

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MICHELLE LYNN

Let Me Love

by Michelle Lynn Copyright ©2014 by Michelle Lynn All Rights Reserved, including the right to reproduce, distribute, or transmit in whole or in part by any means.

This book is a work of fiction.

Names, characters, places, and events portrayed in this book are the product of the author's imagination or are either fictitious or used in a fictitious manner.

Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Editor: Book Peddler's Editing Cover photo: Shutterstock Cover Design: Sommer Stein with Perfect Pear Creative Covers

Table of Contents

Title Page
Copyright Page
Let Me Love (The Invisibles #3, #3)
<u>Prologue – Present Day</u>
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
<u>Chapter 6</u>
Chapter 7
<u>Chapter 8</u>
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12

Chapter 13 Chapter 14 Chapter 15 Chapter 16 Chapter 17 Chapter 18 Chapter 19 Chapter 20 Chapter 21 Chapter 22 Chapter 23 **Epilogue** <u>Acknowledgements</u>

Books by Michelle Lynn

If you find a path with no obstacles, it probably doesn't lead anywhere.

~Frank A Clark

Prologue – Present Day

72 Hours Later Kailey

I stare down at my sister, dressed in her favorite red dress and matching lipstick. She's beautiful. Her body hasn't looked so vibrant since before the disease ate her alive. The ring on her finger, signifying the bond she held so sacred with her husband, shines under the lights, sparkling across the ceiling. Her brown

cheeks with some kind of filler to make her face appear full again. In those final days her skin turned almost transparent. A gaunt face with sunken cheeks had replaced the once lively and energetic sister I remembered. Seeing her like this now, I can pretend she's sleeping and the past year has been one long nightmare. But, unfortunately, there'll be no waking from this nightmare.

hair styled in her signature bob, framing her face. Her hair was the only thing spared by the ravages of the disease. I cringe wondering if they had to fill her

Another woman taps me on my shoulder, interrupting me from my thoughts, to offer her condolences. While she's giving me a tight hug, I search my

brain to remember if I know this person sniffling into my ear. When she pushes back, my memory kicks in; it's my greataunt, Marjory. I don't think I've seen her since my parents' funeral. She's one of those family members you only reconnect with at significant family occasions, like weddings and funerals. Except this time, I can't help but be angry that it's my sister in the coffin, taken by a disease that could have plagued me just as easily. It should've claimed my life... I wish it had.

Three children scurry up to me, weaving in and out of my legs. The guilt hits me, like a hammer impacts a nail. What are these children going to do without their mother? Again, I ask God,

Why he didn't take me instead? I have no children who'll struggle to continue their lives without me. Now these angelic kids rustle around an unfamiliar room, clueless that seventy-two hours ago their lives irrevocably changed, leaving them with hardly any family. Even though they've been left plenty of life insurance money, I'm not quite sure

Twenty-three-years-old seems entirely too young to become an instant mom of three children under the age of six.

Finally, a lull happens with guests, and I take a seat on the couch that faces my sister. Just as I'm about to take a sip of my water bottle, Chloe, my five-year-old niece, hops up next to me. Being the

how what they've lost can be replaced.

what's happening the most. Although, I don't think she can fully grasp what has really occurred. How altered her young life is, and how different it will become. I've lain awake with her every night since everything happened, trying to reassure her that she's being looked after now. After countless books or movies, I'll get her to sleep just as a nightmare will wrench her awake. Her blood curdling screams shake the house until I wrap my arms around her, rocking and

oldest of the three she understands

"Can I have a sip, Aunt Kailey?" she asks, and I hand over the full bottle. Her small hands with pink nail polish grip each side, and she swallows a quarter of

soothing her back to sleep.

the bottle. Amazed at her obvious dehydration, I try to wrack my brain if I fed them this morning. Since their grandparents were over early, I'm almost positive Caden's mom made them breakfast. At least, I hope she did. Crap, I'm usually OCD on their schedule. Then again, I've had help these past months.

Chloe eventually stands up and flutters out of the room, chatting with a lot of relatives she hardly knows. Although she's having the nightmares, during the day no one would guess anything was wrong. Her sister, Tara, runs after her. At three, Tara's big-sister is her idol. Drew, the baby, follows close behind. Since he just learned how to walk a month ago, he's a little slower

than them. As they squeal and run through the streams of people, I notice there's another wave of people coming towards me. People who *think* they're giving me their sympathy and understanding, but it feels more like I'm comforting them rather than the other way around.

I grudgingly stand up and wait next

I grudgingly stand up and wait next to my sister for the mourners baring sorrowful expressions and tear-filled eyes to offer their condolences. There's a stirring in my stomach signifying he's arrived. Even though, my eyes remain fixed downward on the green carpeting, I know his eyes are focused solely on me. If I dare face him, I'll break. With one look into his brown eyes, I'll

become unglued. My shattered insides are holding strong right now, but one brush of his finger could smash through my defensive wall.

The people are whizzing by me too

fast, bringing him closer to me sooner than I can prepare myself. Next to me his deep voice offer sympathies to Caden's parents, making it only a matter of seconds before he'll be in front of me. Not able to bear seeing him, I turn around, pretending to fix the flowers with the sash stating, 'Loving Mother'. His breath hits my neck and his hand finds my hip, fitting across the curve as though it was molded for his grip. One tear escapes my tear filled eyes and trails down my cheek before dropping to

the floor. I will myself to push them back and dry the water from my eyes. Once his soft and caring voice pleas, "Kailey," the dam breaks, and I can no longer hold all my emotions inside. I slump over with sobs escaping my mouth

slump over with sobs escaping my mouth and tears pouring out of my eyes. He quickly turns me around and cradles my head against his broad chest. With one hand on the side of my face and his other on my back, all the built up tears I've been holding in for the past few days, rush out of me as the man I love holds me close. Before I know what's happening

Before I know what's happening he's shuttling me out the room, instructing Caden's parents to take over. He opens a door into a private room,

shutting and locking it behind us. Walking me over to a couch. Never letting go of his hold on me, he sits down on the older couch, cradling me in his lap. His strong arms are wrapped tightly around me. He holds me close as I continue to crumble, soaking his nice blue button down with my tears. He's patient and kind, allowing me release the wave of grief that I've been straining to hide.

My body calms, my shutters stop, and my sobs turn to trickling tears. My finger traces his tattoos while my head lays against his chest. I should've predicted he'd have this effect, he's always had a comforting presence to me. He doesn't mention anything about our fight or me not answering his phone calls. All of our problems are pushed aside, so we can deal with the fog of death that surrounds us now.

I hurriedly stand, straightening my dress after I release myself from the comfort of Trey's love. Following me to the door, his steps echo through the small space. He grabs my wrist to hold me in place. I sigh. "Trey, I need to get back out there," I tell him, but he pulls me closer.

"They can wait five minutes, Kailey. Please, let me be there with you," he begs, already knowing my heart is lost in some dark tunnel without a flicker of light. It's wounded and broken, so my brain has taken over, translating to me

pushing everyone out.

"Trey, thank you for coming, but you can leave now," I say coldly with no

emotion. He can't be tied down with me, he needs to go and live a life I can no longer be a part of.

"No, Kailey, I'm not leaving." He stands firm, planting his feet.
Uncontrollable anger starts brewing in

my veins. I'm mad he won't listen to me and just disappear. Can't he see it's the best for him to forget us?

My hand rests on the lock; ready to

twist it open when he steps forward. He turns me around to face him and cages me between his arms against the door. "Trey," I argue, but he presses his lips to mine and an immediate raging desire

seeps into my every pore. As much as my body screams to him, anger still lingers that he's forcing me to be callous and cruel.

He places his hands on either side of my face, continuing to kiss me as though he's starving for only my mouth. Instinctively, the irrational, live life in the moment Kailey that he easily pries out of me appears. Something only my sister and her family could accomplish until he came into my life. "Please," he whispers, and my body starts to sway in his strong hold, as he travels his lips over to my earlobe and down my throat.

"Stop it, Trey, leave me alone," I cruelly spout, placing my hands on his chest, trying to push him back, but he

only grips tighter.
"You know you don't want me to."

He trusts his keen instincts because they're usually always right when it comes to me.

Trying to close myself off, I press my lips together when his graze across mine again before his tongue requests permission. But in the end, I'm not willing to deny myself, I open, allowing his familiar tongue to roam around my mouth and mingle with mine. The kiss feels safe and warm, like home. Ever since that fateful plane ride, I've felt as if Trey was a part of me. Recalling our first kiss; it was nothing like this. God! He ignited my whole body the first time his mouth pressed against mine. In those

three minutes, he ruined me. No man would ever compare. But this, this is what I crave at night when I lay in bed all alone. It's the familiarity of the one man who knows my lips, my tongue, and my body. My need of one man who continues to enjoy exploring every curve and nuance over and over again, as if he has discovered his own wonderland.

and tongue are moving carelessly without retention of the real issue.

"Stop it, Trey." This time, I use all my force to push him back. I'm torn if I'm happy, mad, or just sad. Sheer dejection fills his eyes, and suddenly remorse hits me. "We just can't," I softly

say, shaking my head back and forth.

When my thoughts unscramble, my lips

"Yes, we can," he says, stepping forward, but I shake my head violently again. "What the hell, Kailey? All I want to do is love you," his voice starts escalating, and I need to flee the room. His presence alone makes me jittery and

His presence alone makes me jittery and uncontrolled. The sooner I leave, the sooner I can get myself stable again, back into my sealed bubble.

"I told you already, Trey." I bite my

lip, not wanting to lie again, but I will, if I have to.

I have to.
"Don't tell me that bullshit again.
You and I both know it isn't true." He

steps closer to me, and my weakness begins getting the best of me.

"Please, I need to get back out there," I tell him, but he approaches again, pulling me to him similar to a child with their security blanket. I succumb to the haven of his embrace, mindlessly relishing the warmness of home.

"Kailey, it's taking everything in me not to keep you right here, up against this door, until you admit you love me. I'll let you leave this room, but don't say you don't love me again. I know you do, and no matter how hard you try to push me aside, I'm not leaving." He releases me after his rant, and I unlock the door, fleeing the room.

I'm not two steps out the door before Chloe's at my legs again. "Aunt Kailey, we've been looking for you," she says, and I glance around spotting her brother and sister happily hopping on the couches while Caden's aunt and uncle try to calm them down.

"I was—" Before I can finish she dashes past me.

"Trey!" she screams, and he scoops her up in his arms, smiling at her.

"Hey, C-lo, what's been going on?" He raises his hand, and she gives him a high five.

"My mommy died," she says to him, and my heartbreaks. Trey glances my way before returning his attention solely to Chloe.

"I heard, but you know what? She's with the angels now, and you know what angels do, remember?" he asks her, and I briefly wonder if they had a previous

"They watch us," she says in the most adorable voice. Clearly Trey has

indeed been filling her in.

"That's right, so where's your mom right now?" he asks her, and she circles her arms through the air around her head. "Right again. Your mom is around

you all the time," he reminds her, and I swallow deep, trying to keep a new set of tears at bay. Not being able to take seeing how wonderful Trey is with them anymore, I escape further into the room, cringing at the sight. It was easier when I didn't have to observe the room of death from this angle.

When I walk through the open double doors, I feel the eyes shift in my

direction, and I hear the faint whispers of guests explaining to others how I'm the aunt. When Trey follows close behind with Chloe in his arms, I swear the whispers become louder. "He's the boyfriend. I doubt he'll stick around. Just look at him." I hear someone attempting to discreetly gossip to another. Rolling my eyes, I continue on my way to the front of the room and take my spot next to the casket to greet the

As people encase their arms around me, my eyes ignore them and seek out Trey. He's seated on the floor in the back of the room with the three kids. Drew sits in his lap while Chloe and Tara listen attentively to what he's

new mourners.

saying. Then they burst into a fit of laughter and Trey shushes them, pressing his hands down in the air, signaling to calm down, barely able to conceal his own chuckles. His smile catches me off guard, and my lips turn up at seeing the kids so happy. I don't know why I expected any less; Trey has been good with them ever since the first day. "I'm so sorry, Kailey," a soft voice

pulls me back to the waiting line. When my eyes shift, I notice Sadie and Brady waiting to hug me. Sadie's warm arms wrap around me, and I almost lose my composure. If I hadn't just cried a river with Trey moments ago, I would've been crying in her arms immediately. Brady's next. He hugs me, telling me how sorry

he is and if there's anything I need, to let them know. I watch them make their way to the back of the room to join Trey and the kids, until I'm tapped on the shoulder by Jessa.

All I can catch is her small smile

before her body pushes hard against me. "I'm sorry, Kailey," she whispers, holding me so tight she restricts my breathing capacity. Grant chuckles lightly before gently pulling a very empathetic Jessa off of me. She quickly wipes her eyes attempting to conceal her obvious emotions. "I'm sorry, these damn hormones," she remarks, playfully glaring at Grant. She looks so cute with her short, now brown hair. Her giggle is infectious, and soon I start. "Oh, I'm

sorry, Kailey. I shouldn't have made a joke," she tells me, clearly concerned.
"Oh please, a little humor right now feels good," I admit, and it honestly does. Caden's parents disgustingly

glance my way, but I could care less

what they think. These are my friends, and they've been there for me during this whole ordeal. Where were they when we needed them most? Nowhere to be seen that's for sure.

"I'm glad I could bring a smile to

your face, but, Kailey, if there's anything
—" she continues, but I quickly interrupt
her.

"I know. I will, Jessa." I place my hand on her forearm reassuring her that I'll call if I need her, but the truth is I won't. She and Grant have enough on their plates right now. She nods her head, genuinely hoping I will, and then Grant comes up and gives me a more relaxed hug than Jessa's. Thinking how this whole scene must be bringing back awful memories for him, my own empathy sets in. As they walk down the narrow aisle between the chairs and wall, Jessa wraps her arm around his waist, forcing him to look down at her. She gives him a sympathetic smile, and he tugs her closer before they join the others in the back of the room. When I turn to find the next guest. Dex is patiently waiting.

Dex hugs and kisses my cheek. I'm thrown off when he whispers, "You're

making this harder on the both of you." Then he grasps both my upper arms in his hands, staring down at me. "Kailey, you need him, and he needs you. Let him take care of you." His blue eyes search my face for some sort of sign that he's gotten through to me, but I hate to admit it, no one will. My decision is made, and it's the best for both of us. One day they will all see that. Frustrated from trying to convince me, he finally relents. "Just think about it." Before I can respond with another polite decline, he's already walking away. His consistent calling and texting since I broke it off with Trey has started to become a norm in my life. As desperate as he's attempting to get us

back together, one would never imagine

attention when we all first met.

My eyes focus on the small group of friends in the back of the room, playing

he was in competition with Trey for my

with my nieces and nephew. Six months ago, I didn't know any of them, and now, they're my best friends. Watching Brady throw Drew up in the air before catching him while Sadie keeps insisting he stops, makes me wish I was them. A desperate need to be the one who didn't just lose everything in their life consumes my thoughts.

Trey's huddled in a group with his best friends, but his gaze finds me across the room for the millionth time. Clasping Brady on the shoulder, he turns my way. My stomach lurches when he starts to make his way over. God, the man is gorgeous. His tattoos only add to his hotness appeal. Tonight, even dressed in slacks and a button down, his ink still peeks out from his rolled up sleeves and neckline. That crooked smile he's throwing my way, knowing I'm mentally drooling over him, is enough to create a

need so desperate for him within me that I'd allow him to take me into the back

room and forget everything.

The memory of that night, when I had no choice but to end it crashes to the forefront of my mind. The hurt in his eyes when I told him I didn't love him. How he crumbled in front of me, begging

me not to do this to him—to us.

Watching him in the rearview mirror as I

drove away. Him standing in the street, watching my taillights disappear is just as gut wrenching now as when it happened. Tears that stung my eyes and the hysterical sobs that wailed out of me, aware that I just lied to the only man I would ever love.

Chapter 1

Six Months Ago Trey

God, I'm already annoyed with these guys. Between Brady and Sadie's constant love fest and Grant and Jessa's newfound lust, I'm ready to retch in every trashcan we pass down the corridor. Why did I sign up for this little spring break outing anyway? Oh yeah the snow bunnies. I can imagine all the little hotties needing me to warm them up after a day on the slopes. Tossing my

duffle on the floor, I slump into the seat across from Hulk, also known as Dex. We nicknamed him Hulk our freshman year, not only because of his size but his sudden outbursts that would get us all using a first aid kit after a night out. He doesn't do himself any favors by wearing the tight ass t-shirts that show off every muscle in his torso. He peers at me over the top of his Men's Health magazine, smirking. I shoot him a confused look, and his eyes shift to the right. Following his signal, I spot the smokin' hot piece of ass at the end of the row.

I raise my gaze to look at her face, but her head is down, focusing on an iPad, and her body is already in a defensive stance, making it known to every male within a twenty-foot perimeter to stay the fuck away.

Although the thrill of the chase entices

me, I'll let Dex have this one. I still owe him from two nights ago, when I snuck in and took that redhead home after he went to the bathroom. Hey, it wasn't like he didn't already have three other girls chomping at the bit anyway. I'm pretty sure when I ran into the cute blonde with the huge rack leaving the house the next morning, he'd forgiven me.

I give Dex the nod, telling him to go for it, and stand up to go take a piss. I hate those airplane bathrooms. They're so small and cramped. Not to mention, I'm always a tiny bit scared the plane

will crash while I'm in there. I'll be found with my pants around my ankles in the bottom of an ocean, and then the sharks—Shit! I'm not going to think about that. On my way to the bathroom, a cute strawberry blonde behind the counter at the gift shop catches my eye. She's clearly giving me those fuck me eyes I'm familiar with, so I change directions and make a straight line in her direction. I slyly act interested at a few

I slyly act interested at a few magazines before grabbing Maxim.

Tossing it on the counter, I give her a flirtatious smirk. I'd use a line, but from the way her eyes are currently roaming my body, no need to waste one.

"Hey." I place a ten-dollar bill on

the magazine, but she pushes it back to me and takes the magazine. After digging around in a drawer, she pulls out a black marker and writes something on the back page.

Handing the magazine back to me,

she says, "It's on me." She slowly moves her tongue over her top lip and winks at me. Shit, she's good. I'm already throbbing.

"Thoules" I shift slightly to readjust.

"Thanks." I shift slightly to re-adjust myself.

"No problem," she replies, leaning forward against the counter, pressing those nice tits together, giving me the perfect view. My hands twitch thinking about manipulating those C cups. "Check out the last page, there's some really

good information there."

I glance at my watch, and then back

at her to read her nametag. "Kim, I've only got twenty minutes before my flight."

"Don't worry about that, I'll meet you in three." She shoos me with her hand, and another young girl walks in. I venture out of the store, flipping to the last page. In big black marker, 'My tits want your mouth. Door in the back. *Three minutes.* 'Thank the fucking lord! This is just what I need, a good fuck to relax me before hopping on that death trap they call a plane.

Exactly three minutes later, I walk back in the store, winking at the new girl behind the counter. She smirks up at me, as I continue my way to the back door. I knock softly and peer side to side to make sure no one is watching. The door opens slightly, and I snake through the small opening, closing it behind me. After I lock it, she pushes me against the door, her hands already undoing my belt. Before I can even kiss her, she's pushing my pants down and falls to her knees. Holy Shit! She immediately descends on me, taking all of me deep down her throat. I place my hands on her head to keep her right where I want her. After only a few more strokes of her mouth, she's back in my face, thrusting her tongue into my mouth. As much as my dick is enjoying the whole take charge thing this girl has going on, I'm a bit

I firmly place my hands on her ass and hoist her up to me. Her skirt wraps

bored with her eagerness.

around her waist, and I dig the condom I snuck in my pocket a few seconds ago. She takes it out of my hand and tears it open with her teeth. Quickly, I pluck it from her hands and roll it down on myself before, pushing her thong to the side and thrusting myself deep. She hollers out, so I cover her mouth. Partly because I don't want people to hear us, and a small part of me doesn't want her to feel like she could kiss me again. This is what it is, a good fuck in a storage room, and I'm not about to confuse it with anything intimate.

Her arms wrap around my neck, and,

soon, she's bucking against me as I'm pounding into her. Taking my hand away from her mouth, I pull out a tit and grab the nipple with my teeth. She moans loudly when I suck it into my mouth, so I place my free hand over her mouth again, and she bites my palm. Shit, I bet she's got a torture fetish! Just as I'm sucking on her tit and my cock is fucking her hard, her muffled groans inch louder and she clenches against me. Slowly relaxing in my arms, I give her no time to recover before I let go of her hips and her feet fall to the floor. Bending her over a chair, I push my dick back into her wetness, wrapping my arms around her body and gripping onto her tits as leverage. Thrusting in and out, I shove

hits me and everything else in the world is gone and only pure pleasure is left. Before I'm about to blow, I pull out fast and rest my condom-covered cock on her back until it all pumps out.

deeper each time until that feeling I love

Then I step back and roll the condom off, knotting it tight and clench it in my fist. She reaches over, and I squint to the bright light she flipped on. After pulling up my pants, I tell her it was good, and she reciprocates the mutual casual sexual encounter politeness. It's nice she has no expectations from this little rendezvous. Clasping the used condom in my hand, I don't kiss her or get her number. Just a shared smile before I escape from the awkward aftermath.

the bathroom and checking the condom for any holes or tears over the toilet and then watch the fucker swirl its way down. When I'm out washing my hands, I'm surprised to find Brady standing next to me.

"Where the hell have you been?" he

I conduct my normal routine, finding

asks. After my smirk, laughter erupts from him and he shakes his head. "Do you go anywhere and not get laid?" "Honestly—no. You're missing out. since you've got that whole one girl thing going on." I raise my eyebrows at him through the reflection of the mirror. I'm not completely against the monogamy thing, it's just I'm always on the fucked up side of it.

"Oh, that's where you're wrong. *You're* the one missing out." Brady clasps his hand on my shoulder, giving it a small squeeze, before leaving me in the bathroom.

I walk out of the men's room and back to our gate, where Brady and Sadie are holding hands next to each other, and Jessa's relaxing in Grant's arms. They each smile wide at me as I walk by content in their little love bubbles. But they know they're jealous that I can fuck anything that saunters by while they're praying every night their girl gives it up. Smiling, I notice Dex has made his move, since he's now sitting next the hottie from earlier. He must be making his mark because the girl seems

receptive, her iPad is now tucked away and she's turned toward him, which is always a good sign.

I slouch down in the seat furthest from everyone and thumb through my phone, waiting for our flight to be called. That fast fuck did nothing to satisfy me. Don't get me wrong, she met my criteria; hot, wet, and willing, but I really hope those Colorado girls know how to show me a good time! Jessa said her sister was coming back from college...maybe. Shit, NO WAY! Jessa would kill me, and she'd have every right to.

Our flight is finally announced, and I rise to my feet fast, slinging my bag over my shoulder. After getting no sleep and

her name again? Tina? Kate? Oh yeah, Kim. Anyway, Dex better not bother me, I'm in desperate need for recouping. I don't bother waiting for all the

exhausting myself with... Fuck, what was

lovebirds. Instead, I walk right up to the airline clerk and hand her my ticket. Once I walk through the small doorframe, the cute flight attendant gives me a blatant appreciating once over with her eyes, and for the first time in forever,

I could give a shit. All I need from her is one of those small ass pillows and itchy blanket. Since I'm one of the first in our section, the overheads are nearly empty. Grabbing my ear buds, I toss my bag in the small compartment and fall into my seat. I wiggle my body to get as

comfortable as possible in the hard seats. Adjusting the air nozzle, I spot Dex and that girl coming my way. She stops right in front of our row

and tilts her head while raising her eyebrows at me. I sit there looking back at her, waiting for her to say something when I notice her gorgeous green eyes with a yellowish gold ringing around her pupils. They're alluring and intriguing, pulling me into a foreign abyss. I desperately beg myself to stop staring, but my eyes won't allow me. "Um...this is me," her clipped disgruntled voice muttering to herself pulls me away, and Dex chuckles. As she takes her seat she huffs out an irritated breath while my eyes focus on her body sliding in next to

me. After she takes her seat, I notice her peering over in my direction out from the corner of her eyes. Dex sits down next to her in the seat closest to the aisle, and I'm about to do the biggest jackass move of all time. "I'm Trey." I hold out my hand, and her slim fingers wrap around my palm.

"Kailey," she says in a much nicer tone than she used with me previously. "I like the plugs," she compliments me, and I'm pretty sure I could point out about twenty things to compliment her on, but Dex's eyes are currently boring into me. Shit, I should ignore her. I already told Dex he had full reign.

"Thanks, I like your...your eyes," the words sputter out of my mouth before I

She laughs the most nervous giggle, and I watch her eyes focus on my mouth

and I watch her eyes focus on my mouth when I drag my lower lip with my stud piercing through my teeth before releasing it. Yep, she wants me. As crappy as I feel for what I'm about to do to Dex, it's out of my control. I'm not about to throw away the first girl to peak my interest beyond a quick fuck since high school.

The flight attendant gets on the overhead and starts talking about the mask and the seat cushion. Kailey grabs the laminated card from the back of the seat in front of her and appears to be studying it. This is my sign to let Dex know, I'm in and he's out. I give him my

silent nod with a little wink. He narrows his eyes with a short shake of his own head. I guess he's in the mood for some friendly competition. Anyone can see why she's worth the fight, her body is killer. But as much as I want to bite my tongue thinking this, I can tell she's more than a one-time fuck. There's something about this girl, but the hell if I can explain it.

Kailey's head mimics a tennis ball as Dex and I volley back and forth, attempting to grab her attention. Dex compliments her while I make her laugh. Our personality differences are in full swing, vying for her interest to peak in our favor. She must realize what's going on, but she shows no sign who she

prefers, other than that her eyes rest on mine a beat longer than Dex. He hasn't given up hope though, even throwing out the small bench pressing competition he took first place in a few months back. I quickly hammer back my own accomplishment, exposing I finished first in a wing eating competition, to veer her attention back my way. A remarkable eighty wings in ten minutes. Laughter erupts out of her, causing the businessman in the aisle across from us to peer over, before focusing back on his laptop. By the time we land in Denver, Dex

By the time we land in Denver, Dex is slowly starting to admit defeat. We file out into the narrow aisle way, impatiently waiting for the passengers in

front of us to grab their bags and belongings from the overhead compartments. Moms and dads attempt to get their children to walk forward while they hold stuffed animals and mini character suitcases branded with their initials or name. This is the first time in my life, I don't mind waiting forever to escape these claustrophobic confines. I'm content to remain pressed up against her, smelling the apple scent as her hair tickles my arm. She glances back, smiling at the older lady in front of her, slowly placing her book back in her purse. Kailey doesn't appear annoyed or bothered by the delay, but instead reaches over to give her a hand.

The purple haired lady, gushes to

the too close for comfort atmosphere, Kailey goes to the side of the elderly lady, gently taking her arm to escort her up the ramp. Dex and I follow close behind like two jackoffs. The skycap with a wheelchair in front of him waits for the lady. "You have a sweet girlfriend," the lady says to Dex, and he thanks her before she's wheeled away. Suddenly, I have an urge to punch Dex in

Kailey, thanking her. Once we get out of

After everyone's off the plane, we go to the bathroom. All four of us stand side by side at the urinals, trying to mind our own business, staring at the cracked tile wall in front of us. I can't wait any

the fucking nose for taking credit for

being her boyfriend.

longer, though; I need Dex to lay off with Kailey.

"Listen man I know you saw her

"Listen, man, I know you saw her first, but—" I start to talk, disregarding our usual set of guy rules.

"Shit, man, don't you know anything about bathroom etiquette? No fucking talking," Grant grumbles, remaining focused on the wall. Brady chuckles.

"He's got a point," Brady remarks without turning his head one-way or the other.

The room goes quiet as we all finish our business and zip up our pants. We make our way to the sinks to wash our hands. Brady and Grant file out, I'm sure already missing their damn girlfriends. Pussy whipped takes on a whole

Dex stays by the paper towel dispenser until I come over, no doubt knowing I want to talk about it. "She's all yours, man," he relinquishes her to me, then turns around to walk out without another word.

A feeling of guilt resonates inside of

definition when it comes to those two.

me, I think he might have really liked her. Hell, how could he not have? I leave the bathroom and lean against the wall, waiting for the girls. When Kailey saunters out with Jessa and Sadie, all the guilt vanishes. Without even thinking, I push off the wall and make a beeline to her. Side by side we venture down to the baggage claim. It's taking every ounce of willpower not to grab her hand, but I can imagine if I did she'd pull away or slap me. Then my angel best friend, Jessa, volunteers us to drive her to her aunt and uncle's, who live in the same town as Jessa's parents. *Jackpot*.

At this point, I grab her hand, in the most friend-like way I can pull off, and lead her to the revolving belt carousel to retrieve our bags. She points her plaid suitcase out, and I grab it off the conveyer for her, being the gentleman I am. With all of us wheeling our luggage, we locate the rental car place.

Reluctantly, Llet go of her hand and join

Reluctantly, I let go of her hand and join the guys, but I can't help myself from checking on her over my shoulder while all the guys file up to the small counter. Brady pays for the van fee, no surprise there. Although he would never admit it, he really is the pseudo father in our small group. My body warms when we begin to approach the girls, my eyes on her the whole thirty seconds it takes to reach them. She's even more beautiful as she smiles and laughs with Jessa and Sadie.

Not sure how she'll feel about it, I entwine our fingers again. A small smile hits my face when she doesn't pull away, but rather I feel her fingertips between my knuckles. Once we climb into the rented van, she scoots comfortably next to me. I'm unusually excited to be near this hot girl for the next two hours. Unfortunately, it also terrifies me slightly because for a change it's not sex,



Chapter 2

Everyone shuffles out at Jessa's parents, happy to stretch. Brady tosses me the keys in the driveway. We give a quick hello to Jessa's parents, and I tell them I'll be right back. I open the passenger door for Kailey, and she sneaks in before I even open it the entire way. Dex's eyes remain focused at me, clearly still pissed off at me for stealing Kailey from him. I'm pretty sure it's the competition he's upset about, not actually Kailey. Because if roles were reversed, I might have to pummel him to the ground before easily handing her

over. Not that I'll brag about it, but anyone can tell she wants me too. It's clear from every giggle that escapes those glossed pink lips or the way her vision diverts to all my piercings and tattoos. She loves the bad boy image I portray. Although, I hope I don't disappoint her, because even though I'm no angel, I'm not an asshole bad boy either.

She presses her aunt and uncle's address into her telephone and starts spitting off directions. Her hand grips the armrest and her foot presses hard against the floor board, fearful I won't be able to break every time the van drives down steep mountain slopes. Another damn cute side of her.

"So, are you out here for vacation?" I swear at myself for asking such a stupid question. Why else would she be here?

"Um...yeah," she says. I can't help recognizing the apprehension in her voice. Then again, I just met her, I could be hearing something not there.

The conversation flows comfortably for the rest of the trip. Between the lefts here and rights there, we sneak in our majors, graduation days, and jobs. Since we're both Architecture majors, we relax into a discussion of professors and classes for a while. I'm surprised I've never seen her before. There's no way I would have missed her. But with her being a semester behind me, she hasn't

spent as much time in the lab as I have. The lab is where I can be found, if I'm not playing with the band or 'playing' at the bars.

We pull up to the small isolated log cabin way too soon for me, and I'm pretty sure there isn't another human being in a five-mile radius. It's eerie and creepy. I get out of the van and grab her suitcase from the back, then walk her up to the door. As we get closer to the porch steps, a light comes on and the door swing opens.

A lady with grey hair and bearing a friendly smile, opens the screen door. She's bundled up in her coat with a pair of black snow boots on. "Kailey, darling, you made it." She opens her

arms as Kailey swiftly climbs the stairs. She leans in as the lady wraps her puffy sleeves around her into a tight embrace. After giving Kailey a little squeeze, her

aunt's curious eyes find me. She peers down and whispers to Kailey, "Who's this?" Her tone is nice and welcoming, and I can't help liking her already.

"Sorry, Aunt Holly, this is Trey Michaels. He and his friends were nice enough to give me a ride from the airport." Kailey remains on the porch while her Aunt steps down, holding her hand out to me.

"Hi, Trey, thanks for looking out for our Kailey," she says. I place my hand in hers, surprised by her firm grip.

"It's nice to meet you," I reply,

walks down the steps for her suitcase that's resting on the walkway besides me. I place my hand on hers, and she quickly snaps her hand back, as though I shocked her. "I'll carry it for you," I assure her, taken back by her reaction. "Why don't you come in, Trey? We're making a late lunch." Aunt Holly

standing there like an idiot. Kailey

opens the door, waiting for me to enter.

I glance at my watch, and then look to Kailey for a clue if she prefers me to

to Kailey for a clue if she prefers me to stay or not. Jessa's mom said she was planning a dinner, but I figure I have some time. "Sure," I answer, and Kailey lets out a small sigh.

Carrying her bag, we enter the cabin. The furniture is big and cozy with throw blankets strewn over the backs of couches and chairs. The warm and welcoming surroundings make me want to plop myself on the couch and prop my feet up on the wood table. Luckily, my mom taught me better than that. So, I wait in the entryway until both women pass me. Kailey never looks at me, almost as if she's annoyed I'm staying.

"KAILEY!" a deep boisterous voice hollers as a man walks into the room. "Uncle Clyde." Kailey practically runs up to him, throwing her arms around him his huge frame.

"We've missed you, girl. How is everyone?" he asks her while letting his large body absorb her much smaller one. He must be six-six, three hundred pounds. I'm intimidated as hell and a million excuses to leave scramble through my head.

"They're good." I hear her voice shake slightly, and he pats her on the back, almost as if he's consoling her. When they pull apart, his eyes find me, and I bite the stud piercing under my lip. "Who's he?" He nods his head my

way and his wife comes over immediately, patting my arm.

"This is Kailey's friend," Aunt Holly introduces me, "Trey."

"He gave me a ride," Kailey adds, and I'm happy to hear her voice a little more chipper than two seconds ago.

"Huh," is all he says while he stomps over to me. He reminds me of a

lumberjack, like Paul Bunyan. I think this might be his brother. He even has the plaid shirt and blue jeans with those identical brown boots. I'm just thankful he's not carrying an axe. After only three strides across the room, he's right in front of me, occupying the same space. I used to think I was tall. Used to being the key words. "Why did you give our Kailey a ride?" he asks me, and I peer up at him, becoming more scared by the second. "Uhhh—to be nice. We'd rented a

car and were on our way here anyways," I stumble over my words, and he stares down at me for what seems like forever.

"Thank you," he holds his hand out to me and starts chuckling.

"Oh, Clyde, I don't know why you think that's funny. The boy almost pissed himself." Holly shakes her head and walks back into the kitchen.

He continues laughing, and I hear Kailey's now distinctive giggling chiming in as well. "It's nice to meet you, Trey." His handshake ten times firmer than his wife's. His large hand claps me on the back, and I stumble forward a step. "Let's eat." Once I get myself back on two solid feet, I find the most amazing sight, Kailey smiling at me.

Kailey and I follow Uncle Clyde into the kitchen. Holly already has the table set with a plate full of sandwiches situated in the middle, along with a bowl and hands me a soda. Although I don't usually drink the Diet Coke she just handed me, my mom taught me better. 'If you're a guest, you will eat and drink what they give you.' So, I open it up and take my seat next to her.

of pasta salad. Kailey opens the fridge

Clyde and Holly drill me with questions about my major, surprised we both attend Western but didn't know each other previously. They actually appear like they don't believe us. "You two look comfortable together, are you pulling our chains?" Holly asks, and Kailey assures her we aren't. "It would be just like you," Holly adds, but Kailey just smiles and takes a bite of her sandwich.

Kailey has my mind all over the place. On the plane and the car ride, she seemed responsive and friendly. But when we arrived here, although her love for her aunt and uncle is evident, she's more reserved. The fact that Holly thinks that Kailey would pull a practical joke, introducing me as someone she hitched a ride from when in reality I'm her boyfriend, intrigues me to get to know her even more.

Clyde jokingly asks me about my tattoos and the meaning of a few. Why would I permanently destroy my body and why do I have earrings like a girl? He doesn't appear to ask them to be offensive, just matter of fact from curiosity. Kailey does try to save me by

saying she likes my plugs. I don't miss that it's her second time mentioning that in just a short few hours. Clyde cocks a skeptical eyebrow at her, and she giggles in response.

After the meal, I say my thanks and shake hands like my parents taught me. Kailey says she'll walk me out. I open the screen door, holding it open for Kailey. Without her jacket, she wraps her arms around herself, rubbing her arms. Man, I wish I were those arms right now, giving her a big hug just to feel her body pressed against mine.

"Do you think you'll have time to get together while we're here?" I ask her, fumbling with the keys in my hand. "Um...I don't know," she shrugs her she's confusing. First no and now yes. Why am I doing this to myself? Just go find another quick fuck!

shoulders up and down. "I guess." Shit,

"Can I have your number?" I pull my cell out from my pocket, and she takes it out of my hand.

Her fingers move rapidly over the keys, and I'm praying she doesn't notice all the other girls' names and numbers I have programmed in it. She hands the phone back to me, wrapping her arms around herself again. "I'll call vou." I tell her and from the tight smile she returns, it's confirmed that she indeed did see the numbers. "How's tonight?" The words spill out of my mouth before my brain can stop them due to a

desperate need to make her aware that those other girls are nothing to me, even if I don't fully understand why.

"I just got in, I'm not sure..."
"We can stay in, watch a movie."

Hell at this point, I'll settle for a thirty minute sitcom. The anticipation of being in a dark room with her is the most hope I've had in a long time.

She looks at the cabin apprehensively, and then back to me as my own hope that she'll say yes rises. "Okay," she agrees.

Trying to act cool and collected, I nod my head and lean in. She lets me wrap my arms around her and the smell of crisp apple mixed with flowers on a spring day embeds in my senses as

Kailey. From this point forward, I'll never be able to eat an apple without it reminding me of her.

I release her and step back, not

wanting to linger like some creep.

Opening the door, I crawl into the soccer mom minivan. She waits by the porch until I pull away, giving me a wave good-bye. Even though, I haven't figured her out completely, I find myself eager peel back every layer of her.

I'm finding my way back to the cabin, the anticipation of seeing Kailey again growing with every mile. The streets are pitch black in Colorado; my headlights the only help to light the way as I retrace a whole new set of nerves to flow through me. You would think with all the mountains, there would be streetlights. Surprisingly, the van climbs the mountains with grace, and I start to feel

my drive from earlier, which only cause

in complete control. Well, at least in control of the car, as far as my emotions, they're all over the place.

When I pull up to the cabin, I spot Kailey waiting by the front door. I texted ber when I left Jessa's parents'. Seeing

Kailey waiting by the front door. I texted her when I left Jessa's parents'. Seeing her there, as though she's just as excited as I am, brings a smile to my lips. I climb out of the van, and she opens the front door for me to enter. The room is dark except for the dim light from the lamp in the corner and the glowing

She's all wrapped up in a sweater, keeping her arms around herself just like earlier. Probably trying to protect her body from my prying eyes. I have to

television without much sound.

body from my prying eyes. I have to admit, my eyes inadvertently veer to her ass or tits, just as much as her glittering green-gold eyes that remind me of a precious gem. The kind only multimillionaires can afford, yet here they are staring back at me.

"So..." she squints her eyes my way, most likely trying to figure out what I'm

"So..." she squints her eyes my way, most likely trying to figure out what I'm thinking. I wish I could tell her, but it's too fucking soon for that. Shit, she'd go running into those mountains.

"What are you watching?" I glance back at the television and then back to

her. The newness between us is present, but underneath it I've never felt so relaxed with a girl.

"Just flipping around." She shrugs her shoulders, finally making her way to the couch.

Following behind her, my eyes peruse the room. "Where's your aunt and uncle?"

"They're in bed. Early risers." She takes a seat, curling her legs up under her body.

Pausing briefly, I debate for a millisecond between sitting right next to her or being polite and taking the cushion over. Fuck it, I plop down next to her. "So, let's do humor."

Those emerald gems glance over,

and then she presses play on the DVD and *Date Movie* begins to play. I bite my lower lip and stare back at her. "Don't read anything into the title, it's slim pickings around here." I laugh at her declaration

"You telling me this isn't our first date?" I ask her.

"You catch on fast," she remarks. "I couldn't agree more. Our first date

will be one you'll never forget."

"Who said I would say yes," she quickly retorts. This back and forth

"You will," I say confidently.

banter has my dick twitching.

"So cocky and sure of yourself, buddy."

"Buddy?" I cock both my eyebrows

at her, and she stifles a giggle. "I most certainly am *not* your buddy."

"What would you prefer me to call you?" She's sitting up now, facing me with her legs crossed. The television becoming long forgotten.

"I don't know, how about stallion, lover, or tiger? Yeah, I like that one, Tiger Trey," I laugh aloud at my own stupid joke. How lame is that? She instantly quiets me, pointing to the back hallway. I imitate the elementary school teacher motion of zipping my lips and tossing the key, making her own giggle explode out.

"I'm not sure about any of those."
She smiles, obviously starting to relax.
"What about tat-boy? I kind of like that

"What about tat-boy? I kind of like that

one." She grins over to me. I'm not sure if she's serious or joking, but I imagine her calling me that when we're a ripe old age when my tattoos are all saggy and faded.

"Take Me Now Boy?" I jokingly counter, but she shakes her head no and pursing her lips.

"Nah, tat-boy. That's my name for you." She stands up and walks in the kitchen. Following her, I admire her ass and how she walks so stealthily and quiet, similar to a cat.

"If I'm lame ass tat-boy, you can be my cat-girl." She turns around and scrunches her eyes and nose in confusion. She's in the doorway of the pantry, so I lean closer, cornering her against the wall. "You move with the graceful finesse of a cat. Mixed with those mesmerizing green-gold eyes of yours makes you my very own little kitty cat." If it's even possible, I feel her body draw closer and pull away all at the same time.

"Kind of a cliché, don't you think? You want me to purr for you too?" She grabs a bag of popcorn and starts pouring it into a bowl. "You can purr for me anytime." I

wink. "Give me a break, it's been a long day. Not to mention, tat-boy, how did you come up with that?" I tease, and she cocks her head silently saying touché.

She grabs two drinks out of the fridge without a word, and goes back to

the couch. She points to the cushion furthest away from her. "You sit over there," she instructs. Then she places the bowl between the two of us on the vacant cushion, the same cushion I wish I was currently occupying. "So, what's the most important part of a first date?" she asks, crossing her legs, which only brings my attention back to her body. When she leans forward, her breasts squeeze together allowing me a glimpse of her black lace bra. For a second I let my imagination go wild thinking about what's not only hiding under that sweater, but exactly how her small tits would feel as I manipulated them with my hands.

I tilt my head, giving her the

flirtatious eyes to hint at the sexual tension, "Do I really have to tell you?" I chuckle.

Surprisingly, she joins in with the humor. "Come on, tat-boy, think with something else other than..." Her eyes veer down to my crotch. I like those cat eyes focused there. Come pounce on me, kitty. "Trey?" she questions, and I bring myself back to our conversation. Then the light bulb clicks on.

"Getting to know someone," I finally answer.

"Ding, Ding, Ding. One for tat-boy." She holds her finger up, making a line in the air. Man, I think I just found the female version of me.

"Aren't you funny, cat-girl? So,

what's the point of this, other than making Trey seem insensitive and stupid?"

"Cute, third person." She smiles, and

I let out a breath. "Okay, okay, sorry. Get a piece of popcorn in my mouth and you can ask me anything, and I'll answer." I'm surprised, she's so willing to grant me permission to ask her anything I desire. "I must warn you, though, I played basketball. So, you'll be answering a lot of my questions." This playful, almost light-hearted Kailey has me reeling more than earlier. Looks like I just peeled back the first layer of her

"Oh you did, did you?" I ask her, surprised.

hard shell.

"I was always good at handling balls," she smirks over at me. Jesus, I'll definitely be rubbing one out tonight. "Then we're a match, I've always

been good at getting it in the hole," I say right back, and her lips press in and turn up on the side as she tries to hide her amusement. "You do know what they call a three pointer in basketball?" I ask her, knowing she probably doesn't.

"Oh funny, tat-boy. Yes, I

know-tre."

"So, you up for playing one on one sometime?" She nudges the popcorn my way. I grab a popped kernel and prepare it in my hand, practicing my throw.

She leans back and opens her mouth. My hand stops midair. "Don't lose your concentration, the only thing getting in this mouth tonight is popcorn."

"Don't worry, you don't have your mouth open wide enough anyway," I tease, practicing my throw again. I throw it and bang, it lands right on her tongue.

"Hot Shot Tat-Boy," she says.
"Shoot." She chomps on her piece of popcorn, waiting for me to ask her.

"One on one?" I ask.

She laughs to herself. "I can definitely arrange a friendly game of horse." I chuckle at her comeback.

We continue this game of popcorn truth for a while and before I realize it, it's three in the morning. She's found out about two brothers, my lovely sister-inlaw, and my very happily married Oberlin, and she says how she grew up in Western. She has a sister, brother-inlaw, and two nieces and a nephew, who all live there as well. Her roommate is a clean freak, who's never home and constantly has new boyfriends. For a second I pray I've never slept with her roommate. It's a perfect situation since she believes one should never live with their friends because before it's all over you definitely won't be friends anymore. So, of course, she finds it odd that I live with all my best friends.

parents. I tell her how I grew up in

It's been forever since I've taken the time to get to know someone. The last thing I want to do is leave, but now she's yawned five times in the last two

minutes. I pray one night I'll curl up with her in bed, but that's definitely not tonight. Standing up, I hold my hand out for her, and she takes it and rises to her feet. She's warm from the blanket she's had wrapped around herself for the last hour. Pulling her to me, I encase her in my arms, squeezing tight. I lean back, keeping her close, and assess the situation. That first date moment debates in my mind, kiss or no kiss. Her body leans closer, my lips, so close I can smell her popcorn breath. I would kill to taste that salt and butter from her mouth, but I don't want to destroy my chances either. "Call you tomorrow?" I ask her, and she nods her head, giving me no signal of disappointment or relief. Better

Entwining our hands, I lead us to the door and when the cold air rushes in, I

can't stop myself. I lean in, kissing her on the cheek, before whispering, "Goodnight, my cat-girl, sweet dreams.

Get inside and lock up," I instruct her before jogging down the steps.

Starting the van, I flick the windshield wipers on and look out the window. Kailey's peering back at me with the blanket clutched around her shoulders. For the first time, in God knows how long, I wish I could warm her up with only my arms wrapped around her, instead of my dick inside her.

Chapter 3

Kailey and I have hung out together every night since we arrived in Breckenridge. After I finish dinner with my friends, I usually spend my time with Kailey until the sun is about to rise, and then I make the dark drive back over to Jessa's parents' house. I'm pretty sure they all know what's going on, but I've kept my mouth shut. I don't want Kailey viewed as some booty call. I'm not ignorant to my reputation within this group.

To be truthful, Kailey and I haven't even kissed, not that it's my friends'

something I haven't done—ever. I've been finding out her little quirks and likes or dislikes. I've surprised myself that I've remained as interested as I have. I haven't turned into a monk. I notice her fine ass and bouncy tits, but I'm enjoying this sense of intimacy we're experiencing with each other in a way I never have before. Tonight, I'm picking her up, then

business. What we have been doing is

we're meeting everyone at the restaurant for dinner. Other than the drive from the airport, she hasn't been around the group yet. This secret friendship we've been having these past few nights has been nice! My friends' are important to me, and I hope they all get along. She still

appears standoffish at times, but she's allowed me to hold her hand or wrap my arm around her shoulders when we watch movies a few times. The junior high affection we exhibit with one another is enjoyable, but I wouldn't be opposed to a little Seven Minutes in Heaven either.

Aunt Holly and Uncle Clyde are

usually sleeping nice and sound before I make my way over, but Kailey told me they know I'm there. Not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing. Uncle Clyde Bunyan scares the crap out of me, and if he thought I was using his niece for her body, I can't imagine what he could do to me. I'm pretty certain about one thing; I'd finally find out that he does indeed

own an axe.

Since I arrive earlier than usual tonight, it's not only the porch light that leads my way, but the house is lit up like a model home. Happy to trade that horrible family mobile for a fun sleek Mercedes, I carefully park Mr. Harrison's car. Due to the feeling this is

more like a date my palms are slick with moisture as if I'm getting ready for the biggest test of my life. Jesus, when was the last time I was on a date? I have no fucking clue.

Lexchanged my usual casual t-shirt

I exchanged my usual casual t-shirt for a long sleeve Henley. Well, at least it's dressier for me, since I don't even own a button down shirt. I'm a college kid for Christ's sake, what the hell do I need business clothes for? Unfortunately, I'm going to have to change that, since I'm graduating and it's time to grow the fuck up.

Just thinking about my carefree time ending depresses me. I'm not naïve that I have it better than most. My parents pay my tuition, my bills, and give me spending money. I've never had to work for anything, unlike Grant, who has put blood, sweat, and tears into everything he's achieved. I'm truly envious of him, though. He found something I didn't think I wanted ...until now.

The snow crunches under my Chuck Taylors as I make my way up the path to Holly and Clyde's front door. I shrug my shoulders up and down vigorously, waiting for someone to answer the door and let me into the warmth. It's so fucking cold once the sun goes down around here.

When Kailey opens the door, my heart stops. It literally fucking skids to a stop before it changes pace and speeds up so fast I think I might drop dead from a heart attack. She's gorgeous in a purple sweater covering way too much skin with a pair of black leggings and completing the look with a black pair of combat boots. Her hair is styled so it swings to the side, with every strand curled exactly the same. All the nights I've come over, she's never worn this much make-up, and although she appears older and more glamorous, it does

nothing to make her more beautiful. She's just as breathtaking with her skin bare.

"Hi," she says, smirking at my obvious approval of her appearance. "Hmmm," I respond unable to have

any further coherent thoughts.

She giggles quietly. "You look good

too," she says, wearing a wide smile. Finally my voice begins coming back, my eyes take her in one last time before I manage to get out, "Oh, you don't look good, Kailey, you look fucking edible." My vision falls to her legs covered by fabric clinging to her like a second skin. All my brain can process is, I want those wrapped around my waist, right fucking now.

"Well, thank you—I guess," she giggles again, and my cock starts throbbing at the sound. "That could be dangerous out here," she jokes. "You know, mountain goats, rams—"

"And Trey, oh my," I finish her sentence, and she shakes her head and rolls her eyes in clear amusement of my *Wizard of Oz* change-up.

"You might be the biggest danger of all," she says, turning around to get her coat. God, her ass, no doubt I just became fully erect. There's no way I'm leaving her tonight without at least a taste of her lips.

I step out of the foyer, not about to leave without saying hello to Holly and Clyde. "Hi, Holly, Clyde." I make myself visible from behind the wall, waving my hand at them.

"Hi, Trey," they both respond in unison. Clyde is relaxing in his recliner with his leg sprawled out in front of him and remote in hand. Holly sits much like Kailey always does with her legs tucked under herself, thumbing through a magazine.

"Where are you guys off to tonight?"

Holly puts the magazine down and stands up to give me a quick hug.
"We're going to Hot Tapas." I shrug

my shoulders. "It was my buddy Brady's choice, he loves Spanish food," I inform her.

