



WHERE THE LITTLE BIRDS ARE

A tale of old love, consequences, and happy ever afters.

B . C E L E S T E

WHERE THE LITTLE BIRDS ARE

B. CELESTE

OceanofPDF.com

CONTENTS

[Playlist](#)

[Blurb](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Stay in Touch](#)

[Also by B. Celeste](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

This Book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, duplicated, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior written consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Where the Little Birds Are

Copyright © 2020 by B. Celeste

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Cover Artist: RBA Designs

Formatting: Micalea Smeltzer

Published by: B. Celeste

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the author.

OceanofPDF.com

To the believers

OceanofPDF.com

PLAYLIST

“Something Borrowed” – Lewis Capaldi

“Bad Liar” – Imagine Dragons

“Change Your Mind” – Nashville Cast

“Call Out My Name” – The Weeknd

“Two Ghosts” – Harry Styles

“What About Us” – P!nk

“Every Little Thing” – Carly Pearce

“Need You Now” – Lady Antebellum

[OceanofPDF.com](https://oceanofpdf.com)

BLURB

Corbin Callum rumored to be involved with bestselling author on set of his latest movie

Corbin Callum, 28, reportedly has affair with bestselling author Kinley Thomas, 26, on the set of the film *Through Shattered Glass*.

Callum and Thomas were seen together on multiple occasions off set of the movie based on Thomas's novel. Pictures taken of Callum sneaking in and out of the Five Seasons hotel where Thomas stayed sparked more rumors following the images of the two out together earlier in the month.

One source working at the hotel tells Entertainment Daily that Callum would "wear an oversized hoodie and sunglasses and take the employee's only entrance at the back of the hotel to visit Thomas in her room after dark."

Another source claims that Hollywood's Most Desired Man would wait in the lobby for Thomas to come downstairs and "cut the calls from his wife short as soon as Thomas would appear."

Hotel photos reveal a disguised Callum walking the halls trying to remain inconspicuous, not leaving Thomas's room until hours later.

No comments have been made from either party.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

KINLEY / Present

THERE'S a tingling awareness of the hardened skin beneath my oversized sweater. The baggy material on my lean figure is premature, but the anxiety of the wrong eyes seeing too much keeps me sweating under the scratchy cotton.

Tugging.

Gripping.

Squirming.

Nobody is looking, yet they see too much.

Pushing the plastic cart to check out, I do everything in my power not to turn my head a fraction to the left. It's a worthless feat. The colorful covers and bold print are there for the world to see, preying on helpless customers stuck in line with nothing else to do.

His face.

His hands.

Those eyes.

Mine are plastered on the way he holds Lena Dasani's hand as they walk toward the photographers on a crowded street. His shades are hooked on the collar of his pristine white tee, not covering his silver eyes like they were when he was with me. There's no hat. No disguise. Why would there be? When he's with his wife, he doesn't have to hide.

Swallowing the rising nausea, I take a deep breath and force my eyes to look at any other magazine. Cooking. Lifestyle. Fashion. But Corbin Callum is on every fucking one like I'm the butt of the universe's pathetic joke.

“Isn’t he sexy?” a voice says from behind me, causing my gaze to lift to a blonde girl no older than sixteen.

I blink. “Uh...”

The blonde rambles despite my lack of conversational interest. “Anyone would be blind not to admit how beautiful the man is. It’s unfair.”

That catches my interest. “Unfair?”

She scoffs in exasperation. “That men like him exist. It seems unreal to me. Have you seen pictures of him shirtless?”

My stomach twists. Can she see my skin gloss with dotted sweat? The back of my mind replays the moments shared with the very man she’s gushing over. Unreal is right. Fingertips tingling over the memories of them trailing over sculpted abs and mountains of muscle confirms everything she assumes.

And once more, I hate myself.

Tugging on the hem of my sweater for the millionth time, I give her my best nonchalant shrug like I’m indifferent to the man who plagues my mind. “He’s okay, I guess.”

One of the girl’s blonde brows arch like she doesn’t believe me. Shifting from one foot to another, I shoot her a small smile. It’s all I can offer under the scrutiny of my own conscience. I know what I’ve done. Corbin knows what he’s done. But the world doesn’t know the intimate details despite the article published almost two months ago.

I shut the world out after getting back, keeping silent hoping the worst would pass. Missed calls, texts, emails all pile up from people who claim they care. But my chest struggles to differentiate those who are telling the truth or not, so I stop looking at them.

The girl’s eyes narrow, and the slightest tilt of the head has anxiety blasting warning signs that I should just leave. “Do I know you from somewhere?”

My black leggings, oversized sweater, and messy brown hair pulled back helps me blend in. I don’t look out of the ordinary and do my best not to draw unwanted attention to myself. People in Lake Roe don’t recognize me very often. It’s a large enough town not to be noticed, giving me privacy that I’ve had no choice but to keep.

I push my cart forward once the line moves, turning slightly. “Sorry, I don’t think so.”

Not giving her a chance to press, I busy myself by pulling my credit card out of my wallet and move to start unloading my purchases onto the conveyer belt. It's hard not to feel the burn of curious eyes. I've acknowledged that I'm this person now—the one who cheats, lies, and destroys people's lives.

But is his destroyed?

My eyes can't help but dart back to the magazine rack, where Corbin's small smile to the photographers graces the front. He doesn't look destroyed. The only life I've ruined is my own.

The girl behind me picks up one of the magazines and tosses it on to the conveyer. "It's okay to admit you like that sort of stuff. My mom gets all weird about it too."

Freezing over the magazine shifting closer to the cashier as the belt moves, my eyes turn to the teenager. I don't know what to say and can't put it back in fear of how that will make me look. When I go outside, I'll throw the magazine away and never open the pages to see the newest story they've printed.

Yet another lie.

THE CURSER on my laptop blinks, the empty screen taunting me as I draw my knees up to perch on the edge of the cushioned office chair. Tapping my nail against the desk, I reach toward the keyboard to write something, anything, before sighing in defeat.

Resting in the desk drawer beside me is every edition of my life in fifteen hundred words or less. Grainy pictures. Professional pictures. Choppy quotes. Wild assumptions woven together by truth and exaggerations. I collect every magazine and don't know why.

My cell rests screen down, buzzing with an oncoming call. Hands twitching against my stomach, I prepare myself for any name to appear when I flip it over. Picking it up, I exhale in the tiniest bit of relief as I swipe to answer.

"Hello, Jamie."

"Kinley," my agent greets. Long nails tapping against keys fills the hesitant silence between us. The noise abruptly stops. "How have things been going since we last spoke? I expect you're nearly done with the second book?"

My eyes go back to the blank screen. “It’s a work in progress,” is the only thing I can think to say. It’s better than the last update she got almost a month and a half ago. The story ideas that normally swirl through my head all disappeared the second I got back to New York.

“They’re expecting it next month. We’re all on deadlines here,” she reminds me, sternness in her tone. “The remaining two books need to be finished by the end of the year.”

Her reminder of the three-book deal leaves thick anxiety creeping up my throat until it hurts to swallow. The first book was one I polished off in California—a way to distract myself from a certain silver-eyed man. “I know they’ve been patient with me, but I may need a little extension—”

“No.” I wince back into my seat at the all-business, no-bullshit response. The few times I’ve witnessed it in person were never directed at me, but it made shivers roll down my spine regardless. “They gave you time after what happened with Parker, but you promised you’d make the new deadlines. We’ve worked very hard to secure this deal, Kinley. You cannot risk losing that. One House is too big of a publisher to get on their bad side.”

Parker.

Normally, the name deepens the little crack in my heart he left behind after calling off our engagement. It’d taken a long time to open up to someone who seemed supportive of my career, crazy schedule, and preferred seclusion, but he’d been that person for me. I knew exactly what Corbin meant when he told me that Lena was what he needed for a while because Parker had been the same distraction for me. But somewhere along the way Parker Jennings got tired of it all. I couldn’t blame him and the way he called me out for focusing more on my books than him. He was right.

Now his name doesn’t give me the same ache in my chest. In fact, there’s no feeling at all. I know the reason behind it is because there’s a hole much deeper from somebody else. The crack Parker left is nonexistent in comparison.

Numbness aside, I find myself nodding. What else can I do when I know Jamie is right? If I mess up this deal, I’ll lose the advancement and any opportunity to publish through them again. But the itchiness of another risk lingering in the depths of my conscience keeps me unsteady regardless of the final two books that I have yet to write.

The truth sits at the tip of my tongue but refuses to escape past my parted lips. After the first accusations of Corbin and I being involved made gossip outlets all over the country, I convinced Jamie Little and her team to let it slide instead of making a press release to deny anything. It would have made the public more eager to believe something happened if we were quick to say nothing had. The last thing I wanted was for someone like Jamie, who took a chance on me when I was younger, to be disappointed.

I can shut myself away from the world and layer in clothes to hide what's growing inside me, but it won't last forever. Rumors will become reality the second the wrong person sees. Every day I try figuring out how to accept that this can't be undone, but I choke on the bitter pill I swallowed when I admitted to myself that I still love Corbin.

Nine years of pretending like I let go is almost a decade spent suffering. How many people have I brought down with me? My ring finger still feels the absence of the silver band I wore—the one Parker wouldn't even let me give back despite the limited money he made.

"Kinley?" Jamie sighs, typing again and clicking on something. "Your schedule is wide open right now, so you should be able to finish if you stick to daily deadlines. Pace yourself like you did when you wrote *Through Shattered Glass*."

Nostrils flaring over the book that got me into this mess, I shake my head. Writing that book doesn't compare to the standalone series following new characters that I took on when I signed with One House. The characters are new and have nothing to do with me or my life, which was supposed to make it easier. Instead, I'm suffocating under the pressure of living somebody else's life like a fraud when I have so much to say that's left unsaid like it isn't important.

I'm pregnant!

I'm in love!

I'm miserable!

