and since Liza lives close to us, she doesn't need to come here to make her move.

But I still haven't decided where that leaves me.

"That's fair, I suppose." The words come out in a grumble, and I can't help my groan of protest when Kayde pulls away completely. Belatedly, I roll over, watching him pull on his t-shirt and shorts. "Though I do feel incredibly offended. I'll never get over this slight against my character."

That earns me a side-eyed glance from Kayde, though I can see the smile twitching at his lips. "My poor sweetheart," he purrs, crossing the cabin and leaning down to kiss my nose. I grumble at that too, turning my face into the pillow. "Go back to sleep, baby. You don't need to be up for another hour."

"We'll see," are the only words I'll give him, though I do curl up on his side of the bed and bury my face in the pillow that smells like him. And if I suck in a deep breath of his scent as my eyes fall closed again, Kayde is at

least nice enough not to mention it. Instead, he crosses back to me and presses one last kiss to my temple, then leans down to murmur in my ear.

The door closes behind him seconds later as he leaves, but I'm too busy with his last words running through my head on repeat to really notice.

*I love you more than anything, Summer.*

Like hell he does, I remind myself. He hasn't known me long enough for that.

“**Y**ou’re flailing again, Melody. You too, Lily.” Kayde’s words are kind but firm, and I peek up at them from over my sunglasses as he stands at the edge of the pool where two of my girls and three of his boys are doing laps. With their free day, the kids could decide to do pretty much anything, but only a few of them had been interested in Kayde’s swimming lessons.

Or more precisely, *competitive* swimming lessons. So far he’s taught them two or three different styles, and I’d had to stifle a laugh when they’d attempted to butterfly themselves across the pool. But Kayde had only given me a withering glance and I’d managed to shut up.

I glance up at them again, content to soak up the sun in a chair next to the pool while the kids try to impress my sociopath. Melody, in particular, strives to be the best with form and speed, and it would take an idiot not to see that Kayde likes her more than the others.

I wonder if it’s the sociopath in her that draws him in like a big brother, or something else entirely. Mel does have a great personality, and the maturity some adults don’t possess. Like Darcy. But if I had to guess, I’d say that it’s the...wrongness about them.

Which I’ve stopped denying, since I’ve started actually paying attention to the similarities between her and Kayde. There are too many to count, really. The same shrewd way they observe people, for one. The easy mask I see Melody put on around others.

The ability to stay calm in any situation, even ones that should bother a twelve-year-old.

A low noise that I recognize as someone clearing their throat catches my attention, and I jerk my head up to see Darcy standing behind me, her face pinched and uncomfortable behind a pair of designer sunglasses.

“Yeah?” I ask, brows raising. “You want something? I don’t think Kayde likes you very much anymore. So maybe don’t push me into the pool

or some other shit.”

“I’m not going to push you into the pool.” Darcy’s voice is a quiet mutter, and I can feel the contempt wash over me as she speaks. She might not do it, but she definitely wants to. But she doesn’t continue. She doesn’t say a damn thing as she stares at me from behind her sunglasses, though I can definitely feel her distaste just as clearly as the contempt.

“Can I help you with something? Do you want to, I don’t know, dump all of your kids on me while you run off to the boathouse with Shawn?” My words aren’t meant to be cruel, but Darcy flinches like I’ve just accused her of the worst thing in the world. Her arms come up, and Darcy seems to hug herself as she stands behind my chair, twisting like a child caught doing something bad.

But she still doesn’t offer me any explanation. I see her chin jerk up as she glances across the pool, and when I follow her look, I find Kayde’s gaze on her. And, well, I can’t really blame him for not looking particularly friendly. But when he looks at me, as if asking for permission, I shake my head just enough that he has to get the message. After all, I’ve never been afraid of Darcy or her caustic words.

And I certainly won’t be starting today.

“Look. Is there something you want? If something’s wrong, just tell me. You know I’ll help with whatever—”

“Have you ever done something you regret? Or, I don’t know, heard about something happening you know shouldn’t?” She cuts me off like I hadn’t been speaking and seems to hover in place like the least comfortable prey animal I’ve ever laid eyes on. Hell, at this point, it seems as if she’ll bolt if I clap my hands or make any sudden movements, so I just wait for her to figure out what she wants.

But then she just...doesn’t continue, and it occurs to me the question isn’t rhetorical. Though it’s stupid enough that it should be.

“Yeah, I’ve done a lot of things I regret,” I tell her, self-consciously rubbing the scar over my eye. That’s certainly not one of them, but it’s become almost a nervous tick. “And uh, kind of?” Kayde probably counts for the second part. And not telling the police, or anyone else, had probably been a mistake on my part once I knew what he was at Camp Crestview for originally.

However, that seems to have worked out. Somewhat. Maybe.

Well, okay, I'm still not so sure about the outcome of that. But Darcy barely seems to be listening to me. She rubs her arms as if she's cold, though the day is sweltering for this late in the summer. Instead of looking at me, she stares at the pool, her mouth pressed into a thin line.

"We're not friends," she announces suddenly, and I blink up at her, bemused and utterly nonplussed.

"Yeah, we're definitely not," I assure her. "We haven't ever been friends. This summer has kind of made that even clearer, huh?" My voice is dry as I speak to her, and not for the first time in the past minute, I wonder what in the world is going on.

"What would you do if I'd done something bad?" she asks finally, and I barely hear her words over the yells from the kids in the pool and Kayde's sharp, barking advice to them.

*Something bad?* The alarm bells in my head are ringing, and I turn without standing to look up at her, dragging my sunglasses off of my face as I do.

But Darcy doesn't return the favor. She doesn't let me see her eyes, and I wonder if that's intentional. "I'd help you." My words, my voice, my tone are all earnest, because I'm not lying. Even though she looks at me with a quirked mouth that shows me she thinks I am. "No, I'm serious. I'd help you, Darcy. Just because you aren't my friend doesn't make you the boogeyman."

She flinches at that, and I have no idea why. I certainly haven't insulted her, I don't think. If anything, I've done the opposite. But the way Darcy recoils makes me nervous, and I wish for the first time I could read minds, or faces, or at least body language better than this.

"You wouldn't," Darcy murmurs. "You're just saying that."

"I'm not." Worried that getting up will spook her, I remain sitting. "I'd help you, Darcy. Okay?" I don't know how else to convince her, and she certainly doesn't look like she believes me.

Her mouth opens, then closes, and she glances up toward Kayde once more. "I've got to go," she says at last, and when I follow the direction of her face, I see that Kayde is sauntering around the pool, his eyes firmly on her. Sure enough, Darcy takes one step back, then another, before reluctantly looking back down at me.

"Be careful in the woods. Be careful near the—"

“Everything okay, Darcy?” Kayde’s words are sharp, and the smile on his face is anything but friendly.

Darcy doesn’t stick around to answer. She turns and walks away from the pool as quickly as she can, disappearing around the edge of Otter Hall as she breaks into a jog.

Kayde comes to a stop beside me, and I get to my feet slowly. “That was really weird,” I tell him, shoving my sunglasses back on my face. “Like...even for Darcy.”

“What did she say?” His voice is sharp. Demanding. I turn to look at him, brows raised, but he just gives me a blank look in reply to show me he really isn’t joking.

“That’s the thing.” I lift my shoulders and drop them in a helpless shrug. “She didn’t say anything at all that made sense. She asked what I’d do if she’d done something bad. Then she told me to be careful.”

“Be careful of what?”

Again, I shrug. “Who knows?” It’s not worth worrying about. Not when it could just be Darcy trying to freak me out. “Maybe she took one of Kins’ edibles and it didn’t agree with her.” Kayde shrugs in agreement, but I’m not an idiot.

Neither of us believe that’s the case in the least.

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# CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



The next morning, Kayde wakes me up before leaving again, and I can't stop the swirl of an oncoming existential crisis. Not when I should be sleeping, not at breakfast, and not when Liza volunteers me to go get the last two kayaks from the boathouse.

Though as I'm dragging them toward the river, it hits me what today is and what I'm about to do.

Suddenly, my emotional turmoil over Kayde and what he is takes a back seat to my fear of the river. I've never been good at this, and without Liza to pony me along, I'm terrified of something happening the same way it had two weeks ago.

Which only makes me think about nearly drowning under Shawn's stupid ass in the pool, and it's official. This is *not* my summer to take chances around water, and I'm about to offer myself up to the karma gods yet again.

"Great," I mutter, my stomach fluttering as I drop the kayaks beside the others. I hadn't expected this, truth be told. I hadn't expected the way my stomach would roil with nausea, or how my legs would lock at the thought of getting back on the river in a kayak.

*It's not that big of a deal,* I chide myself mentally. The kayak wasn't even the problem. It had been a fucked up coincidence, and an accident as well. But somehow, my brain doesn't get the memo that it'll be fine this time.

It has to be fine this time.

I suck in a breath, then another, and belatedly I realize Liza has said something to me from a few feet away. But I'm too busy staring at the water and trying not to lose it.

"Hey." Liza touches my arm and I jump, looking at her with wide eyes. "Are you okay?" Her sunglasses reflect my nervous, pinched look, and I look at myself in them and try to smile.

"Yeah, I'm...I'm great." I'm not doing so great. I can remember quite clearly the pain from the kayak paddle and the feel of literally drowning in the river. No matter what I do, it plays in my head over and over whenever I even look at the kayaks resting by the shore. "Sorry if I don't seem like it."

I'm really not great.

Liza studies my face before frowning in sympathy. She steps closer, hand on my arm again, and says, "You can stay here, okay? Daniel, Kayde, and I can handle the kids. Seriously, Summer. It's no big deal."

*It's no big deal*, is what she says. But that's not what I hear. If I were a dog, my hackles would be up. As it is, I scuff my foot along the ground under me, hating how the words make me feel. I'm not a coward, or a kid who needs to be coddled. I've kayaked multiple times a year, every year, and this cannot be the time that I give up and run back to my cabin with my tail between my legs.

But on the other hand, I can't deny the anxiety that pulses in my throat, or the way something loosens in me when she gives me the option of staying behind. My mouth opens, and I rush to figure out what I'm even going to say to her, when an arm wraps around my waist, pulling me a step back.

"She's okay," Kayde promises, resting his head on my shoulder. "She can do this, Liza."

Liza looks between us, and I give a wan, hesitant smile. "I've totally got this," I agree, lifting my hands in thumbs up motions. "Can't keep me out of the water. Not in July." Though I'd prefer any body of water other than this damn river.

"It's an option if you want to stay," Liza tells me firmly, repeating her words. "Or we have an extra double this time, so you can kayak with me if you want." When Kayde shifts behind me, clearly uncomfortable with her words, Liza's eyes fall on him and narrow.

"Don't let your face get stuck like that, Kayde," Liza says, her voice flat. "She's been kayaking with me for years now."

“Only because I wasn’t here,” he’s quick to point out. It’s surprisingly honest, for him. His mask has started to fall around both of them, as I’ve noticed, but neither Kinsley nor Liza seem to mind or be afraid. But then again, can I really be shocked? The two of them have faced down Fink, other counselors, and wild animals without blinking. Kayde probably doesn’t faze them, since they have no idea what he really is. “But I’m here now, so you don’t have to be her boat buddy.” He says it in such a friendly tone of voice that I can’t help rolling my eyes at the act.

Liza doesn’t quite seem to believe him either. “Jealousy isn’t a good look for you.” But she steps back with a quick look at me that has a frown touching my lips.

“She’s right,” I tell Kayde as Liza crosses the shore to talk to the kids. She’s always in charge of kayaking, and gives the kids their list of rules and what not to do in the water. “Jealousy really isn’t cute on that face of yours.” Teasingly, I reach up to hook my fingers around his jaw, and Kayde looks down at me witheringly.

“I’m not jealous.”

“You’re...certainly something.” The distraction is helping my nerves, though not by much, and I try to surreptitiously suck in a deep breath to stop my heart from pounding. Naturally, he notices. Kayde’s brows knit and he gives me a quick, comforting hug before stepping back. Not that I mind. After all, we can’t let the kids think we’re more than middle school-level boyfriend and girlfriend.

“You’re going to be fine,” he promises, and while I watch, grabs the last two-person kayak before dragging it toward the water. I grab a paddle and follow him, my heart jumping to my throat as my feet splash through the shallows.

“That’s a matter of opinion,” I mumble, dragging my feet through the rocks. But Kayde just glances up at me, and though I offer him a sly, flat smile, I certainly don’t *feel* like I’m going to be fine.

“You first. Let me hold it for you.” Part of me bristles at the idea of being treated like I’m new at this, and I open my mouth to protest, only to stop. Maybe...maybe it isn’t so bad that he wants to make this not so bad for me. Maybe I should let him take over and take charge, instead of being a bitch about the whole thing at every turn.

Maybe I should try to see what it’s like to let him *care*.

“Okay,” I murmur, pushing away the arguments. There’s a flicker of surprise in his gaze, as if he’s just as shocked at my acquiescence as I am. I scrunch my nose, making a face at him, and follow my own mental step by step instructions to get in the kayak.

It’s significantly easier with him anchoring it. Even Liza hadn’t usually done that, since she’d trusted I could at *least* get in the damn thing on my own. And I can. I always have. But still.

It’s nice.

The kayak barely moves as Kayde settles, but I still suck in a breath, my stomach rolling. “Wow, okay, this is awful,” I whisper, taking the paddle and laying it across my lap. I can feel myself trembling slightly, and I can only hope it isn’t noticeable to the other occupant of the kayak.

“It’s not awful. You’re fine.” I definitely hadn’t meant for him to hear me, and my shoulders stiffen as I try not to look at him. “Hey.” He presses a hand to my shoulder, then pushes us away from the shore. “You’re okay. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

The movement is smooth, but abrupt enough that I clench the paddle in my lap and hunch forward, like this really is my first time. “I’m not this bad,” I mutter, half to myself. “Come on, Summer. You *really* don’t suck this much.”

My anxiety and the nerves tingling in my fingers say otherwise, but at least Kayde doesn’t comment. He just smoothly keeps us in a small area, waiting for Liza to finish helping the last of the campers into their own kayaks. Our job is to corral them, keeping them from starting down the river too soon and helping them stay afloat.

Not that my cabin needs it, I notice with a touch of pride. All my girls know what they’re doing, and move comfortably in this area of the river instead of flailing around or nearly dumping themselves. If only I could do the same.

“You ready to sit back and enjoy the ride?” Kayde hums as Liza shoves her own kayak into the water.

“Is that what I get to do?” I ask, turning to glance over my shoulder at Kayde. “Just take a nap?”

His grin is wolfish, and he dips a quick nod in my direction. “Yeah, sweetheart,” he promises me. “Just lay back and take a nap. No problem.”

While I don't take a nap on our trip down the river, I'm a lot less stressed than I'd expected to be. Kayde is good at this, though probably not quite as skilled as Liza. Not that I plan on telling him that. But unlike her, he works to make it as non-terrifying to me as possible.

It's touching, in a way that makes my skin prickle under his constant gaze.

Melody and Lily kayak beside us for most of the trip, and it would take an idiot not to see her admiration for Kayde growing every day.

"Told you this wouldn't be so bad," Kayde tells me as we paddle in a small circle near where the kids are carefully, mostly, getting out of their kayaks and pulling them back up onto the shore. "You had a little fun, right?"

Not really. I'd been too busy clenching the paddle the whole time and trying not to hyperventilate. But I make some kind of mutter of agreement, and help him push our kayak as close to the store as we can. I'm out first this time, determined to be somewhat useful, and the moment Kayde's feet splash in the shallows, I've gripped the kayak and started dragging it toward the shore properly. The weight lessens, and I glance behind me to see Kayde picking up the other end of it, his withering gaze back on me like I should know better.

"I may be freaking out, but I'm not an invalid," I inform him crisply, my eyebrows lifting toward my bangs. "I promise I'm not that delicate."

"You're my delicate princess," Kayde teases. "And I won't let you just carry this on your own. Be real. Liza would eviscerate me." I can't exactly argue with that, I realize, so I don't try.

A yell catches my attention, though I don't think much of it considering how close we are to the main part of Camp Crestview. Kids yell and scream and squawk on occasion, and I've even had kids do dead-on imitations of a dying moose.

But when the yell comes again, I realize that it's not a kid.

*It's Kinsley.*

My head jerks up and from the corner of my eye, I see Liza pause, turning toward the path back to camp, like she's recognized Kinsley's scream as well.

"Kins?" I call, dropping the kayak and striding forward. Trees separate us from the camp, and I see a flurry of movement just before Kinsley comes

into view, sprinting toward the river with a pale face, wide eyes, and hands held up like they're burning.

But Kinsley isn't on fire.

*She's covered in blood.*

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# CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



“Oh my god.” The words leave me in a tumble and I lurch forward, only slightly feeling Kayde’s hand as he reaches out for me and only manages to brush my arm. “Kinsley!” Her name leaves me in a shriek, and as fast as I can, I close the distance between us until my hands are on her, my heart pounding as I look for the source of the bleeding.

“It’s not—It’s *not*—” She takes a deep breath and looks over my shoulder at Liza. “You gotta go. We called an ambulance but, you have to go to your cabin. Please.” She looks shaky and terrified, and turns her gaze back to me like I have the answers that’ll make this better. “I didn’t know what to do,” she murmurs. “I think—I don’t know if we should’ve left her—”

“Hey, hey. It’s okay.” God, I need to know what’s happened. My heart hammers in my chest, and I glance around me to where Daniel and Kayde are standing, keeping the other kids back.

Kinsley can’t be out here covered in blood. Some of the campers are already starting to freak out, and too many of them have already seen her.

“Melody!” I call, looking over my shoulder toward my group of girls. She immediately steps forward, her eyes wary as they search my face. “Take the girls back to the cabin. Find Kinsley’s girls too. You know who they are, right?” When she nods, I’m grateful. “Actually, take them and yourselves to Otter Hall.” My mind scrambles to figure out what to do in the situation, and once Melody is moving, I look at Daniel and Kayde. “Take everyone to Otter Hall, okay? Keep them away from...” I trail off,

not wanting to really give the kids any more nightmares or clue of what's going on.

"I'm taking Kinsley back to Liza's cabin." Without thinking, I yank my tank top over my head, leaving me in my black swim top and shorts. My hands and arms are bloody, and I use my shirt to clean off what I can before handing the bundle of cloth to Kinsley and prompting her to do the same.

"We'll take care of it," Kayde promises, his voice steady.

"Send Darcy and Shawn our way if they're, umm, unoccupied?" Daniel sounds unsure, but that doesn't shock me. He's always been the worst counselor in a crisis and never quite knows what to do. That's fine; he's a follower, not a leader, but as long as he's delegate to, he's reliable as hell.

"Darcy is in Liza's cabin," Kinsley interrupts, looking up with wide eyes. "I'm not sure about Shawn. At the lake, I think, with his cabin and mine?" She stares at me like I have all the answers, but all I can think of is how reliably unreliable Shawn is as a counselor.

God forbid he helps out when we need him. A shitty attitude and questionable crush really aren't excuses to be such an asshole, but he's proving that he doesn't give a damn about that. One more look at Kayde shows me he's shepherding the kids to follow my cabin, and Daniel is bringing up the rear with a pale, bewildered look on his face.

