



# You are the Reason (Boys of Darcel House #1)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** Kinsley Fallon is a drug — intoxicating, forbidden and utterly addictive.

You Are The Reason is a steamy romantic suspense with subtle darker themes.

When I was eight, my father disappeared. Two years later, my brother died in an accident; one that has left me with many unanswered questions. Now years later and haunted by a childhood I can't piece together, I'm determined to uncover the truth.

That is until my alluring landlord — Tanner, forced his way into my life. He sees past the mask I have spent most of my life perfecting, and unlocks a deep, emotional craving I can't deny.

Just as I find contentment in this new direction, a choice stirs. Can I take off my mask and show him the real me? Or will I run; leaving him and the chance for love to heal my trauma behind?

**Total Pages (Source):** 50

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:58 am*

Kinsley - twelve years of age

I can hear my mother calling in the distance, most likely rambling on about something I'm to blame for. I roll my eyes so hard they almost fall into the back of my head. Opening them, I squint into the horizon, from the position of the sun I assume the time to be around 7.30am; half an hour before I can leave for school. What do you say Kinsley? Do you want to go inside, trap yourself indoors? With a mother who most likely just poured herself a glass of vodka, when she realised she had no milk for her coffee? Or, bask in the sun? The warmth of the morning sun answers the question for me, and I roll over, flopping onto my stomach.

I'm sure other parents would fret if their daughter wasn't in the house when they woke up, but not my mum. I've been waking before the sun rises for a while now. Two years today to be exact. Some nights I'm not actually sure if I sleep at all; deep down I think she knows it too. Sitting up, I stretch my arms high, reaching for the sun as if my fingers were able to sweep across the sky, then I climb down the metal ladder attached to the side of the concrete water tank.

My feet sink into the damp soil at the base of the ladder. The concrete structure now blocks the sweet glow of the sunshine. The shade I now stand in mimics the weight of the shadows slowly circling me. It's almost as if when I'm up there, I'm away from it all. It's my escape.

I walk in through the back door, kicking my boots off as I go. 'Good Morning, Meadow. Happy Birthday, Sweetheart.' I sing under my breath, as the back door slams shut behind me. Pausing momentarily, I wait to see if she greets me. Well what do you know, silence. My footsteps echo down the hallway on the old wooden floor

boards before I turn the corner into the kitchen, a single wrapped gift has been left on the kitchen table.

“Yeah, happy twelfth birthday to me,” I mutter.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:58 am*

### Chapter One

#### Kinsley

The feeling of buzzing under my pillow draws me out of my sleep. I mutter nonsense as I roll over and fumble for my phone, 6.25am on a Tuesday, who would be calling me at this time?

Staring at the incoming, unknown caller I answer, “Hello, Kinsley speaking.”

“Miss Fallon, my name is George Watson. It’s come to my attention that you are working with a private investigator —”

His words trail off as my heart drops into my stomach, and the familiar sensation of a weight crushing my chest begins to overwhelm me ... shit shit shit, it’s too early for this, especially today. I hang up the phone without thinking and quickly power it off. Focusing on my breaths to try and ground myself, I count; in 1, 2, 3 — hold, out 1, 2, 3, 4. People run out of phone battery all the time, right? I’ll turn my phone back on in an hour or so once I have had a coffee and a shower, then call him back. Yes, perfect plan Kins.

My breathing begins to slow once again and the weight crushing my chest disappears. I successfully calmed myself before the anxiety attack set in — winning. They don’t happen as often as they once did, but when they do I tend to spiral fast, so being able to snap out of it is a bonus in itself.

My hands twist my hair up into a messy bun whilst the smell of coffee drifts up the

stairs. The comforting aroma makes me smile. It takes me a while to float back down to reality, remembering that I live alone, and I do not own any fancy appliances that brew your morning coffee at a designated hour. However, that would be handy.

I should probably be concerned, but if there is one thing I do know, it's that the life of Kinsley Fallon isn't black and white. I live somewhere in between and I'm unsure whether that keeps things interesting, or has sent me damn crazy. Climbing out of bed, I smile to myself because the aroma that has most definitely filled my entire apartment only means one thing ... he's here .

"I'm going to change the locks this week!" I call out to him, as I make my way downstairs. Lie . A little something I tell myself to keep him at arm's length, but deep down, I know I crave these moments. I eagerly await his visits. The rose colour staining my cheeks betrays me every time.

"Oh, you wanna hide from me?" Tanner says as he grabs me from behind and presses kisses to my neck. "We can play if you want," he whispers. The warmth of his words on my skin causes me to clench my thighs together. I struggle to have any self-control around him.

Playfully, I push him away and pick up my coffee from the island bench. I need a caffeine fix before I deal with this moody man-child. A moment to remind myself that I shouldn't let him get too close. Is it so bad that I like to play hard to get? I enjoy the chase. Well, him chasing me. But only in the metaphorical sense, of course — not like through the woods or anything, I'll stick to reading about that in my books.

I moved into this one-bedroom apartment six months ago. It's nothing special but it's everything I need. It also comes with Tanner, when he decides to drop in unannounced. His parents own the apartment, but with them newly retired and off travelling the world they left their properties, and the real estate business they own, to their son. Their olive-skinned, blue-eyed son.

Can you really blame me for not changing the locks? I know, I know it's for my safety, but the one person I would be locking out brings me coffee with a side of orgasms.

Feeling his gaze behind me, I take a sip of my coffee and turn to face him. He's leaning on the door frame with his arms folded across his chest, the corner of his lips turning up into a smirk. I meet his eyes, now realising that I'm only wearing a white camisole and lace thong. The phone call that had woken me had sent me into a frenzy and I hadn't grabbed my robe.

Looking up at him through my lashes I see that he's dressed for work; dark wash denim jeans and a crisp linen button-down shirt. His suit jacket, which is currently draped across one of the kitchen stools, ties everything together. Sophisticated yet casual. The way his sleeves are rolled up shows off his tattoos, I find myself dragging my bottom lip through my teeth at the sight. His hair isn't messy today either, which means he is in the work car and not on his bike.

"You know, if you had called first, or even knocked, I would have made sure I was dressed appropriately for company." I lie, again, there is something about his attention that I crave. He chuckles, the sound alone sending goosebumps down my spine.

"No complaints from me." Tanner shrugs, taking a step closer, his ridiculously sexy smirk now reaching his eyes. My lips part, ready to tell him he can let himself out, but before I can, he closes the gap between us. With one firm finger he tips my chin up and tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"Why do you do that?" He sighs, taking the coffee cup from my hands and placing it down. "I can see that you want to tell me to leave, when really, I know you want me to stay." Gripping my hips, he lifts me onto the island and stands between my legs. In this position, I can feel his length growing in his jeans.

“Tanner,” I beg, not even sure what I’m asking for. My hands are pressed against his chest and I’m only a heartbeat away from pushing him backwards, yet he’s right, all I want to do is pull him closer. Dammit Kinsley, pull yourself together.

His lips and the stubble on his chin graze that little spot below my ear and he whispers, “Tell me to go and I will, I’ll walk right out that door and close it behind me, is that what you want?” I shake my head gently before something within me snaps. I fist my hands into his shirt, tug him closer and melt into his kiss. He pulls back at the last second. “What have I told you about using your words, Kinsley?”

Fuck, I moan inwardly, this moody man. I’ll never let him know how far I would go, or what I would be willing to do for him. No. That is not something I will ever disclose.

“N-no.” I manage to get out between my heavy breathing. “I don’t want you to go.”

“That’s better,” he praises, kissing me from my collarbone, up to my ear and whispers, “Good girl.”

Minutes pass and, like teenagers, our tongues tangle together as he grinds against me. It feels like butterflies are swirling around in my stomach, a feeling of desire and excitement. Tanner makes me feel things I haven’t in such a long time. He trails kisses back down my neck and across my chest. Hands gripping my waist, as his mouth teases my nipple through the lace covering my breast. When a breathy moan escapes my lips, he growls. My back is pressed down onto the counter and he throws my legs over his shoulders.

I roll my hips against the air, my body begging for any form of contact. Tanner chuckles, “Patience, Kins.” I can feel his warm breath on my thighs as he lowers his face. Tugging my thong to the side, he strokes his tongue up my center and circles around my clit, before curling two fingers inside me.

Tanner will be the end of me.

I thread my fingers through his hair, praying he doesn't stop. I'm so close. I focus on the movement of his fingers, whilst he sucks and caresses me with his tongue. I prop myself up onto my elbows so I can watch him, my slight movement causing him to look up and meet my gaze. There is a hunger in his eyes, a darkness that sends a buzz of electricity straight through me. My head falls back, I explode around him. An orgasm bursts from my body, like fireworks.

Before I have a chance to come back down to earth, I hear the tear of foil. When did he even stop? I think to myself. He doesn't let me get too lost in thought before I feel my thong pulled to the side once again. He lines himself up with my entrance and I watch him slowly thrust himself inside me.

"Oh God, Tanner," I moan whilst my body adjusts to him stretching me. Hitting that spot deep inside.

"Fuck, Kins. You feel so good." His voice is rough and that on its own does things to me, another orgasm builds.

Tanner guides my hand down between us, placing my fingers on that delicate bundle of nerves. "Play," he commands. "I want to feel you come all over my cock."

His voice matches that dark look I saw in his eyes moments ago. I reach down and stroke myself. Once. Twice. I whimper, I'm not going to be able to hold off any longer. Then I climax — again. My back arches and Tanner thrusts into me finding his own release. This is exactly what I needed to wake up to today. Happy Birthday to me.

Tanner collapses down onto his forearms, peppering kisses across my breasts. Once we have both caught our breath he stands and his eyes rake over me. "I better get

going.” His lips brush my forehead as he helps me down off the island bench. “And you better go shower and get dressed, you know, in case anyone else pops over unannounced”.

I laugh, as I begin walking towards the stairs. Looking back over my shoulder, I watch as he fixes himself back into his jeans. He meets my eyes, winks and heads for the door.

Tanner is my escape from reality. I don't have to think when I'm with him. Before Tanner, I was empty. Now, I'm alive. Other than how I like my coffee and my orgasms the guy knows nothing about me, and that is exactly how I want it to stay. It's just easier this way.

Six months earlier ...

Pulling up outside a two-storey townhouse close to the city center, I double-check the address which I scribbled onto a piece of paper. I feel as though I'm stepping into a fairytale ... Narrow and tall, white with black trimmings and greenery creeping up to the second-storey balcony.

There is no driveway and the allocated parking is on the road. Maybe I should just sell my car? Who am I kidding, I'm not a city girl. What the hell am I thinking?

Before I can give myself any more time to change my mind I grab my purse and jump out. Rounding my car, I look to the open door of the townhouse, as a gorgeous tanned man with messy dark brown hair steps out.

Crap Kinsley, you are in trouble here, girl.

Tearing my eyes away before he notices me eye-fucking him, I take a deep breath and as gracefully as a country girl can, walk over to my new home.

“I’m guessing you’re not Mrs Hayes,” I say shyly and offer my hand for him to shake.

He laughs, and it does something to me, a strange feeling in my stomach. Are these butterflies ?

I am way in over my head here.

“Annette is my mother, my name is Tanner.” His firm shake sends a shiver up my arm.

My cheeks are bound to be rosy now.

Tanner turns and walks into the house. “C’mon, I’ll give you the grand tour.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:58 am*

### Chapter Two

#### Kinsley

After Tanner left, I showered, got dressed and reheated the coffee he had distracted me from drinking earlier. Getting myself comfortable on my bed, I grab the journal out of my bedside table. Once again, I start at the beginning hoping that this time when I read it, I will find some answers. You're being ridiculous Kins, you have read this journal in its entirety hundreds of times.

It's true, my mother gifted me this journal for my twelfth birthday and the amount of times I have read it over the past ten years is more than I would like to admit. But something keeps pulling me back. There has to be something, somewhere in here,, that will give me the answers I am so desperate for, why else would she give it to me? I'm five journal entries deep when there is a knock at the door.

The downstairs door unlocks and then closes again. "Meadow, you home?" This time, it's someone I actually gave a key to.

The sound of my childhood nickname causes me to choke on my breath momentarily. On any other day, I wouldn't even blink at the mention but today ... today is different. If I close my eyes really tight, I can almost imagine the footsteps moving through my apartment are my brother's. I rub at my chest. Don't do this to yourself, Kinsley.

Kyle – my older brother, had always called me Meadow, well as far back as I can remember anyway. He said it was because, from the day I could walk I would toddle

out into the front garden and play in the flowers. Then, as the years went by and I got more adventurous, I would sneak through the garden gate and into the meadow with the horses. A smile graces my lips at the memory, the most beautiful wildflowers would grow there; sometimes when the breeze hits me just the right way, I can still smell them on the wind.

“Upstairs,” I call out.

I slip the journal back into my bedside table and sit cross-legged in the middle of my bed. Jesse’s footsteps grow closer as the tall blonde goofball I call my best friend comes into view.

Jesse dives onto the bed, the smell of freshly mowed grass and brown sugar — a weird combination but it fits him perfectly — sweeps over me as he playfully pins me down like an animal.

“Get off me,” I laugh.

A huge smile wraps across his face. “Happy birthday, glad to see you’re already up and dressed. Come on, we have heaps to do today.”

I sit back up, puzzled for a minute. Jesse is already off the bed and walking back towards the stairs. “What do you mean,” I ask. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see,” he says with a wink over his shoulder. Bastard.

Jesse’s friendship is a breath of fresh air, grounding me, filling my lungs and allowing me to breathe. I scramble off the bed and race down the stairs behind him. I haven’t eaten yet, and I still haven’t turned my phone back on to return the phone call from this morning. Regardless, this is my best friend and if he has plans I will tag along, no more questions asked. When I get to the front door I slip on my boots and

grab my coat.

“Your chariot awaits my dear,” he mocks, holding out his arm like I’m a princess leaving a castle.

“Dickhead,” I laugh and walk out the door.

I’ve known Jesse all my life, well for as far back as I can remember anyway. He was best friends with my brother, and when Kyle passed away Jesse kind of took me under his wing. I think I may have even stayed with him and his mum for a little while there.

I was only eight when my life turned upside down and even though the boys were only three years older than me, they had always been the ones I looked up to. Dad was always busy at work and Mum seemed to always have somewhere she needed to be. I sigh at the memory of my childhood and a knot begins to form in the pit of my stomach. It’s all such a blur, but I do remember spending a lot of time with Jess and his mum. I don’t know how I would have survived without them when I lost Kyle.

Jesse pulls me out of my thoughts. “Here, these are for you. I’m guessing you haven’t eaten yet?” He passes me a box from my favourite bakery. I can’t hide the smile on my face when the smell hits me. I grab out a croissant for myself and wave another one in the air. “Open.” I tease and shove one into his face.

We both laugh, except Jesse’s is muffled by the pastry. I put on my seat belt, wriggling to get comfortable in my seat. I have no idea where we are going, but I do know where I don’t want to go. Thirty minutes into our trip I realise where the road is taking us, and sure enough it’s exactly where I didn’t want to go. I should’ve known Jesse would want to come here today, we do every year.

Glancing over my shoulder to the back seat, there are a bunch of flowers and an esky.

“Tell me there’s beer in the esky, Jess.”

He raises a brow, now knowing that I know where we are going. “There’s beer in the esky,” he sighs.

We pull into the cemetery car park, the gravel crunches underneath the tyres and Jesse drums his fingers on the steering wheel ... Well at least it’s a nice day. Jesse grabs the esky and the flowers before we walk over to where my brother, my mother and my father are buried. The contents of my stomach churn at the sight of my family laid out in front of me. I fight back the tears threatening to fall, and Jesse squeezes my shoulders. He places the flowers down in front of Kyle’s headstone and I grab out three beers.

Looking up I pass him two of them. “One for Kyle too,” I say and Jesse nods. He places one down next to the flowers and cracks the other open. I follow suit, even though it can’t be later than about 11am. My phone is still turned off and I can’t bring myself to ask Jesse what the time is. Like it matters what time it is anyway.

Pressing the sharp edges of the beer cap into my thumb, the pain begins to ground me. I’m standing here on the twelve-year anniversary of my brother’s death, on my birthday. I almost laugh, it sounds just as far-fetched as it feels. I guess I can drink a beer if I want to.

A big oak tree shades over this part of the cemetery, its branches resembling arms stretched out wide to welcome everyone in. Jesse walks over and slides down against the trunk of the tree. I follow and sit down between his legs, resting my head back against his chest. We sit silently for a while before it hits me. I’ve lived longer without my brother than I got to live with him. My chest tightens as my mind begins to spiral with all the things Kyle has missed out on.

His first serious girlfriend.

Graduating from school.

Marriage.

I wonder what he would be doing with his life right now?

I shuffle around slightly. “He never even got to drink a beer.” Jesse’s eyes sparkle and a laugh comes from deep in his belly.

“Okay, spill!” I gasp, spinning completely around to face him front on. “How do you still have stories that I haven’t heard? Even after all these years.”

Jesse rests his head back against the tree, closing his eyes. “It was our tenth birthday. Do you remember it? We had a joint party.” He opens one eye to look at me briefly before closing it again. “Anyway, all our friends had gone home, you were already in bed and our parents were having a few drinks around the fire. We came up with a plan that I would distract the grown-ups so Kyle could crawl over to the esky and pinch a beer for us to share.”

“How did you distract them?”

A smile graces his lips as he continues the story. “I told them I wanted to show them a new dance routine.”

“Dancing?!” I exclaim, the smile on my face reaching ear to ear. Dancing was my thing. Every time we had guests I would sit them all down, bring out my CD player and make them watch a dance routine I had spent the whole day putting together.

We sit for what feels like hours, watching the shade of the oak tree move slowly, sharing stories and reminiscing about our shared childhood. After a while, I stand up brushing the leaves and dirt off my ass. “Where to next?” I ask.

Running his hand through his wavy blonde hair, he speaks with a forever playful tone in his voice, “What makes you so sure we aren’t just going back home?” The raised brow gives him away, he is so full of shit.

“Because we have ‘ heaps to do’ today.” I mimic his earlier statement. Picking up the esky, I turn to walk back towards the car.

“Wait up,” Jesse yells. I don’t stop though, nor do I turn to look back. I’ve spent enough time here today, the small beads of sweat beginning to form on the back of my neck are a telling sign to get the hell out before I crumble.

Back in the car, I grab my phone out of my purse as Jesse slumps down into the driver’s seat beside me, I can feel his eyes on me, watching me stare at the blank screen. Turn the damn thing on Kinsley, you can’t ignore this forever. It’s not even something I want to ignore, I haven’t had any leads, from the Private Investigator I hired, for months now. I look up at Jesse and hand him my phone. He powers it on, not even questioning me. This guy knows me better than I know myself, sometimes it kind of scares me.

“Three missed calls, one voice mail, all from an unknown number,” he says.

I nod, letting him know to play the voicemail.

“Miss Fallon, my name is George Watson. I have some information that I need to share with you. I cannot leave you my number, however, I can make another attempt to call you again tomorrow.”

My lungs scream at me to let out a breath and I offer Jesse a tight smile. He hands my phone back to me, turning his focus to driving. Driving to G od knows where. I’m just glad he isn’t asking any questions.

When the car hits a pothole in the road I startle, I must have passed out. I tend to do that on days where I allow myself to remember, to feel . It takes a physical toll. My stomach rumbles and I glance down at my phone, it's close to 3pm. We have been driving for almost an hour. Where the hell are we? Almost like reading my mind, I feel Jesse's eyes on me.

“ Welcome back, Meadow,” a teasing voice says from beside me. He pulls over, parking the car on the side of a dirt road. I sit up and look around, still half dazed before I realise where we are. “Bring your coat, we need to walk the rest of the way.”

“Wait, Jesse! It's trespassing ...” I whisper-shout, even though no one is around.

Ahead of us a long dirt road winds through the scattered gum trees, with a little man-made track to the right. The type farmers would use to access paddocks or graze cattle in a drought. Rolling hills line the horizon and the tree line continues off the roadside, scattering through the paddocks that surround us. I'm home . Memories flash through my mind.

“Higher, Daddy, higher,” I giggle. Clinging with all my strength to the ropes of the tyre swing. Looking out over the rolling countryside, I feel like I'm flying. “One more push then I really need to go to work, Meadow,” he says, as he pulls the swing back before pushing me forward. The rush has me squealing. With each swing I try to see beyond the horizon, as if the higher the swing could take me, the further I could see. “See you tomorrow, darling,” Dad calls as he walks over to his car, “I should be home for dinner.”

I pull myself out of one of the last memories with my dad; my final happy memory with him. Scrambling out of the car and shrugging on my coat, Jesse has already turned right, walking up the track that follows the boundary of my childhood farm. From where the car is parked the house is only five hundred metres straight ahead. Though you can't see it through the trees. I jog to catch up to him as he climbs over a

gate into the paddock, which sits behind the house.

“It might not even be there anymore,” I whisper, more to myself than to him.

But what if it is? What if the one place that holds so many memories is still sitting there? My body begins to shake and despite the cold, my hands are clammy. This is too much, I’m too vulnerable at this moment. Flashbacks come flooding back of the countless sunrises and sunsets, I have watched from the very secret spot Jesse is now taking me back to.

I take a moment to calm myself, counting my breaths in and out. Standing here, in the silence, I can almost hear Mum and Dad’s voices calling me in for breakfast. Wouldn’t that be a sight for sore eyes.

I walk further into the paddock. Allowing the long golden strands of wispy grass to tickle my palms. Then I see it. My secret place ; the concrete tank that I spent so many hours on. Countless sunrises, sunsets and nights spent under the stars. I would watch the whole world pass by when I was up there.

It was my escape.

My fingers wrap around the steel ladder, and adrenaline shoots through my veins. When I reach the top, Jesse is already there pulling things out of his backpack. The cold concrete bites at my skin through my jeans when I plop down beside him. Being the middle of winter, the sun will set soon and with it will come a chill you can feel deep in your bones. “Whatcha got there?” I quirk a brow towards him. Please be food .

“Well ...” he starts in his matter-of-fact voice, brace yourself Kins he’s about to hang shit. “Whilst you were having your Nanna nap, I decided to grab us some lunch ... which has now turned into dinner.”

I flip him the bird, taking in the spread of food. Cheese, crackers, dip, and twiggy sticks, I laugh as I grab one. “These were Kyle’s favourite.”

“I know,” he says and he grabs us both another beer. The look in his eyes says everything that he doesn’t put into words. An apology for all the pain I feel, the pain he has no reason to take accountability for. It all swirls behind his emerald gaze. “Happy Birthday, Meadow.”

A single tear falls down my cheek, and I smile. A real smile. “Thank you, Jess.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:58 am*

### Chapter Three

#### Kinsley

When I was eight years old, my dad went missing. Little did I know, that day on the swings, was the last normal morning we would have as a family. Then, two years later, on my tenth birthday, my brother died. I think they're connected, I just don't know how.

You can't just sit around home all day waiting for the call, I think to myself. I have already taken this entire week off work. Everyone thought it was because I wanted to let loose for my birthday and I didn't have the heart to break it to them. I'm not the social butterfly they assume I am. I go to work, I catch up with Jesse, Tanner brings me coffee two or three mornings a week and that's about as exciting as my life gets.

Standing in front of the full-length mirror in my bedroom, I look over myself. I got up early this morning, showered, washed and blow-dried my hair, and even did my makeup. After the emotional rollercoaster I had felt yesterday, I needed to feel back in control of things; my appearance being the easiest place to start. My deep auburn brown hair is now sitting below my breasts, well overdue for a trim and my curves are on full display; my favourite high-waisted jeans, hugging all the right places.

Deciding that I look and feel too good to just wait around, I grab a coat, my handbag and head out. Outside the sun is shining, but you can see from the cars parked along Cardigan Avenue that the frost has only just melted off their windscreens. Dew is dripping from the trees on the sidewalk and everyone still has their extra layer on. It is Melbourne weather after all, you have to layer all year round.

I wrap my arms around myself to keep the cool breeze from sweeping up under my outer layers. It's only a two-block walk from my apartment to a cosy little cafe that makes the BEST raspberry white chocolate muffins. This time of year they always have the fireplace lit and due to the cold, not too many people visit, which makes it my go-to. It's hard to find even a semi-quiet spot in the hustle and bustle of the city.

The bell on the door chimes as I enter and a welcoming warmth soothes my chilled skin. Raw exposed brick lines the cafe walls, the lighting warm like your bedside lamp and vintage couches arch around the fireplace, this space screams comfort and reminds me of back home.

I cringe at the thought of home, a feeling I seem to be always chasing. I envy those who have parents still living in their childhood home. I often wonder what it would feel like to be able to walk back through the front door one more time. To stand in a house with memories, with laughter stained onto the walls. A house where you experienced the joy of Christmas morning. A childhood bedroom, a window which you climbed out of, walls that muffled the sounds of your first broken heart. Home.

Betty glances up over the coffee machine. "Kinsley, my dear," she exclaims.

"Morning, Mrs Campbell." I offer her a genuine smile, quickly closing the door on my broken inner child.

"Aren't you looking delightful today? Take a seat over near the fireplace and keep warm. I'll get your usual together for you."

I nod and mouth a silent thank you, making my way to the couches near the fireplace. Betty Campbell had taken over running this cafe from her mother when she was my age, she would be in her fifties now. Thirty-odd years on her feet, with a smile on her face, a smile which never seems forced; how nice would that be? She knows all the regular customers' names and memorises our orders. That's probably another reason

it feels homely here, the intimate hospitality of a small country town.

Moments later she places a latte and a muffin on the coffee table before me, smiles, then rushes off to serve the couple who have wandered in. Reaching into my handbag I pull out the book I'm currently reading and get comfortable. This right here, is my idea of the perfect day.

An unfamiliar voice pulls me out of my book trance. "Do you mind?" she asks, gesturing to the empty space on the couch beside me.

"Oh, uh — no of course not. Please, go ahead." I try to keep my facial expressions calm and intact, hiding the fact that small talk makes me cringe. I don't have any girlfriends, other than those at work and even then, I don't spend time with them outside of 'work things'. So naturally, I'm dreading the possibility of 'girlie talk'.

It's not that I don't want to have girlfriends, I just haven't ever had one; not a real one anyway. What do I talk to her about? The little voice in my head laughs at me, she isn't an alien Kins.

Growing up with an older brother, I was always surrounded by boys. Then once Kyle passed away, Jesse stepped into the protective older brother and best friend role. We did everything together. Sure, I had other people come and go, but they weren't the type of friends you had sleepovers with or talked to about your schoolyard crush.

Regardless, I slip a smile onto my face. I can do this.

"What are you reading?" she asks, eyeing my book as I finish off my muffin.

I pass my book over to her. "It's a contemporary romance by a small indie author who I love. Do you read too?"

She laughs and proceeds to pull an identical book out of her handbag. "I do." We lock eyes and my smile turns genuine, maybe this won't be as bad as I thought.

We fall into a natural conversation and all the tension I was feeling slips away. The girl who is now sitting next to me rather than on the other end of the couch, has short black hair, in one of those wavy bob styles; it's stunning. I learn a lot about her in the time we are chatting. We did the 'get to know you' small talk before talking about books.

Her name is Sophie, she's twenty-two, has always been a city girl and works at the Library in the same suburb Jesse lives in. I make a mental note of this, maybe I could set them up ...

I'm about to ask her if she wants another drink before my phone rings. Looking down at the unknown caller flashing on my screen I internally curse myself. I had forgotten all about the fact I was waiting for a phone call. I jump up and toss a twenty-dollar note on the coffee table.

"I've got to take this, I'm so sorry," I say frantically. "Tell Mrs Campbell to put the change in the tip jar for me would you?"

Before she can even respond I answer the phone and run out the door. This is why you don't have friends Kinsley, you scare them away. Walking in the direction of home, I answer the phone. "Hello, Kinsley speaking."

"Miss Fallon, my name is George Watson. It's come to my attention that you have been in contact with a private investigator as of late."

I wait for him to continue, but the line falls silent.

"Y-yes, I have," I say, struggling to understand who this man is.

“It’s in your best interest to stop looking for answers. Call off Investigator Stanley and try to move forward.” His voice is cold and heartless.

A bitter laugh escapes me and I slap my hand over my mouth. “My best interest?” I question him. “To just move forward?” I’m starting to let my crazy show and that’s not a good sign.

Just move forward from the death of my parents, my brother? Who is this man? My chest tightens and my heart rate begins to pick up, robotically I’m placing one foot in front of the other, my body trying its best to get me home before my mind takes over.

George sighs on the other end of the phone. “You already have access to the answers that you’re seeking, you just haven’t found them yet.” Before I can even respond, the phone line cuts out. Taking in my surroundings I find myself standing at my front door, I fumble with my keys as I unlock it, close it behind me and slide down onto the cold tiles. A whirlwind of thoughts fly around in my mind, I fail miserably to latch onto any of them. I see black dots in my vision before I pass out. Another anxiety attack pulls me under.

\* \* \*

Tanner

Leaning forward onto my handle bars, I look up at Kinsley’s front door. I was only here yesterday. I never come around two days in a row, but like an itch I couldn’t scratch, something told me I should swing past. If I had it my way, she wouldn’t leave my side. This girl is addictive, but she has kept me at arm’s length since the day we met. The playful visits have been fun but I want more; I need more . She doesn’t know it yet, but Kinsley Fallon is mine. I’m just biding time until I show her who she belongs to.

Slipping the key into the lock I try to open the door — it won't budge. It feels as though something is pushed up against it. What the fuck. Deciding I don't want to cause a scene today, I jog around the back and enter through the laundry.

The apartment is silent. "Kins?" I shout, but as I walk down the hall and towards the front door, I see her. My heartbeat thunders in my chest at the sight of her; slumped against the hardwood door, her hair slick with sweat and breathing shallow. Rushing over I pull her into my arms. "Hey — Kinsley? Wake up!" After the longest thirty five seconds, she opens her heavy eyes, but they aren't focusing yet. "Fucking hell, please look at me."

"Tanner?" she whispers.

"Hey, yeah, it's me." I lift her into my arms and carry her upstairs, she stays quiet, still dazed. The feeling of her in my arms, leaning into me is almost too much. I place her in bed and her heavy eyes look over me before they close again.

"Stay," she mumbles as she drifts off to sleep – or passes out again? I have no idea what is going on. All I know is that I'm not going anywhere; this girl has never asked me to stay, and if this is my one shot at breaking down one of her walls, I'll take it.

Sliding my phone out of my jacket pocket, I send off a text, cancelling the rest of my day. I only had two property evaluations to do, they can wait. I toss my jacket onto the couch in the corner of her room and take in her space. The floor-to-ceiling bookcase is full, perfectly organised showcasing what must be her favourites, she has this corner set up as a little reading nook. Floor pillows and a basket of throws sit alongside the couch. As much as I drop past, things seem to escalate so fast that we never make it up here. That thought alone forces me to adjust myself.

Kinsley Fallon is a drug — intoxicating, forbidden and utterly addictive.

I place a glass of water and two pain relief tablets on her bedside table before undressing down to my boxers. Pulling back her blankets I climb into bed with her, the silk sheets cool against my skin. I sweep her hair off her shoulder and she mumbles something at my touch, wiggling backwards until her back is pressed to my front. My chest tightens and I can't distinguish the feeling within me, the flames of desire and lust I have for this woman are tangling with sparks of an emotional connection, one which I've suppressed for many years.

### Chapter Four

#### Kinsley

Pain radiates through my head with each thrum of my pulse, am I hungover? Reaching under my pillow for my phone, I freeze when I feel a warm, hard body pressed up behind me.

It must be mid-afternoon, I can see the sun shining through the floor-to-ceiling windows. An arm wraps around my waist and pulls me into them, nuzzling into my neck. Fresh linen, coffee, and something I'm yet to pinpoint; Tanner. Flashes from this morning come back to me. The cafe, the phone call, the anxiety attack. I must have passed out, but how did Tanner get here and why is he wrapped around me like I have confessed my love for him? I know better than to let my feelings get involved in our situation-ship. But as I glance at his tattooed arm draped over my waist I decide that whatever the reason, I'm going to enjoy every damn moment of this whilst it lasts.

He must sense that I'm awake because he rolls me over gently until I am lying in his arms, facing him. "You okay?" he asks.

"Honestly, I'm still trying to piece together why you're here."

Tanner laughs, keeping the mystery alive by sitting up and reaching across to the bedside table. He collects a glass of water and two tablets he must have prepared earlier. "Take these, they'll help with any impending headaches."

I take them without questioning him. I can see the medication is just paracetamol, and the headaches I normally get when I deal with the likes of this morning are not overly enjoyable. Pulling me back into his arms, I rest my head on his chest. I'm still too emotionally exhausted to put my walls back up right now.

When Tanner finally speaks, it's gentle and almost cautious. "Are you going to fill me in on why I found you passed out in your entryway?"

I could tell him the truth about what triggered me this morning, but that would be the beginning of the end. If he knew the lengths I was going to in search of answers, he would get involved and in turn, that would put him at risk. I've already lost too much, I don't want to lose him as well.

Would it be so bad to open up about my struggles with anxiety though? The only person who knows my past is Jesse and I had no choice in telling him, he was there through it all. I decide to keep my response simple before my brain spirals further into a mess of overthinking.

"Just a bad day, it happens sometimes," I sigh. "I must have passed out during a panic attack."

Kissing me on the head, he doesn't push the issue. I can't help but feel as though he isn't convinced by my answer. "Next time you feel one coming on, you call me."

I shake my head against his bare chest, the last thing I need is someone keeping tabs on me. With that thought Tanner grabs my chin and lifts it so I meet his piercing blue eyes. "It wasn't an offer, Kinsley."

I allow my eyes to trail over his left peck, taking in a tattoo I haven't seen before; wild flowering Baby's Breath climbs across his heart; it's beautiful. There is nothing gentle about his touch in this moment though; his eyes grow dark and a look crosses

his face which I've never witnessed before. Despite that, as I stare up at him, a sense of comfort washes over me. I feel safe. Considering safety and comfort aren't things I often feel, it should be something to cling to, right? So why do I feel the urge to run, to run as far away from here as possible?

Because as soon as you find comfort in him, he will leave. Don't be that silly little girl who everyone abandons, Kinsley. Run away, before you get left behind again.

I take a deep breath, desperately trying to rid the little voice in my head. His touch brings me back into the moment, his knuckles catching the tears I didn't realise I had let fall.

"Don't cry, I'm here."

Tanner

I wish I knew what she was thinking. What was running through her mind as the tears silently fell down her cheeks. Taking her hands in mine I pull her up so she is straddling my lap. Her hair falls across her face and before she can fix it I tuck the long dark strands behind her ear, giving me a clear view of her eyes. Eyes that I could drown myself in, they are more amber than hazel, almost the colour of the whisky I pulled down from the shelf last night. The colour begins to deepen along with her breathing, her eyes almost golden now.

She blinks a few times before parting her lips to speak. "Help me forget," she whispers. I want to ask her what she needs to forget, to be able to understand what makes her tick. But when an addict is offered a hit, he takes it.

Kinsley and I have been sleeping together for roughly six months now, in these moments I know exactly what she needs and what her body responds to. Today has shown me that she uses sex as a way to escape her mind, I didn't realise it until now

and I'm not judging her. What this girl doesn't know is that I will do anything to make her mine. Since the beginning I've been following her lead, staying at arm's length, except I'm getting impatient.

"Undress yourself, then lay down on your back," I instruct her as I pick up my jeans and I thread my belt out of them. "Now place your hands above your head." Once she is in position I tie her wrists to the bed frame. She wriggles her arms, testing the belt. The position she is in pushes her chest out and I watch her nipples go hard as the leather of my belt pinches her wrists.

"Too tight?" I ask, and she shakes her head. "I need you to use your words Kins, is it too tight?"

"No," she pants and her heavy eyes meet mine. I wouldn't loosen them even if she had said yes, she needs someone to take control to allow her to let go of whatever is trying to overrun her mind.

I take one of her nipples into my mouth and bite down before soothing the sting with my tongue. Her hips buck upwards begging for attention, but I like it when she uses her words and begs me herself, it doesn't normally take too long. Moving to the other breast I repeat the action and she lets out a breathy moan.

I'm sitting on my knees in between her legs and it's taking all my willpower not to throw them over my shoulders and fuck her with my mouth; she tastes so sweet. "Let's see how wet you are." She opens her legs wider so I have a clear view. I hum, "You're not just wet, you are soaked for me."

"Please Tanner," she begs.

"Please what?" I taunt her, I love it when she's needy but she's still learning to use her words. Kinsley was shy in all aspects when we first met, especially when it came

to sex. But like I said, she's learning.

"I need to come," she says, biting her bottom lip.

"Good girl, it's not that hard to ask for what you need is it?"

Her cheeks flush that perfect rosy colour as I throw her legs over my shoulders and get to work, this isn't about me. Right now it's all about her.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:58 am*

### Chapter Five

#### Kinsley

My feet are back on solid ground, but the vibrations from the motorbike's engine continue to buzz throughout my body. I take my helmet off, shaking my hair loose and a goofy smile stretches across my face. Having my arms wrapped around Tanner's waist as we fly down city streets places me on cloud nine.

After I begged him to take my mind off of everything yesterday, he refused to leave me alone. He fixed us something for dinner and stayed the night. I'm not complaining, but I won't lie, I am freaking out. I don't do relationships and Tanner doesn't do the sweet boyfriend thing.

He takes his helmet off and runs his hand through his dark hair. I love the messiness of it after he's been riding. He grabs my hand and pulls me into him before kissing me briefly. "Don't have too much fun without me." He smirks and I laugh.

"I won't do anything that you wouldn't do," I tell him, passing him my helmet.

He shakes his head. "How are you getting home?"

"I'll grab a ride with one of the girls." I cross my arms, attempting to stand my ground. "Go on, get out of here." With that, Tanner puts his helmet back on and tucks the spare into the side basket. As I walk towards Twisted Sister his bike engine roars to life.

I walk in the back entrance and straight into the office. Only Jesse and Becky — the manager I hired — know that I own Twisted Sister. I still work here and take shifts like everyone else, but the less people know about me the better. I'm leaning over the desk, catching up on everything I've missed this week when Becky walks in.

"Who's the hottie with the bike?" she asks, sitting up on the desk beside where I'm working.

I keep my eyes glued on the paperwork in front of me, I was hoping the music had drowned out the noise and no one had noticed Tanner dropping me off. Even though we have been whatever we are for the past six months or so, we have never been in public together. There is no denying something has shifted between us, over the last twenty-four hours.

Sensing that I'm not going to respond she continues, "I saw you guys on the camera; I was in here when you pulled up." I sigh and meet her inquisitive eyes. "Holy shit," she gasps, with the biggest smile on her face. "We like him don't we?"

I bend over flicking my hair down so I can chuck it up in a high ponytail. I have no idea how she does it, but this girl can read people. Meeting her eyes again with a little wink I say, "There is no we in this situation, Becky, now let's get out there."

I send off a quick text to Jesse, knowing he will be silently going into protective panic mode because I haven't reached out since he dropped me home Tuesday night, then toss my phone onto the desk.

Thursday nights tend to draw an early rush before it settles, but I enjoy the fast-paced environment. Brad is pouring drinks behind the bar and Becky, Sarah and I wait tables. Two hours tick past easily and the happy hour crowd filters out, leaving some girls on the dance floor and a few scattered tables.

“Kins, can you take the new table over in the lounge for me?” Becky shouts over the music.

I nod and smile at her, walking towards the corner we call the lounge. It’s quieter over here, generally it’s filled with those who come to relax rather than dance or drink at the bar itself. We try to cater for everyone. I pass the pool table and the jukebox that divides the dance floor and the lounge, noticing a girl sitting by herself, whom Becky has asked me to serve.

“Hey girl, what can I —”

A pair of deep green eyes meet mine.

“Kinsley? You work here?” The girl interrupts me, jumping up and pulling me in for a hug.

“Sophie?” I say surprised, “Uh yeah, I do. Are you here by yourself?” I glance around looking for any others that she might be here with.