"You'll have to tell me how it is. I've wanted to go there since they thumb in the air, pointing at Clyde, "won't go. Not enough food, he claims." Her joking annoyance to Clyde's defiance on going has an underlying truth.

opened, but this one," she tosses her

"You know how much they want for those small dishes with five pieces on a plate. I might as well go down to Hinkle's for a great big rib eye with all the sides," Clyde tosses back, never looking our way.

"Uncle Clyde, it would be a nice thing for a birthday or anniversary," Kailey chimes in, bending over to give him a kiss on the cheek. He gives her a wink, and she giggles again, knowing full well Clyde will go there at some does anything for the woman he loves. "Relax, dear, we'll go there—eventually," he teases.

point. He strikes me as someone who

"Yeah, yeah, that's what you always say," Holly's voice emanating with humor. "Now, you two go. I miss those swooning days," she adds, and my palms go sweaty again with the expectation this is indeed a date.

"Come on to bed, Hol, I'll swoon you," Clyde remarks from across the room, and Kailey and I laugh.

"That's not swooning, baby, that's speed dating," she joked, but Clyde narrows his eyes at her all the while smirking.

"You two," he points to Kailey and

me, "out. I have some proving to accomplish with my beautiful wife." He pushes the handle, letting the leg rest fold back up into the chair and stands up.

He makes a shooing motion with his hand. "Go," he demands to us again, and we start walking out of the door.
"Clyde!" Holly yelps when he picks

her up and tosses her over his shoulder.
"You asked for swooning baby As

"You asked for swooning, baby. As always, you get what you ask for." He smacks her ass.

Shit, I'm fucking jealous of Clyde. I turn to Kailey and her face is beet red with embarrassment.

"Sorry," she mumbles.

"Hey, it's nice to know they haven't let the romance die," I say, and she smiles up at me.

"Believe me, those walls rock way too often for a niece's ears." She grabs

my hand and a rush of excitement flows through me that she initiated the touching. "Now, let's go get those expensive small dishes."

We leave the house and it's second

nature to be the gentleman my dad taught me to be; I open the door for her, watching her body slide into the black leather seats and cross her legs. Slowly shutting the door, I know she's going to be the death of me tonight. After I climb into the way-too-expensive-for-me car, I carefully back out of the driving. relishing the smell of apples filling the small space.

Once we're on our way, I notice she's fidgeting, so I attempt to ease her anxiety. "So, you met everyone at the airport, but I'll give you the low down on everyone. Okay?"

"That would be great. I think I remember everyone's names, but after hearing you talk about them all the time, I'm eager to put the faces to the stories." I love the fact that she's interested in my friends. They're my lifelines. Having a relationship with some girl who doesn't like your friends, would never work for me. Definitely, a deal breaker for me, as Sadie would say.

"So, I'll start with Brady. He's the guy with the brown hair faux hawk. His girlfriend, Sadie, has the long blonde hair. Usually, they're all over each other, hands never to themselves," I tell her, and she laughs.

"Ian't that a good thing?" she calls

"Isn't that a good thing?" she asks.
"If you're them, I guess," I

sarcastically answer.

"I guess that's true. Jessa is the short blonde, right?" It thrills me she remembers my best friend.

"Yeah, we're pretty tight, and her boyfriend is Grant. Short blond haired preppy dude," I give her more information.

"She's the one you are always talking about?" The clear question evades her voice, and I realize I need to squash any jealousy before her mind veers somewhere it shouldn't.

"Well, we all live together." She looks quizzically at me. Shit, I need to fix that. "Our relationship is like a brother and sister. I'm pretty sure she and Grant will be married happily ever after soon enough. Those two are inseparable." I pray my attempt to soothe any insecurities about Jessa and me did the job.

"Then Dex," she names the last one for me. A ping of jealously hits my veins with the fact she remembers his name. Then her hand reaches over the center console and takes mine, as though she senses my uneasiness. When I look at her hand and then at her, she gives me a small smile.

"Yeah, Dex. We call him Hulk, too,

just in case someone starts referring to him as that you know who we're talking about."

"Okay, thanks, it relaxes me a little

bit. It's always hard meeting the friends, ya know?" Her voice is so casual, I wonder exactly what she's referring to. Does she mean friends of friends or friends of someone you're dating? Crap, see this is why I don't date. All these damn doubts and questions that fill your head throughout the whole night.

When we pull up to the downtown strip of Breckenridge, I attempt to parallel park Jessa's dad's car with the confident skills I clearly don't possess at the moment. Not that I'll let my insecurity show in front of Kailey,

though. Luck must be on in my favor tonight because I squeeze into the space with ease on my first attempt. Pretty good for a kid who failed that part of his driver's test—twice.

"Better you than me," Kailey smiles over at me. I can't help but fear she saw me rub my nervous sweaty hands on my pants before backing up the most expensive car I've ever had the pleasure of driving between two just as pricey vehicles.

"I've always been good at squeezing

"I've always been good at squeezing into tight places," I joke, and she playfully rolls her eyes, and stifles a giggle. A signature reaction of hers.

"Good to know," she remarks, the grin getting wider the more she absorbs

my words.

Our eyes remain on one another's while an energy pulls for a brief moment, until she snaps her head forward. I exit the car, rushing around the front to open her door before she has a chance to grab the door handle herself. After she steps out, my hand reaches for hers, and I weave our fingers together. "Is this okay?" I ask her, staring down at our hands. The last thing I want is for her to be pressured when my friends see us walking in the restaurant with fingers clasped.

She glances down at our hands and back up to my face, "Yeah," squeezing my hand.

I open the door to the restaurant,

dropping her hand, and placing mine on the small of her back to escort her through the restaurant entrance. Once we're through the doorway, I take her hand back in mine, unwilling to not be without her touch for too long. The exhilaration I feel having her next to me, almost like she's my girlfriend, is surprising.

My friend's boisterous laughs and carrying on can be heard all the way across the restaurant at the hostess stand. It's ironic, since I've always thought I was the loud mouth out of all of us, guess I was wrong. Giving Kailey's hand a squeeze while looking at her with confident eyes, I try to reassure her it will be great. Her lips turn up in

response, and she allows me to lead her toward my crazy ass friends. All the while, I'm praying like hell they don't embarrass me.

"Kailey," Jessa exclaims, standing up and walking over to us. She gives Kailey her usual big, tight hug, welcoming her to the group. After she releases Kailey, Jessa winks my way and takes her seat back next to Grant.

Everyone else greets Kailey, completely ignoring my existence. But that's fine by me, let the spotlight be on her tonight. I hold out a chair for her before taking my own next to her. For some reason, it all fits, me being here with her and all my friends.

After small chitchat back and forth

among the group, we all agree to let Brady order for the table, with a little help from Sadie, so we don't end up with only plates of artery blocking meat. The conversation between everyone flows easily. Kailey surprises me with her additions. Although, she keeps her conversations mostly to Jessa and Sadie, she's quietly chatted with Dex a few times while I was pulled into talking with others. Let's just say, it's not possible to listen to two different conversations, so I wisely choose Dex and Kailey's. Lucky for me, I don't have to kick Dex's ass later, not like it's possible, but I could have gotten a few punches in. It was a relief when I heard him talking about Sam to her. Kailey

was encouraging him to pursue Sam, making the smile on my face that much wider. I'm figuring there are no feelings for Kailey on Dex's side, making everything A-Okay in Trey's world.

"So, Kailey, how come you decided to come out to Colorado for spring break, instead of going somewhere with your friends?" Brady asks her, and the rest of the gang leans in as though she's about to divulge some piece of juicy gossip. Of course, I can't say I haven't wondered the same thing.

"Um..." her fingers knead the napkin in her lap, so I reach over and grab her hand under the table. She looks up at me and then back to them. "My aunt and uncle asked, and I agreed. I just needed Brady chimes in. But, for some reason, my gut tells me it isn't schoolwork that Kailey has to get away from. "Yeah," she agrees. "Well, classes and stuff. I don't graduate until next year. I'm only a junior," she adds, and my stomach drops thinking if anything does happen between us, she would stay in Western after I graduate. I haven't decided if I'll stay or mover closer to my family. "Are you guys all seniors?" she asks, and all of us nod.

"We're all graduating in May, except

"I added a second major, so it tacked

for Dex," I inform her.

to get away," her voice slightly shaking.
"Isn't that the truth? Finals are
coming soon, and then graduation."

on another year," Dex explains, and she nods in understanding, otherwise remaining quiet.

Grant and Jessa sneak back to the table in time for dessert, laughing with each other, as though no one knows they just screwed somewhere. If their messed up hair and swollen lips aren't a red flag, Grant's open fly is. I cock my eyebrow, and Jessa giggles some more, pretending nothing just happened.

Kailey releases my hand and straightens her body, which has me scrunching my eyes in confusion. She leans forward, toward Dex again, continuing their conversation, but in a more intimate nature. All throughout dessert, I talk with everyone and Kailey continues to focus her attention on Dex. They appear to be in their own bubble, not including anyone else.

I'm stuck in some limbo, feeling angry and sad. The emotions start getting the better of me. Rather suddenly, I scoot my chair out, everyone's face rises up to me, alarmed by action. Kailey finally turns her attention back to me, but I stomp out of the restaurant in the most embarrassing imitation of a toddler fit.

I bum a cigarette from the guy outside and light it, taking a long drag. Just as I'm handing him back his lighter, Jessa appears outside. I love the girl, but she's isn't the one I was hoping would come after me.

She gives the nice guy a smile and

then turns my way. "What the hell is the matter with you?"
"Nothing, just go inside," I instruct

her, shooing her away with my hand.
"Trey?" she questions, but my eyes

find Kailey, peering out the window of the door. I'm an ass because I'm about to fuck up this whole situation. Jessa follows my vision, rubs my arm, and then heads back inside without saying another word. Watching through the door, as she and Kailey talk, my heart starts to race with anxiety, but before I can make out what's being said, Kailey

emerges with her coat on.

"So, I'm going to call my uncle to pick me up," her voice low and unsure from the uncomfortable situation I've

caused.
"No," I yell and the lighter guy looks
my way. "I mean, why?" Like I don't
fucking know why. I just acted like a

jealous boyfriend, who can't keep his emotions in check, but in my defense, I'm not used to this overwhelming possessiveness that's taken over residency in my body.

"Trey...there's a lot going on in my

life. I don't think I can bear a guy who's clearly in love with someone he can't have." She entangles her arms across her chest, to shield herself from the wind.

"What are you talking about?" I ask her, confused about this baffling conclusion she's come to. If she doesn't want me, why doesn't she just say it rather than give me some lame ass excuse about me being in love with someone?

"You and—Jessa. It's evident you have some sort of feelings for her." I'll give her one thing, she stares me directly in the eye, so she doesn't miss my reaction to her accusations.

I laugh, and she turns around walking down the sidewalk. I throw the cigarette to the ground and jog after her. "Hold up." Grasping her arm with my hand. She spins around at my contact.

"Please, Trey, let's just leave whatever this is here. It's been fun the last few days, but I can't give you what you want, anyway."

"Listen, let me get my coat, and then

response with my hand still on her arm. She looks down at my hand, then up to me, and I release my grip. I give my best puppy eyes to plead my case, and she reluctantly agrees.

we'll talk." I patiently wait for her

"Fine, you can drive me back to my aunt and uncle's. We'll talk on the ride, but Trey, nothing will change my mind," she tells me. Ignoring her words, I quickly go inside, grabbing money out of my wallet on the way to the table.

Tossing the bills down, I grab my coat and leave without a word to any of them.

A sigh of relief escapes from my lips when I spot Kailey sitting on a bench

I'm pretty sure it's a given why I'm

leaving and where I'm going.

outside the restaurant. The snow whips around her, sticking to her silky brown hair. With her phone out, her thumbs speed around the screen, while she types a text.

By the time I reach her, she's turning

the screen off and tucking it in her pocket. "Ready?" I ask, holding out my hand for her.

"Yeah." She stands up, ignores my

hand and brushes past me.

Feeling deflated, I tuck my hand back in my jacket before fishing for the keys with my other hand. My gentlemanly behavior continues as I open the door for her and gently shut it behind her. As I make my way to the driver's side, thoughts rush through my head on how to

make this right.

The engine starts with a purr only

this high-end kind of a car can in this cold as fuck weather. Easing out of the parking spot, I make my way back towards her aunt and uncle's. She finally allows me to take her hand in mine, our warmth spreads together between our cold hands immediately.

"Can we talk?" I ask her, peering at her from the corner of my eye, hoping she'll look at me. No go.

Her body language screams she wants to bolt out of this car, but I'm not about to let her go. I can't, not until I figure this out. "Trey, forget what I said back there. It's me....there's a lot going on with me that I really don't want to

explain." Her vision remains focused on the snow-covered road in front of us.

"I'm not asking you to marry me, Kailey," I assure her, although a part me thinks it wouldn't be the worst idea I've ever had. I've definitely had worse.

"Can you pull over up ahead? At the scenic overlook?" I follow her directions and put the car in park, praying she doesn't know some secret way back to leave me. "Come on," she instructs me and climbs out of the car.

Shutting the door, I bundle myself against the fierce wind and snow swirling around when we leave the safety of the heated seats. "Kailey?" I question.

"Come over here," she instructs me

to join her right at the edge of the mountain.

Words can't express how amazing the view is tonight. The clear sky with the moon casting a shadow onto a lake a hundred feet below us is one straight out of a romantic movie.

"It's beautiful, huh?" she asks, and I glance at her and have to catch a breath before absorbing the whole picture. The moonlight shines down across her face, highlighting her soft features and silky hair. Her skin glows under the brightness of the night sky.

"Yeah," I agree, but referring to a completely different view.

"I have a confession," she admits. Damn it, I knew a girl like her must have a boyfriend. She's not only gorgeous, but she's cool as shit with her smartass mouth. "Boyfriend?" I give her an out. If I

say it first, maybe it will hurt less.
"Lalready wait what?" She stops

"I already—wait, what?" She stops talking when she hears my question.
"No, do you think... Trey, I wouldn't do

that," she divulges. So, no boyfriend, and she's not a cheater from the shocked expression on her face that I would conclude such a thing.

"So, what is it?" I ask her again,

growing more impatient.

She bites her lower lip, sucking it into her mouth. God, I want that mouth. Her green gems look up at me through her eyelashes, and I'm thrown on what

she's about to tell me. "I knew who you were. I knew who *all* of you were," she admits, and I cock my head to the side, confused.

This is one of the few times in my life, I'm speechless. She stands inches away from me, biting that lower lip that I've been dying to suck into my mouth for the past few days. "Why did you act like you didn't know us?" My initial reaction is to step back from her.

"I don't know " From her steady

"I don't know." From her steady voice and calm body it appears she's answering honestly. "I've caught your show a few times, and when I saw you guys walk into the terminal at the airport... I wasn't going to say anything. But, then Dex approached me, and the

whole coincidence of sitting between the two of you on the plane."

"Why didn't you say something?

That's great you know we're in a band, but Kailey, you don't really know us, you just know our stage presence." I step closer and I'm about to take her hands in mine when I notice her eyes filled with regret, revealing there's more than not admitting she knew we were The Invisibles.

"Trey—I've seen you at a lot of bars," she admits, and I sigh in complete exhaustion of knowing exactly what she saw. "Always with a different girl. Always in a compromising position."

"Shit, Kailey, I'm sorry," I apologize, but nothing can make up for

"So, I knew what I was getting when I flirted with you. I wanted someone to distract me this week. Get my mind off

distract me this week. Get my mind off things back home. My intentions were to sleep with you, have fun, and then go back to Western and continue my life, but..."

"You were going to use me?" I smirk at the irony of this situation. "But you never even let me kiss you," I add.

"When you came over that first night, I wanted to, but then we started talking, and I found out more about you. That you weren't just a dog who slept with every available drunk girl. But I still thought maybe by week's end, my feelings would change, and I'd be able to follow

that." Her eyes find mine again, the light from the moon on the lake below reflects in her eyes. "The way I saw you with Jessa, brought a reaction out that told me I need to step away."

"Jessa?" I ask baffled on her

through with my plan. Tonight changed

conclusion. "She's my best friend, Kailey, that's all."

"It didn't seem like that. Not that it's an excuse for ignoring you and flirting

with Dex. That was wrong of me. But I can't help thinking Jessa is an unattainable prize you'll always desire." She backs away from me, turning to face the lake again.

"You have it all wrong. Jessa's with Grant and, believe me, I have no interest in her, I never have," I attempt to reassure her while slowly stepping toward her at the same time. She faces me and a tear falls from

her right eye. How the hell did we get here? "It's not the point, really. I mean, if you want her, it's none of my business. It's not like we're anything." There she goes again, looking me dead in the eye, so I know she's convinced herself to believe what she's saying.

"I thought we might be on our way to

"I thought we might be on our way to somewhere," I admit, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, Trey, but we weren't. I can't have more complications right now. I just can't," she tries to put a finality to the conversation. I'm still trying to grasp that she was going to use

me, but I don't want her to end whatever this is. Regardless, I'm not about to come off like a desperate twelve-year-old boy begging a girl to be his.

"Then I'll take you back to your aunt and uncle's," I say, turning around to go to the car.

"Trey—if things were different," she attempts to plead her case, but at this point I could care less.

"It's fine, Kailey, just get in." I don't

wait for an answer, but instead slide into the car. She opens her door and sits quietly next to me. I'm sure my nostrils are doing that flaring thing everyone tells me they do when I'm angry. Since it's a rare occasion for me to be so thoroughly pissed off, I don't recognize it first-hand. We make the ten minute drive in silence. When I pull up the driveway, the porch light is on, like every other night. I thought for sure this would be the night she granted me permission to kiss her, but it took a very different turn—a turn for the worse. I wait silently in the driver's seat, eyes focused forward. From the corner of my eye, I can tell her

eyes remain on me.

"Trey?" she sighs, but I sit there, ignoring her existence. "Fine, if this is the way you want it." She opens the door and starts escaping the tense confines.

hand is on the door handle while her

"Oh no, Kailey, you were the one that wanted it this way," I sneer, and she slams the car door.

I watch her open the door and walk into her aunt and uncle's house. "Fuck!" I slam my fist onto the steering wheel.

Chapter 4

The drive back to Jessa's is excruciating to say the least. If the roads weren't so icy and dangerous, my foot would be slammed against the gas petal, plunging ahead at warp speed along these curves. I can't believe she was going to use me. What the fuck? I use girls, not the other way around. I'm half tempted to turn this car around and show her exactly how to use someone for a fuck. I could show her a move or two, and at least then I'd enjoy myself for the mere minutes I would last. But no, I had to go and do the thing I swore I'd never do again; I had to

fall for her and that's exactly the reason I'm keeping my ass in this car to go home and sleep...alone.

Not wanting to face everyone, since I'm pretty sure they'd all be back from dinner by now, I turn the wheel in the opposite direction as Jessa's parent. When I come across the bend where I just sat with her only minutes ago, I pull the car over. Throwing my hoodie over my buzzed head, I sit on the edge of the mountain, with my arms resting across my knees. Staring across the open space to the other side of the mountain, my mind begins to wander. Why is Kailey pulling this old version of me out? What is it about her that's so different than all the other conquests I've had? Why is she so god damn special?

The one constant discovery that keeps recycling through me is a gut feeling buried deep under my 'I couldn't-give-a-fuck' exterior. That's all I'm going on which sucks because I

all I'm going on, which sucks, because I guess her gut isn't in line with mine. Her body language speak volumes, which her mouth constantly contradicts. This girl has my insides so twisted, I'm contemplating the urge to say fuck the whole thing and disappear out of her life. But, then when I think about not seeing her again, not touching that long brown hair, or not being able to look into those alluring green eyes my heart wrenches. It's in this moment, I realize, I can't go anywhere. Unfortunately, that

leaves me in the here and now, where she wants nothing to do with me except to use me for a cheap fuck in order to forget whatever the hell her problems are for two seconds. Well, let's be truthful—I'm good for at least fifteen minutes.

By the time I climb back in the car,

my hands, feet, and face are numb from the cold wintery air blasting around me. Turning the heat on high, I let the tingling sensation hit my fingertips before I ease the car back onto the road. Plugging my phone into the audio port, I allow "Change Your Mind" by The Killers to flood the speakers. My fingers automatically begin tapping to the drum sequence across the steering wheel,

letting myself get lost in the one thing that's a double edge sword between feeling and forgetting—music.

The house is dark, except for the

kitchen light when I pull in the driveway. Since, I'm usually coming back at dawn, I hope I can find my way to my bedroom. I just need to crash, sleep, and forget about the girl who's slowly causing me to rediscover a part of myself I thought was gone forever. Using Mr. Harrison's key, I unlock the front door and tiptoe inside. Once I close the door and quietly cross through the foyer, I hear voices. Brady ventures out of the kitchen with a small nod and smirk. How ironic, he thinks I scored. When in actuality, I just got screwed a very different way.

Going to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water, I'm surprised to find Grant leaning against the counter, contemplating something of his own. I'm starting to think we're all a bunch of fucked up guys. Maybe we should change the band name to Fuckedupables instead of Invisibles.

Acting like a bunch of chicks, I spill my problems to him. Then a look of shock and amusement crosses his face. "Shit, are you fucking kidding me? Trey Michaels is falling?" His voice rises with pure astonishment, and I push my arms down in the air, telling him to quiet down. I'm just not sure if it was to not disturb the sleeping, or to stop the words coming from his mouth.

"I might have already fallen," I admit, twirling the bottle around in my hand. Although it's easy for me to admit this, all the other bullshit about her only wanting me for my body is staying under lock and key. This whole guarding your emotions thing sucks, maybe girls have the right idea.

"Give her time. Remember, it's only been four days." He attempts to assure me.

"I just wish I could eradicate her from my mind, obliterate any memory of her." I shake my head back and forth, sucking my stud piercing into my mouth, as if I can shake her presence out of my head. "I think I have to go get a tattoo tomorrow. That should calm me." I display my fakest smile, as though a tattoo would fix this invasion she's executed in my happy carefree life.

We're about to venture out of the room when I stop him in the doorway. "Hey, can I ask you a question?"

"What?" He turns around.

"Were you ever jealous of me and Jessa? Our friendship, I mean?" I ask him Kailey's concern from earlier.

"Are you shittin' me? Of course." He laughs, making it unclear if that's a good

thing or bad. "You guys are pretty tight, but in the end, I'm happy she has you. You give her things I can't."

"But you give her what she wants and needs," I add, because I honestly never felt anything for Jessa other than friendship. I temporarily distract her from her problems with Jack and partying, whereas, Grant heals her. That's the difference between a best

friend and boyfriend, at least when it comes to me and Jess.

"Hey, man," he clasps his hand on my shoulder, "she'll get used it. Once she's around you two more, she'll see it's nothing more than friendship." Grant smiles over at me, and then we make our way down the hall.

I say good night to him with a fist bump in the middle of the hall, and he disappears into Jessa's room. Jealously overtakes me, since Kailey's not waiting in my bed for me. So, instead of going to curl up in an empty bed, I make my way downstairs to the basement, where I last spotted a bottle of Jack.

Pouring the dark liquid into the shot

glass, I toss it down my throat, loving the burn that it leaves behind. I thumb through my phone, looking at the pictures I've taken since we've been in Colorado. Brady and Sadie, Grant and Jessa, me and Jessa, Dex and Grant, but then I stop and inhale a big breath on a picture of one person. My eyes search every spec of Kailey's face. I snapped the photo the other night when we were giving our silliest faces. Her green eyes are crossed and her tongue is sticking out. I smile remembering that moment where I peeled off another layer of her. It was the night we played the popcorn

game, asking what our favorites were. Needless to say, it was all I could do to conceal my excitement when she told me her favorite sexual position. And with that thought, I need another shot. Screw the glass, this time I pour the shot directly into my mouth.

How the fuck did I let myself get so consumed by someone, someone I barely know for that matter? Especially after Zoey. I swore to myself after her, I was done with that happily ever after fairyland shit. Tipping the bottle back for another swig, I remember when she broke it off. The fact she changed my whole world with two words, 'I'm out'. Who the hell ends a relationship without any sort of explanation? A damn text at

that. The thing that scares me the most is, I thought Zoey ruined me, but after a few days this whole thing with Kailey has me more torn up than when I was a girl-crazed boy in high school.

I guess I always knew it wasn't

I guess I always knew it wasn't really Zoey leaving that devastated me, it was the decision I was forced to make a month prior, which turned me into the non-committal ass I've become. The one and only free agent Kailey was hoping to use on her trip. Yep, time for another swig. Wiping my mouth with my sleeve, I flip to the picture with the capability to warm my heart and wrench my stomach all at the same time. Shit, I need to numb myself more, so this time I let the liquid continue to stream down my throat until

the pain and guilt vanishes for the few short hours.

I curl my knees up to my chest, shivering, my face glued to the couch. I peel my mouth away from the leather, wiping the drool as I sit up. Shit, it's cold in this state. Staring at the practically empty bottle of Jack sitting on the coffee table, regret hits me. I'll be useless for the rest of today. That is, until I can drown myself into another bottle tonight.

After I stand up, I attempt to steady myself by holding my arms out, like a toddler on a balance beam, willing the room stop swirling. "He's down here," "Shit, quiet the fuck down," I tell him, and he laughs boisterously. Jackass!

Dex screams up the stairs.

"What the hell, man? We've been searching all over for you," he says, plopping himself on the couch.

"Well, you found me," I say, sitting back down, grateful for the excuse not to move for the time being.

"You got to get it together. We're

going to that party at Sam's tonight. Screw Kailey, there'll be plenty of girls begging to have your dick tonight." Dex's attempt to pull me from this funk, only reminds me of who Kailey thinks I

"Shut the hell up, Hulk." Brady smacks Dex across the back of his head.

am.

He tosses me a bottle of water and sits on the other side of me.

"Just because you and Grant have gone all in, doesn't mean the rest of us want one pussy for the rest of our lives," Dex adds with humor in his voice.

"Grow up," Brady says and picks up the nearly empty bottle in front of him. "If this," he waves it in the air, "and fucking a different pussy every chance you get is being single, then I'm more than happy where my dick lands every night," he finishes, setting the bottle back down

"Save us the whole commitment is the best speech," Dex banters back.

Brady stares Dex down in annoyance while all the back and forth makes my

headache a little more intense.

"If she has you doing this, she must be worth it." Brady cocks an eyebrow at

me, and I stare back at him, already recognizing he's right, but no way in hell am I going to admit it to him.
"Shit," I mumble, and Brady drones

his fatherly know it all 'uh huh' under his breath. Cocky bastard. Standing up, I take the steps two at a time. Right before I reach the top, I hear Brady and Dex talking. "You give shitty advice." Brady tells

"You give shitty advice," Brady tells Dex.

"Fuck off, Mrs. Sadie Miller," Dex says in return. "He's gonna become pussy whipped, just like your ass." "And believe me, he'll be happier," Brady adds. As I reach the main floor, I pray Brady's right.

After I shower to wash off the alcohol smell that's oozing out my pores and brushing the Jack grime off my teeth, I hurry out of the house. By the way Jessa's mom tosses me her keys, I'm pretty sure conversations in this house have already been overflowing with my love life problems. I thank her, and she gives me a reassuring smile.

Unable to drive there fast enough, since I know better than to speed. The mountain roads are crazy slick, even with the constant snowplows and salt trucks you see every few miles. I tap the

fingers of my right hand on my knee, with the impatience at the slowness of time passing until I can convince her to take a chance on me, while my left hand palms the steering wheel directing the SUV.

The tires crunch on the gravel driveway and my heart plummets when I see Clyde helping Kailey out of Holly's car. Screeching the car to a stop, I rush out, slamming the car door "What the hell happened?" I ask. Holly stares from Clyde to Kailey, then finally back at me.

She begins to speak when Clyde interjects, "She slipped on the ice," he tells me, and I reach across holding her other side. "Be careful of her back," he mentions, and I nod. Kailey's green eyes

glance over to me out of the corner, and my mind empties of every word I rehearsed on the way over.

Once we get Kailey into the house, we position her on the couch, and Holly places a pillow behind her back. Holly's usual friendly demeanor has disappeared. I assume Kailey told her about us. She eyes me curiously and glances at Kailey often. Clyde even seems standoffish, taking the lead of his wife for directions if he should go or stay.

"Do you need anything, sweetie?"
Holly pushes the ottoman over and
Kailey rests her feet on top.

"Could you get me the Ibuprofen and water?" she asks all the while diverting

her eyes away from me.
"Sure thing," Holly says, patting her leg sympathetically.

Kailey takes the meds and drinks her water before asking Holly and Clyde if we could have a moment alone. They graciously agree, leaving with small smiles across their faces. Is that the 'it's been nice Trey, but sayonara' look?

"What are you doing here, Trey?"

She turns slightly my way, but grimaces. I get up and sit on the ottoman, so she doesn't have to rotate her body.

"I'm here to beg," I shamefully admit.

"Don't," she says flatly. One might believe she's annoyed from her reaction, but I catch the corners of her lips slightly Even if it's minuscule, I'll take it.
"You better grab it, because it'll be

turn up, telling me there's a chance.

the first and last time I beg," I assure her, and the corners move up a little more. Keep it going, Trey, I silently give myself a pep talk.

"Don't flatter yourself." When she moves slightly she cringes again.

"I guess you won't be walking away from me," I joke, and she shakes her head, biting the inside of her cheek.

"I wasn't the one who walked," she reminds me.

"Not last night, but you were planning to on Sunday," I promptly remind her, and she nods her head, acknowledging the truth of my statement. "Exactly, I thought this was handled last night."

"I changed my mind. You know this is more than some quick vacation fuck," I say to her. Yeah, not my most romantic line.

"I don't have time for a relationship," she repeats herself like a damn iPod on repeat.

"We've established that. I don't need much, but for some reason, I need you." I clench my lip through my teeth, trying to think of a response to whatever argument she'll toss back my way.

"There's not enough of me," she divulges, and I'm confused to the meaning of her comment. "That's why my initial plan was the perfect

"Oh yeah, the part where you were going to use me and throw me away like

going to use me and throw me away like some stray cat?" I smirk with my last feeble attempt at comedy. Humor and laughter seems to be what we do best.

"It's usually your M.O., I know."
She coyly smiles back, but I don't think
I've accomplished enough headway just
yet.

"Kailey, let's just spend the rest of the week together and see how thing go. You at least owe me that much for objectifying me," I tease her, although I'm partly serious.

"Nothing's going to change," she says, but her eyes reveal the truth—she wants more. "Why are you being so

persistent? You know you only wanted me for a 'nice vacation screw'." The thought she knows what my true intention was when I first met her makes me wish I could jump into a time machine and retrace my steps back to this moment without being the 'manwhore' I've become.

"I don't know, I like you," I say with

as much conviction as I'm able to convey. She already thinks I'm scum, so no need to tack on any more bullshit.

She shifts and rises to her feet, and I quickly stand to hold her up. "Just sit down," I tell her.

"The meds are kicking in, I'm fine." Allowing her green gaze to peer into my brown eyes, contemplating her decision. "Alright," she agrees, quickly holding up her hand to my chest, "but no promises." She tacked that qualifier on, but I don't care. At this point, I'll take what I can get of her.

Not about to wait a second more, "I'm going to kiss you now," I inform her while gently taking her hand off my chest and slipping my fingers through hers. I rest our clasped hands at the small of her back before gently pushing her toward me. Bending down to reach her lips, she gasps and her tongue slowly moistens her lips while our eyes never lose focus on one another. Once my lips are mere millimeters from hers, I ask, "Is that okay with you?"

She remains quiet, but nods her head,

giving me approval. Not wasting a second, I let my lips finish their path to a destination I've been waiting to reach since she first told me her name. The soft feel hits me first as we mold together like two puzzle pieces entwined together. Tracing the part in her lips with my tongue, I wait for her to open, allowing me access to her deliciously warm mouth. When she gives me the slightest opening, I snake my tongue inside, finding hers. The pace of our lips increase, and our tongues tangle between them. As though we each need the other for air, we ravage each other until she eventually pulls back. Leaving us both gasping for our breath. "Wow," slips out of me breathlessly,

not able to hold it in. It's the hottest kiss I've ever had.

She bites her lip with the cutest

smirk across her lips. "Yeah," she adds.
Without saying another word, I

release her hand, placing both my hands on either side of her face, pulling her toward me again. As I taste her cherry lip gloss, her fingers run across the stubble on my scalp, and rest at my neckline, holding me against her. In all my conquests, I've never wanted to take someone as much as I do her in this moment. But because of all the using each other talk. I fight the urge to throw her across the couch, fucking her senseless. She deserves nice and slow, cherishing every second love making.

Chapter 5

I've spent all day at Kailey's aunt and uncles', fetching Kailey soup, water, or medicine. Anything she desired, I've been at her beck and call. Clyde and Holly went out shopping for a few hours for reasons I'm pretty sure were just to give us time alone.

Instead of watching movies or playing our popcorn 'getting to know you' game, we, meaning Kailey, decides on the Life board game after me begging to play strip poker. She appears more comfortable from her fall, which makes me hope she'll join me tonight at Jessa's sister, Sam's, party. We'd talked about going before the whole debacle last night, so I'm optimistic that she's still up for it.

"Let's make a bet?" I say, placing all

the little buildings in their designated slots around the board.

"What?" she questions with a

curiosity laced sigh.

"A kiss for every spin." I wink, handing her the white car with a small plastic pink peg in it.

"That's all?" she's says, shocked that's all I would request. Crap, should've asked for more.

"Do you want to up the ante?" I ask, placing my green car at the starting line with the blue peg in the driver's seat.

"Well, first, my girl here can drive," she says, moving her pink peg from the passenger spot to the driver's side. I laugh. "Secondly, what do I get when I win?" I love her cockiness.

"Hey, baby, win or lose you can have anything you want—as long as it entails me." I slyly smirk, and a giggle escapes from her.

After staring over at me for a few beats of the heart, she flirts right back, "I would expect nothing less."

When I pick up my head from

concentrating on the board and find her looking at me, I don't think, I just move. Bending across the board, my lips land right on hers. Snaking my tongue in instantly, she quickly joins me and

places her hand on the back of my head. Her fingernails scrap against my hairline while my hands remain planted on either side of her cheeks.

Reluctantly, I tear myself away from her, worried I may be rushing her. The fear that if I sleep with her now she'll disappear from my life is very real. I smile when her bottom lip pouts out in displeasure that I ended it too soon for her liking. This is good; I need to keep her wanting me. So, I sit back, and we play the game, giving sexual innuendos back and forth. It's been ages since I've flirted with someone and it's exhilarating feeling those flutters in my stomach every time she turns me on with her words or an accidental brush of her

fingers on mine.

Kailey, in fact, does win the game, leaving me in the dust with two carload

leaving me in the dust with two carloads full of kids, a shitty job, and no money. I demand a rematch, but she reminds me I have a bet to ante up on first. Not about to miss that, I knock the board to the floor and grab her by her hips, bringing her onto my lap as I sit back down on the couch.

"Ouch," she whimpers, and I quickly apologize for the abrupt movement to her sore back. "It's okay, sometimes pain is worth it," she replies with a hint of seduction.

Her hands find their now usual spot on my hairline, while mine clasp together and rest along the side of her hip, almost caging her in my arms. This time she bends down to me, making the first move and gradually brushing her moist lips against mine. Desperate to see what she has in store for us, I allow her to take the lead. Her tongue slowly parts my lips, but only enters slightly. Not allowing my own to join hers just yet, she moves her swirling tongue, teasing my lips until mine has no choice but to end this cat and mouse game. Almost like a bolt of electricity

Almost like a bolt of electricity strikes from the mere tip of our tongues colliding. Our mouths quickly become more frantic, while our hands remain firmly in place. It's taking every ounce of restraint I possess not to lift her up and make her straddle me. I'm desperate

for her to feel what she does to me, to feel the hard bulge in my pants up against her, even if it's through pieces of fabric.

We must be on the same agenda because she slowly moves her legs on either side of my hips, her lips never leaving mine. She grinds into me harder, rubbing herself against my dick that's begging me to release him. Grabbing her hips, I press her even closer and suck her bottom lip in between my teeth to nibble on before gradually kissing her chin. My one hand snakes up her back until I grab a few locks of her silky brown hair and lightly tug it back to get better access to her neck. Swiping my wet tongue up her neck, I encase my lips

around her earlobe and suck it into my mouth.

Her moan only drives me harder to elicit those pleasured sounds out of her mouth. As gently as possible, I begin to move her down to the couch, so my hands can explore her body when the sound of a car engine brings us to a halt.

"Shit," Kailey mumbles, sitting up and propping her feet up on the ottoman as though we weren't just about to round second base.

I chuckle and follow her lead by sitting straight up, waiting for Uncle Clyde to come in most likely with his axe. We feel the cold air billow in before Holly and Clyde make their appearance with plastic filled grocery

bags overflowing in their hands.

Holly stops dead in her tracks and coyly smiles over at us while Clyde

gives us a quick hello and ventures into the kitchen. "Looks like we came home too soon," Holly teases, raising her eyebrows, and then her vision lands on the game of Life strewn across the floor. Kailey's face turns beet red, and I shake my head in amusement. "Sorry, guys," she jokingly offers her condolences, and then continues on her way to the kitchen

then continues on her way to the kitchen, giggling.

When I finally hear the ripples of the bags being unpacked and the cans being put away, I turn toward a very embarrassed Kailey. "I guess, I should

get going. Are you coming with me

lips quickly to hopefully seal the deal.

"Yes," she mumbles against mine. I suppress the shout of joy that wants to bellow out of me. I think we just turned a corner.

The van stops in front of Jessa's sister,

tonight?" Praying she says yes, I kiss her

Sam's house. She's having a huge party tonight, and since we're always up for a college kegger, we all graciously accepted the invitation. Grant and Jessa have their hot date tonight, so they're coming later, which will be a good thing. It'll allow Kailey to see how in love they are with each other once they arrive. After the plans I heard Grant had

for them, there's no doubt Jessa will be on cloud nine, bragging about it to all the girls.

As I grasp Kailey's hand, Dex tosses

his overnight bag over his shoulder. He

winks when he catches me smirking at him. He definitely picked up those selfesteem pieces pretty fast after I stole Kailey. The same night we got in from Western, he and Sam started eyeing each other. Not sure Jessa's noticed, and I'm itching to be there when she finds out. No doubt Dex will get his ass handed to him by a spunky little blonde. Sam opens the door before we ring

the doorbell, obviously just as excited about our arrival as Dex. Once she gives a brief hello and a quick tour, she and

Dex disappear into the bedroom while the four of us grab a few beers and sit down.

"Remember those days," Sadie says, squeezing Brady's thigh.

"Those days?" he scrunches his eyebrows at her while taking a sip of his water.

"You know? When we couldn't keep our hands off one another?"

"You have to be shittin' me?" spills out of me in as much confusion as Brady appears to be in.

"Babe, my hands never leave your body," he remarks, pulling her into his lap. "I'm sure there's a spare bedroom somewhere around here." He over dramatizes his head turning left and right.
"You don't need a bedroom," I begin to joke, but quickly stop myself, so

Kailey doesn't get the wrong idea. "Yeah, Trey's never needed one,"

Kailey adds, and I stare up at Brady not sure if it's a slam or a joke on her part. Sadie bites the inside of her cheek, wondering the same.

"Isn't that the truth? All we need is a corner," Brady laughs and, luckily, Kailey does to. Unfortunately, I'm not too much of a fan of being the butt of a joke, especially one that is a sore spot between Kailey and me.

"Hey," she squeezes my hand. I peer down at her next to me and out of the corner of my eye, I notice Brady and Sadie attempt to leave quietly. "I was joking. I'm sorry," she continues, her green eyes reflecting remorse for her words.

Bending down close to her, her body

stiffens against mine. "Things change—people change," I whisper before kissing her. Not sure why I'm suddenly ashamed of every careless fuck I've had. I guess, it's my need for her to feel like I'm worth something. When in actuality, I'm not.

"I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry," she apologizes again.

"You can't be sorry when you speak the truth." I stand up, not able to handle these damn emotions any longer. I leave her on the couch without looking back her way. When I get into the kitchen, Sadie rolls her eyes at me and leaves the room to join Kailey, I assume. "You finally found your match,"

Brady jokes, chomping on some Doritos he found on the table.

Reaching in to grab one. "Yeah, I guess." I shrug my shoulders, searching the room for something stronger. When I spot the bottle of Absolute, my hand reaches, but Brady grabs it away.

"You don't need it," he tells me, keeping it hostage as though I'm some fucking alcoholic.

"What the hell? Give me the damn bottle." My voice rising in agitation.

"Deal with what's going on instead of numbing the shit," Brady says,

handing me the bottle.

I debate his words and with a huff, refill my red Solo cup instead. The hard

stuff won't make this guilt disappear. I lean against the doorframe and look at Kailey laughing with Sadie in the front room. I can't help but wonder if they're laughing at me. "Relax, man," Brady clasps my shoulders, "just go with it and see what happens," he reminds me.

"Like you did with Sadie?" I chuckle, and he joins me in laughter, remembering how he had me stalking the campus for weeks to find her.

"You've made your point." He continues on his way to the girls and sits next to Sadie, wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

Watching from the other room, Kailey laughs with ease and comfortableness at some story Sadie's telling her. I pray like hell it isn't some embarrassing fact about me. Like how I have a habit of drinking out of the orange juice container, or how I left that porn in the DVD player that one time. A small chuckle escapes envisioning Sadie's face when she turned on the television that day. I can still hear her screaming my name.

Kailey glances my way, as though she senses my eyes on her. She's beautiful. Her lips turn up as her eyes remain focused on mine. Turning back to Sadie and Brady, she says something before standing up and walking my way. Our eyes stay on each other the whole time she's making her way over to me. The anticipation to have her in my arms and her lips on mine grows with every step closer she comes.

The back of her hand brushes down my cheek and her green irises stare into mine with complete forgiveness. "Hi," she quietly says.

"Hi," I repeat, not able to tear my eyes away from her. Her hand continues down, allowing her fingers to graze down my lips, making it so tempting to bite at her fingers.

"You scare me," she admits. I'm not sure why she's picking now to divulge her hidden fears. "It was wrong of me to make that joke when you've been nothing short of a gentleman to me." Her apology grips my stomach. I can't quite believe she gives a shit about me.

"You make me—different," I reveal

in the middle of this foreign house. I'm admitting feelings I never thought I would harbor inside of myself again. "Good," she says, inching up on her

toes to kiss me. Not allowing her to escape, I turn us and press her against the wall. My lips and tongue consume her, trying to impart every weakness she brings over me.

A slap on my back and a whistle announces Dex and Sam's emergence out of her bedroom. Reluctantly, I tear myself away from Kailey, and she smiles up at me as she takes in a deep breath. I love seeing her expression when I stop kissing her, it's like she's disappointed that it ended. "We'll finish this later," I softly say, and she nods. The rest of the night goes smoothly,

except for running into Jessa's ex, which Grant handled with nothing but benevolence. As for Kailey, she held my hand the whole night, letting me steal kisses and move her onto my lap. We were a couple, if only for the remainder of our time in Colorado.

Our last night, the reluctance to drop

her off at her aunt and uncle's has me driving slower than normal. My hand has been warming inside hers the whole trip, and I'm not ready for it to become cold again. The few glances we've made

toward one another tells me she feels the same way. I just wish, she would give me her whole self; it's obvious she's holding something back.

I put the van in park and turn toward

her. "I hate that we go back tomorrow," I tell her, fear rushing over me that this could be my last time alone with her. She hasn't been reserved, but she has obligations back home. Ones she clearly doesn't want me a part of.

"I know," she softly says, staring down at our entwined hands. She takes her other hand and rubs it on top of ours. "Do you remember what I said this morning? I can't promise you—," she begins the usual rant.

"I remember." Although I'm hoping

like hell something changed her mind tonight. She picks up her head, and I see a tear welling up, about to escape her eye. "Hey." I reach my hand to her cheek, but she quickly turns toward the window.

"I'm sorry, Trey. I don't know what's wrong with me." She wipes her own tear away, sitting up straighter in the seat.

"You have nothing to be sorry for. I don't understand, Kailey. Why are you crying?" I tentatively ask, knowing if I push to far she'll run.

"When I get back home, I don't have time like this. I barely have enough time to study and attend classes, but... I'll miss this." I notice another tear fall down her cheek, landing on her nylon coat.

"You can trust me," I say, leaning closer. "What's back home?" I'm eager to know what keeps her so closed off.
"Just family pressures." She looks up at me finally. Placing my palm against her cheek, I display a clear concern for her and what her problems are. But

before we can go into it any further, she leans over and smashes her lips against

mine. Soon she's on top of me,

straddling me with her back against the steering wheel.

She's so similar to me, masking her problems with anything but what it is. I allow her to hide, and we make out in

the car for a while. By the time I have to

leave, the sun is about to come up.
Walking her to the door, I wrap her in
my arms, kissing her with every ounce of
me. Hoping it pushes her to continue this

between us. Her last words aren't what I hoped for.

"It's been nice here with you." She kisses me one more time before walking

kisses me one more time before walkin into the house and closing the door behind her. The porch light turns off while I make the lonely way down the steps to the van.

Chapter 6

When the wheels of the airplane skid to a stop on the runway, my heart plummets thinking my time with Kailey is officially over. Although, I persuaded her this morning to keep seeing me after we return to Western, she put stipulations on it. Weekends only is her rule. When I squeeze her hand before the pilot announces we can unbuckle our seatbelts, I already know, I need her to break that rule. We file out of the plane and walk down to baggage claim. The whole time, I'm just a zombie going through the motions. I hold her hand,

grab her bag and kiss her on the head a few times. Depression is beginning to take root in me with the thought that I won't be seeing her every night.

The gang says goodbye to Kailey by the baggage claim and sit down on the benches to wait for me. Taking her hand in mine again, we make our way to the arrival pickup area. "I'll call you," she says. For some reason it sounds more like a line, making me question her truthfulness.

"Sounds good," I attempt to be aloof about the whole situation when in reality my insides are twisting and turning in despair. "Kailey—" I'm about to plead with her again when a red mini-van comes to a halt in front of us. A man in his early thirties with dirty blond hair and scruffy face rushes out. He's a lanky guy, but I could see where girls probably find him attractive in that schoolboy crush kind of way.

"Hey, Kailey," he sounds exhausted and when the door of the van opens, I quickly find out why.

"Aunt Kailey!" a little girl screams out the door. If the girl doesn't appear to be enough, I spot two other occupied car seats in the van. A blonde girl and a baby with a bottle are calling for her attention as well. Shit, this guy has his hands full.

"Hi, Caden," Kailey says, walking up to the van. "Hiya, gals and guy," she says into the van, tickling the oldest girl. "I missed you." There's sadness in her voice.

I take her bag to the back of the van, where Caden is standing with the tailgate open. "Hi, I'm her brother-in-law, Caden," he introduces himself, holding his hand out to me.

I quickly shake it. "I'm Trey," I say, and he smirks up at me.

"Yeah, I've heard about you." He chuckles. At the look of surprise on my face, he adds, "News travels fast in this family." He pats me on the back. "Nice to meet you, but we really need to get going."

"Nice to meet you too." I stand there wondering why anyone in her family would know my name.

"Don't be too flattered, Uncle Clyde is like a little biddy sometimes." She laughs.

"I can see that," I lie, knowing Holly must be the party guilty for spreading the news.

"Well, I have to get going. Thanks for this week, Trey. I've had fun." Her voice shakes, and I know deep down she doesn't want the finality her mouth is currently speaking.

"Call, or text, me tonight," I ask, and she nods her head. One of the kids starts screaming, and she steps back, but I'm not about to let her go without tasting her. It might be my last time.

Grasping her arm, I pull her toward me and crash my lips against hers the

second she lands into my arms. I don't wait for her permission, but nudge my tongue through her parted lips, tasting that sweet ginger ale she had on the plane. She sinks into my arms, and I hold her upright, allowing my tongue to explore her mouth in the tenderness she deserves. "Don't forget," I remind her to call me when I'm done showing her why she should. She nods, backing up to the van.

When she opens the front passenger door up, the girls' laughter floats out. Caden chuckles to himself as I hear the oldest saying, "Kailey has a boyfriend—" Kailey shakes her head, smiling over at me. Right before she shuts the door, she turns around and tells them,

"He's not my boyfriend."

Watching the van pull into the line of traffic, I refuse to blink for fear she was all a dream. Too fast for my liking it

all a dream. Too fast for my liking it disappears from my sight. "Not yet, little girl, but I'll be her boyfriend soon enough," I whisper to myself.

The looks of sorrow on my friends

faces when I come back into the building is enough to make someone want to drown in a bottle of Jack, but then again, maybe that's just me. Ignoring four of them, I concentrate on Dex, the only one who doesn't look like my dog just got ran over. We lead the way to the cars in silence, and I remain quiet for the whole ride home. I want to punch myself in the face over the way I'm checking my

phone constantly, like some lovesick teenage girl.

After two hours and still no word, not even a god damn text back from the one I sent to her, my mind starts going crazy. I lay in my bed, mindlessly tossing a baseball in the air with the hopeless attempt to calm my mind. I shouldn't be this insane over a fucking girl. When ball tossing—baseball tossing, that is—doesn't work, I pull out the picture from my nightstand, and my body calms slightly. I imagine how different my life might have been, how I would've never met Kailey, or any of my friends, for that matter. God knows where I'd be right now. But one thing's for sure, I wouldn't be wallowing in my

own self-pity over a girl. Isn't that what I swore to myself? I would never do this again.

Knowing I need to pry my ass out of my bed, I head next door to Bridgett's house. I'm in dire need for a cigarette to calm these damn nerves.

When she opens the door, she rolls her eyes and walks back to the couch, leaving the door open. Shit, I forgot how we left things before Colorado. "What's up?" I ask, trying to sound casual, as though I don't remember how I fucked her childhood friend when she came up to visit.

"Still trying to dislodge that knife out of my back," she remarks, lighting up a cigarette. Her blonde hair is thrown up in a messy bun, and she's wearing tight sweatpants displaying every curve of her body. Not to mention her visible nipples poking out of her t-shirt. If I wasn't so hung up on Kailey, I would've already had her against the wall.

"Do you mind?" I hold up her pack of Marlboros, and she shakes her head. Lighting the cigarette, I lean back on the couch, the same one I've taken her on more times than I can count. "I'm sorry, Bridg," I tell her, and she nods again, concentrating on the television.

"I should've known better than to try to change you," she chimes in. "Not sure why I thought I was any different than everyone else." I hadn't realized her feelings were so involved, I thought we were just having a good time. I guess in my mind, we were using each other, but she had a different perspective. "How was Colorado?" she asks.

"Good, you know just snow, slopes, and alcohol. Can't go wrong." I get up, stealing another cigarette and tucking it behind my ear before walking to the door. "Thanks for the smoke. You coming to the show on Friday?" Not sure why I would ask her to the same show I plan on begging Kailey to attend. I feel

feelings is my best guess.
"I don't know, we'll see," she says and shrugs her shoulders.

bad for unintentionally hurting her

"I really am sorry," I tell her again in the feeblest attempt to correct my stupidity.
"Don't lose sleep over it—not like you would," she sneers.