"Come on," I murmur, wrapping an arm around Kinsley's shoulder. "Wipe the blood off on my shirt, okay? As much as you can. Then, umm..." I look at her shirt, biting my lip. "You're going to have to change. The kids can't see that, Kins."

"I know." She blinks and swipes a blood-smeared arm across her face in a move I'm pretty sure is to prevent tears from falling. "I know; I just needed help."

"What happened?" Her quick strides match mine, and while we aren't running, we're certainly not taking our time on the way back to Liza's cabin. Whatever it is, I hope it isn't as bad as it looks from Kinsley's shirt and arms because it'll take an ambulance thirty-five minutes to get here.

"I don't know," Kinsley all but wails. "Summer, I don't know. I don't even know the girl. She's one of Darcy's, and she got *lost*, or ran away, or *something*, but Darcy came to me saying she couldn't find her, and none of the kids knew where she went either. Then one of my girls said she'd seen her heading off into the woods toward the south hiking trail."

Fuck. Fuck, I think, my eyes closing hard for half a second. With the south trail being off limits for campers and mostly grown up after a big storm four years ago made it unsafe, we don't even mention it to campers anymore. Most of them don't even know how to get to it, let alone its existence in the first place.

Not to mention, the trail had never been a very safe one. It was for more advanced hikers, with cliffs and drop offs on either side of it that had always made me nervous back when we *did* take a few groups on it every year. I'd been thankful when the storm had hit and knocked a few huge trees down into the path, rendering it impassable.

"She fell." The words chill me to the bone, and sound loudly in my head even though Kinsley has barely whispered them. "It can't have happened that long ago. All the blood...it's still wet." She spits the word like it offends her, and shudders. "It was when I found her, I mean. I was too afraid to leave her out there, even though I know we're supposed to because of a possible neck injury." Her words pick up pace and volume until she's nearly hysterical and I can see the tears burning in her eyes.

"But I didn't know what to do. There was so much blood, and her *head*—" Kinsley chokes off as we finally get to Liza's cabin, and I stop her, my hands gripping her arms.

"Go to your cabin and change," I tell her firmly, eyes never leaving hers. "Grab me a shirt too, please. Calm down, Kins. I get this is so hard, but I need you to calm down. You, me, Kayde, and Liza are all we've got. The others are shit in a crisis, and you know it." I try to joke with her, and I try to smile to get her to do something other than shake.

But the fact I can't distract her whatsoever, and that Kins is too busy staring at the door of Liza's cabin like it's going to bite her, tell me that this is going to be worse than I thought. She nods once, then again, and nearly stumbles down the stairs while I watch, teeth clenched as I steel myself and force my body to not run away.

With Kinsley down, it's just me and Liza. I have no doubt Kayde will be here when he can, but I can't fall apart and leave Liza to deal with the situation on her own. Taking a deep breath, I pull open the door to Liza's cabin, only to jump to the side as Darcy rushes past me, her face pale and bleak.

"Is that you, Summer?" Liza, thank God, sounds as calm as always. There's no trace of terror in her voice, or anything other than determination

and focus.

“Yeah,” I tell her, hesitating as I close the door. “It’s me.”

“If you can, I need you not to freak out. Or I need you to get Kayde, if you think you *are* going to panic.” I’ve never heard her sound so careful. So...deliberate. It puts me on edge, but I walk through the infirmary cabin, to the bed in the back that she’s leaning over.

Whatever I’d been preparing myself for, this is worse. I don’t know the girl by name, but as I look at her bloody, bruised face and the deep scratches that litter her arms and legs, I wonder if it’s a blessing or a curse that she’s currently unconscious. One of her arms is definitely broken, and I have no doubt that if she were awake, she’d be screaming.

I can also see the long, deep gash that starts at her temple and moves back into her hairline, peeking out from the bandage Liza has pushed against it. Two black eyes have already risen to her skin, and if her nose isn’t broken, I’ll eat my shoes; dirt and all.

“Okay,” I breathe, forcing myself to stay calm. If I let my heart pound, if I start breathing fast and start wondering about the what ifs, then I won’t be any help at all. “What do you need from me, Liza?”

“I need you to put pressure on her head. I want to look her over again and check her breathing. Darcy called an ambulance twenty minutes ago now. We’ve still got time before they show up.” Liza moves away as I come close, and I replace her hands on the wads of bandage against the girl’s head that are slowly being dyed red with blood.

I press down, harder than I want to, and set my teeth against the mental discomfort. I don’t want to hurt this girl. That’s the *last* thing I want, truth be told. But I have to keep the bleeding under control, if I can. “Did anyone call Fink?” I ask, realizing belatedly that would’ve been a smart move.

Liza hesitates, looking up at me as she puts her stethoscope to her ears. “I don’t know,” she says at last, and I nod, grabbing my phone out of my pocket and texting Kayde. Initially, I’d balked at him putting his number into my phone two nights ago. But he’d only kissed me, pinned me down, and told me oh so sweetly that this way, I wouldn’t get the wrong idea and could always ask where he was or why he’d done something.

When I’d responded that seemed a little obsessive of me, he’d seemed even more thrilled at the idea.

Now I’m glad for it, and I shoot off a quick message that reads, *Find out if anyone contacted Fink. Its one of Darcys girls.*

Belatedly, as I watch the message send, I add, *Its bad. Dont bring anyone else here.*

His response is a quick confirmation, telling me he'll find out if Fink got called.

*I'll take care of it and be right there. Darcy, Shawn, and Daniel can keep the kids in Otter.* He's right about that, and they're the ones I want help from the least.

Hell, I don't even think Daniel and Darcy are capable of giving us real help. Especially if it involves being in here.

Suddenly, the girl on the bed shifts, and a long, low sound comes from her parted lips as her eyes flicker behind her lids. I trade a glance with Liza and sit down on the bed, leaning my weight across the girl as gently as I can. "Hey, hi," I murmur, keeping my voice calm. It's taking everything in me not to freak out right now, and if this girl loses it, I'm going to as well.

"I need you to stay calm and still for me, okay?" I hear another soft sound of pain from her, and the fingers of her unbroken arm flex. "I don't know if we've officially met, but I'm Summer. We're in Liza's cabin." She seems to relax, even if only a little, when I speak, and it gives Liza a chance to finish checking her over for anything that we can't see.

This time, though, the girl whimpers, and tears gather under her lashes as she opens her eyes to stare into mine.

*Fuck.*

She's going to freak out.

"No, no, no—" she screams, cutting me off, and tries to sit up, though jerks at the pain in the action as I push her gently back down. "I need you to calm down, okay?" I try to say, though her cries drown me out quickly and effectively. My hand on the bandage slips, and warm wetness drips down my hand as her head starts bleeding again.

"Emily!" Liza is back in an instant, standing on her other side and trying to press her down without hurting her. "Emily, I need you to calm down. I know it hurts. There's an ambulance on the way, but you're going to be fine, all right?"

The girl stares up at her, then looks back at me with wide eyes. I nod my agreement, my free hand finding her fingers and squeezing gently. *God, I hope none of them are broken.*

"It's okay. You're going to be okay." I glance at Liza, who nods and heads to the front of the cabin. The door opens, and I hear Kayde's voice as

he talks to Fink.

Seconds later, the camp owner is on speaker, and both Liza and Kayde are filling him in.

“You’re okay,” I tell her once more, trying to pull her attention away from Liza’s and Kayde’s voices. She doesn’t need to hear the extent of what happened. She needs to stay calm and not hurt herself more.

“I-I’m—” she whimpers, tears falling down either side of her face. “I’m sorry.”

“No, Emily, what? You didn’t do anything. You don’t need to be sorry,” I soothe, forcing myself to sound calm and casual. “Accidents happen—”

“But I knew the trail was off limits,” she continues, a tremor building in her small body. “He even told me it was.”

Distantly, I can hear the sirens of an ambulance and I let out a mental sigh of relief. The door opens and closes, and I realize that it must be Kayde going to meet them so they aren’t stuck wandering around looking for her.

“Sorry, what?” I blink back down at Emily, feeling suddenly guilty for not paying attention. “No, look, it doesn’t matter how it happened, okay? It was an accident.”

“He told me about it in the first place,” Emily murmurs, her injuries leeching the strength from her as she fades back toward unconsciousness. “I just asked about the trees...he told me about it and showed me where it was. I’m a hiker. Mom takes me on trails. He said I could’ve hiked it back before the storm.”

For the life of me, I can’t figure out what camper could’ve told her about the southern trail, no matter how I rake my brain for an answer. “Who told you about it?” I finally ask, wishing I didn’t have to. “How did you find out where it was?”

“Counselor Shawn told me. And said I couldn’t go there.” She closes her eyes hard with a soft sound, the tears leaving tracks through the dirt on her face. “But it’s not his fault, Summer. I waited until he walked away a minute later. Until he couldn’t see me. I’m sorry.”

Heat thrums through my veins at her words, and I curse Shawn with every foul thing I can imagine. Sure, okay, he’d told her not to go on the trail. But had he really been stupid enough to tell her where to go and then walk away?

The door bangs open and I move away from the bed just as two paramedics rush toward it. I must be in shock, though, because it seems like

one moment, it's just them, and they're taking vitals and checking her over. But then I blink, and there are three paramedics there, working together in a flurry of movement to get Emily up and onto the stretcher before levering her through the door.

Kayde pulls me out of the way, and I realize I have no idea when he'd gotten back, though it must've been with the paramedics. If he's been talking to me, I certainly haven't heard it. And I definitely don't know when his hands found my waist.

I'm glad for them now, however, though I break away from him to follow the paramedics out the door, the sunlight outside revealing a pale Mr. Fink talking rapidly to Liza.

When the door shuts, he looks up at us, eyes riveting from the paramedics to me. "I've called her parents," he tells them, as Liza jogs alongside the stretcher. "Liza will go with you. She has access to her records. She's the camp nurse."

The paramedics don't argue. They disappear from view seconds later, however, as I stand there wavering on what to do.

Fink solves the problem for me. Slowly, shakily, he climbs up the stairs to lean against the railing of the small deck, one hand rubbing down his face. "What happened?" he asks, sounding both tired and terrified. "God, what in the world *happened?*"

"She told me she asked Shawn about the south trail." I barely realize what I'm saying, and I see Kayde frown from my peripheral vision. "He told her about it and stressed she couldn't go there. She said she waited for him to leave and went anyway."

I can't keep my eyes in one place. I look everywhere and nowhere, not really seeing anything as my gaze roves over the grass and the other buildings. Despite answering Fink, I feel shaky and barely present; I feel as if a strong breeze could knock me on my ass right now. "He shouldn't have told her anything," I hiss, as if my opinion matters.

"He didn't know she'd do that, I'm sure." Fink leans harder against the rail, hands trailing down his face. "God, Summer. We didn't need this. How..." He swallows and looks at Kayde. "How is she? I didn't get to talk to Liza much before the ambulance got here."

"Bad." I don't care that he's asked Kayde. *I'm* the one who sat with her and tried to keep her calm. "She's...It's bad." I close my eyes hard, then

open them and continue to look around the area in front of me blankly, as if I'm searching for something.

But I stop the moment my gaze falls on Darcy, who's standing behind Otter Hall and hugging herself as tears run down her face. But it isn't the crying, or her being here, that causes me to be unable to tear my gaze away.

It's the clear, expressive guilt on her face I can see all the way from here.

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# CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



There's no way most of the kids are asleep. Not after the day Camp Crestview had. But there's only so much we can do, apart from drugging their cocoa, and since Liza isn't here to advise us on morality and dosage, that's not really an option.

But at least all the kids are in their cabins. I'd probably be able to tell from my perch in one of my top five trees if that wasn't the case.

The camp is as quiet as it can be, and I can't hear any human sounds from anywhere around me. Instead, cricket song fills my ears, along with the sounds of distant wildlife and a breeze blowing through the canopy of leaves. If I'm not mistaken, judging by the way the wind smells, it's going to rain soon-ish. And with hiking day being tomorrow, despite my protests with Fink that maybe we should wait or cancel it given what had happened to Emily, I hope that it either rains tonight or holds out until tomorrow night. The kids are already going to be nervous about hiking, if I'm right. Although Fink had tried to keep what had happened to Emily under wraps, everyone knows.

It's impossible to keep a secret around here, after all. Especially from a bunch of twelve-year-olds.

Hearing something that doesn't sound like a cricket or deer, I turn to look down at the ground, and promptly find myself looking down into Kayde's shrewd, thoughtful expression.

Honestly, I don't even have it in me to be startled anymore. "That's so creepy of you," I tell him, eyes narrowing. "I have a question, actually." I hold my hand down to him, but Kayde just eyes it before using two knots in

the tree to propel himself up to my branch. It's a damn good thing this is the most stable of my favorite trees, because our combined weight doesn't even make the thick limb under us shudder, let alone creak.

"What's creepy?" Kayde asks, swinging his legs leisurely under the branch. "That I just showed up? Pretty sure we've had the me following you discussion, right?"

"Something about you being overly possessive, obsessed, and unable to leave my orbit, right?" My brows raise as he just looks at me, but my grin turns a little savage at his flat, unamused glance. "Yeah, we've had that discussion. Plus, I've made my peace with that bit of your weirdness. What I was talking about is your ability to just, you know, show up like that." I wave my hand dismissively in the air and pull my knee up to my chest before dropping the other one off of the branch to swing it below me.

"Was that a thing you could do pre-psychopath days?"

"Sociopath," Kayde corrects automatically, his look turning baleful. "*Sociopath*, baby girl. There's a difference. It's important. If I were a psychopath, I don't think we would have made it to this point."

"I'm still calling you my psychopath. It sounds cooler, and when I tell my friends, you'll sound more intimidating. More threatening." I wiggle my fingers at him when he looks my way again, and I'm surprised to see an amused glint in his eyes.

"Fine," he shrugs. "I don't mind."

"You don't?" Hadn't he just been the one lecturing me about what to call him?

"Not at all." His smile grows crooked on his lips. "You're calling me *yours* after all."

Immediately my eyes narrow, and it's hard not to groan in exasperation. "You're so set on me loving you, huh? Have you considered maybe I'm wild and free and can't be won over?"

"No. Because while you might be wild, and you might not *want* to be won over, you don't love being free from me," Kayde answers sweetly. "Otherwise, you'd put up some kind of fight anytime I pin you to your bed and remind you who you belong to."

There's no way I'm not blushing, and I'm glad for the darkness that hides my embarrassment from him.

"I've always been quiet," Kayde admits, and it takes me a moment to realize what he's talking about. My goldfish brain had completely forgotten

my question about him being so quiet, and I scramble to backpedal to that part of the conversation. “Even before the sociopath thing. But I started trying more, after the accident. It’s easier to get what I want if I can sneak up on my victims.”

“Can we not call them that? Can we at least *pretend* you don’t murder kids?” God, part of me wants to ask him exactly how many kids he’s murdered, but there’s no way I could ever get those words out. Not if my life depended on it. It’s bad enough that I’m pretty sure this isn’t his first summer camp rodeo. I don’t need to know facts.

“No, Summer.” His voice is firm, and his grip on my calf mirrors his tone. “No, we’re not going to call them something else, or pretend that I’m not what I am.” As I watch, Kayde scoots closer to me until he’s straddling the branch to trap me against the trunk behind me. He leans in, his forearms resting comfortably on the bark, and his eyes glitter in the moonlight. “You don’t get to pretend not to know what I am, or *who* I am.”

“Yeah, I figured that would be too easy,” I breathe, unable to pull my eyes from his. “But I’d like it to go on record that I really don’t like it. And I don’t approve.”

His low scoff of a chuckle is barely audible, and he leans forward to brush his lips to mine. “It’s been noted. More than once, actually. But I can’t say that’ll change anything, sweetheart. I’m never going to hide what I do from you. And I’m never going to not want to tell you all about it.”

“Maybe you could just murder adults?” I ask finally, my voice weak. When he nudges my knee that’s pressed to my chest, I acquiesce and drop it off the other side of the limb so that I’m mirroring his pose. “Maybe you could, umm...just chill with the child murder?”

His head tilts to the side, and he reminds me of a curious puppy as he asks, “Would that make you love me?”

The way my stomach constricts and a tremble shooting up my spine have me gasping, and I curl my fingers into the bark under me and the fabric of his jeans. “You can’t ask me that. How do I know if it’ll make me love you?”

“Because I know I love you,” he replies. “I’m just trying to figure out how to make you want to love me, too.”

“Well, knocking me off this branch certainly won’t help, just in case that was going through your head.” I grumble the words nervously, reaching up to rub at my exposed arms under my tank top. While it’s not cold, the

breeze makes the night a little chilly, and I wish I'd thought to wear something that would provide me with a little more warmth.

"I'm not going to knock you off the branch, Summer," Kayde informs me, voice withering. "I am, however, seriously considering how I could fuck you up here."

Yet again, I'm glad he can't see the flush in my face. "I'd say maybe we shouldn't, since I think I missed some blood during my shower," I admit in a small voice. "But uh, I guess that's not much of a turnoff for you, is it?"

Kayde is silent for longer than I expect, and when he moves, it's simply to open his arms and gesture for me to lean forward. I don't even have time to think before my body just...*responds*. Before I know it, I'm leaning into him; his arms wrap around my torso and scoot me forward until my body is flush against his. "You can relax, baby girl," Kayde promises me in a soft murmur, his breath tickling my ear. "I won't let you fall, and I won't let anything happen to you."

"Why is all this shit happening this week?" I whisper, my hands clutched in his shirt. I squeeze my eyes shut and hate how much better this feels, and how much warmer I feel instantly. As if it hadn't been the weather at all, but the lack of Kayde's touch.

I really can't be this hung up on him already.

*I really, really can't.*

"Because bad things come in clusters," Kayde answers reasonably. "Not always, but sometimes. And by the way, Kinsley asked me to tell you that Liza texted her." I hold my breath as he pauses, and find comfort in the soft motion of his fingers on my exposed shoulders rubbing small, soothing circles on my skin. "Emily is going to be okay. She has a broken arm, cracked ribs, and a concussion. She'll need surgery, but she'll be fine, okay?"

Suddenly I let out a breath I feel like I've been holding for hours, and the rest of me gives in to sag against Kayde. "Fuck," I mutter, eyes closed hard. "That's...okay, at least she'll be fine. At least she's..." *Alive* sounds so morbid, so I don't say it.

"Would you like me to remind Shawn why we don't talk to kids about dangerous trails? Explain to him why we don't show them where they are?" His voice is cold, and while I doubt he cares about Emily, it means something that he's willing to do it because it means something to me.

I move just enough to stare up at him, trying to read his expression. “No,” I say at last, shaking my head. “No, it was a stupid mistake. He feels bad about it.”

“Does he?” Kayde’s brows rise incredulously, and he pins me with his gaze. “*Does he, Summer?*”

*No.*

The word echoes in my mind with no hesitation, but I press my lips together and refuse to let it come out of my mouth. Shawn doesn’t feel bad. Shawn doesn’t *care*. His performance earlier for Kinsley and me had seemed genuine, sure, but I cannot force myself to believe that he actually cares about what happened. Even if he’d taken the blame, admitted it was his fault, and begged us not to hate him for almost getting Emily killed.