“Nope,” she says, popping the p, with a twinkle in her eye. “I’m supposed to be meeting someone, he’s yet to show though ... Do you think you could grab me a shot of vodka for the nerves and something ‘girly’ to drink?”

I laugh, “Yes, of course I can, I’ll be right back.”

It’s only the second time I’m seeing this girl, and already I feel as though I could sit in her company for hours. Guilt nips at me for the way I ran out on her at our initial meeting; a strange want to explain myself to her. I sigh, rubbing the back of my neck. The secrets I’ve been carrying all these years weigh heavy; I can’t explain myself to her, not yet. Returning with a shot of vodka and a cocktail – thankful that Brad whipped something up at my request of a ‘girly’ drink – I see she’s still alone.

Glancing over the bar, everyone is pretty settled and I nod to Becky letting her know I'm taking a break.

"One second, don't touch that shot," I tell her as I place my tray on her table. I weave through girls on the dance floor and duck behind the bar, pouring another shot. Brad chuckles under his breath but doesn't say a word. I have a feeling Becky and him might be an item, and she may have informed him that I'm boss lady as she likes to call me.

"Bottoms up." I wink at Sophie as we take our shots.

"Eww, that was —"

"Something to shake the nerves?" I finish for her and we both fall into the couch laughing. She checks her phone and sighs. I can tell by the defeated look on her face that her date has stood her up. My heart aches for her. Jesse will never believe me when I tell him, but for the first time in my life I'm going to put myself out there. Sophie seems to need someone to keep her company tonight and there aren't any little voices telling me to run away. "What's that cocktail like?"

She smirks and takes a sip. "Strong—" she coughs, "—but good." She takes another. I wave Becky over and let her know that I'm calling my shift for the night, she eyes the shot glasses and makes me promise to stay put until she finishes so that she can drop me home.

"I'm going to get one for myself and grab my stuff from out the back, then we are going to show those girls how to dance." Sophie offers me a thank you smile before I leave.

After our second cocktail I drag us off the dance floor back to the couches in the corner. For the past hour and a half, we have danced to all our favourite throwback

songs on the jukebox and we are well and truly the last ones here.

Leaning over and plucking Sophie's phone from her hands, I take a drunken selfie, add myself as a contact and attach the photo.

"Won't let you be the one that got away." I throw the romantic reference in to soften the blow that her date stood her up tonight. I can't help but notice a text message pop up before handing her phone back to her.

Zach - Something came up. I'll make it up to you.

Then it hits me. "I've got it!" I yell over the music. "The most perfect guy for you!"

"Nooo." She shakes her head. "No more guys, no more dates."

"But he's honestly perfect," I stumble over my words, my mind thinking about Jesse — he even has a dog!" I say, interrupting my thoughts. I need to make a mental note to go visit Lou-loo soon. Hopefully, I'll remember this mental note tomorrow once I've sobered up. What girl can refuse a cute guy and a dog?

"We could even double date," I say, focusing back on the conversation. I'm not sure if she has said a word at all since I've been off in my thoughts.

Her response tells me she also has been off in her thoughts, "I'm so glad we met, I think I'm gonna keep you."

\* \* \*

It takes me longer than I would like to admit to unlock my door when Becky drops me off, we dropped Sophie off too. Neither of us in any shape to get ourselves home.

It shows as I hop from foot to foot and lean against the wall to get my heels off. After I stumble up the stairs, I glance towards my ensuite, the thought of having to get undressed, find the right water temperature, get wet and wash my body all to get dry again is far too complex for my brain right now, I can shower in the morning. When I collapse onto my bed, memories of simpler times consume my dreams ...

With my headphones in and my iPod on shuffle, I dance around my bedroom. Drowning out the reality that I'm stuck at home on a Saturday night. A Saturday night which doubles as my birthday mind you. Mum doesn't let me adventure out of the house other than to go to school, yet even though we are under the same roof we barely say two words to each other. She's probably already drunk herself into a state of unconsciousness, glancing at my iPod the time is 9.05pm; yep she will be out by now, I should go turn the lights off and pop a blanket over her. I don't blame her; for the drinking, or for anything for that matter. Her husband left for work one day and never returned, and then her son died two years later. Yeah, life's been a little rough for us.

\*clink\* pause \*clink\*

I take my headphones out and listen for the noise again.

Another clink sounds, before it's followed by a muffled "ah shit"

Peeking through my bedroom curtains, a big goofy grin and green eyes look back at me. I shake my head and slide open the window, whilst he proceeds to pop off the fly wire. "We do have a front and back door," I laugh, moving out of the way for him to climb through, "You know Mum never makes it past 9pm."

I see the concern flash in his eyes before he lets it go. Jesse shrugs. "I thought rocks on the window were kinda poetic."

“I didn’t know Jesse Fernandez was a romantic,” I say before tossing my iPod onto my desk in the corner of my room.

He scoffs before nudging me with his shoulder. “I said poetic, not romantic.”

“I’ll be back, I’m just going to check on Mum.” I wave my hand in front of him. “Make yourself at home.”

Knowing that Jesse might be here for a while, I grab some snacks from the kitchen before heading back to the bedroom.

He sits on the bed, leaning back against the headboard. He’s fiddling with my iPod and the portable speaker. “Playing DJ tonight, are you?” He just looks up and smiles; that goddamn smile. My head goes fuzzy and I feel like a kid at a candy store.

“Grab my backpack.” He points to the chair near my desk without looking up. “I brought you something.”

Curiosity snaps me out of eye-ogling my brother’s, well I guess he is now my, best friend. Sitting down in the spot where the backpack was on the chair, I unzip it before a giddy squeal leaves my lips and without even looking over I can hear Jesse’s chuckle under his breath. I pull out the bottle of vodka, orange juice and a Tupperware container with six jelly shots. I hold the container in the air, in question. “Leftovers, Mum made them for the end-of-season football party last night.”

Jesse’s mum is an absolute gem. Always has been. “Make sure you thank her for me.” I smile. “Even if she didn’t make them for me specifically.” I grab two shots and plop myself down next to Jesse.

“Nah, Meadow.” He shakes his head. “Those are just for you, I’m driving home.” He wiggles his eyebrows.

Jesse has been working with his dad on a HJ Holden Ute since his sixteenth birthday. Last month, when he turned eighteen, his dad got it on the road for him and now that he has his licence, Jesse and that car are inseparable.

“Oh come on,” I pout. “You can crash here, pleeeeeease.” Pulling out all the stops, I bat my eyelashes at him; he rolls his eyes and grabs the shot from me. Another win for me, that was way too easy. Kinsley - 1: Jesse - 0

Three jelly shots and two vodka and orange juices later, I’m stumbling over my words and feeling emotionally lighter than I have in years. Is this what it’s like to be drunk? Jesse and I are both lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Propping myself up on my elbow, I turn to face him. “When you texted earlier, you said you were coming to give me my birthday present.” When he stays silent I probe further. “Was it the alcohol?”

As always, Jesse tries to make light of the situation. “My presence isn’t enough of a gift?” He laughs at his joke and turns to face me. He opens his mouth and closes it again, as if contemplating how to respond. “I wanted to give you the gift of a clear mind, to take a weight off of your shoulders, even just for a night.” His emerald green eyes lock me into a trance.

I’m not sure if it’s the alcohol, but in this moment I’m left not knowing what to say. I know Jesse cares, shit, we have been through a lot together over the years. But for him to open up, even just a little, that’s big. Jesse is the happy-go-lucky one, the jokester. Maybe it’s the alcohol making him more vulnerable.

“Can you keep a secret?” The words tumble out before I realise what I’m saying. Jumping up, I reach out for him and Jesse stands and takes my hand. Leading him out the backdoor, I take him somewhere I’ve never taken anyone before. To the only place that allows me to feel anything close to weightless, a place that mimics the feeling he has been able to give me tonight. My place of escape.

### Chapter Six

Tanner

Kinsley drops to her knees and I grit my teeth. The sight of her in front of me has pre-cum leaking from my tip. Unbuttoning my jeans, her soft hands wrap around my cock as she pulls it from my briefs. She glances up at me, the gold specks in her eyes sparkling. Kinsley holds our eye contact as her tongue circles my tip and she hums in approval.

Her hand works my base and plump lips wrap around my length. My head falls back and a low growl comes from deep in my chest. Two can play this game. Leaning forward I take her ponytail in my hand and wrap her long locks around my fist, once — twice.

“Do you want to keep teasing me like a little brat? Or are you going to swallow my cock like a good girl?” She looks up at me through her dark lashes and smiles a wicked grin, her lips still wrapped around me. My eyes fall shut. “That fucking mouth ...” I moan, dragging out the words as I tighten my grip on her hair and thrust myself deeper into her throat.

When my eyes open, Kinsley is no longer on her knees in front of me. Instead, I’m alone in my bed with a raging hard on. Covering my face with my hands, I sigh. It hasn’t even been twenty-four hours since I last saw her. Fuck. Why can’t I escape this girl? Like an addict seeking their next fix I grab my phone and send off a text.

Me - How was work last night?

Bubbles show up on the screen seconds later ...

Kinsley - Work was quiet and a girlfriend got stood up at the bar, so I opted for a night of drinks and dancing. You could say that I'm paying for it now.

Me - Jump in the shower. I've got the perfect hangover cure.

Kinsley - Enlighten me?

Me - Wear jeans. It involves the back of my bike.

The way I see it, I have two options. I could stroll into her apartment and handcuff her to the bed, teaching her a lesson for getting drunk without someone there to look out for her safety. I could bring her to the cusp of her orgasm over and over, until she promises never to put herself in danger, ever again. Or, I could lock down the whole crazy possessive shit for a little while longer and give her the benefit of the doubt, because she was at the bar she works at — well that she owns, but I'm not supposed to know that yet.

Deciding on the latter, I get in the shower to relieve some of this built up desire and frustration I'm feeling. I take the base of my cock in my hand, imagining her pouty little lips wrapped around my length, and fall back into my dream from earlier this morning. I work myself as the water cascades down my body, my forehead resting against the tiles. It won't hold me over for long, but hopefully just long enough to take her out this morning.

I'm sitting on my idling bike out the front of her apartment when I send off a text to let her know I'm here. If I go inside, we won't be leaving for the rest of the day. Moments later Kinsley steps outside and I drag my eyes up her body, taking in every detail.

She's wearing white converse, black denim jeans, and a button up shirt half tucked in — I need to ask her why girls do this, is it fashion or am I missing something? Her long dark wavy hair like a waterfall flowing down her back. I wonder if she's aware of the way her hips sway when she walks?

“Hi,” she says with a smile. I lift my chin, encouraging her closer. I would still love to walk her ass back in there and show her that she is mine, but I made my choice before I left home this morning.

I hold out a spare leather riding jacket, it's too big for her but it will have to do until I get her one of her own. “Put this on.” She slips on the jacket, I zip it up for her and buckle up her helmet. Kinsley wraps her arms around my waist as we take off, and it takes all my strength to focus on the road rather than the girl on the back of my bike.

Twenty minutes later we arrive at ‘Wake Up House’, one of the first businesses my parents purchased together. I unbuckle Kinsley's helmet and hang it opposite my own on the handle bars. The sight of two helmets on my bike sends a warmth to my chest which I quickly dismiss. She shuffles out of the jacket and I lay that on the seat before taking her hand and leading us inside.

Her eyes light up when we enter the building. Cosy booths line the far wall, with tables scattered throughout the middle. A flower stand spreads from the front window across to the counter, where the baristas are pouring coffee and taking orders. “This place looks incredible,” Kinsley says.

“Hey Tanner,” Lisa — the barista — calls cheerfully from the counter. “Are you here on business or can I get you a table?”

“Breakfast for two please.” I look down at Kinsley. “Coffee or Smoothie to start?”

“Uh ...” she stumbles, clearly trying to grasp the comment from Lisa about business .

“— coffee please.”

I nod to Lisa. “One dirty chai and one latte, thanks Lisa.” I place my hand on Kinsley’s lower back guiding her in the direction of the staircase. “We are going to sit up on the balcony,” I reply over my shoulder.

I had already glanced up at the balcony when we arrived to make sure it was free, it’s reserved for our family and friends but I’ve never actually sat down and dined here. My parents like to show off what they’ve got, and they’ve got plenty. Personally it gives me the ick. I would choose a home cooked meal over being wined and dined any day of the week. Unfortunately for some of us, we don’t get to choose the lives we live. Lisa rattles off something about bringing up menus and setting the table; I’m too entranced however by the woman in front of me to take note of anything else she has to say.

\* \* \*

Kinsley

My head is aching, but from up here, looking over the busy streets with a coffee in my hand and Tanner across from me, for the first time in a while everything feels okay. After Lisa takes our orders for breakfast, my phone buzzes in my pocket.

Sophie - Hey Girl, how did you pull up this morning?

Me - My head feels like I’ve been banging it against the wall. You?

Before she can reply I place my phone down on the table and excuse myself to go find a bathroom. The last thing I want Tanner thinking is that I’ve run off to go take a phone call or something. I’m probably overthinking it but whatever; I’ve got nothing to hide even if he was to go through my phone.

When I return, Tanner is leaning back in his chair, fingers interlocked behind his head with a smirk on his face. “What is it?” I ask curiously. He is definitely up to something.

“I caught a glance of your text, something about a double date?” The smirk remains on his face and he raises a brow in question. I can feel the heat rush up my neck and into my cheeks as the conversations from last night come flooding back. Shit. Now he’s going to think that I’ve put a label on whatever this is between us.

I grab my phone and bring up the text messages.

Sophie - Me too, but I had so much fun!

Sophie - Maybe we can do it all again ... As a double date this time?

Sophie - I didn’t dream up the conversation about you having a cute guy best friend right? And Becky said you rocked up with a hottie on a bike!

Lisa places our breakfast down in front of us as I’m reading the messages. Hmm. Soph likes to rapid fire small texts instead of one long message, noted . I smile at Lisa and thank her for our breakfast. It smells amazing, my stomach growls in agreement.

“Eat,” Tanner says tightly.

Honestly, I have never met such a moody man. His ocean blues aren’t giving anything away, and it has only occurred to me over the past few days how little I really know about him. Sure we have known each other for six months or so, and I know him intimately. But, his day to day? I know nothing, and vice versa. Which is exactly the way I wanted it, was it not?

I make a mental list of what I know about Tanner whilst eating my breakfast.

Name - Tanner Hayes

Age - 27

Manages his parents real estate company and personal properties.

Despite his 'office job' he is the total opposite, he screams bad boy.

Ocean blue eyes, dark hair, tanned skin, broad shoulders, muscles.

Moody AF

Is that really all I know? His name, age and job description?

Flashbacks from the morning he found me unconscious in my entryway remind me of the way he cared for me. He really cared. I'm backing myself into a corner here, surely this could never work. Not with all the secrets I have. Someone is going to get hurt, and something tells me it's not going to be my moody landlord. A guy like him could easily move on and find another plaything, right? But deep down, in the pit of my stomach I have a feeling this is more than just sex. The way he held me and stayed by my side — he could have asked me if there was someone he could call, but he chose to stay. I'm so fucked. There is a reason I have always kept him at arm's length. I need another opinion, next week's catch up with Jesse can't come quick enough. I need to debrief this.

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### Chapter Seven

#### Kinsley

Checking the time, I see that I have another fifteen minutes before Becky will be here to pick me up for work. Flicking through my contacts, I decide to make the call I've been dreading. I hold the phone between my shoulder and ear, whilst shuffling into my heels.

"Hello, Kinsley." Investigator Stanley greets me. "How are you?"

Dropping onto the couch, I gather my thoughts. I didn't expect him to answer my call at 7pm on a Tuesday evening. "Hi Stanley, I'm well, thank you." Lie, I'm still freaking out after the phone calls from George Watson.

"What can I do for you?" he asks, getting straight to the point.

"I had a phone call from a man who called himself 'George Watson'. He told me to cut contact with you and to stop looking for answers. Does that name happen to mean anything to you?"

Stanley remains silent for a minute, the sound of his fingers tapping away at his keyboard echoes through the phone. "It doesn't ring a bell, I'm just doing a search now." I wait patiently, dragging my fingers up and down my thigh; minutes pass by and I begin to grow anxious. What could be taking so long?

"Kinsley, in the files I'm searching there are no records of anyone called George

Watson. He doesn't seem to exist ... Anywhere. I'll run a few more checks, but right now I've got nothing. I'm sorry."

Fuck. "Okay. Thanks Stanley. I appreciate it." I go to end the call as Stanley cuts in.

"Wait. Before you go — Kinsley, you need to be careful."

"I know, I — uhm, Thanks. I'll be in touch."

Ending the call, I throw my phone across the room and pick up a pillow from the couch, screaming into it. I don't stop until my screams turn to sobs and my throat is raw. Even muffled by the pillow, they could have been heard from the street, but I don't care. I'm back to square one again. Square fucking one.

I pull a bottle of whisky down from the cupboard, pour myself a shot and tip it back. Maybe I should just call in a casual to cover tonight's shift. At the same moment, I hear Becky toot the horn on her car from out on the street, letting me know she is here. I find myself glancing from the door, to the bottle and back again. Taking my coat off the hook, I throw it over my shoulders, pick up my bag and close the door behind me. This crap will all still be here when I get back.

Fourteen years earlier ...

The tv show we were watching cuts off and a news reporter pops up in its place. 'Breaking news – A seventeen year old girl has been abducted this evening. Natalie Younge was last seen working the closing shift at Greenwood IGA. Surveillance shows her taking rubbish out the back of the store when a blacked-out SUV pulls up, two men grab her and toss her into the back seat. If anyone has any information, or has seen anything, please contact authorities immediately.' We watched quietly as footage was shown of the horrific ordeal.

Dad had left for work like normal that morning, but had later phoned home to let us know he would be working overnight. He ended up being gone for three days straight and when he, eventually, returned things were different.

I was only eight years old at the time so three days had felt like three weeks. Instead of a warm and welcoming reunion, the atmosphere was tense; something told me not to show anyone how happy and excited I was that he was finally home.

That night I sat with my door cracked open, listening to the conversation my parents were having down the hall.

“We tracked down one of the men from the surveillance footage, the one with the tattoo,” Dad paused before he continued. “We linked the tattoo to a rough underground club of sorts, on the outskirts of town.”

I could hear Mum pottering around in the kitchen — looking back now she was clearly keeping herself busy to calm her nerves. “Were you able to raid the location?” she asked.

Dad muttered something under his breath that I couldn’t make out, “— the guy we tracked down took the full brunt, claimed he threatened a random citizen to help him and then let him go again. The warehouse on the outskirts of town is leased in his name too, unfortunately for us, it all stacks up and doesn’t give the police force any legal footing to stand on for an ongoing investigation. He handed the girl over and has now been charged, he’s being held whilst awaiting trial.”

Mum hesitated before asking, “But, you think there is more to all of this?”

“Dammit Laura, of course there is more to it!”

As I heard Dad raise his voice I hurried back towards my bed with tears stinging my

eyes. Dad never yelled. My door creaked open slightly and Kyle tiptoed into my room.

“Hey Meadow — shhh it’s okay.” He soothed before he lay down beside me and wrapped me in his arms.

The next morning I awoke to voices, lots of them. Voices I didn’t recognise. Peeking down the hallway I saw the house buzzing with police. Mum was sitting at the dining table and Kyle was on the couch in the lounge room. But Dad, Dad was gone.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:58 am*

### Chapter Eight

Jesse

I run my hand through my hair, and pick up my towel off the weight rack beside me. I'm distracted. It's been a little over a week since Kinsley's birthday, since she got a call that could give her answers to the past fourteen years.

I've been trying to give her space, waiting for her to confide in me, but by doing so, our message thread now only consists of random memes and videos captioned 'this is so you'. She's avoiding me.

What she seems to forget is that I've known her since she was six years old. She can't pull the wool over my eyes. It doesn't stop her trying though.

I grab my gym bag and head out, I'll shower at home.

\* \* \*

Cold water runs over my back, shit, how long have I been standing in here? I still can't get Kinsley out of my head and I start work in an hour. I need to get it together. Damn Jesse, just call her dude.

What if she brushes me off, turns me away? She's too good at putting up walls, barricading herself in the tallest tower like the princess she is. I've managed to break them down; to show her that not everyone will leave her, but sometimes she still tries. She reverts back to her old ways, and even though I can see right through the act, she

hits you where it hurts. Her words are ice, freezing you where you stand. In those moments I want to reach out and shake her. I sigh drying off my hair. I don't shake her out of it though, instead I give her space, reminding her I'll always be there for when she needs me.

The last time she got this close to answers, she hit a dead end. Which is why I can tell she is hesitant, she's scared it's all going to crumble again, and when Kinsley gets scared she shuts down. No one, other than her damn toy boy who, in her words, "helps her escape," is allowed in. I'm yet to meet the fucker, secretly I'm thankful. I'm not sure how I would keep up my own facade watching her drool all over him in person, the look in her eyes when she talks about him is enough.

I've always played it cool when she's had flings with guys, little does she know, I had Cole Cooper by the scruff when he broke things off with her via text. He was a wanker anyway.

Kinsley answers on the third ring. "Hey Jess!"

Relief washes over me. "We still on for Thursday?" I keep the conversation light-hearted, even though what I really want to say is, "Did that George guy call you back? What information did he have?" I decide against it.

"Yeah, I finish at 9pm and then I can come over?"

"I'll pick you up," I say. It wasn't a question, she wasn't walking or catching a cab at 9 o'clock at night.

"Fine," she sighs. "Hey Jesse, I've got news to share ..." Her voice is softer now. "I can't talk about it over the phone though, but I'll see you Thurs— oh shit that's tomorrow night, yeah?"

“Meadow —”

She cuts me off. “Please Jesse, just trust me. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The sound of the dial tone tells me she is gone. God damn princess. I grab my keys and head to work. I make it into the classroom five minutes before the bell rings. I really need to start getting to school earlier, especially now that I’m the teacher not the student.

Writing today’s date on the white board reminds me how lucky I am that I’m not standing here writing with chalk on a blackboard. I shudder at the thought, even the memory of that sound somehow makes my teeth hurt. I’m pulled from the painful memory, interrupted by children filling the classroom, chairs being pulled out as they take their seats, bursts of laughter while they chatter amongst themselves.

“Morning Mr ‘Dez.” Lucas, one of my grade six students, holds his fist out for me to bump it with my own. I love how they all decided to call me Mr ‘Dez . I would have let them call me Jesse but apparently that can lead to children not respecting you as their teacher. I call bullshit on that. ‘Dez is way better than Fernandez anyway, so I just run with it.

“How’s it going, buddy?” Leaning against the board, I give him my full attention.

“I had footy training last night, Coach said he will let me play ruck this weekend!”

“That’s awesome, Lucas. Make sure you give ‘em hell on Sunday.”

“Oh, heck yeah Mr ‘Dez! I always do!” he says, making his way to his seat.

Sitting down at my desk, I grab what I need to start today’s lesson. Letting the kid’s banter die down a little before getting their attention once again. The grade six boys

are AFL obsessed, majority of them play on the weekends and take it pretty damn seriously. It reminds me of when Kyle and myself used to play one memory in particular springs to mind. A memory of a night which was the beginning of a domino effect. One by one, the pieces started to fall. It was up to me to keep the final one standing; and that piece was Kinsley. I knew from that point onwards, I would do whatever it took to keep her out of harm's way. I may not have been able to save Kyle, but for Kinsley, I'd run straight into the firing line myself if it kept her from getting hurt.

Twelve years earlier ...

Kyle and I are getting ready to go to footy when Kinsley comes running into Kyle's bedroom. We both look over at her standing in the doorway; one of Ky's old Greenwood football club hoodies on, her intentions of coming with us today being made very clear.

"I'm coming too," she says, placing her hands on her hips.

Neither of us say anything, Kyle looks at me and rolls his eyes and I give a chuckle.

"Give us a minute, we'll meet you out front," Kyle says, and Kinsley leaves the two of us alone again.

Kyle looks at me and I know what he's going to say before he even opens his mouth.

"She can't know," he says. "Please Jesse, what we found in that file of my dad's —"

I cut him off, "I know, and you have my word. But I still don't think this is a good idea, we should take the information we have found to the police. Let them handle this!" I'm pleading with him now, we are two thirteen year old kids. There is no way we can take down grown ass men, especially criminals.

Kyle laughs, “We won’t be storming in there, I just want to go and see what I can find. Watch them from a distance. See it with my own eyes. You can come or you can stay home, the choice is yours. I’m going though – tonight.” He turns his back to me and walks out of the room.

### Chapter Nine

#### Kinsley

It's cold outside and my teeth rattle, the full moon is bright lighting up the whole staff car park out the back of Twisted Sister. I finished work fifteen minutes ago and I had hoped that Jesse would be waiting for me, but he still hasn't shown up. It's been one hell of a week since I've seen him. Normally we would see each other almost every day, every second at least, but as much as I hate to admit it, I've been avoiding him.

Reaching into my back pocket to pull out my phone, he enters the car park. I'm so desperate to flee the cold that I tug open the door and throw myself into the passenger seat.

"I'm so sorry Kins," he whispers. "I wanted to be here when you finished but —"

I cut him off, "You asshole, you fell asleep didn't you?"

A guilty chuckle slips through his lips as I swat his shoulder with the back of my hand. I'm not really mad at him, but I'm going to let him have it anyway.

"Jesse! I've been standing out here for nearly twenty minutes. If I had ordered a cab to be waiting, I would already be at your place!"

"C'mon, don't be like that." He leans over and ruffles my hair. "I'll let you play DJ on the way home."

With those big green puppy dog eyes he passes me his phone and revs the engine, leaving the car park and my shitty mood behind us.

“Lou-loo!” I yell in greeting as Jesse’s golden retriever barrels towards us. Her front paws land on my stomach and I snuggle into her head.

“You’re encouraging her bad habits,” Jesse grumbles.

The drive from the bar to Jesse’s house is about thirty five minutes, he got us here in twenty though, God only knows how he hasn’t lost his driver’s license. When we made the decision to move away from our hometown he didn’t want to move right into the CBD like I did, instead he tiptoed into suburbia.

Neither of us are ‘city kids’ and I can definitely see us moving back out of the chaos eventually, but for now we are both where we need to be. I’ve got the bar and access to more information here than I did at home and Jesse is doing his Grad Year, teaching at a primary school. We are doing normal stuff. Things people in their twenties do, right?

I lead the way through the house, my heels tapping on the wooden floorboards. I’ll definitely have polished floorboards in my home one day, they provide a much warmer feeling than the tiles in my apartment. Jesse slips into the lounge whilst I enter the kitchen in search of some food.

“Movie or footy?” Jesse calls from the couch. I’m not a huge footy fan, but I need to vent so football for background noise will be easier than a movie.

“Footy,” I say. “Whose playing?” He laughs, knowing full well I don’t give a shit about who is playing.

The kitchen leads into an open plan living space, with a lounge area to the left and a

U-shape couch surrounding a TV that has been mounted onto the wall. Jesse's place has a homely feel to it, even though he still hasn't decorated and there really isn't much here other than the essentials.

I place the leftover pizza I found down on the coffee table as Lou-loo jumps up and makes herself comfortable at one end of the couch. Jesse sits smack bang in the middle with his arms stretched across the back and I take a seat between him and Lou.

"Something on your mind, Meadow?"

I sigh, sometimes i forget that he can read me so well. "Where do you want me to begin? Your choices are, the phone call or some dating advice?"

"It depends if it's dating advice for me, or for you?" he says, with a sparkle in his eye.

"Well, that's the thing," I cover my face with both my hands. "Drunk me might have roped us both into double dates." I peek through my fingers as Jesse bursts into laughter.

I tell him all about Soph, how I met her at Mrs Campbell's cafe, and then bumped into her at the bar where she was stood up by some guy.

"So, who's your date going to be then?" he says, as he grabs another slice of pizza. I don't know why, but I've been dreading telling Jesse about how things have kind of stepped up with Tanner. He has always been protective of me when it comes to guys, but the mention of this particular one causes him to react differently. What could be so different this time?

I keep eye contact so I can gauge his reaction. "Tanner," I say, trying to sound casual.

Jesse just laughs at me and shakes his head. Staring at him, I struggle to understand his reaction. Is that disappointment in his eyes? I'm not sure, but what I do know is this laughter is masking something. I know him as well as he knows me, I can see it; he may try but he can't hide from me.

Jesse

My heart is racing and blood is rushing in my ears. Tanner? Is she serious right now ... She wants to bring her fuck boy on a double date? I laugh because I have no words; I can't tell her what I really think. I close my eyes as I shake my head, the next thing I know a pillow slams into my face. Ouch!

"What was that for?" I ask, still laughing. She's kneeling on the couch next to me now, pillow still in her hands ready to strike again.

"You're laughing at me! Why can't I date Tanner?"

"C'mon Kins, even you said he's just —" I mimic her voice now to take the edge off what I'm about to say. "A little escape from reality."

"Well," she draws out. "Maybe it might be more than that now."

Shit, I wasn't expecting that, and by her clipped response I can feel her walls coming back up. Quickly, I sit up and close the gap between us, trying to rectify the situation. Removing the threatening pillow from her hands, I wrap an arm around her and pull her close so she's leaning into me on the couch.

"If you want to date Tanner," I take a deep breath, hoping she believes the lie I'm telling us both. "I promise to be on my best behaviour." She looks up at me through her eyelashes, a huge smile wrapping across her face.

“Really?” She beams, sitting up and wrapping her arms around my neck. “Thanks, Jess. I knew you would have my back.”

I’m not sure if she had been pouring pink gin at work or if it’s her shampoo, but the familiar smell of sweet berries consumes me and my chest begins to tighten, I need to get her off of me before she realises how much of a fraud I am.

“Yeah, yeah,” I say, pulling back and grabbing the six pack I brought down to the couch. “Beer? I think we will need one if you still plan on filling me in on that phone call.”

Kinsley spends the next hour bringing me up to speed on the phone call she received on her birthday, before the voicemail which I played in the car outside the cemetery, and the return phone call she received the next day. I rub the stubble on my chin several times, processing all of the information.

I can’t for the life of me work out who this George Watson guy is though, is he a member of the club Kyle and I looked into all those years ago? Why is he only trying to get her to stop looking into everything now? Kinsley has been working with Stanley for three years, has she uncovered more than she is telling me?

“Here’s the catch,” Kinsley’s voice pulls me from my thoughts. “I spoke with Inspector Stanley and he ran multiple checks, George Watson doesn’t exist.”

“Who would be calling you, and why are they using a fake name?” I’m only thinking out loud now, I don’t expect her to have the answers and even if she does, something tells me she is keeping them to herself. But why?

Kinsley grabs the remote, flicking through until she finds a movie she wants to watch. I chuckle to myself, she’s never been into football. As we settle in to watch the movie, my thoughts drift off until I’m standing in the meadow full of wildflowers.

Kyle and I are standing with the horses, while watching Kinsley skip, spin and dance. She looks over our way and my lips twitch up into a smirk. Even all those years ago she had me wrapped around her finger.

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### Chapter Ten

#### Kinsley

The next few days go by uneventfully, but when Sunday finally rolls around, I start my morning with Soph on FaceTime. Both our phones are propped up in various places whilst she is fussing about what to wear and we get ready for a day out with Jesse and Tanner.

“You’ll look good in whatever you choose,” I say, rolling my lips after applying my favourite raspberry flavoured chapstick.

Sophie huffs, “Yeah, but this is a first impression! I want to make a good one.” Giving me a cheeky wink she spins around showing off her third outfit of the morning, jeans and a cute little flowy crop that shows off just the tiniest amount of her toned stomach.

“Yep! This is the one,” I announce, throwing both my hands in the air in celebration.

“Are you sure?” she asks.

“Yes, definitely. Just grab an extra layer for this morning, it’s probably still chilly out.”

“Okay, thanks Kins! I’ll see you soon!”

“See you soon,” I reply, grinning as I end our call. It’s at this moment I realise that I

actually have a girlfriend . It sounds like something so basic, but I've never really had a girl best friend and even though I would never want to replace Jesse, it's nice to have a friend of the female kind.

I throw on my favourite black denim jeans, and a basic tee. I'm not a girly girl and I'm secretly hoping Tanner turns up on his bike. It almost removes the expectation to dress up, even though that is probably just more pressure I'm putting on myself.

A quick pause in the music tells me I have a new text message. Picking up my phone I see a text from Jesse. If I know my best friend at all, he will be way more nervous than Sophie is. God knows why; he's gorgeous, funny, kind and girls melt over him.

Jesse - I should bring Lou-loo, she's a good distraction for awkward moments ...

I can't help but burst into laughter. I knew it. He's shitting himself. Dialling his number, he picks up on the first ring and I'm still laughing.

“Why are you laughing, Kinsley?!” he demands. “This isn't funny.”

“Bring Lou if it makes you feel better, we are only going to the farmers market, then having a picnic. Lots of people take their dogs to those places.”

I can hear the relief in his voice. “Thank god. Okay, I better get organised. Love ya.”

“Love you too, Jess.”

The minute I hang up, I jump at the sound of Tanner's voice — “Not sure how I feel about that.”

Spinning around, I see him standing at the top of the stairs, leaning against the door frame, with his hands tucked into the front of his jeans. His body language tells me he

is the furthest thing from concerned. He's just teasing.

I saunter towards him. "Feeling threatened are we?"

A deep laugh erupts from Tanner, one that I have never heard before. He seems relaxed today, not as moody. "Nah, not threatened. You've already claimed me, remember? You are the one who set up this double date."

Smug bastard. I pat his firm chest as I brush past him. He can sit with those thoughts, two can play this game. I do love Jesse, in a way that Tanner could never compete with, but he shouldn't feel threatened.

Tanner follows me down stairs, giving my plaits a tug as he moves around me. "I like these." He smirks.

"They're just for whilst I have a helmet on," I giggle. "I'll take them out once we get there." A familiar flush returns to my cheeks; my body is always reacting to him.

"With your rosy cheeks and these plaits, I might just start calling you Pippi."

I knew he would have noticed the flushed look on my face, it's become a common occurrence, along with the fluttering of butterflies in my stomach when he's around. But come on, Pippi Longstocking? Seriously ...

"C'mon Pip, I've got something for you," Tanner says, with a wink.

I roll my eyes, great another nickname. "That's going to stick now, isn't it?" He ignores me, sauntering towards the kitchen bench, where I can see a helmet and leather jacket. "I just need to grab a jumper to put on under your jacket. The wind always blows up the back."

“No need.” Tanner picks up the jacket, turning back towards me and the feeling of butterflies in my stomach increases. “Come here.”

How can a simple two word instruction be so sexy? My feet close the small distance between us without thinking. I swear if he told me to crawl to him, my body would obey before my brain could object. Tanner holds the leather jacket up and I slip into it. It fits perfectly, unlike the one I wore last time. Dragging his eyes slowly over my body, I feel his gaze darken as he hums in approval. “So fucking perfect.”

“You brought this — for me?” I’m a little shocked.

My mind is always in a constant tug of war when it comes to this man. Soon after moving into the city, I gave in to my body’s craving for Tanner. But now that my head and heart seem to be craving him too, it has sent my mind into a free-fall.

Tanner answers my question with a brief nod, as he slides the helmet onto my head, tilting my chin to buckle it. Normally with his moodiness I can easily keep him at arm’s length, but lately that has been getting increasingly difficult. Taking my hand in his, he leads us out the front door. Maybe he is just playing the part, I did rope him into this double date thing after all. Yeah, that’s got to be it , things will go back to normal after this.

My arms are wrapped around Tanner’s waist as we weave through traffic on the outskirts of Melbourne. He takes an exit and the road opens up; my shoulders relax and I loosen my grip on the wall of muscle in front of me. To our left, city skylines are replaced with suburban houses and park lands. The hustle and bustle has been left behind us.

I’m startled by Tanner’s voice echoing in the helmet and I tighten my grip on him again. “Quick detour.”

“Uh, yeah — sure.” Can he even hear me? We have never been able to talk to each other through our helmets before.

A light chuckle fills my helmet. “I upgraded our helmets Pip, I wanted to be able to communicate with you when we ride together.”

My own jacket and helmet. Does this mean he plans on us doing this more often? A girl can only dream.

Tanner downshifts and takes a left hand turn, slowing to stop in front of a beautiful old Victorian home. “This is where I grew up,” he mentions softly, an underlying sense of sadness in his tone.

The house, though beautiful, isn’t what I expected the Hayes family to have lived in. It has a wrap-around porch, a giant oak tree in the yard where an old tyre swing still hangs and a picket fence with a sign that reads Darcel House . The windows are boarded up, telling me nobody lives here anymore, and my heart aches at the emptiness.

“It’s beautiful,” I reply softly. Tanner simply nods, and then lifts his feet as we slowly ride away without another word.

The remainder of the ride is quiet, my thoughts consumed by why he chose to show me his childhood home; and the vulnerability he is allowing me to witness.

Tanner climbs off his bike first. I watch him pull off his helmet and run his fingers through his hair before unzipping his riding jacket. I can’t help but admire the lines of muscle I can see through his tight t-shirt.

Removing my own helmet and lifting my eyes to his, I find him watching me. Great, as if Tanner Hayes didn’t already have a big enough head, now he’s caught me eye

fucking him ... again .

He cocks a brow. “Are you going to just sit there all day?”

Swinging my leg over, I climb off the bike. Allowing myself a few moments to unravel my plaits and smooth down the top of my hair before going in search of the others.

\* \* \*

Jesse

Sophie is awesome; I can see how she won Kinsley over. Not that she would have had much of a choice in the matter. Soph loves to talk and her bubbly personality is infectious. She’s yet to notice Tanner and Kinsley standing over on the other side of the car park. I, however, saw them as soon as we drove in. Kins was shaking out her hair and Tanner’s eyes were glued on her, as if she was the only girl in the world. I can’t blame him though, she is definitely something else.

“Who’s a good girl?” Soph coos to Lou-loo whilst I rummage through my backpack for her leash.

I must chuckle out loud, because when Sophie speaks again, even though she is still staring into the eyes of Lou, it’s directed at me.

“He’s just jealous that he isn’t the centre of my attention.” Lou lets out a friendly yap in response and Soph laughs.

“Yeah, yeah. C’mon you two. The love birds over there are waiting for us.” With Lou-loo on her leash and Sophie in step beside me, we approach Tanner and Kinsley.

“Hey girl!” Sophie greets, with her arms wide open.

I contain my laughter as Kinsley, who I know is not a hugger scowls in my direction whilst Sophie bundles her up in a hug. Breaking apart, Kins turns to Tanner and gestures towards us, “Tanner, this is Jesse and Sophie — and guys, this is Tanner.”

Tanner and I exchange a subtle nod and shake hands.

“Oh!” Kinsley exclaims, both our eyes snapping back to her. “I forgot to introduce Tanner to Lou-loo; I’m sorry, girl!” She coos and Tanner scratches Lou’s neck.

With that declaration I release a shaky breath. Why do I feel so on edge right now? Kinsley crouches down to scratch behind Lou’s ears and I shake my head in amusement.

“I need a coffee,” Tanner announces with tension lacing his statement, obviously feeling the same sense of unease as I do.

“Oooh yes!” Soph silently claps her hands in excitement and trails off behind Tanner. “I haven’t had my coffee fix today yet!”

Kins and I share a look, Sophie doesn’t need any caffeine. Tanner, on the other hand, could use some if it’ll allow him to lighten up. As if reading my thoughts, her lips pull into a thin line.

“Come on then, princess,” I say quietly, bumping her with my shoulder, as we follow the other two into the farmers market to find our coffee fix.

“For the picnic I was thinking of picking up some cheese and wine,” Kinsley says as we walk through the lines of market stalls.

“Yeah, and maybe some fresh sourdough or something,” Sophie adds. “You know like, the thick crusty kind?”

Kins glances at me with a smirk, knowing all too well that my stomach is rumbling in agreement.

“Hey, my stomach appreciates good food, it’s nothing to be ashamed about.”