I want to write my truth on paper and submit it for the world to see hoping it'll relieve the pressure sitting on my chest. Every day when I force myself to sit down and write all I do is focus on the things I can't fictionalize for the sake of admission. My conscience needs clearing, but the guilt just continues festering until I fear I'll explode.

And I let it because I know that it's smarter than risking everything I've worked hard for. "I've just been off since getting back from California.

Seeing the movie took a toll on me and it was hard to sit back down and write.”

Her pause allows me to breathe, closing my eyes and rubbing my forehead while I wait for her response. Sweat dots my brow because I know Jamie’s perspective isn’t like my own. We come from two different backgrounds. “Do you remember when you came to my office the first time all those years ago?”

Walking down memory lane isn’t what I anticipate her response to be. Wetting my lips, I say, “Yes.”

“You’ve accomplished a lot since then.” The statement is one I’d usually be reveling in considering Jamie rarely passes out praise. “I know you have a lot more success in you, but you need to stay on track for that to continue. Do you understand?”

I understand that I’m screwed—that I’m about to let her down. I consider her more than an agent. She’s like a second mother to me. One who helps me achieve every dream I have no matter the size and is proud of me for making something of myself despite the odds.

It isn’t what I answer. “Understood.”

I know there isn’t a smile on her face, but certainly a victorious glint in her dark eyes. “I’ll let you get back to work. Oh, and be on the lookout for something in the mail this week. I was sent mock-ups of the movie posters that will be used for promotional material. In fact, the publisher wants to use the same image for the new book covers. You should receive it in the next few days. Otherwise, let me know if there’s anything you need from me.”

All I can think is, *a miracle*.

CHAPTER TWO

CORBIN / Present

A SOFT HAND gripping my hard cock stirs me from a deep sleep, causing me to groan as it moves up and down in torturous strokes. My lips part as I arch my hips, seeking more. Half asleep, I reach out to the person responsible. Caressing smooth skin, I notice the slightest curve of lean feminine arms.

“Fuck, baby. That feels good.”

“Mm. I missed you too, handsome,” an accented voice purrs back at me.

Eyes shooting open, I jerk away from the wafting scent of seawater and jasmine—the combination undoubtedly belonging to my wife. The one whose finger I put a ring on when I had no right to. She might’ve been what I needed at the time, but I knew I was fucking up. Kinley was the only woman I should’ve ever put my ring on.

Sitting up, the sheet covering me drops to reveal my naked body. Lena’s blue eyes flash with appreciation, landing on the way my cock tents the thin material barely covering it.

“Jesus Christ, Len.” She’s kneeling on the side of the bed she used to occupy, dressed in her favorite floral maxi dress she bought in Greece a few years back. The amount of cleavage shown always gets her attention when she wears it out. And she does. Often.

Her painted bottom lip sticks out. “Why do you sound so angry?”

Blowing out a breath, I scrub a palm down my scruffy jaw. “I’m not angry, you just surprised me.”

She reaches out and brushes hair from my forehead, letting it tangle in her tan fingers. I can tell she’s noticed how long it’s grown. “You need a

haircut. Want me to schedule you one?"

"I'm fine."

Her brow quirks. "You're not." Before I can stop her, her hand grazes my morning wood again. I jerk in her palm as she cups me. "Let me relieve your stress. It's the least I can do after being gone so long."

It isn't like being separated from each other is foreign. Out of the six years we've been together, and the five and a half spent married, we've seen each other in a spattering of weeks at a time. Not months. *Weeks*.

My eyes drift closed as she removes the sheet, leaving me bare to the cool air. She quickly warms it with the friction of her hand, playing with the sensitive nerves under the tip.

"We shouldn't..." I'm cut off when her hot mouth wraps around the engorged head of my cock, drawing my entire length in her mouth like she's far too experienced at doing. My fingers absentmindedly go to the back of her head, but instead of guiding her to the perfect rhythm, I pull her away with a *pop* of her lips.

"Please stop," I rasp, throwing the sheets off me and swinging my legs over the side of the bed. Reaching for a pair of discarded boxer briefs from the floor, I slip them on before standing and turning to face her.

Her arms cross on her chest. "And you say you're not angry with me," she scoffs, sliding off the mattress. "It's been months since you visited me and my family, and this is how you treat me?"

I sigh, knowing I'm being a giant asshole. Walking over to her, I reach out and rub her upper arms that are toned from the workout schedule she obsesses over daily. "I'm sorry, Len. I don't mean to be a dick. I just haven't been feeling well the past couple of days."

Her eyes soften. "You're sick?"

Clearing my throat, I step away. "I'm not sure. I think I might just be run down from shooting. Ever since we finished filming, I've been a little off. It's nothing."

Cringing over the absolute bullshit I'm spewing, I walk into the bathroom to get ready for my day. When Lena appears in the corner of my eye, she studies me with narrow eyes. "Yes, how *did* the movie go?"

She isn't really asking about the movie though. She rarely asks about work, just when I'll be done with whatever I'm filming at the time. I learned a long time ago that she only asks questions that benefit her. Nothing more.

“Fine.” I flush the toilet and walk over to turn on the shower. “Buchanan seems happy and told us he’d call when he got it pieced together for an early viewing.”

She moves to the sink, playing with her hair and adjusting the loose waves she always spends hours styling to perfection. “And what about the author... What is her name again? Kelsey? Kerry?”

Though I’m not proud of the features Kinley and I have had in tabloids, there’s no way Lena or her parents haven’t seen it. They have copies of everything I’m in, especially if I fuck up. Her father never liked me, her mother simply tolerates me, and everyone else only cares about the fame.

“What about her?” I ask, not wanting to feed the fire that I know is sparking in her eyes. I’ve seen Lena angry and don’t want that wrath to come out.

You deserve it.

The shower begins steaming the room, causing the mirror to fog over. She moves away from her reflection and turns to me. “How does she think the movie turned out?”

“I couldn’t be sure.” I grab a towel and place it on the hook near the shower. “She left early. Work or some other reason.”

She hums out a reply, not quite believing me with good reason. “I’m sure she’s a very busy woman. Hopefully she wasn’t too star stuck. I hear people like her tend to attach themselves too easily to celebrities. They get hurt that way.”

Celebrities like us, is what she fails to say. It’s woven between her words, and I suddenly realize why Kinley was so pissed off at me for implying the same thing once upon a time. It makes us sound like entitled assholes.

“Kinley isn’t like that.”

Her blue eyes flash with victory. “Ah, that’s right. *Kinley*. Very unique name, no? It seems fitting for her.”

Something tells me that isn’t a compliment but defending Kinley won’t make this conversation end any quicker. “I’ve got a lot to do today, Lena. Do you mind?”

When she sees me gesturing toward the door, her lips part. “I’ve seen you naked more times than I can count. You want me to leave?”

I don’t want to point out that she spends what little time she has in California at her house, not mine. That tidbit obviously seems lost on her

since she let herself in without telling me she was coming.

“I’d hate for you to get sick.”

Her eyes pin me.

Wetting my lips, I say, “Why don’t we go out for breakfast after I’m finished getting ready? We still have a lot to talk about. Neither one of us can avoid the conversation much longer.”

For a long moment, she just watches me. Based on the distance in her eyes, I can tell my offer isn’t welcome. “As you said, I’d hate to get sick. I’ll call you later, Callum.”

Callum. Not Corbin.

When was the last time my wife called me by my first name? She’s always used the same title the world chose for me. Callum. Hollywood heartbreaker. If only the press knew how right they are. Other than my mother, only one other person uses my actual name and she hasn’t gotten any of my messages.

The door slamming closed behind her has me cussing into the steam-filled room. Peeling off my boxers, I step into the shower and let the water drown out my thoughts. Like always, Kinley finds her way back in.

WITH MY BREAKFAST shake in hand, I settle at my kitchen table and scroll through the undelivered emails saved in my inbox. Each one is addressed to the same person, as if one will magically get through the outdated email address provided on her website.

To: Kinley.thomas@authorkinleythomas.com

From: Jack.Pennywise@gmail.com

Subject: Little Bird

LITTLE BIRD –

YOU HAVEN’T USED my number which means you either didn’t get the notebook or haven’t wanted to give me another shot. I can’t say I blame you if it’s the latter, but we should talk.

CALL ME.

To: Kinley.thomas@authorkinleythomas.com
From: Jack.Pennywise@gmail.com
Subject: Little Bird

LITTLE BIRD –

YOU MIGHT HAVE NOTICED the email address. Knowing you, you rolled your eyes. I watched the remake and liked it better than the original. I remember your reaction when I put on *IT* and still laugh. I'm pretty sure you asked me if Stephen King was known to smoke crack before writing his novels. I still don't know the answer to that, but I'm guessing no.

I NEED to know you're okay.
I love you, Kinley.

To: Kinley.thomas@authorkinleythomas.com
From: Jack.Pennywise@gmail.com
Subject: Little Bird

LITTLE BIRD –

REMEMBER what I said before I left the hotel that night. This isn't goodbye. Not again.

CALL. Me.

BRUSHING A HAND THROUGH MY HAIR, I don't bother reading the rest of them because the lack of response will just batter me more. I want to believe the post office lost my gift, but I have a feeling she received it. It leaves a sour taste in my mouth wondering if she made the final decision about us without me.

Grazing the keys of my cell, I exhale a heavy breath and type out one last email before resorting to new measures. Our history is a record of cycles that bring us back to the same outcome.

Corbin and Kinley.

Actor and author.

Two dreamers.

I'm not ready to break that cycle, but to form a new one. One without pain. One without heartache. One where there's nobody but ourselves to stop us from finding that feeling that kept us soaring in the past.

To: Kinley.thomas@authorkinleythomas.com

From: Jack.Pennywise@gmail.com

Subject: Little Bird

FLY WITH ME, Little Bird.

SENDING THE EMAIL UNSUCCESSFULLY, I switch to social media and track down one person who might be able to help without asking too many questions. That is, if I didn't burn that bridge too.

When I click Zach Russo's name, I hold my breath and type out a quick message hoping not everyone from Lincoln hates me.