It had felt so real, and so genuine, that I’m starting to think I’m an asshole for not believing him or accepting that he does actually care about the kids at Camp Crestview.

“We’ve got to figure out the Grey situation,” I mumble instead of answering his question. I can feel his arms on me, and when Kayde shifts to nudge my face upward to his, I let him.

“I can help you with that.” His lips brush mine on every word, and I suck in a lungful of air from the oxygen we’re sharing between us. “I have some ideas on how to get him to leave. And a few for if he doesn’t take the hint.”

“You’d do that?” Hope blooms in my chest, and I clutch onto his shirt more tightly. “You’re not afraid of him?”

That gets me another round of *the look*, before he scoffs in indignation. “I’m not afraid of an eighteen-year-old *baby* of a killer, no. Did you see him before? He was terrified of me. He may hide it okay, but if I put pressure on him, I think he’ll leave.” The confidence and arrogance in his tone seems to drip from every word, but I find that this time, I don’t mind. Him being so confident makes me worry a little less. “But tell me, sweetheart...” He nips my lower lip, surprising me into a gasp. “What do I get for it?”

*What does he get for it?* I blink once, then again, baffled at his question. “You get, uh, karma points?” I offer weakly. “Which, given the rest of your shit, I’d think you’d want.”

“I’m not interested in karma. Divine or otherwise,” my *sociopath* assures me with another soft bite.

It's hard to think straight when he does that. Especially when his hands massage my hips and pull my shirt up a bit so he can touch the skin beneath it. "What do you want?" I breathe at last. "You know I'll give you anything, Kayde. I always do." I give him *everything*, my brain corrects, but I recoil from the thought because I'm definitely not ready to face it. Not yet.

"Simple. I want you to love me." The words have me pulling back, and I stare at him with wide eyes. "Will you love me, sweetheart?" He leans forward until I'm pressed against the trunk again, and his hands grip my thighs on the limb under us. It's easy for him to push the fabric of my shorts up as far as he can, and teasingly, Kayde tickles my stomach at the line of my waistband. "If I chase him away, will you love me then?"

"I don't think..." I stare at him, utterly taken aback. "I don't think that's how it works, Kayde. Pretty sure I have to love you for you. I think."

His bemusement is clear, and seconds later, he dips his fingers into my shorts to press his fingers to my slit. "I don't like being up in a tree," he muses, his hand slipping free so he can rearrange my legs to be over his. I hook my knees around his thighs, needing some security that I won't fall off from a random bout of stupidity on my end. "It's hard to play with you when I have to hold you up here and keep you from falling."

"Excuse you?" My eyebrows shoot upward. "This is my tree, and I do fine staying in it on my own. I don't need you to hold me up, Kayde."

He just eyes me, his gaze narrowed, and drags me further over his lap until I'm straddling him properly, and I can feel that something about our conversation has him at least a little excited. "Think you can ride me up here, then?" he purrs playfully. His hand comes up to stroke through my hair, and I shudder at the feeling of him between my thighs.

It's an understatement to say that I love Kayde's cock. He rocks against me, one arm around my waist to keep me in place. It's more teasing than anything, though when he buries his face against my throat and bites down hard with a growl, the lightheartedness of his movements evaporates.

Instead, it's replaced with possessiveness and a touch of desperation from my end. Especially when he bites down harder and all I can do is wrap my arms around his shoulders to meet the movements of his body with mine.

"I'll take care of Grey for you, Summer," Kayde finally murmurs, pulling away so he can speak directly into my ear. "But I worry for you. I

worry that we're not seeing everything." There's a touch of frustration in his voice, and I suck in a breath at a sharp roll of his hips.

"What do you mean?" I ask with a whine, fingers digging into his shoulders and scratching against his skin.

"Just be safe for me, okay?" His hand slides down to my ass, and then he's biting me again, clearly unworried about leaving a mark. "Don't make me kill someone for breaking you and have to put you back together again. Plus, Kinsley will be traumatized if something happens to you, Summer."

"How in the world would you put me back together again?" I scoff, only half focused on his words. The rest of me is prepared to jump out of this tree, drag him back to my cabin, and revisit the idea of riding his face until I get off.

"Any way you ask me to." His answer is immediate, and before I know what he's doing, Kayde has slid out of the tree, landed, and is dragging me down as well. I shriek a protest, sure I'm going to break a leg, but Kayde never lets me hit the ground.

Instead, I end up in his arms, one of mine hooked around his neck as he grins down at me. "I'm going to take you back to your cabin and wreck you, princess," Kayde purrs, a promise on his lips. "And then I'm going to figure out how to get rid of Grey quickly and quietly for you, so you can fall in love with me that much faster."

"It's...still more complicated than that," I mutter, rolling my eyes. "Didn't I say that?"

"Yeah," Kayde agrees, his smile wolfish. "I'm just refusing to accept that answer. You're going to admit you love me by the end of the week, Summer. I'm counting on it."

"And if I don't?" I can't help but ask, fingers bunching into his shirt.

But Kayde never stops grinning, and I can feel the chuckle that rumbles in his chest. "That won't happen. There's no version of this week that lets that happen. I won't let it."

And if that doesn't sound like a threat, then I don't know what ever could. But I lock my reply behind my teeth and pretend his words don't have my thighs clenching and excitement running through my veins.

# CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



**E**verything is awful, starting right when my girls wake up. With Kayde long gone from the cabin, I find myself waiting for my girls, perched on the railing of the cabin deck while they finish getting ready inside.

But the moment they come out, I can see they're subdued. It's as if a dark cloud hangs over them, and I frown at my girls before saying, "Good morning, Redtail. You guys look...dreadful." No point lying to them, and even Melody just gives me a side-eyed glance of resignation. "In case it'll help you feel better, Emily is going to be okay."

Two of them jerk their heads up to look at me, eyes wide, and I smile as I rest more of my weight back on the railing. "Liza got back late last night. I heard from her that while Emily will need surgery, everything is going to be okay. And it was just an accident, okay? Just a freak accident that's never happened before and won't happen again." The words feel like ash on my tongue, though, and it occurs to me not for the first time that this camp session is the worst we've ever had.

I just hope bad things *don't* come in threes.

"Are you sure?" Lily's voice is soft, and she wrings her hands together in front of her. "We heard that...well we heard she was dying." She trades a look with Mel, who hooks an arm over Lily's shoulder and pulls her in close.

"I'm absolutely positive." Though, that's just on Liza's word, which I believe without question. "She's okay." The relief is palpable, and I see some of their anxieties lift, though it doesn't do much for the general mood

of Redtail. Mentally, I cross my fingers as we walk toward Otter Hall, and hope that being around the other campers will help cheer them up.

But naturally, that's not going to happen. Not when I walk in to see the same down faces and tense atmosphere that matches how my girls are doing. Everyone seems subdued, and I let out a breath of resignation and sink down across from Kins, who's barely doing more than moving her food around on her plate.

"Hey." Reaching out, I take her hand, trying to meet her eyes. She just sighs and doesn't look up, though she doesn't shake me off, so I'm considering that progress. "How are you?"

It's a stupid question, but I don't know what else to say. Kins finally looks up at me, her eyes red rimmed and framed with dark circles. "I'm awful," she tells me, voice a croak. "And I'm exhausted. I can't believe Fink wouldn't let us cancel hiking day."

From the corner of my eye, I see Kayde's cabin filter in, and my sociopath swaggers up to the food window with a quick, measuring glance in my direction.

"I know," I agree, sitting back but keeping my fingers twined with hers. "None of these kids want to hike. At all. And to not even make it optional for them is harsh." Way too harsh, in my opinion. But Fink's schedule is, to him, a thing of divine creation.

No one can deviate from the schedule and get away with it. At least not if Fink finds out.

Kayde appears at my elbow, sitting down with a sigh and a heavily laden tray. "If you're trying to starve yourself, I regret to inform you I won't let that happen," he informs me sweetly, handing off a plate of my favorite breakfast foods. I wrinkle my nose at the bacon, though, and Kayde just rolls his eyes. "Try it. It's called *protein*, Summer. It's good for you."

"You're a jerk," I tell him politely, accepting the mug of coffee and cup of milk. "But also a really sweet jerk." I can't help being honest, and he rewards me with a wide grin. "Thanks, Kayde."

"Don't mention it. Or, actually. *Do* mention it. At length. I like praise." He takes another spare mug of coffee from his tray and puts it in front of Kinsley, along with three sugar packets and two creams.

She raises one brow at him, unimpressed. "I don't like men," she points out. "If this is your attempt to start building a harem, you should know I vomit at the sight of dick."

Kayde makes a face at her. “I’m just being *nice*. You’re Summer’s best friend, and you look awful. Plus, I know you don’t like dick. You’ve made it really clear every time Summer even so much as says something involving the male anatomy, or that I stayed the night.”

“Did you stay the night?” Kinsley asks, dumping the sugar and cream into her coffee and stirring it with a plastic stick. “Last I heard, Summer didn’t know how to ask you to stay, and was agonizing over it.”

That has Kayde blinking, bemusement spreading across his features. For my part, I groan and bury my face in my hands. “Thanks, Kins,” I mumble, voice muffled by my palms. “You’re such a great friend.”

“Was it a secret?” She seems a little perkier with caffeine and the joy of causing me emotional damage. “Seems like a weird secret to keep from him when I’m pretty sure he’d stay as long as you want.” She eyes Kayde, who nods enthusiastically, then glances back at me with raised, expectant brows.

“I’m a little hurt you never asked me to stay,” Kayde admits, slinging an arm over the back of my chair. “You could’ve said something sooner, you know.” There’s a teasing note in his voice, but it does a poor job of hiding the admonishment in his words. He pushes my plate toward me, as if I’ve somehow forgotten, and reluctantly I stab at my hash browns covered in cheese.

“How’s Liza?” Kayde asks, watching me eat without even trying to pretend he isn’t. “I know she got back late last night. Is she okay?”

“She’s...tired,” Kinsley admits. “She stayed at the hospital until Emily’s parents showed up, then filled them in on what happened. It was a lot. Everything is just a lot right now.” Kinsley sucks down half of the scalding liquid in her coffee mug as I watch, but when I don’t take another bite, Kayde taps my elbow pointedly.

“You are not going to track my breakfast eating progress,” I tell him flatly, tone deadpan as I take a bite of bacon. “I’ll stab you with my fork if you poke me again, Kayde.” I probably won’t, and judging by his expression, he knows it too.

“If you don’t eat, I’ll lock you in your cabin and tell the other counselors you can’t go hiking,” Kayde informs me sweetly. “I’m not here to be your caretaker, sweetheart, but you’re not going to pass out on me halfway through the trail.”

He has a point, unfortunately. I chomp the two strips of bacon, my eyes roaming the dining hall as he and Kinsley strike up a conversation about

Liza's medical training. I've heard it before, at length, from when Kinsley was merely swooning for her partner instead of involved. For that reason, I mostly zone out, making my way through my breakfast as I look over the campers.

The kids really do look miserable. Like we've told them they'll be doing manual labor all day, or cleaning out toilets until their fingers bleed. Most of them are talking quietly, their eyes flicking from counselor to counselor as if they think we're going to make some crazy announcement.

On the other side of the room, Daniel, Shawn, and Darcy sit at their usual table. Shawn laughs at something Daniel says, but when Daniel gently elbows Darcy for a reaction, she only shrinks in on herself, looking miserable.

Is it over Emily? That's all I can think as I watch her seem to curl in on herself, her arms wrapped around her body like she's trying not to fall apart. Once in a while she glances at the boys, a forced smile pushing its way onto her mouth, though it never reaches her eyes.

When she sees me watching her, she holds my gaze, mouth falling open as if she's going to call across the dining hall to tell me to fuck off. But instead, Darcy gets to her feet quickly, mumbling something I definitely can't hear, and bolts out of the dining hall like she's being chased.

It definitely has to do with Emily. Even Darcy isn't cold enough to be unaffected, and Daniel watches her go with concern on his features.

But Shawn?

He just goes back to his eggs without a care in the world.

"Summer?" Kinsley sounds tired when she says my name, and I turn to look at her, a questioning hum in my throat. "I'm going to go...to Liza's cabin. Kayde said he'll take over my hike for me. Umm." She blinks once, looking around, and Kayde frowns sympathetically at her. "Can you come by later? I'm just so tired, and I want to make sure she's okay."

"You should take her something to eat. There are a few of those styrofoam boxes behind the window. Make her a plate?" Kayde suggests, and Kinsley brightens a little at the suggestion.

"That's a great idea," she admits, gathering up her tray. "Thanks, Kayde. You're not so bad when you work at it." There's a little of the usual Kinsley on her face when she walks away, and Kayde snorts his amusement as she heads toward the window.

"I really don't want to do this hike," I confide, leaning back against the chair and his arm. "This is such a crap day."

"Yeah." Kayde sighs, sounding suddenly exasperated. "Now that she's gone, I'll tell you my news. I went looking for Grey this morning, right before the sun came up. You were dead asleep," he adds, a small grin twitching on his lips.

"I'm sure I was. I was weirdly tired last night." Not able to help but quip. "Can't imagine why." Kayde doesn't respond right away. Just fixes me with that expectant look of his until I relent with a huff. "Sorry, okay. Did you find him? Was it hard to make him leave?"

"Well, that's the thing." He pushes his plate away from him, then taps mine pointedly. "Finish the hash browns, please? Don't make me worry that you're going to pass out today."

Picking up my fork, I scrunch my nose as I push them around my plate. "I'm not hungry," I mumble, shoulders hunched. "I've already had some of them."

"I know exactly what you've had. And if we weren't here, I'd pin you down and hand feed you until I'm satisfied," Kayde murmurs rather menacingly.

Too bad I'm so fucked up that instead of being concerned, I find it incredibly fucking hot. The mental image won't do me any good today, though, so I push it to the back of my mind and wait for his answer while shoving a large bite of hash browns drenched in gravy into my mouth.

"I couldn't find him," Kayde admits. "I followed any trail I could, and I found the signs of his campsite. But he wasn't anywhere in the woods that I could locate."

I blink at that, trying to process his words as the campers come a little more alive now that they've eaten. Though I'm not sure I want them to be that rowdy when I'm leaving with my group in the next ten minutes for our hike. "Do you think he's gone?" I ask, tapping my knuckles against the fake wood grain of the table.

"Maybe?" Kayde shrugs. "It certainly seems that way. He didn't exactly seem interested in doing anything to your campers when we met him, so it's possible he really was just trying to leave when we stole his shit."

"Yeah," I concede, though I'm not sure I believe him. Judging by his face, Kayde barely seems to believe himself. "I'll kind of keep an eye out today when we hike and let you know if we find anything?"

Kayde's nodding, mouth open, when movement catches my attention. Both Kayde and I turn just as Shawn approaches the edge of the table with an apologetic smile on his face. "Are you almost ready, Summer?" he asks, rubbing one arm and looking a little out of place. His voice is soft, as usual, and it takes me a few moments to stop glaring at him and remind myself that punching him would be *wrong*.

Then I realize I have no idea what he's talking about. "Almost ready? For what?" Nothing I'm doing should involve Shawn today.

His grin widens, and he looks so put out and awkward that it's cringe worthy. "Daniel asked if I could switch with him. So it's me, you, and Darcy going out this morning. Kayde, Kinsley, and Daniel are going out after."

That...doesn't feel so great. Something ripples down my spine, and I'd be blind to not see the furrow of Kayde's brows, or the frown that touches his lips before his expression smoothes out.

"Why?" I ask, feeling more suspicion than I probably should. "Is Daniel okay?"

"Ah, yeah." He tosses a look over his shoulder at the other counselor, who's sitting with his head buried in his hands. "He's just having a hard time after yesterday. You know how sensitive he is." Shawn doesn't phrase it like an insult, and frowns at us again. "Kayde, could you maybe talk to him? He looks up to you a lot, and he's having a rough time."

My sociopath looks between us, expression calculating. "I could take your hike, Summer," he says, ignoring Shawn's words. "I don't mind."

"You can't," I sigh, head tilted to the side. "You're taking over for Kinsley, remember? That leaves you with two groups of kids to keep from mayhem and destruction. It's fine." Though it wouldn't take much to switch things around, I'd feel guilty bothering Kinsley again. "It's totally...great." It's anything but. I don't want to be on a trail with Darcy. Especially with this mood she's in.

And I *definitely* don't want to spend any time with Shawn if I can help it.

But I can't help it. That's the problem. And when Kayde sees that too, he lets out the breath he's holding and leans over to blatantly kiss my cheek. "I'll go talk to Daniel," he acquiesces, getting to his feet and grabbing my plate and mug. I drain the cup of milk before he can grab it, and lay it on the tray with a soft, grateful smile.

“I appreciate you,” I inform him soberly. “Like, so much.”

“Well, I love you, so it’s basically the same thing.” Kayde chuckles, not bothering to take notice of Shawn’s startled glance. Without another word, he heads up to the kitchen, going through the doors to wash our dishes.

Shawn watches him, face screwed up in surprise. “Did he say he loves you?” he asks, obviously wondering if he’s misheard.

But alas, he has not. “Yep,” I sigh, sitting back again. “He most certainly did.”

“Crazy. You guys have only known each other, what, a few weeks? That’s insane.” But he looks at me again, eyes narrowing, and asks, “Do you love him too?”

And isn’t that the million dollar question of the week?

I hesitate, only to shrug my shoulders and grin up at him wryly. “Who knows?” I ask, folding my arms over my chest. “I’ll get back to you when I figure it out.”

Shawn just shakes his head and waits until I get up to join him outside, where the campers are already gathering. Following after him, all I can do is frown as I wonder how much worse my day can get now that I’m going to be stuck with Darcy and Shawn for the next few hours.

Surely, I think, it can’t get *that* much worse. Especially if I pretend they simply...don’t exist. With that as my plan, I follow Shawn more closely, hands in my pockets as I toss a winning, fake smile to my campers. One way or the other, I’m going to complete this hike and, hopefully, drag Kayde to my cabin before I crash for a nap.

I won’t tell him yet, but he’s the best cuddler I’ve ever met. Plus, I sleep better when he’s in my bed. And while that’s completely fucked up, given what he is, I can’t bring myself to feel bad about it.

# CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



Once we get moving, it hits me clear in the face how little I want to be on a hike with Darcy and Shawn. Hell, I'd take Mr. Fink and his bunions over them, and he complains like nobody's business.

Though, for the most part, the two of them leave me alone. They hang out near the front of the line of campers, even though one of them should be moving up and down the line to check on the kids and make sure none of them sneak off.

Not that I think any of them will. Especially not after Emily's accident yesterday, when it's so fresh in all of their minds and they're clearly afraid of the same thing happening to them. It shows in their careful steps, their caution, and the hushed conversation that drifts back to me every once in a while.

Yet again, I wish Fink would've let us switch days. We've done it for bad weather before, when it's storming and dangerous for the kids to swim or hike or do the obstacle course. So why in the world can't this be another exception to his 'on schedule or die' rule?

Especially since Emily *did* almost die.

Melody drifts back to walk beside me, silent for a few minutes as we stride through an easier part of the trail. "You okay?" I ask finally, when she still doesn't say anything.