“Your stomach would appreciate any kind of food Jess,” she laughs.

The girls shop up a storm and before we know it we are back at the ute loading fresh bread, deli meats, cheeses, and fresh fruit into the picnic basket in the back. Sophie holds a bottle of wine and paper cups close to her chest as if they are her most prized possession, swaying on her feet.

“Meet you two there!” she says and the girls exchange excited smiles. Tanner drapes his arm over Kinsley’s shoulders and nods towards me before leading her towards his bike. ‘ Be safe .’ I internally call out to them. The thought of her on the back of that bike sends a shiver up my spine. When did she go from hanging out the window of my ute, on long dirt roads with the wind in her hair, to riding backpack with a tattooed grump?

### Chapter Eleven

Tanner

I double tap Kinsley's left leg to let her know to lean with me around the bend. I've never really had girls ride on the back of my bike. Which is the total opposite of the boys I grew up with. I swear they got off just on the thought of girls pressed up close behind them; they were always flaunting their bikes around.

I can't pinpoint the reason why, but I surprise myself by being comfortable with the idea of Kinsley riding backpack. There is just something about the smile on her face when I mention my bike; the way she giggles as we fly down the freeway. The little noises from her while we ride have me suddenly upgrading my helmet and buying her a gear of her own.

Taking a quick left turn, I keep an eye on the traffic behind us; one black SUV in particular. Sure enough, the car also takes the unplanned turn, interesting . I follow the road down to the next intersection and indicate right, taking us back onto the main stretch and towards the gardens we are meeting the others at. The car seems to fall back behind a few others whilst continuing to follow the direction we are going.

Despite our little detour, we arrive here before Jess and Soph, giving me time to evaluate our surroundings. The SUV has also pulled into the gardens, choosing the furthest parking spot from where we are. If only I could see into their car, the windows are all blacked out making it impossible to do so even if I were up close.

My gaze darts back to Kinsley as she climbs off the bike and stretches, raising her

arms high above her head. With her leather jacket unzipped, her t-shirt rides up showing off the curves framing her stomach. She must sense the weight of my stare because her eyes meet mine and she quickly wraps her arms around herself, turning her face down towards the ground. Stepping forward, I take her chin between my thumb and forefinger, forcing her eyes back up to me.

“Don’t ever look away from me, Kinsley ... and don’t ever try to hide. You are fucking gorgeous, every damn inch of you.”

Her breath gets caught as I move my fingers down her throat and towards the nape of her neck. Leaning in close I whisper against her lips, “Take a breath, Pip.” She follows my instruction, sucking in a wavering breath. “That’s it, good girl.”

I kiss the sensitive spot on her neck before tucking a few flyaway strands of hair behind her ear.

Moments later the rumble of Jesse’s Holden HJ ute approaches and I retreat backwards a step, giving Kinsley a minute to compose herself. She’s far too easy to rile up. Jesse, Soph and Lou make their way over to us with the picnic basket; Sophie still cradling the bottle of wine and paper cups in her arms.

“Let’s go lay the blanket down over there.” Kinsley points to a shady area under a large oak tree. “Under that tree.”

“Perfect!” Soph agrees with the excited energy I’m beginning to realise is standard for her.

The girls walk off to set up whilst Jesse follows behind them. I take a quick glance back over my shoulder, the car that followed us from the market is now gone. Something about this feels off. I’ll try to catch Jesse alone later on, surely he noticed something as well.

Stretching out comfortably behind Kinsley, I wrap my arm around her waist encouraging her to lean back against me as I sit with my back against the tree trunk. Out of the corner of my eye I catch Jesse's glare from across the spread of food in front of us. I'm trying to work out if this guy is in protective big brother mode, or if the poor bugger has been friendzoned. To hide the smirk I know would be impossible to hold back, I nuzzle into the crook of her neck. Bursts of something sweet tingle my nose as I breathe in the smell of her hair. She swats at my thigh; I wonder if her cheeks are turning rosy.

I've never been the relationship type of guy, there is too much evil in this world to allow myself to be weakened by loving someone; especially the world my parents have placed at my feet, the dirty world they expect me to run.

Money can buy you whatever you want, unfortunately for me the only thing I want is to have no part of it. Right at this moment, for the first time in my life there is an overwhelming sense of satisfaction simply having this girl in my arms, making sure everyone who sees us knows she is mine. A protectiveness which I have only ever felt for a select five people in my life – the guys who I call my brothers and my sister, Emma – has now extended to her. This shy little brunette with honey coloured eyes.

I want the world to know she is mine.

I want her to know she is mine.

### Chapter Twelve

Tanner

I didn't want to freak the girls out, but all day I saw that same blacked-out SUV wherever we went. I'm not the paranoid type, I know what I saw and I'm determined to get to the bottom of it. Knowing that the girls had created a group text message thread for the four of us, I pulled my phone out of my back pocket, saving Jesse's phone number before typing out a message to him directly.

Me - Hey Jesse, it's Tanner. I need to talk to you about something, give me a call when you're free.

It's late so I don't want to call the guy and wake him up if he's already passed out for the night. I place my phone on the charger and walk into the adjoining bathroom. Glancing at the 'his and her' sinks, I realise that I have never brought a woman back here before. That the her side of this bathroom hasn't ever been touched. Why is it only now that all I can picture is one particular woman in here. The thought of bending Kinsley over the black marble top counter whilst she watches herself come, over and over again, consumes me. Fuck, I groan as my dick grows in my pants; she is so damn mesmerising when she falls apart for me.

Stepping under the shower, I let it wash away the thoughts of what I want to do to my curvy little brunette and they quickly flick back to whoever was following us today. My fist slams into the tiled wall. I know what I need to do. Kinsley isn't going to like it, but what she doesn't know is that I would do anything for her, even if that means she ends up resenting me. Resenting me, I can live with, it's the alternative that I fear,

existing in a world without her.

After the shower, I dry off and wrap my towel around my hips, making my way downstairs to my office. Punching in a few codes, I quickly bring up the live stream of security cameras on Kinsley's apartment. I have access to all the properties we manage, not that I'm supposed to look over them. Kinsley however, is a risk I'm willing to take.

I look back over the past forty-eight hours of footage, pausing and zooming in on any vehicle that doubles back past her house. After almost three hours, I press pause on a blacked-out SUV that matches the one I saw today. Zooming in, I take a screenshot and forward it to my phone, taking note of the registration plates too. It's a start for now.

\* \* \*

Jesse

I slept in again.

"Lou-loo," I grumble. "Why didn't you wake me?"

She tilts her head to the side, almost as if to say 'I tried' which, in her defence, she probably did.

There's no time to shower, instead I brush my teeth and splash some water onto my face, before getting dressed and rushing out into the kitchen. I toss some dog biscuits into Lou's bowl and freshen up her water before grabbing my pile of school reports from the table and head for the door. I run through a mental checklist as I place the reports into my laptop satchel.

Reports - tick. Lunch - no time. Phone and wallet - shit, where are they?

A quick dash to find my phone reminds me I need to call Kinsley and ask her to come and take Lou-loo for a walk this morning — maybe she'll even drop me lunch ... But I stop myself when I pick it up and see that there's a text message from Tanner at 10.23pm last night.

T - Hey Jesse, it's Tanner. I need to talk to you about something, give me a call when you're free.

I send off a quick text to Kinsley before dialling Tanner's number, praying this conversation won't last longer than the drive to school.

There is a rumble in the background of Tanner's line as the call connects. "Hello?"

"Are you on your bike?" Curiosity peaks in my voice, and I slap my forehead with my palm. Why did I just say that out loud? I'm supposed to be playing it cool with this guy. "It's Jesse, I just got your text."

"Right." Tanner seems to collect himself and when he speaks again there is concern laced in his tone. "Did you notice anything odd yesterday?"

More odd than being on a double date with you and my best friend — whom I'm in love with — and watching her eye-fuck you all day? More odd than having to explain to the poor girl I was paired with that I can't be anymore than friends with her? Nope, nothing odd happened yesterday.

"Jesse?" he snaps.

"Uh ... nope. Why?"

Tanner sighs, “I saw a blacked-out SUV following us. I don’t think the girls noticed, but I sure as hell did.”

I think back over the events of yesterday. Trying to recall the farmers market and the carpark at the lake where we had a picnic. I did see a blacked-out car both times. “Fuck —”

“You did notice? Jesse, why would someone be following you, or Kinsley? I can only speak for myself when I say that they weren’t following me, I don’t know Sophie but if you can think of any reason —”

I cut him off, “I’ll deal with it.”

“Tell me.” Tanner’s voice is darker now; not a request but a demand, but I can’t share this with him. There is only one person who would be following us and if I’m right, we’re in trouble. Fear swims with anger in my veins at the thought of Kinsley being followed.

“I can’t do that Tanner, I’ll deal with it though. Thanks for the heads up.” I hang up the phone as I pull into the staff car park.

My phone lights up with mine and Kinsley’s text message thread.

Me - Morning, can you please walk Lou for me?

Kinsley - You slept in again didn’t you? I’ll be right over.

Do I tell her? I don’t want her freaking out but I also want her to be watching her back ...

Me - Have I told you that you’re the best?

Kinsley - You have yes, but tell me again ...

Me - You're the best, Meadow.

Once again, I chicken out. You would think I'd have grown a set of balls by now.

\* \* \*

The bell sounds signalling lunchtime and the kids scatter, packing away their books and collecting their lunchboxes before the classroom falls silent again, leaning back in my chair I pull my phone out of my pocket. There are multiple notifications on my screen.

Tanner - missed call

Tanner - I got the registration plates 676 AVC

Kinsley - Lou's knackered out, we went for a run

I open Kinsley's message first and there is a selfie along with her message, the photo is of them both sprawled out on my couch after their run. Kinsley's face is red, her hair wild and sweaty. Laughing to myself, I send off a reply before I call Stanley.

"Jesse," he greets. "How can I help you today?"

I decide to get straight to the point, knowing that Stanley has no care to indulge in small talk.

"I need you to run a registration check for me, can you do that?"

"Of course, fire away."

“676 AVC, the plates were on a blacked-out SUV.”

The line goes quiet, all I can hear is the tapping of the keyboard. I was stupid to think we could just go on living in this bubble of contentment.

When Kinsley and I made our move closer to the city and started looking into her father’s disappearance, as well as the death of her brother, we knew the risks of drawing attention to ourselves; clearly we have become complacent. Twelve years of silence. My hand balls into a fist in my lap and a laugh bursts out of me from deep within my chest. What is this, a fucking psychotic episode? Pull yourself together, Jesse.

“Everything okay, Jesse?” Stanley questions. I almost forgot he was still on the end of the call.

“I have a fucking dog,” I blurt, without even thinking.

“Hmmm?” Stanley is still typing away.

“I have a dog, a townhouse in suburbia, my dream job ... Why the fuck is this happening now?” Stanley doesn’t bite into my spiral, so I slip back to my thoughts.

Kinsley can hold her own, I know that, and I won’t keep this from her. But, I want to have some sort of idea who we are dealing with before I tell her. Unless Tanner already has, considering I’ve chosen to ignore the missed call and message from earlier. I glance over at the door to make sure I’m still alone before running my hand through my hair and swearing under my breath.

“Got it,” Stanley says moments later. “I’ll email you through what I found.”

“Thanks,” I mumble. I should be showing more gratitude to the man who picks up

our calls night or day, but that's what we pay him to do.

"Jesse —" he speaks with caution now and I know exactly what he's going to say.

"I know what I'm doing," I snap, letting my emotions get the best of me.

Twelve years earlier ...

"Kyle? It's one o'clock in the morning," I whisper, rubbing my eyes.

"Jesse listen, I've been watching the house —"

"What the fuck man, where —"

He cuts me off, "Don't you ever stop talking?" he says and I know he would be rolling his eyes. "Listen to me Jesse, this is important. I — I saw my Dad. I'm going in there."

"Going in there? What do you mean? Kyle, c'mon this is ridiculous. Let's call the police."

There is a pause before he speaks again, and when he does he's angry, "He was the fucking police!" I flinch at his words. "I know this sounds dumb, but I want you to promise me that you will look after Meadow. If something happens to me, you need to look after her; Mum's a wreck and Kinsley needs someone in her corner."

Kyle's little sister follows us everywhere; sometimes he gets annoyed with her but little does he know I like having her around. Surely he knows I will always look out for her?

"I — uh, yeah. Of course Ky but —" most boys our age wouldn't share our feelings,

but Kyle and I, we tell each other everything —“I’m scared.”

“I know, but if it’s really my dad? I can’t not take this chance. It’s been two years and everyone else has given up on him.”

There is a moment’s silence between us, but that’s the thing with me and Kyle, we don’t need to speak to communicate our thoughts. He knows; it’ll always be her.

“I’m going to leave my backpack in the same spot we watched from on the night you came with me, do you remember? Come and get it if anything happens.”

### Chapter Thirteen

Kinsley

Tonight's shift at the bar is dragging. The low hum of

conversations and clinking glasses feel distant, almost muffled, as if I'm just a fly on the wall. I blink a few times in an attempt to bring myself back, as the sound of someone drumming their fingers on the bar in front of me becomes more prevalent.

"Sorry," I say leaning across the bar to speak over the music, "What can I get you?"

After I went for a run with Lou-loo this morning, I went home and set up my own little investigation in the spare room. Normally I sprawl everything out upstairs, across my bed, the floor, you name it. But since Tanner has started spending more time at the apartment it's too risky to have it out in the open. I don't want him walking in during one of my deep-dive moments ; he would probably think I'm crazy.

There is a reason I am keeping my past private. Sure, if he dug deep enough he would find the odd news article about my father's disappearance, brother's death and mother's suicide; my name would be mentioned somewhere. But I choose to keep the secrets of my past away from those in my present, because everyone I loved was taken away from me. Jesse is the only one left standing. I live in fear that even my time with him will run out. Every single day I drown in the fear of the past repeating itself.

Maybe if I knew the truth of what happened to my dad and my brother, it would give me enough closure to live without this constant state of fear, but I'm no closer to finding those answers than I was twelve years ago.

When Jesse and I made the decision to move away from Greenwood we were going to get a place together, but I decided I needed to keep him at a safe distance. I made up some crap about independence and wanting to live in the CBD and I guess he bought it because he didn't push the point. The reality of those lies is that I would rather keep him at arm's reach, than lose him completely.

When I finally lock up the bar and say goodbye to tonight's staff, I pour myself a drink and sit down in the office knowing that my taxi is twenty minutes away. I'm lost in thought about doing next week's rosters when my eyes dart in the direction of the door, the sound of glass shattering causes my skin to prickle as it echoes down the hall and into my office.

I freeze in my chair, goosebumps spreading across my whole body and my heart begins to beat faster than ever before. All I can do is stare straight ahead at my open office door as the shattering continues. Smash, smash, smash.

Think, Kinsley! What a time it would be for my fight or flight to kick in, but no, I freeze instead.

Finally my body catches up with my head, my legs responding as I stand. I need something, anything. Scanning the office, I realise I have absolutely nothing in here to protect myself. Not even an umbrella. When did people stop carrying umbrellas?

Smash, smash, smash.

Fucking think, Kinsley. Fast.

Smash.

I take a deep breath, steadying my thoughts. Whoever is out there, assumes they are alone and I can only hope that means they aren't armed. Slowly, I creep my way out into the corridor; if I can make it to the kitchen without being heard I will be able to grab something to protect myself with. Edging towards the kitchen, headlights beam into the dark building and on instinct I press up against the wall.

The taxi, I think to myself, my lungs burn as I remember how to breathe again. The sound of the taxi's horn must startle the intruder, I hear a muffled voice scrambling around out in the bar before the main door slams shut. They're gone. I need to get out of here, and I do. I flee out the back door and into the safety of the waiting taxi.

Me - I need you

Jesse - On my way

As the taxi pulls up outside my apartment, I consider asking them to wait with me but I quickly dismiss that idea. Kinsley, snap out of it, you can hold your own. The voice in my head almost convinces me to text Jesse back and tell him I'm all good now, but I don't. Instead, I sit on the steps outside my apartment and call the local police station to report the break-in. What feels like only minutes later the familiar sound of Jesse's engine grabs my attention and in seconds he's kneeling in front of me.

"Thank you, officer; I can meet you there in fifteen minutes."

When I drop my phone into my lap Jesse's brow furrows and concern is etched into his face. I meet his gaze, I know he's waiting for me to speak but the words just won't come out. Sitting here like this in front of him, all I want to do is melt into his arms and let him take all the weight off my shoulders. He is my best friend, it's what we do for each other, but a small part of me is questioning if I am still able to confide

in him like that; vulnerable and almost intimate, in a way. It's not just him and I anymore. Tanner and I don't have a label on whatever is happening between us, but we aren't just sleeping together. Are there lines and boundaries I should be drawing here? Shit — should I have called him instead?

“Meadow!” Jesse snaps. “What is going on?”

I explain the events of the past hour as Jesse drives us back to Twisted Sister. Once we arrive, we stand around as the police take photos, brush for fingerprints and I give them access to the security footage. It turns out that whoever broke in decided they needed a stress release. They smashed every wine glass from the racks above the bar, but other than that nothing was taken or touched.

After the police get what they need, I email our cleaning crew to come through in the morning so we can open as normal again tomorrow evening. Jesse guides me back to the passenger side of his ute with his arm draped around me. This is us. These moments are so normal for us; do I need to change my relationship with my best friend because of what is progressing with Tanner? The thought makes me uneasy; Jesse is the only family I have.

The drive back to my apartment is quiet; something feels off, other than the emotional fallout from the break in. I'm too exhausted to question him right now though. Once we get inside, he disappears up the stairs. I'm double checking the lock, hanging up my coat and slipping off my heels when I hear a distant grumble come from my bathroom over the sound of running water. ‘Shit, why is that so hot?!’ I can't help but laugh; he's so damn clumsy.

He's going to make a woman so happy one day. I think to myself as I silently watch him running me a bath from the doorway of my ensuite.

What if she feels uncomfortable with how close we are? Will I still be able to call on

him, to confide in him? There is a tightness in my chest as he notices me standing there and the burn behind my eyes threatens to take over.

“Whoa, Kins, way to sneak up on me.” He laughs, before he realises that I’m balancing on the brink of tears. “Hey, talk to me.” Jesse sits down on the toilet and drags me onto his lap.

“Do you think things will ever have to change between us?” I ask. “Like, if either of us gets into a serious relationship?” I can’t bring myself to look up at him; all these emotions have honestly come out of nowhere and I’m just word vomiting on him.

Jesse rests his chin on top of my head as he speaks, “Did Tanner say something?”

“No.” Speaking about my feelings has never been easy for me but with a deep breath I continue. “When I saw you here, in my space doing this for me, just as we have always done so easily for each other —” I pause to take another deep breath because I’m rambling; as always he is so patient. He tightens his hold on me and waits, “—it’s the thought of you having a partner and not being able to lean on you whenever I need you.” I’m a sobbing mess now, what am I even asking him?

When I turn to face him, his brows are furrowed. He tucks the loose strands of hair that are falling into my eyes behind my ear before he speaks.

“I’ll always be here for you, Kinsley. Day or night, if you call me, I will move heaven and earth to get to you. Do you understand me?”

Until he finds her. Until he finds the girl who can give him everything that I can’t.

He kisses my forehead, encouraging me to stand, then leaves me alone to the bath he has drawn for me.

### Chapter Fourteen

Tanner

I'm fuming as I take the exit towards Kinsley's apartment. I had to find out through work that there was a break-in at Twisted Sister. We were notified so we could keep an eye on the other businesses in the area which we manage and to report any suspicious behaviour. It's not just the break-in that has my knuckles turning white against the steering wheel, it's the fact that something could have happened to her.

I've been patient with her, waiting for her to be ready to go all in , but I can't protect her the way I want to — the way I need to — if I continue to wait. It's time to show her, and everyone else, who she belongs to.

Jesse's car is parked out the front, but I already knew that. After I got the call about the break-in I looked over the cameras at the apartment. I saw him come over last night and surprise surprise, the bastard hasn't left yet. It's not that I dislike him, I'm glad she has someone looking out for her. It's the fact that I want to be the one she runs to. I open the door to the apartment without knocking, I've never knocked before, why should I start now?

Jesse is standing in the kitchen and his eyes dart to mine. His initial expression of shock quickly turns to unease. I enter the apartment and he greets me with a fake version of the cheesy grin I know Kinsley loves.

"Hey, Tanner," he says as he leans back on the kitchen counter. The same kitchen counter I have eaten off multiple times, in more ways than one. If only he knew.

“Kins here?” I ask, not bothering with small talk and fake smiles. I’ve never been the jealous type, so I don’t know what has come over me. This girl has me wound up tight and I feel like I could snap at any moment.

We both turn heads as she walks down from her bedroom. How can a girl look this sexy in just sweats? Her hair is still damp from her shower and the scent of her shampoo lingers throughout the apartment. She glances between us both before smiling sweetly at me.

Jesse chuckles and squeezes Kinsley’s shoulder as he walks past her and towards the door. “If you’re all good, I’ll catch up with you later, yeah?”

She nods at him, her eyes continuously drifting back to me. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

I move out of the doorway and towards Kinsley, but as I go to reach out and pull her towards me she places her hand on my chest, keeping a distance between us.

“Jess, wait!”

Looking up I see him hovering in the doorway. Kinsley moves around me, walking right up to wrap her arms around Jesse’s waist. Breathe Tanner, you don’t know how much last night may have shaken her up. As much as I don’t want to admit it, I think Jesse is actually a good guy.

I hear a muffled ‘Thank you, for everything’ before she pulls away and the door closes behind him.

I let my eyes drift from her to the couch. Sitting down, I reach for her and pull her into my lap. “You didn’t call me.” The thought slips through my lips before I have the chance to reign it in, not at all the way I wanted to lead this conversation but, we are in it now.

“This is still so new, I didn’t know if I should.” She looks down at her hands, picking at her fingernails; an anxious habit. “And to be honest, it has only been Jesse in my corner for so long, he was the first person I thought of.”

With a deep breath I take her hand, pressing the tips of her fingers to my lips, kissing them one by one. “I’m going to spend the rest of the day showing you who you belong to, but first I need to know what happened last night.”

Kinsley bristles at my words before she straightens her shoulders and begins to speak, “I was in the office waiting for a taxi when someone broke into the bar and started smashing glasses.” I can feel her tensing up as she speaks, so I trail my hands up and down her back encouraging her to keep going. “The taxi scared them off when it arrived and I just left. I was panicking so I texted Jesse on the way home and once I was back here I called the police station.”

“Are you okay?” It’s a stupid question, but communicating isn’t my strong suit especially when it comes to feelings.

Looking up at me through her dark lashes she says, “I am now.” Her voice is sultry and there is a sparkle in her eyes. She has no idea what she has coming for her and just the thought alone has my cock stirring. From here on out I want to be the first person she thinks of when she wakes up, and the last person she sees when she closes her eyes at night. I want to be in every one of her waking thoughts. The shining knight in her dreams and the devil in her nightmares.

First, I need to know that she wants this as much as I do. I run my thumb along her bottom lip and ask the question that I can only hope she answers in my favour. “Is this what you want Pip, for me to show you who it is that you truly belong to?”

I can see her mind ticking over, she’s trying to figure out what that means. She knows I would never hurt her, doesn’t she? Fuck.

This girl has me considering things that have never crossed my mind before. I raise my hips upwards slowly, allowing her to feel my hard length, she grinds against me in response as she reaches up to wrap her hands around my neck. Our lips are so close together, but I need to hear her say it. I need to know that this is what she wants.

“Kinsley?” My voice is so low and raspy that I almost don’t recognise it myself.

“Yes.” She breathes the word before kissing me. There is nothing soft or gentle about her kiss, it’s needy and passionate. I break away and I swear she almost pouts.

I let a smile creep over my lips. “Yes, what?” I ask her.

“Yes, Tanner, I want you to show me who I belong to. Please, show me.”

With that I lift her up and throw her over my shoulder, she screams playfully and I slap her ass. Let the fun begin.

### Chapter Fifteen

#### Kinsley

Tanner has me over his shoulder as he carries me up the stairs to my bedroom. I'm only petite in height and frame but I do have curves and can't be the lightest thing to just toss around. Yet, he lifts me like I weigh nothing over his tall, broad frame.

My mind is going a million miles a minute trying to figure out his statement from earlier 'I'm going to spend the rest of the day showing you who you belong to'. By the way he pressed his erection into me on the couch it's obviously sexual; Tanner is definitely not shy in the bedroom. He's the most adventurous guy I've been with and I love it, which is probably why my mind is spinning. I have zero experience when it comes to the things he does to me.

Tanner sets me down in the middle of the room, then walks into the bathroom. He returns with a hairbrush and a hair tie. Well I wasn't expecting this. He sits down on my reading chair in the corner and puts a pillow on the ground between his feet.

"Come and sit down," he murmurs softly.

"What?" Is all I can manage, my feet stuck. He has completely thrown me off guard here.

His laughter fills the room. "I just want to get your hair out of your face, c'mon, sit."

Walking over to him I sit down on the pillow. My hair is still damp from my earlier

shower and I've already run the brush through so it shouldn't be hard for him to do whatever it is he wants to do. I assumed he would chuck it up in a ponytail or a bun on top of my head, but in true Tanner Hayes style he blows my mind. My gorgeous, moody landlord is French Braiding my hair.

The act alone has my heart cracking open for him. I can't even remember the last time someone did my hair for me. After Dad disappeared, Mum wasn't very present. Kyle tried to help me, but what does an eleven year old boy know about doing girl's hair? Over those two years, he did get pretty good at doing piggy tails though.

I didn't even realise Tanner had finished until he spoke. "Beautiful," he says. "Why don't you stand up, and get undressed."

Doing as he instructs, and turning to face him, he bends slightly to kiss my forehead. "I'll be back in a second." And with that he disappears back down stairs.

I'm standing in front of the floor-length mirror, admiring the French Braid in my hair when I feel him behind me, his touch sending tingles to my core.

"How — I mean where did you learn to do this?" I ask. There is something deeper behind his eyes, as if the question has caught him off guard, there is something there he doesn't want to share. But if he wants me to be his, that also means he's mine.

After a moment, he gently brushes off my question. "I've had a lot of practice. I have a younger sister, her name's Emma." I know there is more to it and I guess I will get him to open up eventually so I don't push him further. He drops his bag on the floor, allowing him both hands free to spin me around to face him. Slowly his eyes drag up my body. If only I knew what he was thinking right now.

"We need to fix that," he says, almost to himself and he reaches down to get something out of his bag.

“Fix what?” I ask, unsure what he is referring to.

“You’re too in your head Kins. I need you to be focused on what you are feeling, not what you’re thinking.”

God, if only he knew how right he was. I’ve been using his body as an escape from my mind this whole time. A black piece of fabric is placed over my eyes and it takes away my vision. Now that I can’t see, when he speaks, his voice is all I can focus on. My body hums in anticipation for what it will be like when he touches me.

“Kins you have no idea how much I love watching you, so this is more for you than it is for me.” I can feel his hands on my hips as he whispers against my neck, “Your eyes turn almost golden when you come and it’s my favourite sight to see. But, I have forever to look you in the eyes whilst you come, so I can give up this one day.”

‘Forever’. He said that, right? Surely it wasn’t just my heightened senses and emotions running wild. My breathing picks up. I need him to keep touching me, to keep me in the present with him, to keep me out of my head. All of a sudden his hands are no longer on me and music fills the bedroom, Silence by Marshmello plays before Tanner takes my hands leading me forward.

“Climb up onto the bed and lie down on your stomach for me.”

I place my hands out in front of me and sure enough I’m standing at the edge of the bed. I do as he says, lying down on my stomach whilst I can hear him sorting through his bag. The bed dips from his weight and Tanner takes my hands, securing them behind my back. I wiggle at the discomfort of the position it puts my shoulders in. Not only has he taken away my ability to see but now I can’t use my arms or hands.

“I’m going to roll you over now,” Tanner says. My weight presses down on my arms that are tied behind my back as he turns me.

“Okay, now spread your legs for me.”

I let my knees fall to the side and feel him shift his weight. I can sense him sitting between my legs. “I can already see how wet you are, Pip, and I haven’t even touched you yet.”

I moan, if I had the use of my hands they would be wrapped around his neck pulling him down on top of me.

“I n-need –” My words falter; the suspense isn’t like anything I have experienced before.

“You need, what?”

“You,” I say breathlessly, trying to find my words. “I need you to touch me.”

The warmth of his mouth against my thigh sends me wild as he kisses up the inside of my leg, stopping just before I think I’m going to get a release. I need him to continue to touch me, I lift my legs in an attempt to place them over his shoulders but he stops me.

“Tanner, please,” I beg

“We have all day to play.” He drags out the ‘all’ and I can almost hear the smile on his face. “You might be begging me to touch you now, but by tonight you will be screaming my name and begging me to stop. Now, keep your legs down on the bed or I’ll have to tie those up too.”

He is driving me insane. Is it possible to orgasm without being touched? The way he’s talking to me, the feeling of my arms being trapped underneath me and not being able to see – I think it might be.

“You’re going to have three orgasms for me before you get to squeeze my cock with that pretty little pussy, Kinsley. Do you know why?”

I shake my head, but clearly it’s to teach me something. If in his mind this is a punishment, I won’t let him know that the thought of him teasing me and repeatedly bringing me to orgasm, turns me the hell on.

“Hmmm. If you stop using your words, I might need to make it four.”

“I — uh, no I don’t know.” It’s getting harder to speak with the intensifying feeling of an impending climax.

The room falls silent as the song changes and a subtle buzz sounds. A vibrator? Dipping a finger inside of me, he hums before he replaces his finger with the vibrator.

“This first one is to remind you that if you are going to drink enough to be hungover, you are going to let me look after you.”

I expect him to touch me, kiss me, give me something, but he just leaves me lying here and lets the vibrator bring me to my climax. It’s honestly a wave of relief with all the built up suspense, and I moan his name as the orgasm trails off.

“Good girl. Now for number two. This one is to remind you who you need to call when you’re in trouble.”

Before I can even contemplate the meaning behind his words, the vibrator disappears and my body slumps against the mattress, craving the blissful come-down after the high. I savour every second knowing full well what is about to come. Something cool and smooth replaces the vibrator, Tanner gently glides it inside of me finding his own torturing rhythm. A second orgasm builds, even though my body has barely recovered from the first.

I'm already beginning to second guess my earlier thoughts of this not being a punishment. I wonder if anyone has ever suffered from death by orgasm? My thoughts are quickly distracted by him pinching and tweaking my nipple. "Mmm — yes, that feels so good," I moan as he takes my nipple into his mouth, the pleasure finally explodes and I'm coming again. The high lasts for so long; I don't think I'm ever going to come down again.

"I get it Tanner, I'll call you ." I'm breathless now, the desire to touch him is too strong to ignore. "No more, not like this."

"Yes. You can do it, one more. This one is to remind you who you belong to."

"I c-can't, Tanner please, n-not again – I'm yours "

He doesn't relieve me though, instead he slips something small and round inside of me before his weight disappears off the bed. I'm left not knowing if he is even in the room or not, I wiggle on the bed, my body still craving his touch – is she unaware that we were already blessed with not one but two orgasms? Greedy thing.

A low buzz comes from whatever he slipped inside me, stirring the desire deep within me. My third orgasm rolls through me like a wave pulling me back under again. Trapping me under water, as wave after wave crashes over me; I need to come up for air. As I come down from my high the little buzzing ball is removed. I try to wiggle my fingers but I think they've gone numb. My body defies my mind's exhaustion by wanting more, needing more. It must be, because Tanner is yet to really touch me.

He rolls me over onto my stomach and the relief I feel is instant, pins and needles rush through my arms in this new position. Just as I get comfortable I feel his hands on my hips, lifting me up onto my knees and pulling me back towards the edge of the bed. His warm naked body presses against me and I nuzzle my face into the mattress in anticipation. Tanner thrusts into me slowly, I try to rock back against him but

without the use of my arms it's not an easy task.

“More,” I beg, it's all I can vocalise and thankfully he obliges, moving faster and thrusting harder, whilst holding me in place. I climax at the same time that he finds his own release. It's exactly the way he told me it would be, me screaming his name and begging him that I can't take any more.

### Chapter Sixteen

Tanner

These reports aren't going to write themselves. I purposely came into the office today to try and focus, but all I can think about is how perfect yesterday was. How perfect Kinsley was.

I can still hear her screaming my name before she passed out in post-orgasm exhaustion. The way she acknowledged that she was mine through her breathy moans, 'I'm yours'. Even though the sex was hot as hell, it was the time I was able to spend caring for her afterwards that's on my mind.

After untying her wrists and taking off the blindfold, I moved her further up the bed to rest whilst I went and ran a bath. I had so much more planned for her, but when I told her earlier in the day that we had forever, I meant it. With her in my arms, I washed her body. Taking note of all the things I don't normally get to admire. The small birthmark on her left hip, the light dusting of freckles across her nose, the old scars on her wrists.

When I saw the scars, pain shot through my chest. I hate knowing she has hurt herself, even if it was in the past. My fingers trailed over the scars and I couldn't help but wonder what she had gone through.

When she's asleep there are no worries in her eyes, her mind isn't busy; she's peaceful. I held her close and closed my eyes, resting my head against the tiles. After a while, Kinsley's hand reached up and stroked my cheek, I opened my eyes and

looked down at her. “Yeah, Pip?” I asked.

A sleepy smile played on her lips. “Can we go to bed?”

A message from Jesse pulls me from those thoughts.

Jesse - Kinsley doesn't know about the car. I just need some more time before I tell her.

If he's going to ask me to keep secrets, he is going to need to give me more than that. I would do anything for this girl. Then it hits me. He would do anything for her too. Surely we can put our differences aside. The two of us protecting her is better than one, right?

Me - Let me in on what's going on, Jesse. We both care about her.

Bubbles pop up and then disappear again before he finally responds.

Jesse - It's not my story to tell. Does he expect me to carry on as if everything is normal? Not only is there a car following her, but now the bar she owns and her place of work has been targeted. Jesse is a fool if he thinks I'm going to sit here and twiddle my thumbs. Running my hand through my hair, I decide I will get to the bottom of this one way or another. I don't think Jesse realises who he's toying with here. He might know Tanner Hayes but this boy from Darcel House has a few tricks up his sleeve.

\* \* \*

Jesse

Crossing the carpark at school, I glance in the direction of my car to see a guy

perched up on his motorbike. God damn Tanner. He has his back to me, leaning forward with his arms resting on the handlebars of his bike. The muscle shirt he wears gives him away, anyone who knows him would recognise his tats. They cover his neck, shoulders and both his arms. Clearly, he's a good looking rooster, I can see why Kinsley is drooling over him. Freakishly, as if he could sense me standing here, Tanner climbs off his bike and leans against my car. His arms folded across his chest.

"What do you want, tough guy?" I laugh.

"You're going to tell me who is following, Kinsley."

I roll my eyes, it clearly wasn't a question and he isn't going to give this up. Unlocking my car, I place everything onto the back seat before facing him again.

"Fine. Follow me back to my place, we can talk there."

Tanner nods as he climbs back onto his bike and buckles his helmet. He walks his bike backwards before starting it up, waiting for me to take the lead. Here goes nothing, let's just hope Kinsley doesn't fucking kill me in my sleep.

Ten minutes later, I'm walking into my house with Tanner a few steps behind me. Lou greets us at the door and he stops to acknowledge her; maybe he isn't so bad after all. I toss my keys onto the kitchen counter and walk towards the fridge. "Beer?" I ask with my back to him.

"Sure," he clips, clearly eager to get all of this out in the open.

Taking two beers out of the fridge, I place them down on the kitchen counter and flick the tops off of them, sliding one across to Tanner. I perch up onto one of the bar stools and ask him, "What do you want to know?"

“I want to know who the fuck is playing with her, Jesse! First there was a car following her, now someone is breaking into Twisted Sister. Surely you don’t think that was a coincidence?”

Why hadn’t I connected those dots? My hand clenches around my beer and Tanner doesn’t miss the frustration on my face.

“I can’t believe it,” he scoffs.

“What I can tell you is this.” I rub the back of my neck. “Kinsley and I have a private investigator we are working with regarding shit that I’m not going to mention. I gave him the registration and he has hacked into Kinsley’s cameras to set up a notification to ping him if the car is spotted outside her apartment. She is safe there.”

“Who does the car belong to?” Tanner snaps, his mind filtering through the information.

“Let me bring up the information Stanley — uh the P.I sent to me. He sent me all the information he found.” I stumble my words, rushing to get my laptop out of the case. Why did I not look at the reports? Tanner moves to hover around me as I bring up my emails.

Opening the first document, the name under the heading REGISTRATION stands out, it takes me a few seconds before I realise where I have seen it before. Lance Harding. Fourteen years ago, he was charged with the abduction of a seventeen year old girl. Kinsley’s dad was a Police Officer at the time and he was assigned to the case. The case was open for two days before they tracked him down and were able to pin him on several charges. He was serving fifteen years behind bars. It was on the third day straight of Kinsley’s dad – Warren – working on the case, that he finally returned home. y the time morning came around, he, himself, had disappeared.

“Talk to me, Jesse”

“Back when we were kids, the owner of the vehicle was charged with abduction, amongst other things, in Greenwood. Kinsley’s dad was the lead police officer on the case.”

“So? Why would he be coming after Kinsley? Do you think he is attempting to seek revenge on her father?”

“Maybe,” I say, more so to myself. Tanner doesn’t know that Kinsley’s dad went missing; I don’t think he knows anything about her family’s past.

Tanner is typing away on his phone. “We need to find this fucker. What else do you know about him?”

“I’ve got a garage address for the vehicle, but Tanner these guys aren’t ones you want to mess with.”

Tipping his head back, he finishes his beer and places it down on the counter. “I’ll send you my email address and I want you to forward everything you know about him to me. Do that and I’ll give you the time you need to tell Kinsley about all this.”

Before I can answer, he turns and leaves.

Without knowing it, and by trying to protect her, Tanner is now digging into Kinsley’s past. A decision which could cause more trouble than he intends.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:58 am*

### Chapter Seventeen

#### Kinsley

Sitting cross legged in the middle of the floor of my spare room; newspaper clippings, old police reports and journal articles scatter the carpet. Gazing over the timeline I've put together so many times over the years, I notice something that hasn't stood out to me before.

14 years ago - Missing girl - dad assigned to her case

14 years ago - Found man with the tattoo - tattoo linked to club

14 years ago - Dad went missing

12 years ago - Kyle died - news report - suspicious

10 years ago - Gifted Kyle's journal for my 12th birthday

6 years ago - Mum's suicide note

Now - GEORGE WATSON??

Kyle's last journal entry is dated the day before his death, this I already knew, but it's the contents of the note I'm now seeing from a different point of view. I thought the note nodded to another rebellious night out. One where he had planned on sneaking out, meeting up with Jesse and keeping a secret about a girl they were both crushing

on. He was thirteen, for god's sake, anything is possible.

Tonight is the night, I've already called Jesse and I'm sneaking out through my window. I won't lie, I'm scared as fuck but there is no turning back now.

As long as she knows she is the most important thing to me.

I don't think Jesse knows it yet but I know he loves her .

If she can't have me here for her, she will have him and that's more than I can ask for. After all, he promised.

What if this wasn't some love triangle they had been playing into, what if ... No, it can't be, could it? My head falls into my hands. If I'm right, this confirms one thing for sure; Kyle's death wasn't accidental. Someone killed my brother.

I don't know where he went that night, or what he was doing but I am going to find out, because the girl he wrote about – it's me. There is only one person who can give me the answers I need. Picking up my phone, I attempt to call Jesse ... It goes straight to message bank.

Me - Hey, call me back when you get a chance.

Plan B. I flick back in the journal to when Dad went missing, focusing on the two years between his disappearance and Kyle's death. Maybe there is something else I have missed.