To my surprise, he replies. It gives me hope that it's not too late for me to patch up old relationships no matter how many years have passed. There's only one I want to focus on, and I'm staring at her phone number and a message from the very friend I thought I'd lost her to.

Don't fuck it up this time, asshole.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THREE

KINLEY / Past

STARING up at the large skyscraper, I swallow back the nerves that ground my feet to the pavement. The sun's reflection on glass and steel has me wincing as I trail my eyes over to the sign of offices within the huge building.

An elbow nudges my arm. "You look constipated, quit making that face."

Glaring at my brother, I loosen my shoulders and heft out a sigh. "I'm nervous, Gavin. You would be too if you were in my shoes."

His smile turns from teasing to serious. "I know you are, but we came all this way. You'll be fine. You're just meeting with the woman, right? What's the worst that can happen?"

My mind conjures a long list of embarrassing things. What if I step into Little's Literary Agency and vomit? Or sweat through my clothes? Or forget how to talk? The possibilities of things that can go wrong are endless. I get one good chance to make an impression, I hear Jamie Little isn't an easy woman to impress.

"Everything," I mumble.

"Could be worse," he states, pushing me along with him to the spinning glass doors. People power walk by, not paying us any attention despite us sticking out like the middle-of-nowhere natives that we are. Gavin is in jeans and a plaid button-up with dirty work boots on that I begged him to change out of. He just rolled his eyes and ignored me. "Mom and Dad could have come with you instead of me."

I scrunch my face at the ridiculous statement. “They’d never come to the city, Gav. I’m not even sure why you did. I know you can’t stand this kind of scene.”

He deadpans. “You’re not even eighteen yet, Kinley. None of us were going to let you come to New York City on your own to talk to a woman you’ve never met. You could get kidnapped or sex trafficked.”

I blink. “Uh...”

Shrugging, a slight tilt to his lips appears as we enter the fancy foyer bathed in white with a sleek black desk positioned off to the side. A glass directory hangs on the wall by four sets of elevators. “The more I think about it, the more I realize you’d never get kidnapped. You’re too ugly. Nobody would want you.”

Smacking his arm, I hit the button for the agency’s floor and watch his shoulders shake from laughing. “Dweeb.”

“Dickwad,” he returns easily.

Entering the elevator, I feel my palms get clammy. Wiping them on the fronts of my black jeans, I realize I could have dressed up more. The shin-high brown boots, cream sweater, and red plaid scarf that Mom gave me isn’t very formal. Paired with a burgundy leather jacket that Gavin bought me makes it look a little more put together, but suddenly I’m thinking of any other outfit I could have put on.

I sent a selfie to Corbin before leaving my room and he told me I looked beautiful as always. I’m realizing now that I should have tried for professional—maybe something to make me look older. A dress, heels, something. Beauty isn’t a part of this industry like it is Corbin’s.

When the elevator stops at the eighth floor, I swallow hard and glance at my brother. He gives me one little nod that eases some of my worry. As annoying as he is, he supports me.

“I’ll wait here,” he says, gesturing toward a line of blue chairs by reception. There’s a large fake plant in the corner that he flicks before sitting down, stretching out his legs and making himself comfortable.

The receptionist is a brown-haired woman who’s probably around Mom’s age with a friendly smile plastered on her face. “Can I help you, dear?”

Playing with the hem of my sweater, I give her a timid nod. “I’m here to see Jamie. Er, Ms. Little, I mean.”

Amusement flickers on her face as she holds up her finger and picks up the phone. “I just need your name to confirm you have an appointment.”

After I tell her, I shoot a quick glance at my brother who’s playing on his phone. He must sense me staring because he looks over and shoots me a thumbs up. Rolling my eyes, I turn my attention back to the receptionist as she hangs up the phone.

She gestures toward the open space to the side of her desk. “Her office is all the way in the back to the right. You can’t miss it.”

“Thank you.” My voice is weak, so I clear it and nod my head for good measure like that will somehow help.

Gavin mouths *good luck* before I begin my venture past offices lining the walkway. Some doors are open with people behind computers, some are closed with others on phones. It smells like coffee and something floral, a relaxing mixture that I soak up as I see Jamie’s name on the side of a glass wall in the back corner.

The woman behind it looks exactly like her picture online. Short white hair styled to perfection, a no-nonsense expression on her face, and a navy-blue blazer over a white blouse that screams business. I’ve done my research on my company ever since I got the email from her after she judged a writing contest I’d been in. She’s been successful since opening the doors to the agency over five years ago, signing names that go on to become bestsellers in the industry.

Jamie is seated behind her desk typing something on the computer when I arrive at her door. Unsure if I should knock or announce myself, I fidget until her head picks up.

“You can come in, Ms. Thomas.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, I smile and take a hesitant step into her office. It’s bright from the large windows behind her and inviting with white bookshelves lining the wall that are filled with multi-colored book spines. On the opposite wall are pictures of Jamie with different authors, some on red carpets from movies based on books she represents, others holding awards. It leaves my lips parted as I study some of my favorite authors showcased in the black picture frames.

“I don’t bite,” she says, leaning back in her chair once I gather the nerve to look at her. There’s humor in her tone, but not her features. It makes me walk further in until she gestures toward two comfortable looking blue armchairs positioned in front of her desk.

The round clock on the wall indicates it's 3:05, making me squirm a little as I sit. "I'm sorry for being so early. I expected the commute to take longer."

She rests her folded hands in her lap. "Did you take the T?"

I stare at her for a moment. "I, uh, took the subway?" Cringing at how stupid I sound for making the statement a question, I mentally slap myself.

The tiniest smile appears on the corner of her lips. "I forgot you're not from around here. Anyway, I appreciate you being early. A pet peeve of mine is tardiness. So, did you look over the information I sent you? Do you have any questions about the contract or anything else?"

Giddiness over hearing those words escape her makeup-less lips makes me reach for my bag. The day I got an email from her still makes goosebumps coat my arms with pride. I was in study hall listening to Zach jabber on about some sports game he watched when I saw the email sitting in my inbox. The literary agency's name had been the subject line. Zach had asked why I was making weird noises, but I ignored him completely as my shaky hands hit the button to read whatever was sent.

Blowing out a breath, I take out the paperwork. We could have gone over the contract online or spoken on the phone to go over questions. But our email exchange left the option open to come here, and I craved to see the city and talk with her face to face instead. As much as I wanted to put a pen to paper and be part of this company as soon as I found out about it, my brother told me to hold off until after speaking with Jamie. It isn't often he's the voice of reason, but it made sense. My parents easily agreed, though they weren't happy that I'd already told Jamie I'd be open to traveling to see her instead of finding a different way to communicate.

I fidget with the sleeve of my sweater. "I was wondering why you decided to take a chance on me."

It's a bold question in the grand scheme of things. Most people are probably smart enough not to ask it, but I need the answer. I've submitted countless stories and only won a few contests, getting published in various magazines online. Sure, I've had the chance to talk with an author or two since submitting to the website, but even they told me to hold off getting representation until I have more writing experience under my belt.

My eyes travel back around the room, focusing on the images of authors I aspire to be like someday. It seems farfetched to even be sitting in this room, but I remind myself anything is possible. And here I am.

Corbin says the same thing, reminding me that we can do anything if we work hard enough for it. *You've got to jump from the nest and trust your wings will work, Little Bird.*

Jamie's hands move from her lap to the edge of her desk, her fingers weaving together as she studies me. "I see the drive you have, Kinley. When I was asked to help judge the first competition you won, I saw promise from your submission. When it comes to talent in writing, I don't believe in luck. Some people have a natural gift from the start, others don't."

And she thinks *I* do?

"You're young, but you're not letting anything get in the way of accomplishing something big." She points toward the contract in front of me. "You could be doing anything right now, but you're here with me. Why is that?"

It seems like the answer is obvious. "I want this." Not wanting to be too simple, I scooch forward and touch the contract. "Every time somebody asks me what I want to do when I'm older, they judge me for my answer."

Her head tilts. "And what is it you want to do, Kinley?"

Without hesitation, I answer, "I want to inspire people."

There's a minor shift in her expression, her dark eyes brightening as if I said exactly what she wants to hear. "That's why I took a chance on you. You'll be eighteen next year. Most agencies wouldn't even think to reach out to anyone before that point. It's rare they give someone the opportunity they deserve regardless of natural talent."

I shift in my seat. "That's why I'm a little confused as to why you did. Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful. More than you could ever know. When people find out I want to write for a living, they think I'm joking. I know how much work goes into making a book successful, and understand it takes having someone like you backing me to make it more likely to happen. I just..." My shoulders lift. "It seems like this is too good to be true if I'm being honest."

The sound of my heartbeat startles me as I watch her study me. She leans back in her seat again, one of her brows arched. I can't tell if I offended her or not, but my clammy hands suddenly become worse and I'm too nervous to wipe them off. I don't want to walk out of here without a signed contract.

“The stories you’ve posted online are all based on something, aren’t they?” Her inquisitive gaze tells me she already knows the answer. “Let me ask you something. Have you considered combining everything you’ve submitted? You’d be close to the usual requirement for a full-length novel if you did. With some tweaks, extensions, and a little polish, it’d be a unique story about two teenagers who grow together to work toward their dreams. A coming of age, if you will.”

Swallowing, I think about Beck and Ryker. The two characters are loosely based on Corbin and me, but I haven’t been able to write more because it feels like there’s something blocking me. It’s easy to write about two people who love each other when you feel it. So why is my gut preventing me from finishing their story like I want to?

Corbin has been busy with the movie for the past couple of months. We still find time for one another, but it’s different. Our talks of dreams and goals are still strong, but they divide us in ways that make it hard to understand him now. He tells me all about his new friends and the opportunities his acting coach has mentioned since the film he shot was completed. His coach even thinks Corbin will get an agent and manager that way he can try getting more roles to broaden his portfolio.

I love seeing him do what he’s passionate about because it lights up his face. Instead of worrying about his father’s reactions to his success, he celebrates everything he’s accomplished in his own way.