"Yeah," Mel sighs, though she doesn't sound like she means it. "You guys know that literally no one wants to hike today, right?" The question is blunt, and her tone is unimpressed when she looks up at me.

I shrug my shoulders, a frown on my lips. “Well, for what it’s worth, I tried to get today switched to *not* a hiking day. Seriously, I gave it my best shot with Fink. But there’s only so much I can do.” I’d argued with him as long as I was comfortable doing so, and I hadn’t been the only one. Kayde had supported me, along with Kinsley. But Fink hadn’t been swayed by us. He’d been distracted, which I can’t blame him for, but I *can* blame him for not taking the feelings of the other campers into consideration like he should.

“Oh.” Mel’s frown twists her lips, and she walks beside me without speaking for another few minutes. “Did you mean it?” she asks finally, her voice dropping in volume.

I glance her way and hop over a low, gnarled root. “Did I mean what?”

“That Emily is going to be okay.”

Her concern, and the way the kids in front of us glance back to see my reply, twists my heart for these kids. Even the ones who barely know Emily care about her more than most adults would. “Yeah, I meant it,” I assure her, keeping my voice at normal volume so the campers in front of us can hear me as well. “Emily is absolutely going to be fine. I heard it from Liza myself.” More like I heard half of it from Liza, and half of it from Kinsley. But I know they respect Liza’s medical opinion more than any opinions the rest of us have.

All three kids visibly relax, and I look up as Shawn walks down the line of kids, brows knit together as he mouths numbers under his breath.

What a nice change to see one of them actually doing their damn job. Though as he gets closer and looks my way with knit-together brows and a grimace, I start to think that I’m not going to like whatever he has to say.

“Go back to the others, please?” I dismiss Melody, making sure to stay polite and casual. If Shawn’s going to tell me something I don’t want to hear, I’d prefer Mel isn’t around to hear my reply. She looks at Shawn, considering him, before nodding and speeding up to catch up with the rest of Redtail while I fall further behind.

It’s the smart move. Shawn frantically falls into step with me, running his hands through his dark hair. “Don’t freak out,” he tells me, his voice soft. “And don’t hurt me.”

“Did you tell another kid about a forbidden trail?” I ask sharply, unable to keep my disdain out of my voice. “Or, I don’t know, leave another knife

out in your room for someone to find?” If this is my summer to nearly drown, it’s apparently Shawn’s to fuck up.

But the look of anguish on his face—like he’s a puppy I’ve punted across a field—makes me feel a little bad for him. I see Darcy glance back at us, indecision and turmoil warring on her face, but when her eyes fall on Shawn her shoulders stiffen and she picks up her pace as trail leader.

I would say it’s weird, but it’s *Darcy*. I expect nothing more from her and continually have to lower my expectations every time she shows back up at Crestview.

“I know this hasn’t been my best week, okay?” Shawn mumbles under his breath. “And I already feel like shit, Summer. You don’t have to rub it in.”

Oh, but I do. I absolutely want to rub it in when Emily is lying in a hospital bed and going to need surgery to fix her arm. And it’s all Shawn’s fault.

“But I need your help. So maybe save the judgment and self righteousness for a little later?” he requests, sounding nervous.

“What?” I can’t keep the withering, deadpan tone out of my voice, and my mouth quirks into a frown. “What could you possibly need my help with?”

“Carter is missing,” he murmurs, his voice dipping low. “He was here, now he’s not. I just counted, and re-checked. He’s *missing*, Summer. He was really torn up after yesterday. He talked about going to see the place Emily fell for some shit reason that I definitely should’ve listened to.” He rakes his fingers through his hair again as I come to a complete stop, eyes wide.

“One of the kids is *missing*?” I hiss. “And it’s taken you this long to spit that out?”

Shawn meets my eyes with his own wide, pleading gaze. “Help me find him? I don’t want him falling or getting hurt or...” he trails off, eyes closing. “I know I’ve messed up. But I want to find him before something happens. Darcy can take the others to the overlook while we search. That way, she has a good area to corral them in.”

His words make sense, and I glance at the line of kids getting further and further away from us and up the trail. Mel looks back at me, confused and wary, but I just twitch my fingers to make sure she stays with the group.

While I'm sure Mel would be more helpful than Shawn, I don't need to worry about another lost kid in the woods.

"Okay. Umm." God, I don't want to do this today. But adrenaline thrums in my veins as I look around, as if I'm expecting Carter to just pop out of the woods and declare that he was here all along. But, unfortunately, that doesn't happen. "Where was the last place you saw him?"

"The river, I think?" Shawn replies, unsure. "I definitely saw him at the river, because he was helping one of my other campers on the rocks." He bites his lip, glancing nervously around us.

But I hesitate, something in me unsure. "Tell me you aren't lying," I demand, unsure of where the words come from. "Tell me this isn't some fucked up prank."

"Prank?" Shawn's brows shoot up and he looks around incredulously. "How could this be a prank? Do you think I have Carter hiding in the woods ready to jump out and scream 'boo' at you?" He sounds a little desperate. "If you're not going to help me look for him, fine. I'll get Darcy to help." At that, Shawn turns, taking a few steps toward Darcy and the kids before I reach out and grab his arm.

"Wait. Wait, okay?" I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. I'm too tired for this. I want to just be done, go back to my cabin, and sleep. Or at least go get high with Kinsley and forget today and yesterday ever happened.

Well, most of it anyway. I'd be lying if I didn't admit to Kayde giving me the best kind of shivers in the tree last night, and then again when he'd carried me to my cabin and thrown me down onto my bed before falling down after me.

It really is criminal that he's so good at everything, and somehow, I always end up getting less sleep than I want or need.

Leaving me cranky, tired, and sweaty in the woods.

"I'm sorry, Shawn." The words grate in my throat, stinging like razor blades. "I'm just so tired, and so worn out from yesterday. I know you wouldn't lie about this. That would be fucked up." Even Shawn isn't *that* bad.

I think.

"The river?" I repeat, barely considering his words except to map my way back to that part of the trail. "The last crossing of it?" The deeper one, naturally. Shawn nods and sets off at a fast walk with me beside him, both of us nearly jogging back to the river.

“I’m going to take the rocks.” Shawn gestures to an outcropping with tons of crevices and rocks that any kid could hide in. “Take the shore?”

I hesitate, but nod. The shore has brush and more rocks, and if Carter really wanted to, he could’ve ducked into one and lost us. At least, that’s what I’m telling myself, as I try to remember what Carter looks like or when the last time I saw him was.

Had I really not noticed a kid sneaking away from the others, or darting off into a hiding place, thinking he couldn’t be seen? I scan my memories of being here barely twenty minutes ago, a frown on my lips as Shawn breaks away to head to the rocks.

I must be off my game, and that makes this as much my fault as Shawn’s. I’m the one bringing up the rear, after all. How had I not *noticed*?

“Carter?” I call, stumbling over loose rocks on the shore of the river. “Carter!” My voice carries, echoing off the trees, but I get no reply. When I’ve checked both sides of the river where we cross, I glance up, only to see that Shawn has disappeared from view behind the outcropping.

Well, it’s not like he’s much help, anyway.

Without hesitating, I stride into the river, the freezing water swirling around my knees. Being in the water is the easiest way to move up and down the river, and I’d rather get wet than cut myself up in the briars and close-together, tiny trees that line the shore on either side.

Though when I make my way up the river for about a half mile, then back down, I start to think we’re looking in the wrong place.

Thankfully, Shawn is waiting for me about fifty yards from where I’d splashed into the river in the first place, staring up through the trees at the sky above us. “Hey, Shawn,” I call, picking up my stride. “I think maybe he went somewhere else. I’m not seeing a damn thing down here, and he’s not answering me.”

But Shawn doesn’t reply. His narrowed eyes just study the canopy of trees, and he tilts his head one way, then the other.

It’s weird as hell, even for him.

“Shawn?” I prod, slowing to a stop in the rough water beside him. “Are you high?” I can’t really hold it against him, if he is. Not when Kinsley supplies me with a steady stream of edibles that I take to sleep or to calm my nerves when they’re needed.

But I *don’t* get high when we’re doing something with the kids.

“I just remembered something.” Shawn’s head tips down to me, his gaze narrowed. “Well, I remembered it while you were off splashing downstream.” His gaze flicks down to my mud-streaked legs, and it feels like he’s judging me when I’m the only one who looks like she’s been actually searching.

“Yeah?” I don’t know how to take his words, or this sudden attitude shift. “Would you like to share with the class?” My steps bring me closer to him, and I shove my hands in my pockets, waiting expectantly.

Shawn looks me over, a humorless grin touching his lips. “Absolutely. Just had to wait for the class to come back. You look tired, by the way,” he adds casually.

But it’s so *frustrating*, and I glare at him, still breathing heavily from jogging through the river. “Yeah, I’m fucking tired,” I agree vehemently. “I’ve been in the river looking for *your camper* while you apparently stare into the damn sun. I hope you go blind, by the way.” It’s not a nice thing to say, and a little ridiculous, but God, I just can’t stand Shawn.

“I remembered the last time I saw Carter,” Shawn remarks, turning to look at me fully with the waters of the river eddying around our legs. He’s closer than I prefer, and I consider taking a step back before deciding against it. I don’t want Shawn to think I’m afraid of him.

“You already told me.” My words are slow, and my brows knit together in confusion. “You literally told me you saw him here at the river. That’s why we’re, you know, *here at the river*.” I’m starting to think this is some kind of stupid prank, or that Shawn has sunstroke. Either seems like a viable option, given the way he’s acting.

“Yeah, I think I remembered wrong, actually. I’m sure I did. See, now that I’m thinking about it?” His wide, earnest eyes find mine, and I barely register when he shifts a step closer. “I saw him this morning.”

“Okay? Does that help us know where to look for him?” Befuddled is an understatement to how I feel as I glare at him. This is just stupid, quite frankly.

“Yep.” He nods again, looking pleased with himself. “I know where to find him. I’m sure of it.”

“Where’s that?” I’ll take anything to get me out of this river and lead us to his camper.

“The cabin.” The words don’t quite make sense, and I look at him quizzically. “Where I said he could stay after he started puking this

morning.”

...What?

My mouth opens to ask what in the world he means, but Shawn lunges forward suddenly, hand around my throat as he shoves me backward off balance. I scramble, trying to stay on my feet, and panic goes through me when my feet are no longer on the ground. There’s a second where I’m airborne, until my back hits the rocks of the riverbed *hard*, knocking the breath out of me.

And the fight.

I gasp just as my head is shoved under, and river water floods my mouth and lungs. That only makes it worse, and I fight to cough it out, only to find no relief. Not when I’m being held down with Shawn’s hands on my throat.

He’s speaking. Saying something I can’t hear over the roaring in my ears, the protests of my lungs, and the rushing river water. I scream, or try to, frantically making things worse every time I open my mouth.

My legs flail in the air, and I’m so fucking close to the shore that I can feel the grass under my shoes anytime my feet make contact with it in an attempt to push him off of me.

*Stop*, I beg him silently, eyes open. My nails scratch at him, movements becoming panicked and frenzied as the water sears my lungs.

Only belatedly do I see the blackness at the edges of my vision, and notice the dark spots blinking in and out to obscure his face. My struggles redouble as the blackness grows, and I writhe while my brain screams for me to *figure this out*.

Because if I don’t, I’m going to die here. One of my hands comes up to grip his face, slipping and sliding against his skin as I dig my nails in. He tries to shake me off, though not very hard, but I maintain my harsh, biting grip as much as I can.

The pain and fear war for first place in the ‘worst of the worst’ contest, and nausea bubbles in my stomach. My mouth remains open, and every attempt I make to expel water just lands me with lungs that ache more and more black spots in front of my eyes.

It hurts so bad I can barely stand it.

*But I have to stand it if I don’t want to die.*

Fear makes my thoughts go short, and my eyes burn under the water as I meet Shawn’s gaze obscured by black dots. My hands flex, around his, nails digging harder, but I can feel it starting at the tips of my toes and fingers.

Weakness. Acceptance.

The knowledge I'm not getting out of this.

Everything I've done in the past three weeks with Kayde, and Emily, and the other kids. Every time I'd stopped Kayde or the time I confronted Grey are all going to be an absolute waste.

It was for *nothing*, if I die here.

Nothing at all.

*But Shawn isn't exactly giving me a choice.*

The fear grows as my ability to fight wanes, and my head feels like it's going to explode. Pain is an understatement for how my lungs scream in protest, begging me for air and to expel the dirty river water as soon as possible. But with my head underwater, all I can do is apologize to my body as blackness overwhelms more and more of my vision.

The last thing I see before I'm forced by my body to give in and inhale a lungful of water, is Shawn's cruel smile freezing on his lips and his head jerking up to look at something else. My hand slips from his face as he does, and the fuzzy darkness swarms my vision, taking the pain and the fear with it and leaving me with *nothing*.

But at least the nothing is better than the pain.

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# CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



**M**y first half coherent thought is that the third time is definitely the charm, and in the worst way imaginable.

My second thought is asking the universe how the hell I'm still alive. I definitely remember the blackness spreading, taking my consciousness with it. And I *absolutely* remember the pain in my lungs from breathing in river water.

Yet all I have now is a dull ache in my chest, and a weariness that's sitting bone-deep. If I'm dead, then I want a refund. Dead people definitely shouldn't feel pain.

Nor should they be hearing the crackle of a campfire from nearby, or feel the warmth of it wash against them.

"So." The cheerful voice is unfamiliar, but I'm not quite to the point of opening my eyes just yet. I'm still busy marveling over still being alive and trying to remember what had happened.

Oh, right. It clicks into place and jerks me back into consciousness.

Shawn had tried to fucking kill me. And for some reason, hadn't succeeded, though I don't think I can take credit for it.

Curiosity has me opening my eyes more than anything, and my vision flickers, blurry, as I blink to clear it.

"You seem to be having a bad week." Grey sits across from me, on the other side of a campfire that sends sparks fluttering into the air. It occurs to me that it's significantly later in the day than I thought it would be, and I sit up with a groan. "Is it common for camp counselors to try to drown each other?"

I don't answer him right away. I move my hands, then my feet, and notice belatedly that my clothes are mostly dry. My back hurts from hitting the rocks, so I'm sure I'm bruised to hell and back, and my throat stings when I swallow.

But I'm *alive*.

"You know, not in my experience," I croak, voice hoarse. Frowning, I rub the base of my throat and drag my legs up under me, not hiding the fact that I'm studying him. "But I guess things change, and there's a first time for everything, huh?" I'm still playing the last few minutes I can remember over and over in my head, and I glance up at the sky with worry. "How long have I been out?"

"Well, after I pulled you out of the river and got the water out of your lungs, you woke up for a few seconds. I figured then you weren't brain damaged," Grey explains, meeting my look with that shit-eating grin. "Then you kind of faded back out. But you were snoring, so I figured you needed the rest and you weren't, like, bleeding into your brain or something." He's so strangely casual about this that I can't quite figure out how to respond.

"You saved me." It's not a question, but I can't keep the surprise out of my voice. "Why save me? You're like Kayde, right?"

At his quizzical glance, I duck my head in embarrassment and mutter, "A murderer."

"Oh, well, yeah?" He blinks up at the sky. "Anyway, it's almost eight. In case you were wondering. And just because I'm a murderer doesn't mean I'm an awful person. Not to mention one who likes being alive. I don't want your boyfriend to hear about you drowning and come after me for it. Fuck all knows your camp counselor 'friend' is also going to blame me."

Of course he will.

And Kayde could very well believe him.

"I can't believe Shawn tried to drown me," I mutter, though the shock isn't as strong as perhaps it should be. My feet scrape against the dirt of the small clearing, and I drag my legs up to my chest and wrap my arms around them. I'm exhausted and worn out, but this is nothing compared to how much it had hurt back in the river.

Clearly, I'm never going near water again. At least, not outside of a mug of tea or a shower. "What happened to Shawn?" I ask, realizing a bit late that it's probably important. "Did you kill him?" I wouldn't be upset if he had, but Grey shakes his head.

“No. Sorry, Summer.” It still makes me feel weird that he knows my name, even though I’d never told him. “I figured I needed to choose between killing him and saving you, and saving you seemed better for me in the long run.” He picks up a large stick to poke at the fire, making it pop and crackle between us.

But I’m too tired to say anything. With my head on my knees, I watch the flames, hating that I’m so close to dozing back off again. Not that I can really fight it. Drowsiness drags at me, pulling my eyelids down until I can feel myself slipping back into a light sleep.

“So, what are you going to do?” Grey’s voice pulls me out of it, and I manage to shake off some of the sleepiness to hum in confusion at his question. “You very clearly have a problem.” He runs the stick between his hands, eyes finding mine over the fire. “A pretty violent one. He took my stuff out of your cabin, you know,” Grey adds, surprising me.

“How did—” I break off, unsure of what to ask. “How do you know that?”

But Grey just grins slyly at me. “I watch him when he’s in the woods. You know he pushed her, right?”

The words chill me to the bone, but I stare at him, refusing to let my mind continue with that thought. “Pushed who?” The words come out of numb lips, because I already know what he’s going to say.

“That little girl yesterday. He showed her where the trail was and followed her. She didn’t realize it, and when she got to the cliff, he pushed her.” Grey’s eyes glitter, and he watches my face as horror courses through me. “You’ve got a killer on your hands. Or at least, someone who wants to become one. He’s not like your Kayde, and he isn’t like me, either. He’s fucked up.”

“As if other serial killers aren’t?” I can’t help but quip, eyes narrowed. “You certainly seem like a shining example of positive mental health.”

Grey giggles at that. “Maybe I’m not, but I’m also not setting traps for kids and counselors so I can kill them,” he reminds me. And, okay, he definitely has a point.

“He really tried to kill me,” I mutter, the silence between us breaking. “Like, he tried to *kill* me.”

“He did,” Grey agrees. “So what are you going to do about it?”

I open my mouth to answer, though my brain isn’t exactly sure of what’s going to come out of my mouth when Grey’s face changes. He rises

to his feet, looking somewhere over my shoulder, and lifts his hands to show that they're empty.

"I'd definitely prefer you talk to her and have her tell you I did *not* try to drown her, Kayde," Grey states, looking serious for the first time since I've met him.

*Kayde?* I whirl around on my knees, mouth falling when I see Kayde standing behind me, at the edge of the clearing, with his head cocked and a blade in his hand. He doesn't spare a look for me, however. His shrewd, predatory gaze is all for Grey.

"Funny," Kayde murmurs, his grip on the knife white-knuckled. "That's not what Shawn said. According to him, Summer was pushed into the river by some maniac and held under. According to him..." He looks down at me, and for just a moment, his eyes widen and he looks so *vulnerable*.

"You're dead."

"Well, I'm sure he wants me to be." I get to my feet, my legs trembling as I slowly work my way up. "Since he was the one who—" All I see is a flurry of movement before I'm wrapped up in Kayde's arms, his muscles like bands of iron around my body.

"Fuck," Kayde exhales, and takes a breath against my still-damp hair. "I really thought..." There's a shaky note in his voice, and I glance up at him in surprise to find a mix of rage and relief on his face. "I'm so sorry, Summer," Kayde murmurs, reaching up to tuck my hair back from my face. "I knew I shouldn't have let you go."