I'm lost in the past when the sound of the front door opening startles me, pulling me back into the here and now. I immediately jump up and rush out of the spare room, closing the door behind me. This will have to wait.

“Kins, you home?”

Tanner. I hate keeping this from him, but it’s for the best. If he gets involved, I risk losing him too and that is not a risk I am willing to take.

“Coming,” I call out, making my way towards the front of the apartment. I feel like I need to shake all the information I’m still trying to process out of my brain and pick it all back up later. I exhale a long deep breath and slide on a mask I’ve learnt to wear so well.

“Hey, you.” He kisses me briefly before bundling me up in his arms. “I was thinking we could see if Jesse and Soph wanted to do pizza and a movie tonight?”

“Sounds good. I tried to call Jesse earlier but his phone went straight to voicemail.” Pulling my phone out of my back pocket, I bring up the group chat the four of us have and send off a text. Tanner’s phone buzzes in time from his pocket as the message is sent.

Me - Pizza I know exactly what he’s thinking without him even saying it.

“Jesse isn’t odd . Goofy maybe, but not odd.” I correct his thoughts.

“You can ask him tonight. Take some time to chat with him, see what’s going on in that brain of his.”

“Mmm, okay.” I wriggle, still trapped underneath him.

Tanner taps my temple with his finger. “You know how I get when I’m not the sole focus up here.”

“Such a moody man,” I laugh. “Maybe you can help me with that then.”

“I plan on it. But first get your ass upstairs and pack a bag for tonight. I have plans for you after they leave”

Tanner kisses me briefly on the head before releasing my arms and rising to stand.

### Chapter Eighteen

Jesse

Tanner and I have a plan to get Kinsley out of the house tonight. I had a call from Stanley earlier today, he informed me that the same car has been seen passing her house numerous times over the past forty-eight hours. She is still being kept in the dark, and as the days go by, I'm beginning to forget why I didn't tell her in the first place.

The only thing stopping me from telling her now is the fear of her kicking my ass. Grow a set of balls, Jesse . I know the longer this drags out, I'm avoiding the inevitable. She'll find out one way or another. The lies between us are getting thick. It was never supposed to be this way, but what can I do? Just blurt it all out?

Hey Kins, I've gotta talk to you about some stuff ... So to start with, I'm in love with you and I have been ever since we were kids. And uh, the night before Kyle died he told me where he was going and told me to look after you. Oh and he thought your dad was still alive, I could've gone after him but I didn't. There is also a car following you, Stanley thinks it's connected to George Watson and that we should be careful. But, instead of telling you, Tanner and I have just been keeping tabs on you.

Now, that would go down well.

Placing my elbows on my knees, I drop my head into my hands. Lou-loo jumps up onto the couch beside me, nudging me with her head.

“Yeah girl,” I grumble as she nuzzles between my arms, forcing me to lift my head out of my hands and look at her. “I know. I’ve royally fucked this up.”

I ignored Kinsley’s phone call earlier today, but I replied to the group chat agreeing to the plans Tanner and I had already agreed on. Another rookie mistake. I should call her back, at least it will be one less thing she can grill me about.

Lou’s still snuggled up under my arm when Kinsley answer’s my FaceTime call.

“Hey, stranger,” she quips, answering the phone and propping it up on her dresser.

“Hey, sorry I missed your call earlier. I was —”

“Ignoring me?”

“I would never!” I place my hand on my chest, acting dramatically offended.

She rolls her eyes. “Okay well ...” She lowers her tone slightly and glances over her shoulder. “I need to show you something in Kyle’s journal, maybe tomorrow you could come over?”

“Of course I can, whatever you need, Meadow.”

“Thanks, Jess. I’ll see you tonight?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

“Don’t you dare ask for no pineapple!” she shouts and I wink, ending the video call.

Lou wanders off, seemingly content after our chat with Kins. Leaning back, I prop my feet up on my desk crossing my ankles. Scrolling down a few names in my call

log, I dial Mum's number. I clear my throat, ready to leave her a funny voicemail, but she answers on the last ring.

"Jesse, my darling. Is everything okay?"

"Hey Mother Duck, can't a boy call his mum without there being anything wrong?"

Her quiet chuckle spreads a warmth across my chest. "Of course you can, my boy. However, if I hear from you more than three times in the week, something is normally worrying you."

"I'm okay, Mum, really. I just wanted to hear your voice."

She pauses for a moment before continuing, "How's that girl of ours?"

"She isn't ours, mum," I laugh. "We don't own her — but Meadow is doing well. I'm catching up with her for pizza tonight."

"Bring her over with you next time you come home; I miss her."

We talk for a while, the whole time all I want is to be able to tell her everything. The secrets, the lies, the mess that I've made; she would be able to help me clean it all up. But, I keep it all to myself. She knows though, Mum can always see right through me.

\* \* \*

Kinsley

Jesse nudges Sophie once the movie finishes. She's fallen asleep — again. This is the second movie night we have had together, both times she has fallen asleep before the movie even gets half-way through. She is a bundle of energy but when she stops, she

crashes.

“Wake up, Shorty. Let’s get you home.”

I watch their interaction with mixed feelings, more so curiosity than anything else. Even though I’m happily tucked up under Tanner’s arm, it’s still a strange feeling seeing Jesse with someone. She smiles sleepily at him, stretching as she rouses. She mumbles something and he laughs, offering his hand to her to help her up.

“Thanks for the pizza, Jess,” I yawn.

Jesse gives Tanner’s shoulder a squeeze and ruffles my hair as he rounds the couch. The couch which, mind you, stretches the length of the room. Tanner’s place is at least twice the size of mine; the theatre room alone is bigger than my kitchen and dining combined.

Sophie’s eyes find mine; she smiles and mouths ‘ love you ’ as they leave. I never thought I could form such a close bond with someone in such a short amount of time, but this girl right here, she’s family now.

We all are in a way, the four of us. I won’t deny that I can still feel tension in the air occasionally from Tanner towards Jesse, but I always make an effort to bring it up with him and ask if there was anything that may have made him feel uncomfortable. He really has nothing to worry about.

Sure, Jesse is my constant; my person, my voice of reason. But Tanner, he is my guiding light. He keeps me out of the darkness. When I have him near, my mind is above the mess in my subconscious. If only I could share that with him, I can’t though. Not yet. Not until I’ve buried all the ghosts of my past. Not when they’re still out there, ready to start haunting me. It’s not an if, but a when, and something tells me that day is coming.

Tanner takes the pizza boxes to the kitchen and I busy myself folding the throw blankets and placing them on the chaise of the couch. Even though I refuse to bare my heart to him until I am ready to go all in, I try to show him in every way possible what I'm too afraid to say. I hope he knows, I hope he can see me.

By the time I reach his bedroom, I can see the flicker of candlelight through the door into the ensuite. I smile as warmth spreads throughout my chest; a feeling I'm getting used to if I'm being honest. Before I can reach the door, my wrist is caught in a tight grip and I'm pulled backwards, my back quickly pressed against Tanner's firm body.

"Like what you see in there Pip?" His hot breath against my neck sends sparks deep in my core.

"Mhmm"

"Well, you best be a good girl then. You know, so I can take care of you."

"I'll be whatever you want me to be Tanner." I try to take a step forward, to lead us into the ensuite, but Tanner's other arm wraps around my waist and holds me still.

"Slow down, we have all night. I'll take care of you in there after I've taken care of you out here. Once your body is exhausted, when your legs can no longer hold you up and you've finished screaming my name."

The warmth that started in my chest has travelled down throughout my body and has gathered between my thighs. I try to rub them together, desperate for friction but it's not enough. Eagerly I lean back into Tanner, sinking further into his hold. I don't think I need to hope anymore. He sees me.

### Chapter Nineteen

Tanner

I'm really not a people person, despite being the face of the family business day in, day out. I guess years of being trained to act a certain way will do that to you; nine years to be exact. Nine years of being the golden boy — 'the chosen one' — I push the thoughts back down. Regardless of my own social preferences, the four of us have fallen into a routine of getting together once a week. Personally, I could think of several other things I would prefer to be doing with my curvy little brunette ... But, the way her face lights up when we are all in the same room is something I can't bring myself to take away.

I have been waiting hours now to have the house, and her, all to myself, so when she presses herself back against me I almost lose all control. But, what would the fun be in that? I need a hit and she's my drug of choice.

"I had big plans the other day so I feel like we should pick up where we left off," I say, peppering kisses down her neck.

"You had more planned? More than —" She twirls her hand in the air, not wanting to spell it all out.

My chest rumbles, if I didn't know better I would think this girl is too innocent for me. "There will never be enough hours in the day for me to fulfil all the things I want to do to you, Kinsley."

“Clocks ticking then,” she says on a breathy moan.

Damn this girl. She continues to surprise me. I step away from her, keeping my hands where they are for a moment longer so she can find her feet before my touch disappears completely. Kinsley looks over her shoulder towards me, so I lift my chin to encourage her to follow my lead. My girl seems to be feeling shy tonight, I’ll soon change that. I sit down on the edge of the bed and place a pillow between my legs.

“You, uh, want to do my hair again?” Even though the lights are dim I can see the rosy colour spreading across her cheeks.

Tilting my head to the side I ask, “Do you want me to?”

Kinsley looks between me and the pillow, then nods. “Yes please.”

“Then yes, I want to do your hair again. Sit.”

The look she gives me before she makes herself comfortable between my legs almost makes me rub at my chest. She’s cracking me open in ways I’ve never experienced and at this moment I know I would do anything for her. I would rather be the villain in her story, because I know that’s what she needs. I’ll let Jesse be the hero, the one she runs to when she needs someone to be soft with her. Whilst I’ll willingly be the one to take her choices away from her, to help her escape her mind.

I plait her hair, just like she had the morning I picked her up on my bike, and when she realises she breaks out into laughter.

“Tanner! I thought – weren’t you going to braid my hair again?”

“I told you, I like these.” I give them a little tug as she jumps up to her feet with a scowl on her face.

“I never did see a Pippi Longstocking episode where she was cranky though, but I won’t lie, it’s cute.”

Kinsley rolls her eyes and I raise a brow in response.

“What?”

“You rolled your eyes. I think that’s a bad habit, don’t you?”

Instantly her eyes light up. So, she is in the mood to play.

\* \* \*

By the third time my palm comes down across her round little ass, she’s shaking with need. Don’t even get me started on the sounds she is making; my cock is running out of patience. I reach into my unbuttoned jeans to adjust myself, trying to buy myself a little bit more time. I want to drag this out for as long as I can. Gently, I lift her hips off the bed and she settles onto her knees, ass high in the air. I chuckle, not so shy anymore .

“Let’s see if you’re ready for me,” I tease, knowing full well her arousal is dripping down her thighs.

“I am, I — Oh God, Tanner, fuck,” she moans as I push two fingers firmly inside her, when I pull them out they’re slick. I just can’t help myself, there is nothing I love more than tasting her arousal from her own lips.

“Come here.”

Kinsley moves to face me and I hold my fingers out, she hums in approval before wrapping her lips around them, sucking greedily. That right there is my undoing, my

mouth crashes into hers and she opens, letting my tongue seek out what it craves. I find her nipple with one hand whilst the other guides her into the middle of the bed. I pinch and roll her nipple between my fingers, swallowing the whimpering sounds she makes with my mouth.

Needing more, I break away from her and sit myself between her open legs. I plant a soft kiss on the inner of each thigh before circling her clit with my tongue. She threads her fingers into my hair, holding me there and I happily oblige, bringing her climax out one stroke at a time. I don't stop until I feel her body slump into the mattress and the grip on my hair is gone.

I look up and she's propped on her elbows, watching me with sweet pleading eyes.

"I need you inside of me, Tanner, please ."

"Whatever my girl wants," I say, my voice low and gravelly.

I make quick work of removing my pants and briefs before hovering above her again. She's so fucking perfect, lying there for me, all fucking mine. I lean down, taking her lips in a delicate kiss as I slowly thrust inside her.

So fucking warm. So. Fucking. Tight.

Her hands are on me; in my hair, on my chest, her nails grazing up and down my back. A lot of the time I tie her hands up, but it's not because I don't like her touching me. No. If it was up to me, her hands would be all over me, constantly. I tie her up because she gets off on it, it's one less thing she has control over, and in her mind that means one less thing she has to worry about.

For Kinsley, it frees her mind to be able to box up her choices during sex and hand it over to someone she trusts. For that period of time, she doesn't need to make any

decisions, there is no pressure on her. If I wrap my hand around her dainty little neck, she doesn't even need to decide whether she breathes or not. Some people wouldn't understand, but I do. I'll happily carry the weight of her choices forever if that's what she needs. I'll burn the box she's so neatly packed them all into just so she never has to open it ever again.

I thrust into her again, maintaining a slow pace. By the way she's squirming underneath me, I can sense her want for more but instead of going harder, I lift one of her legs and hook it over my shoulder. The new position allows me deeper inside her.

"Yes, d-don't stop," she rasps.

"Eyes on me, baby. You're so pretty when you fall apart."

The gold flecks in her eyes sparkle with the distant flicker of candlelight through the ensuite door. She holds my gaze as her body shatters with pleasure. It's the most mesmerising thing to watch. Her body coaxes my own orgasm from me and I fall to pieces alongside her.

I lay down, dragging her with me and into my arms. I can feel her mind ticking over. Instead of pushing her to talk, I hold her tighter.

She traces the flowers that cover the left half of my chest when she speaks, "Do any of these have meaning?"

"Each and everyone of them," I murmur. I wonder if she will ask about them. What each of them means. We would be here for a while, but I would tell her. We have forever, after all.

Kinsley responds with a 'hmm' and I kiss the top of her head.

“I’ll go and run this bath for us, okay?”

She nods; her cheeks rosy and a smile on her lips.

Looking back over my shoulder, as I walk towards the ensuite I see her propped up onto her elbows watching me, I give her a little wink and disappear into the next room.

Kinsley

Tanner holds out his hand, steadying me as I step into the huge bathtub. Why haven’t I taken advantage of this tub before? The water rises as I lower myself in, the bubbles coming up to sit just below my collarbone. I look around, taking in his space. It’s elegant, yet masculine; I wonder if he designed it himself?

“Something on your mind again, Pip?”

I let my eyes follow the phoenix which has its wings spread down the left side of his neck to the blooming baby’s breath covering half his chest. They all blend together so beautifully, almost as though the bird is rising up, out of the flowers.

“The flowers,” I ask, moving myself forwards so I’m kneeling between his legs.

“Why baby’s breath?”

He shrugs. “It symbolises hope, new beginnings, and everlasting love.”

“And the phoenix symbolises a rebirth, rising from the ashes?”

“Rising from the flowers.” His lips curve into a cheeky grin.

“Choosing to stay mysterious now, are we?”

“I’ve got to keep you around one way or another, can’t give away all my secrets in one go.”

I lean in close to allow my lips to graze over the right side of his neck and whisper, “What about this one?” Beginning just below his ear, the illusion of smoke and haze swirl around the words which read, ‘Don’t take life so serious, it’s not like you’re making it out alive.’

“I’m surprised you don’t recognise that one, ever watched The Dark Knight? ”

“Oh, the one with The Joker? Heath Ledger wasn’t it?” I sit back on my heels. “I always got creeped out by the masks.”

“Well, guess what we are doing after this?”

I bite my lower lip. Tanner brushes his thumb along, releasing it. “Unless you had other ideas?”

### Chapter Twenty

Kinsley

When I woke up this morning, my legs were tangled in between Tanner's and I was wrapped in his strong arms. Though the intimate moment quickly fizzled out when I realised I, in fact, had drooled all over his bicep in my sleep. So sexy, Kinsley.

Somehow, I managed to wriggle out of his hold and dry off his arm without waking him. Now, I'm standing in his big ass kitchen, wearing my fluffy pink bed socks and one of his tee's that sits mid-thigh, with a smile I cannot wipe off my face. Whatever he did to me last night, I'm still riding the high.

I know there is a sound system in this open kitchen and living space, Tanner always has music playing and I can see all the scattered speakers, but do you think I can work out where or how to connect to the thing? So instead I'm playing music from my phone, Shania Twain - Man! I Feel Like a Woman plays as I pull out eggs, bacon and an avocado from the fridge. Using the whisk as a microphone, I belt out the chorus; singing and dancing around Tanner's kitchen.

When I spin around and see him, he's shirtless wearing grey sweatpants and leaning against the far wall, a huge smile on his face. I hide the whisk behind my back on instinct, as if that will erase the image of me singing and dancing. It won't, of course, that will be forever etched into his memory now.

"Crap, the bacon," I mumble, spinning around to find charcoal in the pan. "Dammit."

Tanner's arms are either side of me, one hand removing the pan from the heat and the other confiscating the whisk.

"You can't flip bacon with a whisk, little lady," he whispers against my neck. "How about you finish whisking the eggs and I'll take over here?"

I wriggle around to face him. "I was planning on surprising you with breakfast."

"Instead, I get breakfast and a show." He winks and I press my palm against his chest, a dismal attempt to move him out of my way. Tanner tips his head back and laughs, and I lean my forehead against his chest. "Who sings that song?"

I glance up through my eyelashes. "You're kidding right now? Shania Twain!"

"Why don't we leave it to her from now on?"

"Hey!" I swat at his chest. "I wasn't that bad!"

I don't think I've ever seen him this carefree, so if he's laughing at my expense, I'll let him. This side of him doesn't come out very often.

"Okay, my dark knight, let's get this show back on the road. I'm starving."

He steps back with furrowed brows at the new nickname I just gave him before he slaps my ass. I busy myself, whisking eggs and smashing some avocado with seasoning, whilst Tanner cooks fresh bacon. We are deep into a new and foreign domestic bliss when the app on his phone alerts him that someone is at the door. He glances down to see who it is on the camera as I hear the front door open.

"Brace yourself, Pip," he says, possessively drawing me back into his arms.

“T, I’m home!” A bubbly female voice sings.

Footsteps travel through the house until a tall, thin, supermodel looking girl props herself up at the breakfast bar. Her mousey brown hair is perfectly highlighted around her face, falling down over her shoulders in bouncy curls. She must be a year or two younger than me.

“Welcome home, Sis,” Tanner greets her. “I wasn’t expecting you, does Mu—”

She sighs. “Mum doesn’t know I’m here, I just needed to get away for a few days. Anyway, it looks like a visit is well overdue.” Her kind eyes glance my way. “Are you going to introduce us?”

Tanner places his hand low on my back, guiding me alongside him, over to his sister. Sister ... Wait, Emma? The one he mentioned whilst braiding my hair? He reaches out and drags her off the stool and into his arms, and she melts against his chest.

“Missed you, Squirt.” He looks at me before he continues, a sparkle in his eyes. “This is my girlfriend, Kinsley.”

“Girlfriend?!” she squeals, and almost knocks me off my feet, grabbing my hands and pulling me into a hug. “I’m sorry, but Tanner has never had a girlfriend, so this is kinda a big deal!”

Tanner just called me his girlfriend.

“It’s really nice to finally meet you, Emma, right?” I manage to say, and I think it comes out relatively calm.

“That’s me.” She beams. “Wait, did Tanner mention me?”

She's giddy and it's cute; she clearly idolises him. We get to know each other whilst Tanner finishes cooking and plates up three breakfasts, swapping out avocado for grated parmesan on Emma's plate.

Tanner

Taking a seat at the breakfast bar next to the girls, I take them both in. The two most important women in my life are getting along like a house on fire. Which is surprising because Em is the complete opposite to Kinsley. She is loud and bubbly, and still so young. Even though there is only two years between them, she doesn't have the life experience and maturity that Kinsley has.

Emma has had everything handed to her on a silver platter, it wouldn't be how I would raise my daughter, but Mum and Dad treat her like a princess. She taps a card with unlimited funds, has a driver and access to a private jet. She is supposed to be over in LA studying fashion; yet she is here.

"When did you get back in the country, and how long are you staying for?" I pry, it's not unlike her to drop in unannounced but since she moved out of the country, she normally communicates a little more than this.

"Can't we just enjoy breakfast, Tanner. Please?"

She looks at me with those eyes; the same ones she has always used whenever she wants to get her own way. It works too, I don't look back in her direction until we have all finished breakfast and Kinsley starts clearing our plates.

"Where's Lana?" Emma asks. "Let her do all of this so we can go and catch up properly. I have been dying for real Melbourne coffee."

"— Lana?" Kinsley cuts in.

“Lana only comes over twice a week to clean, I don’t need a live-in maid now that you’re no longer here.”

“Oh. Suit yourself,” Emma states, clearly confused with the fact I don’t have staff living here.

“We don’t all enjoy having people sniffing our ass all day, Em.”

Emma rolls her eyes, pushing past me. “I guess I’ll send Chris away once he brings my bags in then.”

Kinsley giggles beside me, then whispers, “Who’s Chris?”

I keep my eyes glued on Emma as she walks away. I can’t help but wonder what has brought her home? “Chris is her driver.”

### Chapter Twenty-One

Kinsley

My arms wrap tighter around Tanner's waist, as we zig-zag through traffic and he rests one of his hands over mine. My body leans into him, moving as one. We left Emma back at the house to get settled, she pleaded with me to stay there, and as much as I would have loved to, I have a shift at the bar tonight.

"You alright, back there?" he asks through the bluetooth headset.

"Yeah, I'm perfect. Today has been ... perfect."

Tanner laughs at my lack of a better word, but I can't get over how great everything felt today. I got to see a different side of him, a more relaxed and calm version than the one I'm normally in the presence of. Thank the Lord, because man he can be a piece of work. Seeing him with his sister, the care and bond they share reminded me of what I could have had with Kyle; what we did have before it was all taken away.

"Do you want to take this back home with you?" I ask when we pull up outside the apartment, gesturing to my helmet. "In case you and Emma go for a ride?"

He looks at me as if I have two heads. "Nah, keep it here. Princess doesn't ride, she's more the 'private jet' type."

"Your parents have a — never mind, I don't even want to know." I shake my head, there are some things I don't need to be privy to, not when I've got so many secrets

of my own.

Tucking my helmet the best I can under my arm, I follow Tanner up the steps to my front door. He would get a big head if he knew, but I'm so glad I never changed those locks. I attempt to step further into the apartment, but I'm stopped by the brick wall of muscle that is Tanner's back. I can't see around him, something has him planted where he stands.

"W-what is it?" Placing my hands on his waist, I try to move around him. "Tanner, let me see!"

Several photos are scattered all over my floor. Bending down to pick one up, I see it's of me. I reach for another one and it's the same thing; a picture of me from a distance, almost like a paparazzi shot. The photos are all of me, over the course of the past few weeks. At the cafe the first day I met Sophie. Waiting out the back of Twisted Sister, after a shift. Running with Lou-loo. The four of us on our double date.

He warned me to stop.

Tanner gets down on one knee to meet me at eye level. "Do you have any idea who could have left these here?"

"No. I — no, no idea."

It has to be another warning. Regardless of who has sent them. I spread the photos out in front of me on the coffee table. Staring at them for far too long. The phone call. The break-in. Now, stalking? It's the first time I've considered them being anything other than coincidence. Could they be connected?

"Kins, I need to tell you something." My eyes snap to Tanner's and I feel every hair on my body stand up. He knows something. "You're probably not going to like what

I've got to say, but I think you need to know."

I freeze. My whole body tenses up as my eyes plead with him expectantly. He pats the cushion on the couch next to him, encouraging me to sit. It's the last thing I feel like doing right now, I want to pace up and down this damn room; but for him, I sit.

"You know the day we went to the market and on the picnic? The first time we all hung out as a group?"

"Yeah, our 'double date'?" I furrow my brows, urging him to get to the point.

"Well, that day I noticed a blacked-out SUV following us." Tanner rests his hand on my thigh to stop my foot that is subconsciously tapping. "I called Jesse to see if he had also noticed, and after some deep thought, he realised he had."

"Wait, so you're telling me that both you and Jesse have been aware that someone was following us? And neither of you said anything?"

"I'm saying something now," Tanner says softly.

"No. You're only telling me because whoever was following us — scrap that following me, has left me this." I gesture towards the table of photos. "I wish you had told me. And since when are you all buddy with Jesse? That was, what, the first time you guys had met? Why would you go to him and not me?"

"I just wanted to protect you."

I don't even know when I stood up, but I'm pacing the length of the room. I understand that Tanner wanted to protect me, but Jesse knows better. Jesse knows. Shit — Jesse. I bring up his contact and dial his number in a matter of seconds.

“Hey Mea—”

“Don’t ‘hey Meadow’ me, since when did we keep secrets from each other, Jess? A car’s following me? Why am I the last person to know?” I snap, blurting everything out without even taking a breath.

Jesse mumbles something unintelligible under his breath, and as disappointed as I am that he has kept this from me, my frustration fades away when he finally speaks.

“I fucked up Kins, I should have told you weeks ago. There is so much you need to know — the owner of the car, it’s Lance. I’m trying here — but I don’t know. I don’t know how I’m going to protect you.”

“Lance? Lance ... Lance Harding — the girl, the case Dad worked on ...” my voice trails off.

He sounds defeated; tightness radiates through my chest at the thought of him holding onto this, fighting this alone. My eyes flick to Tanner, but unlike Jesse, he looks angry and protective, the blues of his eyes are almost black and his fists are clenched. He sits with his elbows on his knees, and when he notices me looking at him, he lowers his head.

“It’s okay Jess, it’s okay.” All these secrets are threatening to tear apart the life I’ve built for myself over the past year. I won’t allow it. “I’m going to put you on loud speaker, okay? Tanner’s here.”

My phone sits on the coffee table next to the photos and I let Tanner pull me onto his lap. He holds onto me as if someone is trying to pry me out of his arms, as he speaks to Jesse.

“Whoever has been following Kinsley has been taking photos and has now left said

photos in her house for her to find.”

“The cameras — Tanner, check them. Who was it?”

I shift uncomfortably with the news that Tanner has access to my security cameras, pulling my bottom lip between my teeth to keep myself from biting their heads off again. They’re trying to protect you, Kinsley, breathe girlfriend.

“Got it, I’ll trim the footage and email it to you. I can’t get a good look on my phone. Send it to Stanley, too.”

My head snaps around so fast I swear I give myself whiplash, how does Tanner know that Jesse and I are working with Stanley? How much does he know? Tanner senses my anxiety creeping up on me, but before my palms start to sweat, before my heart begins to race, he presses a kiss to the top of my head. Strangely, it helps.

“Kinsley will come back and stay with me tonight, I’m not comfortable with her here alone,” Tanner states, matter of factly.

Kinsley is right here. She has a voice and is more than capable of speaking for herself. A chuckle bubbles out of my chest and I slap my hand over my mouth. Tone down the third person crazy, Kins.

“No, I have work tonight and I think you and Emma need time together. I’m not intruding on that,” I say sternly, weirdly neither of them comment on my moment of hysteria.

Jesse comes to my rescue. “That’s sorted then, I’ll be there to pick you up from work tonight and you’ll stay at my place.”

Ding — Ding — Ding, in the background of Jesse’s line, the school bell rings .

“That’s my cue to go, there are about to be twenty-four pre-teen kids running into this classroom.” With that, Jesse ends the call.

Tanner’s voice is so low it almost comes out with a growl, “I still think you should come and stay with me.”

I cup his face in my hands, brushing my lips over his. “You’re not jealous now are you, my dark knight?”

“This is no time to play, Kinsley,” he says seriously, taking my hands with his. “Let’s go upstairs, you can get ready for work and pack some things to take to Jesse’s.”

I pout playfully and Tanner shakes his head, leading me by the hand towards my bedroom. I can’t help it. I’ve always been the one awkward person who laughs in situations that are the furthest thing from funny. It’s a coping mechanism I suppose.

### Chapter Twenty-Two

Kinsley

Tanner refused to leave me at work until Becky and Brad arrived — together mind you. I'll need to ask her about that; I've suspected something has been going on between the two of them for a long time, but she's never confirmed nor denied it.

"Hey, guys!" I call out as I walk into the bar.

Working the opening shift means we can all hang out for a while before the regulars filter in; right now it's still only us here.

"I know I've been away on and off since the break-in, and I want to apologise. I also wanted to make sure everything is going okay —" The two of them glance at each other, not knowing where this is going, clearly the photos have shaken me up more than I had thought. With a sigh, I cut straight to the point, "— I need to know if you have noticed anyone suspicious hanging around, or anyone causing trouble?"

"I haven't noticed anything, nothing out of the ordinary anyway," Becky says, rubbing my arm in comfort. "It's been business as usual here."

Brad pipes up from behind the bar, "Want me to comb over the security camera footage?"

Hell to the yes. Why didn't I think of that earlier? From the conversation Tanner and Jesse were having earlier it wouldn't surprise me if someone had already checked the

footage, multiple times.

“Oh no, honestly — please don’t stress. It’s all good.”

Brad pins me with a knowing look. “Kinsley, if it’ll put your mind at ease, I’ll do it. It’s no trouble.”

I smile, we aren’t super close but this little work family I have created, they always look out for each other. “Okay fine, only if you get a chance, no pressure!” I say.

Before long the regulars fill the empty booths and bar stools, the drinks are flowing and the jukebox is playing old school hits. I almost forget about the problem at hand, that is until the small crowd parts as Jesse enters the bar.

“Daddy’s home!” he sings out, making an entrance as always. He picks Becky up with one arm and throws her over his shoulder. She punches his back, whilst laughing, and he plops her down on a bar stool next to me.

“I’m calling a family meeting,” he announces.

Internally I facepalm, knowing Jesse is going to stroll in here and go completely over the top. He will want to invite everyone over once the bar closes and throw some extravagant party to keep me distracted. Always attempting to play the role of my protector in his own quirky way.

However the reality of the situation is, Jesse is the one who needs the distraction. If he was to ask me? I would beg him to take me home.

Sarah joins us at the bar as Brad smirks and shakes his head; he too knows Jesse has concocted some plan to try to get us all out together tonight. When Twisted Sister first opened it was a weekly occurrence. We would all get together for drinks, whilst I

secretly checked out the competition. You know the best cocktails to have on the menu and what not.

“Alright, what’s the deal?” I say, throwing my hands up in the air. “Spit it out, Jess.”

“I vote we close this place down early and hit up the town.” He wiggles his eyebrows at me and I roll my eyes.

“Yes! Let’s!” Sarah chimes in. She’s young, flirty and freshly eighteen. She has also been school-girl crushing on Jesse since the day she first laid eyes on him. The whole thing is entertaining to say the least, mostly because Jesse is so oblivious.

He throws an arm over her shoulders. “See this one knows what’s up. How about it, Brad? Becksta?”

“I don’t know about you guys,” Beck says. “But I’m not going to be the one to explain to the boss why we closed up early on a Friday night.”

I lower my palm between the stools Becky and I sit on, offering her a silent high-five. When she reciprocates, I giggle and turn to face Jesse. I’m pretty sure Sarah is the only one here who doesn’t know the truth about who owns the bar, but I like to keep my cards close to my chest.

“Mmm, Becky’s right,” I add with a disapproving tone, Jesse flashes me an evil eye but stays quiet. “C’mon Jess, I’m done here anyway. These guys will survive without us.”

“Meeting adjourned,” Jesse mumbles, proceeding to walk head down, through the back of the bar towards my office; like a puppy with his tail between his legs.

\* \* \*

“I’ve been waiting for one of you to call, I have some things you may find interesting,” Stanley greets, answering the phone.

“Fire away,” Jesse says.

Once I convinced Jesse that we were in fact not going to drink away our responsibilities, he drove us back to his place where we now sit, speaking with the one other person who knows the ins and outs of the past twelve years.

“Let’s start with the car that was following you a few weeks back. The name it’s registered in, I don’t suppose you connected the dots as to who that is?”

“Only today ... unfortunately.” I glare at Jesse, narrowing my eyes.

“My apologies,” Stanley states, shock lingering in his voice. Jesse and I always thoroughly communicate all the information Stanley provides us with, and a lot of the time we connect the dots before even he does; yet this time, that wasn’t the case. “I’ll be sure to call back as soon as I have made any connections in the future, in case you haven’t done so yourselves. Moving on, I did a full check of him, and the reason he has slipped through our radar is because he requested bail for a second time, which was granted in April.”

I gasp, “Wait, Lance has been out for almost three months and we are only finding this out now?”

“I know this isn’t ideal, Kin—”

“Let’s just refocus,” Jesse cuts in. “Please go on, Stanley.”

He clears his throat before continuing, “Once I knew he was out of jail, I searched for any other vehicles, properties or businesses in his name. These were the hits I got —”

I scribble down the following as Stanley reels them off, but then zone out as Jesse wraps up the conversation with him.

The blacked-out SUV, we already knew of

A warehouse located, 45 minutes out of Melbourne

A white van then you can start from the beginning.”

I look to him for confirmation and see a silent tear fall down his cheek. Reaching up, I brush it away with my thumb. “I’m so sorry, Jesse. You should have never been responsible for something this heavy from such a young age.”

He shakes his head and I wish for a moment I was inside his mind. It’s the first time since I’ve known Jesse that I am left not knowing what he is thinking. The inner workings of Jesse’s mind isn’t something I have ever needed to consider, we can normally read each other so well, we don’t keep secrets and in many ways we are one. Until now.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

Kinsley

“It all started a couple of months before he passed away, during footy season. We would train late in the afternoons and being winter, the sun would set early. A few times we went to the storage unit — the one where the police stored all your dad’s files on the Lance Harding case. That’s not all that was in there though, there was also the entire case they had put together on your dad’s disappearance.” Jesse draws his eyebrows together. “Kyle was so angry that they had closed the case.”

“Wait a second,” I say holding up one hand, I need a moment to get this straight. “I had no idea. Why didn’t I know the case had been closed? I could have —”

“Could have what, Kinsley? You were only eight years old when he went missing, not even ten when they closed the case. There was nothing any of us could do.”

I pull my knees up to my chest, resting my chin against them. Jesse is right, there is nothing I could have done.

“One night we were going through the file they had put together on your dad’s disappearance and we found a list of suspects, all of which had been marked as having an alibi. One name in particular stood out from the rest — Lance fucking Harding. Kyle immediately switched back to the case on the missing girl and found the location of the house they arrested him at. “Something about this guy was off and Kyle felt it, regardless of him having an alibi. We made a pact not to tell anyone about what we found, and we started watching the house from a distance. Kyle would

go alone more times than he asked me to go along with him. Then one night —”

Jesse’s expression hardens, he closes his eyes tight and drops his head into his hands. I move closer to him, wanting to comfort him but also not wanting him to stop talking. I know it must be painful for him, but I need to know. I’ve been in the dark for far too long.

“Take your time, Jess.” He looks up at me with so much pain in his eyes.

Jesse lies back on the couch, gesturing his chin down to the empty space beside him. I grab a pillow and prop myself up on my side, my back resting against his chest. Closing my eyes, I wait for him to be ready to continue.

“A few weeks later, I woke up to a phone call from Kyle. It would’ve been around 1am; some stupid hour. He told me that he was watching the house and was going to make a move — he was going in.”

“I don’t understand. Why did he want to go in there?”

“That night when he was watching —”

“Mmm,” I mumble, encouraging him to continue.

“— Meadow, he thought he saw your dad.”

I jump up into a sitting position. “Tell me you didn’t just say Kyle thought he saw my dad, the night before he was found dead?” Jesse tries to place his hand on my back in comfort but I shift away.

“He made me promise not to do anything; that I needed to protect you. There is something linking them to your family, and I think it’s more than just your dad

investigating Lance. We knew it all the way back then and I still feel the same way now. You were in danger, Meadow. You are in danger.”

I disregard that last comment, I’m too angry. “You should have gone to the police!” I’m shouting, my compassion for the situation Jesse was put into has completely gone out the window. “How could you do this?”

“I did what I needed to do, I —”

“No, Jesse. You lied. You covered up a murder —” my lip trembles as I speak “— Kyle’s murder.” I step backwards, for the first time in my life I am walking away from Jesse. The heaviness of the truth is weighing me down. The pillows I had thrown off the couch to get comfortable in his arms only minutes earlier cause me to stumble and I fall flat on my ass.

“Meadow?”

Jesse is right there, he’s always been right there. I break into a sob.

“Kinsley, look at me. Please, look at me.” Jesse’s forefinger lifts my chin but I can’t see him through the tears clouding my vision. “If I thought for a second the police were going to listen to a thirteen year old kid whose best friend had just passed away, I would have said something. They didn’t even look into his death as suspicious; a ‘hit and run’ they called it. Your mum didn’t even want a coroner’s report.”

“H-how do you know that?”

“It was in the papers, Kins. She went off the rails pretty hard for a while there.”

“You know.” I sniff, fighting off the tears. “I don’t even remember living with you and your mum. I remember being there a lot after Kyle died; having my own space to

sleep in, walking to school from your house. But that's it. Why can't I remember?"

Jesse sits down on the floor. "Sometimes we subconsciously push things away when we suffer trauma, especially so early in life."

"I miss her,"

"Your mum?" Jesse asks hesitantly.

I try to laugh but it comes out more as a muffled kind of choking sound. "No, yours."

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Jesse

“Come on, sleepy head, we’ve got things to do and people to see today.”

“Who could we possibly need to see?” Kinsley mumbles into her pillow. “— And people meaning plural? I’m not sure I am up for that.” She looks up at me with a sleepy grin and rubs her eyes.

“Okay, just one person.” I throw a towel at her before I leave the room. “Go and shower, you look like death.”

We didn’t get to finish our conversation last night, or begin sorting through information on Lance. After Kinsley calmed down, I tucked her into bed. She was emotionally exhausted and needed to sleep. She asked me to sit and read to her, something Kyle used to do when she was young, on nights when her parents fought. He would always try to block out the noise; to keep her safe. But, even at such a young age, she knew they weren’t the happy-go-lucky family everyone assumed they were.

Kinsley and I pull up outside the cottage where I grew up. Mum is sitting on her porch swing, eagerly awaiting us. The garden is in full bloom; roses of every colour trimmed into round bushes line the verandah; just like they always have been. I watch Kinsley silently admire the garden, her eyes straying to the corner where she would play fairy gardens as a child. It’s purposely overgrown in the magical way a child would love to explore. Tucked in the corner, there was a little old birdhouse, painted

beautifully and covered in sparkles. Kinsley would leave the fairies drawing and notes. Mum would always write back to her using special paper and a calligraphy pen; pulling out all the stops to keep the magic alive.

To keep a spark inside a little girl who had lost everything.

Our love for her runs deep, which is why I have kept my mouth shut all these years. Sure, I made a promise to Kyle and ‘did what I needed to do’ but it has always been more than that. Heck at the time I was only thirteen; I panicked, I was scared. All I knew was she needed someone in her corner. It took until Kinsley was sixteen years old for her relationship to finally break down with her mother; for her to get out of her toxic hold — it was only then she found herself again. Her spark had returned and, from that moment on, I have done everything to keep it burning bright.

When I look back up at Mum, she is leaning against the porch railing, waving with a big cheesy grin on her face. Even from here, I can see a few extra lines around her eyes. She says she isn’t lonely here by herself, and that the garden and animals keep her company. I do believe her, though part of me will always feel guilty for moving into the city and away from her. But Mums somehow always know, even before you tell them. She knows the promise I made to Kyle and she knows I would do anything for Kinsley.

Everyone knows me to be the kind-hearted, goofy one. A teacher. The guy with a cute dog. Deep down, I know I have the ability to tear the gentle version of myself to pieces. I would go to war for Kinsley if I needed to, and something tells me the enemy is approaching.

“Oh, look at you!” Mum fusses, taking Kinsley’s hand and twirling her in a circle. “As beautiful as ever.”

Kinsley laughs, smiles freely and pulls Mum into a hug. “I’m so sorry; it really has

been far too long between visits.”

I clear my throat and they both turn to me, Kinsley stepping back so that I can wrap my mother up in my arms. I tower over her now and I know despite what she says, she secretly loves it.

“I’m glad to see you brought our girl home,” Mum whispers against my chest.

“Please behave yourself,” I say; stepping back and looking over her from top to bottom before ushering them both inside the house. “I’ll make you some lunch, Ma, don’t want you wasting away.”