Releasing a huff at the drama of this situation, I nod and leave the house, shutting the door behind me. Fuck, I should have listened to Rob when he told me not to screw in the neighborhood. 'Those girls will stalk you, and they'll appear right when you're screwing someone else.' Of course, this was different. I fucked her friend on her couch while she was passed out in the bathroom. And who would have ever thought I would regret not taking advice from fucking Rob of all people. That's just wrong in so many ways.

the house it's his voice coming from his bedroom. The fucker is singing some cheesy ass song. *What an asshole*, I think to myself. If Jessa falls for his shit, I'm gonna knock her out. Not wanting to hear his voice anymore, I go back down the stairs, to the front porch.

Leaning against the railing, I think

Speaking of Rob, when I get back in

about what I should do. Drink is the first thing to cross my mind, but I don't want to continue this habit of drinking by myself. Lighting the second cigarette, I contemplate my options, wishing seeing Kailey could be one of them. Then Jessa escapes the house and Rob. I can't help but laugh at the antics he just pulled on her.

I coax her into going to The Loft, and she readily agrees. I'm not sure what's up with her and Grant after Rob's sudden return, but I'll wait until she's ready to talk about it. Once we get into the dingy college bar, I grab us a booth, which isn't hard to find, and I make my way to Pete stationed at the bar. I chat with Pete while he pours two shots of Jack and two beers. Grabbing the tray from Pete, I

squeeze past a girl leaning against the bar next to me. Jessa's raised eyebrows when I reach the table makes me curious, but instead of asking I pick up my phone. Nothing. She and I talk for a while about me and Kailey. Yada yada yada is all I hear coming out of Jessa's mouth.

Telling me to relax, that I've only known her a week; all valid points, which I don't give a shit about. You'd think someone who just fell head over heels for someone in what—less than four months—would understand falling fast. Finishing my beer, my eyes scan the

local bar, recalling all my escapades in

every corner and booth in the place. Then my eyes trace back to a brunette displaying fuck me eyes at ten o'clock. She bats her eyelashes and shifts her legs as I remain focused only on her. Jessa's talking, but I don't hear her. I follow suit when the brunette stands. Jessa rests her hand on my arm. "You'll regret it," she warns. I'm about to agree and leave with her when my phone

buzzes in my pocket.

Digging it out as fast as my hands allow, Kailey's name flashes across it.

A text in response to one of mine.

Kailey: I just don't have time for anyone else right now.

"Fuck it. See you, J-doll. Give my best to the hubby." I lean over and give her a kiss on the cheek, and then swagger over to the hot brunette. Cozying into the booth next to her, I wrap my arm around her slender shoulders, never looking back at Jessa

"Hey, I'm Trey," I introduce myself in an arrogance tone. The girls always like that

"I'm Amanda," she says, and her hand instantly rests on my thigh. This might be the easiest lay I've ever had.

"Can I get you a drink?" I ask her,
and she rakes her manicured nails across
my jeans.

"Sure, you can get whatever you and your girlfriend were having," she smiles and adjusts her tight top. My eyes appreciate the view of the swell of her tits.

"That wasn't my girlfriend," I assure her, standing up to grab some drinks.

I wait for Pete to get me another shot

of Jack and a girly Lemon Drop for her. He leans in close, handing me my change. "You know I'm usually all for ya having fun, Trey, but you seem like something's bothering you," he softly tells me.

"Thanks for the concern, Pete, but all's good," I assure him.

"Okay, but if you need to talk. You know where to find me." He walks down the bar to help someone else, and I absorb his words before going back over.

This time when I get in the booth, I sit on the opposite side of her. She sips her shot as I down mine. "Do you want to go back to my place?" she asks, and I stare at her, realizing she's a little older than myself. Not that it's a deal breaker, but she's just a shitty replacement for the one I really want. The fact they're both brunette is the only thing they have in common.

"Nah, sorry, but I gotta hit it."

Knowing this isn't the place for me, I slide out of the booth. "It was nice meeting you, Amanda." I wave my hand, and then give a thumbs up to Pete before I leave the bar.

Three days go by and no word from

Kailey. This girl has me so tightly wound I can barely stay away from the smokes. The snow has melted and the spring rain has replaced it, making the grass soggy and the sidewalks slippery. I trudge up the hill to Kent Hall for my Introduction to Photography class. It's a popular undergraduate class and one of my rare classes held in a lecture hall instead of the small interactive

Nodding my head and giving a 'What's up?' to most of the other students walking by on my way across

classrooms of upper classman.

campus. I file into the room and take my usual seat. Shit, I forgot I was supposed to be taking pictures during spring break for that midterm project. I'll have to get that done tonight. I haven't worked my ass off for nothing these past few years to not graduate because of a photography class.

My head turns with the sound of Professor Hodges deep voice wishing the hall good morning. My mouth goes dry when I find her sitting on the opposite side, talking with another girl. Her eyes land on mine instantly and her cheeks flush. The redhead she's talking to turns around to find out what has Kailey so flustered. When she finds it's me, she rolls her eyes and turns her back to me. What the hell did I do to her? Crap, did I?

Professor Hodges, flips on his

computer and brings down the projector screen. Our eyes stay fixated on one another until the lights go out. While the teacher's assistant flips from slide to slide, and Hodges points out angles, corners, and dimensions, my mind continues to focus on her. Why hadn't she told me we were in a class together? What the hell is she hiding? And what the hell keeps her so god damn busy? I attempt to wait patiently until

Professor Hodges dismisses us, but as soon as he says, "See you Friday," I'm out of my chair, weaving through the throng of students to reach her. By the time, I'm at where she was sitting, she's gone.

"Kailey," I call out up the stairs, but she keeps ascending, so I excuse myself bumping into people, taking the steps as fast as my feet allow. By the time I flee the classroom, I look left and right, finding the hallway is filled with students coming and going. I bust open the doors of the building, but she's nowhere to be seen.

Tossing my backpack on a bench, I sit down and drop my head in my hands. Screw this. Fuck her. I'm done with all

these games she's playing. Swinging my pack over my shoulder, I stand up to make my way to my next class. When I raise my head, those green eyes are peering right at me.

"Hi," she says, swallowing an

obvious lump in her throat. "Hi," I respond. Just like that, all the anger dissipates from me.

"How have you been?" she asks and her oblivious remark makes the anger come roaring back to life. How the hell does she think I've been?

"Fine," I lie. Why should she get some benefit of knowing the truth? "You?"

She nods her head. "Good," she adds.

Isn't that just fucking fantastic. "Good." I tip back on my heels, waiting for her. I'm finished with making all the moves. I'm sick of begging her.

"I'm sorry I haven't called. I told you my life is busy," she says, and I shrug in indifference to her obvious ignorance.

"Well, I can't say you didn't warn me," I tell her.

"Trey, it's complicated." She sticks to her same damn excuses.

"Tell me then, Kailey," I plead with her.

She leans in to me, and I smell that apple scent of her shampoo. "I should have called," she admits, ignoring my question.

"Yes, you should have," I say, unconsciously, wrapping my one arm around her body.

"Do you have another class?" she asks me, and I wish I didn't.

"I did," I wrap my other arm around her, pulling her against me, "but if you don't, my scheduled just freed up."

"I have to work, do you want to walk me?" she asks, inviting me along.

"Love to," I say and grab her hand.

Kailey tells me she works at the Parking Services. "So, you're the one who leaves those yellow envelopes on my windshield?"

She laughs. "No, I'm just the dispatcher. I swear I never leave the office," she reveals with a giggle. I

missed the sound of her laughter.

We walk through campus hand in hand, joking and talking like we did in Colorado. Either this girl suffers from a

Colorado. Either this girl suffers from a major multiple personality disorder or something has her all screwed up. She does admit she was embarrassed to tell me we were in a class together, since I didn't recognize her. If she thinks she's embarrassed, I feel like a jackass for not noticing the most beautiful girl in the room. The fact I looked over her to another girl depresses me. Once we make it to the Parking Service's office door, she places her arms around my neck and nudges my head down to her. My lips brush against hers, and she

My lips brush against hers, and she sticks her tongue into my mouth this time.

As gentle as I try to go, she's fierce and meets me more urgently. Going more with her flow, I press her up against the wall, leaving my hands on her hips. Thrusting myself against her, she gasps

feeling the hardness through my jeans.

This is the moment, I wish we could be alone. Hell, the bathroom sounds good right now. She devours my mouth, and I savor her taste as we continue to make out, right outside the door to her job. "Oh, Trey," she murmurs against my lips before I descend on her again, never having enough.

When I draw the kiss to a close, I rest my forehead on hers, and her fingers rub up and down on the back of my neck. I've never felt so satisfied but starved

all at the same time. It's like one square of chocolate, who doesn't want more after just one taste.

"Are you really going to call me this time?" I ask her, and she smiles up at me.

"I promise, lover boy," she attempts the nickname thing again.

"Nope, you really aren't good with nicknames, are you?" I ask her, and she giggles.

"I guess not, but I'll find a good one, one of these times," she assures me.

"All righty, well, get in there, girl." I smack her ass, and she jolts up in shock, but her smile remains intact.

"Bye, Tre-bear." She laughs.

"Keep on thinking," I say, bending

down and giving her one more kiss.
"I'll surprise you soon enough."
"Surprise me Friday and come to my

show," I ask, already planning to give my rehearsed plea.

"Okay," she agrees with no hesitation. Jackpot.

"Really?" My eyes bulge out of my head. "I mean, great, I'll pick you up." I haven't felt this good since we left Colorado.

"I'll meet you there. Aces?" she questions.

"Yeah, are you sure?"

"You have to get ready, but I'll be in the crowd, just look for me." She kisses my neck.

"Are you kidding? You'll be lucky,

if I don't drag you on stage to sit on my lap while I play." I chuckle, happy to see when she does too.

"I'll see you there, I better get in

before my shift starts," she glances at her watch and kisses my cheek.

I wait until she goes through the doors before I turn around and make my way down the sidewalk. Suddenly my phone dings and a wide smile crosses my face when her name appears.

Kailey: Have a good day, stick boy. (Get it...drums LOL)

I shake my head in humor before my fingers start sliding across the screen in response.

Chapter 7

Time has never gone by so painfully slow. After I snatched a seat next to Kailey in photography class, much to her friend Heidi's displeasure, I walked her to work, where she promised she'll meet me at Aces tonight. Not sure why her redheaded friend Heidi hates me so much, but she was less than thrilled when she saw me with Kailey in class. She doesn't look like my usual type, so I'm praying I've never done her.

The minutes seem to be ticking by slower and slower the closer it gets to our show. For the first time in I have no

idea how long, not a drop of alcohol has crossed my lips. I want to be completely sober when I'm with her tonight. My bedroom is clean and ready, hoping she'll come back with me, even if only to sleep.

Aces is packed when we arrive,

wall to wall people. Obviously, the students are ready to party after being away from campus for spring break. Sadie and Jessa are already in our usual round booth closest to the stage. Brady nestles in one side and Grant on the other, leaving Dex and me to follow. My eyes search the door every few minutes, finding nothing but half-dressed girls and guys with wide eyes ogling them. Checking my phone again, Jessa's hand

reaches on my forearm. "She'll be here," she says, and I look up to find the whole table's eyes on me. When did I become the only fish in the bowl?

Just then, Brady hops up and announces it's time. We leap on the stage and just as I sit behind the drum set, I spot her. She's walking through the throngs of people, nudging her way through. She taps Sadie on the shoulder and the two girls slide in, so she can join them. When her eyes finally land on me, I wink, and her bright smile back has me fumbling my drumsticks. I pick them up and then my phone vibrates in my pocket.

Kailey: Butter Fingers?
Having zero time before Brady starts

us off, I quickly type back.

Trey: I'll butter you up, anytime!;)

Brady turns around, and I raise my sticks in the air to count off. Right before I pound them on the drums, I spot her giggling up at me and tucking her phone away. For the remainder of the show, my eyes land on her often, eager to find out if she's enjoying herself. Her head bounces and I see her dancing around in her seat, while singing the words. Every once in a while she leans into Sadie and Jessa to talk to them. With one last song left, I catch a guy come up to her and whisper something in her ear. Shit, upon closer inspection, I know him. Nate fucking Gibson. I wonder if he already knows I've staked my claim. His

usually has him chasing anyone I've been with or any chick I'm about to get with. To his credit, he's beaten me a time or two. The difference this time is I never cared before, not like I do now. Jessa leans over Sadie and says something to him, but he raises his hand in the air. Grant turns my way, surely seeing the same scene unfolding as me. Kailey gives him a smile and shakes her head. Good girl, I think to myself. Then the asshole slides into the booth, caging her in with his body. Kailey stares up at me, worry in her eyes, and I've never wanted down from this stage so badly in my life. Knowing the song by heart, my hands continuing playing while I intently

ridiculous need to compete with me

keep my eyes on them.
Once the song ends, I throw the sticks to the ground and jump off the

stage. Luckily the crowd cleared out of the way when they saw me coming. My footsteps deliberate, I stop at the edge of the table and my eyes land right on Nate.

"Get the fuck out," I demand, and he chuckles up at me.

"Oh, you thought you could keep this one all to yourself?" he questions with

humor in his voice.
"She's mine," I say through clenched

teeth, not even bothering to look in Kailey's direction.

"Sorry, Michaels." He stands up, and I thank God he's finally getting the point. "I've already had her. Just remember, you'll be enjoying my sloppy seconds." He continues to laugh while walking away. My eyes fall to Kailey, who turns her head down, staring into her lap.

Sadie and Jessa remain silent, slowly scurrying out of the booth. Shit, I'm fucking floored by this. Not that I thought she was a virgin, but she's been that douchebag. "Is it true?" I ask her.

"Uh huh," she confirms in a whisper. Looking around, I look for the first thing I could punch that wouldn't break my hand. My fist slams on the table, and she jolts back.

"Fuck!" I scream, and she flinches again. "Shit, I'm sorry Kailey. Of all people you've been with, it's just

—*him*?" I scoot in next to her, but she moves further around the booth. "Kailey," I sigh, pissed at myself for allowing him to get me so worked up,

just like he wanted.

Then Kailey's vision lands on someone else coming to the booth.

Assuming it's one of the guys, I turn and release an annoyed breath. "Leave, Bridgette," I instruct her, but she slides in next to me.

"Am I interrupting something?" She flirtatiously rubs her hand across my neckline. The same spot Kailey rests her hands on when she kisses me. Kailey stares at Bridgette in disgust. "I don't think we've met. I'm Bridgette, and you are?" She holds out her hand across the

table toward Kailey. Kailey glances down at the fake finger-nailed hand and arches her eyebrows up to me. "Leaving," she says and escapes the

"Leaving," she says and escapes the booth.

"Kailey!" I yell, pushing against Bridgette.

"What the hell, Trey?" Bridgette stays in place, so I slide across the semicircle to the other side. Once I'm up, I spot her head about to make it to the door. Running through the bar, I hear people's annoyed yells as their beers spill onto the linoleum floor from me bumping into them.

The chilled air hits my face as I peer around with panic, looking for any trace of her in the streets lined with students

enjoying their Friday night. I finally spot the lone brunette at the corner. Not allowing my feet to stop, I sprint like I used to for first base, my mind on only one object, her.

Grabbing her elbow, I whip her around to face me. Her eyes are swollen and red while her cheeks are filled with tearstains. "Kailey," I sigh, but she turns around and stomps up the cement hill.

"How could I be so fucking stupid?

She screams into the night air as I follow like a lost puppy at her heels.

"Bridgette is nothing," I argue, and when she turns around, I stumble back to her closeness. The sadness from

That Trey Michaels would want me?"

when she turns around, I stumble back to her closeness. The sadness from moments ago has now replaced with "Save it, Trey. I know you've been with her. I've seen you with her before,"

she informs me, and then flips around

continuing her way up the hill.

"I never said I hadn't, but she's not what I want," I reveal the truth, but she's insistent on ignoring me.

"Why? Why do you want me?" She stops again and walks right up to my face. "I wonder, Trey, because you never noticed me before. Photography hasn't been our first class together, we've had others, but you've never even given me a second glance, let alone wanted anything from me before now." She pokes me in the chest, and I step back. "Am I some conquest now because I told you I was going to use you to forget my life?" The tears begin to build in her eyes, but I see her deep swallows and small shutters, attempting to push them back.

"I'm sorry I never noticed you

before, Kailey, but I see you now.
You're all I see...all I want. You have to believe me. No girl comes close to what you do to me." Taking her hands in mine, I bring her hand to my heart. "You are the first to make this beat with the excitement at the thought of having something I never thought I wanted. It's only you, Kailey."

She bites her lower lip, allowing my words to sink in. "What about Nate Gibson?"

"I don't give a shit. I mean, I wish you never had, but we can't change our pasts," I answer as honestly as possible, even if the thought of him with her begs me to punch the brick wall to my right.

Closing her eyes, she turns and walks up the hill, away from me again.

Finding a park bench, she sits down and weeps into her hands. I hear her sniffles and deep breaths. "Like—I said—you scare me, Trey," she stutters out.

Placing my arm around her shoulders, I pull her into me. "You scare me too," I say. "I've never felt this and it scares the shit out of me. But I want to try. I'm willing to put myself out there,

praying like hell it doesn't hurt in the

end."

"My life, Trey—it's not typical. I'm not the average college junior. There's things—."

"It won't change anything," I assure her truthfully.

She sits up, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Don't make promises you might not be able to keep. Hand me your phone." Her voice now steady.

I dig my phone out and place it in her hands. She types in a few things and hands it back to me. "Meet me at this address tomorrow morning at ten. I'll tell you everything, and then you can make your decision." She reaches over and gives me a quick kiss before standing up and walking away from me again.

Kailey

It takes every ounce of my willpower not

to stay on that park bench with Trey. The fear that if I succumb to my desire and sleep with him now, knowing his interest will most likely wane, keeps me walking. Although it was never my intent to get involved in a relationship with Trey, it's something I can't seem to stop craving now. That's why he scares me. The jealousy that boiled inside of me when that blonde placed her hand at his neckline came so suddenly, it was all I could do not to reach across and scratch

her eyes out.

That's why he has to know about my sister and my responsibilities to her

family. To understand if he gets involved with me, he gets involved with them. He'll be getting a girlfriend with barely any time, unless he wants to hang out with three kids at a park or with their dying mother. I'm sure he'll run after he finds all of that crap out, and then I can begin to erase him from my mind like chalk on a chalkboard. Of course, it might be more like marker on a wall, but eventually with persistence he'll vanish. Dropping out of school in order to avoid him would help, but at this point, I don't have much of a choice anyway. My sister has limited time left on this earth,

especially since my last ditch effort for experimental treatment in Colorado failed miserably. There's another thing I need to come clean to Trey about, the real reason I was there.

Climbing into my Honda Civic, I start it up and drive home alone. I thought I would be in Trey's arms tonight, even if we just made out with heavy hand roaming. But our relationship turned course again, so here I am looking like the indecisive girl he thinks I am. I pull into my apartment complex that I pay too much rent for when I'm barely ever there. Noticing Kim's car not around, I'm happy I'll be by myself tonight. She's no doubt out screwing some guy.

She's the one responsible for bringing me to Aces. The first one who exposed me to The Invisibles. She chased Brady forever until finally giving up hope when Sadie never left his side. Brady never seemed like one to sleep around. Not like Trey, or Dex for that matter. Which reminds me of when I first saw Trey. In a corner by the bar with some girl pressed against the wall. I watched him devour her body, like I was some sick stalker girl, but it wasn't his looks, or his actions, that kept my eyes glued. Actually, it wasn't until they switched spots that my vision couldn't veer away. It was how unemotional the whole thing seemed. Trey made the right sounds and his hands roamed where they

should, but his eyes swam across the bar while he did it. Never closing his eyelids once and never with a look of enjoyment across his face. When he caught me staring, he winked and smirked, making me immediately concentrate on my drink.

From that point, I became fixated on

why he did what he did. Kim would take me to Aces every week trying to put the moves on Brady. Every week Trey was with someone else, but all the same movements, all the same noises and eyes always open. Then I found him in my class last semester and was drawn to him even more because of his fun and easy going side. He was always chatting away with everyone around him, joking

around, like they were all his long-time friends.

So, when I spotted the band in the

airport, I wanted to appear aloof, uncaring when Dex came over and showed me attention. Dex really was intriguing, but I already had something burning inside of me for Trey. I thought that would be my time for a mindless screw a few times during the one week I'd had any free time, since my sister was diagnosed with cancer last year. But everything shifted, and I couldn't do it, I wanted more than one night.

Once I insert the key in my door, my phone begins to ring from my pocket. Barely entering, I fumble in my doorway, turning on the lights. I roll my

eyes when I see who it is.
"I'm at home," I tell her and I
already know the words that will come

out of her mouth before they do.
"You better not be alone," she states,

silence in the background.

"Yes, alone." I toss my purse and

keys on the table, and shrug my coat off as I make my way to the living room.

"What happened? You should have been halfway to third by now." She laughs, and I hear Caden join in behind her. "I thought you said this guy knew his way around women?" She giggles again.

"Nate showed up at the bar," I inform her, and her giggles cease instantly.

"Why the hell was that bastard

nerve to come up to you." Anger overriding over her humor now.
"Oh, he had the nerve. Came right up to me and even sat in the booth. Lucky

there? Please, tell me he didn't have the

to me and even sat in the booth. Lucky for me it was right before the last song, so Trey came down all alpha male and demanded him to leave. Knowing Nate you know he had to get the last word. So, he told—,"

"Trey that you slept with him. What a fucking asshole," she seethes through the phone, and I hear Caden asking her who and what. "Did you hit him? For the love of God, tell me you hit the prick," my sister continues her rant on Nate.

"No, Jen," I say, rolling my eyes at her very different personality than mine. "You should have. You should've kneed him right in the nuts. That's what I would've done."

"We all know what you would have done," Caden yells in the background, and I laugh.

"Besides the prick, why aren't you in those tattooed arms instead of sitting on the couch ready to pop in *Leap Year* for the millionth time?" I toss the DVD out of my hand.

"It's complicated, Jen." I don't want to make her feel guilty for things out of her control. Not to mention, nothing means more to me than her, Caden, and the kids. They're my family.

"Kai, you're twenty-two. Get out there and have fun. I know we ask a lot of you—" she starts her usual speech about having fun with guys my age. Play the field, but isn't that how I ended up in Nate Gibson's bed to begin with.

other than—."

"Me not dying. Yeah, me too. I know you like this Trey guy, Kailey, and don't

"I wouldn't change anything, Jen,

let what's happening here deter you from dating him. You deserve happiness."

"Thanks, sis," I say. "I was going to

call you tomorrow, but since I have you, I'm bringing him over tomorrow to meet you, Caden, and the kids."

"WHAT!" she screams, and I pull the phone away from my ear "I thought

the phone away from my ear. "I thought you liked him. Are you trying to make him run for the hills?" Her humor slash

concern fills the receiver.

"If he's going to break my heart, I want it to happen now when it's not

want it to happen now when it's not completely his yet. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, sweetheart, it does. So, what time should we expect you?" Jen relents, knowing what an important move this is for me.

"He's meeting me at the park at ten, then we'll walk over. It might only be me," I say, taking a deep breath.

"From what you say, I doubt it will be. Caden will prepare something for lunch." She yawns into the phone.

"Tell him not to go to too much trouble. Good night, Jen," I say into the phone.

"Hey, baby sis!" Her voice stops me right before I press end.

"Yeah," I quickly answer.

"Don't overwork that rabbit tonight, imagining it's Trey." She laughs hysterically as the line disconnects.

Rolling my eyes and giggling to

myself, I finally end the call. Lying sprawled on my back on the couch, my thoughts go to my sister, how much I love her and already miss her even though she's still a phone call away for now. Unsure of what Trey's response will be tomorrow when I finally divulge about my sister and my plan to stay with Caden and the kids after she leaves us to make the transition as smoothly as possible. I could never blame him if he

decides this is all too much for him. He might say I'm the reason his heart beats with excitement, but I doubt that's enough to change your life for.

Chapter 8

Trey

I walk up to the park and there's no sign of Kailey, so I take a seat on a park bench, pulling my phone out. The playground is filled with kids laughing and running around while their parents appraise me skeptically. I guess some guy with tattoos and piercings all by himself in a park full of children could make people uneasy. Checking my watch, it's ten after ten, and still no Kailey.

After she walked away from me last

night, leaving me alone on a different park bench, I did something I haven't done in forever, I went home by myself on a Friday night. Leaving the lights off, I walked through the dark hallways and up the staircase to my room. Shrugging off my clothes and climbing into the shower, I allowed my body to succumb under the warm stream of water. From her non-verbal language, whatever she had to tell me was serious, and it scared me that we'll be over before we really even began. I grabbed a pair of boxers and slid under my covers, wondering what the hell she was going to reveal to me, realizing I'll have to be straight with her. If she can share with me, I better have the balls to share back. If she thinks

she's worried about how I'll react to her news, she has no idea how scared shitless I am just thinking about revealing my past actions. "Finally," I mumble when I see that

brown hair shining with so many auburn streaks from the sunlight it was almost red coming towards me. Her body tenses

and straightens until her eyes reach mine. Instantly, her lips turn up, and I wish I could say whatever she has to say, doesn't matter. I'm hers, no matter what comes out of her mouth.

"Hey," she softly says and takes a seat next to me on the bench. Wrapping my arm around her, I take my other hand and place a finger under her chin and

kiss her.

"Good morning," I whisper. See that, parents, I'm not some pervert spying on your kids.

"You want to go for a walk, there's a trail?" She points her finger toward the wooded area.

"Sure," I agree and stand up, holding my hand for her to take. Her shaky hand clasps mine, and I hold it firmer and tighter.

Pine needles and stray branches break under our feet as we follow the gravel path. Silence remains between us until we're a little further into the wooded surroundings. The path is void of activity, except for the sounds of animals scurrying from tree to tree. "So," her voice shaky, "I want to start off by saying, I like you, Trey."

"Feelings mutual," I chime in, but she stops walking and turns towards me.

Her lips turn up in a small smile and uneasiness surrounds me that she brought me here to end this between us. "My sister Jen, is dying. She has a rare form of liver cancer called Fibrolamellar-Hepatocellular Carcinoma." Her voice steady while she lets the statement roll of her tongue, sounding like she just introduced herself to a twelve step program. She turns and starts walking again.

My feet move a little faster, trying to catch up to her. "I'm sorry, Kailey." I lightly clasp my hand on her elbow. "I know, everyone is," she says

while her eyes remain forward. "Before you ask, there's nothing else we can do. No more surgeries, or chemo. Me being her closest living relative, I've been poked and prodded every way imaginable, and I can't even help her." Her voice shakes, and she wipes a lone tear from her cheek. "That's why I was in Colorado, there's a medical team starting an experimental treatment. It was the last hope, but the results came back Monday and according to them we don't meet the criteria. I'm sorry for lying to you," she apologizes as her eyes find mine. Those green gems focus in on mine like always to find out exactly what I'm thinking. The trouble is for once, I don't know what to say. I'm sure she's heard

sorry a zillion times. Searching my brain for something more meaningful to say, I stare down at her, and her pleading eyes tell me she wants something, anything from me.

I pull her to me, wrapping my arms around her smaller frame. Her body starts to shake and her breathing stutters. Keeping my lips sealed, I comfort her while she releases all the pent up emotions, figuring we'll finish this conversation when she's ready. Without skipping a beat, she pulls back and brushes her hand against the wetness of my hoodie. "I'm sorry," she repeats again.

"Hey, don't be sorry about anything. I wish I knew what the hell to say.

Believe me, I wish things were different for you." I reach for her again, but she shuts me down and turns back toward the path. The sun streams down through the trees, and I stay grounded, watching the girl who just finished taking my heart. In such a short time, she took hold of it, and I'll never get it back the same way—not

that I want it back.

"You don't understand, Trey. The doctors say a few months at most. Six if we're lucky. She has a family, a husband and kids. My responsibility is to them. That's why this thing between us, I don't know what will happen," she continues talking, even though I'm a few steps back. "I won't have time. I'm barely hanging on right now between school,

picking up the kids, and work. Caden, her husband, does what he can, but he has to work for the benefits and money. We've made plans that after Jen...passes, I'll move in with Caden and the kids temporarily."

"I'll help you," the words leave my

mouth before I can even debate if she would even accept it. Hell, you can see how she's barely living. All of her actions from the last two weeks finally begin to come together. At this point, staring at her so torn apart, I'd let her screw me for fun and toss me aside, leaving me in a wake of heartbreak. It might kill me in the end, but if it made her happy for even a moment, I'd gladly participate. I'll do anything to make this girl happy, anything to make her life a little easier.

She stops and looks at me again. "Thank you," her sincerity clear, "but I can't ask you to do that. The reason I asked you to come here is, if we continue this—relationship," she says, and I think damn right it's a relationship, "you have to know, I can't always go to your shows or out to the bars. We won't

completely understand—." "I do," I say simply. "We'll find ways to see each other. Even if it's just a movie with me massaging your feet at

be like a normal dating couple. That's not to say, I don't want to try. I do. But I

two in the morning." She smiles up at me, the first true

one to grace her lips since last night. "Okay, but if at any time you want out, tell me. I'll understand." At that statement, words won't be enough. So, I grab her by her shoulders and pull her into me, letting my lips be the first contact. Leaning her against the thick tree truck, I bring my hands up to her face and pour everything I feel for her into this kiss. Hoping it allows her to realize she's all I want, and I'll take her anyway I can have her.

We remain tongue tied for a few minutes and when I pull back, I commit the smile spread across her face to memory. "Thank you, Trey," she whispers.

"You have nothing to thank me for,

being with you could be the most selfish thing I've ever done in my life. Trust me, Kailey, I'll take you anyway I can get you," I say back, and when my lips beg to be on hers again, I don't deny them. After making out, like teenagers

hidden from their parents in the woods, I grab her hand and start to walk out of the park. "So, there's one more thing," she devilishly smiles up to me.

"What?" I ask scrunch my eyebrows.

"Do you want to meet my sister and

there's no way I'd decline the offer, even if all the blood just drained from my veins. "I'd love that," I tell her and squeeze her hand in mine.

her family?" Her lips turn up so high,

"Good, they're expecting us for lunch," she says as a small giggle escapes her mouth when I stop in my tracks.

"Now?" I clarify, and she bites her lower lip and nods her head. "Why the hell not? Sister has to be better than the parents, right?" I joke, still scared slightly.

"I guess," she shrugs. I pick her up, toss her over my shoulder and smack her ass. "Hey now!" she squirms.

"Now that I'm your boyfriend, I get to smack this fine ass as much as I want," I arrogantly tease her, trying to ignore the bewildering stares of the parents.

"It's all yours," she places her own

hands on my ass, slapping it like she's playing the drums. "Just remember, what's mine is yours and what's yours is mine," she jokes before grabbing my ass, making me wish I was taking her home rather than to her sister's.

"After your sister's, I'll be showing

stopping outside my car, letting her body slide down mine. "Thank you for trusting me," I change our fun moment to serious, and she cups my cheeks, her eyes remaining on mine.

"Something tells me you're worth it," she says and rises up on her tiptoes to kiss me. When I open my passenger

side door and she scoots in, I secretly

pray she's right.

you what's mine," I tell her seriously,

Kailey instructs me down the two side streets. There's a beat up white Honda outside the house and she tells me to park behind it. The small beige twostory All-American house, it even displays the requisite American Flag hanging from the pole attached to the siding. The small front porch is decorated in an Easter theme of pastel bunnies and eggs. It's the dream home little girls probably envision when they're younger. That living happily ever after shit with a husband, two kids, and house in suburbia. Kailey pats my leg, similar to what I did that night she was

going to hang out with the gang in

Breckenridge. Giving her my best smile,

I try to keep my nervousness at bay. I open my door and walk around to open hers. As she steps out, the front door swings open and there's the little girl from the airport, running out of the house.

"Chloe!" I hear a man's voice yell from inside and the guy who picked Kailey up from the airport appears in the doorway. Seeing Kailey, he waves his hand and walks back into the house.

"Hey, girly," Kailey bends down and allows the girl to run into her arms before wrapping them tightly around her.

"I've been waiting for you," she sighs to Kailey.

"I'm sorry, do you want to meet my friend?" Kailey picks her up and faces

me.
"Hi, Trey!" The little girl says
without introduction. Kailey looks at her

without introduction. Kailey looks at her in disbelief. "What? You talk about him all the time," the girl continues, much to Kailey's chagrin.

"Hi, Chloe," I say and raise my hand for a high five and she slaps it right away. "It's nice to meet you," I tell her and I notice her eyes roaming my body.

body." Kailey laughs, and I chuckle.
"Yeah," I agree, having no idea what

"You have a lot of drawing on your

else to say. I've never had to be around little kids before.

"They're called tattoos," Kailey informs her, and Chloe just continues her stares. "Let's go in, there's two other

little ones for you to meet." She rustles the hair on Chloe's head and lets her down. Once her small feet hit the grass, she's off and inside the house.

"Sorry, kids have no filter," Kailey says, taking my hand in hers.
"No problem." I become more

nervous the closer we come to the house. You can do this, Trey Michaels, you lo—like this girl.

Once we get on the porch, I suck in one more deep breath and follow Kailey into the warm and welcoming house. My body instantly calms when I enter, noticing all the pictures of family that fill the walls. Seriously, I've never seen so many pictures in all my life. Most look to have been taken recently, and I half

wonder if it's because her sister is dying. "I just recently surprised Jen with a photo shoot I did of the kids," Catching me checking out all the pictures, Kailey whispers to me.

"They're amazing," I say, allowing my hands to graze across one of all three of the kids surrounding a woman a few years older than Kailey. The uncanny resembles evident, telling me exactly what she'll look like in ten years. "I had no idea you were a photographer."

She laughs. "I'm not, but it was for class. Jen hasn't had time to unpack all of the family photos since they moved in, so I did it for their anniversary." She winks at me, obviously remembering our project that I had to beg Professor

Hodges to be allowed to make-up. Crap, which reminds me I only have until Monday to finish it. "You want to borrow my camera?" she asks, noticing my rambling thoughts about my project.

"The pictures I want to take can't be seen by anyone, but me." I mention, pulling her closer and kissing her neck. "But if you're up for it, I won't complain," I whisper, and she pats my chest

"I'm sure something could be arranged," she teases and scurries out of my embrace.

"Oh young love, isn't it great, Caden," the same woman from the pictures says, walking into the room. "Remember those days, sweethers

"Remember those days, sweetheart.

appreciate my jokes," she says directly to me, holding her hand out. "Jen Campbell," she introduces herself. "It's nice to meet you. Trey

Michaels." I present my best smile her

"And Cancer," Jen adds and the

Before diapers, bottles, late night feedings, screaming—" Caden says.

room goes silent. "Ugh, they never

way.

"So, I've heard." She loops her arm through mine. "Come in, let me show you some embarrassing pictures of Kailey." She giggles, rising her eyebrows in Kailey's direction, who just

take me away.

We walk further into the house to

shakes her head, allowing her sister to

what I assume is the family room, filled with toys, a large screen television, and an oversized couch. Blankets and pillows fill a recliner to be a make shift bed. She passes that and takes me right to the couch with Caden and Kailey in tow. "So, Trey, tell me about yourself. I already know the easy stuff, you're an architecture major from Oberlin, and my favorite-play drums in a band called The Invisibles. Which by the way, kind of a lame ass name, you boys couldn't come up with anything better?" I chuckle at her straight forwardness and catch Kailey's eyes. "Oh, she's no help, so don't bother looking her way. All she tells me about is your body." Her eyes appraise my body, like I'm a

Chippendale dancer, and she looks at Kailey. "Great description, sis. His arms might not be as big as you described," her hand clasps around my bicep, "but that face. Mmm—a girl could lost in those eyes."

My body shifts uncomfortable of her talking this way with her husband ten steps away. "Oh don't be shy." She scoots closer again. "Kailey, didn't you tell him?" Kailey focuses her attention to us and scrunches her eyebrows while Caden snickers in the kitchen. "The reason you brought him..." she tries to trigger her memory, but Kailey still appears dumb founded until she nods, signaling a light bulb just came on. "I told him, Jen," Kailey clarifies

and nods.
"Good, so after the kids go to bed,"

she teases her fingertips along my thigh, "we'll swap." Her voice steady and nonchalant. My head snaps to Kailey, and she shrugs her shoulders casually. "It's my dying wish," she whispers in my ear, her heavy breaths tickling my earlobe.

My eyes bug out, like I've been electrocuted. The thought of thousand bolts of electricity running through my body suddenly seems a hell of a lot better alternative than what's being suggested right now.

Then Kailey bellows with laughter, pointing her finger at me, and her sister joins in. "You girls are evil." Caden

deserved." He clinks his bottle with mine. The two sisters continue to laugh until the sound of a crying baby screams out of the white speaker on the table next to me.

comes in and hands me a beer. "Well-

"I got it, Jen," Kailey says when her sister slowly starts to get up. Jen sits back down as Kailey leaves the room, and Caden turns on baseball. At least I know I'll have one thing in common with him. Of course, it only makes me remember I have to tell Kailey my secret once we're alone tonight.

"I'm sorry, Trey. I couldn't resist, you looked so nervous standing there," Jen says, still trying to stifle her giggles. "So, while she's not here," she looks

down the hall before continuing, "Caden and I want her to get out and have fun. You seem like you like to have fun." Her eves cascade over my tats, just like her daughter did outside moments ago. "She takes on way too much around here, will you do me a favor?" She waits for me to nod. "Have fun with each other, but don't break her heart, okay? Okay." She stands up gingerly and walks into the kitchen without my answer, although it would have been yes, so I guess it

"My wife has her own way of making people feel welcome," Caden says, continuing to watch the Tigers play the Indians. "Run!" he hollers at the

doesn't matter. I'm really liking her

though—a lot.

television, and I relax into the comfortable cushions, taking a swig of my beer.

"She's funny, I can appreciate that," I respond while keeping my eyes glued to the television.

"Yeah, I think her humor has

increased with her sickness," he mentions, and not sure how to respond, I remain quiet. The silence doesn't seem to bother him. "Unlike my wife, though, I need to ask a little more of you than her." This time he turns his head my way. Unsure of what he's talking about, I sit up straighter. "See Kailey's like my sister. I've known her since she was eleven. I know she's been straight with you because that's Kailey. She's not one

her to tell you about Jen, so I ask that if you honestly can't be there for her, just end it now because it will only be harder later. At least if you end it now, she'll have her sister to console her. Later, she might only have me." He turns his head to the side, breathing before facing me again. "I won't be enough for her and it could break her, losing her sister and a guy who didn't care enough." He pauses again. "Listen, I've been around guys like you my whole life, fun loving, carefree, and uncommitted. So, I might not be as strong as you, or as fast, but believe me when I say, rage can

be powerful," he finishes and relaxes back to his chair watching television. I

to play games or hide. It took a lot for

guess he doesn't want to hear it, just wants me to prove it.

Taking a long swig of beer, I watch the Indians score a double until the two small girls come through the patio door and Kailey comes down with the little boy in her arms and brings him over to us after stopping at her sister briefly. "So, this is Drew," she introduces me to the drooling baby, who fixates on the stud piercing under my lip. As his hand reaches to touch it, Kailey swings her hips to keep him away. I wouldn't mind the little guy playing with it, especially if it makes him like me. Chloe and a smaller blonde girl rush over, clasping onto Kailey's legs. "This is Tara. Tara, can you say hello to my friend Trey?"

The small girl just continues to hide behind Kailey. "She can be kind of—." "Shy," Chloe finishes. "Do you want to play with us?" she asks me, and I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do, so I

do what comes natural.

kitchen to join her sister.

"Sure," I say, and she grabs my hand, taking me to the corner. Pulling a game from one of the shelves, she tugs my arm until I sit down on the ground. Tara and she sit on either side of me, while scrambling to get the game put together. Kailey sits Drew down on the floor with a pile of toys in front of him and smiles down at me before walking into the

"Pretty, Pretty Princess," I mumble, reading the box on the floor.

"Don't you girls think Trey has enough earrings," Caden jokes from his seat and everyone starts laughing. I really hope he's one of those guys that makes fun of the people he likes.

"They're all gray, now you can have pink or purple," Chloe picks up a pink plastic earring and widens her eyes as though I should be amazed.

"How about blue?" I counter, and she relents, giving me the blue board piece.

"I'm purple," Tara softly says, but grabbing the pink piece, and Chloe just smiles and takes the green. Not sure what I'm supposed to do, Chloe explains the game, and Tara spins first since she's the youngest.

Once we're done, I have two blue earrings, a ring and a necklace. Tara won by collecting all her jewelry and *the* crown. Kailey comes over and snaps a picture. "For class," she adds, turning back into the kitchen.

"Alright, girls, put the game away, it's time to eat," Jen says from the kitchen.

I help the girls put it all away, and when I stand up, Tara grasps my hand in hers. I stare down in astonishment, since she's said maybe two words to me the whole time I've been here. The same matching green eyes as Kailey and Jen stare up with a wide smile on her face. "I made dessert," she tells me.

"Really? I can't wait," I say with

excitement. She leads me to the table and stops me right next to her chair.

"You sit here," she points, "and I sit here," she points to another chair with a purple foam cushion on it.

A giggling Jen comes over and sits across from me, smiling at Tara, who has now grabbed my hand, while beaming up at me. "You might have some competition, Kailey," she hollers to her sister, who's getting the food ready to serve.

"I thought he liked brunettes," she jokes, bringing a salad to the table. I scoot my chair out to help, but she waves her hand down, signaling me to stay put.

"It's the green eyes, they entrance

me," I chime into the good-hearted conversation, focusing only on her. A slight pinkness hits her cheeks, and she turns back around.

"Charmer," Jen raises her eyebrows at me.

Damn straight almost escapes my lips, but there are children present. Caden puts Drew in his high chair, and Jen places some puff things from a can on the tray with a cup. Drew picks it up immediately, tilting his head back, like he's taking a shot. Man, that kid's gonna be fun when he's older. The cup slams down on the tray table, and he's all smiles. Yep, future life of the party sitting right there.

Laughter fills the small table, even

with kids' whines and complaints, it's fun hanging out with Kailey and the Campbells. They remind me a lot of my own family. I finally began to ease up, making jokes back, and it seemed to make them like me even more. Here was a family after my own heart. Even with the underlying tone of death, they've embraced it and decided to live normally until they're pushed into facing the inevitable.

Kailey and I do the dishes while Caden and Jen watch the rest of the game. Once we finish, Kailey leans in asking me if I'm ready to leave. "I want you alone, Trey Michaels," she murmurs against my lips.

Adjusting myself a little, I follow her

into the family room and notice Drew is asleep on Caden's chest and a sleeping Tara lays by her mom's side on the recliner with the blanket wrapped over them. Chloe's busy in the corner coloring, but turns and smiles at us when we enter.

"We're gonna get going," Kailey

whispers to her sister. "Don't get up. I'll be back tomorrow." She kisses her cheek, and then walks over to Chloe.

I say my good-byes, shaking both their hands and thanking them for the meal. "Anytime, Trey. You're welcome anytime," Jen says and winks at me,

"Of course, our home is always

"isn't he, Caden?" She raises her

eyebrows at him.

open." He smiles at me before turning toward the television again.

Chloe surprises me with a huge hug around my legs, and I bend down giving her a high five again. "Come back, you can be pink next time," she tells me, and I chuckle, nodding my head.

"Yeah, I'll be pink next time," I tell her, ruffling her hair like Kailey did earlier.

We leave the house happy, and I'm relieved to have the whole dilemma of meeting the family over with. But for the first time, I realize, there's a certain part of Kailey I don't know. "Kailey?" I stop on the porch. She turns my way, curious. "Where are your parents?"

Her green eyes lose their happiness.

"They're dead," she says and turns around to walk to the cars. Crap, my heart tightens.

Chapter 9

Kailey

I purposely didn't tell Trey about my parents. How many horrible things can you inform someone about your life before they cross you off, thinking you're bad luck? Starting a conversation with 'I lost my parents when I was ten due to drunkenness, and, no, it wasn't someone else's fault but my fathers', isn't the best way to keep someone around. There was no one to blame, except the first man I ever loved. The same man that taught me to ride a bike and fly a kite. He's the one

who left me an orphan due to a careless decision to drink too much at a holiday party and wrap his car around a pole with my mother inside.

Lucky for me, my parents had Jen

and me so far apart; I didn't go into foster care, but was able to live with my sister. She turned her life upside down for me, leaving the college she had been attending and coming back home to care for me. We made it work, though. She transferred to Western, and during the first few summers I stayed at Aunt Holly's while she took a full course load to try and graduate early. She got a parttime job in the library. That was how she met Caden. He's was in the reference section of the library, doing

stumbled across my sister looking a little bewildered. He smoothly asked her if she knew where a certain reference could be located, knowing it didn't exist. But the wild goose chase turned into coffee, which turned into dinner, and the

research for his thesis, when he

rest is history.

After that first summer at Aunt Holly's, I got off the plane to find Jen waiting with Caden by her side. She'd mentioned him briefly on the phone, but to find him there with his arm wrapped around her was surprising. A small giggle hits me remembering how mean I was to him. Jen would hire a babysitter for them to go out, and I would answer the door telling him she was gone, or

sometimes just slamming the door in his face. My sister was all I had left, and he was interfering. If I was being truthful, I was scared she would leave me like our parents. Oh poor Caden, what a trooper he was.

"I'll bring you back tomorrow,"
Trey's voice tears me out of my
memories. I pick up my head and must
look confused because he clarifies, "For
your car." He motions with his head.
"You assume I'll be also ping over."

"You assume I'll be sleeping over," I joke, my best defense mechanism, but he just gives me a tight smile and opens the door for me.

Before he shuts it, he reminds me, "You said you wanted me alone. The stipulation is in my bed for the night."

He chuckles quietly and the door clicks shut, leaving his last statement hanging in the air.

See, he gets me. I needed humor in that moment and he understood it. We make the drive back to the house they all share in silence. I've only ever heard about it, I've never actually stepped foot in there. When he pulls his car in the driveway, there's a line of cars and a feeling of dread, not able to be alone, comes over me. "We live so close to downtown, we walk a lot. They might not be home," he assures me, getting out of the car.

We enter through the back door into the kitchen, and he's wrong because a group of guys is sitting around the table, slinging back shots with a pile of cards in front of them. I spot Dex, but I don't recognize the others. They all stop what they're doing and eye us at the door.

"TREY!" a guy yells.

"Alacat time and a

"About time, grab a chair," another says.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Trey says to one of them with dark spiky hair. Instantly the guy stands and walks toe to toe with him.

"Isn't she a little too girl next door for you?" The guy stares me up and down, making me inch behind Trey slightly.

"Fuck off, jackass," Trey places his arm in front of me, scooting me the rest of the way behind him.

"Give it a rest, Rob," Dex says from his position shuffling the cards.

That's Rob? Jessa's ex Rob? Man, he's an ass, but a hot ass. Not that I would ever tell that to Trey. But the guy's got a jaw line that could crack marble. No piercings, but just as many tats as Trey.

"Hey, Trey's never been opposed to me looking at the goods before. What's up, Michaels? You've gone all soft, like Brady? Shit another one loses the battle," he calls out as he makes a check mark in the air with his finger, and the table of guys laugh. He peeks around Trey, staring directly at my chest. "She might be worth it-might," he sneers, and Trey's hand leaves my hip and cracks

him across that perfectly lined jaw.

He stumbles back before catching his footing, cupping his chin. "Get used to seeing me Michaels since Jessa's

seeing me, Michaels, since Jessa's living with her Frat Boy, I'm back in." He gives Trey a condescending smirk and sits back down, turning his attention to the game.

Trey grabs my hand and two beers

before pulling me to the stairs. "I'm gonna fucking kill Brady," he mumbles as we get to the top of the stairs. And this is exactly my reason for not living with your best friends. Don't get me wrong Kim and I are acquaintances and go out occasionally, but for the most part, we live separate lives. Unlike this house where all their lives intertwine

somehow like a labyrinth.

"Kill me, huh?" Brady appears at the top of the stairs with Sadie two steps

separate, I'd be floored.

"What the hell? Why would you allow him back in?" Trey shakes his head in disbelief.

behind. If those two ever do anything

"Trey—," Sadie starts, but Brady places his hand on her arm.

"Listen, Jessa's living at Grant's now. He's down, the band threw him out. I'm sure he'll find another band soon and leave. I know he's done some questionable things, but haven't all of us," Brady tries to reason, and, surprisingly, Trey relents.

"Don't expect me to be here much

then," Trey says over his shoulder, walking to his room.

"You have to leave what happened between him and Jessa between them. She's forgiven him, you should too," Brady adds, and I just give them an uncomfortable tight smile while being pulled by Trey into his room.

Trey slams the door after we're both in the room, cracking open the beer, he guzzles half of it down before resting it on the nightstand. Not sure what to do, I stand there in front of his bed, shifting my feet from side to side. "Sorry," he mumbles, "that guy just knows what buttons to press with me." He quickly stands and places his arms around me. "This isn't how I planned this night to

go." *Me neither*, I think to myself.
"Why do you hate him so much?
Other than his vulgar mouth," I ask,

knowing there's something with Jessa, since they used to date.

"Mostly Jessa, the way he treated her when they were together. The way they broke up, it's unacceptable the way he treated her," Trey begins to tell me, but stops and shakes his head. "Enough about the dickhead, I finally have you alone in my bedroom, willingly," he chuckles.

"Are you telling me you had thoughts of dragging me up here against my will?" I saunter over, positioning my legs on each side of his.

"The idea of tossing you over my

shoulder and locking you in my room might have crossed my mind a time or two," he admits while his hands grab a hold of my ass, pulling me to him. "I might not have objected," I say,

keeping my voice low and sultry. My hands reach around clasping at the back of his neck. The stubble of his short dark hair rubbing against my palms.

"Let's not waste any more time." His hands roam up my back, bringing chills in the wake of his path. Then his tongue licks across his lips before bringing my face to his. At first he's gentle and soft, letting our lips graze over each other. His teeth tug on my bottom lip, dragging it down, teasingly. My hands firm against his neck, not wanting him to stop.

He releases my lips with a pop and smiles up at me before licking his way down my jaw line and up to my earlobe. "I want you tonight," he whispers and the chills reappear, making my body shiver.

As though he knows exactly what he's done to me, he tightens his arms against me, hugging me into him. "I'll be right back," I say and stand up, laughing at Trey's baffled expression. "I need to use the bathroom," I embarrassingly admit.

Still puzzled to why I pulled away, he points me to the door. "Make sure you lock the other door, it leads to Dex's room." He sits back on the bed.

I escape into the bathroom, thankful

embarrassing as it was to leave in the middle to go to the bathroom, it would have been worse for him to find out another way. Going over to the sink to wash my hands, I let my eyes wander over the contents. His toothbrush, toothpaste, hair gel, and razor are all positioned neatly across the counter. So different than Dex's side, whose toiletries are strewn across the counter, as though he lays it down wherever he is when he finishes using an item. Being the snoop that I am, I open the drawer and a small bottle of perfume

that the panty liner is void of any sign of my period. A smile creeps across my face that it's over, and I'll be able to

finally be with Trey tonight. As

door. I pick up the sample size and slowly take off the cap to smell it. A crisp flowery fragrant scent hits my nostrils. The smell is nice, but I don't find a name on it anywhere. I half wonder if this was something some girl left behind or worse some ex-girlfriends that he never got rid of. The image of him picking it up and smelling it to remember the arms of someone else pangs me. Suddenly, the last thing I want to do is go back into that room. But how can I hold it against him, I knew he had a past before I got together with him. Fighting every fiber of me that wants to flush the bottle down the toilet, I reluctantly place it back in the drawer

rolls down, hitting against the drawer

and will myself to forget my findings from my snooping.