"Are you satisfied I haven't done anything?" Grey asks, a little snappy. "Can I sit now without fear of you pushing my face into the fire"

Kayde turns his cold gaze on Grey, lips twitching. "Sure," he invites flatly. "So long as you stay on your side of the fire." When I shift my weight uncomfortably, Kayde pulls me back down to the ground, sitting with me in his lap and my back pressed to his chest.

He's so *warm*. I can't help but lean back against him, my eyes closing once again. They talk over me, with Grey explaining what happened and what he'd done about it.

But I can't stop thinking about the question Grey'd asked me  
*What am I going to do about it?*

My fingers clench in the fabric of Kayde's shirt, and a buzzing anger sets my bones to shivering under my skin. Some of the ache is chased away

by the rage, and when I open my eyes, it's to watch embers shoot frenetically into the darkening sky.

"So what are you still doing here?" My words cut Grey off, and he looks at me quizzically, like I've just asked a stupid as hell question. "I'm grateful," I assure him. "But you told me you're not here to do anything that will have Kayde breathing down your neck. So what are you *doing* here?"

"Oh, that's easy." He unsheathes a knife and runs his finger along the blade absently, eyes fixed on the dull grey sheen of the metal. "I'm just here to watch. As soon as I realized the problem you're having, I thought it would be interesting to see how it ended up. Too bad you two were so busy chasing me you didn't see what he was doing, don't you think? He's gone into town for hunting supplies twice now, first of all. And he walks the woods at night. He's tried following you." His gaze slides to Kayde. "But he's never succeeded."

Kayde's eyes narrow in surprise, and a flicker of confusion crosses his face. "Following *me*?" he repeats. "No, I don't think that's true. I would've noticed if he was."

"You don't notice anything when you're following *her*," Grey argues sweetly. "You didn't notice me for a long time that night we met. And you haven't noticed him either. Which is kind of pathetic, since you're a lot better at this game than him."

This isn't a game, I want to remind them, but I can barely focus on anything more than *Shawn*.

"So you'll leave now?" Kayde asks, his attention never leaving Grey. "You've gotten what you wanted, right?"

"Mostly. I'd still like to see how this ends," Grey admits. "I'll leave in the morning, your majesty. Never to be seen again." But he smiles on the words, like there's an inside joke I'm missing.

"What were you even doing here?" I can't help but ask the question, and I lean forward as much as Kayde will allow. I want to grab onto Kayde and never let go; to break down and have him tell me it's okay, that he'll take care of everything.

I want to watch him hurt Shawn.

But I refuse to let those thoughts do more than whisper in my brain before pushing them away, a frown touching my lips. "Why Camp Crestview?"

“Well, I don’t kill kids, if that’s what you’re implying,” Grey is quick to tell me, holding one hand up in half-surrender. “That’s never what I was here for. Actually, I wouldn’t have stopped here at all if not for him.” He nods at Kayde, who shifts behind me. “He’s kind of famous, you know. To some of us. A *bus crash* turning someone into a serial killer?” Grey shakes his head. “There are bets about whether he’d killed someone before the accident, or the crash just fucked him up in the head.”

“And which side are you on?” Kayde murmurs, amusement tinging his tone.

Grey’s grin widens. “That you were born fucked up, just like me. And just like your little camper, who’s so fond of you both.”

That has my head snapping up, eyes wide. “You mean Melody.” It isn’t a question, though the words leave me discomforted all the same. “You *both* think she’s, what, some kind of monster? But how in the world can you know that, when she’s twelve?”

They share a look that I feel completely left out of, before Grey tilts his head to the side once more, thoughtful. “Like recognizes like,” he shrugs finally. “I’ve seen the way she looks at some of the boys. She’s going to grow up to be some kind of black widow. Mark my words. And have you not seen the way she manipulates everyone?”

“She’s...a good leader. She’s just mature and well spoken,” I argue, the words automatic. But deep down, I know it’s more than that.

And maybe I’ve always known.

“She’s a sociopath like him,” Grey nods at Kayde. “Don’t be naïve, Summer. It’s not a good look on someone dating a killer.”

“Aren’t you a sociopath too?” It’s the curiosity that makes me ask, though I’m not so sure I want to know.

“He’s a psychopath,” Kayde mutters. “Not a sociopath like me. Narcissistic, or sadistic?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” But Grey preens under Kayde’s words as if they’re the highest form of praise. “Try not to ruin her or change her, okay? I like her. She’s going to grow up to be an absolute monster.”

“How would you know?” Something occurs to me, and I close my eyes hard. “Please tell me Melody hasn’t talked to you.”

“We met a few mornings ago,” Grey is eager to tell me. “She knows what I am. As I said, Summer. Like recognizes like. She knows what she is. What we are.” He gestures to Kayde, then himself. “Maybe if you’re not

fast enough, she'll kill Shawn herself. What is she, twelve?" he squints, thinking. "Yeah, that's a good age for your first murder—"

"Stop talking about Mel." I can't handle it. There's no way I can even fathom her killing someone, when it's not just a joke in my own head. "Or I'm going to, I don't know, spontaneously combust?"

The two of them trade another look that I don't love, before Kayde sighs and presses his face against my neck. "Kins and Liza are worried sick," he murmurs. "They're out looking for you as well, since they don't believe Shawn. He said he was calling Fink and the police, but..." Kayde glances up at the sky. "Somehow, I have a feeling that's not quite true."

Before I can come up with a reply, my pocket vibrates. Surprised, I pull my phone out of my shorts to look at the newly cracked screen filled with missed texts, calls, and voicemails. "Well, at least it still works," I mumble, noticing the new text is from a number I don't have saved. I'm just shocked my phone is still alive, even if the crack is bad enough to spider web across the front and cause me to be careful when I slide my fingers across the glass. I'll definitely need a new one, as I'm not so convinced there's not any water rattling around inside the phone waiting to make a nefarious move.

The text contains a picture, and the lungful of oxygen I inhale nearly chokes me as I look at it more closely.

Kinsley lies against a tree, blood trickling from her temple and her face slack. Another text comes in as I try to relearn how to breathe, and it certainly doesn't help.

*Tell anyone and she's dead. No cops, no Fink. Just us.*

"Fuck," I whisper, my hands shaking. "Fuck!" I jump to my feet, breaking free of Kayde's hold and nearly falling. "Kayde!" I whirl on him as he stands, holding the phone out to him with quick, jerky motions. Grey doesn't move. He just watches us from the ground, fingers still trailing over the short hunting knife in his hands.

"Damn it." Kayde curses softly. "Okay. Do you have any idea where this is?"

"Umm..." I look at the picture again, trying to identify the surroundings of it. "Back near camp, I think? That looks like one of the cabins." I gesture toward a few logs I can see peeking between two of the trees in the picture.

"All right. Stay with me, Summer. Do you understand?" I'm already nodding, and I grimace at the pain in my legs from the scrapes and abrasions courtesy of Shawn and the river.

“I guess he’s doing something awful, huh?” Grey doesn’t sound worried or upset like I am. But why should he be? He has nothing to lose. But when I look at him again, he’s on his feet, and Kayde only stalks away with a mutter and a shake of his head.

“So what are you going to do, Summer?” Grey asks, his voice quiet enough that I know Kayde doesn’t hear him. His grin widens, slashing across his lips. “Are you going to let him keep spiraling? He’s going to kill someone tonight, you know. He won’t be able to help himself.”

The words cause something to click into place inside of me, and when he holds the now-sheathed blade out to me, I barely hesitate.

I take the knife in my hand and shove it into the back of my shorts, eyes never leaving his. “No, he won’t,” I promise in a whisper. “Not if I have anything to say about it.”

And that, it seems, is the answer Grey has been waiting for all along. His eyes flicker with a cruel, wicked light that reminds me of Kayde, and I see in him the same monster hiding under Kayde’s smiles and friendly facade. “I look forward to seeing what you do to him,” he tells me, and steps back with a small, mock salute.

“And how many pieces the two of you leave him in.”

# CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT



**B**y the time we're back at Camp Crestview, the sun is so far set that most of the camp is in shadow. I look around, confused by the eerie quiet, before glancing at Kayde for an explanation.

"It's because of you." He tells me flatly. "Shawn told all the counselors about Grey, and they made the campers go to Otter Hall for a 'sleepover.' It isn't the worst idea in the world."

"Unless you're a child-killing ax murderer looking to up your body count," I can't help but snort, and the withering glance I get in response is so worth it. "God, I have...no idea where to start." But my heart pounds in my chest as I think of Kinsley's unconscious body and the idea of Shawn hurting her.

It dawns on me that this will be faster if we split up.

But that's also one of the worst ideas I've ever come up with in my life.

Still, I look at Kayde with an apology on my face, and his lips press together like he knows exactly what I'm going to say. "I'm not going to like what you're going to propose, am I?" he asks darkly, eyes narrowed. "I swear to God, Summer. If you're about to suggest—"

"Splitting up will be faster. And he has Kinsley," I remind him, my voice soft. "I cannot lose Kinsley to *Shawn*."

I see him weigh the idea in his mind, and his grimace tells me he's come to the same conclusion as me. "Fine." Kayde's hand flexes at his side. "But if you find him, if you find any trace of him, you call me. Understand? Even if you have to send up a fucking smoke signal, you get me there. Don't you dare confront him on your own."

I'm nodding even before he's finished talking. "Promise, I'll get you. I'll call you and tell you where I am," I say as he strides over to me, jerking my chin up to him.

"Don't you dare do anything stupid," Kayde snarls lightly, leaning down to nip my lower lip in lieu of a kiss. "Or *I'll* kill you."

*If I'm not already dead*, I don't say. But I grin recklessly and give him a quick, two-finger salute before jogging toward Otter Hall. "I'm going to find Liza," I tell him over my shoulder. "See if she can help us."

"I'm going to start searching around the perimeter." He's jogging away in the other direction as he says it, and I'm close enough to the heavy glass doors that I don't answer.

For a few moments, no one notices me. At least, until Daniel's eyes find mine and I worry he's going to pass out as his mouth opens and closes like a fish. "Summer?" he chokes out at last, looking to his side where Darcy stands, ashen-faced. "We heard...Shawn said—"

"Where's Liza?" I ask flatly. "Better yet, have you seen Shawn in the past hour?" The two of them trade looks, and it's hard not to notice the war of emotions and guilt on Darcy's face.

But I don't have time for her shit tonight.

"We haven't seen Shawn in a few hours now," Daniel admits. "He left saying he was going to call the cops and Fink. But umm..." He chews his lower lip. "I'm starting to think something's wrong with that since no one has showed up."

*No shit, Daniel*, I want to snap. But instead I close my eyes hard and nod. "Liza?"

"She's been gone for awhile, too. Maybe thirty minutes?" He glances at his watch, then up at me. "Maybe forty. She said she was going back to the cabin for a first aid kit. One of the kids fell into a table and she wanted to clean the cut with peroxide."

"But she's not back either?" A bad feeling sinks into my stomach, and I'm already heading back for the door.

"No?" Daniel looks at Darcy, who won't meet his gaze. "Are you okay? You look kind of awful, and Shawn said—"

"Call the police," I order, calling the words over my shoulder. "Call Fink."

"What do we tell them?" Daniel asks, and I pause, knowing all the kids can hear me.

“Tell them...” I trail off, unsure. “Tell them we need help.” I don’t know what else to say. I don’t know how else to get them here, and I don’t want to alert Daniel and Darcy to what’s going on.

God knows they wouldn’t be any help.

Turning back to the door, I slow my steps when I see the figure blocking my way. A wry grin hooks my mouth into a half smile, and I put a hand on my hip to stare at Melody, unamused. “I need to go,” I tell her, voice quiet but no less urgent. “Let me through, Mel.”

“Sure,” she agrees, stepping to the side. But when I push through the doors, I realize instantly she’s on my heels, and she’s slipped out the door before I can actually do anything about her presence.

“Melody...” I glance at Otter Hall, then at her. “Please go back inside. You *cannot* come with me.”

“Are you going after Grey?” Her eyes are wide in her face, but she doesn’t look afraid. Just...anxious, maybe. Like she’s unsure how to feel. “Is that what this is about?”

Right. She’s *talked* to our temporary resident serial killer.

“I hate you know about him. But no. I’m—” I break off, trying to think of what to say.

*Fuck it.*

“I’m looking for Shawn. And...” I suck in a breath. “And Kinsley.”

“Shawn?” She tilts her head to the side. “He left hours ago. And Kinsley never showed up to Otter with her cabin.”

“Yeah, I know that.” I run my fingers through my hair, wishing I had a change of clothes. It’s not an important thought, but the feeling of my stiff, muddy clothes against my skin isn’t a pleasant one. “Look, I can’t explain. Things aren’t great, and I can’t take you with me. Something could happen.”

“So you shouldn’t go alone,” Melody agrees. “I won’t get in the way.”

“You could get hurt.” I shift uncomfortably from one foot to the other, well aware that time is not on my side. “Come on, Mel, I need to *go*.”

“Then *go*. But you’re taking me with you one way or the other,” Melody warns, arms crossed over her chest as she gives me a demanding look that’s far beyond her years. I shake off my unease and finally my resistance crumbles.

“If I tell you to run away, then you *run*,” I sigh at last. “Is that clear?”

Her eyes brighten, and Mel nods. “Yeah, of course Summer. I won’t get in your way or whatever you think. I just want to help.”

“Then come on.” This is such a bad idea, and I don’t wait for her as I jog across the camp toward Liza’s cabin.

The door swinging open on its hinges certainly doesn’t inspire confidence. I slow to a walk at the deck, one hand out for Melody to stop behind me. “Stay out here, okay?” I ask, barely glancing her way as I walk up the stairs.

I don’t think Shawn is here. And judging by the scene in front of me, I’m not sure Liza is either.

Inside the cabin, I immediately find a first aid kit spilled all over the floor; the contents scattered like it dropped and burst like a water balloon. I sidestep all of it, heading to the back of the cabin to look for any signs of life.

Noise from the door catches my attention, and when I look up, I see Melody hasn’t listened to me. She’s inside of the cabin, picking up the pieces of the first aid kit and stuffing them back into the broken plastic box. I waver, considering calling her out for not listening to me, before deciding it just isn’t worth it.

I go back to my search, looking for anything that might show me where my friends are, and coming up empty. Once I’m satisfied every inch of the cabin is empty, I head back to the front, where Mel is just setting the plastic box back up on the cabinet.

For my part, I shoot her a look from under raised brows, and Mel has the decency to duck her head. She knows she was supposed to listen to me.

She’d just decided she knows better.

“I’m not sure where to check...” I begin, stepping out on the deck past the cabin door. My words trail off at the sight in front of me, and I narrow my eyes at the shape of Darcy hovering at the foot of the steps, her arms wrapped around herself as if she’s keeping herself from falling apart. “What do you want?” I snap. “What could you possibly want?”

“I didn’t know,” she whispers, looking up at me with wide eyes. “Summer, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. He just said—” she breaks off, biting her lip as she looks at Melody.

“Yeah, it’s impossible to get her to go away. Whatever she hears is on her.” I figure I’ll give Kayde’s advice a try, and treat her like she’s older than twelve instead of a normal kid like the others.

"I won't even tell my mom," Melody agrees sagely. How kind of her.

But Darcy hesitates still, and when I take a step down toward her, she flinches like she might run. It prompts me to step back, but my eyes narrow in confusion at her actions. If I didn't know better, I'd think that Darcy did something to feel guilty for.

"He told me he couldn't stop dreaming about you," Darcy murmurs finally. "He said it used to happen, but he could ignore it. But then, with Kayde coming back, and him being clear about his feelings toward you, he said it was different." She looks over her shoulder, as if she's afraid Shawn is behind her. "He said he just wanted to teach you a lesson. And that the kids would be the way to do it. I don't know, though." Her brows knit together in doubt.

"Sometimes I think he just likes hurting them. He pushed her, Summer." Darcy squeezes her eyes shut, and I hear Melody's sharp intake of breath.

"So I heard." My voice is flat. Even. "Did you know he has Kinsley now? And Liza too, judging by the inside of her cabin." Saying their names makes panic jump in my chest, but I push it down with the rest of my emotions so I can focus on getting through this with the least amount of damage done possible.

Her nod is jerky. "He said he won't hurt them, though," she promises quickly. "It's not about them. It never was."

"And you believe him?" This time I'm quick to take the stairs down to her, and before Darcy can run away, I reach out and grip the front of her shirt to drag her to me. "You fucking believed him, Darcy? After he pushed Emily off a cliff? After what happened with the knife in his room? I'm willing to bet that wasn't an accident, either."

When she starts to reply, I cut her off. "No, I don't care. I don't give a damn about your reasons, or whatever you think of him. *Where the fuck is Shawn?!*" I'm louder than I intend to be, and I jerk her hard, throwing Darcy off balance.

"I'm sorry!" She breaks into sobs, her shoulders trembling, and falls into me. Any other time, I would try to be supportive. I'd attempt to be the better person.

But nearly drowning has taken that ability away from me. At least for now. I step back, a sneer on my face as Darcy crumples to the ground.

"I didn't ask," I snap coldly. "I don't want your apologies. All I want is my friends. Where the fuck are they, Darcy?"

“If I tell you, you can’t tell him,” she gasps, still sobbing with her face in her hands. “I’m afraid of him, Summer. I didn’t used to be. But after Emily, I confronted him. I asked—”

I don’t mean to do it. Not really. But I just *don’t care* about her explanations, and I need to find my friends. Swiftly, I shove my foot against her shoulder, pushing her back onto her elbows and getting a startled, wide-eyed look in response.

“Where are they?” My voice is cold, and when she shivers, I realize I sound much more like Kayde than myself.

And maybe that should worry me a little. But I don’t have time for worry right now. Or the brain capacity for it.

“North of Dormouse cabin,” Darcy whispers finally, eyes trained on mine and wide with fear. “You know that tree you like? The one you always climb?”

Of course he’s at one of my five favorite trees. My third favorite, to be precise.

“Great. Wonderful.” I don’t thank her. I set off past her, my strides long and quick. “If Daniel hasn’t called the police and Fink, then you’d better make sure it gets done,” I snap, barely looking at her as I speak. “Or so help me, Darcy, I’ll drown you just like Shawn tried to drown me. Only, there isn’t a serial killer in the woods to stop me from finishing the job.”

I’m not sure if I’ll regret the threat, but I can’t bring myself to care, either. Not when Darcy is part of what caused this, and certainly she could’ve prevented it.

All she had to do was tell me sooner than this.

# CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



Tankfully, I have the forethought to slow down from my dead run a good fifty feet from the tree Shawn might be at. I come to a stop, panting, my hands on my knees as I gasp for air. My lungs are still sore from the river, along with the rest of me, so I wince when I gulp air and wish Kayde would do that thing where he just *appears* at my side.

But maybe his superpowers are broken tonight.

“Melody.” I gasp her name as she slows beside me, her eyes sharp and missing nothing. It’s still not completely dark in the camp, but I know when I step into the trees, that will change quickly.

“Yeah?” Her voice is tinged with trepidation, like I’m about to tell her to go back to Otter Hall. Which, realistically, I should absolutely do. But I’d be lying if I didn’t admit having her helps my mental state, at least a little.