She swats at my chest with a chuckle. “You will do no such thing, Jesse. I have everything prepared.”

There is nothing frail about the woman, Marie Fernandez has always been the strongest person I know, both emotionally and physically. I will never stop teasing her though, I love the way it riles her up.

I watch Kinsley as she reacquaints herself with the home that provided her a safe haven for eight months — eight months she can’t recall. I’m hoping this visit will bring her some closure. With all the emotions and past memories being brought to the surface, I hope something will click inside her. Being back in a space she felt comforted and safe in — maybe it will help in some way.

She runs her fingertips along the wallpaper in the entryway, tracing the patterns, before stopping short at the door of the bedroom she stayed in as a child. Over the years we have been back here many times, but she has never approached this room. Kinsley looks over her shoulder and I give her a subtle nod, resting my hand on her lower back. The door opens and I feel her silent gasp, the room is exactly as she left it. A single bed sits in the corner with a princess canopy flowing down from the roof.

“I— I didn’t think I had anywhere that was still home.”

Her eyes are glossy, full of unshed tears. I can only imagine how she would be feeling right now. It’s in moments like these that I stand here like a stunned mullet, not knowing whether to comfort her or make light of the situation with dark humour. The silence gets the better of me, Kinsley has always brought out the softer side of me. “You’ll always have a home here, Meadow. But home is a feeling, not a place, remember that.”

She looks at me with wide eyes, she’s surprised. I shrug. “I’m more than just my good looks.”

“Good looks that come from your mother,” Mum calls out. “Get out here you two, come and eat.”

Kinsley flicks her hair over her shoulder and looks me up and down. “I guess you’re right,” she says, leaving me alone in her old bedroom.

“Wait — right about my good looks or our inspirational heart to heart?” I jump up, following her out.

The kitchen is small and poky, it feels even smaller now as an adult than it did as a child. The counter tops form a U-shape, with one side doubling as a breakfast bar and along the opposite side there’s a large window overlooking paddocks and rolling hills. To the left of the kitchen is a dining area, an old heavy wooden table fills the space with six chairs. I never understood why we even had a table that could seat so many when it was only ever Mum and myself, at the most Kyle and Kinsley would come over after school and she would make us afternoon tea.

Following the sound of their voices, I walk through the dining area and enter the lounge room. A three-seater lounge sits along the wall with a perfect view of the

garden. Two recliners sit either side in a matching cream and floral print with a coffee table filled with biscuits, sandwiches and a pot of tea in the centre of the room.

“On’ya Mum.” I snag a sandwich and a handful of biscuits. “You made my favourites.”

“Yes, Jesse dear,” she placates me as if I were a child before continuing her conversation with Kinsley.

I’m definitely the third wheel here today. I look around, trying to find something that needs doing. “Do you have some lightbulbs that need replacing or anything?” I ask.

Kinsley looks at me, holding in a giggle. Mum on the other hand tilts her head in confusion. It reminds me of Lou-loo which makes me laugh — out loud unlike Kinsley.

“I just wanted to see if you had any jobs that needed a man’s touch whilst I was here.”

It was Mum’s turn to laugh now. “A man’s touch?” She raises her brows. “Jesse, when was the last time I had a man around?”

“Well, after Dad, there was Mr Re—”

Kinsley’s cheeks are flushed in embarrassment and she almost chokes on her sandwich at the mention of Mum with a man

“That’s enough,” she announces, waving her hand at me. “There will be none of that, just eat your biscuits and let us girls catch up.”

### Chapter Twenty-Five

Kinsley

“Can you drop me to the library on your way to work in the morning?” I call out to Jesse from the bathroom. “I want to surprise Soph; I’ve unintentionally been avoiding her.”

“You do suck at this friendship thing.” He winks as he rounds the door and sits on the bench next to the sink.

“What’s the go with you two anyway? She’s never here, did that double date lead to any solo ones?”

“Maybe if you were a better friend, you would know the gossip.” Jesse wiggles his brows and I know he’s deflecting off of the topic. Interesting. How much do I want to push him on this? I decide to stay silent, giving him the option to elaborate. Through the mirror we make eye contact and he’s pouting. Such a baby.

“Come on, spit it out.” Turning to face him, I give him all of my attention. “Do we need to sit down with a tub of ice cream and spoons to have some kind of deep and meaningful here?”

That gets a laugh out of him. “I thought we were the beer and pizza type?”

“You’re deflecting again!”

“Give me a break, I can’t take you seriously with that.” He points at the facemask I just applied. “Stuff on your face.”

He has a fair point, it does look ridiculous. “Fine, why don’t you go order us a pizza? I will wash this off and then I can whip your ass in Monopoly whilst you bring me up to speed on the gossip I clearly missed.”

“That’s my girl!” he whoops and hollers, bouncing his way out of the bathroom and I hear a pitter patter of paws running up the hall. “Let’s go Lou! Pizza time!”

How a woman will ever pin him down is beyond me. I will personally congratulate whoever does; this boy is a handful. He talks to the dog the same way I talk to myself. I wonder which one is more crazy? Take your pick, Kinsley. Hmm, actually maybe a dog would be nice. I wonder if Tanner likes dogs? He has always been fine with Lou-loo.

Taking out my phone I send him a message, no time like the present.

Me- Do you like dogs?

Tanner - It depends ...

I laugh whilst typing out my response.

Me - Depends on what?

Tanner - The owner

Me - If it was me?

Tanner - Then, yes. I love dogs.

Bubbles pop up again, and I wait to see if he says anything else before I respond.

Tanner - Are we getting a dog?

First he drops the girlfriend bomb on me in front of his sister, and now he is asking if we are getting a dog. A warm blush climbs up my neck and over my cheeks whilst butterflies swarm in my stomach.

Tanner - You're blushing, Pip.

Note to self, don't leave Tanner on read. He will continue to message you until you reply. I take a silly selfie, still with my face mask on and press send.

Me - I can't see any rosy cheeks ...

Tanner - Tell Jesse I always knew he had a killer skincare routine, and bring some of that home for me too.

Home, he did it again . These little words and gestures; he probably doesn't even realise what he is doing. I am most likely just overthinking again, but he's breaking through the barriers I have always had so firmly in place. I respond with a laughing emoji and a heart.

Patting my face dry with a towel, Jesse's words from Friday night ring in my ears, 'I don't think he would run, Kins. I really do think you could tell him.' God, I wish that were true. Even if it were, can I really tempt fate by finding out? If Kyle and Jesse were right, if these guys are intertwined deeper into my family than I thought, I need to keep Tanner as far away as possible.

There is a knock at the door and Lou-loo barks. I swear by the sound and speed of his footsteps Jesse is running excitedly to the door. Wrapping myself in my dressing

gown, I attempt to seek comfort in its warmth, grounding myself with the familiar fluffy material.

In the lounge, Jesse has pillows scattered on the floor either side of the coffee table, Monopoly set up in the middle and more beer and pizza than we will be able to consume. I wonder if he realises it's a Sunday night? Why he decided to become a teacher when he could never turn up to school on time is beyond me.

“Better than ice cream and two spoons, right?”

A slither of guilt bites at me. “We should have invited the other two over, don't you think?”

Jesse pins me with a look of disgust. “To our games night? I think not. Jeez Louise .” At the sound of her name, Lou-loo barks and I laugh. “No, Lou-loo, not you. It's a figure of speech.” She cocks her head to the side. “Never mind,” he mutters, waving her off and she huffs, lying her head back down on the floor.

“Okay, well, if we are really doing one of our old school game nights, we are playing by the old rules.” I challenge him with my brows high.

“Oh, you are on, Fallon.” He sits down on one side of the coffee table and cracks a beer. “Each time you land on a chance card, instead of picking it up, you get to ask the other person a question. Deal?”

I nibble my bottom lip. “I've got nothing to hide from you Jess. You'll get bored ... I on the other hand have loads I could ask.”

Jesse smirks playfully. “Roll the dice, Meadow.”

Jesse

I roll a five, moving the little silver dog forward until I find that I've landed on a chance square.

"Buckle up, Meadow." Kinsley rolls her honey-coloured eyes whilst stuffing her face full of pizza. "Let's start with something easy," I say, even though all I want to do is hit her with some hard truths about opening up to Tanner.

"Okay, I've got it. Your first kiss?" I smile coyly, knowing full well this will embarrass the shit out of her. Somehow she manages to swallow her mouthful without spitting beer everywhere before her face turns bright red.

"Jesse!" she gasps. "You already know the answer to that!"

Kinsley hides her face behind her hands, shaking her head. "Leroy Morgan, seventh grade ... It was a dare, okay?"

When she peeks out from behind her hands my head is tipped back and I can no longer contain my laughter. "The poor guy, he had the biggest crush on you. Don't know how you could ever be so mean," I tease.

"Yeah, yeah. Just you wait."

We go around the board twice more, and I consume another four beers by the time Kinsley finally lands on a chance.

"Finally! I was almost going to give up," she giggles, the alcohol making her giddy — as per usual. "I want to know everything!"

"That's not how this works, Meadow. Ask me a question."

"Did you and Sophie go on another date? After the double date. I mean — actually, I

need to rephrase. Have you guys seen each other outside of our group catch-ups?”

“No.”

“No?”

“That’s what I said ...” I pick up the dice, but Kinsley grabs my hand.

“Hey, I’m not finished my turn yet!”

“One question Kinsley, that’s all you get.” She pouts and I consider what I could tell her so she will drop it. If I don’t tell her anything, she will quiz Sophie tomorrow. “Soph is awesome and we get along great, but we both kinda just friend-zoned each other straight off the bat. It’s no biggie, Kins.”

Her brow furrows, I study her face not knowing what direction she will go next. She almost looks defensive. Oh no. Kinsley is a little more than giddy from the alcohol and she thinks Sophie has given me the cold shoulder, this isn’t going to go down well.

“What is wrong with her? Has she not seen — Let me call her, don’t worry, Jess. I will fix this,” Kinsley continues to ramble to herself whilst looking for her phone. The phone I have just now tucked under a pillow. I won’t let her embarrass herself on my watch, especially when her assumption is so far from the reality of the situation.

“Just take your turn, otherwise I’ll call it a night. One of us has to get up for work in the morning.”

“Isn’t it your turn?” She raises one brow in question. “Someone has had one too many.”

“Fine, one more turn but if I don’t land a chance, I’m out.”

Without the liquid courage I wouldn’t be able to ask her the question that comes out of my mouth next. Let’s hope we end the night without tears. I cross my fingers behind my back for luck. “Are you ever going to let Tanner see all of you?”

She bites her bottom lip, her mind going straight to the gutter. “Fuck, Meadow,” I growl. “That’s not what I meant.”

Seeing her like this, so free and happy, I decide to drop it. I run my fingers through my hair. “Let’s just call it a night.”

### Chapter Twenty-Six

Kinsley

Waiting on the front steps of the newly renovated building, a strange sense of belonging washes over me. The last time I was here I kept my head down and eyes on the books I wanted to borrow. I used the self check out and didn't engage with a single soul; it is surreal just how different this is from the last time I was here.

I shuffle impatiently on my feet. The library opens at 9am, when I glance down at my watch I see the time is 8.57, she should be here to open up any minute now. Moments later I see her, Sophie walks towards me with surprise written all over her face. She unlocks the large glass doors and tries to awkwardly hug me whilst I have a takeaway coffee in each hand. She is dressed in blush pink slacks and a white shirt, her short black hair styled in waves with the left side tucked behind her ear.

“What are you doing here?!” she exclaims.

“I brought you coffee — I thought I could follow you around and chat when you're not busy being, Miss Librarian. I've been a shitty friend lately, well at least I think I have. I don't really have any other female friendships outside of work to compare this to.” I give her a shy smile, holding out the coffee in offering.

“Kins, we don't need to talk daily or catch up weekly for you to be a good friend. Life gets busy, I get it.”

I sigh with relief as she ushers me into the building. Glancing up, I see the library

now spans across two floors. I assume the second floor mainly houses books, maybe a conference room or two. Sophie's office and an information desk sits off to the right, a vase full of wildflowers brightening the space. Over to my left, there is another new addition – a small cafe, welcoming you with the comforting aroma of coffee. The space offers intimate lounging areas for people to read. My mind begins to drift, picturing myself curling up with a book.

Soph bumps me with her elbow. "If you're going to show up with coffee and keep me company at work, you're welcome to guilt yourself into feeling like a bad friend more often."

"Noted." I giggle, before taking a sip of my coffee. "So, what does one do at a library all day?"

"Well, today," she says with a grin. "We gossip and drink coffee."

We settle into the couches near the front of the library and Sophie keeps an eye out for anyone who might enter, meaning she will need to actually do some work.

"Okay, me first. I need to know why you and Jesse friend-zoned each other!" I shuffle closer to her. "I am very selective of the women I send his way, so come on, spill the beans!"

"We — we instantly hit it off like a house on fire; laughing, chatting and felt like we had known each other for years, you know?"

I did know, all too well. Jesse has this vibe and when you connect on that level with him it's instant.

"It was more a best friend, brother and sister vibe. There is honestly nothing wrong with him and I will happily join you in the recruitment process for potential women

from now on.”

We both burst into laughter.

“Okay, okay,” she says, composing herself. “What about you and Tanner? That seems to be going well?”

I give her a run down on how things are progressing with Tanner and the fact he dropped the girlfriend bomb when introducing me to his sister, which I’m still yet to bring up with him. This conversation leads into me staying at Jesse’s for the past three nights and the reason why; someone has been following me.

“You’re telling me someone has been following you, taking photos and could potentially be the same person who broke into the bar?” Sophie stands, throwing her arms in the air. I quickly tug on her arm, urging her to sit. “— and you’re just walking around by yourself? Wait until I see those boys, I’ll give them a piece of my mind!”

“Soph, shh. You’re going to make a scene!” I whisper-shout, smiling over her shoulder and giving an awkward wave at the cafe owner who is opening up for the morning.

“I’m not letting you leave here alone, what are your plans from here — for the rest of today?”

“Again, I am fine. Thank you for caring but honestly, I can look after myself. I have an opening shift this afternoon. I was planning on leaving here after your lunch break and going home to change, before making my way into work.”

She drums her ruby red nails on the side of her coffee cup. “I will take you home on my lunch break. I need to know that you’re safe and no other surprises are waiting for

you when you get there.”

I roll my eyes. What’s that saying, my wife wanted a cat, so we compromised and she got a cat? Yeah, well that’s about how I feel at this moment.

People begin to filter into the library and I take a cart of returned books, setting off to put them back on the shelves. I pick up one of the remaining books left on the cart and instantly recognise the cover — Tomorrow, When the War Began by John Marsden — the first series I ever read as a pre-teen. Glancing between the beanbags at the end of the aisle and back to my returns cart, I decide that I’m not being paid for this anyway and if I want to sit and read, I can, right?

What feels like only minutes later, Sophie clears her throat. Only moving my eyes, I look up at her. “Do you need something?” I huff, “I’m mid page here.”

She laughs. “You’ve been missing for an hour and a half, I’m ready to take lunch. Do you want to check that one out, or?”

I stand, letting the pages fall together, closing the door on Ellie and her friends, leaving them to fight the war alone. “Oh, this? No, I have it at home, I just haven’t read it in so long — it missed me; we were getting reacquainted.”

A smile graces Sophie’s lips and we walk in silence, out of the library and to her car.

\* \* \*

“See? Perfectly safe. No surprises here. I bet if you wave at that security camera.” I point to the one directly above the front door “Tanner will magically appear,” I say, throwing my hands in the air and spinning around in a circle.

“Why don’t I doubt that for a second,” she says and we both burst into laughter.

I place the two containers of Pad Thai, along with the plastic cutlery, down on the coffee table. We eat the takeout, which we picked up on the way here, and Soph harasses me about staying vigilant.

It's not that I don't feel threatened by what's going on, I just feel as though we have enough precautions in place to keep me safe. Maybe my relaxed state of mind has something to do with the fact that I am looking for these guys, and if they want to place themselves in front of me, make my job easier, then so be it. I want to find them; to understand what happened to my dad and Kyle, and to seek my own justice for them both. Jesse disagrees. He wants to get the police involved as soon as we have enough evidence, but me? I would be happy to go all dark and twisted, and deal with them however I see fit.

Giving Sophie a brief hug, something I have had to come to terms with in our friendship, I promise to not stay in my apartment alone any longer than I need to be; then we say our goodbyes.

### Chapter Twenty-Seven

Tanner

Having Em home has been awesome, yet I still can't help but wonder why she came back. I have made subtle attempts over the past few days to pry it out of her, but anytime I mention anything that could lead to a conversation about her being here, she avoids the topic and brushes me off; I'll find out sooner or later, I always do. I can't blame her for not wanting Mum and Dad to know the ins and outs of her life; having them sailing around the world on their private yacht has been pure bliss for me. I can't say Kinsley and I would be where we are today if they were here hovering; trying to control me , and dictating what I do with my life ...

Her voice pulls me from my thoughts. "How are Harley and the boys?" We are on the way to have a few drinks at the bar with Kins. Her shift finishes at 9pm tonight and the girls wanted to do something fun before Emma leaves tomorrow.

"I haven't really seen them. I've been busy with the business." My response comes out a little short and I see her straighten in her seat.

"You're twenty-seven years old, Tanner. When are you going to stop letting Mum and Dad walk all over you?" Emma shakes her head and her loose curls fall into her face. She tucks them behind her ear and continues to speak, "Those boys are your family, don't push them away."

"Enough, Em. Just drop it."

I glance sideways at her and see she has her arms crossed over her chest. “Finish the tantrum before we arrive, Princess, or you can wait in the car.”

‘We’ll always be here for you, Chonk. Do what you need to do.’ Harley’s words the last time we spoke whisper in my mind as I indicate and turn into the car park of Twisted Sister. He understands; one day it won’t need to be this way. A sting of guilt hits me and I rub my chest, feeling the physical pain of juggling two worlds; the one I was born into and the one I should be grateful for.

I scan the inside of Twisted Sister as we enter. There are a couple of girls sipping cocktails on couches over in the far corner, as well as a few others standing, scattered along the length of the bar. Making our way through the small crowd, people part as I direct Emma to a tall table with three stools and wave Becky over when she looks our way.

“Could you watch this one for a second? Grab us some menus and a round of drinks for the three of us? I’m just going to grab Kinsley from out the back.”

“Sure thing, I’ll only be one second,” she says, whisking away to get the menus.

“I don’t need babysitting, Tanner,” Emma snarls.

I don’t respond, or wait around for Becky to come back. It’s been three days too long since I’ve seen my girl. My patience has worn thin.

Kinsley is bent over her desk typing away on her computer, the thought of her fingers on the keys when they could be on me goes straight to my cock. Three days too long. My eyes roam down to her round ass and the way her back curves in the position she is in. I lean backwards on the door and it clicks shut. She jumps at the sound; her tits give a little jiggle at the motion as she spins around to face me. I have to restrain myself, because all I want to do right now is throw her up onto the desk; I want to

feel her racing pulse and her heavy breathing against my skin.

Without a second to prepare myself, Kinsley leaps into my arms. I catch her on pure instinct. “Hey, Pip,” I whisper into the crook of her neck. “Missed me?”

A shiver runs down her spine. “Maybe a little,” she teases. Walking over to her desk, I sit down in the chair, keeping her straddled on my lap. “Seems like you may have missed me,” she says, with a slight wiggle of her hips. The bulge in my jeans clearly gave me away. I raise my hips slightly and a whimper escapes her lips.

“I’m not letting you out of my sight for that long ever again.”

She laughs, but it’s husky; my little lady likes being told what to do. “It was only three days, Tanner.”

Kinsley lifts her eyes to meet mine, and it’s as if fireworks were exploding in front of her; the hazel colour is full of golden specks. My hands trail up over her hips, caressing each curve of her body. She leans in, taking my lips in a sweet kiss. She tastes like raspberries, I swear I’m going to buy a lifetime of these chapsticks so she never runs out. My hands continue moving higher and I brush my thumb over her breasts, her nipples harden under her shirt and she moans into my mouth.

I pull back just enough to speak, “Yeah, it was only three days but it was the longest four thousand, three hundred and twenty minutes of my life.”

A knock on the door has my head turning, Kinsley sighs and lets her head rest against my chest.

“Busy,” I clip.

The door opens and Kinsley quickly tries to climb off my lap, I tighten my hold on

her looking over to see who thought it was a good idea to interrupt us at this moment. Of course, my little sister.

“Becky said she doesn’t get paid enough to babysit, so I decided I would come find Mum and Dad ,” she says, putting on a sweet fucking voice.

“ Maybe I should call Mum and Dad, I wonder what they would think of their princess skipping counties without them knowing?”

She huffs, turning on her heels and leaving us alone once again. Kinsley places her hands gently either side of my face, drawing my attention back to her.

“Let’s pick this back up a little later; she leaves in the morning and I would really like to get to know her a little more before she goes.”

With a flutter of her dark eyelashes Kinsley has me in a trance, this fucking girl. What has she done to me? If she said jump, I would ask how high. This is more than a want; I need her, and it scares the shit out of me.

\* \* \*

The girls are on their fourth cocktail when Brad comes over to clear the table. “Last call for drinks, girls. We close in thirty minutes.”

Kinsley and Emma glance at each other playfully before looking in my direction. Whatever they are thinking, it can’t be good. These girls could cause some serious trouble together if left alone. I can’t hide the fact that this is everything I have ever wanted though, the two women in my life hitting it off.

“Whatever you’re thinking, the answer is no.” I look between them both in an attempt to get the message across.

“Just one fun little shot to end the night.” Kinsley purses her lips.

“Make it something yummy,” Emma says. “Like a dessert shot — oh you know those fancy ones, with cream on top where you have to take it without your hands!”

“Oh yeah, I’m down for that,” Becky calls over the music. “It’s just us here now anyway. Brad, line us all up with shots and I’ll start closing up.”

The next time Emma comes home I’m hiring these girls security. I pinch the bridge of my nose, a headache forming. When we get over to the bar, Emma sits on the stool to the left of me and Kinsley stands to my right. Not knowing whether my hand around her waist is supporting her to stand, I leave it there.

“On the count of three, ready?” Becky announces, standing on the other side of the bar, along with Brad. “One, Two, Three!”

Everyone bends down to their shot glass and picks it up with their mouth, tipping their heads back. It’s harder than it looks and when I glance over at Em, she has cream on her nose.

“How did you manage that?” I laugh. “Come here.” I clean the whipped cream off of her face with a napkin. “I think it’s time I get the two of you home.” Wrapping my arm around Kinsley’s waist once again and taking Em by the hand, we head towards the car.

### Chapter Twenty-Eight

Kinsley

“I can walk, Tanner.” I laugh against his chest as he carries me inside.

“Night, lovers!” Emma shouts, as she stumbles through the doorway. Balancing on one leg, she attempts to take her heels off. Instead she lands on her bum with a thud.

“Jesus Christ,” Tanner mumbles, as he sits me down on the sofa in the entryway. “Stay here.”

He grabs Em and throws her over his shoulder. “What the hell! Put me down you big baboon.”

She mumbles endless threats until her voice fades towards her bedroom and moments later he’s back, and I’m being cradled against his chest again. Fighting to keep my eyes open, I reach up and thread my fingers through his hair; he has let it get a little longer than usual. Something to hold onto, I chuckle out loud to my own thoughts. Tanner either doesn’t hear me, or chooses not to buy into my madness. I don’t mind either way, it won’t be long before I let him have his way with me. My body has been craving him since he walked into my office earlier tonight. Thinking of all the things he would do to me and how my body ignites under his touch.

I didn’t realise I had closed my eyes until my ass is placed onto the cold marble of the bathroom counter top. The his and her sinks span the length of the wall, the marble a luxe black in colour. I have to blink a few times to focus, when I do Tanner is

kneeling between my legs, unbuckling my heels. Pairing them together, he sits them in the corner and reaches to unbutton my jeans. I lean back onto my forearms, and lift slightly, allowing him to tug them off.

“You can get back down on your knees if you like.” As the words leave my mouth I swear I see him blush. I never thought I would see the day where Tanner Hayes was blushing in the bedroom — well technically the bathroom.

“Arms up,” he says, ignoring me.

I narrow my eyes whilst raising my arms, maybe it’s the alcohol but the desire I can normally see in his bright baby blues is missing. He finishes undressing me and slips one of his grey tee’s over my head.

“Since when did my dark knight turn into a white knight?”

“A knight is still a knight, Pip. Regardless of the armour they wear. I will always be whatever you need me to be — tonight you need to sleep.” I open my mouth to speak but he places a finger over it. Did he just shush me — I think he just shushed me. “Don’t think for a second that I don’t want to bend you over this vanity and make you watch yourself come over and over again, whilst you milk every drop from me.” He runs his fingers along the black marble. “Fuck, it’s taking every fibre of my being not to do that right now. You’re more than that though Kinsley; I need you to know you mean so much more than that to me.”

I try to push off, to jump down onto my feet, but again he scoops me up into his arms and carries me over to the bed. I know I’m drunk, but I’m still capable of knowing what I want. Right now, what I want is an orgasm, if only I had my vibrator here, I’d just do the damn job myself.

Tanner

Kinsley rolls away from me with a huff and pulls the blankets up around her. She's snooty, I get it and I would think it was cute if I wasn't so caught up in the feelings I am having for her. I don't think she realises how badly I want her at this very moment, but I also need her to know what she means to me. This is more than just sex. I don't know when it turned into more, but it did; it's been more for a while. I undress down to my briefs and climb into bed. Reaching out I pull her close to me and inhale her shampoo and the sweet smell of the cocktails.

Holding her close, I whisper to her, "I remember meeting this girl a while back. She was shy, with dark brown hair and freckles dusted across her nose. Whenever I spoke, her cheeks would blush — I'd never had a favourite colour, until I met her." I lace my fingers through hers, resting our hands on her stomach. "That first day, I caught her eye-fucking me from her car. She didn't know I was watching, but from the second I saw her, I couldn't tear my eyes away. From that moment my eyes were only for her."

Kinsley's breathing begins to even out and I realise she's asleep. I'm not sure if she heard any of what I had said, but being this deep into my confession, I keep going.

"I convinced myself for six whole months that surprising her with coffee and orgasms was enough. That I could play the role of the mysterious landlord who —" Is it breaking and entering if I had a key? Because trying to find the words to explain the first six months of what we had and saying all of this out loud makes me feel a little creepy. I sigh, changing direction. "— The day I found you passed out in your apartment, a switch flicked within me. Knowing that your own mind and body betrayed you lit a fire inside me. I needed to protect you, not only physically but emotionally. I swore to myself I would protect you, even from yourself. I'm ready, Kins."

Kinsley lets out a little snore and I almost laugh. I can't wait to watch her cheeks flush when I tell her that in the morning.

“I was ready for you to freak out because I name dropped you as my girlfriend in front of Em, but you didn’t . I promise you, a little bit of a messy mind will never scare me away. I love you, Kinsley Mae Fallon and I will spend forever proving that to you.”

I lay there with her wrapped in my arms until she mumbles something and rolls away. Instead of pulling her back into my arms like I normally do, I let her go.

Climbing out of bed, I throw on some sweats and make my way down into my office when I spot Emma at the kitchen counter typing away on her phone.

“Can’t sleep?” I ask, raising my left brow.

“Trying to find a booty call,” she says effortlessly. Before I can comment, she raises her eyes to mine and winks at me.

“I really don’t have the energy to kick someone’s ass tonight, little sister. Don’t play with me.”

“You do realise I’m not twelve years old anymore? Someday, I am going to find someone who won’t be intimidated by you.”

I lean back against the bench, pausing as I lift a glass of water to my lips. She’s right, she isn’t twelve anymore but it doesn’t change anything. Whoever she chooses to be with, will need to win me over first. Ignoring the daggers she’s giving me, I stay quiet, drink my water and set my glass down in the sink.

“Promise me one thing before you go tomorrow?”

“Anything,” she says.

“Please don’t be a stranger and come home again soon?”

Emma stands, a devilish twinkle in her eyes. “Who are you and what have you done with my brother?”

“Ha ... Ha ... Very funny. I mean it, at least think about it?”

She strolls over to me, the alcohol from earlier clearly not affecting her as much as it did Kinsley.

“I’ll be home for Christmas, but I’m only coming if you keep her. ” Emma tilts her head towards the stairs leading to my bedroom on the second floor. If only Em knew the lengths I would go to, to keep Kinsley here.

“Between you and me, I don’t plan on ever letting her go.”

She watches me for a moment, then nods. I reach out, pulling her into a bear hug. “You better go get some sleep, Princess.”

Watching her walk off to her bedroom, I decide that just for tonight, tracking down the people who are messing with Kinsley can wait. My girl is here, she is safe and I should be upstairs with her in my arms.

### Chapter Twenty-Nine

Kinsley

I don't often do the opening shift at the bar, but it's a nice change getting home at 7pm, rather than closer to midnight. I convinced Tanner that it would be safe for me to make my way home by myself; I promised to call him if anything seemed out of the ordinary. Both Stanley and Tanner have been keeping a close eye on the apartment's security cameras. I even had a message from Tanner giving me the all clear at the end of my shift so I'm sure if anyone had been snooping around, they would have noticed.

On that thought, I walk into the apartment and see that the door into the spare room is open and the light is on. "Jess, are you in there?" I call out. These guys can not help themselves, if Tanner isn't there picking me up, I always know I'll find Jesse waiting for me at home.

"I'll grab us a beer." My heels are clicking on the tiles as I walk, the sound is almost therapeutic as it echoes through the quiet space. Reaching the doorway of the spare room, I'm met with deep ocean blues. I freeze and the beers drop onto the tiles, the glass bottles smashing at my feet. I've become so complacent that it never occurred to me that Tanner would make his way into my room of secrets. How could I be so stupid?

"T-tanner, what are you —" My body begins to shake uncontrollably. No, this can't be happening. Not now. Not when I've finally let him in, let myself believe this could work. The broken shards of glass glint in the light, mocking me as if they're pieces of

the life I have tried so hard to hold together, the life which is now shattered at my feet.

Tanner closes the gap between us, as I carefully step into the room and out of the puddle of glass and beer surrounding me on the floor. His arms wrap around me and he holds me to his chest. I fist his t-shirt, holding on for dear life because I know that I'm going to have to let him go. He's not safe anymore.

I inhale his scent, which has become familiar and comforting, committing it to my memory; leather, coffee and spice. I can feel his breathing, it's faster than normal. Isn't it funny what you can learn about someone in less than a year? I don't want to let him go, but now that he knows, he will want to get involved. There is no way in hell I would let that happen. If I had it my way Jesse would be kept in the dark as well, but unfortunately for us both, he's in too deep.

We stand like this for a while, holding each other whilst my heart violently pounds in my chest. Eventually, he lets go of me and tilts my chin upwards so that I'm forced to meet his gaze. Hurt, pain and a sense of longing lingers in his eyes, and at the same time, I begin building the wall back up, brick by brick; the one he so effortlessly knocked down. This time, though, the wall is going back up to protect him, he may not see it this way, but this is no longer about protecting me.

"I'm sorry, I really didn't want you to find out this way," I say gesturing towards my mess taking up the spare room.

He runs his fingers through his hair, a telling sign he is uncomfortable. "Do you seriously think I give a shit about any of this, Kinsley?"

I take a step further into the room; everything feels so heavy, with all the weight pressing down onto my chest. I rub my arms, the feeling of bugs crawling over them overpowers anything else I can think about right now. I startle at the touch of

Tanner's hand, he's resting it gently on my lower back and I turn to face him again as he speaks.

"It doesn't matter how messy you think your life is, or was, when I said I wanted you I meant it. I want all of you."

He's not going to make this easy for me, is he? Can't he see that loving me and knowing my past isn't safe for him? That I need to let him go — let him go on my terms; because if he gets ripped away from me like everyone else has — I don't know if I would be able to survive it this time. The need to free myself from the overwhelming pressure and emotions I am feeling is too much. Reaching out, I start ripping things off of the walls; years of connected dots, everything that is holding me hostage in the past — gone. I need an escape.

He is no longer that escape.

I need something. I need something that will drown out this noise. The scars on my wrist burn, my subconscious beckoning me; calling me to do something that was my escape for so long.

"Kins, you're in your head again."

I need to get away from him before I spiral any further. I say the first thing that comes to mind. "Maybe in another time, another place —" How cliché Kinsley, inwardly I roll my eyes at myself and for a minute the ridiculous voices in my head snap me out of my downward spiral. That is until Tanner scoffs — wait a second, he fucking scoffed at me. My eyes snap up to his.

"Nice try, Pip, but I can see through you — through this." He looks between us and then around the room. I take a deep breath, am I really doing this? Pushing away the one and only guy I have ever let my walls down for, just because now he's seeing me

, really seeing me , for the first time? I should be grateful that he isn't running for the hills. I should be the one begging him to stay.

I see it in his eyes though; the want and need to destroy anyone who has hurt me. The determination to fix all of this. "Maybe if we had met in a year or two when all this was behind me. But Tanner, I can see it in your eyes. Now that you know, there's pain in there now."

"Tell me something," he says, flipping the conversation on its head.

"Anything," I admit. "What do you want to know?"

Tanner's deep blue eyes pierce into me, I feel him searching for the key to unlock my mind; looking for a way in, but there isn't one.

"Everything. Tell me everything."

"You already know too much," I say, glancing around the room.

He cups my face with both his hands and rests his forehead on mine. Please don't say it. I can feel the moment approaching, the moment I've been longing for – it's too late now. A tear rolls down my cheek as he whispers, "I'm in love with you, Kinsley."

For a moment my heart skips a beat, it flutters a few times before finding its rhythm again. Those words, now a dagger to my heart. He has never told me that before. Deep down I knew, he didn't have to say it. I felt his love for me; I have for months.

"And I'll always love you. You were my escape. The air I so desperately needed to breathe. You saved me." My eyes are burning, with a tsunami of tears ready to fall. "If I'm going to get through this, I need to walk away. Now that your eyes mirror my pain, I —"

Tanner steadies the back of my head and takes my lips into a kiss. He kisses me in a way he has never kissed me before. It's deep and passionate, tears fall from both our eyes. I open up for him, and I can taste the salt from all of our unspoken words, as our tongues tangle together.

Breaking away he looks at me, and I know exactly what he's going to say. A sob escapes me, but his eyes are pleading. "Please, do this for me."

Everything inside me is screaming 'no' , telling me to walk away now. But over the past nine months this man has saved me from myself, and if this is what he needs to be able to save me once more, to let me walk away from his love. I can do this. I nod. So he picks me up and I wrap my legs around his waist.

Deep blue eyes drink me in while his hands lovingly explore my body. We don't speak. Our bodies communicate without the need for words; expressing the reality that neither of us are willing to face.

Resting my cheek against Tanner's chest I listen to his heart rate begin to slow. He presses a kiss to the top of my head, and I fight to keep my eyes open. ' Don't go to sleep, Kinsley' the little voices in my head say, with every ounce of my being I try to listen to them. Because I know when I wake, nothing will be the same.

\* \* \*

Waking up this morning, the reality of last night comes crashing down. My whole world has flipped upside down again, but this time I was the one to flip it. The thought sinks deep down into my stomach where it turns to nausea, sweat prickles on the back of my neck and my heart rate picks up. He is gone. The bed is now cold in the spot where I had fallen asleep in his arms. The only thing left to show me that last night happened is the spare key for my apartment left on the pillow; his key.

I take a shaky, deep breath in. My eyelashes are lumped together from tears mixing with my mascara, and my makeup is smeared across my pillow.

To be able to get through this, I need to be strong. I would never be able to get through this by looking into eyes where I saw a reflection of the pain that I am trying so hard to bury. I take another breath, this one less shaky than the last, preparing myself to face this new reality. A reality that no longer includes what I considered my healthiest escape. A drug – one I have become addicted to.

The door downstairs opens abruptly and slams shut, I flinch at the sound. Feelings of hope and confusion stir within me causing my stomach to flip. Tanner left his key, I remind myself. Whoever it is, they are in a hurry. I can hear footsteps taking the stairs two at a time. I should be scared after all that has happened over the past few weeks, but fear is the one emotion I'm not feeling. If Lance Harding, George Watson or his goons are here, come and fucking get me; I've got nothing left to lose.

"Tanner?" I whisper, holding onto my last thread of hope. I don't even open my eyes, they're scrunched shut to hold back any tears that are trying to escape. All the reasoning and strength I had just instilled in myself shatters. If he was to wrap his arms around me now, I wouldn't have the strength to push him away. Not again.

The bed dips and I'm being wrapped up into a hold I know all too well. The scent of freshly mowed grass and cinnamon intoxicates me.

"No," I whimper. "No, no, no."

All the emotions I have been suppressing since I woke up rise to the surface and the pep talk I gave myself fades away. I'm sobbing. I thrash and I kick. But he doesn't let go. My breathing turns to gasping for air and a bead of sweat drips down the back of my neck; the feeling resembles a blade slicing my skin.

I haven't had a panic attack for three months. Not since the day Tanner found me.

"Dammit, Meadow, breathe," Jesse pleads.

"H—he knows," I try to explain to Jesse.

"Shh," he soothes. "I know."

Once again, Jesse is here picking up my shattered pieces. This time it's different though, I don't know if Jesse will be able to put me back together, not without the missing piece. The one I just willingly gave away.

### Chapter Thirty

Jesse

The sun beams brightly through the double doors that lead out onto Kinsley's balcony. "Jesse," she rasps, her throat dry from refusing to stay hydrated. "Close the curtains — please."

"I'll close the curtains and let you rot in the darkness, if you take a shower, drink some water and eat —" Softening my voice a little I add, "— I'll go and get you literally anything." She has the blanket pulled up over her face; with one swift tug I pull it off of her and onto the floor. "I'm not tiptoeing around you anymore, Kins — that was yesterday. Today we are doing things my way."

"I c-can't do it, Jesse," she sobs. "I'm — I, I'm so tired."

Seeing her this way is like a bullet to the chest, but I refuse to let her spiral any deeper. I've witnessed her rockbottom and it isn't a place she will ever visit again, not if I can help it.

"Why do you keep pushing people away when they start to see all of you? Is it because you're scared that you're too much? Do you think that you're too broken?"

I sit down next to her on the bed. With the blanket on the floor and nowhere to hide, she has curled into a ball, facing away from me.

"You can't keep running for the rest of your life, Kinsley. Each time you break into a

thousand pieces, who is putting you back together?" I pause, waiting for a response. When I get nothing, I lay down beside her and mold my body around hers, being the big spoon. Then I whisper in her ear, "Every damn time it's me — I piece you back together and I would do it for the rest of my existence, but each time I piece you back together, I lose a piece of myself. I lose it to you, Meadow."

Kinsley stays silent, her breathing evening out and the sobbing subsides. A few moments later she laces her fingers through mine and pulls my arm tighter around her; the only acknowledgement I'm going to get. I lay there with her, allowing my own eyes to close too. So much has happened over the past week, none of it was supposed to lead to this. If I'm honest with myself, I really wanted to be wrong when I told Tanner she would react this way, he is the only guy she has ever let in this deep, and he's actually a good one too.

Little does she know, he doesn't plan on going anywhere. I have to stop myself from laughing at the thought. One, because now is not the time to be laughing and two, because I think Kinsley has actually fallen asleep and I don't want to wake her.

He is kinda obsessed with her in a 'if you touch her, you'll die' kind of way but the scary thing is, I'm not sure how far he would actually go on that statement. Stop it Jesse, he wouldn't actually kill someone ... But how would I know? He is moody enough, his side-eye alone nearly killed me the first time I met him.

When I'm sure she is asleep I roll out of bed and tuck the blankets around her to mimic the pressure of my hold. I close the curtains to allow her to sleep and decide to go off in search of foods which not even she can deny.

\* \* \*

Kinsley

My stomach rumbles. Opening my eyes, I see that the curtains are closed, the smallest amount of light filtering in. Jesse is nowhere to be seen, I'm not sure how much time has passed but the other times I've glanced around, he's been sitting in my reading chair or lying next to me. Deciding I don't want a victory party for actually leaving the bed, I slip out whilst I'm here alone.