I open the door and Trey is staring into his phone, but instantly looks up and smiles at me when he finds me in the doorway. "Do me a favor, baby? Shut that door and swing that latch over it," he instructs, pointing to the small metal to flip lock on the door, so no one can get in.

I follow his directions and walk quietly over to the side of the bed. Trey watches me intently the whole way. "What's up?" he asks still wearing that amazing smile of his.

"Nothing, I just had to check something," I tell him, slowly sitting next to him, keeping my feet planted to the floor.
"Everything good?" he questions, scooting up against his headboard more.

I just know I need to know whose perfume that is. I can't sleep with him, thinking there's a girl out there he still wants.

"Yeah...no," I honestly stutter out. "I snooped in your drawers," I shamefully admit. If I could have left well enough alone, I'd be half naked with him by now.

"Okay," he patiently waits, not concerned about what I could have discovered.

"I saw something in your drawer. A bottle—."

"Shit, Kailey," he interrupts, shaking

his head. "It's not what you think." He inches closer to me, swinging his own legs to the floor.

"I know it shouldn't bother me. I know you had a past, we all have pasts," I begin to ramble. It shouldn't have felt like a knife to the heart, but it does. "Fuck," he mumbles and stands up.

"I wanted to tell you, especially after you shared so much with me today. I just didn't," he closes his eyes and shakes his head before starting again. "I'm scared to lose you.

Standing up, I reach for his face bringing his eyes to mine, "Is it another girl?" I ask, swallowing the large lump drying in my throat.

"Yes," he mumbles, and I step back,

"but it's not for the reasons you're assuming," he says, continuing to stand in place with the look of dread all over his face.

"Then who? Just tell me, Trey." I keep my voice low and concerned. The last thing I need him to think is I'm accusing him of something.

"Let's go," he says, grabbing my hand and his keys.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see." He pulls me through the door. The boisterous laughs of the boys mixed with sounds of clinking bottles and poker chips being tossed fill the downstairs. Trey sneaks us through the front door and to his car. "Hey, Mrs. F.." he hollers across the street and waves to the lady across the way who's collecting her mail before opening his car door for me.

Silence fills the car, but his hand remains in mine, his thumb rubbing against my knuckles in a calming manner. I periodically glance at him while his eyes remain on the road ahead. How on earth can be be so relaxed? Oh yeah, he knows what he's about to tell me. Thankfully, we only drive for ten minutes before he pulls into the historic house museum and country estate known for their numerous gardens, which occupy the acres of land.

He parks the car, and I can't help put be confused why he would bring me here. As soon as I step out, the smell of flowery scents fill my nostrils and embeds in my mind. I can't help but compare it to the perfume that rests in Trey's drawer. Taking my hand once again, he meanders us through the parking lot and up to the landscaped hill. As we walk by a blooming cherry blossom a light sweet scent lofts in the air.

Trey's hand hasn't left mine since we exited the car, and his thumb keeps its motion across my knuckles. "This is nice," I interrupt the silence, and his head turns my way, as though he forgot I was with him.

"Yeah, they just opened for the season a few weeks ago," he tells me. "I come here a lot," he continues. I kind of

already figured that out with the way he has us winding around the paths with a purpose.

We finally end up in a large walkway filled with birch trees on each side. Small stones are embossed on the ground for us to follow. The trees loom over our heads and we suddenly become secluded from others. "Don't you want to know why I come here?" he quietly asks me, his voice low and cautious. "I figure you enjoy it, the peace," I

say hesitantly, not quite sure why we're here, but I'll wait as patiently as I can until he's ready.

"The smell...the smell of the flowers takes me back to one of the happiest and saddest days of my life." I look up at him and his face is blank, bearing no emotion. When I don't speak, he begins again. "It's similar to the smell of that perfume." He finally glances down at me, pausing for me to agree. I nod wondering where on earth he's going with this. "I want to tell you, I've wanted to for a while, but I don't know what will happen, or how you'll react." He stops us in the middle of the walkway and peers left and right. Taking both my hands in his he stares directly into my eyes. His brown filled irises overcome with nervousness and worry as they dart up and down before focusing directly on mine. "I have a kid," he reveals, and as hard as it is, I force my

eyes to stay on his, taking a big breath. "I

signed over my rights to her when I was seventeen," he continues to divulge the information, and I hate it that a happiness fills me that I won't have a baby mamma to contend with. "My girlfriend and I gave the baby up for adoption."

"I can understand that," I admit, and I'm being honest, I can. Knowing Trey he was selfless enough to realize he couldn't give the baby the life it would need.

"Zoey couldn't at first, but eventually she saw how much better off the baby would be. Since Zoey wouldn't sign off right away, we got to spend two days with the baby until they arranged things with the family. It kills me every day, and there aren't hours that she doesn't cross my mind, but I know she's healthier and happier than she would be if I would have kept her."

"Healthier maybe, Trey, but just as happy," I ease him. Just from witnessing him with the kids today, he'll make a wonderful father one day, but it's got to be very hard for a seventeen-year-old to give a child the financial and emotional stability they need.

"Thanks, so you don't hate me and want to break-up?" he asks, and I gasp, amazed he thought I would.

"God no, you made a choice very few people can. It shows how big your heart is that you put her first and your feelings second. I could never be mad at you for that," I say, taking both my hands and placing them on either side of his face. "It did just the opposite," I add, and he smiles down to me. "But what does this have to do with the perfume?" "Well, you might run now. The perfume was the scent of my ex's, Zoey. But it's not what you think. You know how a smell can transport your memory right back to a specific moment in time. You feel as though you're living it all over again. Her perfume does that to me. Since she would hold the baby and then pass her to me, the smell was embedded into the blankets and her onesies. The last night that we were able to have her, Zoey fell asleep, and I kept the baby on my chest for the whole night. Laying

back in the recliner, she curled up across

my chest, and I stayed awake, watching every movement. Every nose wrinkle, open mouth, or eye open, etching them into my memory.

"Zoey and I ultimately broke-up a

month or so after we gave the baby up. Neither one of us had been able to forget. Actually, strike that, Zoey did a pretty good job forgetting almost immediately. Hence the reason our relationship couldn't survive it. It consumed me, whereas Zoey acted like it never happened. Not sure if that was her defense mechanism, to block it out or not, but it was complete opposite to the torment that consumed me every day. Anyway, after we broke up, I was starting to forget, the vision of her little

baby face and the moments I shared with her were vanishing from my memory. I just couldn't deal with it. I was walking through the mall one day, around Christmas, and all the perfume women were out spraying pieces of papers and handing them out to all the men. One lady handed me one, and I took it just to get them off my back, but then the smell hit me and instantly I was in that recliner with her on my chest. I saw her face and her blue eyes peering up at me. From that day forward, I always keep a small bottle of the perfume in the drawer. So I never forget, and I'm able to keep that moment with my daughter alive in my mind." By this time, we're out from the birch tree walkway and into the wideopen field with mounds of flowers at every angle. He slowly swipes a tear away that drops from his eyes. "I'm sorry," I apologize, because I

really have nothing else I could say. "Don't be, I'm sure she's in a great

place. I've never regretted my decision, but I just want to keep her with me somehow." He stops us to sit on a bench.

After I take my seat, he follows suit. "So, the perfume isn't to remind me of Zoey, I swear, Kailey," he turns to me

and his brown eyes are filled with relief. "I understand. That's why you come

powerful," I say, remembering when I stepped out of the car. "Only in the spring," he says. Then

here, the sense of smell is very

"Thank you for understanding." He pulls my head down to his chest and lightly places his lips to the top a few times.

A few minutes go by. Trey holds me

he wraps his arms around my shoulders.

A few minutes go by, Trey holds me close and his heart slows to an even pace. I pick my head up and kiss his neck, committing the smell of Trey to my memory because I never want to forget this moment with Trey, the moment that we gave each other our love. We may not have said it out loud, but our hearts intertwined together on this bench today.

Chapter 10

Trey

The relief I feel at Kailey accepting my past is liberating as we walk hand in hand back to my car. I realize now I probably had no reason to worry about Kailey accepting my carelessness as a teenager, or that she wouldn't understand my decisions. Family is at the forefront in Kailey's life, so my worry that she might not fully understand how someone could give away a child that was a part of them was merited. I meant what I said; I've never regretted my decision. I

would be like if I had decided to keep her, but the same answer always resonate back; she's in better hands with the family we chose. I reassure myself every day that she's with parents who love her just as much as I do. We pull into the driveway, and I sigh

may miss her and wonder what my life

seeing all the same cars still lining it.
Jackass Rob's Mustang is parked in the driveway alongside Dex's truck.
"Would you rather go to my place?"
Kailey squeezes my hand to gain my

attention.

"Nah, they'll eventually leave for the bar." I climb out of the car to walk around to her side just as the dipshits file out of the house.

"Let's go, Michaels, party over at Kipernick's. Last one before graduation," Dex hollers, and then notices Kailey getting out of the car. "Never mind," he says with a smile on his face.

The other guys stare over and jokingly roll their eyes before climbing into Dex's truck. "See you, jerkoff," Rob calls over, and blatantly appraises Kailey. "Hell, if I had that hot piece, I might stay home too." He chuckles and ducks into the back seat.

My fists automatically ball up at my sides, but Kailey calms my rage instantly by placing her hand on my forearm. I smile down at her and those green eyes show me everything I want. There's no

way I'm wasting an opportunity to have her in my bed. Scooping her up, I knock the car door shut with my ass. She laughs and wraps her arms

around my neck. I claim her lips as I walk us to the door. Just as I'm fiddling with the doorknob, her tongue swipes across my neck and sucks my earlobe into her warm mouth. The door swings open, and I'm about to step through the doorway when her body freezes in my arms. Pulling back, I question her abrupt stop and her eyes shift to the right to direction me. Following her line of vision, I notice Bridgette standing in her lawn staring at us with a look of disgust across her face. I give her a quick nod of my head to acknowledge her, and she

just stands there, like a fucking lawn ornament. Then Dex's truck backs up and stops by her. She hops in and flips me off through the window.

Kailey tenses in my arms, her eyes focused on the truck pulling away. "Don't worry about her," I say softly, hoping she'll take my advice and let us enjoy this night. We've gotten this far, and there's no way I'm allowing Bridgette to stop us.

"Trey?" I shake my head, not putting her down on the ground, thinking here we go; the moment between us is finished.

"Yeah," I murmur. "It wasn't anything. It was—casual," I admit, and she nods her head with obvious

understanding of who I was and the girls I've had.

"Kailey." Her eyes land on mine,

and I don't miss the disappointment that currently fills them. "I wish like hell I could somehow change the past and take every damn girl and stupid decision back. I wish I could go back and tell myself 'there's an amazing girl that's waiting for you to find her, just hold on'. But I can't. I promise you, though, you have me, there's no one else." Her lips begin to creep up slightly, and I take my opportunity to capture them, this time for good. Kicking the door shut behind us, I carry her up the stairs while her fingers massage the back of neck and my tongue searches for hers. Her moans have me

even antsier to reach the security of my bedroom.

When I land on the top of the stairs, I waguely sense a presence, but it's not

vaguely sense a presence, but it's not until Kailey giggles and stops kissing me that I realize Sadie's there. She says, "Oh, don't mind me, continue on." She laughs, descending the stairs we just came up.

"Finally!" Brady chimes in following Sadie.

Ignoring both of them, we finally escape into my room, and I shut and lock the door before tossing her on the bed. She lightly bounces off the mattress, laughing the entire time. I double check the bathroom door and then climb on top of her. Slowly, I begin to kiss her neck,

up the curve of her jawline, finally landing at her ear.

She whimpers and widens her legs for me to fit in between. As soon as my hardness finds her center, she encloses those long gorgeous legs around my torso to hold me close. Grinding myself against her fuels the fire as moans of pleasure escape her throat. Hell, I doubt I'll hold on long between the grinding and the soundtrack of desire echoing within the walls. Rising up on my hands, I stare down at her, the most beautiful girl lying under me with expectations I worry I can't fulfill. All the confidence that's usually flowing out of me in this situation has vanished, and now I'm shaking with insecurity. She needs more

of me than I've ever given. She deserves to be cherished and loved. I pray I'm able to show her just how much she means to me. My fingers find the buttons on her shirt. Popping the buttons, her purple lace bra begins to peek out, and I groan when my knuckles graze across her hard nipple. Her legs give out and collapse against the bed, as her head falls back into the soft mattress. Watching her eyes leisurely close, my lips descend on her collarbone and travel across her chest until they plant in the middle of her breasts. I reach behind her and unclasp the two hooks. At least,

As leisurely as possible, I lift her

my shaking hands are able to maneuver

that like a pro.

shirt off and pull the bra straps down each arm, exposing a sight that's occupied my dreams since the day I met her. Her smaller breasts with kiss size nipples are much too tempting. Wrapping my mouth over one pebble, I twirl my tongue, circling her nipple while my fingers pinch and play with her other. She arches her back, pushing her breast further into the wet, warmness of my mouth. When I withdraw from her breast, she whimpers, and I begin to travel down her stomach. That's a good sign, right? Slowly kissing down her flat mid-section, my fingers find the button of her jeans and I pop it open. I place my teeth on the tip of the zipper and pull them down while my eyes seductively

remain on hers. "Trey," she pleads. "You're so beautiful." I slide my fingertips inside her jeans, and she

squirms to help me discard them for her. The jeans flop onto the floor, and I trail kisses down one leg and up the other until I arrive back at her panties. Finding the matching purple silky fabric soaking wet, my finger teases her around the sides of her panties, feeling her trimmed pussy. "You're so wet—so ready," I whisper, and her hands run across my scalp again. Resting my chin at the top of her panty line, I stare up at her, and she

peers down at me. The pull toward each other is so strong in this moment the doubt I can give her loving and caressing instead of hard fucking vanishes from every fiber of me and only leaving love. Hooking my fingers on each side, I

slide the last piece of fabric off her body. My hands graze across her legs, up to her hips and lightly flows up and down her sides before tucking them under her ass. I cup it with both hands and pull her toward me. Starting off slow, I swipe my tongue along the center of her folds and when the nub of her clit hits my upper lip, I wrap my mouth over it, sucking it into my mouth. She wiggles her hips, but I hold her firm against me. Allowing my pierced tongue to play and excite her. I bring one hand up to push a finger into her and the sounds of her wetness has my dick weeping with the

eagerness to get wrapped in her wetness. Plunging another finger in, she bucks against me, and my body is burning with desire to feel her. "Trey," she whispers, gripping the sides of my head. Not letting up, I continue the rhythmic push and pull of my fingers while my mouth tantalizes her clit. Her body's constant squirming signals she's coming close, so I continue to thrust two fingers into her and curve them up to reach her g-spot. Instantly, her whole body arches up and her hips attempt to get away, but I keep her steady to allow her to experience the waves of pleasure. Slowing my tongue's pace and resting my fingers inside of her, I patiently wait for her body to calm.

recover as I rub her clit with my thumb, and my fingers escape her warmth. "Holy shit," she murmurs, and I laugh, relieved that I just gave her at least one orgasm she'll hopefully never forget.

Inching my way up her naked body,

my guy is about to bust open the zipper

I smile up at her, watching her

of my jeans. Almost immediately she sits up and pushes me onto my back. Before I can register what happened, she's straddling me. "You have way too many clothes on to play this game." She coyly smiles at me as her hands grab the hem of my t-shirt and swiftly strips it off me. Her hands trail across my shoulders and down my stomach. Her fingers quickly unbutton my jeans, and my hips

unconsciously buck with the impatience to be freed. She takes off my pants and boxers in one swoop, and my cock springs up, eager and ready. Her hands wrap around my length, and she strokes me a few times before her lips land on mine again. As I'm propped up on my hands, her body leans into mine. The heat that's radiating between us is becoming unbearable.

"I can't hold off much longer, baby," I mumble when her lips leave mine and escape to flutter down my chest.

"Condoms?" she asks, and I point her to the drawer next to the bed. When she reaches across me to get them, I quickly beat her to it after realizing what's in there. But she snatches it from my hand and tears the foil packet open with her teeth. My come boils up inside me when she descends upon me. Feeling her mouth and the latex covering my hard dick at the same time has me practically coming before we get started. She flirtatiously smiles my way after she's finished and I grasp her hips and flip her over.

head of my cock at her opening.

"Now, Trey," she instructs, and I happily oblige. The hot slickness has my dick begging my brain to release, but I count off music chords in my head, so I

can get myself under control to at least

"God, I can't wait," I say with the

get her off one more time. Plunging forward, a long moan seeps out of her, and a groan just as long releases from me. I've never felt something so fucking good in all my life. She brings her knees up along the sides of my torso, and I start moving in slow circles with shallow and deeper thrust mixed in, finding our rhythm. It's not long before our bodies are colliding together in an easy flow of movement. With every thrust of mine, she bucks against me. I lay on my forearms, caging her head between my arms. Bending down, I seize her lips with mine, and she quickly opens, allowing my tongue to mingle with hers. The gentle entangling mixed with the wetness and taste of the sweetness that's her, has me counting those chords again.

Unable to last much longer, I use what always gets a girl to climax. Except this time, it's not dirty words spilling out of my mouth but something out of ordinary for me. Moving my head into the crook of her neck, her heavy

breaths pulsate at my ear. "You feel so good, Kailey," I begin conveying foreign, but truthful, words, and her unintelligible mutters just keep flowing. "You're everything...everything I didn't know I wanted, but everything I've needed." She wraps her arms around my shoulders, pulling me harder into her. "I'll never get enough of this feeling of me and you together." Kissing right below her ear, her grip becomes tighter and her nails dig into my back. My

thrusts become more forceful the closer I feel she is, and when she constricts her thighs around my hips, I still inside of her, joining her in the ecstasy we've created.

My body collapses on top of her, and

My body collapses on top of her, and I kiss her neck one more time before pushing myself up on my arms. When I find those loving eyes, I can't help but catch the words that are about to stumble out. Instead, like a dumbass, I say, "That was incredible." I give her a chaste kiss on the lips, and when my face pulls back love has been replaced with sadness. Shit, did she expect me to say those words? It's only been two weeks, way too soon for those, right? Slowly, I pull out of her and go into the bathroom to

"Fuck." How could I be so stupid? Why didn't I just tell her? I've never even had these feelings for Zoey, and w

dispose of the condom.

even had these feelings for Zoey, and we were together for a year. But what if I'm wrong and she wasn't expecting me to divulge my love to her? Maybe she was disappointed in my performance. Hell no, from the way her body was grinding so hard against mine there's no way that could be it. I cup the cold water in my hands and splash it on my face. Staring into the mirror for a few beats, I contemplate my life before her and now with her in it. Shit.

When I finally emerge out of the bathroom, she's under the covers texting someone on her phone. She turns my way

when she hears me and tucks her phone by her side. "Hey." She scoots up in the bed, and I can't help but think the fact that she's still naked has to be a good sign.

"Hey," I mimic her and don't miss a beat before I climb under the sheets and take her in my arms. Her adorable giggle that always makes my heart skip a beat bounces off the walls. Laying her on her back, I prop myself on my elbow and take one last look at her naked in my bed just in case what I'm about to reveal makes her jet. "So..." her green eyes find mine, never wavering. A small smile spreads across her face as if she knows what I'm about to say. "I know it's crazy. I know we've barely been

together, but Kailey Reynolds," I take a deep swallow, and her eyes begin to bug out, "I love you," I tell her, and her small smile becomes wide before it falters.

"Are you sure?" she asks, and my body inches back, but she places her hand on arm. "Please, don't say it unless you mean it. I know there was something there between us a minute ago. Just, please, Trey, don't say it just to make me happy." Wetness fills her eyes.

I sit up and stare down at her now glossy green gems. Eyes which captured me before they staked their claim to a part of my body I never thought could beat for someone else like it does now "Kailey, I promise you, I love you. I

ignited in me, but, believe me, I would never tell you if I didn't honestly know what it was. You bring something to my life that I thought could never be found. You make me believe in something I never thought was for me. Hell, you have me dreaming of kids, a dog, and white picket fence. But, please, baby, tell me you feel the same way. If you don—."

can't describe this feeling that you've

whispers.

No other words are needed. I place my hands on either side of her face and crash my lips to hers. Without stopping, I roll her over to lay on top of me, and her

long hair cascades around our faces,

"I love you too, Trey Michaels," she

She places her finger over my lips.

encasing our locked lips in a warm cocoon. "God, Kailey, thank you," I mumble between short breaks from kissing. "You won't regret it," I murmur against her lips.

"Please, don't break my heart." She pulls back from me slightly, doing her looking into my sole stare thing.

"I'll do everything in my power not to," I honestly answer, and she leans down leaving mere millimeters between our lips.

"Devoted Trey?" She laughs, realizing how horrible that nickname is. "How about hot ass boyfriend?" I

counter.

"Well—every hot ass boyfriend needs a beautiful girlfriend," she teases.

"This hot ass boyfriend already has someone way out of his league." I raise my face, so my lips can reach her neck. "I've got a girlfriend who has a hot ass." I smack it before gripping it with my hand, and a low squeal escapes her. "Amazing set of tits." I kiss the other side of her neck, and she playfully slaps me. "Her face, so fucking beautiful no one comes close to her." I kiss her lips, and her body begins melting into mine. "Do you want to know why I'm so lucky to have such a beautiful girlfriend?" I wait for her to answer, but she just nods. "Because she loves me." My lips slowly graze over hers, and I place my hand on the back of her neck to draw her closer

to me.

She attempts to mumble between our lips to deny my words, but I hold her in place, unable to fight it. I realize how lucky I am that she's giving me her heart, and I meant what I said, I will hold it tight with everything I have. I just hope that's enough.

time, although we didn't take it as slow as we did the first time, I have to say, this love-making thing is actually better than fucking against a bathroom stall. Or maybe it's just Kailey that makes it so incredible: the realization dawns on me, like I've discovered life on Mars. I throw on a pair of my pajama pants, and

After I make love to Kailey one more

toss Kailey a pair of my sweats and a tshirt. "Man, you're so adorable." I kiss her nose after she rolls my pants over a few times at the waist and each leg. "I'm starving." she says as we

"I'm starving," she says as we descend the stairs. All the lights are off, which means all my roommates are gone. When we get into the kitchen, I notice it's only midnight, and I smile, figuring we have a few more hours before they all stumble in.

I open the fridge. "What do you

want?" I look around; hoping like hell Brady or Sadie made something we could snag. Spotting Brady's chicken salad, I take it out, and Kailey's face lights up when she grabs some croissants on the counter.

"Will they mind?" she asks. I really need to get her around my friends more. "Nah." I snatch the bag out of her

hands and pull out two. While I cut the

buttery croissant in half, she hops up on the counter. The temptation to take her in this kitchen is almost too much to bear. But even though I've done it before in much different circumstances, I'm not about to take the chance of one of my roommates seeing any part of Kailey's naked body, especially Rob.

Once I'm finished preparing the sandwiches, I rest the plate next to Kailey and position myself between her legs. Picking up half of a sandwich, I place it in front of her lips, and she takes a small bite. "Awe, come on, baby, you

can take more than that," I coax her. She cocks her eyebrows before letting her mouth widen and her lips rest over the flaky bread. Shit, I'm half hard when the image of her mouth hovering over a part of my body flashes through my mind.

As she begins to chew, she captures the sandwich from my hands and copies by gesture. "Why don't you show me how it's done, big boy?" She places it right to my lips, and I quickly snap a big bite, similar to an alligator being fed for the first time in a week.

Her body falls back in a fit of giggles as I chew the huge amount in my mouth, probably not looking my finest at this moment. Leaving her laughing on the counter, I head back to the fridge and take out a soda and water. I'd bought her diet coke on the slim chance she'd be at my place. Opening the can, I hand it over to her, and she takes a sip but a small amount dribbles down her chin. And now it's my time to laugh. When I chuckle at her, she kicks me, and I grab her leg, wrapping it around to my back.

As soon as I'm against her, she places her other leg around me, and my tongue licks the diet coke up before she can get a napkin.

"Yeah, this isn't going to work," I

"Yeah, this isn't going to work," I tell her, bending my head down to her neck. My tongue swipes up every last drop of the dark liquid.

"What?" she questions softly while her hands grip my shoulders.

"I need you again, and I'm not ready to fuck you against the damn cabinets—at least not yet anyways. I need you in my bed with doors locked, so no one can interrupt us." Picking her up, I hand her the plate of sandwiches and the drink. She giggles, attempting to hold everything while my lips remain on her neck and earlobe.

"You could wait until we get upstairs," she says.

"Hell no, it's your fault," I inform her and pull back slightly.

"What's my fault?" she leans back from me.

"You're too fucking gorgeous and edible for me to keep my hands off." I firmly squeeze her ass, and her body rises up allowing my mouth to find the swell of her breast.

"I guess there could be worse things." She shrugs her shoulders, wearing a huge ass smile.

"Just remember that every time I have to take you into a closet, bathroom, or, hell, some nook on campus, it's all your fault." I chuckle into the crease of her breasts, and she only squeezes her legs tighter around my torso. "Keep doing that and we won't make it upstairs."

"Who said I wanted to wait until we get upstairs?" Looking down at me she arches her eyebrow.

Shit, this girl really was meant for me, but fuck if I'm letting asshole Rob

see any bare inch of her.

"Believe me, baby, I'll find some obscure spots to fuck you, but tonight we are only making love in my bed." I wink.

"Promises, promises," she says, and I'm half tempted to prove her wrong.

"Now, get me up to that bed right now." Her one foot kicks my ass lightly like a cowgirl kicks her horse to gallop.

cowgirl kicks her horse to gallop.

"Yes, ma'am," I adhere to her wishes, climbing the stairs as fast as possible.

Chapter 11

Kailey

I drive my beat up Honda over to Trey's house. The plan is to drive with him to the auditorium. It's his graduation day. and I can't believe how fast the day has arrived. A month after we confessed our love for one another, we're still going strong. Unfortunately, Jen is not. Although she, Caden, and the kids are coming for the big party tonight, she mostly likely won't be able to stay long. Trey's been amazing, coming over with me to help Caden or Jen out. He even

takes the kids to the park on a regular basis. Jen's still a bit skeptical on letting him watch them on his own just yet, but we have a day planned next week to have pedicures while Trey and Jessa watch the kids. For some reason, Jen is much more comfortable having two people with no prior experience with children than one.

The driveway is packed full of cars, so I have to find a spot along the street. Trey assured me I wouldn't be meeting his family until after the ceremony, so I'm assuming all the vehicles belong to Sadie and Brady's relatives. But from what I'd heard, they both have hardly any family. I barely get to the door before it swings open and a guy, who

looks a lot like Trey without tattoos or piercing, blatantly looks me up and down. A sandwich fills his hand, and his mouth continues chewing for an awkward moment before he asks me, "What's up?" and all of a sudden my nerves get the better of me. My voice goes mute, and I contemplate running down the walkway to my car. Before I can say anything, Trey pushes the guy out of the doorway.

"She's my girlfriend, asshole," he says, smiling at me in the pin stripe button down shirt we bought last night. "Hey, baby." He steps out and pulls me up off my feet, swinging me around. "Can you believe I'm graduating?" he whispers in my ear. That gut wrenching

stomach all day from the worry of not having any idea how long I'll have him here flares into an even bigger fear. He's been searching for a job nonstop and soon someone will snag him up, he's too talented of an architect. Jeez, I'm envious, since I'll most likely be taking time off of school after Jen... Tears sting my eyes for the fear the inevitable is coming too fast. I'm bound to lose my sister and the man I love all at once. After he rests my feet back on the

feeling that's been consuming my

After he rests my feet back on the ground, I notice how truly happy he is. "What's the matter?" He places his thumb under my eye before a tear escapes. "Jen?" he asks, and I shake my head and place the biggest smile on my

"No. I'm just really happy for you," I say. I'm not lying, I am happy for him.

face.

He's worked hard to get here, and he has every reason to be proud of himself.

"Awe, thanks, Kailey, you'll be here before you know it," he tells me and kisses my lips. I wonder if I'll ever be in his shoes, graduating and ready to start a new venture.

"Who do we have here?" A woman stands in the doorway. She's wearing a nice blue pants suit with a matching pair of heels. Her short chic haircut and just the right amount of make-up to look natural, but it's the shape of her eyes and the smile identical to Trey's which already tells me who she is.

"This is Kailey, Mom. Kailey, this is my mom." He wraps his arm around my waist, and I step forward with my hand.

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs.

Michaels," I say, but she shoos it away and takes me in her arms.
"You can call me Elena." Her rose

scented perfume compliments her nicely. When she pulls back, she holds me by my upper arms. "It's so nice to meet you, Kailey. Now, the family has taken over this house and you most likely won't remember all their names, but I'll do my best to give you small snippets to remember them by." She places her arm around my shoulders and leads me into the house.

"Mom," Trey calls out, but she

ignores him. I glance over my shoulder, and he just smiles, allowing his mother to kidnap me.

In all the times I've been to the

house, I've never seen it like this. There are some small kids running around chasing each other while adults talk loudly. Some baseball game streams in the family room while a group of guys sit around chomping on sandwiches and chips arguing about teams. We stand in the doorway and Elena points out each person, rambling names to me. "That's Trey's older brother, Jack.

he's married to Irene. IRENE!" she yells, and the small petite blonde looks over and waves at me before wrestling the toddler in her arms. "The bald one is

Trey's Uncle Mike, he's not married and no kids. Divorced," she whispers as though he's a murderer. Not sure if he heard her, but he nods my way. *Crap, awkward*.

So, far I mentally keep track in my

head. Trey has two uncles; one married, one divorced. There's also an older brother with a wife and at least one kid. Who are all these other people? Once we get to the kitchen, my lungs constrict, and I'm dangerously close to having a panic attack. Practically wall to wall people fill the small space, but it doesn't stop Elena. She walks right through everyone, dragging me along with her hand in mine and stops right behind a large man, probably six-three, with dark

hair. When she taps him on the shoulder, he turns around from the stove, his brown eyes match Trey's.

"Oh Kailey, I've heard so many nice

"Oh Kailey, I've heard so many nice things about you," he says, wrapping his arms around me and kissing me on the cheek. "I'm Pete, Trey's dad," he introduces himself, although I already figured it out. "Hey, everyone, this is Kailey," he points down to me, and the room quiets, "Trey's girlfriend." They all begin to talk at once with happiness filling their voices.

"We've been waiting a long time for Trey to get serious with someone," Elena whispers in my ear.

"Oh," I remain quiet, unable to process everything that just happened

within the last fifteen minutes. Before I can do anything else, a hand appears on my wrist and yanks me out of the family circle staring down at me with clear speculation about what makes me so special. When I'm pulled into his arms, my body calms.

whispers, clasping my hands with his. "Go about your day. Eat, drink, and mind your own fucking business," Trey shouts and an older lady smacks him across the back of his head. "Sorry, Aunt Rita," he says, and she shakes her head.

"Sorry, they're a bit—much," he

"There's damn children running around here," she says and smiles at him. "It's nice to meet you, Kailey." After a quick nod toward me, she walks into the throngs of people, disappearing quickly.

"Let's go," he says leading me

"Let's go," he says, leading me toward the staircase. Once we get into his room, after being delayed by at least five people wanting introductions, he captures my lips with his, and our tongues immediately meet. "I missed you last night," he murmurs against my lips as he walks me backwards toward the bed.

When the back of my legs hit the soft mattress, he pushes me gently, so I fall backward. "You'll wrinkle my dress," I joke.

"We could solve that problem easily," he slyly says, starting to unbutton my dress. I let him get two down before stopping him.
"You're whole family is
downstairs," I remind him, starting to sit

downstairs," I remind him, starting to sit up on my elbows and button up my dress.

"All the better, they'll never hear

us." He playfully smacks my fingers off the buttons while his lips explore my collarbone. "You could be screaming my name, and they'll never even know." He snakes his hand up the hem of my dress and rests it on the side of my panties.

"No way, I just met them." I start scooting up on the bed, but he only follows me, like a tiger, intent to get his prey. "I'm really starting to think you should be called Tiger Trey," I tease.
"Why?" He continues his slow

steady path toward me, and soon I run out of bed.

"You come toward me slowly and deliberately, like a tiger stalks its prey." I smile up at him, but he quickly dives for my neck and gives a small nibble.

"Come on, baby, show me your cat side. Rip this shirt off me and have your way with me," he says seriously, but I shake my head and chuckles begin to escape him. "God, I love you. I'll give you a pass, but you're sleeping here tonight, and I want a big 'ole congratulations romp."

"You got it, but I bet you'll be too drunk to finish the job." He sits back on his legs and stares down at my body. "Never, baby—never," he tells me, and I bite my lower lip.

"We shall see. I'm still waiting for the time you take me in some sleazy unexpected place." I remind him of his

unexpected place," I remind him of his promise, and he shakes his head. "I have to go to the bathroom." I get up and make my way to the door.

"You're better than that. When will

you understand that?" He says softly and seriously, but somehow I worry he doesn't have that burning desire for me like those other girls. I want that animal in him to need me so bad that he can't wait until we find a bed. "Make sure Dex's door is locked," he calls out. Every time I'm over here, he double checks that I lock the door before doing anything.

before going to the bathroom. The noise filters in from downstairs, and I imagine tonight will be crazy. After I wash my hands and check my dress and make-up, I unlock Dex's door. Hearing soft moans, I guess a house full of guests don't stop some people. Trey's back is to me when I emerge. His body looks magnificent in his nice button down shirt tucked into black slacks that hug his ass perfectly. "You ready?" I announce my presence.

I make sure everything is locked

His head turns my way to look over his shoulder, and then turns and drops something in the drawer before I hear it shut. "You look beautiful," he says, and I wonder what exactly he was just doing. "Everything okay?" I take his head in my hands and peer into his eyes. My dad told me a long time ago, the truth is in the eyes.

"Of course," he says, but I see the hint of sadness that clings to them. I don't know what's weighing on his mind, but one thing is certain, he'll tell me when he's ready.

The commencement music begins, and I spot Grant and then Brady emerge through the doors in their cap and gowns. Brady's sister and father, Jessa's parents, and Sadie's mom begin snapping pictures of them. Jessa comes

out a few minutes later, waving her hand at her family. Sam eagerly stands up, nudging in front of Dex to take a picture, and when Jessa gives her a thumbs up, the light catches her ring. Grant's peering over to her, and their eyes find each other before she takes her seat. They truly love each other, and I wonder

They truly love each other, and I wonder why I was ever jealous of her and Trey. Then my heart stops as Trey's smile

outshines everyone else when he walks through the doors. He's sexy as hell, and I wish I could take him right here, claiming him as mine. "Oh, he looks so happy," Elena says behind me.

"Yes, he does, and hot," Sadie's

Grandma Ida, chimes in next to me. She's been chewing my ear off this whole time about how hot all the guys that live in the house are, and how she wishes Brady would invite her to move in. I have to say, as disturbing as some of the things that come out of her mouth are, she had me rolling with laughter, which made the awkwardness of being left alone with Trey's family a little easier to deal with. "I told Brady, he should really consider getting a tattoo." She pokes me in the leg to make sure I'm listening. I hear her, but all my attention is on the guy walking through the metal folding chairs while his eyes remain on mine. My heart melts when he winks at me before taking a seat between two females, whom I notice are appreciating him as well. Lucky for me, though, he's

paying them no attention. Shooting a nod to Brady and Grant, he smiles widely Jessa's way.

Sadie is the last to walk, and her mom starts frantically waving at her. Sadie raises the hand at her hip to let her mom know she sees her. "Sadie, always the shy one," Ida tells me. "Sometimes I wish she took more after me," Ida continues talking. "At least she found herself someone like Brady. I mean his body is, well, I don't have to tell you. But he loves her the way a man should." She turns directly toward me. "Does that

tattoo god you're dating love you good?"
A giggle sneaks out of me before
realizing she's serious. I can practically
feel all the heads of Trey's family

leaning closer, waiting for my answer. "Um, yeah, he loves me good," I tell her, and she pats my leg.

"That's good, sweetheart. Everyone deserves to be loved right."

Before I can blink, Elena is next to

me. How the hell did she manage that? I swear there was a man next to me the last time I checked. Keeping my eyes focused forward, I quickly look from the corner of my eye, and she's staring at the side of my face. "So?" she whispers, and I slowly turn to face her. She must notice my confused expression because she begins talking again, "So, do you love him?" The hopefulness in her eyes would have me saying yes even if it wasn't true. Luckily, for both of us, it is.

before her arms fly around my shoulders. When I wrap mine around her, I see Trey peering up from the gym floor, cocking

"Yes," I answer, and she shrieks

his eyebrow up to us.
"Elena, quiet down," Pete softly tells to her.

"Yeah, mom, seriously," Trey's younger brother, Derek, joins his dad in his moms reprimanding.

"Oh shhh, you two," she says shooing her hands at them. "This girl loves my baby." Her face beams so bright.

"I thought I was your baby," Derek jokingly whines and then chuckles with his dad.

"Oh, you're all my babies," she

adds. "And he loves you," she whispers directly into my ear before leaning back and winking at me. "A mother knows these things."

"I know. He's a great guy," I say, feeling uncomfortable and awkward about what I should be doing or saying back.

"Will you come home with him for

Julyfourth? We have a huge bar-b-que with all the family." She continues talking softly as some guest speaker about Microphysics rambles in the background. I vaguely wonder how many more family members they could possibly have.

"I'll definitely try," I tell her honestly, although it will be a fat chance due to Jen's health. The last place I want to be is too far and be unable to get home.

"Oh, you have to. I'll talk to Trey later about all the plans." After that, she quiets down.

She seems like such an amazing Mom, and thoughts of my own mom fleetingly flit through my mind. It's been so long, my memory has started to fade of her. In so many ways, Jen is my second mom. How ironic that I'll most likely be that way to Jen's children, unless Caden remarries. Just the thought of some other woman caring for my nieces and nephews has my stomach churning. Not that I don't want him to be happy, it's just... I hate it when my mind

wanders.
Thankfully, the applause snaps me out of my thoughts. Well, that and

out of my thoughts. Well, that and Grandma Ida poking me in the side. Brady and Grant accept their diplomas, and return to their seats. After Jessa crosses the stage and she's on her way to her seat, Grant gets up and pulls her into a big bear hug, swinging her around. He whispers something into her ear and redness fills her cheeks when he lets her

go.
"He probably said something sexual," her sister Sam says from in front of me, elbowing Dex.

"Samantha," her mom scolds, but Sam and Dex just laugh, like teenagers.

Trey's name is announced, and he

crosses the stage, shaking everyone's hands. The Dean of Architecture pulls him in and whispers something in his ear. Trey appears shockingly taken back, but a wide smile forms on his lips immediately. I wonder what he just told him. Maybe he got that job in Cincinnati. I know the Dean was putting a good word in for him. Oh God, a tear comes into my eyes thinking about him leaving me. I've tried to prepare myself for a Trey Michaels free life, but we've gotten so close this past month. He walks down the stairs and rounds the corner to his row. Staring up at me, he gives me a thumbs up along with a huge smile. I think I'm going to be sick. After that Sadie walks across the

about her a little more I really become disinterested in the whole ceremony. My thoughts go from my sister's death to Trey leaving and everything in between. I'll soon be left alone, especially if Caden remarries. Sure, I'll be their aunt, probably one of those crazy aunts with all the animals. They won't want to come over to Crazy Aunt Kailey's house filled with plants and animals that I have named and have conversations with daily.

stage, and Grandma Ida begins bragging

"Let's go, girl." Grandma Ida pokes me in the side with her long fingernail for the umpteenth time. When I look up, the ceremony is over and everyone has already started filing out of the auditorium. "She's nice, but kind of ding-batty," I hear her whisper to Sadie's Mom.

A little annoyed at this point, I follow the others inch by inch to the end of the row. Not sure why Ida was so insistent to move, it's not like we're going anywhere. After about twenty minutes, I inhale a big breath, relieved we're out of the claustrophobic surroundings. I don't have much time to recoup before I'm swept up into someone's arms. "I'm a college graduate, baby!" Trey swings me around in utter excitement

"Congratulations." I kiss his cheek, and he places me on the ground. My feet don't hit the linoleum floor before his family rushes over. I begin to back up slowly, but he grabs my hand between the throng of people and brings me back to him. As his family gives him hugs and kisses, he keeps my hand in his, rubbing his thumb over my knuckles.

"Pictures" Troy's dad calls out, and

"Pictures," Trey's dad calls out, and you would think a drill sergeant just screamed at them the way the group scrambles into formation. It's as though everyone knows exactly where they are assigned to stand. Trey is swallowed whole by his family, so I slowly back up. After a few shots, I ask Pete if he would like for me to take the picture, so they can have one with the whole family. He kindly hands over his camera, but Grant comes over and takes it from my

"Thanks, man," Trey head nods to him. "Come on, Kailey," he calls me over, and everyone parts to give me

hands.

space next to him. He tugs me against him so hard, his hand snakes across and grabs my ass, and I paste a perfectly wide smile on, trying not give away where Trey's hand has currently taken residence. "It's mine later," he whispers, and I jokingly roll my eyes, even though I secretly love it when he talks like that

"We'll see about that," I tease. "Hey, what did Dean Girardo tell you on stage?" I can't hold out any longer. If he's leaving me, I need to know.

A distraught look quickly comes

over his face. "We'll talk about it later," he says before shuffling all of us down

to the cars.

Chapter 12

Trey

I can't believe I'm a college graduate. It's the most liberating feeling I've ever had. Well, when Kailey told me she loved will always be the top, but this is definitely my second. No more classes, no more exams, or papers. Hallelujah and after what Dean Girardo told me when I got my diploma, I can finally rest easy. Kailey will be just as excited as me, it's an opportunity of a lifetime, and I'm sure she'll feel the same way.

Once we get back to the house, the

few family members that couldn't actually go to the ceremony quickly come outside to congratulate me. I never thought this many members of my huge family would make the trip down here. I love my family. Luckily, they love Kailey too, not that I didn't think they would. I mean, how could anyone not love her?

We all enter the house and my mouth waters, smelling the food that's been cooking all day. I told my parents we should cater, but they just don't do things that way. Thankfully, Brady had no problem with them taking over the house. But I'm pretty sure he didn't expect it would be this intense either.

A few hours later, most of our

for Brady, anyone who knows him can clearly notice he's about two seconds from throwing up at any moment. Sadie leans over him, constantly asking him if he's feeling okay, placing the back of her hand on his forehead and her palm on his neck. He just shakes his head and tries his best to convince her that he's fine. After she finally goes upstairs, per Jessa's request for a sweatshirt, all the guys start to file outside. Kailey seems pretty occupied with her sister and Caden, so I just point to the backyard, and she nods. The stage

was already set up earlier, so all we

friends have shown up, and some of the family has left with the exception of our immediate ones. Tonight is a big night candle. The most amusing part is Sadie did most of the prep work for her own moment. Grandma Ida hollers for everyone to come outside. I take my spot behind my drums as Grant and Dex swing their instruments around them. Maura, Brady's sister along with her family and his Dad, know what's going on when they find Brady on stage with the microphone in his hand. When Kailey walks out the back door, I wink her way, and she smiles at

have to worry about is some minor

twinkling lights from tree to tree

details. We turn on the streams of white

illuminate the dark area along with small mason jars hanging from the trees. We all scramble around, trying to light each Brady and every once in a while he closes his eyes. Why he's so scared, I have no idea. Their love is clear as day to everyone. No way his proposal won't go well.

Then Jessa comes out and gives two

me. You can see the sweat dripping from

thumbs to Brady and us. He takes a deep breath, and I raise my sticks to count us off. When Sadie appears in the doorway, confused about where everyone went, we start playing "Never Stop" by SafetySuit. Tears automatically fill her eyes, and Jessa gives her a little nudge to walk forward. She follows the rainbow colored daisy path, looking into Brady's eyes the whole time. When their hands meet, you can see a calmness

come over Brady's body. He places her in the sole chair in front of the stage and gets down on his knee, singing every word only to her.

We fade our instruments as the song ends, and Brady places the mic on the ground and digs in his pocket. "Sadie, you are my one and only. You've taught me how to love, showed me how wonderful life can be when you trust someone with your whole heart. From the moment I saw you on that hill, I knew, you owned me. So, what do you say? Do you want me?" He smirks up at her, and she laughs through the tears streaming down her face.

Sadie wipes her tears with her back of her hand. "Yes, always, as long as we

don't let go," she finally says.

"I'll never let go, baby. Marry me,
make a family with me, and grow old

make a family with me, and grow old with your hand in mine?" he asks, and if I thought the tears were going before, it's like a damn flood now.

She nods, and Brady places the ring

on her finger. He picks her up and whispers something in her ear, and she looks like a damn bobble head she's nodding so much.

I step out from behind the drums and

grab the microphone. "Ladies and gentleman, the soon to be Mr. and Mrs. Brady Carsen," I exclaim, and the whole backyard claps. All the girls have tears in their eyes while the guys move over to the coolers for more beer and drinks.

When I spot Brady and Sadie sneaking off into the house, I know we just lost our singer. "So, everyone, looks like we need a new singer for at least an hour or so," I joke, and everyone laughs. "Let's have open mic night," I announce.

Before I can put the microphone

back on the stand, Kailey's sister Jen comes running up and snatches it out of my hand. This lady amazes me. Yesterday she was lying on the couch for most of the day while Kailey and I watched the kids. But I shouldn't be surprised, ever since I've met Kailey, Jen's health has been a rollercoaster of good and bad days. She huddles all of us together and tucks the mic behind her back, so no one hears her. "Okay, guys,

let's do 'I Love Rock 'N Roll' by—,"
"Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, we
know it," Dex interrupts and strings a
few chords for her.

"Great," she exclaims, beaming from ear to ear. I sit behind my drums really wishing that I had Kailey with me. Maybe I can convince her to come and sit on my lap for a few songs. But right now she's rallied the troops to watch their mom perform. Caden holds Drew in his arms, shaking his head in amusement at his outrageous wife. Kailey sits on the ground with the two wide-eyed girls in her lap, staring in awe at their mother. Our eyes catch

briefly before I'm about to start the beat. As I cross my arms and my foot presses

on the petal, my sticks start drumming. She licks her lips and images of that tongue in my mouth, or around me, has me shifting on my stool.

Jen starts singing the words, strutting

back and forth on the make shift stage. Grant and Dex laugh while joining in singing when she places the microphone in their face. All the guests are front and center, with a few couples dancing, my parents included. Kailey, Chloe, and Tara clap their hands to the beat, and Jen walks off stage and sings right in their faces before stomping her way back up to us. Everyone is engaged and loving her, she should have been a performer. Then it's time and Grant steps up, playing his solo and Jessa screams, "Go

baby," and raises her hands with a rock on hand symbol.

Jen drags the girls up on stage and gets down on her knees, allowing them to scream into the microphone. After what seems like a zillion 'I love rock 'n rolls' we fade the song, and Jen wraps her arms around the two small girls, kissing both their heads. She gets down on the grass, and Caden hands Drew off to Kailey before dipping his wife and kissing her. Chloe screams, "Gross." while Kailey and I share an amused laugh.

Before I can blink, Grandma Ida has the mic and is talking to Dex. He raises his eyebrows my way and she grabs his face, bringing his attention back down to mean we don't know any of the songs she's requesting. Finally, his head nods, and I wonder how long I'm going to be up here. Dex looks at me with an exasperated look before walking my way. Grant follows suit. "She wants 'Do You Love Me'," he whispers.

"Shit, are you sure?" Grant's eyes follow to Ida as she practices her twist.

her. I take his continuous head shakes to

doesn't break a hip," I joke.
"This should be fun." Dex plasters a smile across his face, and she smacks his ass on the way back to his side of the

"Alright," I agree. "Hopefully she

If I thought Jen hit it out of the park, Ida made it clear across the river.

stage.

yard, doing the mash potato and the twist. Not one person's body isn't moving. Chloe and Kailey hold hands while their ankles twist and hips bob back and forth. Shit, Kailey's ass looks fucking delicious right now. My eyes are so fixated on her tight jeans, hugging her ass as she shimmies back and forth that I don't notice a tall figure coming her way until his hands obstruct my view. Fucking Nate Gibson, what the hell is he doing at my party? Kailey looks back, and then turns making his hands fall off of her. That a girl. Chloe now between them, she continues to concentrate on the small girl in front of her, but Nate isn't

allowing her to distract him. I see his

Everyone circled around in the small

up, then apologizing to people after bumping into them. Shit, when will this song ever end? Running out of options, she picks Chloe up, and my brother Derek steps between her and Nate. Thanks, little bro. A few choice words back and forth between Derek and Nate happen before Nate turns around. Finally

the song ends, at least I hope it was supposed to end. Because I'm not

lips keep moving as she keeps backing

wasting my graduation night on this fucking stool unless her ass is in my lap.
With determined steps, I reach
Kailey, and the anxiousness in her eyes tells me she's scared I'm about to start a fight. Instead of chasing down Nate, I pull her toward me with Chloe in

between. "What did he say?" I whisper, and she shakes her head. She bends down, releasing Chloe and the little girl runs to her parents, who are already walking toward us. "Kailey, what did he say?" My voice sterner this time around.

"He just asked if he could cut in. It's

mannerisms tell me it was more. "What I

nothing." She waves me off, but her

don't understand Trey, is why he's

pursuing me now, after he dumped my ass after only two dates and one lackluster fuck?" I've never heard Kailey so angry.

"It's kind of stupid, but I'll be putting a stop to it," I attempt to appease her, but she won't stop huffing, and Jen is getting closer with every sigh from her

lips. The last thing I need is her big sister finding out Nate and I have always had a pissing contest involving girls. Kailey doesn't speak, just crosses

her arms over those perky breasts I was just admiring and shifts the hips attached the ass I had wanted to grab only moments ago. Impatiently waiting for my answer, those damn eyes bore into me like always when she wants to know I'm telling the truth.

Releasing a heavy sigh, I begin to

reveal a pretty immature and stupid fault. "Nate and I, we kind of compete for girls." Her arms collapse and her shoulders slump in disappointment. "Not like that, it's just occasionally if he saw me with a chick—."

"Nice, Trey," she rolls her eyes at my word choice.

"Girl," I correct it, but it does nothing to change her stance. "Anyways, if he saw me starting to get with a *girl* and I left to go get a drink or something, he would try to step in and grab her before I did." I swipe my hand over my head, completely humiliated to admit it to her.

"And would you do the same thing?" she asks, hands on hips now and Jen standing right beside me, sighing.

"Yeah," I shamefully admit softly as though she won't hear it. "It was a different time, before you," I add, but she just shakes her head and walks away.

"I'll talk to her," Jen says beside me. "It's not like we didn't know you were a himbo," she mentions with her back toward me

"What the fuck is a himbo?" I ask to myself.