Melody is surprisingly cool in a crisis.

“If we find them there...” I trail off, thinking, and wonder if what I’m doing is right. Maybe I *should* tell her to go back or go somewhere else where she’ll be safe.

But I have a feeling if Shawn is here, I’m going to need Kayde as backup. Even though the knife sits heavily at my back, and I’ve definitely never felt this murder-y before. Is this how Kayde feels all the time? With the simmer of anger just under his skin and something like nausea in his stomach? Surely not. That would be rather uncomfortable.

“If we find them there, I need you to run. I need you to find Kayde.” Especially since I know how little phone service this end of the camp gets. “He’s checking the perimeter for Shawn. That’s the best I can do.”

"I can find him for you, Summer," Melody promises, her voice flat and free from anxiety or nerves.

I dip my head in a nod and straighten, finally able to breathe, and wish my lungs would stop burning from the oxygen I sorely need. My steps are long, and my stride is quick as I make my way toward my third favorite tree, taking a path that will get me there the fastest. But unfortunately, that also means if Shawn is there, he'll see me coming.

Not that I can avoid that tonight.

My steps crunch on the twigs and leaves littering the path, and it doesn't take long before the upper branches of the huge, climbable tree loom into sight.

As does the flashlight shining up from below the limbs. Voices reach my ears, one of which sounds a lot like Kinsley, and when I turn to glance at Melody, she nods and takes off at a dead run back towards the camp.

Leaving me all alone.

But it's better this way. I know that for certain, just as well as I know that I never could've endangered a twelve-year-old by letting her stay with me when I've found Shawn. My steps come to a halt and I fish my phone out of my pocket, crossing my fingers that I'll have one measly bar of signal.

Naturally, I don't. My heart twists, butterflies taking flight uncomfortably in my stomach, and I momentarily consider backtracking until I get a signal.

At least, until I hear Kinsley's raised voice and Liza's protests.

"Fuck it," I mumble, slamming my phone back into my pocket. "Sorry, Kayde." Apparently, I'm a liar. I'd promised him I'd call him before I did anything stupid. I hadn't intended to do this alone when I know that Shawn is bold enough to try to kill me.

He's already tried once, after all.

I straighten my back and walk toward the little clearing around my tree like I'm not afraid. Though it's hard to ignore the terror that makes my fingers shake until I curl them into fists at my sides.

*I don't want to do this.*

In fact, I'd rather turn tail now and wait for Kayde to come. I know he'll handle it for me; hadn't he been clear about that already? I know he'll take care of everything, instead of leaving me to deal with Shawn alone.

*I'm so afraid to do this.*

No one has ever tried to kill me before, and in my opinion, I'm handling it pretty well. But I've always been a master of compartmentalization—I can thank my dad for that. Abuse makes for one hell of a motivator to get mental shit in order as much one can.

At the very least, I'm good at pretending like everything is fine, when it's definitely not.

Shawn and I see each other at the same time. He turns away from Kinsley, who's tied to a much smaller tree than mine, with Liza at her side. At the sound of my steps they look up, and the black eye Kinsley sports does nothing to quell my anger with the shittiest camp counselor in the world.

"Cute," I tell him flatly. "Using one of my favorite places totally doesn't feel intentional or anything. Really fucking adorable of you, Shawn."

His smile is unfriendly, unkind, and maybe just a little bit unhinged. He shrugs his lean shoulders and flips the knife in his hands from one to the other. When he sees my eyes on it, that grin widens. "Do you know how hard it was to get this back after Nolan and Alec took it out of my room?" he asks, brandishing it at me. "Seriously. I thought I'd just have to give up and go buy another."

"What, were you afraid you didn't have enough left of Mommy's allowance to go to the hunting store for another?" I sneer coldly. "Poor baby."

His eyes flash a warning, but I'm too far in this to listen or abide it. "Last I checked," Shawn murmurs, stepping away from the tree where Kinsley and Liza are tied. "I'm holding a knife, and I have them." He jerks the blade at them, making my stomach clench.

He's right, and I hate that he is.

"So watch how you fucking talk to me, Summer." When he lifts the blade again, I raise my hands in surrender, the knife at my back cold against my skin. Grabbing it and diving for him would be stupid. If I'm going to use it, it's going to be when I have the upper hand, or the element of surprise. For all of my desperation, I'm not sure I want to try to take Shawn in a fair fight.

My best plan is to stall him until Melody finds Kayde, and hope to God they find us.

"You're right. Okay?" I flex my fingers, stopping at the edge of the little clearing. "You're right. Though I don't suppose I could convince you to let

them go?” I tip my head toward my silent friends, and Kinsley’s jaw clenches.

“Summer, there’s something wrong with him,” Kinsley hisses, a tremor in her voice. “He’s—” She flinches when Shawn whirls on her, and I’m halfway across the clearing in an instant.

“Hey, whoa, whoa. Kinsley hasn’t done anything to you,” I remind him sharply, coming close enough that he could definitely stab me if he set his mind to it. My nerves tingle, and it’s hard to ignore the fear in my throat that bubbles up to choke me. “Neither has Liza. I thought it was me who’d gotten your panties in a twist, Shawn?” I back away a few steps, maneuvering him away from my friends. It works, and proves that Shawn really must hate me to be so easily distracted from Kinsley’s insults.

Liza, thankfully, stays quiet. Though she keeps her eyes on mine warily.

“So what *is* it with these dreams of yours, anyway?” I ask lightly. “Darcy tried to explain, but she was crying and I was mad. So...” My shoulder lift and fall in a shrug. “I’m all ears now, though.”

Shawn hesitates. He glances back at Kinsley, stroking his thumb along the knife, and my heart jumps to my throat.

“Clearly not that important if I’m not worth your time. Should I leave? Should we leave so you can have some alone time here in the woods? I hear there’s an elk around—”

“Shut the fuck up.” His voice is cold and bored. Not quite the manic desperation I’d hoped for. “Jesus fucking Christ, Summer, do you never shut the hell up?”

“Nah,” I tell him with a wry grin. “It’s one of my superpowers, actually. I can talk forever. I’ll probably still be talking when I’m dead.” Instantly I know that’s the wrong thing to say. Especially when Shawn grins and turns on me again.

“Maybe we’ll find out if that’s true tonight,” he threatens under his breath. “Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“Summer, get out of here!” Kinsley’s voice is shaky, and it’s clear that she’s riding the wave of terror and adrenaline, just like me. Her feet scrape in the dirt, and she struggles with the ropes on her arms keeping her and Liza against the tree. “He’s fucking crazy and this whole time he hasn’t stopped talking about you. Just—” she breaks off when Shawn lunges for her, but I’m not far behind.

“No!” I grab his arm, the one not holding the knife, and only belatedly wish I’d grabbed the one in my shorts to stab him with. “Shawn, no!”

He switches direction mid-motion, whirling on me with a white-toothed grin. “Okay,” he agrees, grabbing onto the front of my t-shirt and yanking me off balance. “Okay, Summer. You want to be the center of my attention? Fine.” He leans in close while dragging me closer to him, though I fight to keep my footing in the dirt. “I’d much rather hurt you, anyway.”

It occurs to me, way too late, that maybe him turning on her was a ploy to put *me* off guard. And that maybe I’m an idiot for forgetting that Shawn is surprisingly smart behind his crazy mask of insanity.

Those thoughts are knocked out of my head, however, when Shawn’s knee slams into my stomach. I gasp around the pain, my body folding inward, and he lets go of me so I can fall to my knees in the dirt in front of him, lungs burning again in exasperation at this new method of attack.

His knife suddenly finds my throat, and I try hard not to give him any response as he forces me to tip my head back and look up at him. “Here.” Bending down, he grabs a coil of rope from the pile of hunting supplies near the tree. “Put your hands behind your back, Summer. And if you try to run I swear to God I’ll gut Kinsley while Liza watches.”

That’s not an option. Putting my best friend in danger has *never* been an option, but this feels like an awful turn of events. When he walks back to me, however, I can’t do anything else except what he tells me to, and I can only pray he doesn’t find the knife at my back.

Somehow, that’s my one bit of good luck. He doesn’t find it, and his tying of my arms is sloppy and overdone. It still sucks, and my arms are still held fast, but he doesn’t notice the bit of space between my wrists, just as he doesn’t notice the outline of the blade I’m hiding.

Now if I can only use that to—

I don’t see his punch coming. Not until his blow knocks my face to the side as both Kinsley and Liza make sounds of shock and protest. My face burns, tears threatening to fall, but I force them to go away by squeezing my eyes shut, then look up at Shawn around the burning pain in my jaw.

“Feel better?” I ask, bracing my legs on the ground under me. “Did you get that out of your system—” This time I have enough warning to brace for the hit, but God, it still hurts. Pain washes through me; it’s the same kind of pain I remember from the bad times, when I’d been a kid and my Dad was too keen to hurt me when the alcohol hit.

It doesn't feel any better now to be punched in the face than it did back then. I groan and crumple to the ground, my hands jerking against the ropes holding them captive.

But I can't try to slip free. There's no way he won't notice, when he's this close. "So...the dreams?" I push, wondering if I can get him talking. Bored Shawn seems like a recipe for disaster, and he's mad enough at me, or so it seems, that I'm hoping I can distract him enough to wait this out.

Even if that means getting punched a few more times.

"Darcy should keep her fucking mouth shut," Shawn spits, quite literally, and I flinch when it lands on my cheek. It's decidedly less hot than when Kayde does it, and I rub my face in the dirt to get it off. After all, dirt and blood is better than anything of Shawn's. "But okay, you want to know?" He bends down and drags me back up into a sitting position, eyes brighter than I've ever seen and filled with sparks of what might be anger.

Because it can't be anything else, but he seems positively unhinged right now.

"I dream of how fucking stupid you are," he purrs, leaning close. "I've dreamed of killing you since that first summer, when you had a crush on me. Fuck." He looks away and scoffs a laugh. "You know that year, I thought maybe I had a crush on you as well. I thought that had to be it, because what else could it mean when I couldn't get you out of my head?"

Kayde would say that's some form of obsession. I'd say Shawn was dropped on his head at birth. His hand tightens in my shirt and he sneers in my face before continuing. "Then I started dreaming of you dying. Of me killing you. Isn't that just so messed up?" His laugh is cruel, and I stare at him, unimpressed. "Bet you never thought you'd meet someone who wants to murder you for the fun of it, huh Summer?"

Well, actually...I glance away from him, still unimpressed and wondering how I can fake it. This would've been a lot more impactful a few weeks ago. Shawn is just late to the game. But I can't hide that I'm afraid of him. I can't hide that I *really* don't want to die tonight. Especially by Shawn's hand.

"I, uh, certainly didn't," I answer, eyes squeezed shut as I try to chase away the rest of the pain in my face, or at least bury it somewhere in my mind. "Any particular reason? Any, I don't know, trigger? I'll be honest, Shawn..." Eyes widening, I lean forward until we're only a few inches away. "I really thought all this was over Darcy not getting Kayde."

“Maybe it’s over Kayde getting *you*,” Shawn purrs, mirroring me by leaning in. Kinsley whimpers somewhere behind him, but neither of us look at her.

Which is great, because I don’t want him to. I’ll do anything to keep him over here with me, instead of there with her and Liza.

“Is it? You just said you don’t like me like that,” I remind him, head tipping to the side. “So what does Kayde have to do with it? Hell, what do the kids you almost killed have to do with it?”

“I wanted to see how it would feel. Nolan and Alec really were an accident...mostly,” he admits. “But Emily? Well, she looks a little like you, don’t you think? Same eyes.” He reaches out to tug on a lock of my hair that’s fallen from its ponytail. “Same hair. I looked at her broken little body on those rocks and thought to myself that it might be you. And do you know what that was like?”

“I can guess, seeing where we are now.”

“It was *perfect*. But it wasn’t enough. It’s not enough to just push you off a cliff. And I’m kind of glad that weirdo in the woods stopped me from killing you. But I was so close, wasn’t I?” His fingers curl in my shirt, tugging pointedly, and I try to hide the horror I feel from my face. “Does your chest hurt? You breathed in so much water I swore you were a goner. Any bruises? I tried to make that fall hurt.”

There’s really, *really* something wrong with Shawn. He’s not like Kayde, or Grey, or maybe Melody...No, he’s something else entirely.

Something that really doesn’t deserve to be breathing.

“Could’ve been worse.” I shrug, trying to keep my cool. “I’m honestly still a little unclear on how this whole thing started. Could you try explaining it again? In simple words, please. I am post-almost-drowning.”

His smile turns sweet, and instantly I realize I’m about to regret this entire day. Sure enough, Shawn hits me in the face again, his fist cracking against my nose before he lets me fall to the dirt amidst Liza’s and Kinsley’s shrieks of protest. They don’t stop, though, and when Shawn turns on them, I blink through tears and hook my ankle around his, throwing him off balance.

“I wasn’t done,” I protest weakly, tears streaming down my face along with blood from my cracked nose. “So don’t ignore me, Shawnathon.”

“That’s not my name.” But he turns on me anyway, brows raised. “Where the *fuck* did you get Shawnathon from?”

“I don’t know. It sounded stupid. Isn’t that reason enough?” I taunt, struggling to sit up again. “Weren’t we having a conversation?” Without Kinsley and Liza here, I wouldn’t be so bold. I also wouldn’t have gotten close enough to him for this to happen.

But I’ll do whatever I have to to keep him away from them. I can’t *not*, when their lives are in danger. And all I have to do is hold out until Kayde shows up.

*If he shows up, a very unhelpful voice whispers in my brain. And if it isn’t too late.*

Shawn does turn at my words, though it’s just so he can kick me hard back to the ground, and takes advantage of my position when I curl onto my side to slam his shoe straight into my solar plexus.

I wretch, my hands clenching around the rope, and wonder how long I can realistically last before he finally does just kill me.

Another kick has me gasping for air, but when Shawn drags me back to a sitting position, I only give him an incredulous, half-manic laugh and a crooked grin. “You kick like a little girl. And not the kind of girl that comes here to camp. The kind of little girl too *delicate* to camp,” I clarify.

For a moment, Shawn just looks at me. Then he hits me again, and sends me right back to the ground, only to drag me back up as I groan around my throbbing, bloodied mouth. “What is the matter with you?” he laughs, incredulous. “Summer, in case you haven’t gotten the memo, I’m going to kill you. Right here. Right in front of them.” He gestures toward Kinsley and Liza, but I refuse to look at them. “You should be terrified of me.”

“Yeah? I should?” I blink, still grinning stupidly. “Okay, I’m feeling a little faint, so lean in here. I’ll tell you a secret.” It’s such a stupid thing to say, but he leans in anyway until our faces are nearly pressed together. “The truth is, Shawn...” I look down, then flick my gaze up to his. “Compared to my dad? You’re a preschooler in a sandbox throwing a tantrum.”

And with that, I slam my forehead against his with an audible *crack* that has me reeling and immediately wondering if I’m going to vomit.

But it has Shawn doing the same, and he falls back onto the ground as I do, my hands scrabbling for the knife at my back as I twist and try to free myself. I squirm and writhe, moving my arms past the point of pain until they’re screaming, but the ropes are tighter than I’d expected, and all too

soon I'm being yanked up to a sitting position so roughly that my t-shirt tears.

"I'm not playing around, Summer!" Shawn sneers in my face. "And I'm not your fucking dad. I'm not going to walk away once I've had enough. I'll make you afraid of me—"

I spit in his face, and with some satisfaction, watch the mix of blood and saliva dripping down his cheek. Shawn's face curls in disgust, and he snarls as I continue to scrabble at the ropes holding me.

All I have to do is get free. He doesn't know I have the blade, and in my desperation, I'm willing to do something stupid.

But the shine of a blade isn't in my hand when it appears. It's in *his*. Shawn lunges, deaf to Kinsley's scream, and pain blooms in my shoulder as he lets the blade sink in a few inches just under my collarbone before yanking it free.

Instantly, my mind goes white with pain. It's a struggle to pull myself out of it, and my mouth falls open in shock.

He stabbed me.

He really, actually, *stabbed me*.

It burns more than a punch or slap ever could, and for a moment, all I can do is try to wrap my mind around the dizzying, searing pain.

Not that Shawn seems keen on giving me the chance. He slashes the blade along my thigh, missing my femoral artery but still scoring deep enough that I worry I'm going to pass out. My escape attempts have come to an end, and when he shoves me down on my back, straddling my hips a second later with the knife still in his hand, all I can do is look up at him in a pained, desperate daze.

"Beg me," he snarls, leaning in close. "*Beg* me not to kill you, Summer. Beg me to kill one of them instead." His eyes are bright with desperation and excitement, and his hand trembles on the hilt of the knife.

So I smile sweetly, trying not to cry, and let out a soft, exasperated sigh like I'm only mildly inconvenienced. "Oh, Shawnathon," I murmur, shaking my head at him in disappointment. "If only you weren't so bad at this."

His face contorts, and when I see the muscles in his hand flex, I at least pat myself on the back with the strangely disconnected part of my brain.

As far as last words go, they really aren't that bad.

I wonder if Kinsley will have them etched on my gravestone.

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# CHAPTER FIFTY



Time seems to slow down as his fingers tighten around the knife. There's no mystery about what's happening. But I can only watch as it comes down in increments, aware of a loud sound in my ears that I assume is my mind screaming its panic for the rest of me to listen.

Not that I'm going to be able to do anything about it. What *can* I do, except what I've been doing, with my hands tied and my brain foggy from pain and blood loss?

I'm going to die here, under Shawn.

And all I can think about is how upset Kayde will be with me when he finds my body.

The sound gets louder and Shawn jerks his face up, shock registering in his eyes, just as something crashes into him and takes him to the ground away from me.

“Oh.” I murmur, blinking up at the dark sky I can see through the trees. “Well, okay then.” I’m definitely not in my right mind. The pain is dulling slightly, but that’s probably not a great thing considering how much Shawn has hit me and the blood loss. In fact, when I struggle to sit up, my ribs twinge in a way that makes me think they’re cracked, at the very least. The rope feels looser around my hands now, thanks to Shawn, I suppose, and I manage to get one of my hands free to brace my weight as my eyes fall on the scene in front of me.

Kayde saved me, after all. Like I’d hoped he would.

As I watch, he slams his fist against Shawn’s face over and over again, snarling something I can’t understand while he pins him under his weight.

But I can't even pretend to be shocked or upset about it. Shakily, I try to get to my feet, only to fail and drop back down to my knees.

"Okay then," I mumble, my vision a pinpoint surrounded by blackness. I can't focus on more than one thing at a time, so I slowly crawl my way over to the tree where Kinsley and Liza are still tied.

But they aren't looking at me. They're staring at Kayde, though neither looks particularly horrified by him beating the shit out of Shawn.

"Can you guys help me with this?" I ask when I'm close enough. "I'd actually like to see the show as well. But I figured it's a little rude to leave you tied up." I'm rambling now, and lightheadedness is taking over as I fall into Kinsley.

"Holy *shit*, Summer," she whispers, looking down at me and trying to writhe free of her ropes. "You're really not okay. *Fuck*."