Still, the warnings my brother gave me about Corbin’s impending departure from Lincoln lingers. Eventually, he’ll graduate and find better places to go. I hope Gavin is wrong about him though. Corbin will come back for me because we’re too alike. We’re driven, determined, and yearning to make something of our lives. And we keep our promises. Always.

“I never considered it,” I admit. “It’ll be difficult to write more of. I haven’t been feeling very inspired which is why my entries have been on different characters.” I pause when I realize something vital that led me here. “You’ve been following all of my submissions?”

Her chin dips. “I look out for people I think I can make something of. With the right amount of work that book can become something big, Kinley. Coming of age stories are a hot commodity, and what better storyteller than someone living the journey? I wasn’t going to let you shop anything with somebody else if I could get to you first.”

My eyes widen. I never expected somebody like her to tell me that. It's different hearing your writing is good from someone close to you. Corbin insists it's going to take me places all the time, but he's obligated to make me feel good about myself.

"You underestimate yourself," she states, as if she can read my mind. "When people write because they want to, it changes the game. It isn't about money or fame, even though those are nice to have too. It's about making a difference."

I press my lips together. "What if I can't though? It seems like having an impact on people is difficult."

"Do you have a story to tell?"

I look at the contract again, toying with my thumbs. "Don't we all?"

"Agencies and publishers are afraid to take a chance on youth because they're afraid of disappointment." She shrugs like it's that simple, but the thought terrifies me. "But I think people like you are our best asset when utilized right."

"Because of my story?"

"Most people only write what they feel they can do justice. It doesn't matter if you think it'll make a difference. It always will to somebody."

My body loosens with ease. Smiling, I pick up a pen from her jar and click it open. Despite her weariness, Mom signed the contract since I'm under the legal age to sign it on my own. Dad had their lawyers look it over to make sure it's fair, but I knew I wouldn't get anything better than this even before the lawyer confirmed as much.

I begin signing my name, thankful for all the times I've practiced my signature in classes pretending my notebooks were novels. "I trust my parents' lawyer and I trust you."

"Why is that?" she questions.

Pushing the contract to her, I say, "It's like you said. Everybody else thinks youth is a risk. If people don't like my book I want it to be because they don't think it's for them. Not because I don't have the experience to tell the story. *My* story."

An impressed look colors her otherwise blanketed features. "Keep up that determination, and you'll find yourself on every list there is to be on before you're twenty-five." Wetting my lips, I glance quickly at the pictures on her walls. She says, "You'll be up there too one day."

Emotion grips my chest, leaving my lips wavering in a grateful smile. Telling her how much I need to hear that is impossible. I manage to thank her before thinking about the possibilities this new relationship will bring.

Spread your wings, Little Bird.

I smile to myself and think about Beck and Ryker and what their love will do for me.

I am, Corbin.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOUR

KINLEY / Present

THE COLD TILE is welcome against my clammy skin as I curl up on my side hugging the toilet bowl. Closing my eyes, I blow out a shaky breath and ignore the sharp pain in my shoulder from the hard floor. Lying in bed and sweating through my pajamas isn't an option with the way my stomach churns.

I'm not sure how long I lay there. I think I doze off for a while because I wake up to my cell ringing from where it rests on my nightstand. Not knowing what time it is, I groan to myself as I stiffly sit up. Wincing at the lightheadedness that takes over, I gather my bearings and peel myself off the floor.

The rancid smell of my morning sickness fades as I walk into the bedroom. Swiping at my forehead, I sit on the edge of the mattress and glance at the familiar blue light flashing in the corner of my phone.

"Shit." My eyes train on the new missed call from my brother. My family agreed to give me space when I asked for it after the second tabloid hit, but I know they want answers. I've texted them saying I'm fine, but that's all I've had the energy to mention. The more news that comes out against me, the more restless they become.

Each time a new picture appears of me with Corbin, it becomes front page news. Despite believing it'll fade from people's interest, there's always some new piece of evidence against me. It's hard to deny what everyone is saying when you have detailed accounts from hotel staff where I stayed that piles onto the guilt I'm already buried under.

The staff was all too happy to give the paparazzi an inside scoop, especially for a good price. I should have known someone would talk. They don't owe me anything. Maybe I'd even talk too if I were in their shoes.

When Gavin's name lights up the screen again, fear locks my body. My voicemail is full of unanswered calls, which I'm sure he's long since figured out. Heart pumping wildly in my chest, I stare until my phone goes black again. Part of me wants to answer and hear his voice, but another knows it won't be a civil conversation. He's told me countless times that he's here for me—both he and his wife Kayla have visited when I've been at low points with writer's block or stressing about deadlines. They'd send me well wishes from Mom and Dad, sometimes even bringing food Mom made because she knows I don't eat when my schedule is packed.

I torture myself with isolation from them because there are no words that can form an explanation for all that has happened. I let the tears welling in my eyes roll down my cheeks and accept that I made this bed and have to lay in it. The lightest tap of a teardrop hits my arm, breaking me from the stupor I'm frozen in.

Walking away from the small torture device before it can flash again, I grab fresh clothes from my dresser and head toward the bathroom. Letting the shower run, I strip off my pajamas and walk over to the vanity. My complexion is frail, eyes too dark and skin too pale. I look as sick as I feel.

With anxiety. With stress. With reality.

Running a brush through my tangled hair, I remember strong fingers making the very same strokes. I let my eyes close, memorizing the sensation. My movements slow as silver eyes pierce my thoughts until I can't bare to look at them any longer.

When I open my eyes, I can't see my reflection through my blurry gaze. Jaw trembling, I drop my brush and walk toward the steamed glass with billowing water behind it. I step into the hot spray and pretend everything can wash off me.

The memories.

The choices.

The hurt.

But no matter how long I let the water cascade over my body, it doesn't help. The heaviness of my hair sticking to my face matches the weight pounding in my chest. Struggling to breathe, I press my palm to the wall and stare as the water crashes against the floor.

When the sound of my phone goes off for the millionth time, I slam my fist against the side of the wall and find my way to the floor. Wrapping my arms around my legs, I curl up and drown in my indiscretions.

Belly hard against my thighs, I rest my forehead on my knees and slowly begin breaking down for the first time since the news.

“Make it stop,” I whisper.

MY CALICO CAT Penny jumps on the desk in front of me, nudging my hand until the magazine I stare at falls open onto my lap. The image on display has me blowing out a breath, seeing my light brown hair barely covering my face as Corbin and I leave the hotel. It looks like someone took it from a distance the night we’d gone to the drugstore for Motrin because neither of us noticed anyone pointing a camera at us.

Smaller images of him in his hoodie and sunglasses coat the side of the article. The interior décor of the hotel hallway leading to my room is in the background of each picture. It’s my guess that someone waited for him the last night he showed up.

Corbin Callum seen sneaking out of Kinley Thomas’s hotel room just days after the two were seen off set together.

I bite down on the remainder of my thumbnail until it cracks under the pressure. Wincing from the pain, I release my finger and study each printed image. How long did they wait to capture these? I’m sure whoever was assigned to get the inside scoop had a lot to tell.

Jamie says its defamation since there’s no actual evidence over what the press is saying. It doesn’t matter that Corbin’s touch is intimate, or that he’s at my hotel hiding himself because he knows he’s not supposed to be there. It’s all speculation, and speculation sells copies.

I wonder if Jamie’s in denial or doesn’t care, but I can’t get myself to think too deeply on it in fear of the answer.

The problem of the supposed speculation comes from the quotes gathered by people from the movie—quotes that make it hard to deny that something went on while I was in California based on the volume of accusations. Extras talked, and they said all reporters needed to hear to piece together a story.

One inside source claims they saw Ms. Thomas walking to Callum’s trailer and didn’t resurface until hours later. “A few of us saw the way they

looked at each other on set. It wasn't hard to figure out something was going on between them even before we saw them disappear together."

Scrubbing a palm down my face, I skim over the rest of the article and shake my head. I don't know how many people were on set when I decided to go to Corbin's trailer. It wasn't like I frequented it—I'd been twice, and the second time involved me slapping him across the face like he deserved. But clearly whoever kept tabs on me didn't care about that because they'd formed their own assumptions.

Jamie told me not to say anything to the people online who started attacking me once the news broke. Everything with my name on it had been trolled by fans of Corbin and Lena. Names were called. Memes were created. My business email was taken over by somebody else because the threats were too intense to deal with on my own and my physical mail had to be screened because of the amounts of hate I received.

The whole thing is a mess that I haven't seen Corbin try to stop. Someone had to take over all my social media pages to get it under control because of the amount of people posting on my threads and reporting my content. Other than the occasional email I get forwarded that's business related or something sweet my loyal readers send me amidst the drama, I don't see anything worthwhile anymore.

Before I could say no again to issuing a press release, Corbin's people issued a statement saying that the rumors of us are ridiculous—that Corbin and Lena are happily married and don't need the public trying to tear them apart over unrealistic rumors. *Unrealistic*. I'd be lying if I said that wasn't a punch to the gut.

Maybe if I were anybody else, I'd believe that statement. I would doubt the likelihood of someone as famous as Corbin getting involved with someone less than his status like me. I've ranted about people trying to make a big deal out of everything before. If this were any other couple, I would have even rooted for them to make it despite the rumors.

But for obvious reasons, I can't. I just wonder what Corbin's expression was when he approved the release. Did he cringe? Nod? Even try to fight against issuing that for the world to see? I'm not sure I want to know the truth.

As soon as his statement was made, Jamie acted quickly to make ours. I couldn't even try telling her the truth about the tricky situation before she made the decision for me. I no longer have a voice. Telling her that I'm

pregnant after informing the world that Corbin and I are nothing more than a story in a tabloid would just label me a liar.

Shaking my head from the rabbit hole I'm jumping toward I focus my gaze on the stack of posters still sitting in the cardboard box they were delivered in over a week ago. I'd waited a few days before even opening it despite Jamie seeming to be excited over the concept design. I knew I'd have little say in what is approved for the posters and book cover anyway. More than that, I knew I'd have no control over my feelings once I saw Corbin's face.