"It's another word for male slut," a familiar girl's voice answers from behind me.

When I turn around, I wish I hadn't. "Hey, Bridg," I say.

"Hey, Trey." She fiddles with her red solo cup with her name written on it with small heart over the i and her B looks like a set of tits. "Nice playing," she compliments me.

"Thanks. Listen, I gotta go." I take steps back toward the house.

"Yeah, go get your crying debutant. Would hate for her to be upset," she sneers.

"Rein in the claws, Bridgette," I warn, but she continues to run her mouth. I look around thankful that everyone is wrapped up in their own conversations.

"Why would you choose her? She has nothing you want, or, for that matter, need." She steps closer and rakes her finger nail down my chest. "I know how you like your cock sucked, I can make you hard just by my dirty talk. What does she do? 'Oh, Trey'. Just a bunch of lame moans, I'm sure. I would bet you come thinking about someone else," she keeps ranting, and I've heard enough.

"Get over yourself, Bridgette, and

—," I'm about to tell her to fuck off when Kailey's gasp announces her presence at the door. Her face pale and her eyes filled with wetness. I stare between the two girls, before Kailey bolts back into the house. "Fuck off, Bridgette," I scream before following Kailey.

I weave through the masses of

bodies while hearing quarters dinging the tables and plastic cups being flipped. I half wonder where all the adults are, but I soon forget them when I spot the brunette hair briskly heading to the staircase. When I pass through the living room, I find all the adults. My parents, Jessa's parents, Sadie's mom and grandma are all sitting around drinking

coffee and chatting to themselves. "Trey," my mom calls out, but I ignore her, taking the stairs two at a time.

When I spring the door open, Kailey's head is in her hands. Getting down on my knees, I place my hands on the outside of her thighs, hoping she'll talk to me. "I'm sorry," I tenderly apologize.

Her head springs up and anger floods her eyes. "What exactly are you sorry for?"

"That you had to hear that, for who I was before I met you, for the fact that Nate is trying to get you back. Although, don't worry, I'll handle that." I ramble every possible thing I can think of. Not that I don't regret it all, I do.

"Was she your fuck buddy?" she asks, staring up at me through her dark eyelashes.

I sigh. "Yeah," I admit, and she takes a deep breath.

"That's what I thought. You do know she wants more," she informs me, but allows me to take her hands.

I entwine our fingers. God, her warmth feels good right now. "Maybe, but she's not getting it." I use my hand and raise her chin, so she can look me right in the eye like she usually does. "I only want and *need* one person—you." A small smile begins to claim her lips, and I've never been more relieved. "Please, know, I don't want her, baby. I

"Please, know, I don't want her, baby. I don't want anyone else. Just you." I gently push her back on the bed. "You're the one I love. You're the one I see my future with." My lips travel up her neck as my knees nudge her legs apart. "Do you believe me?" I whisper, and she nods her head. "Tell me, Kailey," I beg.

"I love you, Trey," she whispers back and hearing those three words escape her mouth, all my self-control flies out the window. Not caring about the house full of people or that someone could walk in on us at any time, there's no way I'm leaving her body even for the minute to take care of the task of locking the door. I pull my shirt over my head and her hands splay across my chest

Our lips meet and frantically delve

into one another's. Teeth knock, lips bitten. You would never guess we just had sex less than twenty-four hours ago with the way we strip not only each other's but our own clothes off our bodies with pure lust that fills the four walls. I can't get enough of her. "Fuck me, Trey," she requests, and I need to be

inside of her so damn bad.

I rip her soaked satin pink panties from her body and toss them to the floor while she leans forward and twists her arms behind her to unclasp her bra. Her breast spring out with pebbled nipples. My hands don't let me think twice before they're over the small mounds of flesh, rolling the pink nubs through my fingers. She slides her big toes into my boxers

and pushes them down my legs. As I step out of them, I open the drawer and grab a condom. Wishing like hell she would do it with her mouth again, but not wanting to waste any time, I tear open the foil and roll it over my hard cock. "Hurry," she breathes, and I don't waste time getting between her soft silky legs, thrusting in immediately. Her moan confirms that's exactly what she wanted. Instead of the usual gentleness I do with her, I lunge in and out, driving deeper with every thrust. God, she's so fucking warm and wet. It's a perfect fit for my dick as her folds encase me, like

a warm sweater on the coldest of winter nights. Her legs wrap around my hips, and her nails dig in my shoulders,

pushing me faster and harder. Her eagerness makes me that much hotter and harder. Our lips suck and lick each other's neck and shoulders. Then her moans turn to wails, and she's begging me not to stop. Not like I would. When her teeth sink into my flesh, and she tightens around my cock, I'm done. The come bolts out of my cock at record pace, I collapse on top of her, and she holds me in her arms.

That's the difference between fucking a one-time girl and fucking your girlfriend; I would have already been up and out the door by now, but with Kailey it's different. She can tell me to fuck her, and I can throw her around like a rag doll, but as soon as it's over, we're back

to the love. "You're amazing," I say, and she just continues to catch her breath in the sweet comfort of our embrace.

Kailey and I don't rush to go back

downstairs, knowing the party will still be there in an hour or so. We cozy up under the blankets, and I hold her close to my chest. "Congratulations, graduate," she softly says with her fingers tracing over the drum set tattoo on my chest. "How does it feel?" she asks.

"Fucking amazing." I mindlessly rub my own hand back and forth down her

bare arm.
"I'll have to experience it through

you." Her voice lowers.
"Hey," I nudge her head up so she can see me, "you'll graduate, Kailey.

We'll make it work." I have no doubt we will. It might be hard after Jen...but I won't let her not finish her degree.
"Wo'll soo," she says, shrugging her

"We'll see," she says, shrugging her shoulders like there's no way it will happen. "Are you excited?" "Of course. Not to make you feel

bad, but no more tests or early classes."
Not that I'll be far removed from it.

"When do you leave?" she questions, and I feel wetness against my chest. Is she crying?

"Leave for where?" I sit up a little, so she has no choice but to reveal her face. When she does, she has long lines of mascara down each cheek. How did I not realize she's been crying this whole time?

"Cincinnati."

"Why would I be in Cincinnati?" I feel like we're playing some twisted game again.

"The job, isn't that what Dean Girardo was talking to you about at the ceremony?"

"Kailey," I curtly spout, a little angered that she would assume I'd make a decision that major without consulting her. "He offered me a job. Here, at Western." I had plans to make a big deal of it. Take her to a nice dinner, have a real date for once. Rest her mind that's been worried about me leaving and watch her face light up knowing I'd be here for at least a year, until she graduated.

"What? You can't teach—," she says, her voice rising back up to the normal level, if not a little excited as well.

"They're building that new fitness center. They need architects, and he asked me to accompany the team. All the senior graduates had to do a blueprint for our last assignment. Mine got accepted—well, parts of it did. It'll be a mixture of a lot designs submitted. I'll work under him as a paid intern and gain the experience."

She immediately straddles me and places her hands on my face. "So, you're staying? You'll be here for a while?" she questions.

"At least another year, long enough

to get you graduated, then we can find somewhere to go *together*, or stay here," I admit with a shrug, as though her reaction is exactly what I pictured. There's no way, I'm going anywhere without her.

"Oh, Trey," she exclaims. She bends down and wraps her arms around my neck tightly. "I thought you were leaving." She pushes back from me, leaving our faces right in front of each other. "Not that I would have stopped you. I'll never hold you back," she says. I pull her into me, ignoring her disclosure.

We enjoy the moment of peace and quiet a little longer before we venture downstairs to join the party. By the time we escape the bedroom, all the parents are gone and Jen and Caden have left, leaving our usual crowd. I sit in a chair with Kailey on my lap. Looking around the table, I'm amazed eyeing each one of my buddies in a similar position as me. Sadie is nuzzling into Brady, Jessa is searching the cabinets while Grant's chin rests on her shoulder and well...Dex. Dex and Sam currently have their tongues down each other's throats. What a change just from last year when we were all single. Usually these parties entailed us sitting around playing cards and drinking until the sun came up.

"You guys have nothing to eat," Jessa angrily says, slamming the cabinet. "I'm starving," she whines, and Grant ice cream fast enough. Taking a spoon out of the drawer and nudging it with her hip to shut it, she grabs the chocolate sauce from the fridge and plops down at the table. She pops open the carton and pours an inch of chocolate gooeyness over it before her spoon digs in. A huge heaping of ice cream rests in front of her face while we all stare in awe her way. "What? Did you guys want some?" she asks before her mouth covers the whole spoon, and she slides the ice cream off of it. "Attractive, babe," Grant says,

The table fills with laughter as Sadie

rolling his eyes.

starts searching for her. When she flings the freezer open, her hands can't grab the containers and seven more spoons. We all take our turns dipping our spoons into the different kinds of ice cream my mom had brought over. My friends...my family, I love them and adding Kailey just makes it all fit together.

gets up and grabs the rest of the

Chapter 13

Kailey

It's been two weeks since the graduation party. I can't believe how fast Jen's health has diminished. She can barely get in the car to go to her doctors' appointments, so forget about picking Drew up now. She's needs me more than ever lately, and I refuse to disappoint her. Taking a chunk of my parents' life insurance money, which was supposed to be going toward my schooling next year, I quit my job for the summer in order to take care of the kids. Caden has

to work to support the family and keep his insurance. Even with his class schedule lighter this summer, he has to be away quite a bit.

I moved out of my apartment and into

their house to make it easier. The roles are beginning to shift, and everyone feels it. Chloe and Tara now run into my room in the morning instead of Jen's. Drew cries out for me more nights than not. It's terrifying when I think of the future, so every time it creeps into my mind, I push it back as far as it's willing to go. I've caught Caden crying two nights this week in the quiet dark room of the living room with only the flicker of the television lighting the room. Leaving him to his solitude, I tiptoed out of the room

before collapsing into my own fit of tears in their guest room. How on earth would we all go on with our lives without her? She is the glue bonding us together.

Trey started his job a week after he

graduated and loves it. It's nice to see him so happy, doing what he loves. The thing I'm not so happy about is the girl, Sara, who's also working on the building. Yeah, yeah, there's a team of them, but all I ever hear out of Trey's mouth is, 'Sara thought of this awesome thing we could do' or 'Sara and I grabbed a bite,' after I'd prepared him a dinner. He spent his days flitting around with Sara while I changed diapers, fed kids, cleaned floors, looked after Jen,

million times. You'd think Swiper would get the hint by now, but he continually gets caught. The threat of Trey and I slipping into different lives lingers over us like a dark cloud reaching its capacity of water.

Eventually, it has to release.

Tossing the diaper bag on the table, I

and watch Dora the Explorer five

whisper shh noises into Drew's ear, attempting to keep him asleep. The girls had a play date down the street, and I've desperately been yearning for a nap myself. Between keeping the house going and continuing to be a girlfriend to Trey, I barely sleep. My normal routine involves taking care of the house and kids during the day. Then when Caden

comes over here. He's bonded with the kids, and if Caden has to work late, Trey always takes them to the park to give me a break. The guilt that his life has changed course since he met me hits me every time he steps through that door with a pizza in his hand and the kids go running to him. He should be going to the

comes home, I go over to Trey's, or he

Today will be glorious, I think to myself as I lay Drew down, and he immediately turns to his side and sticks his thumb in his mouth. Turning on the monitor, I quietly vacate the room and shut the door behind me. I'm about to open my bedroom door to crawl into my bed when I spot Jen in her room on the

bars, still celebrating his graduation.

floor. I stand in her doorway, watching her frantically placing papers in order here or there. She's a meticulous organizer. "What's up?" I say to her, and she barely glances up before her head is back down focusing on the papers and her hands flip through the pages in a frenzy.

"Kailey, oh thank God. I need you.

Sit down," she demands. I sigh, realizing I won't be getting those few minutes of sleep today. I take a seat next to her and cross my legs. "Caden will be in no shape to deal with this. You have to take charge of the paperwork. Okay?" Her speaking is rambling a mile a minute and I can barely catch every word. "There's the life insurance, the kids birth

certificates and social security cards, all the financial accounts—,"

"It's okay, Jen. I'll handle it," I

place my hand on her forearm, and she looks up at me with tears in her eyes. "Oh, Jen. I promise, everything will be handled." The tears prick behind my own eyes and the thought of escaping this room to allow them to freely fall deepens inside me. But I have to stay strong for her, for the family.

"I know you will. I'm so sorry,

"I know you will. I'm so sorry, Kailey," she softly says. "You've lost your youth to this. We've all lost something to this FUCKING disease," she yells. I have no idea what I should do. Sitting there looking at the piles of paperwork spread across her bedroom floor, anger at the disease begins rising inside of me as well.

"Come with me," I insist, standing up and holding my hand out for her to take. She gingerly leans her hand on the bed and rises to her feet. "Can you make it downstairs?" I ask.

"Just took my pain go away pills, so I'm good for a little while," she says.

I hold her hand while we take one cautious step at a time. Escorting her to the garage, I sit her in a folding chair while I grab the white tarp and spread it across the concrete floor. "I've been meaning to do this, but time has been slim." My fingertips grasp for the box, and I slowly lower it and walk it over to her feet.

"Mom and Dad's old dishes?" she questions confused.

"Yep," I answer, opening the box, I dig out their white china plates with yellow flowers and lace intricate designs.

"They loved these," she says. "We can't." She shakes her head.

"They're hideous, and you know it," I grab a plate and throw it to the ground. Watching it shatter, a little piece of the anger and stress dissipates within me.

"KAILEY!" she screeches.

"Come on, Jen, it feels so damn good," I say, nudging the plate in front of her.

She sighs a few times before ultimately taking the plate from my

hands. "Think of everything you're mad at, Jen. How unfair this whole thing is. Take it out on this damn china." She stares up at me, contemplating her decision. Then she winds her arm behind

her head and uses the small amount of

strength she has to smash the china to the ground allowing it to shatter into thousands of pieces. "Feels good, doesn't it?" I ask, and she holds her hand out for another plate.

I hand her the pieces one by one and

a smile starts creeping across her face with each broken china piece. Every fifth one, or so, I smash one myself. By the end, we're laughing at how much we hated those plates and how much our parents loved them when they bought them from an estate sale. After we finish, I go over to the outside fridge and hand her a bottle of water. Clinking the plastic bottles together, we sit and relax, both feeling a little more at peace. "Why did you ever keep these?" I ask her.

"I thought we would appreciate them someday. Maybe we needed to age to see their beauty," she says, laughing at her own statement.

"There's still nothing beautiful about

them. What Mom and Dad saw, I have no idea?" I shake my head, laughing. Then the garage door shuffles and begins to open. "Crap," I yelp, springing to my feet to stop Caden. He

begins to open. "Crap," I yelp, springing to my feet to stop Caden. He immediately hits the breaks and puts the car in park. When he sees what we've

been up to, he shoots us both a knowing smile. I'm reminded of when I first met him; how attractive I thought he was and how lucky Jen was to find him, even if I hated him. Caden to Jen is like Trey to me. Although they are drastically different in appearances, they both hold great regard to family and protect their loved ones fiercely.

Caden examines the piles of broken dishes and raises his eyebrows to us. "Any left?" he questions, and I search the box, finding one small saucer. "Here." I toss it to him, and he catches it. He places his keys in his

catches it. He places his keys in his pocket, smiles at Jen and then throws it against the concrete. Shrugging his shoulders, he walks over to Jen and

bends down to kiss her.

"How's my gorgeous wife?" he asks, and she beams at his words.

"Tired," she softly replies, melting into his lips as they meet one more time.

"Well, then, I should take you to bed," he drops his black bag and swiftly picks her up out of the chair. His hand rests on the doorknob before he tosses his head back my way. "You got this, right, Kailey?"

"Yeah. I think I'll take Drew over to Trey's for a bit. Girls are on a play date until five."

"Thanks," he sincerely acknowledges.

"Any—," I say and the garage door shuts before I can finish.

Don't people say not to wake a sleeping baby? Well, those people don't have a dying sister who desperately needs to spend some quality time with her husband. Drew is a ball of sweat when I pick him up, but he nuzzles into my neck. We get to the minivan and I buckle him up. Thank god, he actually stays asleep. Oh how I envy him right now.

When we pull up, Trey's car is in the driveway. I should've called or texted him to tell him I was coming, but I was in such a rush to leave Jen and Caden it didn't cross my mind. Drew stirs and wakes up as soon as I unbuckle him out of his car seat. "Tr, Tr," he asks.

"Yep, Trey's house," I tell him,

pulling his hand out of my hair again. I think I've forgotten what my hair looks like not thrown up in a ponytail and actually brushed with a comb instead of my fingers.

"Vailoy hi" Sadia apare the door

"Kailey, hi," Sadie opens the door and greets me. "Hi, Drew," she says, tickling his stomach. He smiles widely at her. She immediately grabs him from my arms.

"Thanks," I say.

"No problem. Come on in. Jessa and I are just doing the favors for the wedding." I follow her into the living room. Small pieces of silver wrapping paper along with white and black ribbon and little boxes of chocolate occupy every inch of the floor.

"Oh, maybe Drew and I should go somewhere else," I automatically worry. This would be his dream to tear all that paper up and ruin everything they're doing.

"No way, we can figure something out. In the meantime, you can take my place while *I* take care of this adorable little man." She scrunches her face into his, and he giggles before locking his hands into her hair. "Ouch," she yells. "I'm sorry, Sadie, let me have him."

"I'm sorry, Sadie, let me have him."

I quickly rise to my feet to take him, but she shifts her weight not allowing me to.

"Peally Kailey it's fine My fingers

"Really, Kailey, it's fine. My fingers are numb from all the ribbon tying anyway." She laughs good-naturedly, and Jessa narrows her eyes at her.

"Sit down, let's chat," Jessa calls me over, patting the ground next to her.

Sadie props her feet up on the table and positions Drew so he's sitting on her stomach. She plays with his hands, clapping them together.

"How's it going?" Jessa asks, handing me the supplies to wrap the small chocolate box. The one thing I love about this spunky blonde is she never gives me the sympathy look. As though she understands how much my situation sucks, but she's not going to continuously remind me.

"Okay. I saw Trey's car, is he home?" I ask, not because I don't enjoy girl time. I crave it most days, especially with Jen being so sick recently.

there was some luncheon at Filgrees." Sadie informs me while raising Drew up in her arms and bringing him back down to her as he grasps for her face.

"I think he walked today. I guess

"Filgrees? That's nice," I mention completely envious that Trey gets to eat at some five star restaurant all the faculty usually dine while I ate cold macaroni and cheese right out of the pot. "I know, he really nailed it with this

job." Jessa smiles brightly, holding the box with the ribbon around it. "Can you hold your finger here?"

I place my finger on the box to secure the ribbon while she starts knotting it. "Be careful, Kailey, she'll tie

your finger if you don't snatch it away

fast enough," Sadie jokes.

"She just has slow reactions. That ring weighs it down." Jessa whispers

ring weighs it down," Jessa whispers and laughs.

"What did she say?" Sadie turns her head to see us. "What did you say, Jessa?"

"Nothing." Jessa shakes her head back and forth, pursing her lips together to harbor her giggles.

"I swear, if you weren't getting married..." Sadie doesn't finish because the girl knows nothing except how to be nice to everyone.

"Oh!" Jessa places the box down and excitedly pats her legs. "I almost forgot, Sadie and I are planning a spa day, and we booked you too. Trey said he'll cover the kids for the day. I think
Dex is going with him. Too bad it won't
be me, since I'm an awesome babysitter,
right, Drew?" She's rambling so fast,
and Drew obviously doesn't respond,
but she keeps going. "So, it's next
Saturday. We already booked you, so
you're going."

"Geez, Jess, give the girl some

breathing time," Sadie chimes in, but

Jessa waves her off.

"Kailey, you need the break, and I really want you to come with us. It will be so much fun. Believe me, Trey is like Mr. Mom over there. He'll have it under control." She begs me, and I just nod, knowing I could always cancel with them later. I desperately would love to

go, but guilt quickly supersedes my excitement that Jen can't. We've always done stuff like that together, and she would've loved to come. Maybe a few weeks ago, but no way now. "Great!" She ends the conversation and grabs another box. I think she's on some kind of high from the upcoming wedding. I'd probably be on one too if I was marrying

Trey. Speak of the devil. I hear his voice

carry through the front door.

He must be on the phone, and I spring to my feet, eager to see him. I'm at the edge of the door when a girl's voice chimes into the conversation. My stomach drops and my movements abruptly stop. Sadie looks my way with Drew in her arms. Her expression isn't

anything but curiosity. Jessa, on the other hand, rises to her feet and stomps into the foyer.

"Hi," I hear her say to the girl. "I'm

Jessa, who would you be?"
"I'm Sara," the small soft voice

Jessa disregards her and turns her attention to Trey, "Kailey and Drew are here," her voice stern and noticeably annoyed.

"I saw the van. I'm just getting something for Sara. Where are they?" he casually asks her.

I finally reveal myself and stand in the doorway with my hands clasps together in front of me. What the hell am I doing? I should be fighting for him. Letting this Sara know that he's mine, and she needs to back off. His eyes light up when he sees me, and I'm in his arms in point three seconds.

"Hey, baby, why didn't you tell me you were coming?" he asks.

"It was unexpected," I answer.

"Where are the girls?"

"Play date," I answer all his questions, and then turn my head to look at Sara.

She's a mousy little girl with short red hair and hazel eyes. From the way she's shifting her feet from side to side and staring at the ground, her discomfort in this tension filled room is clear. By now Sadie appears in the doorway with Drew in her arms. "Drew!" Trey hollers, and the little guy reaches for him. Not thinking twice, Trey grabs him from Sadie and walks us over to Sara. "Sara, this is my girlfriend Kailey and her nephew Drew."

"Hi." Her hand lifts slightly, but you can tell she's uneasy, most likely from the way Jessa ran in here and the tension radiating off of me.

"Hi, it's nice to meet you. I've heard a lot about you," I say, holding my hand out for her. A smile quickly comes across her face, and she limply shakes my hand.

"I feel like I practically know you," she jokes, her voice rising to what I assume is her normal range.

"I have a habit of talking about you

constantly." Trey kisses my temple and hands me Drew. "Let me get that disk for you, Sara. I know Matt is waiting for you." He takes the stairs two at a time. "Matt?" Jessa questions, her voice

tremendously softer than two seconds ago.
"My fiancé," she answers. "He

works at the restaurant, so he gave us a ride home."

"Fiancé, huh?" Jessa calms her temper down. "When are you getting married?"

"Christmas. I've always wanted a winter wedding," she continues.

"This one's got two weeks," Sadie divulges, jerking her thumb toward Jessa. "Do me a favor and treat your

bridesmaids nicely before your big day." She playfully cocks her head to Jessa, who gives her a small push on the shoulder.

"Congratulations," Sara's voice lowers again. Trey's steps coming down the stairs can be heard before he appears.

"Here you go, Sara." He hands her the disk, and she smiles.

"Thanks, Trey, I'll get it back to you tomorrow," she tells him turning around and opening the door. She turns around when her hands reaches the knob. "It was nice meeting all of you," she says, and we all scramble to get the same words out of our own mouths.

"Time for a break, give me this big

guy." Jessa grabs Drew. "I bet you're hungry," she says, and Drew nods his head excessively.

"There's snacks—."

"I got it covered," she tells me.

I walk over to the window and find a guy pulling out of the driveway with Sara in the passenger seat. Trey's arms wrap around my waist and his chin rests

on my shoulder. "Jealous?" he kids.

Little does he know I was green with

jealously, and I actually doubted him. I shut my eyes in regret of my foolish

suspicions before turning around. "I'm sorry," I apologize.

"I told you, Kailey, I'm yours," he brushes his lips against mine way too short for my liking. "You were always talking about her, but I shouldn't have come to conclusions. It's just things are...getting worse," I admit to him.

"I know, we'll get through it. Let's just take it one day at a time." He peers down at me, and I nod in agreement.
"So, why are you here?" he asks, "Not

"So, why are you here?" he asks. "Not that I'm not thrilled to see you," he adds.

"Long story, but pretty much giving Caden and Jen some much needed time alone." I nuzzle into his chest, relishing the ocean breeze scent that is Trey.

"Let's give them the whole night. Sara was telling me she takes Matt's niece to this Showtime Pizza Palace all the time."

"Are you nuts? You do know what it

is, right?" I raise both eyebrows at him. "Yeah, they have games and stuff. I'm sure Drew can't do much, but the

girls will love it." He appears so excited at the idea; I'm not about to tell him the truth.

"Alright, we'll get the girls from

their play date and go," I agree.

Chapter 14

Trey

We pull up outside the enormous castlelike structure, and I spy parents tugging their screaming kids away from the building. The whole unfolding scene makes me want to speed away as though the building caught on fire. I glance at Kailey from the corner of my eyes and she giggles. "It will be fine," she assures me and pats my leg.

"I don't think so," I say dead serious. These three well-behaved, precious kids we have in the back might just turn out to be like the aliens now tearing away from their parents' hands and back into the building.

I got to hand it to the redheaded boy with glasses, he's escaped his dad's tight grip twice, circling around, making it back inside the doors before his dad could figure out where he had disappeared. I could be looking at a future pro running back with skills like that.

"Out!" Tara screams, and I give Kailey the 'I told you so look', but all she does is giggle again. Her amusement goes to show I'll be one of these poor souls dragging some kid away in a few hours.

I turn off the ignition as the rear

unbuckled and helping Tara out of her car seat contraption. They both jump in my arms and their excitement is contagious, bringing a smile to my face and quickly vanquishing the memory of what I just witnessed. Kailey takes Drew in her arms, and the five of us venture into the unknown. At least for me it's an abyss I'm not sure we'll escape out of the same way we went in. Giving the smiling Kailey one last look, I open the door for us, and the noise that blasts out of the energy filled building has me fearful for my life. The high school student studies

sliding doors open. Chloe is already

The high school student studies Kailey and I before stamping our hands with some form of invisible ink. "Why can't I see it?" I ask the young girl. "So you don't take the wrong kid," she explains, but I look around the

building at the screaming uncontrollable children running around and then back to the three calm ones next to me. "You don't have to worry about

that," I inform her.

"It's more so no one takes one of ours," Kailey chimes in, and then it all clicks in my head. Of course, one of these parents would want to trade these darlings for one of their devils spawn.

Not going to happen, my friend.

Ordering some pizza and buying tokens for an ungodly amount of money, we find our seats. Nestling into a booth, I grab a highchair for Drew, and Kailey

gives him some crackers to keep him busy until the food arrives.

"Trey, let's play," Chloe says, pulling on my hoodie sleeve.

I look over to Kailey, and she nods. "Go ahead, I'll let you know when the pizza comes," she instructs. Her calmness over this place amazes me.

Grabbing the small bucket of tokens,

Tara and Chloe file out of the booth after me. I bend down to give Kailey a kiss, and she surprises me when she pulls me down to whisper something in my ear. "Don't worry about the tickets. You'll get the top prize tonight." When I pull back, she winks my way. God, I love her. In those few short words, she's calmed me down from the panic of this

germ infested kid zone.

Chloe takes my hand and leads me over to a basketball game. Taking a

token out of the bucket, she inserts it and starts playing. I gotta say, the girls got skills for five. While she's busy playing that, I get Tara set up on skee ball. Instructing her on how to roll the ball, instead of throwing the ball, is harder than it should be. The fearful employee's scared shitless face when the ball went flying towards his head, has me biting my lip to hide my laughter. Once she's

who has found her way over to a driving game.

An older boy is hovering over her while her legs stretch to reach the

got it going, I scoot back over to Chloe,

pedals. She's a determined little girl that's for sure, but the game is a bit complicated and probably too advanced for her. Tara runs over. I scoop her up, and we watch Chloe ranking sixteenth out of sixteen, dead last, but she's happy and loving it. She snags another token and puts it in to play again. Then the boy who's probably twelve or so decides to speak up.

"She's too young to be playing," he spats, and my head turns his way.

"She's fine, don't worry, you'll have your turn," I assure him, kindly hoping he shuts his mouth.

"It's a waste. She's holding everyone up. As her dad, you shouldn't allow her—," the smart mouth kid I place Tara down on the ground, who instantly stands next to Chloe,

watching her smash into walls and rocks and whatever other obstacles are in her way. Walking up, so I'm looking down at him, intimidation is key. "Listen, she's going to play the game, and if she wants to play again, I have a bucket full of tokens. We'll stay here all night. So go play some other game while you're waiting," I say, shooing him away with my hand.

"Trey!" Kailey appears with Drew in her arms, but I don't change my stance, waiting for the kid to disappear.

"Whatever, *Trey*, why don't you listen to your baby mamma," he sneers.

A chuckle escapes me from the balls of this kid. God, he reminds me of myself a little bit.

"Nah, I think the little girl wants to play again, maybe even her sister," I casually shrug my shoulders and turn around toward the girls, who are now staring at the scene unfolding in front of them. Their big eyes darting between me and the punk. "Chloe, you want another token?" I hand her one, but she shakes her head.

"No, I'm done," she says, hopping off the chair and walking toward another game.

I stand there in disbelief that she's not even staying out of the pure will to make this kids life hell. Kailey giggles behind me, and I shake my head in disbelief while the now smug kid makes the move for the seat. I'm half tempted to squeeze in before him, shoving my token in first. Then my Zen counterpart comes along side of me. "Come on, baby daddy. The pizza's ready," she swings her arm through mine, laughing the whole time. Even Drew's bottom two teeth are sticking out in amusement to the little showdown.

The girls and I eat the pizza, while Kailey nibbles on hers and feeds Drew small pieces. Once I finish, I instruct her to eat while I handle Drew. Playing a little game of zoom zoom airplane, landing small pieces of pizza on his tongue while he laughs in delight, we

end with a few games of peek-a-boo. Chloe and Tara grow restless, so we give them some tokens and let them venture out to the games around us.

Watching Kailey keep her eyes on them and what's happening around us, tells me mother's instinct aren't something that automatically comes after you push the kid out. Sometimes it's just brought on. She's not only these three kids' aunt, she's their second mother. Jen could never be replaced, but Kailey's a great substitute.

Kailey and Drew finish and the three of us join Chloe and Tara. Watching the excitement in all their faces makes coming to this insane rave like atmosphere for children halfway okay.

Kailey and I do a little competition on the basketball game ourselves, and I find out where Chloe gets her nothing but net shot. Except neither have anything on me. I beat out Kailey not once, but twice. It rolls off her back no problem, another reason I love her, she's as laid back as

me.

Then out of nowhere, Tara starts whining for a token. When I tell her we're out, she throws herself onto the floor, screaming. Shit, they must pump something into the vents to make the kids go bat crazy. This is foreign behavior for Tara. I bend down to her level to attempt to rationalize with her, mistake one. Tears stream down her face, and I'm about to buy another crap load of tokens

when Kailey says, "Time to go. Pick her up. She's just tired. She'll fall asleep on the way home." How the fuck does she know that?

I wrap my arms under Tara's to pick her up. Her legs kick and her arms flail as though she's drowning in the crumb filled disgusting pool of carpeting. Then the aliens have completely taken over her little body. Screams bellow out of her small lungs as her feet leave little bruises all over my legs. "Let's just buy some more tokens," I shout over to Kailey, who's putting Drew's coat on. I guess that's a no from the death stare she returns my way. Maybe I should mention I'm not asking for a three way, just to give this little three headed monster

Tara's in between us. Lucky for me, Kailey's handling Drew and Chloe. However, even with this two to one ratio, I think I got the raw end of the deal. Actually, I'm sure of it as I watch the trio ahead of me calmly walk through the front doors while Tara's screams become louder screeches the closer we

some coins. Keeping my mouth shut, I grab my jacket from the bench, throw

That teenage girl stops me with some sort of black light, waiting for our wrists. Kailey stands on the other side of the rope, and I sigh, pulling my wrist out, holding Tara out with one arm. Can this little bubblegum chomping girl not tell I'm about to get kicked in the nuts if I

get to the front door.

don't control her legs? After we're cleared to leave the premises, I turn back around and say, "You should really think about selling alcohol."

"Oh sir, we don't want any responsibility for parents driving—" she starts her most likely well-rehearsed Showtime Palace response.

"Not for me, for ones like this," I

interrupt and point to Tara. The young girl looks at me confused, no doubt those tight clothes are cutting off the circulation to her brain. "Yeah, never mind." Realizing she's not getting my joke.

"Oh, I gotcha," she laughs as the door shuts behind us.

"Trey, she's probably still trying to

calming Tara in my arms, her cries still there, but slowing, I stare down at Kailey. I love her so much. I'd put myself through this hell every day for the rest of life, with one stipulation; she has to be with me. "What are you staring at?" She knocks me with her hip.

put it together." Kailey laughs. With a

"The most beautiful girl," I say and wink at her.

"Oh, Trey," she looks up at me with those sparkling eyes and love induced smile.

"Did you catch her? She just turned the corner," I tease, and laughter erupts out of her.

"And here I was being all arrogant thinking you were talking about me." She ventures to her side of the van and after we buckle everyone in, we stare at each other from both open doors.

"Be arrogant, be smug, be confident, baby. To me you're the top number one billboard hit of all time; that one song that people try to redo, but nothing compares to the original. The first version is so amazing and beautiful that no one can even come close." She smiles widely over to me, and climbing into the seats we shut the doors.

"You're number two on that list, babe." She winks, strapping herself in.

"Hey, can't we be tied," I joke.

"There's only one number one, you said so yourself," she teases, giving me that heart melting smile.

"That I did, baby—that I did," I agree and we look into each other's eyes for a few beats, knowing how lucky we are.

"Can we go now?" Chloe pleads

from the backseat.

Giving Kailey a wink, I start up the soccer mom mobile.

One thing can be said for Showtime Pizza Palace, it might be a few hours of hell, but you get rewarded tenfold when they all crash. The low music plays in the van with nothing but silence from the passengers. Kailey and I don't talk, and I wonder when this became so comfortable. It's only been a short few months and I've already turned in my black book for a chore chart. The astonishing thing is I love it. When I think about Jen and her

impending death, it ties me up in knots. I can't imagine knowing I have such a limited time to be with my children and leave them in the hands of others. I'd rather go quickly and not have to think about it. Kailey and I will definitely be there for these three kids and Caden when Jen passes, but I hope, on some level, Kailey and I will be able to build a family together as well. Of course, stay

that away from her or the kids. Eventually, Caden will want to start again, maybe remarry. Right? Then

close to her family. I would never take

again, I'm most certain if Kailey died, I'd never recover. Shit, not that we're married now, although some days it feels like it.

With me starting the job and her moving in with them, our lives have shifted. Our time is more limited, but that doesn't stop me from loving her or wanting her. I see her pulling away more and more every day as the inevitable comes closer. She's always talking about my exciting job and how all she did was take the kids to the park or found some new craft to do with the girls. The worry etches in her face as our lives move in two directions. I enjoy hearing about what she did; it only makes me wish I was with them. She

doesn't see that, though. All she sees is the difference between our days. The house is dark when we pull up,

and we quietly open the doors. I grab Chloe and Tara in my arms, while she gets Drew out of his seat. The sound of the television comes from the family room, as we walk the kids upstairs. I drop Tara off and she splays across her pink canopy bed. Thankfully, she doesn't have her jacket, since she was in a fit of rage when we left. I toss a blanket over her and turn around. Next is Chloe, in her purple room and she tries to kick me when I take her shoes and jacket off. Slowly waking she buries herself under the covers. "Sing to me, Trey?" she softly requests. Racking my brain for a

lullaby, I only have a song that's been embedded into my mind for a while lately. I sit down next to her and clear my throat a little before starting "Elderly Woman Behind a Counter In a Small Town" by Pearl Jam. As her eyes begin to droop, I lower my voice and slow my

vocals until I know she's fast asleep.
When I stand up and turn toward the door, Kailey's leaning against the frame, peering in at us. The light from the hallway halos her perfect body. She's gorgeous and she's mine. How great is my life?

"What a heartiful same? What's the

"What a beautiful song? What's the name?" she asks as I quietly shut Chloe's door. I tell her the name of the song, and she shrugs her shoulders. "I

had no idea you could sing."
"I wouldn't say that," I say, leading

us to the staircase.

"You sing beautifully, baby," she tells me, leaning into me. I guess I should plan on serenading her one day.

We quietly make our way downstairs where Jen is laying propped up against Caden. They both turn our way when we take a seat on the loveseat. It still amazes how quickly this house became like a home to me. The uncomfortable feeling from my first time had vanished by my return. "So Trey, how was your first time at Showtime Pizza Palace," Jen mimics the talk of the character bear.

"Holy shit, how come none of you warned me?" I ask. Kailey brings her

"You have to experience that place to really know what it's about," Caden proclaims. "Thank you," he sincerely

"No problem." I nod.
"What did you guys do?" Kailey

adds.

asks, and they laugh lightly to themselves. Yeah, I'm guessing Jen wasn't too tired.

"Why don't you two go out?" Jen mentions, and I glance at the clock. It's only nine o'clock, shit where did my carefree life go. A few months ago, I wouldn't even be pre-partying yet.

Peering down at Kailey, she kind of perks up a little. "You want to?" I ask her, and she shrugs her shoulders. Kailey

gives Jen a kiss on the cheek, and we leave. We climb into her Honda to drive over to my house.

The house is bustling, and I wonder.

The house is bustling, and I wonder when it became the party house. Oh yeah, when dipshit Rob moved back in. He and Dex have been partying day and night. Besides the small reprieve we had during graduation weekend, he's been here all the time. That's why I usually keep Kailey and myself holed up in my room, stopping his prying eyes from staring at her.

When we walk in the back door, half-naked girls and guys are sitting around the table laughing. Beer bottles have begun to pile up on the counter. We obviously interrupted a game of strip

poker or some crazy game I would have had a part in back in the day.

"Hey, man," Dex nods at us. "Hi,

Kailey" he greets her with a half-naked girl straddling him.

"Dex," Kailey says curtly. I'm sure she's disgusted by the look on her face.

Looking around the room, I'm happy there's no Rob anywhere.

"You guys want to join us?" Dex asks, laying down a fan of cards and everyone sighs before beginning to disrobe another piece of their clothing.

"Nah, we're going out in a bit," I tell him. "You guys staying here for the night?" Crossing my fingers he answers no. I'm shocked Brady has let this go on as long as he has.

"Nope, heading over to Billy's, Rob's band's playing. Y'all gonna come?" he asks, like I would even consider it.

"Sure," Kailey excitedly agrees next to me, and I whip my head her way.

"Why the hell would we go that hell hole?" I ask her.

"It will be fun." She shrugs her shoulders.

I'm not quite sure why she wants to go out with these guys, and I definitely don't understand why she would want to go to Billy's, but like everything else she wants, I don't deny her.

"I guess we're in," I say to Dex.

Chapter 15

Kailey

I gasp at how beautiful Jessa looks as she walks down the aisle in her white satin gown. The wedding dress conforms to her body, displaying her curvy but slender figure. Grant's face lights up, like a kid on prom night, when she stops at the edge of the chairs. My eyes can't stop from watching as her dad holds out his arm, and she slips hers through his as they share a look of pure love between them. He pats her hand, and they make their way up the aisle. Once she reaches

on the cheek. No veil to lift up, no train to hold. This is the simplest wedding I've ever attended, but the most romantic by far. All the guys line up behind Grant. Brady, Trey, and Dex bringing up the rear. Dressed in new matching grey suits with white shirts but each sporting a different tie. As I'm appraising all the good-looking men, my eyes stop on the drop dead gorgeous one that's all mine. He winks and gives me a sly smile before turning his attention back to the pastor. Once the ceremony is concluded and

Grant, her father releases her with a kiss

Once the ceremony is concluded and more than a few tears are shed, Mr. and Mrs. Grant Bishop walk down the aisle as a married couple. Brady puts his arm out for Sadie, and Trey and I follow suit before Dex and Sam bring up the rear. "Yes. I gotcha now, babe," Jessa says to Grant once we're all together

Grant once we're all together congratulating the newlyweds. "No escaping me," she pushes up on her tiptoes, and he rests his hand across her cheek, looking at her with nothing but love.

"I've never wanted to escape you,

I've only ever wanted to draw you closer to me," he softy says and kisses her briefly before pulling back. "I love you, Mrs. Grant Bishop," he murmurs.

"I love you, Mr. Jessa Harrison," she giggles.

"Yeah, I guess I kind of am," he chuckles to himself and shrugs his

shoulders in agreement.

I can't help but feel like the six of us are intruding on what should be an

intimidate moment between newlywed's. Trey pulls me closer and kisses the top of my head. The heat from his hand resting on my own satin gown brings shivers up my spine. Visions of Trey and me in our own world after we say our 'I do's' flutter to life in my mind. Would we have a big wedding or prefer to elope somewhere? Or would there never be a wedding, Trey isn't exactly in favor of that certificate to prove your love thing. Lately, he's changed so much, maybe that will too.

A few butterflies flutter around as Grant and Jessa walk hand in hand and

idea was it to do these butterflies?" Dex asks, and Sam elbows him the stomach. Immediately, he straightens his body, glancing down at Sam, annoyed and confused.

climb into their limo. "Whose lame ass

"Mine," Sadie lowers her eyes to the cement ground, staring at the scattered dead butterflies and Brady wraps his arm around her.

"It was a great idea, it was beautiful, baby! Right, Dex?" Brady's stern fatherly voice requests Dex to agree.

Dex shrugs his shoulders. "Yeah," he mumbles and Brady kicks his foot. Dex raises his annoyed eyes toward Brady now, "It was, Sadie, really," he attempts to make up for his foot in mouth

comment, but everyone knows it's forced.

"Jeez, Dex, manners?" Sam maddeningly spouts, and Dex holds his hands out at his waist as though he has no idea what she's talking about. She swings her arm around Sadie's shoulders, and they walk off to the cars.

"Dipshit," Brady murmurs under his breath as the rest of us follow the two.

"What? How was I supposed to know it was her idea? It would have been beautiful—if they were all *alive*." Dex places his hands in his pocket, shaking his head.

"Enough," Trey tells him, "just let it go," he attempts to help him out from the hole he's currently digging himself into.

"Come on, guys, it's funny." Dex stares up and raises his hands walking backwards. "I can't be the only one that sees the humor in this," he continues, and Trey chuckles slightly while Brady narrows his eyes before cracking a smile

himself.

Sadie and Sam quickly turn around watching the four of us lowly laughing. Their hands on their hips and astonished looks, we each try to stifle our humor back. "I just wanted it to be beautiful. I ruined their wedding," Sadie admits, covering her face. Brady jogs over to her while Sam consoles her.

"It's not your fault. It's the damn place you ordered them from. What's the name? I'll go find them and kick their

ass myself," Brady pretends to crack his knuckles, and Sadie shakes her head.
"Stop it, Brady," she says through sobs.

"I mean it. They hurt my girl, I'll hurt them." All of us burst into full out laughter. Sadie picks up her head, staring at each one of us. Finally, her lips turn up, and she punches Brady in the chest. He grabs her hand and pulls him into her. They embrace until Sadie picks up her head. "We owe them an expensive wedding present," she mentions.

"Um...no. They wouldn't even know each other if it wasn't for us. Believe me, we gave them the once in a lifetime fucking wedding present," Brady reminds her and luckily it appeases her.
We all climb into our separate cars.
Trey opens my door, and I slide in. After

he starts the car, he looks my way. "You

reverse, and I wish I knew how we got

are beautiful." He puts the car in

to this point. I wanted today to be different. I desperately wanted to forget all my responsibilities and enjoy it being just me and him.

I tried to have us do the typical things people our age do. That's the only reason I pushed Trey to go to that condemned bar named Billy's two weeks ago. I wanted to show him, we

could have it all. We could take the kids to Showtime and go out with friends and drink until dawn. But all that happened was we became edgy with each other from being exhausted. We were tired and cranky. Eventually we decided to leave the bar at midnight, went back to his place and fell asleep. It was the first time I laid side of side with Trey instead of entwined in his arms. From that night forward we forked off from one another. He's been so busy with the early stages development on the building that I haven't seen him except for one night this week. Since it happened to correlate with the very same night Caden had a night class, we spent the few hours together, feeding and bathing the kids, filled with silence between us. Jen has only gotten worse. A

hospital bed was delivered and set up

sleeps. The kids are confused, and I have no idea what to tell them. Caden walks around like a zombie, not talking to anyone unless asked a direct question. When the kids hop on his lap, he listens to them and smiles when he should, but the blank facial expression confirms his mind is somewhere far, far away from us. The inevitable is coming, and it has encompassed all of us, even Drew. For the first time in a while, the ping of fear that Trey and I won't survive this consumes me. The path we're on is separating farther. Soon our hands and love are bound to tear apart. A tight squeeze of my hand pulls me

downstairs in the den where she mostly

from my nightmare, and I look up at the

restaurant. "You okay?" he asks me. His brown eyes stare over with clear concern if I'm happy or sad today. He cares about me, and I'm not going to waste these few free hours we have, thinking about 'what ifs' in regards to our future.

"Perfect," I say, and a huge smile brightens his face. The best sight I've seen in the past two weeks. "I love you," I whisper when he bends down to kiss me.

"I love you. Let's just relax and have fun tonight. It's me and you, all right?" he cocks his head to the side, awaiting my agreement.

"Yes," I mumble, and when his lips hit mine, I'm transported to our first kiss. He pours all his desire for me into our kiss, and it covers me in a warm and loving blanket. All I want to do is nuzzle up to him and savor the ocean scent that's Trey.

When he parts from me, my body chills, and I push all other thoughts away. My door opens, and I take his hand, climbing out of the car.

The atmosphere blankets the room

with love, and emanates through all of us. The small round tables are lined with white linens and small lit votive candles. Silver packages that we wrapped are perfectly placed on top of each plate. The room looks elegant and simple, just like Jessa.

Trey's hand is either in mine, or

the dinner. We talk about reality television and drinking games. I miss this carefree life of a college student. Sam and Dex can't keep their hands off each other, constantly roaming and kissing. Every time she gets up, he smacks her ass and she jumps in reaction. Although I envy the way Dex doesn't hide his attraction to her, neither one of them shows much romantic affection toward one another. It's grabbing and swatting, but no caressing and lingering kisses. I wonder if maybe, in fact, they are just fuck buddies, like Dex refers to them as. Envious of their public displays of desire, I begin to let my hand explore up

resting on my knee, throughout most of

Trey's pants leg. As I continue talking about Vanderpump Rules with Sam, I grab his package, feeling it start to bulge against my palm. He quickly places his hand over mine to stop me, but I'm persistent, searching for his zipper. Just as I grip it with my fingers and begin to lower it he tenses in his chair, and I worry the table will pick up on the little game of cat and mouse we're playing.

The hotness of his crotch hits my hand as I weasel it through the opening. As soon as I reach my destination, he takes my hand and places it back in my lap. Shifting in his seat, I know he's discretely zipping himself back up, trying not to draw attention. A rush of emotions detonates within me;

self-doubt. He just knocked all my selfesteem out the window with the push of his hand. I slowly become more enraged the longer I sit and talk about a show that follows a group of servers and bartenders that appear more like enemies than friends. Excusing myself

embarrassment, guilt, but most of all

Tears threatening to break at any moment, I pep talk myself to quickly become composed. This is your night off, enjoy it, I repeat to myself. But it's no use, the one tear escapes before I can stop it.

from the table, I escape out to the lobby.

Seeing the ladies sign, I make determined steps to reach that door before it all crashes down. With both

hands on the door, I'm abruptly grabbed by my wrist and dragged out the back door. The sweltering heat immediately has sweat starting to drip down the crease of my breasts. My back hits the brick wall before Trey's fuming face fills my complete vision. "What the hell, Kailey?" he asks me,

anger filling every word.

"Forget it, Trey," I push him back
with my arms, but he takes my wrists and

pins them up against the wall. The brick scratches my wrists as I attempt to wiggle out of his grasp.

"Why the hell are you mad?" His nostrils flare while his eyes question me.

"I was trying to be spontaneous, sexual. Make you want me," I admit, still

wiggling and shifting any weight to get the advantage in this conversation.

"I want you every minute of every day. Actually, scratch that, every second." His hands loosen, but he doesn't let me go.

"How come you've taken girl after girl against a bathroom stall or a dark corner? Hell, you've probably received fucking hand jobs in lecture halls. But with me, it's all hand holding, hand on the small of my back until we get behind closed doors. I get it that I'm not as sexy as your other conquests, but I don't think I'm some hideous monster either." I take a deep breath, surprised by own response. That I just divulged all my insecurities about my being enough for

him sexually.

He releases my grip and walks to the other side of the alley, tossing his hands over his head. After minutes of silence

over his head. After minutes of silence he marches up to me and pushes me against the wall again. "Is this what you want, Kailey? You want me to fuck you against this wall, like some groupie slut?"

"NO!" I screech. "I want you to want

me so badly you can't wait until we get home. I want to enflame your body so much that you desperately need to get inside of me, unable to hold off. I just want to be irresistible to you," I yell back into face.

He thrusts his crotch forward. "Do you feel how hard I am right now?

That's you, Kailey." His voice still emanates anger, but is beginning to calm. "I put myself through pain every day, so I don't throw you over every damn piece of furniture or car. You deserve better than that." He takes a deep breath. "Jesus, Kailey, you're more to me than some cheap fuck in a filthy alley. I thought I've made that clear. I fucking love you. I didn't love those girls. Hell, half of them I didn't even like." He backs up and places his hand on my cheeks. "But you, you're the reason I get up in the morning. You're the one I can't wait to lay in my bed with, so I can savor every moment I have with you. Please, don't take my reserve to mean anything but selfishness to explore your

gorgeous body longer. I enjoy taking my time and savoring the taste of every inch of your skin. With you, it's not just getting off, it's feelings and emotions. Things I never had with anyone else."

His eyes continue to peer down at me, waiting for me to respond. What the hell do I say to that? The urge to bury my head in my hands and walk away embarrassed are tempting.

"I just thought—," I start but he places his finger in front of my lips.

"You don't have to say anything. I should have made this clear a long time ago." He absolves me of my self-pity. "Since we're out here and everyone thinks we're fighting, how about we make the most of it?" He slyly smiles

dissipates with it. How did I get this man? His head turns left and right, perusing the surroundings. Soon he grabs my hand and tugs me toward a dark corner. "So, I owe you one quick screw against a wall, but don't get used to it, babe, okay?" He flirtatiously smiles my way.

and all that anger surrounding us

"It's really fine, Trey, let's just go inside," I reply.

His hands start pulling the fabric of my dress around my middle. "Nah, you started it. I'm hard and," he inserts a finger into my panties, "you're wet. Let's not waste time, love," he finishes and grabs my ass, holstering me up against the brick.

He propped me up with his one hand and leg while unsnapping and zipping his pants. Soon the heat of his bare bottom half hits mine, and there's no way I'm saying no. "Shit!" he hollers right as the tip of his cock is at my opening. "I don't have condoms," he sighs.

"What?" I question in disbelief.

"I stopped carrying them around when I met you. I could go ask Dex but

"Go ahead, Trey, I trust you," I instruct him.

"Kailey," his exasperated breath tells me between his past and the chances of another pregnancy, we're done. "I'm on the pill, go ahead," I divulge. I feel bad for never telling him earlier, but I'm not about to pass up on this incredible desire right now.