"Yeah, nope." I agree, pulling the knife free from my shorts. "Definitely not okay." I have to focus on what I'm doing with my small amount of vision, and when Kinsley is free, she gently takes the knife from me and does the same for Liza.

Who, naturally, springs straight into action. Tearing her gaze from Kayde and Shawn, she kneels down in front of me, one hand on my wrist as she presses two fingers against my pulse. "Kins, I need your shirt. If you can tear it, do that," she orders, gently pressing me back.

"I'm fine," I protest, though I'm sure I'd just said the opposite a few seconds ago. "I'm *fiiine*." I'm so not fine.

Liza just glares at me as Kinsley holds up both pieces of her destroyed shirt, but my brain doesn't feel like listening to them when I turn my head to look at Kayde and Shawn.

"Don't you just think he's so pretty?" I barely know what I'm saying anymore. But at least the pain has dulled, becoming a tingling, unpleasant sensation that's present all throughout my body. I can barely tell what hurts the worst anymore, though if I had to say, I'd pick my shoulder, just under my collarbone.

Where Shawn had stabbed me, even though he hadn't committed well enough to keep me down.

"Sure, he's gorgeous," Liza agrees flatly, and a moment later, I hiss when one of them presses down hard on the stab wound. "Just keep your eyes on him for me, okay? Don't go to sleep."

“Uh, huh.” That feels like it’s going to be harder than it should be, and I realize distantly this is when the shock sets in.

And maybe when I die, if I’m unfortunate enough.

Suddenly Kayde stands, and fists his hand in Shawn’s torn and ragged t-shirt before dragging him toward us across the clearing. Kinsley stiffens, forming a barrier between us, but even I can see that Shawn isn’t in a position to do more than just lay there and sob.

“Tell her you’re fucking sorry,” Kayde hisses, hand in Shawn’s hair to hold him up. “Tell her you’re just some fucking loser who never had a chance with her and needed a reason for your own bullshit. *Tell her!*” he thunders, voice colder than I’ve ever heard it.

But so is his face, when I manage to look up at him. Kayde is furious, and he’s white under his tan. His hair has come free from its bun and hangs around his face in waves, giving him even more of a feral and unhinged look.

It’s hot as fuck.

And I don’t think that’s the blood loss talking.

“But I’m not...sorry,” Shawn snarls, though he can’t do more than squirm in Kayde’s hold. “I’m not fucking sorry. I’m going to kill her one way or another. She’s already mostly *dead*, anyway.” Kayde drops him to the ground, flat on his face, and kicks him over onto his back.

“Then if you’re not going to say it, you really don’t need to talk anymore.” The words register in my brain a little late, as does the coldness in them.

I just wish I could warn my friends not to look.

Kayde lifts one foot before slamming his heel down on Shawn’s face, the lack of emotion making it somehow worse. Kinsley screams, her face in her hands, and even Liza looks away sharply.

But I...don’t.

I watch as he lifts his shoe to do it again.

I watch as Shawn spits out the cracked remains of his teeth and wails out a sound that barely sounds human.

*I watch* as Kayde bends to pick up the discarded knife Grey gave me, and straightens to meet my gaze. “Don’t look away,” he whispers, and I’m sure the others have heard. But the words aren’t for them.

They’re for me.

I keep my eyes on him, even though I can barely see through the black spots in my vision and the spinning of my head. I don't look away when he falls to his knees over Shawn, hand raised.

"Your first mistake, Shawn," Kayde tells him with a coldness that should herald the beginning of winter. "Was ever thinking Summer belonged to you." His hand moves so fast, that to me that it looks like a blur, and it's not until Shawn screams that I realize Kayde has plunged the blade into his chest, just above his heart.

"Your second mistake?" He gently, almost fondly, reaches up to tangle his fingers in Shawn's hair and drags his head back so that Shawn has no choice but to look at him. "Well, your second mistake, and arguably the most important, was touching what belongs to *me*."

Shawn's mouth opens, as if he's going to argue, but Kayde moves too fast for that. He drags the blade across Shawn's throat, blood spraying from the wound as Kinsley scrambles back from them, face pale.

My lips part, and I suck in a breath as arterial spray splashes Kayde's shirt and face. I watch the pulses of Shawn's heart send blood spraying upward, and I can't take my eyes off of his face or his still open mouth.

He dies like that, with his eyes and mouth open as Shawn stares up at Kayde with disbelief clear on his features.

Shawn dies, and for a few seconds, everything feels too quiet. Too *still*.

Until Liza clears her throat. "Are you done?" she asks, unimpressed with Kayde or his murdering of Shawnathon. "Because if you are, I could use some help with her. Are the police on their way?"

"Paramedics too, according to Daniel." Kayde moves smoothly, sinking into a crouch on my other side and surveying the damage.

Judging by the way his eyes darken, it's not great. But thankfully, I'm too lightheaded and out of it to feel much of anything. That's a bad thing, I know, rationally. It's a terrible thing to not feel the wounds Shawn has inflicted. But right now, I can't help feeling grateful over it, and grateful I'm not in the kind of pain I'd been in earlier.

"You know, I'm not dead yet," I slur, feeling my consciousness coming into question. "You don't need to look at me like that."

Kayde snorts and accepts the t-shirt, which he presses over my collarbone. "Just admiring your pretty face, baby girl," he assures me, leaning down so that he's the only thing I can see. "And wondering what in the world you said to him for him to fuck you up this badly."

Kinsley laughs at that, sounding hysterical, and I turn just enough to watch her sink down against my third favorite tree. “What *didn’t* she say to him?” She giggles, tears streaking down her cheeks. “Seriously, Summer. What the fuck were you thinking?”

Isn’t it obvious? My brows knit in confusion, and I look from her to Kayde. “I was thinking of saving you,” I mumble, more of my consciousness escaping into the ground along with my blood. “I’d do anything to save you, Kins. You, and Liza, and Kayde.”

My head spins, and when I try to blink up at Kayde again, his face is blurry. “Uh oh,” I mumble. “I’m uh, not feeling so great, Liza.” I know my words are slurring, but I can’t help it. “Maybe I won’t be able to stay quite so awake after all.”

“No, don’t you dare,” Liza sounds threatening, but her voice is distant. “Space out if you want, if you have to, but don’t you dare go to sleep.”

“Summer...” I hear Kayde’s voice, and I think I see his lips move, but for the life of me, I can’t figure out what he’s saying to me.

*Oh well*, I think, eyes slipping closed. *I can’t win ‘em all.*

I don’t quite fall asleep. Not all the way, at least. I doze, maybe, and space out as Kayde scoops me up in his arms to carry me somewhere that isn’t here. There are voices around me when I come to next, and the loud wailing of sirens does more to drag me from my near unconsciousness than any of Kayde’s threats.

At some point, I’m laid on a stretcher. Unfamiliar voices talk about my vitals with Liza, and I feel hands on my face and shoulder, causing the pain to violently slice through my daze.

Last but not least, as the paramedics are lifting me into the ambulance, I distinctly hear Melody from somewhere near me, whispering to Kayde.

“Is she dying?” There’s a tremble in her voice I’ve never heard, and if I could, I’d open my eyes and tell her I’m fine.

“No.” Kayde’s voice is solid and firm, but underneath that, he sounds... unsure. “No, Mel. She’s going to be fine.” But if he doesn’t seem to believe it, then how in the world can I?

“You’re going to be okay.” The paramedic that speaks to me is a woman, and seconds later, I hear the doors of the ambulance slam closed. “We’re getting you to the hospital, Summer. You’ll be okay. Just stay with me, okay?”

But she isn't Kayde, and her words don't have the same pull on me as his. I try, I really do, but as the ambulance jerks into motion, the last of my consciousness flees as darkness fills my brain with a painless, dreamless sleep.

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# CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE



The first thing that tips me off I might not be dead is Kinsley's voice filling my ears, along with the occasional beep of a machine.

The second thing is the dull ache that runs through me, though it's significantly less than the pain I'd been in before passing out in the woods.

"I've heard this story before," I mumble, as Kinsley launches into the tale about her beating up some bully on our playground. That had been how we met, actually, and a smile touches my lips at the memory.

"You've lived it too," Kinsley replies crisply, but I can hear the tremor in her voice and the creak of the chair she's sitting in. "Holy shit, Summer." When I'm finally able to open my eyes, Kinsley has moved to hover over me, her eyes wide in a pale face. "You almost died." She whispers the words like they're a secret.

"Yeah, I kind of got that when I was passing out in the ambulance," I tease, though my voice is hoarse and I know I sound awful. "How long's it been? Any news for me about, well..." I lift my arms as much as I can, which isn't much given they feel like they have lead weights attached to them. "Anything."

"Okay. News. Yes." Kinsley falls back into her seat, eyes closed as she collects her thoughts. "Well, Fink showed up right when the police and paramedics did. That's about when Kayde carried you out of the woods all heroically and dramatically."

I snort softly, my eyes sliding closed. "Where is Kayde? And Liza?"

"One question at a time." Her tone is reprimanding, but she doesn't mean it. Not when I can hear the teasing under the words. "Kayde, Liza,

and *your mom* went to the cafeteria. She was ready to murder someone on her own. I think she might've slipped Kayde a twenty for the public service of dispatching Shawn."

I can't help but crack a smile at that, and my fingers curl into the sheets. For some reason, I hadn't even considered that my mom would be here. But now that I know she is, I'm aching to see her.

"The ambulance took you. Kayde wanted to ride along, but uh, that didn't go well. Liza did, though. Since she's the closest thing to a doctor and could explain to them what happened." She stops talking and is silent long enough that I crack my eyes open to glance her way.

She looks...awful.

Kinsley's shoulders are hunched, and she seems to be trying to fold in on herself. With her hands clasped in front of her and her head bowed, I'm starting to think I really am dead and hallucinating this whole thing.

"You died in that ambulance," Kinsley whispers, looking up at me mournfully. "You *died*. Liza told me they had to get you back twice, and you were rushed into surgery when you got here. He just barely nicked an artery in your leg."

Oh. Well, so much for me thinking he hadn't.

"Well, as I'm not dead now..." I look myself over, as much as I can. "Seems to me this worked out okay."

Her watery chuckle is reluctant and humorless. "What were you *thinking*?" she demands, leaning forward in her chair toward me. "Why didn't you run away from him? He was crazy, Summer. He was *insane*."

"Yeah, that's kind of why I couldn't. He was going to hurt you guys. And you know, I am the one with more in-the-bed hospital experience. I figured I'd take one for the team—"

"You shouldn't be joking about this!" She gets to her feet quickly, tears shining in her eyes. "You *were dead, Summer!*" Belatedly, I think that if she keeps screaming at me, she's going to get a nurse called on us.

"You can yell at me all you want." My eyes drift closed again. "But I'm going to do the same anytime you're in trouble, Kins. It's not in me to let you get hurt." Her, the kids, or anyone else I care about.

"You can't self-sacrifice your way through life," Kins mutters, and I grin at the words.

Self-sacrificing has been the name of the game this summer. Starting with Kayde and ending here. Had I suspected I'd get murdered, or almost

murdered? Yeah, I had. Every time Kayde had come to play with me that first week, I'd been sure that was it. That I wouldn't wake up the next morning.

So there's definitely something ironic about the fact it was Shawn to almost do me in, and Kayde being the one to save me.

"Can I...talk to you about Kayde?" Kinsley's words are slow and deliberate, and they send alarm bells ringing through my tired brain. "For a minute, if you aren't too tired?"

Tremors of nervousness ripple up my arms and down my spine, but I open my eyes to look at her again. Explanations and excuses roll around my brain like bowling balls, but I bite my tongue until she speaks.

"Is there something, uh, off with him?" She sounds...polite. Like she's trying not to offend me or be rude. "Because I don't know how awake you were, but he kind of stomped Shawn's face to a bloody mess."

"Oh, I was so awake for that," I assure her drowsily.

"I think your boyfriend is a little fucked up."

My snort is softer than I intend, and I hate that I'm falling back asleep. "Does it bother you if he is?" I find myself asking as the excuses and explanations drain right out of my brain.

"What? No, not at all." I hear her shift again on the chair. "I think it's cool as hell. So long as he's with you, who in the world could ever fuck with you, huh? Seems like the best remedy for that hero complex shit you've got going on."

"I'm a self-sacrificer," I remind her, my words slurred.

"You're an idiot."

**H**ey, there, Summer." The voice is strained, and worried, and every little bit of what I want to hear. My mother smoothes my hair back from my face as I force my eyes open, and a small smile touches my lips when I see her.

"Mom," I sigh, putting all of my strength into lifting my arms until I can hook them over her shoulders. "Oh mom. I'm so happy you're here. Kins said you were, but I couldn't stay awake, and—"

"Shhh, shh. You're okay, hon." I don't realize until she wipes tears off of my face that I'm crying, but once I do, it's like a dam breaks in me.

I sob, face in her shirt, and my mom sits on the bed properly, rocking me a bit awkwardly as I cry. And the best thing about her is that she just lets

me do it. Mom just holds me, letting me cry out the pain, the fear, and the worry from the last few days.

“You’re okay,” she murmurs, hands rubbing my back as I cry. “Everything is okay. The doctors say you’re going to be fine. All of your friends are fine.”

My breath catches in my lungs, and I wish I could stop crying, but now that I’ve started, I can’t. Thankfully, my mom is the only one in the room, instead of someone who might judge me for this.

At least, until a noise in my ears signifies the door sliding open, and when I peek over my mom’s shoulder, I see Kayde hesitating in the doorway, concern etched onto his features while he holds two styrofoam cups of hospital coffee.

“I’m clearly crying because you weren’t here for all of a few minutes,” I mumble hoarsely, making a joke out of it. My mom twists to glance back, and a small smile touches Kayde’s lips.

“I can go,” he tells me, setting the coffee cups down on the nightstand. “I can come back—” I reach out with my one free hand and grip the fabric of his t-shirt in a silent plea for him to not go anywhere.

“You don’t have to,” I murmur, feeling selfish. Tears still run down my cheeks, but at least I’m no longer actively sobbing. “You can stay. I uh, hear you two may have met?” My mom pulls back, but helps me sit up slowly and carefully in my hospital bed.

“Someone should’ve told me she has a boyfriend. Especially when it’s so serious,” my mom admonishes gently. I stare up at her, taking in her bright green eyes set in a face as pale as mine with a spattering of freckles. Her dark hair is pulled back into a bun, and more than anything, Mom looks exhausted.

“We’re more like...engaged than just dating,” Kayde slips in smoothly, and I shoot him a withering look, prepared for my mother to launch into a speech about not rushing things.

But my mother beams at him, then looks at me. “You could definitely do worse,” she assures me. “And Kayde says I get to plan the wedding.”

“Does he now?” My brows arch towards my bangs as Mom grasps my hand lightly. “That’s so...bold of him.” If there’s a warning in my eyes, then Kayde just ignores it as he smiles and sips his coffee.

“Hey.” My mom draws my attention back to her and smiles. For the first time, I see her red-rimmed, puffy eyes and the exhaustion dragging at her

features; making the lines in her face look worse than usual. Today. My mom looks closer to sixty than fifty, and I don't like it. "I *love* you, Summer. And everything is going to be okay. You'll get to go home in a few days, and then you can sleep and watch all the horror movies you want."

"While you and Kayde plan the wedding?" I ask rebelliously, and my mother laughs.

"Yeah. Absolutely. We'll take care of all of it while you go on a *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* marathon. Sound fair?"

"Only if we get a Leatherface impersonator to marry us." I yawn, leaning back against the head of the bed. "That sound okay?"

My mother makes a face, and Kayde chuckles. "I'm sure it can be arranged," he promises, and offers the other cup of coffee to Mom.

"Thank you." She stands, hand still in mine, and searches my face before she smiles lightly again. "I love you," my mom reminds me. "I'm going to run to the bathroom, okay?" When her eyes flick to Kayde, I realize this is just a terribly unsubtle ploy for me to talk to my apparent 'fiance.'

"Okay," I sigh, knowing she's going to take her sweet time. "Grab me like ten gallons of coffee on your way back? Please?"

"Nope." My mother breezes out of the room, closing the door behind her as she goes.

For a moment, the room is silent. I can hear the ticking of the clock on the wall, and the occasional beeping from the machines I'm hooked up to has become white noise to me. "So how'd you do it?" I ask, turning to look at Kayde where he's still sitting quietly.

His eyes widen, and my sociopath is full of innocent good will as I glare at him. "Don't even try the Lassie face with me, Kayde. My mom doesn't just *like* people. She threatened the last guy I dated with a lawsuit."

"Maybe he deserved it." Kayde shrugs. "Maybe she just *knows* I'm your soulmate."

"Maybe you're stupidly charming and know how to get what you want," I retort, and he chuckles.

"Yeah, okay. Maybe that one. But she *does* like me, Summer."

"She doesn't actually think we're engaged, right?"

The look Kayde gives me makes me groan, and I throw my head back against the pillows. It's a questionable move, and my head spins while

nausea briefly claws at my stomach. But I swallow it down and suck in a breath before focusing on him once more.

“She’s certainly heard me say it enough over the past few days. And she only questioned it once, then asked why you aren’t wearing a ring. I think that’s the part she’s most upset about,” Kayde admits. “Why? Would you prefer for me to tell her that you’re mine? That I’ll kill anyone who touches you? Shawn is pretty good evidence of that. But I can phrase it that way if—”

“No, God. No,” I moan, eyes closed again. “Can you tell me more about what happened? I asked Kinsley, and she started to tell me, but then I—”

I barely hear him move. My eyes open just as his face looms in my vision, and his fingers drift against my cheek just before his lips slant against mine sweetly.

It’s not the normal kind of kiss we share. It’s kind and affectionate. There’s no demand between his lips. Nothing urging me to do more. Just... *Kayde*.

It’s perfect.

When he finally pulls away, it’s just so he can sit and press his forehead to mine. “What were you thinking?” he murmurs, hand cupping my face. “What were you *thinking*, Summer?” For the first time, I hear the rawness in his voice. The nerves, the exhaustion, and everything else he never lets me hear. For the first time, my heart twists for Kayde and I reach up to press my fingers to his jaw, delighting in the warmth of his skin and the scrape of stubble against my fingers.

“I couldn’t let him hurt Kins and Liza,” I murmur. “Come on, you know that. I had no phone service, but I did have a Melody. It’s not like I did *all* bad.”

“I don’t know what I would’ve done if you’d died.” The admission is so raw and genuine that I have to swallow around the lump in my throat before I can even think of an answer.

“This is unhealthy.” The words come out in a soft whisper, and I find I can’t look away from him. “*We’re* unhealthy. We can’t be this attached, Kayde. I’ve only known you for, what, three weeks?”

“Give or take a few days with you here,” Kayde replies. A smile quirks at his lips, and satisfaction lights up his eyes. “Also, you totally just said *we*.”

“Don’t push it,” I warn.

“No, you said *we*. Does that mean—”

“I’ll cut out your tongue if you say it—”

“Does that mean you *love me*, Summer?” Kayde purrs, leaning in closer.

I can’t help it. I kiss him hard, with desperation and sweetness and a demand that had been absent from my lips before. But he meets me with the same energy, hands clutching at my shoulders for a few precious seconds. But he lets me go too quickly, leaving me a panting mess with an increased heart rate that I can hear in the beeping behind me.