I can't physically lay in that bed any longer, however the sight of the stairs sends a shiver up my spine. I'm not ready to leave the comfort of my little abode up here. Hmm, maybe Jesse has gone to get me food? I think I recall him throwing the blankets off of me earlier, demanding I get up and eat something. I'm not sure what day it is or even the time. All I know is that Jesse has been here, looking out for me, fussing over me. The least I could do is try to pull myself together, even if I'm not ready to walk downstairs in my own apartment yet.

Bath or shower? The shower would hide my tears, but the bathtub will cocoon me, hold me and keep me safe.

"Bubble Bath?" Jesse speaks from behind me. The smell of baked goods follows him. He's holding two bakery trays in brown paper bags. "I got all your favourites."

A smile creeps onto my face, I can't help it. "Yes, please," I say, taking the trays of food from his hands. The water begins to run, filling the bathtub as I take the food back into the bedroom.

"Hallelujah!" Jesse cries out when he sees me chewing. "She isn't going to die of starvation."

I flip him off, unable to speak with my mouth full of pastries. I hold up the tray, gesturing for him to grab something.

"Oh, I wouldn't dare," he laughs, holding his hands up in front of himself.

“I can’t physically eat all of this, Jesse; help a girl out here.”

He approaches with caution. “Fine, but only if you go and get in the bath.”

I stand, giving him the best version of a smile I can muster.

“— and Kins ...” he adds, I pause gripping the doorframe of the ensuite, looking back over my shoulder at him. “Can you leave the door open?”

A glance at my wrist and back towards him, causes my chest to ache and tears well in my eyes. He’s scared. I don’t say anything, I continue to walk into the bathroom and out of his line of sight, undressing and lowering myself into the bath; all whilst leaving the door open. If that’s the peace of mind he needs, I’ll give it to him.

### Chapter Thirty-One

Tanner

Two days prior ...

Jesse finally told me everything.

Now, I'm standing in Kinsley's spare room, looking around at the mess of papers, the pinboards and notebooks. I'm not angry that she kept this from me, I'm hurt that she is going through this without my support.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickle when I think of the final words Jesse left me with, 'If she knows that you know, she will push you away. She can turn cold as ice and her words will hurt you. Just know that in her eyes, she is doing this to protect you.'

She wouldn't push me away though, would she? She is fucking delusional if she thinks for a minute that I would walk away from her. Kinsley Mae Fallon is mine .

I can make it look as though I'm walking away, if that's what she wants. But little will she know, I'll be walking into battle right alongside her. I will let her believe she is protecting me. I will willingly walk away. Fuck, it will be the hardest thing I've ever done, but for her I would do anything.

Jesse seems to think he knows how she will react when she finds me in here, when she realises that I know the details of her past — or really lack thereof. Except, I'm

hoping he's wrong. I'm pacing the room when I hear the front door unlock and the familiar clicking of her heels on the tiles. From the entryway she will be able to see that the door to the spare room is open and the light is on. My chest tightens as I wait for her to notice. If Jesse is right and she pushes me away, we have a plan, a plan that ends with her back in my arms.

"Jess, is that you in there?" she calls out. "I'll grab us a beer."

Moments later she's standing in the doorway, hazel-coloured eyes collide with mine and the beer bottles shatter onto the tiles.

"T-tanner, what are you —" She's shaking her head, clearly not wanting to believe the sight before her eyes. The sight of me seeing her, really seeing her, for the first time.

I've had hours to figure out what I was going to say to her, but now she is here, standing mere feet away from me, I'm speechless. My heart lays on the ground between us, resembled by the shards of broken glass. I have to try, for myself, for her, for us. We are more alike than she knows, but now is not the time to revel in the loss of my own family ties. The look in her eyes and the way her body is trembling screams to me that this is clearly a bigger deal to her than I thought it would be.

Closing the gap between us, I wrap my arms around her and hold her to my chest. Her hands fist my t-shirt and we stand in silence holding each other; an attempt at masking all the unspoken words. Eventually, I let go of her and using my forefinger, I tilt her chin upwards. She blinks and the eyes I'm met with are no longer sparkling, there isn't even a hint of gold left in them. Jesse was right . Kinsley is shutting down and soon she'll be pushing me away. If only she understood how serious I was when I told her forever .

Knowing what I do now, I should have slipped a fucking marriage certificate in with

her rental agreement. The thought almost makes me smile, but it's neither the time nor the place.

\* \* \*

Tanner

Present time ...

I'm drowning in the shadows of my office, the only light flickers from the computer screens in front of me. To my right my screen is split into four; showing the two cameras on the outside of Kinsley's apartment, as well as two new cameras; one in her bedroom and one in the open living area downstairs.

Jesse has the doors open to her balcony, the white sheer curtains moving in the breeze. I can see him attempting to talk to her, while the blankets are pulled up over her head. I should have installed a microphone along with the fucking camera. Moments later he pulls the covers off her and she retreats into a ball. Her body shakes, not from fear or being cold, no – she's sobbing.

I tip back the glass of whisky I poured earlier. The burn of alcohol is no competition to the way my heart is cracking open at the sight of her. Looking back at the screen I see Jesse laying beside her, pulling her into his arms. A mixture of guilt, jealousy and gratitude wash over me and I remind myself that I promised her I would always be what she needed; right now she needs me to be her dark knight ... Jesse has always been the one in shining armour.

Turning my attention back to the screen on my left, I continue running a search on Kinsley's family. I'm determined to learn as much about her past as I can. Jesse has brought me up to speed with his recollection of events, which has helped me paint a picture of her childhood, however I need to dive deeper into her parents; something

about them is off.

If Kinsley's dad – Warren — came home after making the arrest on Lance Harding and then disappeared before morning, Kinsley's mum would have been the last person to see him. I need to find her statement to the police, lucky for me Jesse gave me Stanley's contact details.

Dialling Stanley's number he answers on the second ring, "Hello, Stanley speaking."

"Stanley – My name is Tanner Hayes, Jesse gave me your contact details."

"Yes, he did mention I may hear from you. How can I help?"

I fill him in on my own personal findings, before asking him if he had any witness statements or reports from Warren's disappearance.

"Thanks, Stanley," I say, as an email pops up on my screen. "I've got it."

"Just doing my job, Mr Hayes. Can I ask –"

I cut him off, "Please, just call me Tanner. I'll be in touch if I need anything else." I end the call, slamming my phone down onto the desk. The motherfucker ran a search on me. It's the only explanation as to why he pulled the 'Mr Hayes' crap. I push back from my desk, needing to top up my glass of whisky before I read over this report.

My fist connects with the drywall, leaving another hole I'm going to need to patch. I need to get out of this house. Stretching my fingers out straight before curling them back into a fist, I hiss at the sting of my knuckles. It's the third time in two days they have been split open. Today, the culprit was a pink scrunchie. Lana – the cleaner, must have found it somewhere in the bedroom and placed it on the bedside table.

Unable to sit around in this empty house any longer, I pick up my phone and dial the only number I know I can confide in.

“Been a minute,” Harley teases.

“I’ve had shit going on, you know what it’s like.”

Silence lingers between us, I can hear the rest of the boys in the background which tells me Harley and the others are at the shop.

“Can I swing by?” I ask, already knowing the answer. Harley is the type of person you don’t need to talk to everyday, or even every six months — shit it really has been a minute .

When he speaks again his tone is less comical, “You know you’re always welcome here, Chonk . ” I nod in response, as if he can see me; end the call and make my way there.

Music drifts out of the workshop at the rear of the shopfront, I park my bike next to the four others and place my helmet on the seat. Harley might be understanding of how I come and go but some of the others aren’t as easy going. We are supposed to be a family and we were, we are — things are just more complicated than they used to be; when we were younger.

Harley, Josh, Zach, Carter and I grew up together. Unlike theirs, my life took a turn when I found myself at an intersection; one where I had no choice but to turn left whilst the others went right. I’ve been trying to find my way back to them ever since; I’m still trying.

When I walk through the door, the chatter stops. Let You Down by NF plays on the radio and I square my shoulders, not knowing how my presence will be perceived.

Josh is taking his turn over at the pool table, his grey t-shirt tight across his biceps, showing off more ink than he had last time I saw him. His light brown hair is buzzed short and roughly spiked on top. He doesn't look up as he pockets a ball, instead he continues moving around the table to take his next turn. Zach is working on a bike in the far left corner. He's spread out underneath it, all I can see of him are his combat boots and denim jeans which are covered in oil and grease. Carter is sitting on the couch in the centre of the room, there is barely an inch of unmarked skin left on him that I can see. He always had the most tattoos, but the woman's face that sits on his neck, with roses and thorns covering her is one I've never seen before. There is a girl sitting on his lap, she is a tiny little thing, her white blonde hair is in a pony tail high on her head, and her dark lipstick throws off, don't fuck with me vibes.

Harley approaches me first, pulling me into a hug. He swings his arm over my shoulder and we walk towards the group. I'm close to six feet tall but he towers over me. From the corner of my eye, I see Carter stand, bending to kiss his girl on the forehead, before heading our way. He takes my hand and pulls me into a one arm hug, slapping me on the back.

"It's been a while, Chonk." He winks. "I'll grab you a beer."

I laugh at the nickname I was given as a child and my shoulders relax a little. My eyes find Josh leaning against the pool table, his arms folded across his chest. He is going to be the difficult one. He challenges me with a lift of his brow and I shake my head. Josh is the youngest of us, only recently twenty-one and I know he took it the hardest when I left. How can I blame him? He was only twelve and the five of us had been the only family he had ever known.

"Don't be like that, Bubs." I say, but I can't hide the guilt in my voice. I'm the one who pushes them away when it all gets too much, when I can no longer take the pressure of juggling both worlds. Carter hands me a beer and I twist off the cap, flicking it into the pot belly beside me.

“How long are you gonna stick around for this time?” Josh asks, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it with his zippo.

I mull over his question, trying to find the right words to answer him. If only my parents didn’t turn their nose at the mention of my brothers. Sometimes I wonder what life for us all would be like if I chose Juvenile Detention over the arranged adoption nine years ago. I was only sixteen and Harley encouraged me to take the adoption, he told me it would help set us all up for our future if one of us had a family with money behind them. In some ways it has, I guess. But in other ways, like right now, I’m left wondering if I messed up.

“I fucking knew it!” Josh kicks a drum of empty beer bottles over as he walks towards the door.

I move to follow him when Zach appears and speaks for the first time since I’ve got here. “I’ll go,” he grunts, his light blue eyes giving me the once over before dismissing me. Other than growing out his hair, which he has tied back in a man-bun, he hasn’t seemed to have changed much.

I rub the creases forming on my brow and sink into the couch beside Carter and his girl. Her hands are playing in his hair and the hoodie she is wearing swims on her, I can only assume it’s one of his. She smiles in my direction. “So, I’m finally in the presence of the mysterious Tanner Hayes.”

I chuckle. “Something like that, don’t believe anything these four tell you, though.”

“I’m Michelle, but unless you want to sleep with one eye open I suggest you stick with Micki —” Harley’s laugh interrupts her and she rolls her eyes, Carter throws his head back against the couch as if he’s heard this speech numerous times. He’s got a firecracker on his hands, that’s for sure “— it’s your death wish.” She adds.

Before I can respond to her, Josh returns with Zach close behind him. I sit up on the edge of the couch, resting my forearms on my knees. Josh walks straight past me, back to the game of pool he was playing when I arrived.

“Did you take your shot?” he asks Harley, without turning our way.

“Nah, not yet. But Bubs —”

“What are you waiting for then?” Josh cuts him off.

I lean back into the couch, Harley squeezes my shoulder moving around the couch to finish his game with Josh. Surprisingly it’s Michelle that speaks next. “He’ll come round,” she says with a comforting look in her eyes.

Carter tightens his hold on her. “She’s right, T, you know what he can be like, his fuse has only gotten shorter over the past six months.”

I don’t let myself ponder on that statement too long, the thoughts of what could have happened in the months I’ve been away. I grunt out a response and within a few minutes everyone has resumed their places as if I didn’t just walk into the shop for the first time in six fucking months.

For now, I’m home.

### Chapter Thirty-Two

Tanner

Pushing myself up off my knees, I stand and walk over to the corner of the workshop where Zach is still tinkering on a 2002 Harley Davidson Softail. I lean back against the wall, sliding my hands into the front pockets of my jeans.

“Pass me that,” he curses under his breath, obviously having trouble with whatever he is trying to accomplish.

Crouching down, I hand him the spanner. “Need a hand?”

He chuckles. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you’ve forgotten how to work with your hands, pretty boy. Stick to pencil pushing.”

“Fuck off, Zach.” I stand, resuming my position against the wall. “I taught you everything you fucking know.”

He slides out from under the bike momentarily. “You’re a bit feisty, do you need to blow off some steam? I’ve got a couple of girls on speed dial?” He wriggles his brows at me and I wave him off, I’m not in the mood to play his games.

After another round of beers and catching up on the past six months, the boys and Carter’s little firecracker clear out, leaving Harley and I alone. He has a loft above the shop, whereas the boys live together in a place a few blocks away.

Harley has always preferred his own space and this spot allows him to open the shop early, or work late if need be. The workshop doubles as a place to come together; the boys always congregate here at the end of each day. I'm thankful for that, it provides me with reassurance knowing Harley isn't always alone.

"Anything you want to tell me?" he asks, now that we are alone.

Working together, we pop the fold out bed from the couch and I collapse back onto it. My mind is spinning with everything I have held in since the last time I came and confided in him.

"Not tonight, I think I need to just pass the fuck out."

He nods, tossing me a pillow and blanket. "I'm glad you came."

Harley switches off the downstairs light and walks up the stairs to his loft. I will need to talk to him, tell him what's going on but the heaviness in my body tells me I might actually sleep tonight and God, I need it.

\* \* \*

Three whole days.

Three days of no contact, with either her or Jesse. I'm itching to know how she is, I can only find out so much from watching her. Regardless of how much it's driving me insane, I need her to at least think I'm respecting her choice. A choice that is fucking stupid, but her choice none the less.

What she doesn't know is that Jesse and I will put an end to whomever is causing trouble in her life. His idea is much more law abiding than mine, but we will iron out the details. Regardless on whether we kill the fucker, or Jesse gets him locked up

behind bars, he won't come near her ever again. The latter will require me to keep tabs on the bastard though, which is plain annoying. It also means I'll have to finish the job once he's released; but for now I'll worry about finding whoever it is.

This will be the one and only time I will ever let her push me away. I will make sure she will never have to look over her shoulder again, unless it's to reach for my hand; because once this is over, I'll never leave her side again.

Buzzing from my pocket brings me out of my thoughts, glancing at the screen I see Jesse is calling. "Jesse, is everything okay?" I rush out, this whole situation has me on edge and I don't like it.

"Hey Tanner, woah man — take a breath. Everything is fine."

"Fine? Nothing is fine, Jesse." I clip.

"I know, that's why I'm calling. We need to get together and figure some things out. Can you come over —"

"I'll be there, give me an hour?"

"See you then." Jesse pauses before adding, "She went pretty dark there for the first forty-eight hours, but she seems to be doing okay today. I'll be heading back there again tonight — I wanted to give her some space for the day."

"I'll be at your place soon."

What else can I say? Thanks for updating me that she survived her depressive episode? The one caused by me walking away from her. Approaching the boxing bag in the corner, I lay into it, each punch a desperate plea for something to fill the void in my chest. My knuckles have healed slightly but it still stings. I welcome the pain, a

distraction from the one which has been building in my chest. The boxing bag stills, Harley takes it in his hands and braces his stance. Lifting his chin, he motions for me to keep going and I nod, before continuing.

After a good twenty-five minute session my body collapses onto the couch, sticky with sweat. I could use a shower. Reading my thoughts, Harley tosses a towel at me, hitting me in the head.

“You stink,” he laughs. “Go upstairs and take a shower. I’ll make us something to eat.”

\* \* \*

An hour later I’m sitting on Jesse’s couch. When I first arrived, he shook his head at the sight of my knuckles but he kept his mouth shut. Either he must be learning the meaning of a time and a place, or this whole thing with Kinsley has really shaken him up. I’m starting to think I was too hard on him in the beginning.

“What I can’t work out is who this ‘George Watson’ could be and why he warned Kinsley away from — all of this.” He gestures towards the living room floor where he has what looks to be everything from Kinsley’s spare room scattered everywhere.

“All of this.” I nod towards the mess. “Looked a lot more structured at her apartment.”

“Now who’s trying to joke around? Keep to what you’re good at, T.” Jesse laughs and I can’t help but smile.

“What about the footage of whoever dropped off the photos?”

“It gave us nothing, they had a balaclava on.” He rubs the back of his neck. “Back to

square one.”

“Can I see? Just for the sake of it?”

Jesse was right, you couldn’t see a thing from the security footage. The guy even had gloves on, I thought maybe I could pick up on a piece of jewellery or a tattoo or something, something that Jesse had missed.

“Scrap this George guy, it’s leading us nowhere,” I say, getting aggravated. “What are the reasons we have that they would be pursuing Kinsley for? Why is she a target?” Fuck, there are so many more questions ... Why her family? Is this all because her dad was a cop? No, it can’t be. It would need to be more, but what?

“These are my possible theories so far.” Jesse takes a breath and picks up a piece of paper, one that has his own handwriting on it instead of Kinsley’s. “One, this is all a retaliation from Kinsley’s dad being the police officer on the case. It doesn’t explain why they waited until now though. Two, they found out Kinsley has been using a Private Investigator and they have sent George Watson in to scare her off.”

“And three?”

“Well, that’s the thing, I’ve only got two theories so far.”

An envelope with ‘To My Daughter’ written in cursive handwriting sits on the coffee table and it catches my eye. “What’s this?” I ask.

“That’s the suicide letter, Kinsley’s mum left her. I haven’t read it —” Jesse opens his mouth to continue talking but closes it again.

I open the envelope and take out the letter. “How old was she when her mum died?” I ask.

“Eighteen,” he answers without missing a beat.

I read over the same sentence three times, there is something cryptic in this message.

Sometimes when you know too much, you need to be silenced. It’s my turn to be silenced. Listen carefully now, be silent, Meadow. Be silent or be silenced.

I let my forearms rest on my knees as I stare at the paper, the longer I stare the more my stomach twists with unease.

“You need to read this, Jesse. At the very least, just this part here.” I hold the letter up to him pointing out the words which have me in a chokehold. There is something not right about the way in which it is written.

Jesse’s pupils dilate as he takes in the information. His reaction telling me this is new, something he wasn’t already privy to. As quickly as the emotions flicker across his face, they’re gone again and he gives a poor attempt at smiling; his facade faltering.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking B2?”

Inwardly I roll my eyes, but I play along. When the fuck did I fall onto his wavelength? “Why do you get to be B1?”

Jesse throws his head back in laughter. “I need a beer if we are going to keep doing this,” he says, standing. “Do you want one?”

Nodding in response, I pick the letter back up. Maybe the words will explain themselves to me if I stare at them long enough.

### Chapter Thirty-Three

Jesse

Tanner is still reading over the letter from Kinsley's mum when I return with beers in hand. I hold one out in offering and he takes it, flicking the cap off and downing at least half before lifting his eyes from the paper.

"She had to have known something," he says with a pained look in his eyes. "Why didn't Kins ever mention this to you?"

I know why, but it's not going to help us now. Kinsley wanted to keep me as far away from this as possible. Not knowing that I was already far deeper involved than she ever thought possible.

"It's a warning, but from what? Kyle's death? Warren's disappearance?" He continues, questioning me now.

"I don't know, I really don't." Rubbing the back of my neck, I sink back into the couch. "We need to focus on the here and now, use the new information Stanley has given us. If Kyle was right and Kinsley's dad is alive — if Lance Harding is the key to all the mystery, we need to find him."

"I know some people, I could —"

"No." I interrupt, but before I can finish my phone rings. It's Kinsley, I look at Tanner and he acknowledges as I answer.

“Hey Meadow, everything okay?”

“Hey Jess, yeah everything is fine. I was thinking, you should stay at your place tonight — get some real rest.” She pauses briefly before continuing, “I’m fine, really, and I thought I might ask Soph to come over. She can stay with me, give you a night off from babysitting duties.”

A quick look at Tanner and I can see his discomfort, even if he doesn’t want to admit it, walking away from her was the hardest thing he has ever done. I can see through his shield, he loves her. Well, the feeling is mutual.

“Will she stay the night? Have you already asked her?”

“Jeez Jess, lighten up. I’ll speak with her and report back, but you don’t need to be on constant watch. I need to learn to walk this road on my own, and when I do — in a few more days, we can get back into planning how to tackle Lance.” Her voice gets louder, more determined. “I think we just go in guns blazing. I’m not scared, what do we have to lose?” She laughs, I glance sideways and Tanner smirks, these two are more alike than they know.

“Let’s just take it one day at a time hey? You’ve only just started leaving the bedroom. Message me once you’ve spoken with Soph.” I can almost hear her rolling her eyes, if that were possible.

“Yeah, yeah. Okay, I’ll let you know.”

With that, I end the call, tossing my phone aside. I finish my beer and let it fall to the floor. “I’m going to the address Stanley gave us. Tonight.”

“Are you fucking crazy?” Tanner retorts.

“Me? You’re the one pacing the room, sit the fuck down.” I wave him off, dropping my head into my hands. “I just want to go for a drive, sus it all out. I won’t let myself be seen.”

“Fine. But I’m coming with you,” he says, leaving no room for discussion.

The next few hours pass by slowly. When Kinsley sends me a message letting me know Sophie is coming over, Tanner brings up the cameras he informed me he hid in her apartment to make sure she isn’t bluffing.

I was a little taken back when he told me he placed a camera in her bedroom, but I can’t say I was surprised. He did break into her house, offering sex and coffee, before things got serious between them. Knowing both of us are heading out tonight, we need to know Kins isn’t alone. The moment Sophie’s car pulls up, Tanner’s shoulders drop and he visibly relaxes, pocketing his phone and turning to look at me.

It’s go time.

The air between us is thick with tension as the GPS lights up with directions, the location is only forty-five minutes away. I can see Tanner out of the corner of my eye, he looks uncomfortable. I’m sure he is normally the one driving; he is probably the one in control of everything, 99% of the time. That makes me smile. Poor Tanner.

“Something funny, Jesse?” he questions.

“A little,” I say with a shrug. “I was just thinking how it must be hard for you to be sitting there in the passenger seat. You seem like the type to always be in control ... That’s all.”

He doesn’t respond, instead he turns and looks out the window until his phone buzzes with an incoming text.

Glancing over as I drive, I see him reading over the message. “Everything okay?”

If looks could kill, I would be dead right now. I know it without even giving him eye contact. How does one man have such an evil stare? Whoever sent the message must have really ruffled his feathers.

Tanner’s fingers float across the screen before he tosses his phone back down.

“It was Soph,” he says on an exhale. “She said, and I quote ‘I hope you know what you’re doing’ with an evil eye emoji ... Do you think she’s onto me?”

“Most likely, but she’ll keep that to herself even if she is. She might be a little over the top, but she’s not stupid,” I say, my eyes glued on the road. “Kinsley isn’t dumb either, if she wasn’t thinking with her heart right now, she would know exactly what was playing out. She’s just hurting.” Tanner shifts uncomfortably in his seat, but I keep my focus on the road ahead of us.

It’s not long before the GPS directs us through a small town on the outskirts of Melbourne’s northern suburbs and onto a dirt road where trees and scrubs span out along the edges. At least there are plenty of places to hide. I won’t be stopping tonight though, we will just drive past and scope out the area. Once we go past the location I will key ‘home’ back into the GPS, to look for any alternative routes away from here.

“Your destination is four hundred metres on your right.”

Tanner’s eyes flick across to the other side of the road. “Over there, I can see a light.”

I slow a little, not wanting to stop completely and draw any unwanted attention to us. Sure enough, a few hundred meters to the right is a driveway, if it were daylight we wouldn’t have been able to see the warehouse hidden back off the road. The only

reason Tanner was able to spot it, are the large flood lights behind the building.

“You call that a light? She’s lit up like Luna Park in there. Seems like more than freight and cartage, I’ll tell ya that for free.”

As the light of the warehouse fades, I pull off to the side, keying in my home address. Tanner turns his body towards me, a mischievous look on his face; a look which says we are going to fuck shit up .

“Go on then,” I say. “Out with it.”

The crazy bastard gives a chuckle. “This Stanley guy you and Kinsley work with, he can obviously hack into cameras ...”

“Yeah, he has eyes on the apartment. Why?”

“Is he good enough to see if there are cameras on this property? If he could access them, we could scope out the location better, learn more about them, their comings and goings.”

My eyes go wide. “That is so much better than my plan of hiding out by the trees.”

Tanner raises his left brow, looking at me puzzled. “You were just going to hide out on the road side? Waiting for them to turn into their driveway?”

“Well yeah — but when you put it like that it sounds stupid.” I scratch the back of my head. Stupid, Jesse. So freaking stupid. I know Kyle would be laughing if he were watching this unfold. Knowing that I was going to hide out in the trees like we did as kids ... You’re a grown ass man now, Jesse, you can do better than that.

Tanner shakes his head. “Let’s get back, then we can call Stanley and get the ball

rolling. I—” he pauses briefly, wiping the palms of his hands down his jeans “— I’m losing patience.”

The way he stumbles over his words tells me he is struggling with being separated from Kins. I leave him with his thoughts, he doesn’t need my smart-ass comments pissing him off. The GPS loads and reroutes us to home, taking us back the way we came.

Glancing sideways at Tanner, he huffs. “It’s only been three fucking days!” He throws his arms wide. “Have you ever gone that long without contact from her?”

I stay quiet, revving the engine and doing a U-turn. If I’m honest, I don’t think I have gone more than a day without some form of communication with her. He’s a more patient man than I am.

### Chapter Thirty-Four

Kinsley

Resting my hands on my knees, I lean forward, welcoming the cool morning breeze against the back of my neck. I glance down at my smart watch trying to catch my breath, a new personal best flashes on the screen – 36 mins/5.2km. I smile with a sense of accomplishment before the reality of why I'm pushing myself so hard smacks me in the face.

It's been three days since Tanner discovered the truth of my past and only today has Jesse left me alone for more than a few hours at a time. He stayed by my side for the first forty-eight hours; I know he was concerned for my well being and I don't blame him. My track record in the mental health department isn't great. But come this morning, I needed my own space, I practically begged him to leave me alone. Leave the poor 'self inflicted, yet broken hearted' girl alone, Jesse.

At one point there, I wondered if I had made a mistake. But we quickly squashed that thought, didn't we Kinsley? Ugh, clearly the exercise isn't helping to rid the little extra voices in my head. I don't mind them being there most days, but sometimes, when they turn dark, they creep out like shadows, climbing the walls and towering over me. They make me feel small, and I find myself crouching in the dark corners of my mind, pulling my knees tight to my chest. These voices dictate my thoughts and manipulate my feelings, it's almost as though I am being buried alive; trapped with no way out. It's suffocating.

Despite the little voices taunting me I shake them off, the endorphins still pumping

through my veins manage to keep me afloat. I bound up the steps, taking them two at a time. Opting for a red bull from the fridge rather than a bottle of water, it's not like I'm exercising for my health after all.

Looking around for something to keep me busy, I come up empty handed. Maybe I should go into the bar, check over the books — no, that wouldn't be a good idea. The image of Tanner leaning against my office door springs to mind, his hungry eyes prowling over my body. My chest tightens at the memory from only days ago. I can still feel the butterflies that swarmed low in my stomach, the desire that pooled in my core. Fuck, am I depressed or aroused right now? You're broken, Kinsley, that's for sure.

I pick up my phone and dial the only number I know off by heart. It rings three times before Jesse answers.

“Hey, Meadow, everything okay?”

“Hey Jess, yeah everything is fine. I was thinking, you should just stay at your place tonight. I'm fine, really, and I thought I might ask Soph to come over. She can stay with me, give you a night off from babysitting duties.”

Will I ask her though? I love Sophie and I really should confide in her but ‘people-ing’ at the moment doesn't really excite me. Then again, a girls night with drinks, snacks and our favourite books ... Okay, it really isn't a question, I want a girls night. Clearly my inner child is feeling neglected by the lack of sleepovers as a tween.

“Will she stay the night? Have you already asked her?”

Jesse and I go back and forth about my current emotional state, the who, what, where, when, why and how of my plan to move forward through this mess. He's always been the planner, the one who thinks everything through before acting on it. I however,

prefer a more spontaneous approach.

“Yeah, yeah. Okay, I’ll let you know,” I say, ending the conversation.

Scrolling down a little, I hit ‘call’ on FaceTime and wait for Sophie’s face to pop up on my screen.

“Hey pretty lad—” she cuts herself off before saying what I hope was pretty lady, because I am most definitely not a lad. “Whoah, Kins, are you okay?”

“Do I look that bad?” I laugh. “I went for a run, that’s all, I’m fine.”

“Kinsley, you don’t run ... Scrap that, you don’t exercise at all.”

I shrug my shoulders in response. “Enough about me, what are you doing tonight? Please tell me you don’t have plans.”

“Are you inviting me over? Because I’ll be there in twenty-five minutes!” she squeals, jumping up and down. “Let me go pack my bag.”

“Bring snacks,” I laugh again.. “I have plenty of alcohol!”

“Got it, see you soon!” she squeals as she drops the phone, and all I hear is her running off down the hallway.

I can do this. A girls night, with snacks and alcohol, oh we could even have a read-athon! I contemplate telling her to bring her Kindle and a few books but who am I kidding, that girl goes nowhere without a book.

Maybe after a few drinks, I can tell her about Tanner; I could tell her everything. Kinsley, you need to tell her everything. The little voice is right, Soph is one of my

closest friends. It's a surreal feeling, having a close friendship with someone other than Jesse. It's something I have longed for since I was a little girl and now my dreams are becoming reality. Sharing secrets and swapping stories is the next step in our friendship, right?

\* \* \*

Sophie lies diagonally across my bed kicking her feet whilst reading a cute little romance novel. The books she reads are my palette cleansers in between the morally grey men I find myself dreaming about. I'm a dark romance girl at heart, give me all the shades of black. Two pages of trigger warnings? Sign me up.

I top up her glass with my favourite raspberry gin before snuggling into my reading chair. I'm not sure how much time has passed; we have each got up a few times to go to the loo, have a stretch or pour ourselves another drink, but as I glanced out the balcony doors, the sun is setting. Bright rays of red and orange swirl together across the sky. It reminds me of simpler times. I briefly recall a saying my dad would repeat each time we saw a red sunset, something along the lines of, 'Red skies at night, sailor's delight. Red skies in the mornings, sailor's warning.'

Slipping on my Uggs, I walk out onto the balcony. The crisp night air hits my lungs and I'm taken back to the nights I spent on top of the concrete tank. Thousands of sunrises and sunsets dance across the sky in front of me, and memories of home hold me tight.

A few moments later, Sophie's hand rests on my arm. "Is there something you want to tell me, Kins?" she asks, a hint of hesitancy in her tone. "This girls night is great, but I can't help but feel like you're trying to fill some kind of void?"

"Can we sit out here?" I drop my eyes, fidgeting with my fingers. "There are actually a few things I want to get off my chest."

She turns, walking back inside while I stand here, regretting this whole girls night because now I am about to let all the skeletons out of my closet. How much am I going to tell her? Could I actually tell her everything?

“Help would have been nice,” she huffs, throwing two floor pillows and a blanket at my feet.

I roll my eyes, bending down to arrange everything into a comfy little corner on the balcony. “Grab a cushion or two as well!” I call out.

“And I thought I was the guest here ...” she mumbles, placing our drinks down and turning back on her heels for the third time. I can’t help but laugh. She acts tough, but she really is one of the most caring people I know.

Once we are settled, Sophie pins me with a knowing look. I drop my head back against the cushion and stare out into the setting sky. Time to put my big girl pants on.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, things that no one, other than Jesse, knows. These things ... Tanner found out about them and I pushed him away. I couldn’t have him fixing my problems, or looking at me with pain in his eyes.” I look at Soph, her brows are turned in with concern, and when our eyes meet she reaches out and takes my hand in hers. “I haven’t spoken with him for three days. I got lost in a pretty dark place. I’m still lost, but I’ll be okay.”

She squeezes my hand, shuffling closer. “He let you push him away? You’re joking right? That possessive hunk of a man just let you say bye-bye and willingly walked away?”

At those words, my chest begins to feel heavy and my lungs work harder to get air. Closing my eyes tight, I begin to count, in 2, 3, 4 – out 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. When I open

them again, Sophie kneels in front of me with a glass of water.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “Please don’t tell Jesse about this.”

“I won’t tell him, as long as you promise me that one of us is always in the know. I don’t care if it’s me or him, as long as you’re not carrying all of this yourself. You got me?”

I muster up a smile and she helps me stand. “Let’s go jump into bed. We can deal with all of this tomorrow.”

We climb into my bed ignoring the mess around us, we can tidy up tomorrow. Flicking on the TV, I scroll through movies and shows until I pause on *Gilmore Girls*, sharing a look that says heck yes, we settle in for the night.

### Chapter Thirty-Five

Kinsley

A cool breeze causes me to stir, oh crap, by the looks of the daylight pouring through the windows it's at least mid-morning. I must have drifted off to sleep whilst watching TV last night. Propping myself up on my elbows, I notice that I'm alone. "Soph?" I call out.

I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and into my Uggs; these tiles are pretty but they get so cold. The balcony is empty and all the pillows and blankets have been brought inside. How long have I been asleep for? I close the double doors and check under my pillow and the bedside table for my phone. It's nowhere to be seen, neither is Sophie. With a final scan of the room, I notice all evidence of last night is gone. Even the pillow on my reading chair has been straightened.

Making my way down stairs I hear whispering voices in the kitchen. "Sophie, are you in here? I'll need coffee before you jump out and scare me or anything like that."

"In the kitchen," she sings happily. "Get your cute little ass down here."

As I step into the kitchen I see her stacking the dishwasher, gently arranging all the glassware we used last night. She turns, smiling brightly. Her smile is infectious and it instantly fills a little bit of the emptiness. One day at a time, Kinsley. You survived yesterday, let's do it again. At least the voices are on my side today, that's a positive.

Movement to my right catches my eye. Jesse is sitting at the dining table, fiddling

with an empty coffee cup.

“You brought coffee?”

“Well, kind of ... I did bring coffee, but Miss ‘Kinsley needs her rest, don’t you dare wake her’ wouldn’t let me bring it to you, so I drank it.” He shrugs, with that big cheesy grin spreading across his face. “Sorry, Meadow.”

“He’s not really sorry. If he was, he would take us out for breakfast,” Sophie speaks up, propping her hands on her hips.

“You guys do realise I’m doing my grad year ... Teaching. This coffee wasn’t even in my budget!”

I throw my hands in the air. “My shout then, let me throw some clothes on.”

“Psst!” Jesse whisper-shouts to Sophie. “She’s willingly leaving the house!”

“I heard that!” I say, without even turning back to look at them.

These two might drive me a little bonkers, but when it comes to times like this ... Times where I count on them to show up for me, they do so without fail.

Jesse

Kinsley is only gone momentarily before appearing again, her hair is up on the top of her head in a messy bun and she switched her pyjamas for leggings and a hoodie. Wait, that’s my freaking jumper!

“Hey!” Walking right up into her space I tug on the drawstrings around the hood. “This is mine!”

The smile on her face tells me she knows. “Mine now,” she says with an evil grin, stepping around me. I’ll have to steal it back off of her later on; it’s my favourite.

“Come on, kids,” Soph hollas from the front door. “I’m starving!”

\* \* \*

We walked a few blocks down to one of Kinsley’s favourite little spots. The spring breeze would have been a nice addition to the morning if my hay fever wasn’t at its peak. I sneezed multiple times on the way, after the fourth time, Sophie finally offered me an antihistamine. Is there anything that girl doesn’t have in her purse?

Now, we are sitting around a table, whilst Mrs Campbell — who insists we call her Betty — fusses over Kinsley and brings us our coffees. The girls are telling me about the day they first met each other here and I can’t help but feel a sense of admiration for how far Kinsley has pushed herself out of her comfort zone with this new friendship. It was only a little over three months ago that the girls met in this very cafe, and now Sophie can hug her without Kinsley dying on the inside.

The rest of the day goes by quickly. After breakfast, which has turned into lunch by the time we leave, Sophie says her goodbyes, and yes, Kinsley willingly hugged her. She really is letting Soph in. Good. Kinsley needs other people in her life. Especially with Tanner temporarily MIA.

If I’m honest with myself, I’m shit scared that during our attempts to take Lance out, one of us won’t make it back to her.

Tanner wants to go all underbelly on Lance; I didn’t even ask how he knew people that had access to weapons, I just quickly shut the conversation down. That was a big Hell No from me; who does he think he is, The God damn Mafia?

Whether Kinsley likes it or not, Tanner needs to be there for her. He might think he's the big tough guy and I'm ... just Jesse . But, I can do this – I need to do this. I have always said when the time came, I would put myself on the line for her. Our top priority is attempting to find Warren. I don't even know if he is alive but I have to follow through with what Kyle started. I need to see for myself.

The second thing we need to do is close in on Lance, catch him in the thick of whatever the fuck he is doing. To have the police on speed dial and bring them in; I can only hope that there will be enough evidence.

I don't know Tanner's life story but he doesn't seem to have much faith in the law enforcement system. From my own experience, watching the way the police treated Kins and her family throughout the disappearance of her dad and the death of her brother, the process is corrupt. Kinsley would have opted for Tanner's plan every day of the week, not that I told him that.

I won't let either of them in the line of fire, not with the chance of them being locked up behind bars — or worse. I run a hand down my face. Do Kinsley and Tanner expect me to take that risk, all because we didn't think this through properly? I don't think so. Right now, all I know is that I'm not going in there to kill him. My end goal is to get him back behind bars; death would be too kind.

### Chapter Thirty-Six

Tanner

If only Jesse would let me take this guy out.

When I told him I could have Lance taken care of, he shut me down instantly. I wish I had a recording of his face, it was honestly priceless. His pupils nearly tripled in size and he went white as a ghost. The poor guy freaked. He has no idea the life I lived prior to becoming Tanner Hayes , so we can do all of this his way — for now.

I've been trying to stay distracted by burying myself into studying the daily runnings of Lance's operations. Speaking with both my own connections, as well as Jesse and Kinsley's PI Stanley. The word from the underground is that he is running a sex trafficking operation, however Stanley assures us that the evidence only tells him Lance trades in drugs, not people. Which is the problem with Private Investigators, they don't have access to the inside.

What neither Jesse or Stanley know is I have eyes and ears in all places. It took some effort, on my part, to convince a few people that I hadn't skipped out and abandoned my brothers. Especially when no one had seen me in over six months. Luckily for me, Harley had maintained all our connections and he was still trusted in the inner circle.

I rub the back of my neck, releasing a long breath of air. This is all such unknown territory for me, normally I take what I want without any care for who gets in my way. These circumstances are different though with Kinsley in the middle of it all. Leaning back in my chair and closing my eyes, I remind myself that walking away

was the right thing to do. Even if she hates me for it, I will find my way back to her once all this is over.

An email pops up on the computer screen in front of me, opening it up I see that it's forwarded from Harley, the original sender blanked out. Not that long ago, the emails would have been sent directly to me. However, I'm aware of why people are still uncertain about my motives. Josh and his damn feelings, that's why. If Josh would just get his act together, and leave his bitterness towards me out of this, everyone would move the fuck on.

There is a file attached to the email containing multiple photos and a document. I click into the document, reading the first line to myself. 'PHOTO ONE - fourteen year old caucasian, blonde hair, brown eyes.' I scroll down to the bottom of the document, the last line reads 'PHOTO THIRTY SIX - seventeen year old Caucasian, brunette, blue eyes.' Each has a price next to them and a box where depending on whether or not they were a virgin it was ticked. Mother. Fuckers.