He waits no time before thrusting himself into me. When his hardness busts through my folds, I clench around him, squeezing him tightly inside of me. His warm breath tickles my neck. "You always feel so fucking good, Kailey," he tells me, and I contract harder around him. "If you want to finish, you'll have to loosen up for me, baby," he says softly in my ear. Even when he has me pressed against the wall, he's sweet and loving.

I begin to loosen, and I feel my wetness smearing down my thighs when

excruciatingly slow pace. What happened to that guy I would see at the bars? Shit, there he is; he slams into me, and my back hits the rough surface. "God, Trey, more," I softly say. His hands are squeezing and pushing my ass into him. I wish we could strip our clothes off and feel our naked bodies against one another. I guess Trey has a point, with the slow and devour version he prefers. "Baby, come for me, I'm not going to last much longer without anything between us," his voice staggered and

he slides in and out of me at an

I grip his shoulders, digging my nails into his crisp linen shirt in order to drive

breathless

down on him. Holding his head in my hands, pressing it against my neck, I move my hips up and down on him. He groans and grunts. Hearing the noises erupting out of him has me wetter and becoming more aroused with every syllable. The same noises he makes in bed. I'm just on the brink of letting it all go when I take his face and bring it to me. I smile. He opens his eyes and alluring brown eyes capture mine. We focus on each other, until we both come, and his body pins me against the wall to stabilize himself while he catches his breath. "Shit, maybe I should reconsider my

"Shit, maybe I should reconsider my earlier argument," he jokes, breathing heavily in my ear.

"You had your eyes closed," I remark, and he scrunches his eyes in confusion. "You usually have them open."

"Really?" he questions, releasing me to the ground. My heels find the potholed filled drive, and my dress falls to the ground.

"Okay, you know when I told you I'd seen you with girls at Aces?" I swallow hard that I'm about to share this bit of information with him. He nods, pulling up his pants and buckling his belt. "You always had your eyes open, looking around the room as you would make out with them." I bite my lower lip and a slow smile creeps along his lips.

"I never knew you were checking me

out that much," he teases with pure pleasure in the fact.

"You were hard to miss," I say, smacking his shoulder.

"Oh, babe, I love that you were that into me. But—," he corners me with his arms right before we're about to walk back, "do you finally believe me? That you're different." He kisses my nose, and I glance at the small, dark corner we just christened. Well, I'm sure we weren't the first ones.

"Yeah, I do," I honestly answer.

"Remember, I'm yours," he reminds me, and we open the doors.

As we make our way back over to the table, I realize Trey's right. I don't even feel close to completely fulfilled as place and hands entwined, we must look like a love sick couple. Tonight I want to dance with him close and smell the scent of spring of his body wash. I want my head to rest on his chest and hear the beats of his heart as he sways me and back in forth to the music. I want to toast champagne and kiss him any time I desire. I want to forget what tomorrow will bring and relish in everything that's us. He pulls my chair out, and I take a

I do when we take our time. Smiles in

He pulls my chair out, and I take a seat, carefully smoothing my gown down. Everyone around the table peers over at us with conspicuous glares, coming to their own conclusions to our disappearing act. I'm sure my make-up

more wrinkled. Instantly, the warmth of his hand brushes along my satin covered thigh and a burn ignites in me again. I briefly ponder if I'll ever have enough of him. Will we ever be that couple that gives a quick peck on the lips and rolls onto opposite sides of the bed? God, I hope not.

"I'm going to get a drink. Do you

is smeared, and Trey's pants look a bit

want anything?" he whispers in my ear, but I shake my head, happy with the glass of wine. "I'll be right back." He kisses my temple. I watch his backside as he walks away for a few brief seconds.

"Man, you guys have it bad," Sam teases and moves to the empty seat on my left.

Not really knowing how to respond, I decide a smile is enough. Most likely the blush that's currently rising up my cheeks should be a good indication of how much I love that man.

"So, tell me. Are you guys serious, like marriage, kids, and the whole caboodle? Or, are you two just having fun like Dex and me?" Not really interested in thinking about my hopes and dreams of a future with Trey recognizing I might never get that wish granted, I decide to turn the tables.

"Is that all you and Dex are?" She turns his way and then back to me.
There's no longing love gaze, but there isn't a frown either, just indifference.

"Yeah, we live hundreds miles from each other. It's fun while we're together, and he can make me come through the phone, so bonus there. Oh, on those nights I come home half plastered. Instead of bringing some guy I don't know with me, I just dial Dex, and he gets me to the point of exhaustion all through the receiver of my phone." I'm surprised she's so willing to share this much information about what they do with each other. Does she know she's not his only girl he shares his 'words'

"Oh, well every couple is different." I smile and glance over my shoulder for Trey. He's chatting with Grant and Jessa, the happy couple. "So, when do

with?

you graduate?" I ask her, and she begins rambling about the classes she's taking for the summer. At least this is a topic I can converse about.

Trey slides back down next to me and takes my hand, giving it a squeeze. Out of the corner of my eye I see them wheeling the cake into the center of the room. Grant and Jessa get shuffled over, and the buzzing of my phone alerts me. Trey heavily sighs with assumption that more than likely our night just ended.

Excusing myself from the table, Trey's eyes divert from mine. Not that I try to meet his either, but his blatant glare the other way tells me all I need to know. "Hey, Caden," I answer. I hear Jen's moans in the background. "What is it?" My voice quickly becomes frantic.
"I'm taking Jen to the hospital, she can't stop throwing up, and her fever is rising. Mrs. Altman is watching the kids,

but do you think..." He releases a long sigh. "I'm sorry, Kailey, I hate to ask. I know it's their wedding, but if the kids

wake up..." His voice filled with

cake cutting.

sadness for me when he should only be concerned for his wife at the moment.

"It's fine, Caden. I'll leave now.

Call me when you have news." I hang up and make the dreadful walk back to

Trey. He sits alone with his shoulders slumped as he stares into his fresh drink from the bar. Sam and Dex are long gone from the table, snapping pictures of the

My shaking finger taps his shoulder, and his back rises and falls before he turns my way. No words are exchanged as he pulls the keys out of his pocket. I bite my lip from despair at the horrible place we're in. I wish I could beg him to come with me, but his place is here with his friends.

Placing my hand on his forearm and asking him to hold on a second, I maneuver through the chairs to tell Grant and Jessa.

"Hi, Kailey," Jessa says, embracing me immediately.

"Um...I have to go. I'm sorry. Caden is taking Jen to the hospital," I reveal, pushing back the tears that are waiting to be unleashed from my eyes.

Jessa takes my hand and for the first time she gives me the sympathetic look that almost breaks the gates on my tears. "Go. If you need anything, you call us, okay?" I nod, and Grant gives me a hug.

"Is Trey going with you?" she asks, and I shake my head. Her eyes dart to him, and then she smiles trying to conceal the pissed off look I witnessed.

I say my goodbyes to everyone, and

Trey silently begins to walk alongside of me as I leave the restaurant. The tension filled silence surrounds us, except the clicking of our shoes on the pavement. When we get to his car, he opens the door and hands me the keys. "I'll get a ride with Dex." I nod and climb in. The car purrs to life, and I roll the window

down, wishing I could just speed away and escape.

"I love you" be tells me leaning in

"I love you," he tells me, leaning in and giving me a chaste kiss on the lips.

"I love you too." When I roll up the window and back-up as he rocks back on his heels with his hands stuffed in his pockets. I wonder if what we have is enough as I drive away.

I pull onto the road purposely leaving the radio off. The car contains only the sound of the engine and the tires on the road. Once I'm alone in my thoughts, the tears break through. Everything I've been holding in comes bursting out with sobs, screams, and palms beating the steering wheel. Why is life so fucking unfair?

Chapter 16

Trey

Seeing the taillights of my car pulling out of the parking lot fills me with dread that I'm not in it. I should of fucking driven her, but I'm pissed as hell. It was our night. One fucking night, and you couldn't even give us that, I say looking up at the sky. I get it, Jen's sick, and Kailey's her sister. I wouldn't expect her to do anything other than leave when she receives the phone call. It's just I'm in desperate need to have her to myself if only for one damn night.

The guilt of disappointing her just like I did someone else years earlier starts to eat away at me before I even hit the doors of the restaurant. I open the door and the cool swish of air hits my face. Although everyone seems to be dancing and having a good time, there are a few currently watching my every move. The few who know why Kailey just left. The few who are now curious why the hell I'm still here. I wish I could answer them, but instead I snag the bottle of Jack from the bar and disappear through the back door.

Untwisting the bottle cap, I stare at the brick wall I just took her against less than a half hour ago. All of our times, float through my memory like a slideshow. Screw this. I stand up, leaving the bottle on the ground. My hand on the doorknob, I fling the door open to find Jessa standing there with keys dangling from her finger.

"Thanks," I murmur before grabbing

them and running out to the parking lot.

I have to check the keys twice, trying to figure out whose car they belong to, before smacking myself for not just hitting the panic button on the keyset to identify the car. Brady's Camaro lights flash, and I jog over, hopping into the smooth leather seats. I pull out my phone and dial up Kailey, but it goes straight to her voicemail. I wish I could kick my ass for not asking her how serious it was that she left. If it is really bad, she would head, I can kid myself all I want, but deep down she'd keep it from me, just to make sure I stayed. She's so hell bent on me living the life she assumes I should. A life I don't want any more if it doesn't

have said something, right? Shaking my

When I see my car in the driveway, I finally release a relieved breath. Not for my car, but for her. Mrs. Altman's climbing down the steps just as I'm walking up the drive.

involve her

"Hi, Trey. Don't you look draper today," her grandma voice shakes with her compliments. "Kailey too, she's beautiful."

"She is," I agree, and she places her hand on my forearm, giving it a light squeeze.
"You're a good guy, Trey." She
keeps going down the paved walkway,
turning on the sidewalk. I watch for her

keeps going down the paved walkway, turning on the sidewalk. I watch for her to get into her house safely before going to the door. I've been here so often I have a key, but it's on my keychain that's currently in the house with Kailey.

Knocking softly, I spot her image

walking toward the door from the window encased within the wood. She unlocks the bolt and stands in the doorway. "Hey," I say, "can I come in?" She doesn't answer, but steps out of the way. I walk in and grab her around the waist, pulling her to me. "I'm sorry you love a dickhead." My lame ass attempt to end this with humor.

She doesn't laugh. "You should have stayed. You belong there."

"I belong here. Anywhere you are is.

"I belong here. Anywhere you are is where I'm supposed to be."

She leans into me, and tears begin to fall. "What is it?" I ask her, pushing back and gripping her upper arms.
"Caden hasn't called yet. They're at

the hospital again. It's the third time in two weeks. I just know, Trey, I just know—," her voice shakes, and sobs begin pouring out of her. "The t-t-time is c-coming," she stutters, and I grab her as tight as I can get her against me. Holding her head against my chest, I attempt to soothe her, but it's too late. Kailey holds everything in until she can't hang on anymore, so I know she just needs a

release.

I walk her through the living room and kitchen, positioning her on the couch

in the family room. We sit in silence with only her labored breaths sounding the room. Eventually she collapses from exhaustion on my lap, and I pull a blanket down from the back of the couch and drape it over her. Loosening my tie, I slip my shoes off and turn on the television. My head falls back to the cushioned fabric with the light of the TV flickering in the darkness. All that I think about before my eyes lose the battle of sleep is, am I strong enough to get her through this?

I'm awoken by Drew's babbling and Chloe's voice talking to him. I slide out from under Kailey and head upstairs. Chloe is on a step stool, reaching in to

grab Drew from the crib. "Whoa," I say, rushing over to pick him up. Chloe loses her footing right before I snatch Drew from her arms.

"Trey, what are you doing here?"

Chloe asks me while I make my way over to the changing table to change Drew's diaper.

"Well, good morning to you too," I joke, and she giggles.
"Did you sleep in Aunt Voiley's

"Did you sleep in Aunt Kailey's room again?" The little imp caught me sneaking out of Kailey's room one morning. Usually I wake up early and act like I slept on the couch. But the five year old private investigator caught me red handed in pajama pants and no shirt. "No, I was on the couch," I answer

her, rubbing the top of her head. Her hairs spring up from the static cling. She rolls her eyes just like her aunt would do, they're more alike than they realize.

With Drew in my arms, I instruct

Chloe to go into her room. Turning on the television, I sit Drew in her lap to watch an episode of Dora. I escape into the hall and peer into Tara's room. She's at her closet, pulling out different shirts and pants out of the drawers and tossing them to the floor.

"Tara?" I walk into the room trying to figure out what in the hell she's doing.

"Trying to find a dress. I want to wear a twirly dress." She continues plucking every item out until she lands on a pink dress with green polka dots on it. I swear, who the hell designs clothes for kids? They're always so bright and gaudy looking.

"You have to put the clothes back in the drawer," I instruct her, but she just ignores me, changing her clothes. Deciding that will be an argument for later, I turn to make sure Chloe and Drew are okay. When I get to her room, they aren't there. Just the blare of Dora and Boots shouting 'No Swiper, no' fills the room. By the time I get to the top of the stairs, Tara grabs my hand. At least her independence means, I don't have to

dig up clothes and beg her to get dressed.

I hear Kailey's sweet voice before my feet hit the bottom of the stairs. When

my feet hit the bottom of the stairs. When I reach the kitchen, she's in her dress from last night mixing Drew's oatmeal and pouring Chloe's cereal. The girl amazes me. "Good morning," I say and kiss her cheek. "I had dreams of slowly taking this dress off your body," I whisper in her ear, and she shivers. I love it when I have that effect on her.

All the kids sit down, and I grab
Tara her cereal, while Kailey prepares
the coffee. We really have already
mastered this routine from all the times
we either let Caden and Jen sleep in or
Caden had an early class and Jen was

too tired or weak. The eerie part is the kids don't ask where their father or mother is this morning. It's like they're so used to having Kailey and I around they don't think anything is different.

We all go on with our routine, and I'm happy it's Sunday, so I'm able to help Kailey. She's been pretty quiet all day, keeping to herself. I hope it has more to do with Jen than my fuck up last night by not coming back with her.

"Have you heard anything?" I ask Kailey.

Her eyes peer to the kids and then back to me before her head gives me a small shake. My stomach drops. We all knew this day was coming, but just thought there would be more time. I hear my phone start ringing from the end table. Scooting the chair out, I stand and pick it up. When Caden's name crosses the screen, I walk into the solitude of the garage.

"Hey, Caden," I answer.

"Trey, are you alone?" his voice quietly asks.

"Yeah."

"It's bad. The doctors have suggested hospice. Jen is refusing to come home, insisting on going to a care facility. They're transporting us by ambulance in an hour or so. I'll be back today to pack a bag." Caden sighs into the phone.

"Don't worry about things here, we have it under control. Stay with Jen. One

of us can pack a bag and bring it up," I inform him, my heart aching. My empathy for Caden and Jen has tears swelling in my eyes.

"Thanks," his relieved voice flows through the line.

We hang up, and I have no idea what

"No problem."

the hell is going to happen. Even though we all knew this time was coming, I'm not sure we're prepared for the outcome. The thought of breaking the news to Kailey, is the most unnerving I've felt in forever. I have to go into that room and give the love of my life the worst possible news. Her sister is in her final stages and soon won't share the same breathing space as her. There's no way

I'm telling her in front of the kids, so I hammer a text off, and thankfully, I not only have the best girlfriend ever, but my friends are pretty awesome as well.

A half hour later, the doorbell rings, and

Kailey curiously looks at me. "Who could it be?" I stand up sporting my pink necklace, bracelet, and earring to answer the door, fully aware I'll be getting razed for this look. "I know you liked the piercings, but you're taking it to a whole other level now," Brady jokes, walking into the house. Sadie slaps Brady across the shoulders. Dex follows behind with boxes of donuts. "Sorry," Brady says,

realizing not a good time to joke.
"Thanks, guys," I say, and they each

give me their own sympathetic look.

"Always." Dex shoots a tight smile while clasping his hand on my shoulder,

squeezing it a little.

Kailey stands up from the couch as soon as she hears the voices, staring at us from across the room. Her eyes shift between them to me, and her breath stops for a moment when she puts two and two together. A look of devastation occupies her beautiful face, and she whispers, "Did you call them?" With one nod, she's sprinting past me and up the stairs.

"Go," Dex instructs.
"Who wants DONUTS?" Brady

exclaims in his most excited voice. I hear the girls screech, and their bare feet stomp across the hardwood floors.

I find Kailey in Jen's room, with a

suitcase on the bed. "She needs her stuff.

How long will she be there? I don't know what to bring her. Oh, I'll have to bring her face cream and mascara. She'll die if someone sees—." She rushes into the bathroom, and I follow.

"Kailey," I say gently, attempting to ease her into this.

She continues tossing make-up into a small colorful bag. Her eyes look to the ceiling, as though she's thinking about what else to bring. She has an 'aha' moment and steadily walks to Jen's closet. Standing in the middle of the

forth, I gather every ounce of courage in me. When she passes me for the fifth time, I grab her and pull her into my chest. "Relax, baby." She melts into my embrace for a few minutes, but then she's off again, talking to herself while grabbing clothes and Jen's belongings.

Instead of stopping her, I decide to help and get Caden's things together for

room, watching her scramble back and

him. After we have the suitcases ready, I carry them downstairs while Kailey cleans herself up. Neither one of us has taken a shower, and I'm still wearing a wrinkled shirt and slacks.

Dex has the girls on each shoulder,

Dex has the girls on each shoulder, pretending they're on a roller coaster. They giggle as his body walks around

the house dipping and rising. "Try not to injure them," I say with an edge to my voice. When I turn the corner, Sadie has Drew in the highchair, giving him small amounts of a glazed donut, and Brady sits on the couch with the remote in his hand. "So, we'll be back," I begin to explain, but the sound of Kailey's footsteps stops me.

We say our goodbyes, and I tell them I'll text or call as soon as I know what's going on. Caden texted me fifteen minutes ago that they're on the way to the hospice facility. I drop the suitcases in the trunk and climb in next to her. After reversing out of the driveway, I grab a hold of her hand; coldness replaces the usual warmth.

"I'll be with you every step." My words are sincere and honest.

"Thank you." I soothingly rub my thumb across her knuckles, and she clamps her other hand on top of our entwined fingers.

She stares out the window for the half hour drive. The silence between us saying everything. We know what the future has in store for us. The despair, depression, and sadness will become our norm for an intermittent time. But, I'll see her through it, and we'll get to other side together.

The small one story brick building looks nice and well-kept. I follow Kailey with the suitcases in my hands. The front desk area is adorned with

plants and nice calming colors of pale pink and green. A friendly lady stares up at us with a wide smile that shows her perfectly white teeth. "How can I help you?" Her eyes glance at the luggage in my hands before focusing on Kailey again.
"We're here to see Jennifer

Campbell," Kailey tells her, and the woman's lips turn down, but quickly even out. The huge welcoming smile is no longer present.

"Mr. Troutdale, our facilitator would like to have a word with you." She places her finger up in the air, while picking up the phone. After a hushed conversation she hangs up and instructs us to have a seat.

"What's this about?" Kailey asks when we take our spot in the designated chairs with a table of magazines fanned out in front of us.

"Not sure, maybe to give us more information." I shrug my shoulders.

Five minutes later, a tall man with greying hair and a slender build emerges out behind a locked door with two police officers on either side of him. His determined steps in our direction, tells me it's Mr. Troutdale, and I'm completely confused as to what is going on.

"Kailey Reynolds?" he questions. She looks at me and then stands up, shaking the hand he has out.

"That's me," she answers, her voice

beginning to shake. I stand up beside of her, and the police officers give me a double take.

"Can you come with us?" he asks, and I pick up the luggage.

"Oh, you can leave those here, Wendy will watch them." I skeptically narrow my eyes in his direction, but he places a perfectly composed stature across his face.

This time Kailey grabs my hand, instead of the other way around. I bring our hands to my lips and kiss the back of her hand. We follow Mr. Troutdale and the two police officers through the locked doors.

Chapter 17

Present Day 72 Hours Later Trey

By the time I get out of work two days after she ripped my life away, my mind is a blur, and I'm exhausted from two nights of no sleep. I check my phone and there are no texts or missed calls. Briefly, I debate if I should call her again. She has to come around eventually, she's just grieving. Right?

relationship from the beginning. I've constantly had to fight against some image in her head of what my life should be. It's my life and my choices. To be honest, I still imagined myself drinking and partying at this age. Not my now usual routine of putting the kids to bed and then crashing with Kailey on the couch to watch some dumbass reality show about millionaires who can't find love. But that vision shifted as soon as Kailey sat down next to me on that airplane. I just need to get her to believe that The parking lot of the funeral home is packed. Finding a spot in the back of

the lot, I take a deep breath before

This has been the wedge in our

opening the door. This is my time. She can't run or dodge my calls. She'll have to face me here and allow me to comfort her and show her that we'll weather this storm together.

I step through the doorway and

people are milling about. Most I don't recognize, except maybe some of Caden's faculty friends from the university. When I step in the room, my heart plummets to the ground. The sight of side-by-side caskets with bouquets of flowers fill the front of the room. It's hard to express that it's almost peaceful that they went together. God knows I can't imagine continuing my life without Kailey. Caden kept to himself mostly, but he showed the deep love he had in

his own way. It wasn't unusual for me to find him crying in his car, downstairs late at night, or just the sporadic tears that would overflow his eyes when Jen would be throwing up all night or admitted into the hospital. I sign the guest the book and wait my turn to give my condolences. My heart clenches, my mouth goes dry, and I fight to keep my feet planted to the ground. As much as I want to run to her and wisp her away from this whole scenario like some prince from the fairytales I read to Chloe and Tara, I don't because this is reality not only for her but me too. Her body shifts, and her gaze concentrates on the floor in front of her while she waits for guests to hug her and whisper their

sympathizes in her ear. Her aversion to looking up reveals she knows I'm here. How could she not? I felt her in the parking lot. That undeniable connection Kailey and I have had since I laid eyes on her that day.

People inch forward, and my time draws closer. She won't be able to escape me. She'll have to face me. I keep my eyes on her because there's good chance I'll be chasing her at some point.

The closed casket is lined with

pictures of him, Jen, and the kids with an enormous bouquet of flowers. A small red sash, reading 'Loving Husband and Father' peeps out. Caden's parents flew in the day after the accident, finally

willing to help out. It's the only reason I've given her the distance; otherwise, I'd be sleeping on that damn couch until she comes back to her senses. They give me their sympathies back. Caden had become a good friend over the past months, and I can't help but sense his parents and he had a strained relationship. They've been upfront and honest that due to their age and location, they can't take responsibility for the kids, not that Kailey would want or allow it. I place my hand on the casket and say a silent prayer for a funny, straight-forward man, who's up in heaven with his lovely wife. No one could have predicted that they would leave this earth together.

Instantly, my mind takes me back seventy-two hours ago. Mr. Troutdale's deep gravelly voice rings in my head. "There's been an accident...the ambulance was hit...it rolled several times...Mr. Campbell wasn't strapped in...only the driver survived." Kailey's sobs were the next noise to fill the room. Her repeated 'I don't understands' has me begging every last person in heaven to take this pain away from her. Send Caden and Jen back down, make this nightmare go away, make my girl happy again.

Kailey stays strong through her tears, even going down to identify the bodies after constant pleas from me not to. The police are willing to let me go

by myself, but Kailey says she needs to see them to believe it. She never even fully loses it when

She never even fully loses it when we go home. Deciding on how we're going to tell the girls, Kailey decides to tell them together. Brady, Sadie, and Dex take Drew to the park while we sit Chloe and Tara down. Tara on Kailey's lap and Chloe on mine, we tell them there was an accident, and that their

course, neither fully understands.

Later that day, Tara passes out from crying in a fit asking for her mom and dad, and Chloe sits in her room playing by herself. I knock softly, and she turns my way. The redness in her eyes evidence she's more upset than

parents wouldn't be coming home. Of

across the plush carpet, and I sit beside her, crossing my legs. Her collection of Barbies is strewn across the floor. "Do you want to talk?" I ask her.

she's letting on. My feet carry me

"No." She picks up the red-haired doll and changes her into a fancy dress.

"Are you sure?"

Are you sure?
She continues to play quietly,

ignoring my existence. "Where are they?" Her voice is soft and vulnerable.

"Remember how we've talked about this? In Heaven," I remind her of the conversations I had with her a few weeks ago when she cornered me at the park. Asking questions about her mom being sick and what did dying mean. I worried it wasn't my place, but I figured I should be straight with the kid. She had legitimate questions.

"With the pretty angels," she recalls. Picking up a doll-sized brush

she starts combing the red hair over and over again.

"Yeah, she'll watch over you now.
Her and your dad. They're never far

away from you." My best attempt to understand something I've never had to fathom. Everything inside of me breaks for not only this little girl, but her siblings as well.

"Will I see them?" My shoulders fall and my eyes close, willing myself to come up with anything in order to leave

this girl with some hope.
"One day, you'll meet them in
Heaven. But right now, just know

Heaven. But right now, just know they're looking over you." Her eyes meet mine, and she studies my face for a few breath-starving minutes.

"I miss them," she says straightfaced no emotion.

"I know." I hold out my hand, and she clasps it tightly.

We sit for a while in the silence filled room until Dex knocks softly saying they had pizza downstairs. Chloe lets go of my hand and walks out of the room. Dex clasps my shoulder when I pass him. "You okay, man?" "Yeah, eventually we will be," I

say.

That day I realize I would be a father to these children. Kailey and I would be their guardians. The scariest part of the whole realization was...it wasn't. Thoughts of my days with Kailey and these three kids don't frighten me. No anxiety or panic wash over me. Of course, I wish they could have their parents and vice versa. It's the ultimate devastation to a family, one I would reverse in a second if I had the power. But I couldn't, I was powerless except for the fact I could be there for them. Give them a life filled with love and laughter. I just have to convince Kailey first.

Her back is turned to me when I approach, but she knows I'm here. The

urge to touch her is too great to ignore. My hand steadies on her hip, and my feet bring me closer to the warmth of her body. Leaning into her, her apple scent has me breathing deeper. It's been two

long days without her, the longest I've been away from her since we confessed our love for one another.

"Kailey," I plea, begging her to let me love her love all of them. Give me

me love her, love all of them. Give me the chance to prove this is what I want, instead of her deciding for me. Her head drops, and her shoulders shudder making my hands automatically pull her toward me. Entrapping her in my arms, I hurry her out of the room while whispers swirl around us. We barge into the room I spotted on my way in. Luckily, it's

empty, and I lock the door. I sit on the flowered couch and bring

her down to my lap. She finally releases all her tears and grief into my shirt. Rubbing her arms and telling her she'll

get through this, I patiently wait for her to calm down. Anger starts to boil in my blood that things should be different. I should have fought harder when she pushed me away. With all her attempts to appear as though she's fine and holding it all together, she's not. How could she? How could anyone?

Forty-eight hours ago she made the decision to cut me out of her life. I sit on my bed stunned as she ends it with me. She grabs my heart, yanks it from my chest and tosses it out the fucking

window. Her words are kinder at first. "You deserve a life...a life I can't give you...this is an instant family, Trey. You're only twenty-three."

Then I hammer back arguments like, "You're my life...I only need you...I love all of you...please, don't push me away." Our voice rise as she pushes and I pull back and forth until she hammers the final nail. "I don't love you, Trey." My mouth drops for the pure fact the words could leave her mouth.

"Don't say that," I instruct her, grabbing her by her upper arms.

"I mean it, Trey. I was just using you." Her desperate plea to break me. She pushes my hands off her arms, and

they drop to my sides. She escapes from the room, her frantic footsteps running down the stairs. The twist of the doorknob and slam of the door announcing her departure jolts me to run after her. My feet can't go fast enough, even slipping down the last few steps. Her car is pulling out by the time I open the door, and I sprint, pounding on her window not to do this. She places her car in drive once she gets to the street, and stares at me. Her tear filled eyes look ready to burst, I think she's relenting. She rolls her window down, and I'm positive this is it. She'll park back in the driveway, we will drive over to the house, relieve Caden's parents from watching the

kids, and snuggle up in bed and comfort each other. I'll help her prepare the funeral arrangements, pick out what Caden will wear and stuff like that. "It's over, Trey," she tells me and speeds off before I can say anything.

I stand there in the middle of the street watching her taillights disappear like some fucking movie. There's no way she meant it, right? We're more than this. My throat contracts with the thought of never touching her again; never a brush of our fingertips, never a taste of her luscious lips. Just like that I'm back to being seventeen, signing the papers and handing my daughter over. The guilt and pain are too unbearable, the urge to forget, to numb

this pain too great to deny. I begin to walk back to the house when movement from the corner of my eye draws my attention.

"Hey, Trey," Bridgette flirtatiously says, twirling her long hair around her finger. She's dressed in a white tank top and tight blue boy short panties. Why hadn't I stayed on that path, the easy one? There are no bumps, twists,

off ramps. "I've got your favorite bottle," she informs me.
Flat and easy sounds good right about now.

or sudden curves, just a straight and flat easily accessible road with on and Kailey rises quickly to her feet and walks to the door. She cannot leave this room. I need to prove my love to her. Fight the case she didn't let me two nights ago. Show her how fucking good we are together. Her right hand has a tight grasp on the lock, and desperation tears into me. Grabbing her and caging her between my arms, I plant my lips on hers. The immediate desires pools between us, and I slide my tongue through her parted lips. When her body relaxes and sways into mine, I know I have her and she knows it too. She feebly attempts to push me away, even though her mouth and tongue continues to mingle with mine. I use my strength over her as my advantage, pressing my body

against hers.

Then she places both her hands and

with all her force, pushes me away. Anger boils in my veins that it's not enough. I can't get her to understand how wrong all this is. How ridiculous and selfish she's being.

"We can't, Trey, just leave," she spouts with eyes glued to mine.

"No, it's bullshit, Kailey, and you know it."

"Why won't you just let it go?"

"Because you love me. Don't deny it, Kailey. Stop cheating what we have." She briefly wavers, and I take my last opportunity to pull her into me. Her body contours with mine. Her head just under my chin, so I can kiss her apple scented hair. My arms stretch around her, my one hand firm against her neck with my fingers laced through her hair. She relents, reaching her arms around my back and just like that, we're back. The warmth of our bodies merge together into one solid form.

"Please, Trey, go," she begs in a soft

whispery voice, barely audible. There's

no wish I wouldn't grant Kailey. Nothing I would deny her—except for that.

She bolts out of my arms and out of the room within seconds. Chasing after her, the crowd of people in the waiting area has increased. My eyes find the little brunette within the crowd. She stops at Kailey, and then her face beams and her little feet sprint my way.

"TREY!" she screeches and heads my way. I scoop her up and my throat constricts when her small hands cup my face.

She tells me about Jen, and I remind

her what we talked about. I know she'll never remember this day, but a pain will fill her in the future that doesn't today when she's old enough to realize that her parents died much too young and were unable to watch her grow. Keeping her in my arms, we walk into the room. Hushed whispers of family or friends discussing the situation, pointing Kailey out as the Aunt and now guardian fill the room. The one older lady's voice rings in my ear, "That's the boyfriend. Like he'll stick around. Just look at him." I

one and tell her where the hell to go. How dare the old hag question my dedication and love for not only Kailey but the kids. But starting a fight in the middle of a wake might not be the best way to plead my case.

want to go up to her and ring her a new

Rallying up the crew, I lead them into the back of the room. A couch and a few chairs fill the space, but it's more segregated and removed from the people. Kailey's eyes glance our way occasionally. Not sure if she's just watching the kids or myself, probably both. The gang walks back and Brady grabs Drew out of my lap.

"This little man loves me." He starts tossing him in the air, and Drew laughs

incessantly the whole time.

"Brady, you're going to make him throw up," Sadie says, shaking her head

in disapproval.

"No you won't, will you, little man,"
Brady speaks solely to Drew, and he
giggles again.

Jessa pulls out some coloring books and crayons from her bag and hands them out to Chloe and Tara. Oh, my friends, I love them. They've done so much to help us. I know Sadie and Jessa took turns spending the night with Kailey the past two nights. I would have thought one of them could have convinced her she's being bullheaded and needs to let me decide the fate of my life.

Dex is the last to make his way to the

back of the room. Shaking his head, I already know what he's going to say. "I tried, man. She won't listen to me." He clasps my shoulders and before I notice all the guys are in a circle with me.

"I don't know what to do. I got her alone, but she's still convinced she knows best."

"What's your plan?" Grant chimes

"What's your plan?" Grant chimes into the conversation.

I entwine my hands on the back of my neck in exasperation of her. Kailey, a girl who's had me chasing her from the first day I stared into the emerald depths of her eyes. "I don't know what else I can do," I admit I'm coming close to defeat.

"We'll think of something. How

about a weekend alone, just you two?" Brady adds.
"No, it has to be the whole family," I

tell him, especially now. There's no way I'm taking her away from the kids. Then across the room, I spot my in. A man I'm sure can flip this around back in my favor. "Thanks, guys, but I think I got it."

I walk toward Kailey, and her eyes roam over my body. She likes what she sees, and I want to get down on my knees and thank the heavens above. At least I got one thing going for me. I stand to her right, giving her space to be comforted by people that truly love her. Holly's skin is now sun-kissed from the sun of Colorado, and she pulls Kailey toward her and holds her tightly against

her. Kailey slightly breaks, and I see her back rising and falling at a rapid rate. Clyde shakes my hand and then wraps the two of them into a great big bear hug. The three of them all weep for the family they've lost. Feeling like the outsider that I am now, I wait patiently until they finish. Then Holly abruptly yanks me into the hug, and I wrap my own arms around her and Kailey. Before I gather what has happened, Holly slowly moves her and Clyde out of the circle, leaving me holding Kailey. As though she knew what's going on, and she's trying to fix it. Clyde keeps his wife at his side and eventually Kailey calms again. When her head picks up and she gathers I'm her comforting source, she straightens her

She focuses on the group behind Holly and Clyde and walks over extending her hand.

back and wipes the tears from her eyes.

Holly shakes her head and pushes her arm through mine, escorting me out of the parlor. I pray that between her and Clyde I'll be back where I was fortyeight hours ago.

Chapter 18

Kailey

Trey stays for the duration of the wake. Aunt Holly and Uncle Clyde take the kids back to Jen and Caden's, along with Caden's parents. He silently stands by the doors, shaking hands with guests as they leave. His way with people has always amazed me. That everybody is my friend attitude warms people to him immediately, even with his outward appearance of tattoos and piercings. It was the one characteristic that first drew me to him like a moth to a flame. I

thoughts and dreams when I was still invisible to him. It's hard to believe, he now stands there at those doors peering over to me with eyes so packed with love my heart swells from just one glance. I should have never dragged him into my life in the first place. I shouldn't have been so selfish. The last couple leaves and the funeral director walks into the room. Trey follows close behind him,

remember how much he consumed my

Trey follows close behind him, unwilling to leave my side. God, I love that man. Forever loyal. The director informs me of tomorrow's schedule, the time of each step. He asks about the pallbearers, and my gut sinks, realizing I never thought about it.

"It's all taken care of. I can give you a list of names," Trey conveys.

My astonished face stares up at him, and he places his hand on the small of my back, rubbing small circles.

"It looks like you have it all set then.

Thank you. We'll see you tomorrow at nine o'clock." The director escorts us out of the room, shutting the doors behind him. A feeling of loneliness washes over me. The two people who were second parents to me, now lay in that room, still and empty. Trey immediately wraps his arm around me and pulls me into him. His lips brush the top of my head as he leads me out into the summer night air together.

Since Holly and Clyde took the van,

knows that already leaves weariness in me. We drive to the house, his hand in mine, his thumb rubbing over my knuckles like always. The comfortableness between us has me wishing things were different. I imagine that we're on our way back from a magnificent date, where he swooned me with his sweet talk and kind gestures, instead of the reality. The lights are on in every room

Trey's my ride home, and the fact he

when we pull up, and I'm assuming all the kids are up, most likely struggling without their normal routine. "Looks a little crazy," Trey mentions, throwing the car in park.

"Yeah, I better get in there. Thanks

for the ride and...everything," I say, staring into my clasped hands.

"Let me help you get them calmed down and in bed?" I shake my head, trying to discourage the eagerness in his voice.

"No, I got it covered. There's a lot of help in there." I point to the house.

"Okay. I'll pick you up tomorrow for the funeral."

I shake my head again. "I'll be fine. Thank you, though." My fingers grasp the metal door handle, but my heart is struggling to let me actually leave. I need to make this fast, or I'll never get the courage to do it.

"I'll see you tomorrow. But if you need—,"

"I won't. Good night, Trey," I whisper and quickly exit the car. I rush to the door as fast as I can, shutting it as though some stranger is chasing me.

"What the hell is that all about?" Holly asks, wiping her hands on the dishtowel. Chloe and Tara are running around, screaming and laughing. When I enter the family room, I release a relieved breath that Drew is asleep in Uncle Clyde's arms.

"Where are Caden's parents?" I ask, since there's no sign of them anywhere.

"I sent them to the hotel." Aunt Holly finishes loading the dishwasher. "And now, it's bath time," she pretends to chase after the girls, and they squeal up the stairs. "You," she points to me,

"stay," she instructs and points to the couch.

Uncle Clyde gives me a tight smile, and I solemnly walk toward him, finally figuring out why Trey was my only option for a ride home tonight. I'm about to take Drew from his arms when he shakes his head and nods toward the seat on the couch. I don't think I've sat down for more than five minutes all day, and I'm antsy without a child to hold or a task to complete. "Where's Trey?" he asks casually, like he knows nothing of the break-up.

"On his way home, I assume," I answer, fidgeting with my fingers.

"Why?" he arches his eyebrow, and I bite the inside of my cheek.

"Give it up, Uncle Clyde. I know you know." I roll my eyes with irritation.
"Watch it, I'm still your elder," he

jokingly warns. "Stop being stubborn," he tells me, and I curl my legs up under me on the couch. The sound of small footsteps running along the hallway has me thinking I should be up there instead of here. "Holly can take care of them," he informs me and widens his eyes

anticipating my answer.

"You know as well as I do that he doesn't need us in his life." Uncle Clyde and I have always had a close

relationship. I still remember asking him question after question about my parents. With him being my mom's brother, I would dig into their past growing up and

my parents' marriage. A pre-teen in the mountains of Colorado for an entire summer with no friends, can be much like a game of This Was Your Life. He always took my interrogations with ease and finesse, weaving in and out of certain topics only divulging necessary bits of information.

"True," he nods his head with

agreement. My head zips up, and his smiling face looks my way. "He doesn't need an instant family. He just graduated, and now his girlfriend just became a guardian of three kids. Can you imagine what he must be thinking?" I'm not sure where exactly Uncle Clyde is going with this, but I remain quiet, waiting for the 'aha' moment. "What?

That's all I have." He stands up and rocks Drew in his arms. "Time to get this little guy to bed." He stands in front of me, and my vision follows him until he disappears out of my peripheral sight. "But, Kailey, remember, sometimes you

want things you don't necessarily need. From what I see, Trey definitely wants not only you, but these three kids."

His thumping footsteps go upstairs and after ten minutes the house rests. No more little footsteps scurrying across the floor or laugher bellowing down the hall. Just silence. I turn on the television, needing the noise of distraction. *Yukon Men* is on, it's a show Trey got me addicted to, and I half wonder if he's watching it now too. Allowing myself to

forget my life and live in someone else's for just sixty minutes, I grab a pillow and lay down.

The clattering of pots and pans wake me the next morning. The television shut off and a blanket over my body, has me thanking Aunt Holly. Then my heartbeat increases. The kids. I quickly stand up and am about to run upstairs when Holly is smiling my way as she whisks eggs. "Relax and have a cup of coffee," she says motioning with her hands.

"Chloe. Did she wake up? Have a nightmare?" I'm practically breathless from the anxiety.

"She did wake up, but I was able to

ease her back down. It was only once."

"Thank you. I guess I was more tired than I thought," I place my head in my hands, staring down at my cup of coffee.

"Well, if you'd let your boyfriend

help out, you'd be more rested," she smirks my way and turns her attention back to the stove. Fluffy pancakes cook on a skillet and bacon sizzles in the oven.

"I don't need the lecture from you

too," I prop my head in my one hand, bringing the warm delicious coffee to my lips.

"Kailey, he loves you. Anyone can see that. I know you can too," she says, flipping a few pancakes and then pouring the eggs into the hot pan. "It's not about if he loves me," I'm finally going to reveal my biggest fear. Something only Jen would have known.

"What then? I don't want to hear the bullshit about not tying him down."

"Of source it's that He deserves to

"Of course it's that. He deserves to live a happy life, have a family of his own someday," I start explaining. "I made a mistake in Colorado. I should've fought him, not let him pursue me. I should've squashed it immediately. Then he wouldn't be in this compromising position. He'd be free, living his life without this drama and heavy responsibility." "Why didn't you?" This is not the

"Why didn't you?" This is not the question I thought would come out of Aunt Holly's mouth.

"I had liked him for too long, and then suddenly he starts telling me he wants to date me. You know that one guy in high school that you just can't stop staring at? The one who makes your body shiver with goose bumps just from the sound of his voice? The one you secretly hope to be seated next to or partnered up with in Biology class? The one that you hope one day notices you and falls madly in love with you for ever and ever?" I don't know if I've ever been this honest with anyone about my infatuation with Trey before he knew I existed.

"Doesn't everyone have that one crush? But it doesn't mean that it can't come true. That the prince can't open his

eyes one day to find out his Juliette has patiently been waiting for him." She mixes up her fairytales, but I understand her meaning. God, I love Trey with every beat of my heart, and that's why I won't let him pay for my mistake.

"No, it's just a fairytale. There's a

reason he never noticed me before. I was just a conquest he tried to conquer and now he's mistaking it for love." I can practically feel the coldness of the lies I'm spouting, but it will get me through today. If I can escape the funeral without Trey coming home with me, he has a chance, an opportunity to escape us and find his own life.

"Aw, sweetie, you obviously see a very different man than I do then," she

says, giving me a weak smile and turning her complete attention to the stove.

I'm shocked she actually lets the

subject rest, that's never been her way. Eventually, the girls come downstairs, sleepy eyed and tired. No doubt from their late night. Usually we're stricter with the bedtimes, but we're all in uncharted territory.

Chloe sits in her chair while Tara

climbs into my lap. My fingers run through Tara's hair cut in a short bob, similar to Jen. Their resemblance is uncanny. My heart aches for my sister. I already miss her, and it's only been a few days. Since Tara is nuzzling up to me, pushing her head in the crock of my neck, I know she's missing her too. The

flitters around, placing food filled plates on the table, grabbing the margarine out of the refrigerator, and opening drawers and cabinets for silverware and plates, stacking them on the table. "Don't just sit there, set the table," she demands, and Chloe and I start placing plates and silverware out. Tara jumps off my lap and turns on the television, sitting down in her Dora pillow chair. "Look who woke up?" Uncle Clyde comes downstairs with Drew his arms. I'm surprised to see how fitting of a father he is, since he and Holly never

had children of their own. Drew squirms out of his arms and after Uncle Clyde

kitchen quiets and even the charismatic Chloe is silent and solemn. Aunt Holly lets him down, he waddles into the room with Tara. Standing up, Uncle Clyde hugs me. "Did you do any thinking last night?" he asks.

"No, she passed out on the couch

before I even made it downstairs," Holly answers for me. "She's still being blind and stubborn," she informs him, and he shakes his head in disapproval.

Ignoring their comments, I grab a

sippy cup, fill it with milk, and take it to Drew. Pouring Chloe and Tara's milk, I place them at their settings and excuse myself to go get ready. My feet skid to a stop when I hear Chloe say to Aunt Holly, "These are much better than Trey's. Where is he?" A heart wrenching pain hits my chest. Is it really

fair that I take him away from her too? Quickly, I disregard the thought, it's better now than in a few months when this life becomes too much for him to bear.

I pass the closed bedroom door to Caden and Jen's room. Briefly, I think how I would have borrowed something from Jen to wear today on any other occasion. All her beautiful dresses and pants suits from the dinners and faculty events she attended with Caden. The noise from kitchen float up the stairs showing the kids are finally really waking up. My hand reaches for the doorknob on its own accord. Twist it, I tell myself. Bury yourself in the grief, surround yourself in it. Looking down

at the floor, I rush in and shut the door behind me.

The smell of fresh linen and cotton has my eyes closing in remembrance of my sister's favorite scent. Her room spray that she had to swap for candles after the kids came rests on the dresser counter. The bed is made with the precision Caden always possessed. The suitcases sit on the floor next to the footstool. Trey must have brought them in when we returned. Pictures of her and Caden at their wedding, the day they brought Drew home, and all of us last spring on the porch steps line along her dresser. A bowl full of dried up rose petals from the first bouquet Caden ever brought her amongst them. Slowly I walk rest next to their designated sinks.
Caden's cologne placed on his shelf with his aftershave and deodorant.
Everything exactly where it should be as though he had outlines drawn to where

to the bathroom and their toothbrushes

Jen's side a little messier, her hairbrush laying on the counter with strands of her chestnut hair weaved through the prongs.

they belong.

I walk into their enormous walk in closet. The one Jen demanded Caden redo when they bought the house. There are shelves for her sweaters, shoe racks for her high-end designer shoes. All of Caden's ties rest on a custom made tie rack Jen had made for him when he

'Professor Hottie' engraved across the top. His laundered shirts, hanging up according to color, plaids, or stripes. A small smile creeps across thinking about how Jen and I always imitated his obsessive-compulsive tendencies, and he would tell us that is a serious condition. We would continue laughing until he would leave the room in a huff throwing a pillow at us. For the first time, it hits me; I'll never have that again. There are no more movie nights where Jen and I force Caden to watch a chick flick while he sits there begrudgingly, secretly enjoying it. We won't have the rock, paper, scissor game to predict who washes the dishes after a

became Professor at Western. Jen had

holiday meal. Nothing in my life will be the same again.

A flood of memories come over me.

Caden's expression when I slammed the door in his face that first time I met him.

When he asked me for Jen's hand in marriage and included me in the planning. Their small wedding at Aunt Holly and Uncle Clyde's, Jen with flowers in her hair like some free spirited hippie. Caden in his nice blue suit, his eyes only on her as she walked to him. When Chloe came home and the small bickering between them on who would feed, or change her. Me getting up in exasperation to just make it stop. Their laughter when I returned that it was a game to get me to do it. Me

throwing the pillow in their faces then.
All the loss becomes too much for me, and I grab one of Caden's sweatshirts, throwing it over my head.

Pulling a scarf of Jens down, I sink to the floor, curl up in a ball and cry into the scent that's home. That mixture of Caden's musk cologne and Jen's crisp peach lotion that made them, Jen and Caden, a love that ended much too early.

Sobs scream out of me. My fists

bang the carpet. My legs curl into me. I'm not sure how long it's been before Uncle Clyde busts into the room and sits down next to me. Placing his hand on my back, he whispers things will be okay, we will get through this. I allow him to tell me all the bull shit people say after

someone dies. I stand up and hug him, saying he's right and I'll be fine. Then I walk out of the room, get in the shower, and dress in my best black dress.

Aunt Holly and I dress the girls

while Uncle Clyde takes care of Drew. We do their hair and make them look like beautifully angelic girls. Aunt Holly shifts her skeptical gaze to me occasionally. She sees the coldness in every step I make, the robotic moves and directions. I'm slowly shutting down just like I did when I was ten. Pretty soon I'll be completely in a black hell, it's safer there. I don't give a shit what anyone says; I'd rather be alone than feel this heartache again. Twice in one lifetime is enough for me.

Chapter 19

Trey

I sit in the driveway and bang my head against the steering wheel before throwing the car in reverse and speeding off. Not wanting to go home, I continue driving. Thoughts of my whole life float through my head like a slideshow of pictures. All the girls, drinking, and band gigs swarm around my memory of my college years. The baby and Zoey peek through the fog of my mistakes the past five years. I just can't let Kailey push me away when every fiber in me

screams she's where I belong. It's her and the kids I'm meant to be with. They're a package deal, and I wouldn't want it any other way. Now I just need

her to stop being so fucking stubborn.

Hours later, I pull in my driveway, and Bridgette's house is thundering with music and high-pitched laughter. Cars line up and down the street while students mill around the yard with red Solo cups and cigarettes. This is the first time in months that I crave a cigarette. I park the car and holler over at a group of guys huddled around the keg. A guy turns

guys huddled around the keg. A guy turns around, and I ask him to bum a cigarette. He's on his way over when Bridgette appears out of nowhere and holds a butt of one to my lips. She flicks the lighter,

and I allow her to stick the cigarette in my mouth before raising the lighter. Inhaling deep, I can't help but let my eyes wander down her exposed cleavage lit up from the red iridescent glow of the flame. When my eyes turn back up, she's flirtatiously smiling up at me. A look that would have had me pushing her up

against the side of the house already in

my former life.

"I heard about Professor Campbell and his wife," she says flatly. "Shouldn't you be playing your role of daddy now? Or is the mommy still wanting you to chase her." Her bitter words has me wanting to flick the lit cigarette in her face.

"God, Bridgette. Jealous?" I accuse,

wishing like hell I would've just gone into the house.

"Why would I be jealous? She might have gotten you wrapped around her finger, but people like you and me don't change, Trey." She takes her finger and slowly moves it down the front of my shirt. "It's probably for the best, you would've broken her heart eventually," she finishes and smirks up at me.

"You don't know shit. You're just a fucking slut, whom no one gives a shit about. I get it, I hurt you. You thought you could be more to me that a good time, but you weren't. And seeing how spiteful you can be makes me pretty damn happy about that. Don't hate Kailey because you're jealous of her. I

pretty fucking spectacular, but you'll never be it the same league. Hell, I'm not in the same league, but god damn it if I'm not going to try to make her believe I'm good enough for her," I assert and turn around toward the house.

"Whatever, Trey, I give it a month

tops." She yells out, and I raise my hand as I continue to walk away and flip her

know there's a lot to be jealous of, she's

off.
Sadie and Brady are watching a movie. Dex is most likely out. I grab a beer and join them, but it's another fucking eighties movie. Does Brady have any balls? He's so damn whipped. Not able to take another love story, I catch the light on in the detached garage.

Rob's in there, working on his Mustang. Figuring at least he'll give me a fight that might release some of this aggression that's overflowing in me I head that way. His long legs lay out from under the

car and the cranking of a wrench can be heard from below. "Hey, dipshit, what are you working on?" I announce my presence. Gotta say, I'm surprised he's not next door at the party.

"What the hell do you want?" He

rolls himself out and the grease along his fingers tells me something's not working right.

I take a long pull of my beer. "Need to work off some steam. Either we fight, or I'll help you."

He shuffles over and grabs his own

second, almost contemplating if he wants my help or not. "I'm getting it ready to race, changing out a few things, so it runs smoother and faster." He tosses me a wrench, and I take his spot, lying down and sliding under the car.

beer, staring at me for a few beats of a

This is an area Rob and I have always seen eye to eye. He helped me restore my pride and joy, and I've given him a hand on his. "I'm still surprised, you bought a new car," I yell up through the insides of the car.

"Yeah, I think I was just caught up in that instant mediocre fame and the little amount of money I was making on my own. Should've bought something to fixup, make it my own," he admits. Once I get the new high-torque mini starter tightened, I slide back out.