And when I opened the box and stared at the beautiful couple embracing each other in a mixture of orange and yellow hues, I didn't know what to do. I cried. I yelled. I slammed the box down on the kitchen counter and walked away from Corbin Callum's pretty face.

Not because it isn't perfect, but because it is. Olivia's confliction. Corbin's determination. The way they fit together is exactly how I pictured them. And it hurts because I can't picture myself saddled next to Corbin the way she is—the way Lena is in the pictures that surface of them amongst the images of us.

And I know the reason why is because the media have made me out to be the lesser choice. Why would Corbin go for somebody like me when he has an international supermodel as a wife? She's beautiful in all the ways that count. I see what outlets say about me and could wallpaper an entire room with their descriptions.

Plain.

Dull.

Poor.

Unworthy.

Wholly unimpressive.

It feels like high school round two where the mean girls burn me with their opinions that I cared about too much. But it's worse than that because I'm on blast for the world to see. And knowing that those girls who told me I'd be nothing are probably reading every comment makes each and every word become branded on my skin for life.

Startled when my phone buzzes, I force my gaze away from the posters and stare at my brother's incoming text message.

Gavin: *I swear to Jesus if you don't pick up the fucking phone I'm coming to your house.*

Eyes widening as I palm my stomach, I pick up my cell to dial his number. The last thing he needs is to see me like this. He picks up on the first ring, cursing me out before saying hi. I wince and sink into my chair, letting the magazine on my lap fall to the floor.

"I thought that'd get your attention," he grumbles coolly.

"Please don't say anything. I—"

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Gavin—"

"Mom and Dad have been trying to reach you for weeks, asshole." My teeth sink into my bottom lip. "You don't answer our texts, phone calls, Facebook messages—"

"I've been avoiding Facebook," I explain quickly, rushing to give him a little comfort. "I'm sorry, Gavin. I really am. But ... things have been tough for me and you all promised to give me time. I haven't had the energy to explain anything."

He doesn't relent. "Times up, Kinley. I'm not dealing with the bullshit I keep hearing, seeing, or reading about. I see your name everywhere next to his and I go mad. If one more person brings up the shit being said about you, I'm going to jail for assault. Now tell me what the hell happened."

I don't answer. If there's one person who sees right through me, it's my brother. He knows when I'm lying, when I'm hurt, and when I'm struggling to cope. But if I tell him what's happened, he'll just tell me he was right all along. That's the last thing I need to hear right now.

"I need..." I clear my throat. "I just need you to know that everything will be okay. I'm handling it."

"You're *handling* it?" he scoffs. Something crashes in the background as he says something away from the receiver. "What is it that you're handling exactly and why are you keeping us out of it? We can help."

But they can't. I know my family. They're hard-headed and stubborn just like me. They won't accept that there's nothing to be done and will try figuring out something to do despite my insistence otherwise. Their involvement will only feed a fire that has grown out of control already.

Knowing I can't keep evading his questions, I do my best to give him what he wants without feeling like it's tearing me apart. I fail though because shards of invisible glass cut into my skin with every second I hold back the truth. "Do you want me to tell you I screwed up, Gavin?"

He remains silent.

I take a deep breath. “Would it make you feel better to know that you were right this entire time? Congratulations, big brother. Every single warning you gave me since you suspected something was going on with Corbin back in high school came true. He left. He broke me. I tried to move on and failed. And then we...” He makes a noise when I pause. “And then I fell back into old habits. Happy now?”

But I know Gavin. He’s not happy. How could he be? He’s one of the few people who made it seem like what I do is impressive. His wife tells me that he brags to people about my books when he’s out, not that he ever admits it.

His laugh is dry. “He’s married.”

“You don’t think I know that?” My voice breaks as tears cling to my eyes. “I’m sure you think that I’m stupid. I think I am too. But whether either of us likes it or not, I made a bad decision because I was never really over him.”

I keep telling myself that there’s no such thing as a failed relationship because each one has a lesson to teach. But what has Corbin taught me other than how to be cautious?

“What about Parker?”

Somehow I manage to roll my eyes. I ask myself about my ex-fiancé all the time. “You mean the man who ended our engagement right before the wedding? He knew that I wasn’t in it like I should have been and was smart enough to bow out before it was too late.”

My eyes widen. *He’s my Ian.*

Subconsciously I’ve always known. Maybe I even played into the role of Beck when I agreed to go out with him the first time. The biggest difference is that the character I wrote Ian to be was compassionate enough to let Beck be with the man she really loved. That kind of response is fictional—a fantasy that we want to believe in, so our actions make us less like a bad guy and more humane.

But I was the bad guy to Parker. From the day I met him at Jamie’s office when I was seventeen, our fate was sealed. Whether I admitted it or not, I chose somebody other than him no matter how hard I tried making it work. He was simply the man I settled with to lessen the likelihood of getting hurt again. And while I loved Parker Jennings in a lot of ways, I loved Corbin Callum more.

To my surprise, Gavin's voice isn't as jagged when he speaks again. "It's been years, Kinley. You can't honestly tell me that you're not over him."

"Maybe I'm not supposed to be."

"He moved on," he points out gingerly.

My lips tremble. "But did he?"

He sighs heavily, grumbling under his breath. "I saw this coming from a mile away, but you're too stubborn to listen. Why do you put yourself in these situations?"

I rub the side of my face, feeling a headache form in my temples. "Please don't do this right now."

"Then what am I supposed to say?" he doubts, irritation evident in his words.

"That it'll be okay."

"Someday," he agrees. "Someday people can move on from this, but you're a public figure. How many times have you told me that since you started making a name for yourself? Since you got a fanbase? People watch what you do, and they definitely watch him. The two of you..." A string of curse words flies from his mouth. "The two of you doing something as stupid as rekindling some flame that died years ago was reckless. What did you think would happen?"

The burn in my chest intensifies. My hand goes to my stomach. "I don't know. I guess we were trapped in our own little world for a while."

"I love you, Kin." His sincerity gives me a little hope, but I know it's only a microscopic step for us. "I just wish you would have listened to me back then so this could have been avoided."

"I wouldn't even be here," I remind him, knowing damn well that he realizes who the book is about. He told me not to bother giving Jamie the story when I admitted how much of my past was tied to the plot. Mom told him it'd be good for me to get my feelings on paper, but I don't think she realized how far I'd take it. Jamie encouraged me to write a story worth telling, and I bled my soul onto each page of inked paper for the world to pick apart.

Pulling the plug on the movie would have been easier, but I don't think it would have been worth it. I know having a production as big as this one connected to my name will increase the sales and be the best thing that's

happened to me. But I also know that it can ruin me in a heartbeat since I became the epitome of Beck.

I'm my own puppeteer pulling the strings.

And I got tangled.

I bite on my jagged nail, remembering something that Corbin told me a while ago. "Hey, Gavin? Did you and Corbin ever talk one on one? Like maybe after he left?"

The chances of him answering are slim since he probably doesn't want to discuss Corbin any more than I do. But I held off asking when Corbin insisted because I was afraid of what he'd say. I pretended like I didn't care when it secretly ate at the back of my mind. I wanted to live in a fantasy world with Corbin without our bubble popping. But now? It imploded.

"What did he tell you?" he asks distantly.

I blink. "To ask you." When Gavin doesn't say anything, I begin to sweat. "Gavin, what happened? He said he went back to Lincoln to talk to me, but nobody said anything to me about it. Wouldn't I know?"

I hold my breath as my brother cusses again, leaving prickles of worry needling the back of my head. "I was just looking out for you."

"What?" I swallow, feeling the possibilities dredge me with fear.

"He'd been gone for a few months and there was some shit online about him being with one of his co-stars during some promotional tour for that movie you got him in," he begins reluctantly. "Honestly, the pictures seemed pretty believable. Christ, he was holding her hand in one! It pissed me off, okay? When I saw him at the gas station I lashed out. He had no right coming back when he made a big deal out of leaving everything behind."

"He came back," I repeat.

It's not a question.

He came back.

He murmurs, "Yeah. He did."

I shake my head at this information. Corbin told me as much already, but I wasn't sure I believed him. When he made it sound like everyone in Lincoln knew about it, I thought it was pettiness talking. He made it seem like they chose me over him.

"What did you do?"

"Listen—"

“What the hell did you do, Gavin?” I growl, sitting straighter. Penny jumps off the desk and scurries from the room, and probably for the better.

“I hit him, okay?”

I draw back.

He doesn’t stop there. “He said he wanted to talk to you and asked if you were home. It was one of the few days you weren’t locked in your room on your fucking laptop typing your goddamn memoir all about the asshole. Mom had texted me saying you’d gone with Zach to some event out of town, and I didn’t want Corbin messing that up. I knew if he found out where you were, you’d just forgive him and pretend you’ve been fine since he left.”

My eye twitches. “What. Did. You. Do?”

He blasts, “For fucks sake. I told him that it was too late for him because you were with Zach. Are you happy now?”

My lips part as I suck in a sharp breath and hold it. I try making excuses, like I misheard him somehow. Yet, I know better. I heard him just fine, and a new form of hurt plows into me.

Nostrils flaring, I grip the phone until my fingers hurt. “How could you do that to me? You knew how much I loved him! You said—”

“I was looking out for you!”

“You’re such a fucking asshole!” I yell, standing up and tossing the box of posters off the desk until they scatter across my office floor. “I cannot believe you’d do something so selfish. Just because you got hurt by Aimee doesn’t mean everyone else’s relationship is doomed!”

“That’s not fair.”

A dry laugh bursts from my lips. “What isn’t fair is you deciding what’s best for me. Do you know that we could have had a chance if you didn’t meddle? You probably don’t even care that you screwed everything up, do you?”

“No, okay? I don’t feel bad.”

I throw my free hand up. “I don’t even want to talk to you right now. You have no idea what you did.”

“What I did? I helped—”

“I’m pregnant, Gavin.”

Complete silence.