Hesitantly, I open the first photo and sure enough it's of a young girl who matches the description of 'photo one'. She's standing there, staring blankly down the lens of the camera. Her eyes silently scream for someone, anyone, to help her.

"Fucking pieces of shit!" I yell, slamming my fists down onto my desk.

We need to do something. Now.

\* \* \*

Jesse

My phone rings through the Bluetooth in the ute and I accept the call. Tanner's voice booms through the speakers before I even have a chance to say hello.

“Where the fuck are you?”

Oh hot damn, he’s in a mood. “Hello to you too, lover boy. I’m on my way home from school. Why? What’s up?”

“You need to get your ass over here, I have something for you to see.”

Tanner’s voice is dark. Normally, if he’s moody there is a hint of ‘I don’t want your bullshit’ in his tone, today his voice is laced with something else. I wrack my brain thinking of what could have pissed him off this much. I must get lost in thought because he huffs, mumbling something under his breath on the other end of the call.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll go home and get changed, feed Lou her dinner and then come to your place.”

The dial tone that sounds tells me he ended the call. Well shit. Shifting into fifth gear, I speed down the highway to home.

It’s been a little over a week since we first drove out to what we now call The Chemist. I thought the name was fitting, they are making and selling drugs out of there after all. Since that day, Tanner has been monitoring their security cameras. We have a pretty good idea of their ‘work hours’, if that’s what you want to call it, and the schedule they are running on.

“I feel like an FBI agent,” I say out loud to myself.

No, Jesse, not cool. This is why I need Kinsley around, she’s my voice of reason.

“Repeat after me, we are not FBI agents. ” Before I can even repeat it back to myself, I break out into laughter. Far out, it really has been a long week.

Turning the ignition off, I collect my bag from the backseat and make my way inside. Lou-loo greets me, like always, wagging her tail and zooming up and down the entryway.

“Hey, girl,” I say, dropping my bag on the dining table. “I’ve gotta go to Tanner’s, so we won’t go for a walk –”

She barks at the mention of the W word.

“Crap, no, Lou, not tonight. I’ve got to go to Tanner’s; I’ll get you some dinner and then I need to go.”

She huffs in response, turning in a circle before plopping down on the rug.

“Yeah, I know. Hopefully things will go back to normal soon.”

Taking a leaf out of Tanner’s book, I waltz on into his house without knocking. His voice echoes loudly from somewhere within the walls, “My office – Second door on the left, past the stairs.”

“Roger that,” I say under my breath. I pass the stairs, heading down a hallway I’ve never taken notice of before.

An eerie feeling overcomes me as I enter his office and a chill runs up my spine. It’s dark and moody; there are no windows in this room; no life. A desk spans the length of the far wall where there are three PC monitors set up, each showing something different. Taking a step towards them, I focus my eyes on the first screen which is split into four and I recognise it as the live feed from The Chemist.

The second screen seems to have an assortment of documents and files he must be looking at, and the third screen is split into six — two cameras streaming both the

front and back entrance of Twisted Sister, and the other four are cameras on Kinsley's apartment; the front and back entrances, as well as her bedroom and downstairs living.

Suddenly, a firm hand clamps down on my shoulder and my whole body tenses.

“Middle screen — Sit,” Tanner demands, as he strides past me, further into the room. My exhale is long, longer than usual. How much air can I hold in my lungs and why don't I realise when it happens? After a quick reminder to myself to continue to breathe, I sit down in the seat next to Tanner.

“You're starting to have me worried. What's going on?”

“Tell me what you see.” He splits the screen in two, on one side is a list of titles and descriptions, and on the other are files with the corresponding titles.

“Uh, you know I'm not very tech-savvy, man ... But, I guess it looks like descriptions on one side and matching files on the other?”

He stays silent and clicks open the file titled ‘ PHOTO ONE ’. I shuffle closer, reading the description before allowing my eyes to flick to the image that has popped up on the other side of the screen. My heart begins to beat faster and the hairs on the back of my neck stand. What in the world have we got ourselves involved in?

### Chapter Thirty-Seven

Jesse

“Jesse?” Tanner answers the phone on the second ring.

“I’m going in tonight — well technically this morning,” I say glancing at the time, it’s currently 1.12am.

Tanner mumbles something under his breath, I hear him roll out of bed and walk a few steps before a door opens and closes again. Is he with her? If he is, I should be happy right? She is going to need him more than ever. She hadn’t told me that they were back on again though. Or even that she had spoken to him for that matter — Tanner interrupts my spiralling thoughts. “Alright, I’m listening.”

With a deep breath, I re-focus, clearly I was overthinking again. I would know if they had rekindled, I’m keeping close tabs on her after all. “You know what you need to do, right?”

“I still think I should be the one going in there — You’re too close to this, Jesse. She’ll never forgive you for leaving her. She already pushed me away, you’re all she has. Maybe even all she wants. ”

The line goes cold and silent, what the fuck do I say to that? Clearly he isn’t with her now then if that’s his thought process.

“Stop it, you know that’s bullshit. I have to follow through with this, what if Warren

really is there —” I pause. “There is no other option and you know it. She will never stop unless she gets answers. It’s me or they come for her.”

Fuck this. It’s always been her.

He knows it and he won’t argue with me because it’s the only damn thing we agree on; we will put Kinsley first until our heart’s stop beating, until our blood runs cold.

“Are you in this with me, or not?”

Tanner has got the sulks on; he has ever since the night she pushed him away, but we don’t have time for that now. It all seems like deja-vu, from my final phone call with Kyle but this time it’s me putting my life at risk for her and putting her life in the hands of the man who loves her.

“I’ll pick up Lou-loo in the morning and go over to Kinsley’s. She isn’t going to be happy, man. I’m taking your key for the apartment too, because I doubt she will let me in if I knock. She thinks I gave her back my only key ...”

I laugh because it’s all I can do, he’s never fucking knocked.

“Glad to see you find this shit funny,” he huffs.

“I’ve got the earpiece and I will put it in beforehand, that’s all I will have on me.”

“I’ll be on the other end of the line if you need me.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Jesse — come back for her.”

The line cuts out. I guess this is it. Lou-loo is sitting at my feet, her big brown eyes watching me; she knows something is going on. I put everything Tanner will need on the kitchen table and switch off the light. It's now or never.

"You be good for Kinsley and Tanner," I say, scratching Lou-loo behind the ear.

\* \* \*

The drive out of Melbourne is eerily quiet, I guess that's what you get at 1am on a weekday. Tanner and I have been planning this for weeks now, watching and learning the daily runnings of Lance and his goons.

Deep down I was hoping to catch a sighting of Warren but I haven't seen anyone who resembles him in the slightest. Sure, it's been twelve years, but I would recognise his sharp facial features and honey-coloured eyes, a perfect match to Kinsley's, anywhere.

My windows are down and the chill of the night air sweeps through the car. The song changes to Papa Roach - Scars and I turn it up, flooding out the constant scenario's playing over and over in my mind. When Tanner turns up to Kinsley's apartment in a few hours time, she isn't going to be happy.

At first she is going to be angry. Angry at Tanner because he is the one who will be standing in front of her giving her the news, then the anger will be turned towards me. I rest my head back, watching the dark road ahead of me, the flashing of trees passing by in my peripheral vision. Her anger will quickly merge into feelings of betrayal, loss and disbelief; feelings I never could have imagined I would be responsible for.

That thought prompts me to think of Kyle and how he must have been feeling. Was he scared? At only thirteen, I can only assume his thoughts consisted mostly of finding a way to somehow rescue his dad and little else.

The song changes again, this time to Dean Lewis - All I Ever Wanted and with a check of my mirrors I indicate, pulling over onto the side of the road. I pick up my phone and set it up to record a video; there is too much that I have left unsaid.

“Hey Meadow.

I know you’re angry right now — fuck. I’m so fucking sorry.”

The speech I had planned turns to mush and I start speaking all the truths I have kept locked away for so many years. I run my fingers through my hair, wanting to grip hold and tear it all out at the thought of leaving her.

“I need you to know that I’m doing this for you; we are doing this for you.

Kyle made a sacrifice, now it’s my turn. I need to go and finish what he started — I need to bring your dad home.

I want you to know that whatever happens, you are not alone. Kyle chose me and now I’m choosing Tanner.”

Saying that out loud, takes the breath from my lungs but lucky for me there’s more. I need her to know everything.

“It’s always been you for me Kinsley, and it’s one of my biggest regrets not telling you sooner. But I made a promise to look after you, to be there for you and I would like to believe every decision I have made has had your best interests in mind.”

Maybe it’s the nerves, but I can’t control it, unexpected laughter fills the car.

“When I get back, because I am coming back, please just don’t let Tanner hit me. This isn’t some declaration of love where I come and try to sweep you off your feet. I

don't want anything to change between us. I just — I just couldn't walk into the unknown without telling you how I feel. Please don't ever forget. It's always been you."

I take a shaky breath as realisation hits me, the words tumbling out before I can think them through.

"— the only reason you'll be seeing this is if something does happen and in that case, please just breathe for me. Right now, Meadow, look at me — breathe. I don't know what waits on the other side but whatever it is and wherever I end up, I will spend my entire existence searching for you. I will find you again."

I stop the recording, rubbing the sweat from my palms onto my jeans. Woah. That was a lot. Head back in the game, Jesse.

I insert the discreet earpiece and send off my final text message to Tanner before powering off my phone.

Seconds later Tanner is in my ear. "Jesse?"

"Let the fun begin," I say lightheartedly, I can feel Tanner scowling me from here. "Lighten up, T."

"Remember," he says. "If I haven't heard from you by 6am, I'm coming in."

"6am, got it." I pause. "Hey Tanner — Look after her."

"6am, Jesse."

There is a dirt road with scattered treelines six hundred metres from the abandoned warehouse; ditching the car in the place where Tanner has the location pinned, I set

off on foot. Leaves and twigs crunch, as I walk out of sight and hidden in the shadows.

I've watched these guys every night for two weeks, both Tuesday's at around 3am, a van arrives with what I can only assume is drugs. This is going to be my way in, I'll intercept the van and tie old mate up, hopefully without too much struggle and then continue on. Stanley was able to hack into their surveillance system which is surprisingly pretty basic, which allowed me to know which areas to stick to, to be able to keep out of sight.

Leaning against a tree a few metres back from the road, I take what I need from my backpack; rope, duct tape, a pocket knife and a handgun. I don't know how Tanner got access to a handgun, and I don't plan on using it, but he wouldn't let me go through with this without it. I tuck it into the back of my jeans, place the pocket knife in my back pocket, and shove the rope and duct tape into the front of my hoodie.

Now, we just wait.

### Chapter Thirty-Eight

Jesse

I've never been the violent type, but I've always been willing to do what it takes to protect those I love. My brain snaps into singing 'I'd rather be a lover than a fighter' and I smirk. Now is not the time to joke around, Jesse. Surprisingly, it wasn't all that hard to tie up the driver, tape his mouth shut with duct tape, and throw him in the back of the van.

The van which was empty — not something I was expecting, maybe they are taking drugs from here instead of unloading them? I guess I'll find out soon. Deep down, I know Tanner is right; I know there is more evil here than Stanley has told us, but I am holding onto hope Tanner is wrong. It's only drugs ...

The long dirt driveway to the warehouse is lined with trees and scrub. I follow it around to the rear, where only one of the two roller doors are open. The driveway curves into a circle to mimic a roundabout, and a large flood light illuminates the abandoned space. I park the van strategically to the side, partly hidden in the shadows and kill the engine. It's go time.

"Driver's here, get the girls." I hear a deep voice call out into the building.

My stomach drops. Fuck, it can't be. I shake the thought out of my head and focus on the job at hand; finding Warren. Before going in, I move the driver into the passenger seat, leaving the back of the van open. As long as whoever, or whatever, goes into this van is in my care, I'll find a way to take care of it.

Pulling my hood higher over my head, I slip around the side, towards the front of the building where I think I saw a door. Turning the knob, I sigh a breath of relief when I find the door unlocks. Quietly, I enter.

Inside, I'm reminded of an old reception area, the carpet is stained and the furniture in the room smells damp and mouldy. This left side of the warehouse must be split up into rooms — maybe old offices, whereas the right hand side where the roller door was lifted up was clearly used for loading and unloading goods, looking more like a workshop space.

Taking the hallway to my left, I walk further into darkness. Voices come from behind a door to my right and I sink back into the shadows of the hallway. The door opens and a man exists, thankfully walking in the opposite direction to where I'm standing. When he is out of sight, I slink through the shadows towards the open door.

In the centre of the room sits an old dining table, this must be used as a tea room or kitchen. With the coast clear I enter, closing the door behind myself. For a moment I take in my surroundings and gather my thoughts, there is a whiteboard on the far wall with dates and times written all over it.

Before I can get close enough to read any of the details I hear a creak behind me. Spinning around and placing my hand on the gun tucked into the back of my jeans, I face a man who looks to be in his fifties with rough facial hair, torn jeans and a flannelette shirt. His eyes meet mine and go wide with shock. Pushing my hood off of my head, I drop my hand from the gun.

“W-Warren?”

“Jesse,” he stammers. “What — you can't be here.” Checking over his shoulder, he closes the door we both came through.

“I’m here to get you the hell out of this place,” I whisper-shout, throwing my arms out to the side.

“I don’t understand Jesse. How? Why?”

“I can explain all of that, but right now we need to leave before they realise what’s going on. There is a van parked at the rear entrance, that’s our ticket out.”

Warren approaches me and places a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. “Follow me.”

Slinking through the shadows once more, Warren leads the way towards the back of the warehouse. Somehow, we make it all the way to the van without being seen, but the relief is short lived. As I wrap my fingers around the door handle, something cold and hard presses against my back.

“L-Lance,” Warren mutters. The tone in his voice tells me this man holds significant power over him.

Raising my hands above my head, I step forward and slowly begin to turn to face the devil. The man who has had us walking on eggshells for the past twelve years. The one who holds the answers. My hands shake, I know I’m only going to get one shot at this, if only I had taken Tanner up on those lessons out at the shooting range.

I take a small step backwards, my hands dropping to my side. Lance’s eyes are glancing between Warren and myself. As his eyes look towards Warren once more, I reach around behind my back and palm the gun. The rough texture of the handgrip tells me I have taken hold of the right part. There’s no time to think.

In one quick motion I move the gun from being tucked away in my jeans to now pointing directly at Lance. Pulling back the slide on top, the gun loads with a click.

As Lance's eyes look back at me, they narrow. I swallow hard, trying to contain my nerves, I have to get out of this alive and not try to be the next John Wick.

A deep belly laugh rumbles out of Lance. He's a big man, both tall and broad, grey stubble creeps up his jaw along with a thick goatee. Tattoos cover half his face and both his arms, not in the sexy way like Tanner either; this guy gives me an ick.

"Put the gun down kid, you'll flamin' hurt yourself."

Instead of listening, I do the opposite. With my eyes glued on the man in front of me I speak with clear determination and my finger on the trigger. "Get in the van, Warren, we're leaving."

Lance hovers his gun between Warren and myself. "I'll ask once more, you little cunt." His face turns a lovely shade of red. "Then you'll see just how fucking nasty I can get."

I take the opportunity while he isn't focused solely on me. In my head I count down from three, 'on one, we shoot' I tell myself.

Three. Two. BANG.

The gun fires, the sudden bang causing my eyes to close and my ears to ring. My elbows bend slightly, as I'm hit with the recoil. For something so small, this thing has a kick to it.

Shit. What did you just do Jesse? I wasn't aiming to kill, I was aiming to buy us time, just to slow him down a little. It was only a split second, but it was like everything moved in slow motion, as if I could see the bullet leave the barrel, spinning towards Lance and the impact of it going right through his shoulder.

Another bang sounds, or at least I thought it did; maybe it was just still echoing in my ears. It wouldn't be the first time I've heard things that weren't there. Focusing on all that is happening in front of me, I see Lance stumbling backwards into the wall, holding his shoulder. The impact had caused his shoulder to snap backwards and throw him off balance; hitting the wall, he lands on his ass with a groan and a thud. Warren is standing behind me in shock; he reaches out for me, and I flinch at his touch. Voices are coming closer. If anyone was in the warehouse, they would have heard the shots go off.

Get out of here, Jess. Now!

“Warren!” I yell. “Get in the van!”

I jump into the driver's seat and drag the tied up man into the middle so Warren has room to climb in as well. The man is mumbling under the tape across his mouth, I don't have time to deal with him right now. We need to get out of here.

I press the accelerator to the floor and the tyres spin in the dirt as we take off. My shoulder is still aching from the force of the gun's recoil. Why did no one prepare me for that? I rub just below my collar bone to ease the burn. My shirt is damp with something warm and sticky, pulling my fingers away I hold my hand up into my view.

“It wasn't an echo,” I say more to myself, but as realisation takes over I speak again. “Warren, I've been shot.”

Shock starts to cloud my rational thinking. I glance in the rear view mirror – no lights are following. I come to a stop at the end of the driveway, turn off the engine, and listen. There's silence.

“We need to find somewhere to park so that I can patch you up, Jess.”

I'm beginning to feel dizzy, my clouded thoughts now turning fuzzy, I need to get Warren ... the girls – are there girls in the back of this van? I rush to the back, checking over my shoulder, and grasp the door handle.

“My name is Jesse. I'm here to help, not to hurt you. I've been shot, but once I'm cleaned up I will get each of you to safety. I promise.” Muffled cries respond, and it takes all my willpower to delay opening the door. Every minute counts, and we need to get to safety. Right fucking now.

“I have – I have a first aid kit in my ute a little down the road,” I say to Warren once I'm back in the van.

“Take us there,” he says with concern all over his face. “You're only going to be able to run on adrenaline for so long.”

### Chapter Thirty-Nine

Tanner

It's 5.54am. I've been watching this clock tick since I gave up on sleep two hours ago. Not only am I concerned about Jesse and the mess he is walking into, I am also losing my mind not knowing how Kinsley will react if I have to be the one to go and get her.

All I want is to scoop her up in my arms and never let her go, but how do I know her feelings mimic mine, after I willingly walked away? She deserves someone who will fight for her. All I can hope is somehow she will understand that this is my way of fighting. There will never be a battle that she faces alone.

"Jesse? Jess, can you hear me?" I speak into the earpiece.

The seconds drag as I wait for Jesse to respond.

Finally heavy breathing fills my ears. "Y-yeah Tanner, I-I'm here."

A sense of unease washes over me, blood starts rushing through my veins. Something is wrong.

"What the fuck happened? Where are you? Talk to me!"

"Listen f-for one-once. I'm okay. Warren is here."

Okay my arse, he is almost incoherent. Looking around my office I spot the car keys hanging by the door, I reach them in three strides and jog towards the garage.

“I’m going to get Lou and then I’m going to Kinsley’s. Meet us at the pinned location.” I toss the earpiece down onto the passenger seat and take off in the direction of Jesse’s house.

Jesse had left the side gate unlocked. Walking into the backyard, I know any second now Lou will come running towards me. “Hey girl,” I whisper as she jumps up, planting her two front paws on my stomach. I give her a big scratch behind the ears before pushing her off.

“Now, where did your dad leave this key?” I look around for anywhere a key could be hidden. “Pot plant, or maybe the meter box? Of course he couldn’t just tell me where the key would be.” Lou barks, tilting her head to the side. “Yeah, that would be far too practical for him, wouldn’t it?”

I find the key sitting in the meter box and enter the house. Lou-loo’s lead and Kinsley’s apartment key are sitting on the kitchen table, I pocket them both and lock Jesse’s door behind me on the way out.

“Come on, Lou,” I call, opening the back door of the car and gesturing to her to jump inside. The drive to Kinsley’s doesn’t take long. I clip Lou-loo’s lead onto her and look up at the two storey apartment. The French doors out onto the balcony are open, which tells me she is still having trouble sleeping. The cool breeze is a calming force for the storm she is battling within. It’s the first time I have ever hesitated to give myself access to her home, but now isn’t the time to be getting acquainted with my feelings.

The house is dark and quiet, the only sound is Lou-loo’s paws pitter patter against the tiles. “Stay with me, girl. She isn’t going to be too impressed to see me but we

need to act fast here.”

Light filters in through the second floor of the apartment; the French doors give us first-class seats to the sunrise on display. Kinsley is asleep on her bed, the blankets pulled up to her chin with one leg hanging out the side.

I let Lou off the lead and nod towards the bed. Without a second thought, she launches up and onto where Kinsley peacefully lays. I have to hold back a chuckle; in any other situation, it would be hilarious, but right now, knowing Jesse could be in danger and remembering the last time I was in this room, it’s anything but.

“Huh?” she mutters, shielding her face from the dog’s morning kisses. “Down, Lou. That’s enough,” Kinsley scolds.

Slowly, I step further into the room. “Pip?”

“Tanner?” She almost jumps out of her skin at the sound of my voice. “Where is Jesse? Why –”

Deciding we don’t have time to fluff around, I get straight to the point. “Jesse is in trouble, we need to go.” My voice comes out a little too hard for my liking and confusion is written all over her features. Softening my tone, I try again. “I need you to trust me. Can you do that?”

She narrows her brows together but nods slowly. From her drawers to my left I pull out a pair of jeans and a hoodie. Tossing them onto her bed.

“Throw these on and meet me downstairs. Come, Lou.”

Kinsley meets me downstairs in a matter of seconds and I jerk my chin towards the front door. She follows silently, not at all like the girl who last followed me out this

door. I hate this distance between us, knowing that she feels uncomfortable in this situation and not being able to comfort her is a test I hadn't prepared for.

As hard as the past few weeks have been, I was able to suppress the urges to come storming back into her life whether she wanted me to or not. Now she is within my reach, it's not going to be long before I snap. Something tells me that our lives are changing today. What I can't pin point is, if the changes are going to be for better or worse.

I need to prepare her for what she is about to see. My body tenses at the thought of causing her pain. Where do I even begin? Do I tell her about the last communication I had with Jesse, how he could barely string a sentence together? There is also the part about her dad ... She is about to see him again for the first time in fourteen years, the man whom they had a funeral for, and whom she has grieved since she was a little girl.

Without knowing any of this, all her mind will be focused on at this moment is us. The tension is prevalent, I can feel it. I can't say anything though, I would be a real bastard to try to make today about me. Does it even matter that I knew everything before I walked away? Fuck, I can't go soft now. I don't need her to know all that; I'll make her mine again regardless.

Closing the back door after Lou jumps in, I watch as Kinsley buckles herself into the passenger seat. The ignition roars to life. I sweep my fingers through my hair and I can feel Kinsley's eyes on me, for a brief moment I close my eyes and rest my head back against the seat. Don't even think about it. Too late, my cock twitches in my pants at the knowledge of Kins watching. The fool doesn't realise the situation we are currently involved in. Unfortunately for us both, he will need to wait.

### Chapter Forty

Kinsley

Waking up to Lou-loo slobbering all over my face and Tanner standing in my bedroom is not at all how I thought my morning would go. I rub my eyes, half thinking this is all a dream. Why would Tanner be here with Lou-loo anyway?

Opening my eyes I look down into big brown ones, Lou has made herself comfortable in my lap. I count to five before lifting my eyes to the man standing at the end of my bed, could I have imagined it to be Tanner rather than Jesse?

“Pip?”

“Tanner?” The look in his eyes causes my heart rate to increase, something’s wrong. I move Lou out of my lap and I crawl towards the end of my bed. “Where is Jesse? Why –”

Tanner’s face turns hard and he runs his hand through his hair. “Jesse is in trouble, we need to go.”

‘Jesse is in trouble’ the words repeat over and over in my head as I stare ahead of me. Tanner clears his throat. “I need you to trust me. Can you do that?”

I watch as he pulls a pair of blue skinny jeans and a hoodie out of my drawers and tosses them onto the bed. “Throw these on and meet me downstairs. Come, Lou.”

I shimmy into my jeans, giving a little jump before doing up the zip and fastening the button. I have no idea where Jesse is, or what kind of trouble he is in, but you can bet your bottom dollar I am freaking out. I pull the hoodie over my head and throw my hair up into a messy bun.

Tanner asked me to trust him and even after everything I said and did, I do. He has never shown me any reason not to, yet I can't help but feel nauseous at the unknown. My stomach flips as I rush down the stairs to where Tanner is waiting. He jerks his chin towards the door and without a word I follow him out and into the car.

The silence begins to eat away at me. "Tanner –" I try to gently coax something out of him, but he is too quick; he opens his eyes and straightens in his seat, putting the car into gear and pressing his foot flat to the floor. The speed gives me a hit of adrenaline, which almost makes me giggle. Time and place, Kinsley. It's not the right time to be laughing.

"I'm trying here, Kinsley, just let me get my head on straight. Please."

Seeing Tanner this way, so out of control and openly emotional, only heightens my feelings of anxiety. Little voices in my head are screaming at me, coming at me from different angles, all saying different things. Apologise to him. Ask him why he walked away. Tell him you regret it. Has he been in communication with Jesse this whole time? Silly silly girl.

"I'm going to need you to listen to me. You're going to feel every emotion under the sun when you hear what I have to say, and I will give you a chance to feel them all and express them in whatever way you need to, but right now I need you to just listen and not interrupt me." He looks across at me and I try to force a smile to acknowledge him, but it's more a twitch of my lips if anything.

He sighs, looking back at the road ahead of us, speeding through a red light and

exiting onto the freeway. “Jesse went after Lance,” he blurts out.

Hesitantly, I speak even though he told me not to. “I feel like you might need to backtrack a little, Tanner. Can you start from the beginning?”

“The day before you found me in your spare room, Jesse had told me everything.” He pauses, glancing my way. “He told me about your brother, your dad and your mum. He told me what he and Kyle found when they were kids and what happened the night Kyle passed away. I decided that if you weren’t going to tell me yourself, I would put myself in a position where you had to.” Tanner’s knuckles turn white as he tightens his grip on the steering wheel.

My body reacts on instinct to the sight of his discomfort, my hand reaches for him, longing to ease the pain he’s holding on to. As quickly as I reach out, my mind catches up to my body and I pull away again. Tanner’s fingers flex, even though he would have seen me reach for him, he doesn’t let his eyes linger from the road ahead of us.

“After that night, Jesse and I began working together. Alongside Stanley and some contacts of my own we put together a plan to take down Lance and seek out the answers Kyle went looking for originally.”

“M-My dad?” The words tumble out. I don’t care anymore. He can jam the ‘ just listen and don’t talk’ rule where the sun doesn’t shine.

This time Tanner reaches for me, intertwining his fingers with mine; a rush of electricity flows through our palms. He allows his thumb to caress the top of my hand and I stare up at him, pleading with my eyes for him to speak.

“Tanner, did Kyle find our dad?”

“He did.”

Those two words dismantle everything I had known to be true, whilst at the same time they confirm all that I had hoped for. My dad was alive. If he was alive then, could he be alive now? My body begins to shake uncontrollably, the sound of my teeth chattering is all I can hear as I feel myself beginning to spiral. I need to pull myself out before I end up somewhere else. Lately these panic attacks have been turning into dissociations and right now, in a moving car, I can't let that happen. Closing my eyes, I turn my focus to my left hand, squeezing tightly the pressure of my nails burn before finally the splitting of skin is what brings my hearing back. Opening my palm I see four little crescent shaped imprints; a night sky, each moon sparkling with shooting crimson stars.

Tanner continues to hold my other hand tight and we sit in our own thoughts for the remainder of the drive. After roughly half an hour, we are driving into bush land, the bitumen disappears behind us and dust from the dirt road stirs underneath the tyres.

At the sight of Jesse's ute, I un-click my belt and scramble out of the car before Tanner can even put it into park. The passenger side door is open and the first aid kit is thrown all over the place. My heart threatens to launch out of my rib cage but the intense tightening of my chest holds it all in place. Blood is smeared on numerous wrappers of bandages and gauzes and a trail of blood has been left in the dirt. I spot Jesse's hoodie which has been left hanging on the side view mirror of the driver's door and I pull it against my chest. The warm damp crimson colour leeches into my clothes, I breathe in his familiar scent and panic overwhelms me. I drop to my knees. Where is he? I dart my eyes around, searching for any sign of him as my fingers intertwine in the hair at the base of my neck; fisting my hands I pull, the sting of hairs ripping from my head keeps me here in the present. I can't afford to lose myself right now. Jesse needs you, Kinsley.

Looking at Tanner, my eyes plead for him to find Jesse, he holds my eye contact

briefly before he continues to pace up and down. He's talking into an earpiece, from what I understand it allows him to contact Jesse. My stomach sinks with each frustrated grunt he makes. The only assumption is that he isn't having any luck.

### Chapter Forty-One

Jesse

I wince as Warren's left hand reaches across, pressing down firmly on my chest.

"I'm sorry, Jesse. I need to keep pressure on this."

"Enlighten me." I cough, a metallic taste filling my mouth. "H-how the fuck did you —"

"A story for another day Jess." He glances my way before refocusing on the road. "Please know that my only comfort was found in knowing you've been looking out for our girl. I don't have the words to even begin to explain – Knowing she has had you has been my lifeline."

"The girls ... How many more are there?"

He shakes his head on a frown before answering me. "This whole operation is bigger than anyone could fathom. I wasn't kept in the loop, they didn't trust me with any intel. All I know is that the drugs are a cover up." Warren glances in the rear view mirror, dropping his shoulders slightly with the knowledge that we aren't being followed. "I overheard a conversation one day, Lance was speaking with someone he called 'Luxton' – I didn't catch a first name. I asked around later on and apparently they are a family within the Los Angeles Mafia."

"Wait – as in the United States?"

Warren gives me a curt nod, ending the conversation as he drives back towards where my ute is parked.

After he patched me up, we opened the back door of the van to find four trembling girls. They were malnourished, with dirty clothes and tear-stricken cheeks. It took a lot of gentle persuasion but we were able to convince them that we weren't here to hurt them.

Warren suggested we take them to a set of abandoned shearing quarters; ones he had found when he attempted to escape a few months ago. The girls would be safe there until I called the police, so would the driver who I left tied to a chair. The bastard can give evidence.

I wish I wasn't bleeding so heavily. My face is pressed against the passenger window, the cool glass a welcome relief on my cheek. I'm too dizzy to sit up straight. I know this is serious; I'm not naive. I need to get to a hospital, but a part of me wants to drive back to the warehouse and find Lance before he escapes.

The sun is rising now, a warm glow reflecting off the dewy leaves. All I can think of are the nights Meadow and I spent on top of the concrete tank, talking for hours until we would watch the sun rise. I remember the first time she took me up there, it was her fifteenth birthday. I knew she was spending it at home; her mum didn't let her go out or socialise, other than school and to be honest, at that point in her life, I think Kinsley was too beaten down to even want to be out in the world. She felt more comfortable in her own space than she did surrounded by people. Somehow, the more people that were around, the lonelier she felt

"Can you keep a secret?" Kinsley giggles, taking my hand and dragging me out her bedroom door. She is drunk for the first time in her life. I swear her attempts to tiptoe down the hallway without my hand would lead to her being upside down; there is nothing quiet about her at this moment. We walk out the back door and I help her into

her boots. She stumbles again and I catch her, she falls into my chest, still giggling and I tip my head back with my own laughter. When my eyes meet hers again, she is staring up at me through her long eyelashes, I reach out and tuck a wild strand of hair behind her ear.

“Jesse?” she asks, and it snaps me out of my daze. What the hell am I thinking? It must be the alcohol.

“Meadow,” I reply. “Isn’t there something you wanted to show me?”

That snaps her out of it; she smiles and takes my hand again.

“Yeah, it’s this way. C’mon.”

We walk into the paddock, which sits above the house, on a rise. To our right, with the perfect view of the horizon, is an old concrete tank. ‘Please god tell me she doesn’t want to go swimming in there or something?’ I think to myself. Reaching up, she begins to climb the ladder. “Meadow, what the hell are you doing?” I call out to her.

When she looks down at me, she wobbles and I quickly climb up behind her. At least if she falls now, I’ll soften the blow. Following her up and onto the roof of the tank, I realise that she doesn’t want to swim, she only wants to sit.

“This is the only place that allows me to feel anything close to weightless, a place that mimics the feeling you have been able to gift me tonight. This is my place of escape.” Her eyes have sadness behind them, even as she smiles covering up her deepest confession with lighthearted humour. “It’s a secret though, so don’t go telling anyone.”

Secrets — that is what started it all. If only she knew. Maybe one day; one day she

can know, it's always been her.

Her voice beckons my attention and I glance her way, her head is tilted to the side, brows drawn together. I laugh, she's so cute when she's in this mood.

"What are you thinking about?" She presses when I don't answer her silent question.

I consider lying to her, but I doubt she will remember tomorrow. "You," I answer with only one word and the most beautiful rosy colour spreads over her freckles. "I'll keep your secret, if you can keep mine," I whisper, leaning in close. Kinsley closes the gap between us and I cup her cheek in my palm. Dusting my lips over hers, I pause giving her the chance to pull away. She doesn't, instead she kisses me back gently, almost lovingly. I slow the kiss and pull back. "Happy Birthday, Meadow."

Her smile is all the confirmation I need. She sees me, even if she doesn't know it.

"M-my phone," I say on ragged breaths. "A video — for Kinsley."

Warren grabs my face with both hands. "Whatever you want to say to our girl, you will tell her yourself. She's here. Let's go Jesse; just focus on me."

My eyes widen at the mention of her. She's here; I don't want her to see me like this, but at least she can see that I am alive. Warren wraps his arm around my waist, I'm wobbly on my feet, and he's supporting nearly all my weight, as I climb out of the van. With his help, I stumble towards where I think I can make out two figures, I can only assume it's Kinsley and Tanner standing near my car. It has to be them, no one else knows we are out here.

I suck in a breath, almost gasping for air. The pressure of Warren's hand has left the wound, instead using it now to help me stand, but the crushing weight I feel on my chest remains the same, making it hard to breathe. With each breath, I struggle and

my eyes are growing heavy, somehow through the haze I see them; her honey-coloured eyes.

I think she's calling my name, but all their voices sound so far away. Warren sits me down in the backseat of Tanner's car, and I feel my body slump against the cool leather. Before too long, my head is propped up and I feel the warmth and comfort of lying in someone's lap. Berries and Lou-loo? "Mea—dow?"

"It's me, Jesse. I'm here — Stay with me." She strokes my head and pain shoots through me as she applies pressure to my chest.

"Y-your dad," I cough. "He's alive."

"Shh, Jess. Dad's here — Thank you for finding him, just hold on okay."

All the noise drowns out around me and my eyes fall shut. I try to listen as everything begins to fade further away. No bright light is welcoming me, only darkness pulling me under.

For a brief moment, I hear Kinsley's sweet voice whispering in my ear, "I love you, Jesse — every piece of you; all those pieces of yourself that you lost putting me back together — I'll hold onto them. I'll never let them go. You will forever be with me."

I want to hold her. I want to tell her that I would do it again. Over and over again. I would lose every piece of myself to her if that meant living and breathing in a world with her. I don't know if she is able to make out the words that attempt to leave my lips, but I know what I'm trying to say.

"You. Are. The. Reason." I can't open my eyes, I can no longer speak. She strokes my hair and her lips press a soft kiss to my forehead as the darkness pulls me under.

### Chapter Forty-Two

#### Kinsley

Tanner is behind the wheel; the tyres are screeching, creating dust down the dirt road. It took us around forty-five minutes to get out here and it is at least twenty minutes back to the closest hospital. With a quick glance out the window, I see the speed in which the trees are passing us. Tanner is driving faster now than he did earlier. At this rate, we might cut the travel time in half, that's if he doesn't lose control.

"We aren't going to make it," I say more so to myself than to anyone in particular. Streams of tears are flowing down my face and the pounding in my chest vibrates through my body. I can't lose him. Jesse is my constant, my person; I don't know how to do life without him.

Looking down, he lays pale and still; memories flash before my eyes. One painful memory in particular, almost deja-vu with roles reversed.

"Wake the fuck up, Kinsley!" Jesse shouts. I try to speak, I try to move but it doesn't work. My body is failing me. I can see him, I can hear him, but I'm unable to communicate. What an idiot, my body isn't failing me, I failed. Again.

"I can't believe this!"

He's angry, so he should be. I'm angry too. If only he was the type to beat me up a little, knock some sense into me, maybe then I would fall unconscious, into a sleep I would never wake up from.

He hurls me into his arms and carries me out to his car, yelling something to who I can only assume is my mother — yeah, let her drive; she'll probably wrap us around a tree. Not that I would want Jesse involved in that, no, just let her take me by herself.

He sits me in the passenger seat, reclining it slightly to stop my head falling forward and buckles me in.

“You’re not going back to that fucking house, Meadow,” Jesse says, jamming the car in reverse. “When we leave the hospital this time, you’re coming home with me — where you belong.”

It’s the only memory I have of him where he showed the slightest bit of anger. I was in a dark place; my relationship with my mum was nonexistent, and she was too messed up on drugs to realise that only two weeks after my first suicide attempt, I would try again. Jesse was never aggressive. He was always just so ...

I blink in an attempt to clear the tears from my eyes. I tried to take my own life, twice, and failed. He saved me three times, and on the third, it cost him his own.

It’s always been him.

“Keep talking to him, Kins. We’ll make it.”

His breathing is getting slower, more raspy. His chest rattles, blood is soaking through his shirt; the bandages Dad dressed him with are a crimson river covering us both. He isn’t going to make it, a deep feeling of finality washes over me. I hold him close, needing him to know that I’m here. Does he know? God, I hope he doesn’t think he is alone. Take me, Jess. Dammit, take me with you.

“I’m here, Jess, it’s okay — if you need to go, if you’re in pain — fuck it.” I let out a strangled cry, pulling him up further onto my lap. “Kyle will be waiting for you,” I

sob. "Tell him I love him."

"Don't fucking say that, Kinsley. He will be okay," Tanner growls from the front seat. He can't see him though, the boy who was always so full of life; now lying lifeless in my arms.

Jesse was gone. Only his body lies here now; still warm, still intoxicating me with the smell of freshly mowed grass and cinnamon. If only there was a way I could bottle it up. I don't speak, my mind is a mess. I couldn't thread a sentence together, even if I wanted to. Instead, I let Tanner keep driving. Maybe if I close my eyes real tight, I'll float away into the abyss with him. If I had my time again, I would see him the same way he saw me. I was too stuck in my own head to realise that everything I ever wanted was right in front of me. Right fucking there for the taking. Why didn't I see him? Was he unhappy? Did he feel like I just kept him at a distance our whole lives? I didn't, I let him in. Surely he knew that, God, I hope he knew it. I let him see me.

"Out of your head, Kinsley!" Tanner snaps, his eyes piercing me through the rear view mirror. He sees me too. He somehow sees every damned thought racing around in my head. Am I hurting him? Can he see how deep my love runs for Jesse? Can he see my life flashing before my eyes? Does he sense my terrorising fear, navigating a way forward in life without Jess?

Without my person.

My mind is racing with voices on repeat, and my heart is struggling to keep up, pounding faster and faster. The shadows in the car are closing in, making the space feel smaller and even more suffocating. There is nowhere to hide, nothing to protect me. I'm trapped. I sink deeper into the seat, clinging to Jesse's limp body. It's a struggle to hold him close, but I find strength in my desperation. Tanner's voice is stern, but it's too late; the shadows are pulling me under. I pray to a God I don't believe in, that the shadows will consume me completely this time. I pray I won't

wake up.

\* \* \*

The beeping of hospital monitors rouses me. Unfortunately for me, I don't even get a moment of confusion; I know exactly where I am, what has happened and why it's me lying here being monitored. It is a little overkill though, let's be honest. I shake off the probe clipped onto my finger and the machine sends out an alert. If only I knew how to turn the damn thing off.

Movement in the corner of the room startles me, Tanner is by my side in what feels like an instant. Maybe my reflexes are lacking by a few seconds because he can not have moved that fast.

"Thank fuck," he mutters under his breath.