"It will be your own, but it's a shame you'll put so much more money into it." I toss my empty beer in the trashcan and grab another from his cooler.

"It is what it is."

"Where you racing?"

"There's an open track up at Speed Chasers in two weeks. You should do it too. It's nothing crazy, I think cash prize is only like a thousand, but it's a huge event." I have to admit, it's tempting, but there's no way I'm doing it. As much as I don't want to sound like some fucking middle aged man, it's too dangerous.

"We'll see," I tell him, but he knows

that's my decline. "Let's get this thing going then," I say, not wanting to allow my thoughts to drift to Kailey and the kids.

Rob and I stay out there in the garage for another three hours. By the time we're heading back in the house, my forearms are tight and biceps sore from all the back and forth with socket wrenches and screwdrivers. Sadie and Brady must have already gone to bed, and Dex hasn't returned home, leaving the kitchen dark when we enter. Rob goes to the fridge and offers me another beer, but I'm finished for the night.

"I heard about your girlfriend's sister and brother-in-law. I'm sorry," Rob expresses his sympathies, and I'm almost struck with shock. "Let me know if you need anything," he continues, and I'm thinking someone else has invaded his body.

"I've got it handled, but thanks," I say, leaving the room. "The funerals tomorrow if you want to come." I begin to tell him the details, but he stops me.

"Sorry, man, I don't do funerals. But

—," he trails off because it's Rob. He doesn't wear his heart on his sleeve and since tonight was our first conversation.

—," he trails off because it's Rob. He doesn't wear his heart on his sleeve and since tonight was our first conversation in the past months that didn't include fists clenched or thrown, I'll leave it as it is. We all know Rob has a past he doesn't share, and I'm not about to try to figure him out.

"If you need help with the car, just

yell," I tell him and jog up the stairs.

It's eight-thirty when I arrive at the funeral home the next morning. I could have been here at four this morning, since I didn't sleep worth a shit. Sixty hours without Kailey snuggled up in my side, but who's counting. Last night, I even stole the body pillow Jessa left behind, but it doesn't slightly blow hot breath on my neck or sandwich its leg between mine. My hand can't tangle through long stands of dark hair or feel its breasts up against my bare chest. So the attempt to sleep with the body pillow was useless for me.

The director, Mr. Greyson meets me

outside the office and shakes my hand. I stare at the two caskets and tears pool in my eyes for them and what they've left behind. It's eerie and slightly uncomfortable with the death that encompasses the room. I'm suddenly thrown into a conversation I had with Jen a month or so ago.

"Do you love her?" She asks me

"Of course," I answer honestly. A little offended she asked the question.
"How much?" She's sitting up in her bed eating fries. I just snuck in McDonalds for her while Kailey was

point blank.

picking Chloe up from pre-school. Kailey is strict with Jen's diet, making sure everything had nutritional value. Jen had secretly sent me a text requesting I pick it up on my way over and the times Kailey wouldn't be home. "With every fiber in my body," I tell her. She pops a fry in her mouth.

"Not good enough." She washes the fry down with a sip of Diet Coke.
"What do you want me to say?"

"I can't tell you what to say. That would be an unfair advantage."

"It's not a game, Jen," I add while sitting on the footstool at the end of their bed.

"That's good to hear. I need to know, Trey. Tell me what I want to hear, put my fears at rest before I leave her."

"Jesus, Jen, I love her. She's all I

think about, when I'm not with her. I count down the minutes until I see her again. She's everything to me," I start, but she still seems unsatisfied. Not sure what she's looking for me to say. Hell, I feel sorry for Caden. I can't imagine what he had to prove.

"That's a good start, but what

else?"

Standing up out of pure frustration. I throw both my hands over my head. "There's nothing I wouldn't do for her happiness. I'll protect her with every

inch of my skin."
"She'll fight you," she reminds me.

"She'll push."

"And I'll fight right back and pull her back to me," I say, and a smile

spread across her face. "She's stubborn" "I'm persistent and tenacious." "She'll shut down." "I'll find my way in." "She'll use the kids." "So will I." She quirks her eyebrow my way. "For good, of course." "She'll eventually relent. When you least expect it." "That's why I'll stay determined until she surrenders." "To the love you share." "Yes, to our love for one another. It will be my biggest selling tool." "Your body will help too," she laughs clearly satisfied with our conversation.

"Take care of my baby sister, Trey."

"With my life and heart."

In just the short time I knew her, she wormed her way into my heart. Her perseverance for her sister's happiness was strong and unwavering. Walking along the wall, the pictures on top of Caden's casket have me choking back tears. A father taken unexpectedly. He sits on the couch with all three kids around him, and I remember when Kailey took the picture. She had been trying to get more with Jen, but Jen was tired and fell asleep upstairs. Not wanting to ruin all their nice outfits, she had them pose with Caden. It's almost fitting in a way, now they'll have these

A loud voice and Tara's shriek transports me out of my thoughts. When I turn around Kailey stands outside the

transports me out of my thoughts. When I turn around, Kailey stands outside the doors. Her mouth agape and eyes boring into mine. I pick up Tara off the ground and pull her into my arms. She looks adorable in her black dress with a puffy bottom and satin shoes. "Put me down," she insists. When I do, she twirls around. "Look, it's like a princess," she tells me, and I smile down at her.

"Yep, you're a princess all right."

She flutters around the room showir

She flutters around the room showing Holly and Clyde how when she circles around, the skirt twirls. Kailey finally makes her way up to the caskets, and Holly nudges her head my way. I pray

she's been a little persistent gnat attached to Kailey when I'm not there. "Chloe still having nightmares," I ask, coming along side of her as she

stares down at her sister. The blank expression reminds me how Kailey can push things out and keep herself closed off from everyone that loves her.

softly says, her eyes never leaving Jen. "Is she sleeping with you," I ask, and she nods.

"Yeah, only one last night," she

"Holly did it last night. I feel asleep on the couch. But it's the only way so far. Even then she fights me sometimes. She's so startled she flails her body around until eventually succumbing to sleep again." Her voice is so expressionless. Where is the woman I love?

"I could spend the night. I can sleep on the couch if you want." At this point, I'll take what I can.

She turns her head, and this is the first time I've ever seen her eyes so empty and voice void of any inflection. She's pushed her emotions so far inside, I don't know if we'll ever find them. "No," she says and turns to exit the room.

see guests making their way to the caskets, saying their silent goodbyes.

Mr. Greyson comes over, and I round up the pallbearers for him. He discusses the duties to the mixture of my friends and

I'm about to chase after her until I

Caden's relatives. It kills me that I'll be one of them, keeping me from comforting Kailey and the kids the whole time, but at least this is one thing I can do for the man who became my friend.

Just as I'm about to make way to

them again, trying to figure out in my head how I'll ever get her to come out from behind her wall, my mom's voice has me turning around. Her arms wrap around me, and my dad and brother, Derek, are right behind her. "What are you doing here?"

"Kailey needs us, you need us," she

"Kailey needs us, you need us," she tells me. My family's unyielding love never ceases to amaze me.

"Thanks, Mom." I bury my head into the crook of her neck, wanting to cry like a toddler. I want to tell her my problems and hope she can fix them. She quickly pushes me away, and I follow her footsteps to a very shocked Kailey. My mom mimics her previous motion and gives Kailey a big bear hug. It takes a few seconds, but eventually Kailey reacts and wraps her arms around my mom in return. Then my mom's hands cup Kailey's face between them, and my mom says something to her before hugging her again. Seeing Drew at her legs, my mom sweeps him up and swings an arm around Kailey's shoulders, leading her into the other room.

"Hey, son. Are you holding up?" My dad finally speaks after witnessing the scene between Kailey and my mom.

"It's okay. She's shutting me out."
My dad and I have always had a good relationship. He was one of the ones who helped me decide about giving the baby up for adoption and made me realize that it wasn't a selfish decision.

"I don't envy her position. This is hard for anyone, but a twenty-two year old." He shakes his head. "I can't imagine."

"I'm becoming desperate, Dad." He rests his hand on my shoulder.

"Give her some time and space.

She'll come around." Isn't that everyone's answer? But they don't know her like me. Then I hear Jen's words again. "She'll eventually relent." When god damn it? When will she finally give

in?
The director calls everyone in, and I'm about to take a seat with my parents when Chloe and Tara come over and

when Chloe and Tara come over and grab each one of my hands, leading me to the couch in front of the caskets. My dad urges me to follow, so I do. They sit me right next to Kailey and hop on our laps. Holly sits in the chair next to us holding a sleepy Drew in her arms. Clyde is on the other side of her. Caden's parents peer over at our make shift family from their own couch to the

right of us.

After the priest and the prayers, the mourners file out, and the family is given time to say good-bye. Kailey surprises

time to say good-bye. Kailey surprises me when she exits the room two seconds

after the doors shut. The gang has the kids along the couch, Sadie feeding them graham crackers. Uncle Clyde and Aunt Holly, along with Caden's parents, come out fifteen minutes later, and the despair in their eyes when they look at me.

could only spend a few minutes with them.
"Can you take the kids?" I ask them,

They're just as confused to how Kailey

and they nod their heads.

Kailey stands outside the room, talking to one of the pallbearers. Mr. Greyson comes up to her and asks if everyone has said their goodbyes, and she nods. I grab her wrist and start walking into the room again.

"Stop it, Trey, what are you doing?"

She tries to wiggle out of my grip, but I hold tight. The curious eyes over my impromptu scene does nothing to waver me.

"Kailey you're going to face this." I

"Kailey, you're going to face this," I tell her and open the parlor doors and shut them behind us. She stands with her arms crossed over her chest, an indignation I've grown to love. I point to the caskets. "Say goodbye," I instruct sternly, but she shakes her head, like a fucking two year old.

"I already said goodbye," she says not even willing to glance in their direction.

I grip her hand again and force her toward the front of the room. I take the picture of Jen and Caden and shove it in Kailey," I take both her hands in mine. "I know this hard as hell, and you're breaking inside, but, believe me, you'll regret it if you don't take the time and say good-bye."

She says nothing, her blank green

her face. "You need to face this reality,

eyes peer over at Jen. "No, then it's a reality." Finally we're starting getting somewhere.

"I know, baby," I gently speak,

entwining our fingers and leading her over to her sister.

She surprises me when she lays her hand on the casket and closes her eyes. I start to release her hand, to give her the space she needs, but she squeezes harder. "Stay, please." Hell, if I would

I stay quiet while she whispers

sweet things to her sister, and then makes her way over to Caden, telling him goodbye. After she's done, she looks up at me and nods. It scares the hell out of me that there are no tears in her eyes, revealing that she's still lost somewhere inside herself. I need to reach her darkness, show her our love is worth it. One step at a time I tell myself. She allows me to keep her hand in mine as we open the doors. Most everyone has departed to their cars. All the pallbearers, including my brother, who graciously filled in for me, file into the room under Mr. Greyson's directive. Sadie and Jessa bring the kids our way,

and we stand there along with family, watching the two caskets brought out on rolling carts. The gloved hands of the men resting on top, are serious and mournful, lifting the caskets into the two hearses.

The sound of the doors being shut makes Kailey's body jolt. I place my hand on her back, and her head drops. She grabs Drew in her arms and takes Chloe's hand in hers. I, in turn, pick up Tara, and we leave the funeral home for a long time to come, hopefully. I don't ask, and she doesn't say anything when I climb into the driver's seat of the minivan.

The rest is a blur of activity. Driving to the church, Holly and Caden's

cousin's eulogies, the cemetery and the caskets being lowered into the ground all runs together. Throughout the whole thing, Kailey doesn't shed one tear, doesn't release one sob. Polite and courteous as she sees the last guest out of the banquet room the university let her use. The catering crew makes the rounds of clearing dishes and glasses from the tables. Scooping up the tablecloths into balls and tossing them into baskets. Aunt Holly and Uncle Clyde have been lifesavers, taking the kids back to the house once again. She gathers her purse, and we walk out to my car without a word spoken. I open the door for her, she slides in, and I walk around to my side. I'm suddenly breaking inside that

the one I love is shattered beyond my healing powers.

When we get to the house, it's darker

than last night. I'm not surprised the kids aren't already crashed in their beds. I swallow hard, wanting desperately to beg her. Let me come in, hold you tonight, and begin this new life with you; be together and face this as a team, I can be her savior, her knight. "Thank you, Trey. Goodnight." She hurries out of the

Needing to give her some time, I back out of the driveway to return to my lonely bed, racking my brain on how I'll convince Kailey to see what everyone else does.

car, just like last night.

Chapter 20

Kailey

It's been two weeks since we buried Jen and Caden. Aunt Holly and Uncle Clyde are staying for the summer to help everyone get adjusted. Their help is great, since I was in the middle of summer school. Now that they're retired they volunteered to move here permanently, or us to Colorado, but I declined the offer. Chloe still has nightmares, but they're only a few times a week. Tara and Drew don't completely understand, mostly asking

where their mom and dad are right before bed or a nap. We're hanging on, mostly to each other for the life support we need to carry on.

Trey stops by every day, either taking the kids to the park or just to hang out for a few hours. I try to make myself scarce, but occasionally I just sneak up to my bedroom until I hear the roar of his muffler disappear down the street. My body begs me to stay where he is, waiting for his fingers to brush against mine, to feel that electric shock, but it will just make the inevitable harder. Trey won't be able to stay in this caged life. He should be out there living, instead of nailed down with three kids and a pseudo wife. His tenacious side is

really shining, and I'm waiting for the day he doesn't show up, the day he finally chalks it up and forgets us.

Uncle Clyde continues to do his

silent encouraging, and Aunt Holly furthers her bluntness to informing me what a stubborn ass I'm being. But they don't understand, I saw the toll it took on Caden when he took me on as well as Jen. Not to say we weren't happy, we were, but it wasn't easy. I can't help thinking Caden wouldn't have minded dating Jen without having to worry about a babysitter or a little sister tagging along. Those teenage years, when I was outspoken and downright mean. The fights we had when I disrespected Jen. I

love Trey. I wish everyone would

understand, I'm putting us both through hell for him. That doesn't mean I'm not mourning

Trey in a way as well. My heart practically shatters every time I see him, my feet desperately want to disobey me and run toward him. It would be easier for me to jump into his arms and allow him to wipe away all my worries. So, I keep repeating to myself, it's for his own good. I just wish he'd give up already because I'm starting to waiver the more he comes around.

Especially since when I came back from class this afternoon, I found suitcases by the door. "Aunt Hol," I yell, "what's with the suitcases?"

She doesn't bother even turning

around from the sink. "We're going somewhere," she says, continuing to clean the dishes

"Where, and who is we?" I make my way to the fridge to grab a Diet Coke.

"All of us. Well, you probably won't want to go, so you can stay here. But me,

Clyde, and the kids." She's been giving the cold shoulder for the past week.

"Where would you be going? It's Fourth of July, I thought we could—,"

"We've been invited to Trey's family's house. I think it would do some good for the kids to get away."

"You can't just take them," I spout. She turns around and raises her

eyebrows at me.

"Okay, Kailey, can we take the kids

to Trey's for the long weekend?" She sighs and purses her lips.
"No," I answer, shaking my head.

"Too bad." she shrugs her shoulders.

"I said no. I'm their guardian."

"Kailey, they need a change. They

need something to look forward to. To get out of this house and not be reminded of everything they lost. Maybe you want to continue to wallow in grief, but it's not fair to them."

Taken back, I cock my head, surprised she's pointing the finger at me.

I wasn't the driver who smashed into the ambulance. I'm not the one who gave Jen cancer. All I've done is continued our normal schedule. The kids do everything like they did before their parents died.

It's not like I lay in my bed all day feeling sorry for myself. Well, maybe a little.

"That boy loves those kids and you

too, if you'd just open your damn eyes you'd realize it. His mom called me and invited all of us, including you, which is more than I can say I would do from the way you've treated her son." I release a deep breath from exhaustion of her attitude with me.

"Fine. Go. I'll stay here." I shout at her while I walk up the stairs. A memory suddenly floods to mind of the fights I had with Jen when I was sixteen. Oh, how I miss her.

When I get to my room, I slam the door like a teenager and flop down on

my bed. Anger rising within me, the nerve that she's taking the kids away, and with Trey. My phone dings in my pocket, and I pull it out.

Trey: Please think about coming. It would be good to get away. Love, your little drummer boy. Although, there's nothing little about me.;)

Tossing the phone into my pillow, I

let my head fall down onto my crossed arms. The ache that occupies my body is for Trey. I've been dreaming about him every night. The feel of his warm arms wrapped around me. There's no way, I can be in a car with him for three hours, but at the same time there's no way I can't. The pull to him is too strong, and he's weakened me these past weeks as

much as I hate to admit it.

Already accepting I should be

Already accepting I should be packing my bag another text comes through.

Trey: Not even a LOL or smiley? Give me something.

The smallest smile starts to form. Damp him

Me: \square *LOL. Happy now?*

Trey: I won't be happy until you agree to come. Come on my cat girl.

Say no, say no.

Me: Fine.

Trey: Pack a skimpy bikini. Wait, strike that. Bring a one piece too. The bikini will be for the midnight swims with just you and me.

Uh, the audacity of him to think just

because I'm agreeing to go, I'll be skinny dipping with him in the middle of the night.

Me: Don't get any ideas. I'm not going to be skinny dipping with the likes of you.

Trey: Look has the dirty mind now. I said bikini, not naked. But hey, I'm sure you can persuade me. I'm leaving my house, so pack that bag because I'm coming to get ALL of you.

Just like that the butterflies swarm

within my stomach, and the anticipation of being near him grows more intense. Jesus, Kailey, you have no self-control. You've held off for the past two weeks, and now you're just going to give in. What the hell is wrong with you? You

love him that's what.

Trey arrives fifteen minutes later. I barely have everything packed by the time he's at my bedroom door. He leans against the doorframe so cocky and sure of himself, bearing that flirtatious smirk. "Did you pack it?" he slyly asks.

"Maybe," I playfully respond, shrugging my shoulders. He comes into the room and grabs

my bag from the bed. When he passes by me, his hand grazes mine and goose bumps spread like wildfire up my arm.

"I just want to make something clear, Trey. This doesn't change anything. You still need to move on with your life." His eyes drop, and he takes a long breath before they open again. "Got it." His lips turn up into a

smile.

We climb into the van, all the kids in the back row, and Holly and I in the second row with Trey and Clyde up front. Holly pats my knee and smiles at me, obviously deliriously happy that I changed my mind.

Three hours, two bathroom breaks,

and an hour filled with whining later, we arrive at Trey's parents'. It's an enormous two-story brick house set back on a lot of empty land. Classic and modern all rolled into one. With tons of windows and black trim, it's stunning to look at. The lines are sleek but jagged.

Whoever designed it had a keen eye for architecture, that's for sure.

Trey parks the van in front of the

four-car garage, and all of us are eager to escape the confined space. "I forgot what it's like to travel with children," Holly says to me and just shrugs. I want to remind her she's the one who was so keen on this little road trip, but this will be uncomfortable as it is, I'll need her as an ally not an enemy.

Trey and Clyde carry the bags, but before we open the door it busts open with Elena standing in the doorway. Seriously, do these people have magic powers? Have they ever heard of letting some knock before answering? "Hi, everyone. Welcome." She throws the door open all the way and signals us to come in. Anxiety builds inside of me that maybe I'm not really welcome, but of course she quickly proves me wrong.

Once I'm through the door, she

squeezes me tightly just like her son always does. "Welcome, Kailey." Her arms bring a warmth around me, almost chipping away some coldness. I nod and clench my teeth, so I don't break down. Elena makes a huge pot of spaghetti

with homemade meatballs for dinner. We sit on the patio that overlooks acres of land. The kids play in the yard, Chloe does cartwheels, Tara somersaults, and Drew just running in circles. It's nice to see them so happy and carefree, like children should be. Not that they aren't

at home, but Aunt Holly was right, they needed to get out of that house and Western. *Damn, I hate it when she's right.*

"Kailey, will you help me?" Elena asks, taking the dishes into the kitchen.
I automatically stand, kicking myself

for not offering first. Trey rises to his feet to help. "Trey, you stay. I only need Kailey. We'll be right back." She smiles, and I look at Aunt Holly with fear of what I'm in for.

Elena is already at the counter,

placing desserts on the tray to take out. She shuffles with such grace from the cabinets to the counter and back again. I wonder if she was a dancer at one time in her life. After she places everything on the tray we need to take, I scoop up a stack of plates and turn around hopeful to escape. "Kailey, can we have a quick moment to talk?" I close my eyes take a deep breath and turn her way again with a perfectly wide smile encased across my mouth.

"Of course." I go back, and she signals for me to scoot the stool out. My eyes are darting everywhere but at her.

"I know this is hard for you. Although I've never lost anyone so close to me, as you have. I imagine it's unbearable." She pats my hand.

"We're managing, but thank you for your concern." I act nothing short of polite.

"Trey's been through a lot," she

starts, and I just want to roll my eyes. Here's the mother bird protecting her helpless baby.

"I know."

"Don't get me wrong, he's been no saint. But I can tell you he loves you, and I hope that you can see you're hurting both of you." She gives me a small smile and turns around.

"I just don't want to force him into taking care of us. It's my love for him that has me pushing him away. Please, don't confuse it for anything, but me wanting the best for him." I'm even surprised by myself that I'm revealing my fucked up feelings to her so fast.

"That's admirable herey." Oh good

"That's admirable, honey." Oh good, she's on my side. "But, it's not your

decision, so it's only you that's making him unhappy at this point." Her lips tighten and she pats my hand. "I am sorry for your losses, Kailey, but you are here still. Make the most of your short time, be happy. If Trey is it, don't push him anymore, embrace him. Don't let vour fears determine *his* future." She scoops up the tray and walks back outside. "Could you bring those plates on your way?" She asks as though she didn't just

decision to make if Trey wants to be a part of yours and the kids' life. It's his.

If I know my son, he's made his

By the time, I venture out with the plates, Trey's in the yard playing with the kids. All three of them are chasing

give me a nice kick in the ass.

him around the big yard, and when he pretends to fall, they all topple on top of them. The laughs and giggles are contagious among everyone. A small smile spreads across my lips, and I want nothing more than to be out there with them. For the first time, I admit to myself that I want this life, and that I

desperately want it with Trey; the kids, the husband, and the whole fairytale. I'd

been pushing it aside, not wanting to admit it to myself. He catches me out of the corner of his eye and winks before focusing his attention back on the kids.

Elena grips my arm on her way back to the kitchen, smiling at me. Fully aware I finally had my 'aha' moment.

Trey stands up with his eyes only on me.

The girls grip onto his legs, but he continues walking my way with them giggling and pulling on them. He bends down whispers something to them, and they scurry over to the swing set, Drew two steps behind the girls.

"Holly. Mom. Can you watch the kids tonight?" He asks them with his eyes staring right into mine the whole time.

"Of course." They both say in unison. He grabs my hand without saying a word, and I don't argue or pull back for the first time in two weeks. He leads us to the garage and punches in a code, the double door opens, revealing any guys dream. Motorbikes, four wheelers, and mountain bikes fill it from wall to

wall. Every adrenaline junkie's dream. "What do you want to ride?" He opens up a metal cabinet with hanging keys like a valet case.

"Um...I can't ride a motor bike." I admit.
"Do you think I'm letting you ride by

yourself?" He smirks at me, grabbing a set. "Let's take the four-wheeler." He looks me up and down, and a surge of heat flows up to my cheeks. "You okay if you get dirty?"

I glance at my jeans and sweatshirt. "Yeah."

"You might have to strip down when we get back and shower in the back of the barn," he slyly says, and all I can think of is if he's with me, I'll make do. He hops on the green and black one and holds out a helmet for me. After both of us are equipped, he starts it up. "You're gonna have to hold on to me really tight." He chuckles.

"I wouldn't think otherwise." I

"I wouldn't think otherwise," I flirtatiously say, wrapping my arms around his stomach. My hands on the hemline of his shirt, he takes them and puts them under his shirt, so they're splayed on his bare skin.

"Better," he tells me, and I conform

my body against his, my head resting on his back. His muscles tighten and ease as he steers the vehicle through tree lines and mud lined fields. Usually not being in control would scare me to death, but Trey has always relaxed me. I've trusted

him with everything, but one thing. It's time I change that, he's deserving of my heart. I know he'll protect it.

He stops us, and I pry my body away

from his, missing the heat the second I push back. The sky streaks orange and yellow as the sun begins to set. He holds out his hand for me, and I willingly take it in mine. Grabbing a blanket from the bag stashed on the back, he leads me to a tree house.

"Watch your step," he instructs me,

pointing at the narrow steps leading up to the wooden house.

"This is quite elaborate for a tree house," I remark, stunned at the two winding staircases to reach the actual house.

"Well, not much to do when you're a kid. It got us out of the house." He continues taking the steps slowly every once in a while peering down in my direction. "My brother used to throw crazy parties up here until all the parents finally clued in on what everyone was doing. It made for a great make-out place, though." He winks over his shoulder, and the thought that this is the place he got his girlfriend pregnant

flashes to mind. We finally reach the landing after the first set, and he cages me against the railing. "I wouldn't have brought you here," he tells me, obviously aware of where my thoughts ventured. "What? Oh, that doesn't matter." I

attempt to play it off as best as I can.

"Well, I just wanted to make it clear." He takes my hand and positions me in front of him. "This is a steep one, so you go first."

"I think there might be another reason why you want me to go first." I arch my eyebrows, and he chuckles.

"Just hope my hands don't disobey what my head is telling them," he says with a bellow of laughter.

I shake my head, even though I love his flirtatious talk. It's surprising how fast I can get back into our banter, it must mean something. Trey gives me directions on how to undue the latch and pry the door open. "Is some animal going to attack me when I open this?"

"No. Well, there shouldn't be

last time anyone was here." He shifts his jaw and raises his shoulders. "Here, let me do it." He begins squeezing by me. I grip the railing as his body slides along mine. He stops when we're right next to each other on the narrow steps. I vaguely think we might plummet to our deaths, but the back of his hand touches my cheek, slowly flowing down. "You're so beautiful," he whispers.

anything in there, but I don't know the

My eyes begin to water, and I push the tears back. Now is not the time. His eyes fall, and he turns around to open the latched door. "Nope, no animals," he says, climbing in. He holds out his hand to help me climb in. While he positions the blanket across the floor, I look around at the torn boxes of board games, a few beanbags positioned in corners, and miscellaneous knick knacks that have been left behind. It's the most spacious tree house I've ever been in. Not that I've ever been in one. I always imagined them some makeshift small room that you had to sit in due to low ceilings. That the wood would creak every time you moved, making you think it would crash down to the ground and you would fall to your death with pieces of wood scattered around you.

But this is opposite from every vision I had. The ceiling is tall, and there's even another small staircase that takes you to the next level that has a window to look out of. "This is

amazing," I say, taking in everything around me.

"It was okay. With you here though, it's breathtaking." He smirks, knowing he's purposely sweet-talking me.

"Nice, Michaels," I compliment, walking over to him. He lies on the blanket, and holds his hand out for me to join him. Slowly, my legs make it to the hard floor, and he pulls me on top of him. "Trey," I sigh.

"Shhh" He places his hand on the

"Shhh." He places his hand on the back of my neck and brings me down to his lips. I begin to push, placing my hands on his muscular chest, but he just grips me tighter, not allowing a miniscule of space between us. "Enough, Kailey," he says. "You can't push me

anymore." His lips crash into mine again, and he licks the seam of my dry lips. I slowly part, but he doesn't wait, thrusting his tongue into my mouth. Our lips dance like always, a reminder of how well we fit together. Our connection showing with the surge of electricity between the two of us. My body collapses, and he rolls me over to my back. Instantly, my hands find the familiar hair line right above his neck, mindlessly massaging it while my one leg wraps around his waist. Pushing his body against my small frame, he tucks his hands under my thighs, and I wrap both legs around him, clasping him against me. Holding me there, he allows his lips to explore my neck and throat. "I fucking love you, Kailey. You're not going to toss me away because you're scared," he says, and I moan pressing his head against my neck. Not willing to let me get away, he backs his head up slightly and stares down at me. "I'm here. Do you understand? I'm not going anywhere. I'm yours." He waits for me to answer.

I continue to gaze into his brown eyes. "Are you sure?" I ask, and he sighs.

"Yes, damn it," he presses his body against mine, cupping my face with both his hands. "I want this life. I want you and the kids. I want to drop Chloe at kindergarten and Tara to pre-school. Have chaotic dinners filed with laughter and sometimes tears. I want to argue with you on whether we should allow them to do something we disagree on. I want to hire a babysitter and take you on dates, knowing that when we return home, you'll be mine for the taking. I want to wake up early and surprise you with breakfast with the kids jumping around us. Yes, maybe this life would have scared me shitless a few months ago, but now I'm scared like hell you're going to shut me out of what I want most in this life."

I bite my lower lip. "What do you want most?" I ask in a whispery voice. "A future with all *four* of you."

Unblinking, I bring my hands to his cheeks. "It's yours." A small smile

creeps over his lips before I push him back down on me.

Chapter 21

Trey

Not willing to let Kailey get away, I continue to kiss my way down her neck. I want to take her so fucking bad. The need to be inside of her, my dick surrounded by her clenching warmth is so intense, I could practically come right now. With her legs tightening around my waist, I know she's thinking the same.

My hands begin to roam up her shirt, until my hand cups her breast, massaging her pebbled nipple between my fingers. God, how I've missed them. Unable to

hold back, I pull down her bra, letting the fullness spill out. I inch her shirt up until it rests at her chin. One breast out and one barely concealed inside the green satin of her bra. My fingers twitch with need to unclasp her bra. To my surprise, she reaches forward and does it for me. When the green fabrics falls to the side, revealing her luscious, creamy skin with the small pink nipples, my mouth salivates with the thought of it wrapped around one of them. "You're so damn hot," I say, bending down and taking a mouthful. As I take turns switching from one to the other, never completely satisfied, Kailey begins to squirm under me. She's getting as hot as I am, and the thought of how soaked she

is right now, makes me grow even harder.

She doesn't make me wait long, as she begins to guide my hands down to her waistline. My fingers unbutton her shorts and pull the zipper down, revealing a peek at her striped underwear. Her body wiggles back and forth, and I help her drag down her jeans, watching her as she gets her legs out and kicks them across the room. Peering down at the sight of her in only her underwear, her legs spread out waiting for me my breath stops. Her eyes holding my gaze with the love and life I haven't seen in weeks. "Well, are you just going to sit there?" She cocks her head to the side, giggling.

"No," I answer, staying right where I am. "You're mine?" I question, craving the finality that her fight is over.

"I'm yours," she confirms and holds her arms out. I inch forward but she places her finger up in the air. "Take the shorts off," she demands, and I scramble to take them off as fast as I can.

Once I'm on top of her, my cock begs me to relieve him, I gently nudge her with my hardness and she moans. "Say it?" I ask her.

"I love you, Trey," she answers immediately.

"For how long?" I ask her, kissing her neck and collarbone.

"Always," she breathlessly tells me. "And?" I say, kissing her stomach

and hooking my hands on either side of her panties. I begin pulling the striped cotton underwear down her thighs, exposing her glistening wetness. "Forever, Trey," she sighs. "I need

you, now." I finish pulling them down her tanned legs, and shrug out of my boxer briefs at the same time.

"Remember that." I'm not even fully

at her opening when her hands take a firm grasp to my ass and thrust my body forward. She's so fucking wet, I slide right in.

"Ahhh," she moans, tilting her head back. I descend on her neck like a damn vampire starved for blood; sucking her flesh into my mouth with the sensation of her wrapped so tightly around me. My face burrows into her shoulder as I pump into her time and time again.

I'm barely going to hold on. It's like

lighting a match and the quick descent of the flame to your fingers. I can't hold back much longer, but damn if I'll burn myself before she doesn't get off before me.

"I love you, Kailey. Never leave me again. It's been a nightmare without you." My heart starts speaking for me.

"Never, Trey. I promise. I'm done fighting," she stutters between moans and gripping of my body.

"I think I just went from hell to heaven in the past hour. That's what you are to me, Kailey, pure heaven." Her legs are tightening around my waist, and I know she's growing closer.
"Oh Trey," she whispers, her warm rapid breathing right at my ear. "Look at

me," she asks, and I pick my head up. When I catch the desire and love all mixed together in her eyes, I'm finally at peace that it's okay. She's not going to leave me again.

She licks her lips, and she doesn't have to tell me twice before I cover hers with mine. Our tongues are frantic within each other, darting in and out and around. Sweat puddles between our bodies while our teeth knock, our hands grasp, and we whisper promises of love and happily ever after.

By the time we come, I'm exhausted. Seeing the sweat line across her hairline and her body trembling, I pull her toward me. Sitting up, I stare into her eyes and the small film of tears in them has me terrified I pushed us too fast.

"Why are you crying?" I cradle her to me, rubbing my thumb across the bottom of her eye.

"I'm sorry," she weeps into my arms. "I put you through hell... I put us both through it." A small smile begins to form, thankful she was in hell just like me.

"Hey," I push her back so she can see me, "it's all good now. Really good," I let my eye roam down our naked bodies.

"So you forgive me?"

"I'll always forgive you." I place my

finger under her chin and lightly kiss her lips. "For future reference, I'm not going anywhere."

"Thank you for sticking with me."
"Well, your stubborn side is one I
love the most." She playfully smacks her
hand at my chest, but I just pull her
closer.

I ease us onto the blanket and rub my

fingers down her arm, feeling the warmth of her hand on my chest. "Can I ask you a question?" She picks her head up to look at me. "Do I need to start investing in good pairs of track shoes?" Her eyes squint from confusion. "Am I going to be chasing you for the rest of my life?"

She softly giggles. "I think my

running days are over." She places the softest kiss on my stomach. "Can I ask you something?" I nod my head. "Are you sure I'm what you want? Am I enough to keep you?"

My body jerks up. "Kailey." I'm thrown at the seriousness of her question. Mine had been a playful slam on her always running from me, but she clearly still has concerns about my feelings. "Yes, you're what I want. How could you ask that?"

"It's just..." the tears are forming again in her eyes. "Trey, I really liked you when you still didn't know who I was. You never even gave me a second look. There were times, I was sitting right next to you when you would come

up to the bar. One time you actually winked at me. I'm just worried that—," I stop her.

"Kailey, I was a different person then, blind to any girl who wasn't putting off a vibe that I could get in her pants. I'm sorry that you noticed me first, but believe, baby, the last thing you need to worry about is not being enough for me or what I want. I've been waiting for you my whole life; I was just too fucked up to know it. When you sat down next to me on that plane, it was like an awakening. Everything cleared and it was only you standing in the vision of my future. You know how many times I've lain awake with you in my arms, wishing for morning never to come? Or

the times, I count minutes until I'm going to see you again? When we're together, I pray for time to slow and when we're apart, I beg for it to speed up." He pauses staring down at me. "So, I guess what I'm trying to tell you is, I was a complete prick for never seeing the girl who held my future in her heart. But now that I've found her, I'll never give her up. You got that, baby?" A sly grin forms and she throws her arms around me.

"I love you, Trey Michaels," she says into my ear. The best five words of all time when they come out of her mouth.

"I love you, the future Mrs. Trey Michaels." She pushes herself up and looks at me in shock. "Yes, baby, one day I'll be tattooing our wedding day on my body." I'm not asking her although if she accepted right now, I wouldn't think twice before running out and getting her a ring. But it has to be special, she deserves that plus more.

"How did I get so lucky?" she asks, her lips millimeters from my ear.

"Nah, baby, I'm the lucky one."

Kailey and I stay up in that tree house for the night, making up for our weeks apart. We text Aunt Holly, and, of course, she says she has it under control. The next morning we're both itching to get back to the three munchkins. After one quickie against the wall, we get dressed and leave the small love shack we called home for twelve hours.

I feel like I could conquer world peace right now with her behind me, holding me tight. On our way to the kids, who I can't help but think of as a part of me now. After I park the green machine in the garage, I push Kailey against the wall, giving her one long lingering kiss. "Until tonight, baby." I tell her, and she looks at me quizzing. "You're in my bed tonight."

"Oh, I thought you meant I wouldn't be getting a taste of those lips all day." She takes a fistful of my shirt and yanks me back into her again.

"You'll be lucky if I make it to the house without sneaking you behind a

bush," I say, leaning back to watch the pink flush spread across her cheeks.

When we open the door, three kids run at us and we scoop them in our arms. With Drew and Tara in mine, they nuzzle close. "We missed you," Tara says.

"You and Trey all better?" Chloe asks, and we look at each other and then at my mom and Aunt Holly walking toward us.

Trey not around," Holly confesses.

"She's an answer seeker, that's for

"Like the little tike didn't notice

"She's an answer seeker, that's for sure," my mom laughs.
"Yeek we're all better" Veiley

"Yeah, we're all better," Kailey says, finding my hand. The five us together, a family.

My mom smiles, knowing exactly

what I'm thinking. I have to say, I'm a bit surprised she's so willing to push me toward this instant family. She was my biggest supporter with the adoption.

After showers for both of us, we get the kids ready. I take Drew with me to pick up the meat at the butcher along with my dad and Clyde, while all the women take Chloe and Tara to get their nails done.

We aren't back for five minutes before the gang arrives. I open the door to Brady, Sadie, Jessa, Grant, Dex, and some girl named Chrissy that I've never met before.

"Hopefully that wide grin means you won her back?" Dex says, clasping my shoulder as I hand them all beers and drinks around the kitchen island.
"Yeah, she can't deny this gorgeous face for that long," I joke.

"Hum—always conceited." The voice that makes my body jump with excitement adds while walking into the room. She gives everyone hugs, and they all glance my way once she moves on to the next. Surprised to the instant change. Snaking her way to me, she slides close to my body and her arm rests along my back.

"I have to take it where I can. It's hard not being the gorgeous one between us two." I smile down at her, and she shakes her head in amusement.

"Good one," she says, rolling her eyes and blushing.

"Let's leave these guys and have some girl talk. I'm entirely pissed off at you for not waiting to get your nails done until we got here." Jessa teases Kailey, pointing at her with her already polished nail.

"Come on guys, we can go outside," I say, waving them toward the screen door. "Where are the girls?" I ask Kailey.

"Outside playing with your parents and Derek. Aunt Holly and Uncle Clyde are upstairs resting," she raises her eyes multiple times.

"Kind of like we rested yesterday?" I whisper, and the pink actually begins at her neck. Kissing the exact spot it starts I leave her to the girls.

"Later, Michaels," Jessa tosses her hand in the air as though she's been waiting for me to leave.

The guys go outside, and my brother Derek throws a football my way. We all spread out on the grass while my parents blow bubbles with the kids. We toss the ball back and forth while they drill me with question after question about Kailey's sudden change of heart. It suddenly occurs to me that I have no idea what made her turn back. When the kids were on top of me in the yard, tickling me last night, I caught her eye and just knew. That love was flickering to life again between us. My gut told me, she was ready to let me love her and finally trust me with her heart.

"Who's the girl?" I throw the ball to Dex.

He catches with ease, "A girl from back home," he informs us. "We're friends," he adds and in all the years I've known Dex, he hasn't had girls that were friends.

"Since when you do hang around girls that aren't laying on their back for you," I ask, and his face tenses. "Did I hit a nerve?" I joke, but he doesn't laugh. "What the hell?" I'm waiting for him to add something.

"Seriously, I'm not the one who is going to tell Jessa you threw her sister to the wayside. I'm surprised she hasn't gone off yet. You never know what you're going to get with her hormones lately," Grant chimes in, and Brady snickers.

"Sadie said she's been a little intense?" Brady raises his eyebrows at Grant, and Grant gives an exaggerated nod.

"To say the least. She actually tried to get me to have sex with her at Barbells for old time sake. When I refused, since she's carrying my baby, she actually got mad at me and stormed out, leaving me there. Greg had to give me a ride home. I think she's freaking out, thinking she's losing her youth or something. But, enough about my pussy problems involving my wife wanting me to fuck her in crazy places. Dex, tell it straight." We all crack up at Grant and

Jessa. The two couldn't be more opposite in some ways.

Dex throws the football at Brady, who runs to catch it. "Nothing to say. I don't know how many times I have to tell you. Sam and I are just having fun. Seriously, Chrissy and I are just friends, nothing more. I've known her since we were kids." Dex is saying all the right things, but he's hiding something. I've known him long enough to know this Chrissy girl is something to him alright.

Brady points for me to go long, and I start jogging to catch the ball and once I grasp it in my hands, a small boy grabs my legs, and I have no choice but to fall to the ground. Drew jumps on top of my stomach, drool dripping from his mouth.

I take my shirt and rub his mouth before lifting up in my arms. "Guess football's over," Grant says, and the guys make their way over and sit in the grass.

Soon Chloe and Tara join us and we

end up playing duck, duck, goose. It might just be the funniest thing I've ever witnessed. Especially when Dex calls goose on Brady, and the two end up chasing each other around the whole yard. Eventually Brady does tackle him, and the girls screech in delight, running over to Dex. They start tickling his sides, and he squirms. The next thing I know Jessa, Sadie, and Kailey all run over and join in. Chrissy waits under the pergola, watching the scene unfold. Disregarding her, I run to join in the fun,

picking Kailey up and swinging her around. Her giggles make me want to take her right there. Yeah, I might have to sneak her away at some point. Two weeks is a long time to make-up for.

The afternoon is filled with laughs,

jokes, and good times for everyone. Well...everyone but Chrissy. I'm not quite sure why Dex even brought her, she mostly stares into space or watches us from afar, instead of interacting. Soon the sun begins the set and that night sky takes me back to Kailey and me in the tree house last night. Drew is asleep in my mom's arms. She peers down at him smiling at his small hand that grips her finger. She rubs her knuckle along his cheek. "He really is the sweetest little

thing," she remarks, and everyone smiles at the adorable baby. The girls are eagerly waiting with all of the kids from my family for it to get dark, so the fireworks start. They all sit across the lawn talking about god knows what. "You guys go have fun. We have them." My mom urges us to join the younger adults at the bonfire circle. Kailey

I take a seat and position her on lap, loving the feel of her body close to mine. Talk of everything from sex in public and drinking games to hangover cures is the conversation. Other than the sex in public, Kailey and I are very out of the loop for this crowd. The surprising thing

questions me, and I grab her hand and escort her to the brick encased circle.

is it bothers Kailey more than me.

As the group continues their conversation, I rub her upper thigh, and

conversation, I rub her upper thigh, and she tucks her head into my neck. "I guess we're not so young anymore," she whispers.

Bringing my head in front of hers so we're only centimeters apart I whisper back, "Oh we can show them how young our bodies move together. I guarantee we have them in the sex position category."

She laughs and wraps her arms around my neck. "Maybe if they want advice on the bottles that cause the least gas, or the best priced clothes for kids."

"Or how many times I can fuck you in an hour. How wet you become just

from me talking," I turn the tables, and the way her butt keeps squirming in my lap, I'm pretty sure she's loving it.

"What about how hard I can make you from one touch." She snakes her hand between us and palms the hardness in my shorts. "Hum—I didn't even have to touch you this time."

"How hard your nipples get when I touch them through three pieces of fabric." I cup her breast, and I half wonder if we're giving everyone a show. When I move my lips to kiss her neck, I peer over at the group, and they seem to be disregarding us, enthralled into their own conversation.

"I love hearing your deep breathing in my ear when you want me," she softly says, so I purposely make my mouth move up her neck and suck her earlobe into my mouth.

Exaggerating my heavy breathing, I whisper, "I need you now." She softly moans dipping her head closer to my mouth. "Are you up for some hot sex against the barn?"

"I thought you only liked me in your bed," she teases.

"I can't wait until then. Plus after the last time I had you against a wall, there's something to be said for seeing your girlfriend spread eagle in public. Just as long as no one else ever catches a glimpse of her."

She stands up to her feet, and I follow suit, shifting to conceal anything

that might be sticking up. I swear girls have it easy. All the assholes whistle when we walk away, but I just flip them off while we sneak away into the darkness.

By the time the fireworks start going off, I'm already inside Kailey, pounding her against the barn wall. Her legs wrapped up around me and my shorts around my ankles and her panties slid to the side. Yeah, I've done this before, but it never felt like it does now. With every moan and tight grip from Kailey, I'm closer. Although I love it when we take it slow, there's something to be said for raw, unleashed fucking, which is exactly what this is.

After we both come down, we smile

between us. She pulls her shorts up and I reluctantly button them for her. "This doesn't mean you're off the hook for tonight," I say.
"I would hope not. You made

coyly at each other, a secret shared

promises by that bonfire, I intend to make you keep," she reminds me, and I rack my brain for what I said. Seeing my face, she clues me in. "How many times can you fuck me in an hour?" Crap, I'm already hard as stone again.

Chapter 22

Kailey

Things have been beyond good with Trey and me. He's back to sleeping over almost every night. He gives Aunt Holly and Uncle Clyde nights off when I'm in school. We've made a schedule that hasn't been extremely hard to keep. My stomach gets all fluttery every time I come home to him sprawled on the couch watching television, and the kids are fast asleep. The sigh that escapes his lips as I slide next to him and wedge myself between him and couch, shows

me he's at peace we're together.
Chloe's nightmares have subsided to occasional. We still haven't done

occasional. We still haven't done anything with Jen and Caden's room, but Aunt Holly told me she wants it cleared out before she leaves, which is in two weeks. I know she sees it as a step that has to be made, but they've only been gone for six weeks.

Aunt Holly and Uncle Clyde said it's their turn to watch the kids, while we get away tonight. There was no way I could refuse. We haven't seen our friends except for the times they come over, and we order pizza. One night we all went to Showtime Pizza Palace, and the guys had some skee ball contest which had the attendant coming over to stop them due

to the long line of kids waiting for their turn. The fear that filled Jessa and Grant's eyes made me think it was a bad idea to expose them to the insane surroundings of unruly kids so early.

I instructed Trey he had to go home, shower, and get ready. He would ring the doorbell and pick me up just like a date. Chuckling as he walked out the door, I knew I'd have flowers too. I grab a pink sundress from my closet and curl my hair in tight waves that will most likely dissipate the second I walk out into the humidity filled air. My make-up is done perfectly. I have to say, I look pretty damn hot.

When I step into the kitchen, the kids are all eating sundaes, and Aunt Holly's

putting everything away. Uncle Clyde relaxes on the couch. I really need to take them out to dinner before they leave for a big thank you. There's no way I would have gotten along without them.

"Aunt Kailey, you look beautiful."

"Aunt Kailey, you look beautiful," Chloe says, and I smile down at her.

"Thank you," I tell her.

Sitting in the chair between her and Tara to wait for Trey, the apprehension about leaving them washes over me. As though feeling it, Aunt Holly chimes in, "Trey will be drooling as much as Drew," she laughs, swiping Drew's mouth for most likely the twentieth time today.

Before I can answer, the doorbell rings. From the small window, I catch

Trey's tattooed arm. Chloe beats me to the door and swings it open. "Hi, Trey," she exclaims, and he picks her up, kissing her on the cheek.

"Hey C-lo, your aunt—," he stops and stares at me. That familiar look of desire and lust roams up and down my body as he bites his lower lip. He had to take out his piercings last week, since Drew wouldn't stop tugging them. Hopefully, it's only temporary, but like usual Trey took it all in stride. "Your aunt is gorgeous," he finishes. "Yes she is," Chloe agrees, beaming

as bright as I most likely am. "Shall we?" he asks, and I nod, walking toward him.

"See you, C-lo, take care of the

family," Trey tells her, giving her a hug and kiss.

"It's all under control," she tells him, and we laugh.

"Jesus, Kailey, I'm dying," he says, opening his door.

"We can skip dinner," I say, pushing my body against his.

"If you keep doing that, we will."

We don't skip dinner. We go to the fanciest restaurant in Western. Trey holds doors open, pulls out my chair, and offers his arm everywhere we go. A true gentleman all the way from the beginning through the end of the date.

He pulls his car up to the house, and I see Rob in the garage working on his car. Trey gives him a small hello as we

enter through the back door. Brady and Sadie are arguing about wedding details—again. Dex is nowhere to be found, as usual. After a quick hello, we retreat to his bedroom.

"Now for the real fun," he whispers in my ear, backing me up to the bed.

He gives me a gentle push, and I fall into the bed, causing my dress to hitch up. "You have to be shitting me? The whole night?"

I nod and bite the inside of my cheek. "Fuck being a gentleman. Next time, I'll have to go exploring." His hands graze across my legs, inching further and further with every second. I swear I'm already wetter than I've ever been. "Explore me now," I invite him to

me, and he doesn't wait before his fingers are circling my clit. Rubbing his finger up and down between my folds, the sounds of my wetness echoes throughout the room, only making my desires stronger.

"I'm going to promise you right now; the second time, we'll go slower," he says, and I giggle wanting nothing more than to have him in me. When you sleep under the same roof as three kids, sex is pretty tame, quick and quiet most of the time.

"Turn on the radio," I tell him, and he smirks figuring out exactly why.

"Why, baby, you feeling a little freaky tonight?" he asks me, then when "Criminal" by Fiona Apple starts up, he "We'll see if you can bring it out." I tease, and he takes the bait, tearing my

tease, and he takes the bait, tearing my dress off me in one fluid motion. I hurry and get on my knees to unbutton his pants, and they fall to the floor. Taking both my hands, I cup the edge of his button-down shirt and tear it open. The sounds of busted buttons hitting the dresser and falling to the floor ricochets through the room.

After I have him completely naked, he grabs a fistful of hair and pulls my head down. His mouth crashes against mine, his tongue piercing tickles my lips. I open immediately, thrusting right back. Our mouths more open than closed; our tongues take turns in each other's

mouths.

Gently tugging, he guides me to my

feet. I stand on his bed, my pussy in his face. His tongue darts into my fold, and his hand reaches behind my ass to keep me in place. I buck forward when his fingers insert into to my wetness. He just groans and continues tasting me.

Completely caught off guard, he grabs

Completely caught off guard, he grabs my feet, and I fall onto the bed in a fit of giggles.

"We don't have long" he talls me. "I

"We don't have long," he tells me. "I haven't even cherished these tits," he grabs a hold of each one, massaging and tweaking. "So, you're going to be on top," he instructs, and I automatically return the favor of sucking him into my mouth.

Scooting over, I lay over his cock and encase my lips over the hardness. His hand ventures to the back to my hair, pushing me into his body. Just hearing the groans and obscenities escaping his

mouth has me practically orgasming. "We'll be revisiting that another time," he says, pulling me back up to him.

I swing my legs over his body, inserting his dick between my folds. The wetness allows him to slide right in. He smacks my ass, and I buck rubbing my clit against his pelvic bone. His hands find my breasts, and he raises up to lick and suck my nipples. "You're so perfect," he tells me, and I arch my back, placing my hands on his thighs behind me. "Just like that, ride me baby," he

instructs me. I quicken my pace, bouncing up and down while pushing forward. "Shit, Kailey!" He holds my hips and starts raising his ass to reach deeper inside of me.

"Trey," I scream, and his serious expression shows he's most likely listing chords has me clench tight before releasing completely. Trey follows two seconds after me, and I crumple on top of him. Keeping him inside, I wait until he softens and slides out before I move off of him.