Sniffing back big, fat ugly tears, I force myself to add, “You’re no different than him, you know. Why do you guys think it’s okay to make

choices for other people? I've always had a right to decide what's best for me, and you took that away until I crumbled. Big brothers aren't supposed to do that."

"Kinley..." He sounds as broken as I am.

"I don't want to talk to you anymore."

"Kinley, stop. Are you really—"

I hang up on him.

He calls again.

We repeat that twice more before I do what I've only ever done with Corbin. I block his number and look down at the silver eyes staring back at me from the ground.

I kneel and pick up one of the fallen posters, noticing the damage inflicted from throwing the box down. It's almost symbolic that there's a wrinkle splitting Corbin and Olivia. My thumb caresses the blemish as I rest on my knees, staring at the posters everywhere.

My phone buzzes beside me, causing me to glance down at the news alert. I know I shouldn't look, but I do. When I see Lena Dasani's name in bold lettering, I let the poster fall from the others.

Lena Dasani speaks out amidst rumors of husband's infidelity.

I tell myself not to click it.

My thumb doesn't listen.

"My husband and I have been married for years and we don't plan on letting these silly rumors ruin the love we have for each other. I wish Kinley Thomas all the best, but even she knows that there's nothing between them regardless of the time they spent together doing the movie."

Teeth grinding, I power off my phone.

Was Corbin lying this whole time?

CHAPTER FIVE

CORBIN / Present

I STARE at the millionth undelivered email and toss the cell on the table before palming my eyelids. The empty room is about to fill with people in suits who annoy the hell out of me, so I try pushing my personal life to the side to save face. Thankfully half the people I encounter during meetings like this don't give a shit about my personal life, just the money I line their pockets with.

It's probably for the better considering I'm two seconds from wringing my wife's neck. The stunt she pulled releasing a statement to the press about our supposed love-filled marriage boils my blood. She all but claimed her territory publicly to get the point across as if the statement Eddie made—without my consent—didn't do a good enough job. She wasn't just targeting the general population when she made it. She wanted Kinley to see.

I knew better than to ask her not to say anything about the situation with Kinley because it was unfair, but even she knows that feeding the press with bullshit like this only makes it worse. But Lena doesn't care about anyone other than herself and I see that now more than ever.

When the conference room door opens, I'm leaning back in the chair with my arms resting across my chest. Men and women alike file in and take their seats around the polished oak, greeting me with fake smiles and enthusiasm. It's always the same painted expressions throughout the hour of droning about business, meetings, and appearances.

"Callum," Eddie Mansfield greets, closing the door behind him and taking the seat at the end per usual.

Eddie has been my manager for almost four years now. My first one got arrested for embezzling money from his clients, taking over ten million combined. Needless to say, my agent helped me find someone with a clean reputation. When he suggested Mansfield I'd been cautious, but he doesn't beat around the bush and gets the job done without screwing me over.

"Let's get down to it." He slides paperwork in my direction. Catching it before it falls off the edge of the table, I study the schedule packed full of dates. "The promotional tour for this movie is going to take about four months to complete. You'll start in the new year and end right before the film comes out in May. As you can see, there are talk show interviews spread out throughout the first two months. You'll hit major networks first, then work your way into different social media channels to film question and answers both individually and with cast."

My eyes trail down the list of places and dates, only half listening as he rambles on about the type of shit I've heard hundreds of times. I know the drill. Talk up the movie, play nice with cast mates, and get seen in public with fans. If it's anything like my last project, I'll do live interviews, make random appearances where the target audiences will most likely be, and do some fun events for YouTube movie bloggers that have a huge following.

When I see appearances with the cast and film crew, I scour for a different name. "When will we be doing interviews with Kinley?"

The room grows eerily quiet.

I glance up at my manager, who's shifting in his chair. He clears his throat and leans forward, resting his arms on the table. "We feel it's best if you two do separate interviews for the tour."

My head cocks. "What about the question and answer segments scheduled at some of these locations? The audiences will want to know things from her that we can't answer."

A newer woman I don't know the name to speaks up. "We've spoken to Ms. Thomas's representation, and they also think it's a good idea to keep the focus on the actors who brought the film to life."

"That's bullshit." She flinches back. "We wouldn't even have a film if not for her. Who told you that?"

"Sir—"

"Corbin," Eddie cuts off. "With the amount of press you two are getting from the media right now, it's best to let things cool off. I can confirm that

she'll be at the red-carpet event for the screening premiere in Los Angeles and do an after-screening Q&A panel."

I level with him. "You always tell me that any press is good press. Half of the articles circulating are in tabloids everyone knows is made up bullshit."

"And the other half?"

Pressing my lips together, I lean back in the chair and stare back down at the tour schedule. It wouldn't be right to do this without Kinley. It's one thing to conduct a few interviews with cast only, but another to not give credit where it's due.

Kinley and I always used to say we'd support each other. How many times have we planned formal events? Award shows? This is our fucking moment and they're telling me she won't be a part of it when she's the one who made this happen.

I tap the paper. "I want to talk to her."

"Her agent—"

"I want to talk to Kinley," I repeat, looking each person in the eye until they inevitably drop my gaze.

Eddie is the only one with balls enough to hold the stare. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, son. Her agent informed us that she's letting them handle all communication. From what I could gather, it's been rough for her since the first article released. Her email, social media pages, you name it are all under somebody else's control until things simmer down."

Eyes widening, I grab my phone. "Rough how exactly?"

"You know how loyal fans can be," is all he says, making me wary of what's been happening under my nose. I look at my professional pages but don't run them, and oftentimes don't look at anyone else's. Her personal page has been set to private since she left California and I haven't bothered sending her a friend request to reach out because I didn't think she'd accept.

Scrolling through her business page, my eye twitches. For the most part everything looks clean. My bet is that whoever took it over for her keeps the comments regulated. But there are still some that pop up calling Kinley degrading things in my defense.

I wave my phone in the air. "Were any of you going to tell me about this?"

Somebody across the table intervenes cautiously. "All due respect, Mr. Callum, but we don't represent her. I'm sure her people are handling the

situation just fine.”

I smack the phone down onto the table harder than I intend. “I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but my name is being used to bring somebody else down. Someone, might I add, who doesn’t deserve that kind of treatment. Shouldn’t my reputation be your concern?”

Nobody says anything.

I turn back to Eddie. “I’ll say it again. I want to talk to Kinley. Now.”

He scrubs a palm down his face and rolls his shoulders back. “Think about this before you make an irrational decision. Do you truly think that reaching out to her is in her best interest?”

I scoff. “Do you even care about her best interest? It seems like you don’t.”

“Frankly, I’m not paid to care.”

Nostrils flaring, I know he’s not wrong. It doesn’t stop me from wanting to fight for her. She’s strong and can speak for herself, but I’m just as much to blame for this shitshow as her. She doesn’t need to go about it alone, especially not when Lena has become involved.

“I’m not being irrational.”

He straightens his spine, giving me his typical *I know best* look. “The last thing you need is press surrounding your personal life right now. You told me that you wanted privacy until things between you and Lena are figured out. If word gets out that you’re reaching out to another woman while married to someone else—”

“Soon to be divorced,” I remind him.

“Until she signs those papers we got drawn up, you better get a different perspective,” he states firmly. “I know you may find this hard to believe, but the world doesn’t give a flying fuck if you’re separated or not. Legally, you’re married. The press is already set on believing that you cheated whether it’s true or not. I’m here to make sure you don’t ruin your reputation.”

“Isn’t my reputation already shit?”

He eyes me. “I’m not your father—”

I bite out, “Then stop calling me son.”

“I’m just here to do what I was hired for,” he tells me blandly. “That means you’re going to sit down, shut up, and listen to what I’m about to say. Understand?”

My jaw ticks.

“Good.” He leans back. “The movie trailer is set to release on New Year’s Day. I’ve already spoken to Buchanan and a few others who informed me the love triangle will be clearly represented. Those who read the book knows there’s cheating, and those who haven’t will see it for themselves come January first.”

Shoulders tightening, I begin piecing together his point. “You want me to act like this is a promotional stunt for the movie to garner attention.”

Quiet murmurs of praise sound around the room. I drown them out and watch Eddie shrug like it’s a simple plan. People know the ins and outs of promotion though. It’s no different than proposing leading co-stars date, which I’ve found myself forced into doing before I got married. That only works in certain situations. It’s a stretch to think it would be successful here.

“All I’m asking is that you keep to yourself and let me do my job. Let the people believe what they want and don’t feed into it.” He gives me a knowing look. “That means staying away from Kinley Thomas, especially while you’re still married to Lena. I don’t give a damn what you do with your life after the divorce is finalized, just hold off on making rash decisions until then.”

And when will that be?

Lena and I talked in detail about going through with the separation a long time ago. Neither one of us loves each other like we used to, and even that love has been partial at best. When I visited her in Greece, our plan was rehearsed. We’d tell her parents that we were separating. Her father would rejoice. Her mother would curse me out. Her cousins would comfort her.

I was willing to be the bad guy.

For her.

For me.

For *us*.

But Lena changed her tune. She’s had the paperwork for well over four months now and keeps dragging it out without telling me why. Every time we meet to go over it, she puts on a show for the cameras who follow us like there’s nothing wrong.

“You care about her?” he asks.

He doesn’t say who.

He doesn’t have to.

I simply say, “Don’t waste my time with stupid questions, Eddie. You’re better than that.”

The room watches us intently.

When Eddie laughs, the atmosphere lightens. It’s no surprise that people are intimidated by him. Not me. “Then do what’s best for her, son.”

Playing unfairly is what he’s known to do to get what he wants. The son of bitch knows what he’s talking about. I rarely go against his wishes because he gets results. He gets me money, which in turn gets him paid too.

He’s just not getting his way this time.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIX

KINLEY / 17

THE LIGHT BLUE chiffon dress flows against my shins as I walk down the steps. When my feet hit the banister at the end of the staircase, I inhale before rounding the corner.

Dad sees me first, lips wavering before giving me a nod of appraisal. “You look beautiful, kid.”