“If we do too much more, you’re going to have nurses in here trying to revive you,” Kayde breathes, his voice rough. There’s a brightness in his gaze that I’ve never seen before, and I stroke my fingers along his face, touching him freely for the first time outside of sex.

“If I say it, you have to get me coffee,” I bargain as I settle back in the bed. “Deal?”

Kayde’s grin turns taunting. “No deal,” he replies. “That’s unhealthy for you. Besides.” He leans in again, nose brushing mine. “I don’t *actually* need you to say it, sweetheart. I can see it all over your face.”

When he moves to pull away again, I reach out to grip his wrists, the smile falling from my lips to be replaced with seriousness. I contemplate this. Us. I study his face, and finally I say, “I love you, you know. It’s weird and fucked up and probably some *folie à deux* shit going on. But you were right. I’ve probably been in love with you for at least a few days. Depending on how long I’ve been out.”

“Four days and six hours,” Kayde informs me, still grinning. “That’s how long you’ve been here.”

“Tell me you’ve gone home some. Tell me Mom has, too.”

“Of course not, baby.” His fingers curl around mine. “We were never going to leave you.”

Getting the full story of what happened takes another day, due to me falling back asleep at random and being unable to stay up for more than an hour at a time. Though according to Kayde, my record for the first twenty-four hours after waking up is staying awake for approximately forty-seven minutes, not quite an hour.

But I’m on the side of rounding up, for my own pride.

According to Kinsley and Kayde, the cops had taken everyone’s statements, including Darcy’s, and ruled Shawn’s death self defense. None of us are in trouble or under suspicion.

Especially once Emily wakes up and admits to Shawn pushing her.

Both Kinsley and Liza lament that they'll never know what the hell happened to Shawn, and more than once allude to the wedding they're sure Kayde and I will be having before Christmas. But it's Kayde who finally admits to knowing a little more than they do.

"He's not like me," Kayde tells me, leaning back in his chair while I curl my legs up under me in my hospital bed. "He's not like me, or Grey, or Melody. Well, *wasn't*, since he's very dead now." He glances at me when he says it, like I'll suddenly grow a conscience about Shawnathon's death.

But while I replay the image of Kayde kicking his face over and over in my brain, it's not because I'm disgusted or having a moral crisis.

It's because he'd gotten what he'd deserved, and Kayde had been a sight that I never want to forget.

"We're not *crazy*," Kayde goes on, explaining what he means. "Sure, we may be messed up. Grey is definitely a psychopath, while Mel is, I think, more like me. But we don't go on frenzies or do stupid shit just because we snap. I talked to Darcy."

My brows shoot up at that, and he grins wryly in my direction. "I didn't even yell at her. She asked about you, by the way. But I told her she didn't have the right to say your name. Turns out, she's known for a while that something is off with Shawn. He had these dreams about you, where first he imagined you being his, kissing you, whatever. But then they changed and became dreams of murdering you. He's been having them for two years now, according to Darcy. But something changed."

"When you arrived, right?"

"Yeah. I guess it triggered something in him, because Shawn started having them constantly. He was obsessing over the idea of killing you. Slowly. He only waited so long because he didn't want it to be over. He wanted to *hurt you, Summer*." His voice is flat as he says it, but I can see the spark of rage in his face. "Darcy thinks it has something to do with his mom, or his childhood. I don't know. I'll be honest here, Summer." When he looks at me, it's with a flat, disinterested expression. "I couldn't care less what shitty things happened to him as a kid. The moment he thought about killing you, it was all over."

**H**ours later, I still can't get his look out of my head. Not when he's sleeping in the uncomfortable chair by my bed, and certainly not when

my mother whispers to me that he'll make a great son-in-law.

I want to feel bad for Shawn. For the little boy that had a hard time growing up and turned into someone that couldn't control themselves.

But I *can't*.

Because at the end of the day, he's not the only one of us who suffered abuse or cruelty from their parents. But he *is* the only one who took it out on a child and tried to kill me not once, but twice in the same day.

So I stop trying to find my moral compass and instead focus on memorizing Kayde's face while he sleeps.

The flowers from Grey arrive a day later. I roll my eyes at his note, unsurprised to see stupid, cartoonish drawings of bunnies on it and a wish for me to get better soon. The bouquet is the most ridiculous, over the top thing I've ever seen as well, and when I find a second note stuffed into the vase, I unfold it with knit together brows.

*Thanks for keeping my stuff safe. Got it out of your cabin before I left. I expect an invite to the wedding, but please get in writing that Kayde won't kill me as a wedding gift to you, okay?*

*P.S. I heard Kayde stomped his face in. Was it epic??*

*P.P.S. Tell Melody to stop going into the woods alone, looking for a thrill. She's going to find it, if she keeps it up.*

I can't decide whether to laugh or groan, but a knock on the door has me stuffing the note back into the vase where it can't be seen through the gaudy bunch of flowers.

“Summer?” a small, nervous voice calls. “Could I come in?” It takes me a second to place it, but when I do, my grin turns rueful.

“Yeah, Mel. Of course you can,” I tell her, dragging myself up in my bed.

In seconds Melody is around the curtain, her mom behind her looking me over.

“Oh, Summer,” her mom sighs, giving me a pained smile. “I know you take your job seriously, but isn't this a little much?”

I glance at Melody, unsure of how much her mom knows about the situation, and my favorite camper says slowly, “I told mom about Emily. I said you were the only one willing to go after her, but you fell, too.”

Well, it's not the worst lie I've ever heard.

I grin wolfishly at her mom, fiddling with my sheets. “Nah, I promised to risk life and limb for my campers, Mrs. Carr,” I promise. “No matter the

danger.”

“There should be some kind of camp counselor award for dedication, then.” Melody makes a face at her mom’s words, and shrugs free of her grasp.

“Can I talk to Summer alone for a few minutes?” she requests, eyes wide and plaintive. “Please, Mom?”

Her mom doesn’t argue, but I’ve started to think that her mom *never* argues with her. She’s out of the room in a few seconds, and Melody turns to me again, then takes the chair I dramatically motion her toward.

“Who are these from?” she asks, wrinkling her nose at the vase of flowers.

“Grey,” I tell her flatly. “He’s—Mel, no!” But before I can do more than reach toward her, Melody has fished the note out of the vase and read it quickly. Her brows lift, and she looks at me incredulously, appearing much older than twelve.

“I get to come to the wedding too, right?”

“Yeah, Mel.” I laugh, rubbing my face. “You can be the flower girl.”

“I’m too old for that.”

“Bridesmaid? Ring bearer?”

“Maid of honor,” Melody retorts.

“Pretty sure Kinsley gets that.”

“Well, if she doesn’t want it, can I be the runner-up?”

I crack a smile at her words. “Sure. You’ve got it. Runner-up maid of honor.”

She refolds the paper and shoves it back in the vase before sitting back in the chair, her hands clasped around the armrests. “I met him in the woods,” she admits finally. “One night when I was out looking.”

*Looking for what*, I want to ask her. But I keep my mouth shut. I don’t need her to confirm Kayde’s suspicions or my worries.

“Did you like him?”

She scrunches her nose and shrugs. “He was weird. He’s so *happy*, and he giggles.” She’s right. He does, in fact, giggle like a psycho. Mel is quiet for a few moments, and I take the time to drum my fingers on my stomach and wish I could go home earlier than tomorrow.

“Kayde is...like me,” she says finally. Carefully.

And instantly, I know this is not a conversation I want to have. I grimace and turn to look at her, studying Melody’s face. “Like you?” I

repeat, but she just glares at me. “Okay, all right. But you’re *twelve*, Melody. I do not think you can compare yourself to Kayde at *twelve*.”

“I turned thirteen yesterday,” Melody corrects.

“Happy birthday. My point still stands.”

“Can I come visit you guys sometime, maybe? I like you. And umm.” She taps her fingers against the armrests. “I’ve never met anyone like me.”

I hope she never will again.

“If you ever need help, then absolutely. If you want to just come hang out and get away from your mom and all that stress, then *absolutely* to that too. With her permission, of course. Don’t pin a kidnapping charge on me, please.”

She smiles at that, and hops out of the chair to hug me, suddenly. “Thanks, Summer,” she mumbles, squeezing a little tighter than I’d like her to. “You made Camp Crestview worth going back to.”

“Nah,” I sigh, as the door opens to admit a curious Kayde and Melody’s mom. “You just think that.”

## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO



I 'd never thought it possible before coming home from the hospital.

I'd never thought anyone could stand up to Kayde's superpowers and his Lassie face. Never imagined for one minute that someone had enough of a spidey sense to know when he's around before anyone else does, and could prevent him from doing his sneaky-walk.

But Elena, it turns out, has powers that rival even Kayde's.

My mouth twitches into a smile as I lean back against my headboard, and I can imagine the look on Kayde's face as Elena loudly greets him on the landing outside of my door. She waylays him for a few minutes, asking how he's doing and if my mom knows he's here.

But luckily for him, he has carte blanche approval from my mom to be here during the day, even when she's across the ocean in Thailand with one of her longest, most faithful clients. It's just a shame he's on trial for coercion, and she's had to take the whole week to learn how to proceed with the laws in Thailand.

My door opens and Kayde breezes in with a sigh before closing it gently behind him. "She hates me," Kayde informs me, sitting down hard on the end of my bed.

"Elena doesn't hate you," I laugh. "She's very...*responsible*. She takes her job as chaperone incredibly seriously."

"When does your chaperone leave, exactly?"

I glance at the clock, then back at him, as a wolfish smile crosses my face. "She's probably on her way out. You timed it perfectly today."

Because of course he did. His beaming grin tells me it isn't a coincidence, and I roll my eyes at him as Kayde stretches out on the bed beside me.

"Go me," he murmurs, peering at the magazine I'm flipping through. "*Horror Weekly?*" he deadpans. "Where are the wedding magazines your mom told me she was bringing home?"

"Probably in my mom's office," I tell him absently. I'm a little out of it, thanks to the effects of the pain medicine I continue to swallow every few hours, but not enough to not enjoy his company.

Every day Kayde shows up by two in the afternoon, and every day he stays until after midnight. Normally he doesn't leave until the morning, and only then, so my mom or Elena don't think he's over here spending the night.

When I'd asked Mom *why* he can't spend the night, she'd only given me the look and asked Kayde if he wanted pizza or tacos for dinner.

A knock on the door makes me look up, and Elena leans in with a smile. "I'm heading out," she announces, her eyes on Kayde and rife with suspicion. She has to know we're fucking. There's no way for her *not* to know when she'd walked in on us making out a week ago. That had been a particularly embarrassing day, and even Kayde had looked a little ashamed of himself.

"Thanks, Elena," I tell her, smiling. "I'll see you tomorrow?" Mom had arranged before she left for Elena to be here every day, and while she'd told me it was for the cats, I'm not stupid. She wants her here to check on me in the mornings and make sure I'm okay.

Though in my opinion, Kayde could do that just as well as Elena. And with the added benefit of not reporting our every move to my overprotective parent.

Kayde's phone goes off, and he tells Elena his own goodbye before glancing down at the screen. For my part, I get another warning look, and I'm surprised she doesn't tell us to 'make good choices' before she's gone from the doorway, her footsteps receding toward the stairs.

"I didn't know you had friends," I remark, not looking at Kayde's phone. "Or is that your mom?" Contrary to what I'd assumed, Kayde has a good relationship with his parents.

I've even FaceTimed with them.

"You're hilarious," Kayde mutters. "It's Melody, actually." But he grimaces and tosses his phone on the nightstand after shooting off his own

reply. "She's a lot more, uh, honest with me now that camp is over for good. About the sociopath thing."

His words make my stomach twist nervously, though it's not necessarily bad. Melody is too old for Camp Crestview now, but more importantly... I'm not a counselor anymore.

I'd been told by Fink I was welcome to come back. He'd come in and apologized, over and over, telling me he should've seen what Shawn was somehow, and that he'd have to be more careful not to let psychos into his camp.

The best part of it had been that Kayde had been in the room for the entire conversation.

But like Kinsley, I'd realized in the hospital that I was done with being a counselor. It isn't for me anymore, I'd decided. Especially after almost dying there this year. Multiple times.

"Are you *sure* your parents don't mind you moving here? Just like that?" I ask, not for the first time.

Kayde sighs and very gently pushes me down onto my back on the bed. He can't exactly straddle my hips with my leg still a little messed up, and he has to be careful with me, but his hands come down to cup my face, thumbs running over my lower lip. "My parents love you, in case that's what this is about," he informs me sweetly, his caramel eyes twinkling. "They think you're the best future daughter-in-law they could ask for."

"We're not even actually engaged," I point out.

"Doesn't really matter."

"It does for looks. And maybe I *do* want a huge wedding. Melody wants to be, uh, runner up maid of honor, by the way."

Kayde makes a face, his hand moving down my arms before he nudges my thighs apart gently, careful not to jostle the still-bandaged wound on my right thigh. That and the stab wound under my collarbone are the only things still bandaged, and the last remnants from Shawn's tirade.

Though we both know I'll have the scars from him for the rest of my life.

And I'll show them off proudly whenever the opportunity arises. I'm certainly not ashamed of them. The same way I've never been ashamed of the scar my dad gave me.

"That's a thing?" he asks, settling between my knees. Dressed only in a pair of running shorts and a t-shirt, I've made it pretty easy for him to touch

me however he wants, and wherever.

And I'm not complaining about that, though my outfit choice has more to do with the heat than him. This is just a happy bonus. His hands massage up my thigh, and he drags me down the bed until my legs are pressed against his sides.

"I don't think so. But I guess we're making it a thing for her. Did she want something?" Their sibling relationship that's formed over the past few weeks is adorable, though I won't say that out loud.

"She just..." He waves a hand in the air, and sighs. "She wanted to know how you were. And told me about some kid at school. Do all kids text this much?"

"They do when they're lonely in school and think no one other than you understands them," I reply kindly, fighting back a moan when his fingers dig into my tense calf muscles. "Did you go to school for this? You're *really* good at all of that."

"Sports massage," Kayde supplies. "I took a few classes in college. You're not an athlete, but you don't seem to be complaining."

I'm certainly not.

But I do space out a little, completely relaxed, as he moves up to my uninjured thigh. He's so careful when he touches me, and so thorough as he flexes my knee and moves back down my calves, to my ankles.

It's only when I'm half asleep that I feel my mouth moving, and my brain struggles to catch up to my words. "I wasn't afraid of you, you know. That night you killed Shawn."

Kayde doesn't reply at first. Just flexes my ankle between his hands. "Yeah?" he asks, voice carefully neutral. "What were you, then?"

A small smile flits across my lips, and I throw an arm across my face before speaking. "I thought it was hot." Though, I hadn't realized that for a little while. But I'd been so in awe of him, and so thrilled he'd given Shawn what he'd deserved, that I'd never once thought to be afraid of my sociopathic, murderous boyfriend. "Just maybe if you decide to kill me, don't stomp my face in before you slit my throat. That looked painful."

"It was meant to be." He huffs a laugh under his breath. "You really thought it was hot, baby girl?"

"Don't let it go to your head, psycho killer."

"Sociopath."

"They're lyrics."

Kayde snorts, his fingers digging into the ball of my foot deliciously. I've never had a particular love or fascination for getting a massage before, but somehow Kayde has completely altered my opinion on them.

"I'm not afraid of you." I want it said. I want it out in the open, just in case.

Especially if this is going to last.

"And Kins thinks you're pretty cool. They're coming over tonight, by the way. Did you know they got a *dog*?"

"Yeah. They're naming it Camper. Did you hear *that* part?" He shifts between my thighs, fingers tugging at my running shorts to bring them down my legs. As always, he's so careful with the bandages, and before long, I'm left just in my t-shirt that he pushes up to my shoulders to leave me bare and vulnerable to him.

But I'm not embarrassed or nervous or *scared* like I had been. I soak up his attention, peeking out from under my arm to stare at my sociopath. "Camper?" I repeat. "No."

"Yep. *Camper*." His fingers stroke up my inner thighs, and he pushes my legs wider so he can lean down between them, his breath ghosting over my stomach. "I know riding my face is off limits for another week or so, and I'm totally going to have you ride me until I either die or you pass out when you're allowed to, but can I eat you out, baby?" Kayde purrs, fingers teasing my folds.

"No." I reach down and grab his hair, dragging him up to me until Kayde is hovering over me on the bed. Confusion pulls his brows together, and I grin. "Not until I get to hear you say you love me again."

His face brightens, and Kayde leans down to nip at my throat with a laugh. "Baby girl, you *know* I love you," he tells me, as I readjust to wrap my arms around his shoulders. "I love you more than anything else in this world. I'd kill twenty Shawnathons for you, and then twenty more. Love isn't strong enough to describe how I feel about you."

I've asked him why more than once. I've asked him what it is about me that makes me worth his time and his obsession. Usually, Kayde explains by taking me apart piece by piece until I'm barely conscious and sore in the best ways. Though he promises every time that when I'm all healed, he'll wreck me properly for even thinking of asking *why*.

*Because you're you*, he'd murmured against my skin three days ago, while I'd barely been able to stay conscious after hours of him eating me

out and fingering me to orgasm after orgasm.

*Because, Summer. It was always you.*

And maybe it was always meant to be Kayde for me. There's really no explanation, other than madness, for how quickly I've fallen for him.

"I love you." The words don't sound as smooth and confident when they come from my mouth instead of his, but he still rewards me with an elated grin and eyes that light up at the sentiment. "I...I really do. I *love* you, Kayde." Threading my fingers through his hair, I draw my sociopath down for a kiss.

"I'm glad," he murmurs against my lips. "Because you had me worried there."

"Really?" My brows shoot up. "When? For how long?"

"The day I came back to Crestview. For a whole, I don't know, at least three minutes." He's completely serious when he says it until his grin cracks through the expression. I snort and shove him off of me, tossing him to his side on the bed.

"I take it back." But I can't stop my wide grin, or the way my hands itch to grip his shoulders once more. "I don't love you. You're too arrogant."

"Well..." He rolls back onto me, pinning my hands gently above my head as he leans close. "I'll just have to make it up to you. Over and over again. Until you love me...or you're just too fucked out to remember which way is up. I'll take either one."

"I bet you will," I reply, but I'm certainly not arguing. "Kayde?" My words make him pause, and he lifts a brow in question.

"Darcy doesn't get to come to the wedding."

His answering laugh is full-throated and genuine, and with a wolfish grin, he leans down to kiss me again, not pulling away until I'm out of breath and ready to beg him for more.

"Fine. But only if Fink gets to be the ring bearer." I groan at his suggestion, though the sound turns into a yelp when he bites down on my throat, sucking another mark onto my throat to match the fading ones that mark me as *his*.

Though even when the marks fade, if he lets them, that fact will never change.

*I won't let it.*

## ABOUT AJ MERLIN

AJ merlin is an author, crazy bird lady, and rampant horror movie enthusiast. Born and raised in the midwest United States, AJ is lucky to be right in the middle of people who support her and a menagerie of animals to keep her somewhat sane. Connect with her on facebook or social media to see updates, giveaways, and be bombarded with dog, cat, and pigeon pictures.



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