"Where did they take him?" I say on a rasp, my voice husky and dry.

"Here," he clips in response, ignoring my question. Tanner holds a glass of water in front of me, positioning the straw to my lips. "Drink this."

I want to demand answers, but I have no fight left in me. Right now I need this, someone bossing me around and pushing me to pull myself together, because if I'm left to do as I please, I might not make it out alive. Jesse isn't here to piece me back together anymore. The thought sinks low into my stomach and nausea overwhelms me.

"I think, I'm going to be —"

Before Tanner can call a nurse or pass me the bin, I empty the contents of my stomach over the railing and onto the floor.

“Shit, hang on a sec,” Tanner says, grabbing some tissues and pressing the buzzer for the nurse.

A middle aged woman pokes her head through the curtain and smiles sympathetically. She holds up one finger, I assume to let us know she will be back to clean up.

### Chapter Forty-Three

Kinsley

“Kins.” Tanner looks at me, his hard and moody expression from earlier is gone, the raw emotion in its place causes my chest to tighten.

No, I need him strong, I need him to hold me together. I’m not ready to feel all of this yet.

He nods. “Yeah, Pip.” Reading my thoughts he takes my hand, squeezing gently. “I need you to acknowledge all of this, then we can go home.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, as if I were a child making a wish. If only I had woken up and all this was a dream. I know what I want to say, but the words won’t leave my mouth. I focus on my breathing, counting in for four and out for eight. My heartbeat slows and I open my eyes. Please, don’t make me say it.

“They have him in a room, he has been cleaned up so that when Marie arrives she can go and see him.” He hesitates for a moment before continuing, “Do you want me to take you?”

“Marie.” Her name tastes bitter on my tongue, and Tanner nods.

“The police came around earlier to speak with us, you were still asleep. They said we could go into the station tomorrow, once you have been discharged. They sent someone to Marie’s home to speak with her and I believe they are going to drive her

in.”

The information filters through my mind. Marie, Police — my dad. “Dad,” I announce out loud. “— my dad. Tanner, is my dad alive?”

So much has happened, most of which I hoped was a nightmare to wake up from, but this is something I never could have imagined. Our encounter was brief, and I wasn’t able to acknowledge him properly with my attention focused on Jesse, but he was there nonetheless.

Tanner moves to sit up on the bed next to me, shuffling me into his arms. I rub my temple as he kisses the top of my head. “Yeah, Kins. Your dad is alive. He was here earlier but he had to leave with the Police to make a statement; he was checked over first before they took him. I think he will be stuck down at the station for a few hours.”

“W-what happened to —” A nurse enters the room, interrupting me.

“Sorry to interrupt, but there is a Mrs Fernandez here to see you,” the nurse says, pain laced in her voice. Word would have travelled throughout the hospital about what has happened.

Words fail me. My body begins to shake, my teeth chatter and sweat builds on my palms. How can I face her right now? Multiple what if’s race around in my mind, the biggest one being ... What if she blames me?

Tanner acknowledges the nurse, and then Marie slowly enters the room. Even with bloodshot puffy eyes she tries to smile; always our pillar of strength . She walks towards us, her eyes drifting over my body — she’s making sure I’m safe. The woman who has just lost her son is standing before me and hiding all emotion to ensure my safety.

Tanner releases me from his hold and I move myself to the edge of the bed. Marie pulls me into her arms, squeezing tight; when she lets go, she brushes my hair out of my face and looks deep into my eyes. “I haven’t been to see him yet, I needed to make sure you were all in one piece first. Do you need anything?”

“I—I’m so sorry.” Is all I can manage. Sorry? Really Kinsley, that’s as good as you can do?

Marie blinks firmly a few times, an attempt at stopping the tears threatening to fall. “You have nothing to be sorry about, my girl. He made a promise and he fulfilled that.” Her eyes stray to Tanners before coming back to me. “He’s left you in good hands.”

For the first time since I have woken up, the tears fall freely; cascading down my cheeks. My chest contracts and I wonder if you really can die from a broken heart. This pain is something I have never experienced before, this grief so different from all the others.

I find Tanner’s eyes watching me attentively, he nods sensing the permission I’m seeking from him.

“Can I come with you?” I turn my attention to Marie now.

“I was worried you wouldn’t ask.” Relief washes over her face. “Yes, please do.”

\* \* \*

The words the nurse spoke sink further into my chest, “If you follow me this way, I will take you down to the morgue.”

My body stiffens, stainless steel tables with sheets draped over cold bodies flash

before my eyes. I can't. I can't let that be the last — a firm grip lands on my shoulders, halting my thoughts and squeezing me back into reality.

“Oh, sweetheart,” the nurse pleads, understanding my fears. “No, your friend is in the viewing room. It's comfortable, come I'll show you.”

The three of us follow her down a long corridor, Tanner's hand in the small of my back keeping me grounded. She enters the lift and waits for us to shuffle in beside her. The metal doors close and when they slide open again we are greeted by a reception desk, this time with two women sipping cups of tea in front of computer screens. We bypass them to the left and come to a stop outside a door with a sign that reads 'viewing in progress'.

The nurse turns to face us. “I'll give you all a moment.” Then without another word she walks in the direction of the reception desk. Off to indulge in gossip and a cup of tea. Lucky her.

### Chapter Forty-Four

Tanner

When we first arrived at the hospital, Kinsley was passed out in the back seat; her dark hair had fallen loose from her bun and stray strands were slick with sweat against her face. She was somehow still holding Jesse against her small body, knuckles white while gripping his shirt.

Nurses and Doctors surrounded the car, carefully removing Jesse, laying his body on a stretcher and wheeling him away. Then two others in white scrubs stepped forward and a fierce protective instinct washed over me as they reached for Kinsley. Despite their pleas of bullshit policies and procedures, I forced my way through them. I scooped her up and cradled her in my arms, marching her limp body into the hospital myself. After checking her over and clearing her of any physical injuries, they insisted on monitoring her until she woke up. I couldn't disagree, I saw the darkness in her eyes from the rearview mirror as we drove to the hospital; she was lost so deep within herself.

Now I'm standing, arms folded across my chest, in the doorway of the room where Jesse's body lays lifeless. 'I'll give you all a moment'. I scoff at the comment the nurse had made. I'll be damned if anyone is interrupting the time Kinsley and Marie want to have in here, I'll stand with my feet planted here all day if I have to.

I watch the two of them for a while, before stepping out of the room and pulling my phone out of my pocket. There is someone I need to call. My fingers swipe across the screen; the dial tone rings in my ear four times and I almost end the call when a

feminine voice answers.

“Hello?”

“Hey Soph, it’s Tanner.”

“Hey, what’s up? Everything okay?”

“How quickly can you get down to Blackwater Hospital?”

“Uhm.” Her fingers tapping the phone screen. “I can be there in thirty-five minutes.”

“Soph,” my voice thick with warning. “It’s not good.”

“Stay with her, I’ll be there soon.”

Ending the call, I turn back to look through the glass. Kinsley is sitting on the far side of the bed brushing Jesse’s curls out of his eyes; her lips moving whispering all the things she never got to say. He knew. In the weeks I spent alone with Jesse I learnt a lot about him; his devotion to Kinsley and his promise to Kyle.

When they were kids, their relationship started out as a schoolyard crush, she was just his best friend’s little sister. But as they got older, especially after Kyle passed away, she became less of his best friend’s little sister and more of the woman he served to protect, his twin flame; the one he wanted but couldn’t have .

They had a continuous ‘Right Person, Wrong Time’ situation on their hands. Only Kinsley never knew it. Somehow she was oblivious to it all. Now, as she sits at his bedside, I can see the regret written all over her face. How the fuck am I going to help her through this?

Quietly, I re-enter the room and neither of them acknowledge my presence; good, I want them to be in this moment with him. Marie's head rests on Jesse's chest, her small, weathered hands clutching his. With the time that has passed, the warmth of his body would be gone now. Scanning the shelving unit in the corner, I see a pile of folded woolen blankets. I take two, shaking them open and proceed to wrap one around each of the grieving women before me.

Kinsley looks up, her eyes telling me stories of a thousand lifetimes. Each one playing out with an ending different to the one she is witnessing today. I want to scoop her back up into my arms and protect her from her pain. From all that is still to come. But I can't, not yet.

\* \* \*

Kinsley

Marie finally rouses, I'm not sure how long we watched her sleep for. She passed out earlier with her head on Jesse's chest, and during that time Tanner had to turn several nurses away, demanding they not disturb her. When she eventually finds the strength to drag her eyes from him she stands, folds the blanket and pulls her cardigan tighter around her body. Her eyes meet mine and two words slip quietly from her mouth, "I'm ready."

Then, as if he was a guiding light leading us out of the darkness, we follow Tanner out of the room. The click of the door closing behind us will forever haunt me. Marie and I walk hand in hand to the elevator, the three of us taking it back to the ground floor. As we enter the small hospital cafeteria, a familiar pair of chocolate brown eyes meet mine across scattered round tables.

Sophie is sitting alone at a table with four takeaway coffee cups. Please let them be for us, could you imagine if she had consumed all that caffeine ? Tanner snickers

behind me — wait, did I just say that out loud?

“Marie, this is Sophie,” I say as we approach her.

Marie greets her with a soft smile. “Sophie, I’ve heard so many lovely things about you.”

For the first time since I have known her, Sophie is lost for words. Her smile lacks the little dimple on her left cheek, her eyes dart between each of us lacking their usual sparkle. Suddenly it smacks me in the face, she doesn’t know.

“I, uh — there are two lattes and two hot chocolates.” She gestures to the table. “I wasn’t sure what to get.”

Marie and Tanner each take a seat at the table. Whilst I stay standing, twisting a small strand of hair around and around my finger before I feel the relief of the burn. I need to tell her .

“I need to use the bathroom.” Sophie excuses herself from the table and glances my way.

“Me too, actually.” I look between Tanner and Marie. “Will you two be okay for a moment?”

“Go, sweet girl; we will be here when you get back.” Marie shoos us away with her hand.

In the bathroom, Sophie rounds on me, desperation in her eyes. “Kinsley, please, I’m begging you. What is going on? Where is Jesse?”

I close my eyes, one final attempt at wishing this all away. When I open them, I catch

a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror. I'm still wearing the same clothes; the crimson stains on my jeans are a telling sign something has gone very wrong.

With Sophie perched on the bench, next to the sink, I lean against the hand dryer. "Soph, I — I don't even know where to begin ..."

Threading her fingers through mine, she squeezes. Somehow, I manage to keep my emotions buried deep inside. It's almost as if I'm living in one big dissociation, looking down from above and narrating the events of the past twenty-four hours.

Being woken up by Lou-loo with Tanner standing in my bedroom, finding out my dad was alive and then having Jesse bleed out on my lap. It sounds ridiculous to say it all out loud. Soph just listens, absorbing all the information, as the colour slowly drains from her face.

### Chapter Forty-Five

Kinsley

“Thank you both so much; I wouldn’t have been able to do that alone,” Marie whispers. As she steps back, my heart sinks a little from the loss of her embrace.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come and stay with us tonight?” I ask her. “Or I can stay here with you?”

Marie shakes her head, a single tear falling down her cheek. “No, Meadow, dear. I think I need to be alone tonight. I will phone you first thing in the morning though.”

The left side of my mouth turns up in a half hearted smile, it’s all I can muster in this moment. “Promise?”

“I promise. Now go, I’ll speak with you in the morning.”

Each step I take towards the car, a thundering vibration surges through my body; the finality of today begins to settle into my bones. When I reach the passenger door, I look back over my shoulder one last time, Marie’s chin dips with encouragement and I climb in. Tanner squeezes my thigh as we reverse out of the only place that still felt like home.

Rolling hillsides melt into multi-storey buildings as we make our way back into the city. Tanner hasn’t said a word since we left Jesse’s childhood home, even though I’ve seen his eyes flicker my way whilst driving.

When he does speak, his voice startles me, “Do you want to go back to your apartment, or would you rather come back to my place and get some sleep before —” he takes a moment to find the right words, “— You know, before tackling any other big emotional things?”

“I’m not sure I’m following you — Oh, my dad is at my apartment isn’t he? No, take me there. I need to see him.”

We arrive as the sky is turning a beautiful mix of oranges, pinks and yellows. It’s the most magical sunset I have ever witnessed. He’s still with me. Jesse’s words of reassurance, from the night I was worried about him finding someone of his own, come to mind.

‘ I’ll always be here for you, Kinsley. Day or night, if you call me, I will move heaven and earth to get to you .’

If only I knew then, what I know now.

My palm firmly grips the door handle, turning it slowly and pushing it open with caution. I expect Lou-loo to greet me as she normally does, with a big slobbery grin on her face, however the house is quiet. No pitter patter of paws, no excited barking; only silence.

“Lou?” I call out, walking through the front entry of my apartment. The lights are off down here so I continue through the living area and flick the kitchen lights on. I check the spare bedroom, nothing.

“Let’s check your room.” Tanner tips his chin in the direction of stairs.

“Lou-loo!” I sing louder this time. Her whimpers grow louder as my bed comes into view; she’s laying in the middle of my pillows with her head between her paws.

“What’s wrong girl?”

“She’s been like this all day,” a gravelly voice responds over to my right.

I spin around towards the balcony. There, in the light of the setting sun, stands my dad. The golden light beams around him, as if he’s walked down the staircase from heaven; yet I know he’s been living in hell. He’s thinner, a little gaunt in the face and his hair is now grey, but it’s him. He’s wearing jeans and a flannelette shirt and has rough stubble on his chin.

“D-Dad?”

“It’s me, Meadow.”

My feet move me forward without thought, closing the distance between us. He cups my face in his large hand, stroking my cheek with his thumb. I close my eyes, memories appearing like a kaleidoscope of colours. He pulls me in close and wraps his arms around my shoulders as I bury my head into his chest.

“I am so sorry, Kinsley. I tried — I promise I never stopped trying to get back to you.”

“They’re gone, Daddy,” I sob. “Kyle, Mum and now Jesse.”

He holds me; like he did when I was a little girl, when my emotions were too big for me to work through on my own. He was always so good at just being there; knowing when I needed him to fix something, compared to moments like these, when all I need is him .

“We will get through this together.”

Dad fluffs the pillows, propping me up and Lou snuggles closer with a huff. She lays her head in my lap, big puppy dog eyes pleading with me.

“I know, girl, but we will be okay.”

Dad moves to my reading chair in the corner. He leans forward, resting his forearms on his knees. I understand that this would be hard for him, but he’s had years to prepare for this moment. Me? I have so many questions floating around in my mind. Where do I even begin?

Where has he been all this time? Why has he been there? Does he know what happened to Kyle?

Tanner enters the room, snapping me out of my thoughts, two steaming cups of tea in hand. He passes one to Dad before placing the other down on my bedside table.

“I’ve got a few things to take care of — a couple of phone calls to make. Come and get me if you need anything, okay?” Briefly he kisses the top of my head and turns, leaving the room.

The tea is hot, sending a comforting sting down my throat. I let my shoulders drop and relax my head back against the headboard. Moments pass before either of us speak.

Dad is the one who finally breaks the silence. “I know you will have a lot of questions, Kinsley. But —” he sighs. “I don’t know if tonight is the right time to start digging up the past.”

### Chapter Forty-Six

Tanner

Warren's footsteps pad down the stairs. My fingers fly across the keyboard, sending off my final email. Closing my laptop, I slide it across the kitchen bench and turn to face him.

"Kinsley?" I question with a raised brow. I shouldn't be so abrupt, but fuck — I've only just met this guy and he has been with the enemy for the past fourteen years. Of course I am going to be hesitant to trust him. Jesse should be here dealing with this, and I should be up there with my girl.

"She's asleep." He pauses, looking over his shoulders and up the stairs. "I could sit there all night and watch her but she's been through so much. I don't want her to wake up and get a shock if I'm the first person she sees."

I grunt, tilting my head in the direction of the spare room. "I'll make sure the spare room is made up for you." Leading the way, Warren follows in step behind me. Jesse had already cleared out most of Kinsley's paperwork that she had collected over the years, but there are still a few old news articles lying around. I gather them up, stacking them neatly. Without turning around to face him, I place my palms flat on the dresser, leaning forward and dropping my chin to my chest. "Lance ... Did they get him?"

"The police said they have him in custody, as well as the man who was driving for him. They had loaded four girls into the back of the van when Jesse and I took off, we

spoke with them — tried to calm them down, then hid the four of them in a set of abandoned shearing quarters not too far down the road. Once you and Kinsley left to take Jesse to the hospital, I went back to check on the girls and used the driver's phone to contact the police.”

Four fucking girls. How many more are there that we are no closer to finding? What was it, fifty-one or something on the file I received the other day? If Lance is locked up, someone else is going to step into King Dick position and will continue running the show. The police might believe having Lance behind bars will halt his operations, but he already has the pawns in his game doing the dirty work for him. This will continue, whether he is around or not. I need to know the ins and outs of this operation, so lucky for me I have someone standing behind me who has had their hands in it for over a decade.

“Tanner?” a sweet voice floats down the stairs interrupting my thoughts.

Warren gestures towards the door. “I’m okay here, this room has more than I have had over the years. We can finish this conversation tomorrow.”

I’ll have to make some calls, get the others to dig a little deeper. Hopefully, between my contacts and Warren’s intel, we can find the slimy bastards that will inevitably fall through the law enforcement cracks.

“Yeah, Pip, I’m here,” I say, walking out into the hallway, closing the door to the spare room behind me. She’s standing at the bottom of the staircase, trembling, with her arms wrapped around herself.

“I woke up and —” she looks to the ground, her eyes lacking the gold flecks I’ve come to love, “— I, uh, I was alone.”

Tipping her chin slightly so her eyes meet mine, I search for all the scars that live

buried under the surface; I want to heal them all. “You’ll never be alone again. That I can promise you.”

I scoop her up into my arms to carry her back upstairs and, as we walk, she relaxes in my hold and nuzzles in against my chest. This isn’t at all how today should have played out. I can’t even stand here, and be grateful to have her back in my arms, knowing the circumstances that have brought us here.

In her bedroom, the French doors rattle gently in the summer breeze and I notice Lou has moved herself over to a blanket in the corner. I place Kinsley down on the left side of the bed, before stripping down to my briefs and climbing in beside her. She rolls towards me, placing her hand on my chest.

“This one’s new.” She inspects curiously, tracing my fresh ink with her finger, and I hum in response.

The little 444 sits directly across my heart. I got Carter to do it the night Jesse and I had the conversation about him needing me to protect her. The night he asked me to fulfil the promise he made to Kyle, if for some reason he was no longer able to. At the time I thought he was being irrational, but now ...

“Why these numbers?” her voice pulls me back into the present.

“444 signifies protection,” I pause, tucking her hair behind her ear. “— and I made a promise.”

### Chapter Forty-Seven

Kinsley

Tanner buttons his shirt and tucks it into his slacks as I continue to pick the invisible lint off of my black pencil skirt. My stomach feels as though it's in my chest, my palms sweaty.

It's been a long week, the days full of police interviews and funeral planning. Dad's the one who has had to spend the most time down at the station; he seems to be doing okay though. I almost laugh at that thought. Are any of us really okay? Dark humour has been my saving grace, even though I am convinced that Tanner is only days away from having me locked up in a psych ward.

"Hey girl, it's just me!" Sophie calls out from downstairs. Did she knock? I didn't even hear the door open.

Warmth trails up my neck; Tanner's eyes are on me, I can feel it. He tips my chin up, stealing my attention with his deep blue eyes. "I'll go down and send her up. When you're ready, we will get going."

Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, he gently catches a tear falling down my cheek. Thank God for waterproof mascara.

The click-clack of heels carry Sophie up the stairs as I straighten my silk blouse, fiddling with the already fastened buttons. I don't want to be seen today and I don't mean physically seen, I can handle that; I mean seen . I don't want someone to peel

the layers away, breaking into the hurt and anger that I've been locking up inside of me. If someone manages to let it out, I won't be able to contain it. It will consume me; the darkness, the shadows, the voices. Everything I have crammed into the box in the corner of my mind.

The only person I want to confide in, is the same person I'm going to say goodbye to for the final time. The person who put themselves in danger to protect me. He would know what to do. He would reach inside my mind, take the box, and place it in front of us. Then, whilst holding my hand, he would open it and slowly let each emotion creep out. First, the sadness and the guilt; I would cry in his arms, as he stroked my hair and whispered sweet nothings. Letting me sit in silence, just holding me. Second, the anger, frustration and resentment. Even though targeted at him, he would help me glove up and let me exert all the built-up tension. Then would come the emptiness; the soul-crushing feeling of abandonment. My pulse thumps in my head at the thought, the sound dulling out all my surroundings.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I want to scream, the repetition becoming too much for me to handle.

Make it stop!

Thump. Thump. Thump.

How can I make it stop?

Strong hands grip my shoulders, their fingertips pressing in. Slowly, I hear them; the sobs and sniffles in the background. My eyes dart around unfocused, before landing on Tanner standing directly in front of me. He's sternly calling my name, trying to bring me back.

\* \* \*

Sitting front row at a funeral hits differently. In all honesty, if I wasn't required front row at a funeral, I probably wouldn't go. I don't understand those oldies, you know the ones. The ones that check the local paper and read the death notices to see if there is anyone that they know. I guess it's just the progression of life though, right? Engagement announcements, weddings, pregnancies and births ... Then the death notices.

This is my fifth time sitting in the front row at a funeral. Five fucking times. Pale, grieving faces of people dressed in black flash in my vision from each funeral I've attended.

Nine years old when my dad was presumed dead.

Ten years old to bury my brother.

Seventeen years old when Jesse's dad passed away.

Eighteen years old and left alone in the world by my mother.

Truth be told, she had checked out a long time prior to that. Her funeral was one of the hardest though, because other than Jesse and Marie, I had no one in that front row with me; and they were only present out of support for me. Mum had lost Jesse and Marie's respect years ago.

Whoever is mapping out my life story needs to give me a break, or just drop the fucking pen, because I'm done. I don't have anything left to give anymore.

“— that concludes our service. We ask for you to respect the family, as they move to the cemetery for a private burial. Refreshments are in the function room, please help

yourselves. The family will join you once they have concluded. Thank you.”

The celebrant’s conclusion of the service pulls me from my thoughts. I blink a few times to focus my eyes and notice Tanner’s hand resting on my knee. Placing my hand on top of his, I squeeze, my gaze meeting his through our dark sunglasses. I can’t see his eyes, but I know they’re laced with concern for me. Time to be strong, Kinsley. The waves of emotion I am feeling today are wild, right now I’m made of stone, a force to be reckoned with. Not an emotion in sight.

Standing, I take note of both Soph and Dad hovering closely behind Tanner. Knowing I have tabs on them, I look for Marie. She was sitting right next to me at the beginning of the service, but I zoned out and now she’s nowhere to be seen. Scanning the rows of people once more, I begin to walk. There are a lot of people here, but none that she would confide in. My mind ticks over, scrolling through the internal list of people who could be here that she would wander off with. Louise . Of course, she was travelling up to stay with her and attend the funeral; it’s been so many years that I had almost forgotten that she existed.

Louise was Jesse’s Aunty, well not technically. You know those best friends you have from childhood, that when you eventually have kids they just call them Aunty? Well, me neither. But she was like that kind of Aunty to Jesse. She was a constant in his life, from the moment he was born, up until she moved away. I think he missed her so much that he named Lou-loo after her. I believe it was around the same time that Dad went missing when she moved away ... It had to have been, because I don’t think she never came around whilst I was living there. Focus Kinsley, look for Louise.

The crowd of people split into two, the majority moving towards the function space, a separate building to the right of the one the ceremony was held in. The rest of us begin to make our way to the cemetery. The cemetery is conveniently located on the same grounds; sitting among beautiful gardens that are full of native Australian flora,

with tall gumtrees scattered throughout. Just ahead of us, off to our right is a bench seat and sitting there is Marie, Louise and Lou-loo.

Lou barks, her tail wagging as I approach, causing Marie and Louise to whip their heads in my direction. I was expecting red puffy eyes and miserable expressions — and while it is their red eyes that greet me, miserable wouldn't be the word I use to describe their expressions. They look like two naughty teens who have been caught around the back of the school gym. Marie slaps a hand over her mouth and Louise giggles, hiding something down to her side. Smoke begins to drift up from where they sit, floating higher with the breeze; their reaction and the smell tells me they have smoked something a little stronger than tobacco. I shake my head, a smile spreading wide across my face. Jesse will be getting a kick out of this.

Slowly, I walk further into the area and move to the front of the small group. With a steadying breath, I suppress the emotions threatening to bubble over. The celebrant steps to the side, allowing me space to say a few words. Talk straight to him, Kins. Talk to him as though no one else is around.

“Jesse. Fuck — Jess, how did we get here? It was only yesterday that I was hanging out the window of your ute, flying down dirt roads. Having dance parties in my bedroom, when you would sneak through my window.” Tilting my head back, I look to the sky, hoping to keep the tears filling my eyes at bay for just a little while longer. “You were always there, Jesse. It was always us against the world. I hope you knew how deeply my love ran for you. You were my person. You were my reason. ” Looking back down, my eyes lock onto his coffin ...

His coffin .

I can't hold it in any longer, I try to speak but the lump in my throat catches; my emotions begin to bubble over and a sob is all that comes out. Taking a shuddering breath, I try to go on, I need to tell him; he needs to know this. “H-how can you

expect me to go on? How —” I feel Tanner come to stand beside me. I turn into him, burying my face into his chest, the tears flow freely now and my voice is barely a whisper, “I can’t.” Wrapping me in his hold, Tanner moves us to the side so that the officiant may take over; reading a verse we chose before To Be Loved — Tones she is looking for him. She knows something is wrong but she doesn’t understand why he hasn’t come home. Lowering myself, I wrap my arms around her neck and bury my head into her fur as she begins to whine. “It will be okay Lou, I have you now.”

\* \* \*

“The four of us will follow you back home.” I squeeze Marie’s hand as we walk towards the car park. Lou nudges my leg, her big brown eyes trying to tell me something. “What is it, girl?” I tilt my head, mimicking her. She looks at Marie and barks once. “You want to go with Marie?” I ask and Lou-loo barks again.

“I think she wants to ride with us,” Louise pipes up from a few steps behind.

“Go on then,” I say, opening the back door of Marie’s car, Lou-loo jumps in. “Be good; we will be right behind you.” I give her a scratch under her chin and close the door.

Tanner guides me towards the car, his large hand warm against the small of my back. Sophie is there waiting for us, her sleek black hair and black clothing give off Addams Family vibes. The thought has my lips turning up at the sides, she elbows me in the ribs. “Hey!” I protest. “What was that for?”

“You gave me a look,” she shrugs, batting her eyelids at me.

“Get in the goddamn car,” Tanner laughs, opening the back door and ushering us both in; we both may have had one too many glasses of wine during the wake. Dad climbs into the passenger seat and Tanner starts the engine.

It's not long before we are walking up the steps and into the comforting feeling of home. Showing the others into the living area, I flick on the kettle to make a pot of tea. The cupboard in the top right hand corner of the kitchen catches my eye; it was the alcohol cupboard when we were kids. I glance over my shoulder, probably out of habit, before pulling it open.

There are several dusty, half empty bottles; Vodka, Malibu and Blue Curacao just to name a few, my stomach churns at the memories. My days of Fruit Tingles are long gone. Someone clears their throat behind me and I close the cupboard. Louise is standing there, a bottle in hand and three tall glass mugs.

"Irish Coffee?" She winks, handing me a bottle of Baileys with a smirk on her face. Louise is trouble. No wonder Jesse liked her so much.

Carrying the pot of tea and three mugs, I place them on the table, whilst Louise makes sure Marie and I both get our spiked coffee. Sophie gives me a knowing wink, I would have made her one too, but I know she needs to drive home once we get back to the apartment and she already had one too many wines earlier.

Taking in my surroundings, I see Tanner's eyes are focused on Louise, almost as though he finds her familiar. She doesn't seem to reciprocate the exchange when their eyes meet, only briefly smiling and moving on. Strange. Make a mental note, Kinsley, that was definitely a little odd. I'll bring it back up with him later.

### Chapter Forty-Eight

Kinsley

Tanner silently follows me into the bathroom. It's been a long day, the buzz of the alcohol is wearing off and I need to get out of these clothes and into something more comfortable. Reading my mind, he gently begins to unzip my skirt. Wriggling my hips it falls to the floor as he sweeps my hair over my shoulders and I start unbuttoning my blouse.

"I know her." Tanner exhales heavily.

"Who?" I ask, as he slips my blouse off my shoulders and unclasps my bra.

"Louise; I've seen her before. I just can't place it."

"As long as you don't wake me up at 2am when it pops into your head, we'll be fine." I try to laugh it off, I don't think I have any brain capacity left for emotions tonight.

He turns the water on and begins unbuttoning his shirt. "I'm serious, Kinsley. I have a gut feeling that I know her. I haven't just seen her in passing. It's not like that." Running a hand through his hair, he leans against the basin. I step forward, his open shirt revealing the new addition to his tattooed chest. Gently, I place a kiss in its place and he wraps his arms around me. "I know we need to talk, but I need you, Pip."

The room is steaming up from the running water; I take his hand and walk us backwards towards the shower, quickly stepping out of my underwear. I never

stopped needing him.

\* \* \*

“We are still missing one important detail,” Tanner interjects, both Dad and I turning our attention to him. “Who the fuck is George Watson?”

“Ah, now that is something I need to explain.” Dad shifts in his seat. “George Watson is a false identity I made up to try and keep you safe. I thought if I could just get you to back off a little —”

“ YOU threatened me? As a joke? I thought I was being stalked.” My jaw drops to the floor, and I narrow my eyes on him.

“It’s kind of genius.” Tanner smirks. Turning on him sharply, the back of my hand connects with his chest.

“Think about it, Pip. If you hadn’t been caught up with these threats, you would have gone in guns blazing all by yourself. Who knows what the outcome would have been.”

“They knew someone was onto them so it was only a matter of time until they found out who.” His voice drops lower, almost to a whisper, “— as soon as Laura killed herself, I knew you wouldn’t be safe anymore.”

Laura. It’s been so long since I have heard my mother’s name. My heart rate picks up, thundering in my chest. “Wh — wait. How would Mum being alive keep me safe? I didn’t even live with her, we barely had a relationship.”

He exhales a long breath, guilt written all over his face. “It was her.” His eyes look straight through me as he speaks. “She was in charge of it all. The drugs. The crime.

Lance. She was the only thing that stood between them and you.”

Tanner straightens in his seat. Ignoring the bomb my dad just dropped about my mother, he asks, “Why would they want Kinsley?”

Dad scoffs, shaking his head in disgust. “Since the day she was born, people would stop and look at her, ‘oh she’s so pretty’ they would say, ‘look at her with those honey-coloured eyes’. ” He pins me with a haunted sense of emptiness. “I tried so hard to always tell you how smart and kind you were, I wanted you to know that there was more to you than the compliments you received from strangers, they were always focusing on how you looked.”

“They wanted to sell her?”

“I didn’t find any of this out until afterwards — I swear.” He shakes his head. “The way I overheard the men speak, they made it sound like Lance had been trying to convince Laura to hand Kinsley over since she was a toddler.” Dad pinches the bridge of his nose. “I still don’t know how Laura even knew Lance or how she got involved in all of this. Sounds awful to say it, but with all the shit I now know she was responsible for, I’m surprised she didn’t.”

He looks at me now, as bile rises up my throat at the thought of my own mother being involved in girls being sold for sex. I make a run for the kitchen sink; there goes this morning’s coffee.

Dad has spent the last two hours filling us in on the past fourteen years. My head is spinning with everything I am trying to process. The night he went missing, he believes Mum drugged his whiskey, and had one of Lance’s men come to take him. When he woke up, he was locked in what seemed to be a basement. Ironical how we both woke up to our worlds tipped upside down.

“What about Kyle?” Tanner directs his question to Dad as he holds my eye contact; I know he’s watching for any cracks to surface; knowing it’s the question I have been desperate to find an answer for all these years.

“Kyle came looking for me,” he sighs. “I caught a glimpse of them one night; him and Jesse. I knew they saw me but, dammit, I didn’t think he would come for me — he was so young. I can still hear his tortured voice; his screams — he fought so hard.” Dad stands and begins pacing the room. “I don’t know how long they beat him, but when they threw his limp body into the room they had me locked in, I knew he didn’t stand a chance. They left him there with me. They —” He drops to his knees, unable to string any more words together.

“It’s okay, Dad,” I soothe, kneeling down beside him. “There was nothing you could do.”

“She let them,” his voice getting louder; it has so much force I shuffle backwards. “She declined the autopsy and let it get swept under the carpet as a fucking hit and run!” Standing once again, he throws his arms in the air.

Tanner approaches with a short glass of amber liquid. Here, Warren, have a glass of whiskey, it’s not drugged this time. I shake off my inner thoughts that have no place here, why would I even think that right now?

Dad tips the liquid offering back in one go.

“Another?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “I think I might go for a walk to cool off.” His knuckles go white with the tension he’s holding onto the door handle with, “Meadow?” he says much more softly now.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t express my frustrations that way.”

I run into his arms. He stumbles back a step; it takes him a moment to gather his wits about him to return the gesture. We stand there for a moment, arms wrapped around each other before I release him. With his eyes trained on me, he slips his hands into his pockets in a relaxed manner, we smile at each other before he pulls his brows together, glancing down. Out of his pocket he pulls a phone. Jesse’s phone .

“I — uh, here.” Dad passes me the phone. “I guess there is never going to be a right time to do this.” Glancing between Tanner and myself, he pauses before continuing, “He made me promise to get this to you if he didn’t — you know ... He said something about a video.”

Tanner mumbles something under his breath and walks off out of the room. Tightening my grip on the phone I hold it to my chest. “Thank you.”

Placing the phone on the charger, I pop on a playlist for some background noise and pour myself a drink, a little heavy handed on the gin but surely it’s after twelve o’clock by now.

Two thick, tanned arms lock me against the kitchen island and I spin in a tight circle meeting the wall of muscle that is Tanner’s chest. “How are you even comfortable to sleep on at night?” I think out loud, which earns me a chuckle.

“We need to talk.” He cocks his head to the side, waiting on an answer to a question he didn’t ask.

“Sure.” I nod. “Let’s sit.” He leads us over to the couch and I place my drink down on the coffee table. Lifting my gaze, I slowly roam his features. Dark circles sit below

his eyes; heavy and lost. His shoulders fall forward, unlike his usual stance; radiating confidence, so tall and broad. I don't think I have really stopped to think how this would be affecting him.

"I'm sorry," I begin to say, but he cuts me off.

"Kins, stop, you do not need to apologise. I just need to get this off my chest, I need you to hear me. Walking away from you was the hardest thing I have ever had to fucking do. Jesse was the only reason I didn't refuse to leave; I knew he would do anything to protect you. He was the next best thing other than being here myself. But with Jesse gone, his protection isn't an option anymore. I need you to promise me that you'll never ask me to do that again — I won't do it. I'll never leave you." He rubs the back of his head in contemplation. "I'd rather keep you locked up against your will, than let you push me away again." I lift a brow, challenging him. The way his eyes are locked on mine should be intimidating; the serious tone in his voice hasn't faltered and there isn't even a hint of a smirk on his face — he's serious. "I was always content with being the villain in your story, Pip."

Tanner reaches out and I take his hand, climbing onto his lap. His hands go straight to my hips, keeping me steady. Holding his eye contact and allowing myself to get lost in his deep blue orbs, the seconds pass before I finally find the courage to whisper my truth. "I'm in love with you, Tanner Hayes."

\* \* \*

The next morning, I make my way into the kitchen, flicking on the coffee machine and popping on some gentle music for some background noise, before reaching for two mugs. Dad has already left; he's gone to visit Marie and take Lou-loo for a play. My eyes drift to Jesse's phone, still on the charger. Picking it up, I power it on.

"Want some company?" Tanner's eyes stray to Jesse's phone in my hands.

“That would be nice, but —”

Tanner silences me with a short and sweet peck to the lips. “Whatever Jesse says on there, and however that makes you feel —” he takes my hands in his, “—I’m not going anywhere, it won’t change anything for me.”

His reassurance is comforting because deep down, I am scared. I’m terrified. My head is a mess. All I know is, I loved Jesse in a way no one can ever compete with.

The song switches over to If I Would Have Known — Kyle Hume and we stand frozen for a moment.

“Should I turn this off? I know how music can, well —”

I butt in before he can call me out for playing music on the days I want to feel certain emotions. There is nothing wrong with a dance party to burn off your frustration or having a playlist for when you need a good cry.

I muster up half a smile. “Nah, let the song play.”

Taking my hand, we snuggle up on the couch. I take a big gulp of my drink and unlock Jesse’s phone, bringing up his videos. Sure enough, his bright green eyes are staring at me through the screen . With a shaky hand, I press my thumb to the play button.

“Hey, Meadow.”

A gasp leaves me with the sound of Jesse’s voice and I slap a hand over my mouth. Tanner’s arms tighten around me, keeping me grounded.

“I know you’re angry right now — fuck. I’m so fucking sorry.

I need you to know that I'm doing this for you; we are doing this for you. Kyle made a sacrifice, now it's my turn. I need to go and finish what he started — I need to bring your dad home.

I want you to know that whatever happens, you are not alone. Kyle chose me and now I'm choosing Tanner."

Tears well in my eyes and Tanner drops his head against my shoulder.

"It's always been you for me, Kinsley, and it's one of my biggest regrets not telling you sooner. But I made a promise to look after you, to be there for you and I would like to believe every decision I have made has had your best intentions in mind.

He pauses, ruffling his wild mousey blonde locks, a nervous habit I had come to love.

"When I get back, because I am coming back, please just don't let Tanner hit me."

Jesse's laughter echoes through the phone as he speaks and I don't know whether to join him or cry harder, a muffled sob comes out instead.

"This isn't some declaration of love where I come home and try to sweep you off your feet. I don't want anything to change between us. I just — I just couldn't walk into the unknown without telling you how I feel. Please don't ever forget. It's always been you."

He pauses for a moment taking in a shaky breath, and naturally, without thinking. I mimic him. So many times he sat in front of me counting breaths, bringing me back from the brink.

"— the only reason you'll be seeing this is if something does happen and in that case, please just breathe for me. Right now, Meadow, look at me — breathe. I don't know

what waits on the other side but whatever it is and wherever I end up, I will spend my entire existence searching for you. I will find you again.”

The video ends and Jesse’s phone falls from my grip; the blanket we are wrapped up in swallows it, as I let all my weight sink back into Tanner’s hold. He doesn’t speak and I’m thankful. I have no words, no emotions, nothing.

I’m just numb.

Tanner

Kinsley lays in my arms, her body pressed against mine. The steady rise and fall of her chest soothes an ache I've been feeling since I walked out on her. Closing my eyes, I let the emotional exhaustion take over.

"Tanner!" Harley calls from the cubby house we built at the top of the tree. I run towards the ladder but before I reach it, my body hits the ground.

"Damn shoelace!" Tears prick at my eyes but I refuse to let them fall. My father's voice booms in my mind 'tears show weakness Tanner and the weak don't survive in this world'. I've been at Darcel House for almost two years, and I can still hear Dad's firm voice as if he was standing there next to me. If only Mum's laughter and her nighttime stories were as easy to recall.

Quickly, I tie my shoelace and brush the dirt off my knees. "Hurry up, Tanner!" Harley moans and I roll my eyes. When I reach the ladder, I climb up into the space we made for ourselves. There are lots of other boys here too, maybe twenty. Some come and go, but others stay until they're grown up enough to work.

Light blue eyes and a warm smile peak up into the cubby house. "A little birdie told me it's somebody's tenth birthday today." Turning her attention to me, she slides a small package my way. "Keep this between us, oh — another little birdie told me there were cupcakes hidden in your wardrobe too." And with a wink, she disappears again.

My eyes spring open, I remember where I've seen her before.

Louise worked at Darcel House.