Blushing, I flatten the material.

Gavin walks in and shrugs after giving me a quick once over. “You look all right. Better than the usual hobo vibe you give off.”

I roll my eyes. “Dweeb.”

“Dickwad.”

Mom comes in with a camera, making me groan. “Be nice to your sister. Now, come on. I want photos of you three together.”

Gavin shakes his head. “I don’t do—”

“You’ll be in the picture,” Dad states firmly, pulling him toward us.

Gavin and I both sigh and relent while Mom positions us for photos. After a few with the three of us, Gavin takes over to get some with me and our parents.

“You guys are going to make me late,” I mutter through my smile. After another ten, I flip off my brother and step away from my parents.

It’s Gavin who says, “Why isn’t your boyfriend picking you up again? Isn’t that how these things work?”

I slide into my black ballet flats and eye him while Dad gets my coat. “I don’t know, Gavin. Remind me again how you did it?”

He glares at me and picks up the popcorn he was snacking on. Dad chuckles as he helps me into the sleeves of my jacket. “She’s got you there, son.”

“Just because I never went—”

“Which means you can’t judge,” I add.

“—doesn’t mean I’m wrong.”

I button my coat and cross my arms over my chest. “I love you but you’re annoying me right now. Corbin wanted to pick me up, but I told him I’d meet him there. Stop being stupid.”

“But—”

Mom cuts him off, swatting him away to the living room. “Your sister wants to surprise him, Corbin. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

I nibble my lip. “Thanks.”

Dad offers me his arm. “Ready?”

It took him a while to be okay with me dating, especially when Gavin expressed his dislike over Corbin. But since Mom met him and his family in town, she told them to leave me alone. Despite her support, I can’t help but feel like she feels the same way Gavin does. I don’t talk to any of them about Corbin and they don’t ask. I should be glad, but something tugs on my chest telling me that I need their opinions on how to make things work.

I just don’t think they’d offer me the kind of advice that I’m looking for. It’s not that I want them to tell me what I want to hear, but I’d like an honest opinion, not biased.

When Dad rolls up to the curb of the large brick building the winter formal is being held at in the center of town, I stare at the white twinkling lights lining the rails and door out front. A black carpet is placed over the steep steps, and the double doors have snowflakes and flowers hung on them.

“Want me to walk you in?” He’s already turned off the car and unbuckled, so I just smile and nod at him.

Gavin used to tease me for being a daddy’s girl, but I never cared. My father is six-three with muscles he earned from a lot of physical labor over the years. People have compared him to a biker, but I know the truth. He’s a giant teddy bear who’s protective of me. As embarrassing as it can be when he shoots scathing glares at Corbin when the two see each other, I love him.

Dad escorts me into the building, leading me down the dimly lit hallway toward the loud voices and music. Anxiety greets me with every step, but it

all disappears when Corbin appears at the end of the hall in a black tux and light blue tie that matches my dress. Everything fits him perfectly, tapered and cut to fit his tall, lean figure. Dad tightens his grip on my arm as I suck in a breath and study Corbin from head to toe.

When we get closer, I notice Corbin is holding something in his hands. Stopping just in front of him, Dad leans down and kisses the top of my head.

He stands tall and stares at Corbin with narrow eyes. "I expect your hands will stay to yourself, boy. Correct?"

"Dad!" I hiss, heat blossoming from the back of my neck and settling into my cheeks.

Corbin's eyes widen. "Yes, sir."

Dad lets go of me with a chuckle, smiling before telling me how beautiful I am again. A similar smile tugs across my lips. I watch him leave after giving another warning glance Corbin's way.

When Dad disappears out the front door, Corbin steps closer and brushes his hand down my arm. "Your dad is scary but right. You look beautiful, Little Bird."

I nibble on my lip and gesture toward the box he's holding. "What's in there?"

He perks up, fumbling to open it. "I know corsages are usually a prom thing, but I got this made for you."

When the top opens revealing what's inside, my jaw drops. "Corbin..."

He pulls out the blue origami bird. "I saw a woman in the town over make custom corsages for formal events. When I sent her pictures of the birds you made, she told me she could make something that matches your dress."

Eyes watering, I pick it up and examine it closely. There's something written on the paper in script. When I narrow my eyes to try making out the letters, a hand reaches out and takes it from me.

"It says *fly with me*." His voice is quiet as he slides it over my wrist. His thumb caresses the back of my hand as he lifts it up to his mouth and peppers a chaste kiss on it.

"You're a sap," I accuse, wiping under my eyes to catch a tear before it falls.

"You love it," he teases, offering me his arm.

I hesitate, then wrap my elbow around his and let him guide us toward the large ballroom. The truth bubbles inside my chest. “I do,” I say in my quietest voice.

The song we walk in on is something techno that I’ve never heard of. Corbin makes fun of me for my taste in country music, but that’s all I grew up on. It’s no different than his love for classic rock because it’s his father’s favorite. They bond over Def Leopard and AC/DC, just like I bond with my parents over Willie Nelson and Hank Williams Junior.

I giggle, causing him to look over with an amused smile on his face. “What’s so funny?”

I lick my bottom lip. “I still have your AC/DC sweatshirt. My brother gets annoyed when he sees me wear it around the house.”

His smile transforms into a smirk. “It’s yours, Little Bird.”

“I can give it—”

He waves me off. “Looks better on you.”

I lean into him and study the room. Peers dance in groups, moving in ways that’d make my brother blush. Yelping when Corbin spins me around, I catch myself on his chest and keep my palms planted on him as he pulls me closer. One of his arms hooks around my waist as he holds me there.

I laugh when we start slow dancing. “I don’t think we’re doing this right.”

His brows arch. “Would you rather twerk like the rest of them? Pretty sure that girl over there is about to throw her back out.”

I full on laugh, causing a few people near us to glance over. Hiding behind Corbin as he spins us, I move my hands to his shoulders. “I think my father would have a heart attack if he saw me dance like that.”

One girl starts moving down a guy’s body *Dirty Dancing* style until a teacher stops them. My eyes widen as I dart them away before they can see me watching.

Corbin glances at the same couple being scolded, smirking. “Your dad would definitely have a heart attack if he saw us doing that. Pretty sure he’d make you take a pregnancy test.”

My eyes widen. “Don’t say that!”

A laugh bellows out of him. “What? You do know that someday he’ll have to accept that you have sex.”

I blanch. “He probably thinks I’ll be a virgin forever. One time he made a comment about how I didn’t have enough clothes on when we went to the

county fair. I was wearing bootcut jeans and a long-sleeve shirt, Corbin! I can't even imagine having to tell him that I'm having sex much less pregnant someday."

Humor dances in his eyes. "He'll love you even when you tell him. If you even want that sort of life anyway."

Now I look at him in confusion. "Why do you say it like that? You don't want a family someday? I'm not asking like I expect us to..." My entire body heats as the song changes into something slower.

He holds me closer, locking one hand on my hip and the other on one of my palms. "I haven't really thought about it. You and I are both career-driven anyway. Can you really picture a life with babies and a white picket fence? It just doesn't seem like us."

I gnaw on the inside of my cheek and shrug, not really sure what to say. It isn't like I've thought about our future in depth, but it makes me wonder if I should. If he doesn't want kids and I do, then where does that leave us after we graduate? Five years from now?

"We're too young to think about this," he adds, which breaks me from my thoughts. He's right. Neither one of us are ready for that kind of commitment. I can't help but wonder if we ever will be though.

Brushing it off, I nod. "Still think my father would try to shoot you."

Corbin cringes. "Does he really own a gun?" I don't confirm or deny anything, leaving a nervous look in his eyes. He blows out a breath. "I'm determined to make your family like me. Gavin might be hard to win over, but I'll make it happen."

I deadpan. "He caught you in my bed. That isn't going to happen in this century."

He frowns. "He's protective of you, huh? Have to say, kind of like that about him. But he doesn't have to be when it comes to us."

The few conversations I've had with my brother about Corbin and I have stayed between us. I'm afraid if I speak it to anybody else, the possibility of his assumed tragic outcome could come true. Doubt already lingers in the back of my consciousness out of practicality. It doesn't matter what I hope will happen. It's not just up to me.

"Hey, Corbin?" I whisper, staring at the paper bird perched on my wrist. "We'll always fly together, right?"

His hands twitch. "Always."

I close my eyes and rest my cheek on his shoulder, letting the music fill the comfortable silence between us. Moments like this are what build the fantasies in my journal, immortalizing us no matter what happens.

Details of Corbin.

His warmth.

His touch.

Everything.

We're Beck and Ryker.

And I love us.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVEN

KINLEY / Present

I PULL the jacket tighter around my body as I walk down the quiet street. The beginning of October brings cooler weather, and my on-again-off-again clammy skin welcomes the subtle breeze against it. The hot flashes during the summertime heat made my discomfort tenfold and my doctor assured me I'd do better once fall hit. Thankfully, he was right.

As I stuff my hands in my coat pockets, I look down and note the fallen leaves on the ground. The various colors of yellowing green make me realize the pretty foliage I love so much will soon disappear. Studying my surroundings, I let out a small sigh. When I arrived in California, all I wanted was to come home. I hated the noise and busy streets and wanted nothing more than seclusion. Now that I'm here, something feels like it's missing.

Lake Roe borders one of the largest lakes in our region. It serves the summer tourists well with canoe races, barbecues, and fireworks for the fourth of July. Outside of tourist season, it's much more peaceful. There are restaurants and stores in walking distance instead of cow pastures and endless fields, but it still has the rural atmosphere that I find comfort in like I did in Lincoln. As much as I wanted to get out of that town, I always felt like I couldn't commit to the distance.

Maybe I always knew I'd wind up in this situation—needing people in my corner. If I'd left the state like I thought about, I'd have nobody. Then who would help me?

Gavin wouldn't.

Blinking away the emotions that build in my eyes, I walk into the nearest corner store that I frequent for snacks and premade meals when my energy is too depleted. Browsing the aisles for sugar, I grab a few candy bars and head to the checkout.