He brings me to his side and our bodies begin to calm down. "You owe me a shirt," he jokes, and I laugh.

"We'll go shopping tomorrow," I tell him. Eventually, I get up and clean myself up.

Our night consists of sleeping,

making love, sleeping, fucking, and sleeping. It's the most incredible night, and I honestly feel Trey and I are exactly where we need to be. My fears of him waking up one day and wanting out this life are slowly vanishing.

The next morning, I'm sad when Trey's not with me in bed. Hearing the shower running, I'm pretty sure where he is. Debating on joining him, I quickly nix that idea, since the bed is way too comfortable and warm to leave. Getting restless, I begin to think about packing up this room and bringing Trey's stuff over to the house. I contemplate if Trey would want to move in with us, he's

there all the time anyway. My mind wonders from thought to thought, scenario to scenario. At least the one constant is we're together in them.

nightstand to grab it. Seeing it's just a Facebook notification, I put my phone back down. I bite my cheek when I spy the drawer. Trey hasn't ever said not to open it, but I know he keeps something very private in there. Crap, I'm so curious. Hearing the water still going, I slowly open the drawer. A box of condoms, a few receipts, and a book are all that occupy it. I release a relieved breath. Even though, I'm not quite sure

My phone buzzes, and I reach over to the

architects, beginning to read about Adolf Loos when something falls out. Bending over the bed, reaching towards the floor, my fingers barely grasp the photo laying there. When I turn it around to look at it, my stomach tumbles to the depths of hell. My mouth goes dry, my heart starts racing, and the sounds of the world are muted. The sound of the shower turning off

drawer. I pick up the book about famous

what I thought he was hiding, I'm thankful there's nothing much in the

snaps me out of my stupor, and all I can think of is getting the hell out of here. I throw the covers off of me, scrambling around the room to grab my clothes. Once I've thrown on my dress from last night, I'm two steps from the door when Trey appears in the bathroom doorway. His body glistening with wet droplets, a towel wrapped around his taut stomach.

"Kailey? What's wrong?" he questions, clearly concerned.

"Who is this?" I ask him while

"Who is this?" I ask him while holding the picture up, already assuming the answer. My hand balled at my side, fingernails piercing my palm.

"I was going to show you at some point. It's just I keep it—" "Who?" I cut him off, and he steps

back confused about my inquisition.
"It's my daughter," he cautiously

"It's my daughter," he cautiously divulges.

"You bastard," I yell. "How could you? I fucking believed you loved me.

You manipulative asshole." I scream, tearing the door open and slamming it shut.

Brady skids down the stairs from their room to investigate the noise. Dex and Rob open their doors. "Are you okay, Kailey?" Brady asks. "No, I'm not. Your roommate is

fucking prick, who uses people's hearts to gain what he wants." By this time, Trey's already out of the room with his towel still wrapped around him. Sadie appears next to Brady in her tank top and boxer shorts. She approaches me, and I step back. "Did you all know?" They all stare at me with confused expressions, but Sadie places her hand on my shoulder. "Can you take me home?" I ask her, and she nods, escorting me downstairs. She needs no explanation, she's just there to help me.

Before I take the steps, I look directly at him. "Stay the hell away from her. Do you understand me?"

"Kailey, what the hell are you talking about? I'm sorry I never showed you the picture, but I don't get why you're so mad."

"Do you get some sick twisted pleasure by tormenting me? All these months, all the lies. How could you do this to me?" The tears start streaming down my face even after pushing them back. "I knew it. I knew there was a reason you pursued me the way you did."

"Kailey! Talk to me, I don't understand? Why are you so mad I didn't show you the picture?" "Did you think the situation was your

opening, and I was your golden ticket? If you think you're going to get her now because Jen and Caden are dead, you're mistaken. I'll fight you till my last breath. Do you understand me?" I stare directly into those eyes that I once believed reflected the love he felt for me.

"Who the hell are you talking about?" he screams.

"Chloe. You gave her up Trey! Using her mother's illness to sneak into her life through her aunt's weakness isn't going to get her back." His face falls and a

glaze covers his eyes. "Don't contact us, and don't come around." I run down the stairs. Sadie's mouth is completely open in astonishment. I guess she didn't know. She follows me out.

I keep running until I get to the safe confines of her car, and Trey runs out of the house after me. Sadie attempts to push him back, telling him to give me space. The guys come out, and Dex places his hand on his chest, attempting to keep him back, but Trey pushes past him and makes it to the car, banging on the window. "I swear, I didn't know, Kailey. I swear." Figures he'd go the ignorant way out of it.

Flipping him off as Sadie pulls out of the driveway does little to make me

street, she places her hand on my leg. She remains silent for a few minutes until we get to a stop light. "Kailey?" Her soft voice fills the silence. "I'm not entirely sure I know what's going on, but whatever it is, Trey was just as surprised as you right now." Her phone buzzes, and she pulls it out. Texting someone back, she sticks it back in the

feel better. Once we're driving down the

"Trey had a daughter." I decide who the hell cares about keeping his damn secret. "He gave her up for adoption when he was seventeen."

center console.

"Is that what the fight is about?" she hesitantly asks. I'm thankful it's Sadie with me, instead of Jessa. I'm not even

sure Jessa would have let me leave the house.

"There's no fight because we won't be making up. It's over. His daughter is...is...is...his daughter is Chloe," I admit to her as much as to myself. My voice doesn't reflect any emotion. I can almost feel the cold swirling within me.

"Oh," she takes a deep breath and glances over at me. The rest of the ride is complete silence, except for my phone's consistent buzzing in my purse. I know who it is, and he can go to hell.

We pull into the driveway, and I thank Sadie. "Let me come in. We can talk." Her hand covers the keys idling in the ignition.

"No, thank you, Sadie. I need to be

by myself for a while." She gives me a huge hug, and I step out of the car to try to figure out how this happened, but not before I spot Trey's car squealing around the corner. He slams the car into park as he and Brady get out of the doors.

"Seriously, man, you practically

slamming his door.

Trey pays no attention, running up to me. He has a pair of jeans and a t-shirt that's still wet from his body, and bare feet. He's not going to use his charming

killed me," Brady shouts at him,

pleads.
"NO! Get the fuck out of here," I scream at him.

ways this time. "Kailey, listen to me," he

He gets down on his knees, begging me to talk to him. "Just listen to me god damn it!" he hollers back. Uncle Clyde comes out to see what the commotion is. Sadie and Brady stand by the car confused and shocked by what's unfolding in front of their eyes.

"You gave her up once, you'll do it

again. How could you think this would be good for her? Hasn't she lost enough? We're better without you. She is better off without you. The best thing you did was give up being a part of her life. She doesn't need to know her birth father was such a selfish manipulative bastard. Just leave," I say sternly before walking past Uncle Clyde and into the house. "What the hell is going on?" Uncle

Clyde's deep voice questions Trey.

Slamming the door, I see Aunt Holly standing at the window with Chloe and Tara by her legs. She stares up at me confused as everyone else. Looking at

confused as everyone else. Looking at Chloe, I'm not sure why I never noticed it before. The shape of her eyes, the fullness of her lips, and the hair color—identical to his. How fucking blind was I?

"Give me a second, okay?" I tell

"Give me a second, okay?" I tell Aunt Holly and run upstairs. Bursting into Caden and Jen's room, I go to the back of the closet and find all the paperwork. Pulling out the heavy filing box, I'm thankful for my sister's organization skills. I collapse to the floor, thumbing through the typed labels, until Chloe's name appears.

Aunt Holly quietly comes into the small confines and sits down across from me. She doesn't say anything, just stares at the papers I'm shuffling through. Medical records, kindergarten registration, then BAM, there it is...her adoption records.

My eyes scan the paperwork,

praying I could be wrong. Trey can't be Chloe's birth father. That the little girl in the picture was a baby that looked just like her, that the dress she was in could be a common one for that year. My stomach drops when I land on the closed adoption reads, birth parent names are blank. Looking at the date of Chloe's birth, I calculate Trey's age in my head.

"How could it be?" I say more to myself, but Aunt Holly answers.

"I don't know. It's an unlikely coincidence."

"That's why you know he found out where she was. I don't know how, but he purposely sought me out. All these months have been lies."

She looks over at me and bites her lip.

"What?" I sigh. She wants to tell me something, but is too afraid of my reaction.

"I think you're wrong. He's outside talking to Clyde. Brady and Sadie took the kids to the park. He's confused and devastated. You need to talk to him, hear his side of the story. This might have been one of those crazy stories you hear about on the internet," she says with a hollow laugh.

"I seriously doubt that. Out of all the people I meet, it's the birth father of my adopted niece. Give me a break, Aunt Holly." As I continue to search through the documents, a manila envelope falls out of the folder. There are three envelopes inside. The first is labeled Chloe, the second Mom and Dad, and the third Sweet Girl scrawled across it in Trey's scribbled handwriting. My shaking hands attached to my trembling body slowly open the first envelope.

Dear Chloe,

I know when the time comes your Dad will give you these letters. I hope you'll understand the decisions we made about your adoption. Chloe, you are one of the greatest blessings in my life. Dad & I were so honored to be chosen to be your parents. We love you more than we could ever express in words.

Because your adoption was closed we didn't receive any information about the identities of your birth parents. Communication was restricted to go through our adoption counselor. We were told your birth parents did plan to register, so you would be able to contact them when you turn eighteen if you so wished. Dad & I were so

thankful for the gift your birth parents gave us that we wrote them a letter to thank them.

Not long after the letter was sent the adoption counselor contacted Dad & me with a request from your birth father. He asked if he could write you a letter. He knew that there was a chance you would never see it, but he wanted to do it anyway. We gave permission, and two letters were forwarded to us. The first was addressed to Dad & me. The second was addressed to you.

After we read your birth father's letter to us, Dad & I made the decision to keep the letter to you private. It was written for you, and should only be read by you. If you're Dad has given

these letters to you, than you must be questioning him. I wish you all the luck on any answers you hope to find. Please always remember, you're Dad and I love you so much.

I love you forever and always.

Mommy

The second envelope contains a letter from Trey to Caden and Jen. I'm debating reading it. I know these are private words meant for Jen, Caden, and Chloe, but Jen and Caden aren't here, and I need to make the decision that's best for Chloe. If it turns out to be true, and Trey didn't know, would she be angry that I took away her chance to

have a father in her life. A man who would be a great father. A man who is a great father already. I pull the letter out of the open envelope.

I wish I knew what to call you, but it

seems like Mom and Dad is the best thing. Thank you for sending the picture. It means a lot to me. The adoption counselor said you gave permission to write the baby a letter. I wrote her a letter telling her why her birth mother and I made the decision to place her with another set of parents. It also contains all of the information she could use to find me one day. I know in my heart you will know when the right

time is to share the information with her. I only ask that you tell her I do love her very much. Thank you for providing her with the parents she deserves.

I hold the small blue envelope in my hand, at the handwriting I already

recognize. An answer is in the envelope that I can't turn away from. It will change everything with the rip of a paper and unleash a truth none of us could have though possible. As hard as it is to open, I have no choice. So I allow my finger to run along the sealed flap and take a deep breath before my shaking fingers take the piece of paper out.

To my Sweet Girl,

I stare at you as you lay in my arms. My body torn between letting you go live a life far better than I can give you right now and keeping you with me for pure selfishness on my part. I'm hoping if you ever read this letter, you're old enough to realize this heart

gripping decision was not made lightly. Your small breaths and movements have kept me mesmerized all night. I've cried over you, laughed at your squirming, but most of all loved you. If you ever want to find me, please do. I've included the information I think you could use to locate me. But if you don't, I get that too. I hope you have a

great life filled with parents who can give you everything you've ever wanted.

Please never think I don't love you because I don't think I've ever loved anything more. It's my loved filled heart that helped guide me to your parents.

Love, Trey Michaels

I pass the note to Aunt Holly and sigh. Could she be right? Could he really not have known Chloe was his daughter?

Chapter 23

Trey

The warm water cascading down my body, leaving small bubbles around the drain has me craving Kailey. We very rarely ever get nights like last night, ones where we don't have to worry about kids coming into the bedroom or being distracted in some way. I rack my brain for why I never noticed her before. The love of my life has been right in front of me how many times, and I just fucking ignored her. The whole scenario makes me sick thinking about it.

Drying myself off, I do a quick shave. Kailey always likes it when my face is smooth. Opening the drawer, the perfume bottle rolls down. I haven't smelled that since Kailey and I became so close. I guess with all the events that have unfolded recently I haven't had much time to think about it. Or Kailey has filled that part of me. Still seeing it there, I pick it up and smell the scent and like always, I'm back in that vinyl hospital chair. She's in my arms, squirming back and forth as I smile down at her. Then I start hearing Kailey rumbling around in the other room. Her footsteps hard against the floor and swearing under her breath. Wrapping the towel around my

waist, not sure why I bother, I'll be making sure I take her one more time before we head back. When I open the door, her hand rests on the knob of the bedroom door, already dressed.

She holds up the picture of my

daughter. "Who is this?" she demands. I'm thrown slightly, since I told her about the baby already. Not sure why she's surprised, but I should have shown her already. So she knew everything, especially since we've been through so much. She didn't need to be caught off guard. But her mannerisms scream it's something else, especially when she starts really yelling at me. I'm trying to answer her, but she keeps screaming. "You bastard," she yells. "How

could you? I fucking believed you loved me. You manipulative asshole." Then flees the room.

I bolt to the door, but when I get out the hallway everybody's fucking there. Brady is the closest, and I'm practically begging him with my eyes to keep her there.

"No, I'm not. Your roommate is a fucking prick, who uses people's hearts to gain what he wants." I'm struck dumb. I don't know why she's reacting this way.

"Did you all know?" She calls out to all them, their just as confused faces as mine. I have no idea what the hell she's talking about. "Can you take me home?" she asks Sadie. Oh, hell no. There's no way she's going anywhere without telling me something.

She begins to walk down the steps, but stops and points her finger at me. "Stay the hell away from her. Do you understand me?"

I begin to argue, but she continues her rant not even paying attention to me.

"Do you get some sick twisted pleasure on tormenting me? All these months, all the lies. How could you do this to me?" Her eyes overflowing with tears, spilling down her cheeks. "I knew it. I knew there was a reason you pursued me the way you did." Shit, we're back to this again. When will she ever understand what she is to me? She can't leave without answering

me. "Kailey! Talk to me, I don't understand? Why are you so mad I didn't show you the picture?"

"Did you think the situation was your

opening, and I was your golden ticket? If you think you're going to get her now because Jen and Caden are dead, you're mistaken. I'll fight you till my last breath. Do you understand me?" There goes those unblinking eyes, like small laser beams into mine.

My patience beginning to falter, I

scream. "Who the hell are you talking about?"

"Chloe. You gave her up, Trey! Using her mother's illness to sneak into her life through her aunt's weakness isn't going to get her." I heard nothing but talking about sinks in; Chloe's the one in the picture. Chloe is my daughter. I want to drop to my knees and weep. What? How? No? Questions race through my mind, small questions bubbling around. "Don't contact us, and don't come around." She runs down the stairs, and Sadie's mouth is completely open in

astonishment. She escapes the house, and

"Crap, someone get him clothes. I'll

I hop over the railing onto the stairs.

Chloe. Then the realization of what she's

grab his keys." Brady hollers behind me.
I catch up to her as Sadie's about to
get in on the driver's side. She quickly
comes up to me, placing her hand on my
chest. Ignoring she's even there, I keep
my sights on her. Kailey will not do this

to me...to us. Soon Dex's hand replaces Sadie's, but his strength has nothing on my adrenaline.

I pound my hand against the glass, pleading with her to listen to me. Sadie continues to back out as the guys pull me back. Rob tosses a pair of jeans and t-shirt at me. I throw off the towel, tossing it to the ground.

"Fuck, man, Mrs. Fletcher doesn't need a show of your bare ass," Dex sarcastically remarks.

Ignoring him, I grab my keys that Brady's dangling in front of me and run to my car. I'm half way down the block when I realize Brady's in the passenger seat.

"What the hell is going on? What is

all this about Chloe?" he asks as I weave in and out of traffic, zooming through lights. Barely stopping at the stop signs, I attempt to answer.

"From what I gather from Kailey's reaction, Chloe is my daughter I gave up when I was in high school."

"You had a child?" Brady questions.

"Have," I clearly state.
"Yeah, that's what I meant. It's

Chloe? Did you know?"

I take a second to glare at him, and he holds up his hand backing up.

"Does it look like I fucking knew?"

"It's just an odd coincidence, don't you think?" Brady mentions, and I can't help but agree with him.

"Closed adoption. Neither of us

knew anything about each other. The parents sent the picture to the agency, who gave it to me." I admit way more than I want to, but he's the only one asking.

"You never said anything?"
"What am I supposed to say? Yeah, I knocked up my girlfriend and gave up my kid," I sarcastically comment, swerving the car around a bend.

"We're your friends. You knew about my family," he mentions. It's not like he could hide that as easily as I could.

"Sorry," I say, half-heartedly. Mostly because I want to get to her,

explain I had no idea.

Just as I make the final turn, my tires

squeal, and I skid to a stop before running out of the car.

Brady says something, but I don't hear it because I only care about Kailey. She's just up to the steps to the porch when I grab her wrist. "Kailey, listen to me," I beg.

"NO! Get the fuck out of here," she screams again.

Having no shame, I get down on his knees, pleading with her. "Just listen to me god damn it!" I yell back. Uncle Clyde comes out to see what the commotion is. Sadie and Brady stand by the car, confused and shocked by what's unfolding in front of their eyes, most likely sharing the stories between the car rides.

"You gave her up once, you'll do it again. How could you think this would be good for her? Hasn't she lost enough? We're better without you. She is better

off without you. The best thing you did was give up being a part of her life. She doesn't need to know her birth father was such a selfish, manipulative bastard. Just leave," Her words are like a cut to the wrist. Sharp and deliberate.

She breaks me when I watch her

She breaks me when I watch her back disappear into the house. My body shutters with the sound of the door slamming, shattering my insides and I crumple to the ground, tears escaping out.

Brady and Sadie rush over when Clyde pulls me to my feet. "Tell me

what's going on?" His authoritative voice doesn't scare me anymore. Actually only one thing scares me right now and it's that my future is over.

We all enter the house, and the kids look at me questioning what exactly is going on. I want to wrap my arms around

Chloe and pull her close. The urge to tell her I'm her dad is so great, I have to turn my head from staring at her. "We'll take

the kids to the park," Sadie says, shuffling around for their shoes.
"Come on, guys, who can beat Brady to the slide," Brady adds, trying to

appear enthusiastic.

"Thank you," Aunt Holly tells them
as they're walking out the door

as they're walking out the door.

Clyde takes me into the kitchen,

sitting me at the table. "Start from the beginning." His no nonsense voice demands. Holly pours me some lemonade, although my body is craving Jack right about now. With shaky hands I bring it up to my mouth, trying to moisten the dryness of my throat. Holly places her hand on arm, telling me to calm down. She won't be saying that in a second.

"When I was seventeen, I got my girlfriend pregnant," I admit. Shit, I feel like I'm at a damn AA meeting between Brady and now them. "My girlfriend and

"You kept this from Kailey?" Uncle Clyde questions.

"I did at first, but I told Kailey

I gave her up for adoption."

months ago when things really started getting serious between us."
"So, I'm not sure I understand," he

says.
"She found a picture of my daughter

"She found a picture of my daughter in a drawer this morning. She recognized the baby," I practically choke back my cries.

mouth and sits back, her own tears welling in her eyes. "Did you know?" "No, I swear I didn't. If I did, I would have said something." I shake my

"Oh My God!" Holly covers her

head violently, trying to make my point.

"I'll be upstairs," Holly stands up and exits the room. My eyes find Clyde, watching me warily, most likely thinking I'm a liar.

"You have to believe me." He raises his eyebrows. "Shit, I barely believe myself. It's so fucked up." I drop my head in my hands. "What the hell am I supposed to do? Tell me, Clyde. Should I just disappear out of their lives? I'll do whatever you say because my mind is fucking screwed up right now I have no idea what's best for them." The tears fall onto the table. My mind is racing, I wanted this life before I even knew Chloe was mine. Could I even walk away from them if it was for the better? My mind says yes, but my heart screams

"You're not going anywhere. You promise me you didn't orchestrate this whole scenario?" he asks.

no.

"No, I never would have thought it. About a month after I signed the papers, our adoption organizer called me and said she had something for us. When my ex-girlfriend and I went to pick up the envelope, she gave us each a picture and told us the adoptive parents wanted us to have it. We talked with her about our lives and what we were doing in school. Zoey, my ex, was having a hard time, partying non-stop. I think she was regretting giving her up, trying to mask it through drinking and having fun, but I didn't know for sure. Then when we got in the car she confirmed it. She told me she caught the postage city stamped on the envelope. It was from Western. She

wanted us to come up and find her. I told

her it was for the best and that our daughter was in better hands than ours. It's the day we broke up, she turned to drugs and alcohol to make her forget.

"For some reason when it came time

to decide on a college, I thought I could be closer to her if I came here. In the first few months, I scanned every little girl, trying to compare them to the picture. I don't know if I even had a clue of what I would have done if I had come across her. But as I started my college years, I knew Zoey and I made the right decision. I never stopped thinking of her, but I stopped searching for her. Believe me, Clyde, this has thrown me just as much as you guys."

"What do you think you want?" he

"How could you ask me that?" I raise my face to stare into his.
"I think it's a legitimate question."

asks, tapping his fingers on the table.

His face stone cold.
"I was all in before I even knew

Chloe was mine. Nothing changes that, but I'm not sure Kailey will ever believe me. If you think they'll be happier without me, say the word and I'm gone."

"That's not a question for me." His eyes shift to the left. Kailey stands in the doorway with the blue envelope in her

hand. The letter I wrote to my daughter. My letter to Chloe. Her face is red faced and blotchy from tears.

Clyde gets up from the table. He and Holly walk out the front door. Kailey

letter in her hand.
"I guess she's yours," she mumbles,

leans against the wall, fiddling with the

standing still.

"I didn't know," I say. My hands itch
to hold her. For her to hold me. She's the
only one who calms me when I'm upset,

but I may never get to feel that unconditional love ever again.

"I'm unsure of what to say, but

here," she steps forward and hands me the letter. "Please, tell me I'm not some naïve idiot for believing you had no idea Chloe was the same girl in this picture?"

She digs the picture and letter out of her back pocket and hands them to me.

I look at the angelic baby

remembering how many times I

wondered where she was or what she was doing. All those questions now have answers, but they've brought on so many more questions because of it. "It was a closed adoption. All Zoey and I had was how long the parents were married, what they did for a living, and other unidentifiable information. We weren't given any names or where they lived. Neither were they about us. There was a short bio on each of them. We went through so many, constantly disagreeing, but eventually we settled on...well, Jen and Caden. It said the guy worked for some research company and the woman was going to be a stay at home mom." She nods her head, obviously still not convinced.

"Why did you come to Western if you were so set on not knowing anything?" I just realized if I would have told her most of this before we wouldn't be where we are right now. Does she think I'm jumping up and down inside with excitement because I'm still shocked on the whole issue.

"I did come to be close, I'm not going to lie. I wasn't set on not knowing anything. It was one of the hardest things about the adoption. The only couple Zoey and I felt right about wanted a closed adoption. It wasn't what we wanted, but we felt they would be the best parents—for Chloe.

"The first few months after I came to Western, I would look in every stroller,

trying to find her. But then I met Brady, Dex, and Rob. Eventually I came to realize, if I believed in my decision to place her for adoption, I had to live my life. Make something of myself. Pretty soon I wasn't glancing in every stroller or scrutinizing every little girl looking for any similarities as I walked by. She stayed with me, but assured she was living a great life I let her go. And I'm thankful I was right. That I gave her to people like Jen and Caden makes me even more sure of my decision." I toss my hands through my short hair, resting them on the back of my neck. At the rate I'm going to pull out all the newly grown hair. "How do I know you didn't figure it

out and used me to get close?" I sit there quietly for a while contemplating how to go about this because it's a sore subject for her. But to really convince her I have to say it. I grab her hand between both of mine, happy when she doesn't pull away. "Kailey," I bite my lip, wishing I still had my piercing to fidget with. "Don't you think I would have approached you before the airplane?" Her face falls and her eyes dart to the table, and she attempts to pull her hand from my grip. Grasping it harder, I entwine our fingers and place my finger under her chin,

bringing her face up to look at me. "I don't say it to hurt you. I regret every day before that airplane ride. If I could can't. It proves Kailey that I really had no idea. Please, believe in what we've built together. I know it took me forever to find you, but the day I did everyone else disappeared." My teeth find my lip again, nervous habits are hard to break.

Then she walks over to the wooden

go back and change it, I would, but we

table, opening the bottom drawer. As soon as she pulls it out, I figure out what it is. She rests it on the table and takes a seat. The pastel colored book labeled Our Baby Girl grips at my heart. "Here you go," she pushes it toward me, and I hesitantly begin to open. "Jen and Caden tried for three years to have a baby. She went through rounds of fertility treatments. They explored international

adoption, but domestic as well. One case fell through. It was to be an open adoption. The birth mom changed her mind after two weeks. Jen had already mothered that baby. Set up to get breast milk from one of those agencies. It devastated her. They agreed that they would only do closed adoption after that. They were on wait lists after wait lists, and Jen was growing extremely impatient. I remember the day she told me about Chloe. She was so excited, but I could see the fear in her eyes that one day, she would be taken away from her."

day, she would be taken away from her.'
As Kailey explains Jen and Caden's struggles, I open the book of my baby's life. The first picture is the same as mine. I run my hands over them, starting

on the day they received her to her first birthday. Her happiness displayed in each one of her smiles and laughs caught by the camera shows me I made the right decision. On her first birthday, there's one with Kailey and her. Their cheeks side by side, smiling widely for the camera with a great big princess cake in front of them.

"There are more pictures, but Jen and Caden moved here right before Jen got diagnosed, so most of them are still boxed up in the basement. I hope you don't mind, I read the letter Jen wrote to you before she sent it. It's all true, she was very grateful to you and Zoey for giving them the opportunity to love and raise Chloe." Her voice breaks, and I

nod. The letter we got with the pictures was a simple and heart filled letter from Jen, thanking us for being brave and trusting enough to give our daughter up for adoption. It's a letter that kept me going in those early years, a reminder that I did the right thing.

"Are Tara and Drew adopted?"

"No, Jen became pregnant with Tara right after they adopted Chloe. It's that

same story, when the stress of trying stops, it happens."

"Does Chloe know?" I'm glad Kailey seems okay with me asking questions.

"She knows she's adopted. Jen and Caden have always been upfront with her. Not sure what we'll say now." Yeah, that's a whole other question and answer round I'm not quite ready for yet. "I want you to know that I loved

Chloe just as much when she wasn't mine as I do knowing she is. It's no different than my love for Tara and Drew." I begin to plead my case, hoping she'll face this together with me.

She looks around the room. "Will you fight me for her?" her question throws me.

I close my eyes and open them.
"No," I whisper, knowing I'll barely
hang on to a life without any of them. "If
you think you'll be happier without me,
I'm gone. I wouldn't rip her from the life
she's known all these years."

"What if she wants to find you one

day?"

"That's your decision," I scoot the envelope back her way. "You can give

She eyes it on the table for what seems like hours and then looks up at me. "You can give it to her yourself." She nudges the letter back my way and smiles gently.

"So you're not pushing me out?"

"Nope."

her this "

"What are we going to say?" I question her.

"I'm not sure— I'm sorry for what I said." She squeezes my hand. "I shouldn't have come to that conclusion. I was just taken aback. Not that there's

I stop her from talking by placing my lips on hers. "It's okay. I understand. But next time, will you just stand still? My feet are getting sore from all the running." I laugh, but she just bites her lip. "I love you," I say and her lips turn up.

"I love you too. I promise from this moment, I'll never run away from you again."

"Deal." I kiss her again. "When do you think our life will become simple?" I ask.

"Well, how old is Drew? So, seventeen years, maybe."

"Nah, do you actually think I'm not going to knock you up with a couple kids?" I gently pull her up and into my lap. "We're looking at years of chaos," I add.
"I look forward to every second," she says, kissing me on the lips. Then

she stands up and holds her hand out to me, and I immediately join her. "Let's go have some fun with our family at the park."

"I have no shoes," I say, glancing at

my bare feet.

"I guess we'll have to keep all of them here from now on." She wraps her arms around my waist.

"Are you asking what I think you're asking?"

"Hey, who wouldn't want a hot, sexy D.I.L.F. hanging around the house?" she shrugs her shoulders.

"Now there's a killer nickname. But shit, that makes you a M.I.L.F."

3 months later...

"So, you're my Dad?" Chloe asks while scooping the chocolate chip sundae into her mouth fast enough to cause an imminent brain freeze.

"I'm your biological Dad, yes. But your dad is still your dad. You have two," I explain to her, and Kailey squeezes my leg.

"So do I call you Dad, instead of Trey?" She asks, placing the heaping

amount into her mouth.

"That's up to you." I'm not even sure

what I want her to call me. I just want her to be comfortable.

"Can I think about it?" she mumbles through her ice cream.

"For as long as you want," I assure her.

We took Chloe out to dinner, just the three of us, and surprisingly she took the news well. After she finishes her ice cream, we file out of the booth and she grips both our hands. Her head bobs from me to Kailey, and we smile down at her and then at one another. "I miss Mommy and Daddy. But I like our new family too." She lets go of our hands, skipping ahead of us, and my hand finds

Kailey's. Her warmth spreading through my body like it always has.

"I like our new family too," I say to Kailey and kiss her on the cheek.

"It went better than I expected," she mentions, and I nod in agreement.

"Let's go home."

arrival.

When we walk into the house, Jessa sits on the couch with Tara curled up along her small belly. Grant's on the floor playing hot wheels with Drew. "Look at you two getting ready for parenthood," I say, announcing our

"It's relaxing and nice," Jessa says, and Kailey laughs.

"Come over more often," she sits on the couch next to Tara.

If it wasn't for our friends, we wouldn't have gotten through the last three months. Holly and Clyde wanted to stay, but we sent them home, saying we could handle it. Kailey attends most her classes at night, so she can stay home while I'm at work. If I have to quit my job I will, but she'll graduate if it's the last thing I do. Our friends frequently babysit and visit us so regularly they've already earning the pseudo names Aunt and Uncle.

Jen and Caden's room still remains shut, the suitcases still sit on the floor, Jen's hairbrush on the sink. Kailey isn't ready just yet, and I'm not going to push her. Their pictures adorn the walls, and we talk about them often, so the kids

remember their parents. All of us together, alive and dead, make up this house, as a family.

Jessa and Grant stay and help us put the kids to bed. Jessa is trying to pick Kailey's brain on every last detail to make sure she's prepared. Obviously, she doesn't remember who she's married to. Grant probably has a list of everything he needs, like some damn Boy Scout. I bet he's already read two parenting books. After we get everyone down, I'm

eager for them to leave, so I can have Kailey to myself. It's one of the best times of my day. The house quiets, and I snuggle up with the woman I love, cherishing what we have. Thank god they take my subtle hint when I say, "Thanks for watching the kids, now get the fuck out."

We say our goodbyes, and Kailey begins walking into the kitchen. I quickly step up behind and wrap my arms around her waist. Snuggling on the couch, she begins to fade fast until eventually succumbing to sleep. I watch her for a few moments, her chest rising and falling and the light stream of breath flowing from her mouth. She's so beautiful, and she's mine. A feeling of ownership and happiness flows through my body. I finally found where I belong.

I get up, turn off the television and carry my beautiful girlfriend up to our bedroom. She wakes up barely to get

dressed in her pajamas, and I strip down to my boxers and curl up next to her. Her ass presses into me and it's all I can do not to wake her up. But she needs her sleep, so I wait until my eyes eventually droop and close.

I'm awoken by the bed bouncing and loud squeals the next morning. All three kids are jumping around, laughing and falling all around Kailey and me. I reach up and grab Drew, pulling him down to the bed. He giggles in delight, and Kailey stretches awake displaying her flat stomach when her shirt rises up. "I guess it's time to get up," I say to her, pulling her close to me.

"Breakfast," she announces, and they jump off our bed.

"I want pancakes," Chloe says.

"Bacon," Tara shouts.

"Me too," Drew babbles.

"Well, go downstairs, we'll be right there," she instructs our small army, and they scurry out of the room.

I stand up to put on a pair of pajama pants and shirt. Kailey grabs my wrist and yanks me down on the bed. Placing her one arm around my head, she presses her lips to my cheek. "I love you," she whispers. I imagine I'm displaying the cheesiest grin, but I could give a shit. My life is fucking great.

Epilogue

Dex

Pink and Purple balloons blow in the wind from their spots tied down in every corner of the yard. A giant Princess jumpy thing is anchored to the wellmanicured lawn. For a guy who didn't want the suburbia dream life, he sure has it now. Trey moved out the next day after finding out Chloe was the daughter he placed for adoption. Not that it was the deciding factor, I'm sure it would have happened regardless.

My ass has been sitting in this plastic

chair for the past hour as kids run around me, screaming and crying. I love my little pseudo nieces and nephew, but all of these kids at once are a bit much for me. If all that wasn't bad enough, their parents are here too. The youngest parent still has Kailey and Trey by at least six years. They're all far removed from their college days, which leaves me to hang out with my friends. Which would be great if I wanted to hear about Jessa's cervix and Sadie's incessant wedding talk. Not like I don't hear it enough around the house. Twenty-four fucking seven, she's on the phone with her mom or Brady's sister Maura. I can't wait until they get married, so it all stops, but I'll be long gone before then. No way

will I live with a married couple. Rob and I have talked about getting a place of our own, so we'll see.

Trey walks out, calling Chloe over to blow out her candles. If the kids, their parents, or my friends weren't enough to drive me insane today the fact that Trey's whole damn lot of living relatives fills the yard seals it for me.

His mom won't let it rest that I'm the only one here without a girl. Jessa looks at me, knowing Sam's arriving in a few weeks when the baby comes.

I sigh thinking about Sam. No one

believes us, but it truly is casual between us. She's the girl version of me. She likes to get off, and I don't mind being the one to do it. I went out to visit

her once, and it was fun. We rented a hotel room and fucked all day and night. As far as talking or getting to know each other, nope. We watched a lot of

Ridiculousness on MTV and laughed our asses off getting drunk. We have a good time together, and I'm eager to see her in a few weeks because man does she have some skills in the bedroom.

Chloe runs over and sits in her queen chair, ready to blow out the candles. After she makes her wish, all her friends fill the empty chairs while Trey and Kailey begin passing out the cake. Finding this as my time to escape, I sneak into the house. There's barely an inch of wall space that isn't occupied with a picture of someone. Jen, Caden,

the girls, Drew. Everyone is up on display.

"Hey, man, how are you holding up?" Trey comes in searching the freezer.

"Fine. Shit, man. You've done a oneeighty," I remind him, like I do every time I see him. I can't help it, I miss my wingman.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You should try it sometime." He smirks my way. Brady and Grant follow inside next.

"Jesus, can you please tell her to stop mentioning how much she's dilated and how exactly the doctor figures it out? Come on, man," Brady sighs, shaking his head at Grant.

"No way, you tell her. She's eight

and half months pregnant, hormonal to the fucking max. She's uncomfortable and cranky one minute and all lovey to me the next. I'm not telling her anything but yes until the baby pops out," Grant says with the conviction of a man trying to stay alive on the battlefield, and we all laugh.

"Tell your girl to quiet down on the wedding talk. It isn't the fucking royal wedding or something. Fifty billion people will *not* be watching it," I say to Brady.

"You can tell her, but she thought Jessa was bad. If she only saw herself in the mirror." Brady shrugs. "But the hell if I'll say something."

"You're all pussy whipped. Let's do

a Vegas trip or something," I try to rally them.

"Jessa's due any day," Grant says.

"We have the wedding expenses," Brady adds.

"Look around, man, do you think I'm going anywhere?" Trey chimes in.

'You all suck," I say. "Where's Rob? He'd have my back." I pretend to

look around the room.

"He said he couldn't make it.

Another car race." Trey digs the ice cream out, and Kailey's already there to grab it from his hands. "Thanks, babe," he says and kisses her on the cheek.

"He's really into that car shit lately," Grant mentions. "Every time we're over, he's in the garage."

"Yeah, it's his second love, after himself," Brady jokes, and we all laugh. "Let's at least go up there one night.

Trey, you could race the Charger?" I try to gather them up again.

"Maybe I'll go, but I'm not racing," Trey sits down at the table, and we all pull out our own chairs and join him.

We continue to talk for a while. Trey gets up to say goodbye to the other kid's parents and his family. Soon the girls find their way inside, luckily the talk of placentas and tulle have been replaced by music and television. Grant slides a beer to me from across the table, and I clink it with him before downing half of it.

Kailey and Trey join us after

everyone has left. Chloe plays with her new dolls, sharing with Tara. Drew passed out on the floor. Trey's mom scoops Drew up and disappears upstairs while his dad ushers the girls to take a bath.

"We have this guys. You go outside and enjoy yourselves," Pete, Trey's dad instructs us. Kailey and Trey don't have to be told twice as they grab some more beers and rush outside. Trey lights the tiki torches, and Kailey unplugs the inflatable. We all sit around their porch table, and Trey pulls out a deck of cards. Now this is what I'm talking about.

all stare at me like I have three eyes. "Fuck you, Dex, you think I'm going

"Strip Poker?" I question, and they

to let you see my girl naked?" Trey says, winking at Kailey. "Although you're missing something pretty spectacular." She giggles next to me, and I want to lean over and vomit.

"I've already seen her," I mention, and Kailey slaps me over the head. "WHAT?" Trey stands up, peering

down at me.
"I accidentally walked in on her

once," I tell him, and his nostrils start flaring.

Kailey cocks her head to the side and gives him a long sigh. "No, he didn't, he's just joking, baby," she says.

"Do you think we didn't all hear you every time you told her to 'make sure you lock Dex's door'?" I give my best

Trey voice. Lame as it might be. "So, you didn't, right?" he persists.

"No, man, I've never seen your girl naked," I laugh, and Kailey joins with me.

"Thank god. I was seeing red there for a minute," he sits back down and shuffles the cards.

We end up playing poker, but no stripping involved. For hours, we rip each other apart and laugh remembering stories. Grant and Brady start talking about when they were younger, and Brady, Trey, and I go back down memory lane as freshman. It's like old times except the three women they all love sit next to them. I can't help but feel like the odd man out, not that I want to

join them. It actually scares me that what's happened to them is going to happen to me. That some girl will walk into my life, and I'll be them in three months.

Hours pass by and suddenly Elena, Trey's mom is at the screen door. "Trey, Chloe's screaming, and I can't calm her down. She's calling for you." Trey bolts up, and Kailey follows. Minutes later Kailey emerges back through the door. "Is she okay?" Jessa asks.

"Yeah, she has them on and off.

Usually when she's thrown off her routine or overtired. Trey's calming her down now. He'll sing her their song. It's like a magic spell that calms her down."

I excuse myself from the table to use

the bathroom when my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out, but I don't recognize the number, so I let it go to voicemail. After I finish taking a piss, my phone alerts me of a voice message. "Hi, Dex, It's Hank down at Weddles. I thought you'd want to know a

pretty hot dirty blonde you know is here. She's been playing for an hour and losing kinda bad. Figured since you guys have always been so close, you might want to take care of this yourself. "Fuck me, what the hell is she doing there? Why the hell is she tossing her money away, she has always been so against "the lifestyle"? Sneaking upstairs, hoping to catch

Sneaking upstairs, hoping to catch Trey to say goodbye. I don't really want to explain myself to the others. I hear his voice from the top of the stairs. He's lying with Chloe, singing "Elderly Woman Behind a Counter In a Small Town" by Pearl Jam. It's an incredible sight to see him with his daughter, the love he has for not only her, but all of

them emanates from him daily. Not that I would ever tell him. Once he finishes the

last of the lyrics, she's fast asleep and he slides out from beside her. Quietly he shuts the door and points me down the hall.

"Sorry, man, I gotta go." I shake his hand, and he pulls me into a one arm hug. "Great song by the way. It really fits the two of you."

"Yes, it does. I feel like I've never

been apart from her." His face has a sappy look of contentment. "Thanks for coming. Thanks for her dollhouse. She loves it." Trey says.

He walks me to the door, and I venture outside alone. I climb into my truck, figuring my night just took a turn I wasn't expecting.

When I arrive at Weddles down in

the city, I walk through the door, into the dark and dingy shack of a bar. Old men are slumped over in their chairs, half naked working girls, peering my way. I nod to Hank and the others before knocking on the red door in the back hallway. When Jeff sees it's me, he opens the door, and I spot her in the middle seat among a bunch of middle-

aged men. Sitting back, I watch her for a while. She's playing stupid, not at all like her usual style. Sloppy and all over the place. The only thing she has going on for herself is the men keep flirting with her and underestimating how talented she really is at a poker table. I wish I could wait and see if she can turn this around, but when the bald comb over guy next her reaches around and kisses her under her ear I can't wait patiently anymore.

I'm out of the old vinyl chair I'm occupying before he can sit straight into his own chair again. Ivy behind the table spots me coming and holds her deal, knowing I'm about to steal one of her players. When my hand wraps around

gorgeous sky blue eyes swim into mine shocked to find it's me. Yanking her off the stool, the men whine that I'm taking her away. Ivy does her job and quietly settles them down with a joke, making them forget the whole scene entirely. Once we escape into the dingy cover up bar, she tears her arm out of my hand and whips around to face me. "What the hell? I had them," she tells

her bare arm, she jolts up. Those

high school when I beat her boyfriend at blackjack. She'd begged me to take it easy on him, to let him win, but fuck that. "You didn't have them. You're under by over five bills. You'll never make it up, and pretty soon Len will come in and

me. I haven't seen her this angry since

stop it himself. Why the hell are you here anyway? Aren't you the one who hates this scene? Everything and *everyone* who's involved?" I remind her of heated words she spoke to me not only four months ago.

"I do. Just let me go back in there." She's digging into her pockets, no doubt searching for more money.

"Hell no, you stay here." I signal to Hank to get her a drink and position her on the stool. Since she already appears as though she's had her fair share of drinks tonight, she'll probably happily accept what Hank offers her.

I retreat back to the room, walking past the poker tables and through the black curtains. Len's there like I

assumed, eyebrows raised and a tight smile. Digging into my pocket, I toss the bills on the table in front of him, and he picks up the money. Motioning for me to take a seat, I happily pull out a chair and join him. "She's been here a few times, there are rumors around town," Len

"Why didn't anyone call me before? We know she's not involved in all this." I lean up, resting my elbows on the table.

begins to tell me.

"I thought you left her a long time ago?" he coyly questions, lifting his dark amber liquid drink to his lips.

"We just went different paths. What are the rumors? Ralph?" I question, already knowing the answer.

"Who else? He's a damn fuck up."

He shakes his head. "She's in the thick of it, Edge." He refers to me by the nickname my dad and Ralph gave me the first time I made the right picks when I was nine.

I sit there for fifteen minutes, letting
Len fill me in on what I should have
been told by either her or my damn dad
months ago. Why am I surprised they
were covering up Ralph's fuck up again?
Who the hell knows! He's given her a
damn life filled with nothing but
heartbreak and poverty.

Len says he'll alert me if he sees her again, but we both know he won't. Not unless he needs me to bail her out again. That's exactly why I'm taking control of this situation whether she likes it or not.

She'll fight me every step, so I'll keep my new found knowledge to myself until she's ready to reveal what's really going on. She's slumped over the bar when I

return, her dishwater blonde hair splayed across the dirty ass wood in front of her. An empty shot glass rests in her hand. The clothes she's wearing filthy with stains. Her sandals are missing a strap across the top. She's a fucked up mess, but my mess to clean up now. "What the hell, Hank?" I question

him, and he shrugs his shoulders. "Thought she wouldn't mind forgetting her problems for a while." He

ventures down to the other side of the

bar, completely ignoring my now dilemma.

Picking her up, I swing her over my shoulder, and she groans. "If you're going to puke, you better damn tell me," I holler at her, but she doesn't move.

She flops down on my seat when I lift her off my shoulder. Her head falls to the side, and I notice her long mascara stains and smeared red lipstick. I could kick his ass for doing this to her again. Why can't he just leave her the hell alone, let her live her life without his fucked up problems.

"I've missed you," she mummers, and I wish I could say the same. I do miss her, just a very different version of her.

I shut the door and walk around the truck, and I'm about to climb in when I spot her old Volkswagen. Walking over to the dented car with rush spots covering the whole back end, I shake my head that she still drives it. It's a miracle the piece of shit runs. I peer through the windows and it reveals what a shitty friend I've been to her over the years. Blankets and a pillow are strewn across the backseat, with fast food wrappers and piles of clothes fill the passenger seat. She's been living out of her car, I say to myself in disbelief. I try the door handle and roll my eyes finding it unlocked. Scooping all her clothes in my arms and a suitcase she has a few toiletries in, I walk back to my truck.

Tossing it into the truck bed, I slide into the driver's side. Her head rests against the window and light snores escape her nose. She's still beautiful even in this state of dysfunction.

I start the truck up and pull out of the

parking lot. I have to keep telling myself, it's not her I'm upset with, it's him. Actually a whole shitload of people now.

We pull up to my house, and I carry her up the stairs. It's dark and quiet as I lay her down in Trey's old bed. I take

off her shoes and shake my head at her filthy feet. She begins to nuzzle into the pillow as I pull the blankets over her body. Man, she's just as I remember. After she's tucked in, I go back out to my

clothes in the washing machine, and take the suitcase upstairs. I'm about to escape the room when I hear the wrestling of her movements on the sheets. "Dex?" she whispers staring at me at

truck and grab her stuff. I throw her

in the doorframe.

"Hey, Chrissy, it's **m**e. Sleep tight,
I'll just be next door." When the door

I'll just be next door." When the door shuts, I take a deep breath. My life's axis just shifted again.

Dex's Story - Can't Let Go

(The Invisibles #4) COMING Summer 2014

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/
can-t-let-go
I would appreciate if whether you liked

LET ME LOVE or not, to please leave a review. Reviews are a key component for spreading the word regarding Indie authors & their books. Thank you!

Goodreads:
https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/ let-me-love

Join Michelle Lynn Newsletter http://eepurl.com/O0v4n

More From The Invisibles <u>Let Me Love playlist on Spotify</u> <u>Join The Invisibles Discussion Group</u> <u>on Facebook</u> Let Me Love Book Trailer

Acknowledgements

My first thank you is to Elizabeth Aguilar. This story would have been so much less without your input and guidance. You saw something I didn't and lead me through Trey and Kailey's story with patience and unwavering dedication to not only me, but the characters as well. The hands on treatment you give your clients shows how invested you are in their art of writing and storytelling. Thank you for the hours of phone calls and constant Facebook messaging while developing the story of Trey and Kailey.

Next is my family. My husband, who allows his wife to fade off into plotting land, which results in me asking him to repeat himself numerous times. And the man, who brainstorms ideas with me, helping me get into a man's head at times. I love you! I thank my patient children, who draw me away from the world of books. Two little beings that have the ability to bring me to tears of laughter and love. Without you, I fear my life would be filled behind a computer screen, never seeing the light of day. Heather Davenport, Book Plug Promotions. Thank you for your tremendous organization skills. My cover reveal, book blitz, and tour for Let Me Love all done flawlessly as normal.

My cover designer, Sommer Stein with Pear Perfect Creative Covers. As with all my others, Let Me Love is beautiful. Thank you for never letting me accept

anything less than LOVE!

My street team. Oh, how I love you all.
Without all of you, I'd be nowhere. I appreciate all the hard work you go in order to get my name out there and help people discover me and the characters and stories I've created.

To all the Bloggers, who have signed up for the release events, thank you for taking on The Invisibles Series and Let Me Love and helping me spread the word amongst readers.

Most of all, thank you to all the readers.

Most of all, thank you to all the readers. If you didn't take a chance on Indie

Authors every day, this book would have most likely never been written much less published. Thank you.

Michelle Lynn

www.michellelynnbooks.com
Facebook
Goodreads
@michellelynnbks
michellelynnbooks@gmail.com

Book Peddler's Editing (Editor)

www.bookpeddlersediting.com

<u>Facebook</u> <u>bookpeddlersediting@gmail.com</u>

Sommer Stein (Cover Designer) Perfect Pear Creative Covers Facebook

Books by Michelle Lynn

Love Me Back

Growing up in small-town Belcrest, Maddy Jennings always thought she was destined to be with her childhood sweetheart, Trent Basso. Throughout the complicated road she has traveled with Trent, someone else has had a strong presence in Maddy's life. Trent's older brother Gabe has always been someone she could count on, therefore neither of them can be blamed when lines blur from friendship to something more. However, promises made between

brothers threaten to ensure that neither of them will have a permanent place in her life.

When Maddy returns to her

hometown for her brother's wedding, she is forced to face both Trent and Gabe for the first time in two years. While the two Basso brothers fight to win her heart, she is busy struggling with a past that won't seem to let her go. Whether she wants to or not, Maddy must decide to either forfeit her own happiness or forever tear a family apart.

Amazon UK

The Invisibles Series

Don't Let Go

Sadie Miller is attempting to change her ways and hide somewhere no one knows her former self. She only wants to finish her final year of college, obtain her degree, and get out from the hold of her affluent parents. Then she meets Brady Carsen, the lead singer of The Invisibles, a popular local band in the college town. She tries to stay away but quickly realizes that, although he might not be what she's used to, he's exactly what she needs and more importantly, everything she could possibly want.

Unfortunately, Sadie's troubled past left her with insecurities that make her question Brady's true intentions. And while Brady is convinced that Sadie is the one for him, he has his own secrets that he fears will be their undoing. If they want to be together, they will have to stand united and fight the outside influences that are threatening to tear them apart. Can they put their pasts behind them for good in order to secure their future?

Amazon UK

Let Me In

Grant is damaged, selfish, and undeserving of love...or so he thinks.

Jessa is happy, in love, and has overcome her past...or so she thinks.

Grant and Jessa can't stop thinking

at a party a month ago. And despite their differences, they can't seem to stay away from each other either. However, both are hiding secrets of less-than-perfect pasts, fearing what will happen when those mistakes come to light. As they grow closer, they each battle their own insecurities, and neither believes that they are worthy of the kind of love that they both still want. So if it's true that opposites attract, what happens when the similarities begin to surface? Amazon Amazon UK

about one another since being introduced

Collaboration (co-written with Nevaeh

<u>Lee</u>)

This is not your typical rock star romance. For one, the "rock star" is a rapper. And not just any rapper. Trace is the hottest ticket in the music industry right now, regardless of which definition of 'hot' you choose.

Taryn Starr is not the girl-next-door who unknowingly meets a celebrity. Known as "America's Sweetheart," the reigning country music princess and world-renowned superstar knows exactly who Trace is...or does she?

Their worlds collide when the

Their worlds collide when the musicians whose paths were never destined to cross are forced by their joint record label to collaborate on a song. The sparks fly and ignite a fire that

spend together—for better or worse. One thing's for certain, the two media magnets can't deny their explosive chemistry, but will life in the spotlight ultimately bring Trace and Taryn together or force them apart?

blazes hotter with every minute they

Amazon UK