The middle age woman working the register smiles at me in familiarity. “I see you’re back for more. No Twizzlers again today?”

Staring down at the various chocolate I chose, I give her a lighthearted shrug. “Guess I’m not in the mood for them.”

She swipes them across the scanner and grabs a bag for me. “I thought they were your writing fuel? Haven’t seen you buy any in a couple months now.”

I haven’t been able to eat Twizzlers since I found out I was pregnant. I’m just starting my second trimester and the smell of my beloved candy still churns my stomach. My cupboard is full of stale candy wasting away since I haven’t bothered throwing it out. I haven’t been able to stomach much food between stress and morning sickness, so I go with what I crave. Unfortunately for me, that’s junk food that’s added on a few more pounds than Dr. Ray likes.

“Switching things up a bit.” I give her a small smile and pass her some cash as she gives me the plastic bag.

As she counts my change, she says, “I finally read your book. I can see what the fuss is all about. What was it like?”

My brows raise. “What?”

She looks up and hands me the remaining change. “Being with all those famous people? The boy they have leading is a looker. I saw the pictures of you two.”

When she winks, it’s the last thing I expect. I slowly wrap my fingers around the dollar bills and blink as a heaviness settles in my chest. “Uh...”

She chuckles. “I’m not going to judge you, darling. If I got close to Johnny Depp I’d be trying to climb him like a tree. I won’t fault you for getting a few good squeezes in.”

I choke on air. The few times I’ve engaged with people on the topic, I denied the claims or walked away without commenting. But I can’t find the words now because she says it so casually. I’ve known Mel since I moved here. People don’t get her eccentric personality, but I always liked it.

Thankfully, she changes the subject. “Are you working on anything new? I’ve been talking to a few girls in my book club and they’re planning

on reading *Through Shattered Glass* before the movie comes out.”

The best I can do is smile. “I’m taking my time with my next book. Tell the girls I said thank you for the support. My agent talked about doing a local screening party here before the movie is officially released.”

Her eyes light up. “Will the entire cast be here? Perhaps the handsome boy with those sexy eyes that you’ve caused a stir with?”

My face heats. I wouldn’t call Corbin Callum a boy but given the fact she’s probably in her early fifties, I can see why she calls him that. “I don’t know, to be honest.”

She nods. “Well I’ll support you regardless if that hunk comes here. But sign me up for a front row seat if he steps foot anywhere near this place.”

For the first time in too long, I laugh. “I can do you one better. I’ll send him to your store. He has a sweet tooth too.”

Her blue eyes light up. “Does he now?”

I gesture toward the magazine rack. “I haven’t thanked you for what you did. I’m sure your boss wasn’t happy when those copies disappeared out of the blue.”

When her shoulders lift, the playfulness in her eyes increase. “Delivery must have gotten lost.” We share an amused look. “I never liked how people were portrayed in those silly things. It’s nobody else’s business what goes on outside their own lives.”

My fingers twitch around the handle of the bag I’m holding. “You’re one of the few who believe that.” Sighing I nod toward the door. “I should get going. Thanks again.”

“Enjoy the sugar, Kinley.”

Before I push the door open, she says, “I know you don’t want to talk about it, but I’m here if you need me. Things can be tough in the early stages, so know you’re not alone.”

My palm freezes against the door handle as I slowly turn to her. Her smile is warm, genuine. It barely eases the fear from the knowing look staring back at me.

“How...?”

She waves me off. “Have two of my own. Call it a sixth sense. None of my business, but I just wanted to let you know that I’m here if you need advice. Or if you have a craving the store carries. Pickles were my choice after the sickness stopped.”

I whisper, “Pickles?”

“And peanut butter.”

My nose scrunches. “Together?”

She laughs. “Darling, you’ve got a long way to go by the looks of it. You’ll start wanting things you never thought you’d like. Just wait.”

I blow out a breath. *Great.*

THE FAMILIAR SIGHT of peppered dark hair greets me as I walk toward my front door. Her hair is styled in a short ‘do that rests just above her shoulders, highlighted with silver that the sun emphasizes when she turns around. My feet slow as I tighten my grip on the bag of candy.

“Hello, Kinley.”

I swallow my nerves. “Hi, Mom.”

My eyes go to the black car parked in my driveway behind my own. When I meet Mom’s distant gaze, I know she knows. It’s the way her lips twitch like she wants to say something but can’t. She rarely holds back.

She silently moves out of the way for me to unlock the door, then follows me inside. Since she knows where to put her coat, I let her settle in while I drop my keys and food onto the kitchen counter. Too afraid to take off my own jacket, I stuff my hands in the pockets and walk over to where she stands in between the foyer and living room.

Penny rubs against her shins, but she doesn’t pay her any attention. Her eyes are on me until my soul feels the burn of her unspoken words. Her gaze doesn’t even have to linger to the midsection I hide under layers of clothing.

“How are you?”

She walks into the living room. “Don’t start with me, Kinley Ann.” Cringing over the middle name, I follow her in. She takes a seat on the couch and I sit in the chair next to it.

Drawing my legs onto the edge of the cushion to hide my torso, I bite down on my thumbnail. “Where’s Dad?”

“At home.”

Her short replies mean I’m in big trouble, so I prepare myself. “I know you’re upset, but I really need you not to be right now.”

Her hard expression doesn’t change, leaving me sinking back. “And what about what I need? Or your father? We’ve been worried sick about you. Your brother—”

“Don’t.”

She throws her hands up, staring with hard eyes unforgivingly at me. “Don’t what?”

“Whatever Gavin told you isn’t...” I lick my dry lips, feeling them crack under the tip of my tongue. “I can explain, okay? It’s not going to be easy to hear, but there’s a reason.”

Mom doesn’t answer, but doubt is displayed across her face. “Then explain it to me because I don’t understand where we went wrong. How many times have we told you to let go? We didn’t tell you that because we wanted to control you. It was to protect you.”

Protect you from this, is what she doesn’t add. It’s clearly stated between the lines. Her gaze finally dips down to my midsection.

“Tell me.”

My lips part, but only air comes out.

At the worst time possible, I think about Parker. What does he think of me? Mom and Dad didn’t offer their opinions about him like they didn’t with Corbin, but their hesitance wasn’t as obvious. They’d ask me about Parker and seemed happy to hear he was doing well. They liked him.

I bet he doesn’t like me very much.

Standing up, she paces a few times before turning to me again. “We have tried to be supportive of your choices, but we can’t keep standing around and watching you self-destruct over somebody who isn’t worth it.”

I loosen the grip I have on my thumbnail, blinking at her as I absorb the words. “You gave me a chance to bond with somebody who understood what it was like to dream beyond the town line. I needed Corbin back then.”

She rolls the same dark color eyes I get from her. “You didn’t need him then, and you don’t need him now. Same for Parker. You’ve always been stronger than that and Corbin poisoned your mindset. He’s not a good—”

“*I’m* not a good person,” I cut her off, dropping my feet onto the floor. “You can call him names and put all the blame on him, but you don’t see both sides. You want to take mine because it’s in your nature to. But I fucked up, Mom. And I don’t want to be in this position, but I have no other choice.”

“You could have chosen differently.”

I stand, shaking my head and walking into the kitchen. Reaching for the bag of candy, I tear open one of the chocolate bars. “Are we really going to play that game? There’s a lot of things that *could* have been different. Corbin *could* have moved anywhere, but he came to Lincoln. The principal

could have asked someone in his own grade to show him around, but he chose me. Gavin *could* have walked away when Corbin came back, but he opened his big mouth. And you know what else? I *could* have married Parker, but we weren't right for each other. Are we going to stand here and go back and forth about what could have happened like that makes a difference?"

Breaking apart a chocolate square, I shove it into my mouth and wait for her to say something. When she leans against the counter and shakes her head, I know she isn't going to. She's learned by now that I won't hear her out when I've made up my mind.

Just like her.

I lean my hip against the counter. "I don't want to talk about this if we're just going to fight. That won't lead us anywhere."

Quietly, she finally asks, "What do you want then, Kinley? Because I've stopped understanding what that is a long time ago."

"Right now?" I shrug. "I want my mom."

Her hands rest on the edge of the island, her body leaning forward. "I'm right here. You just need to talk to me. Why don't you *ever* talk to me about these things before you act?"

Clicking my tongue, I meet her sullen expression. "We never had that kind of relationship. You and Dad never understood how much writing meant to me, but Corbin did. And even though you guys let me go to New York City and meet Jamie and let her represent me, there was always a disconnect. Writing and Corbin have always been two things that meant so much to me that I wish I could have talked about, but it never felt right to do."

The hurt weighing down her lips has my shoulders dropping. "I don't know what I did to make you think you couldn't talk to me. I've always done my best to let you have control over your life, especially with Corbin."

"I know—"

"Do you, Kinley?" She backs up and looks around the house, gesturing around with her hands. "We're so proud of everything you've accomplished. You're young and successful and somebody any parent would be proud to call their child. I'm sorry if we didn't show that."

I brush hair out of my face and sigh knowing this is going nowhere. "I'm not saying you don't care or that you're not proud."

"Then what are you saying?"

“I don’t want to tell you everything!” I blurt, clenching my fists by my sides. “I like keeping things to myself. It’s easier that way. Some parents have the type of relationships with their kids that are open. Anything is on the table with them. Admit it, Mom. That has never been us.”

“Your brother and—”

“Don’t bring him into this,” I cut her off, pulling out a stool from under the breakfast counter and sitting down. “The reason it’s different between you guys is because you have common interests.”

She doesn’t have an answer.

“I’m not mad.” I break off another piece of chocolate and stare at it. “Maybe I used to be but I’m not anymore. It gives me a chance to do my own thing and be proud of my accomplishments.”

Before I can say anything else, my phone begins ringing in my back pocket. Putting my candy down, I pull out my cell and glance at the unknown number. Promptly, I ignore it.

Mom’s brows arch as she gestures toward the device. “Not going to answer that?”

Considering I’m sure it’s Gavin using a new number to reach out to me, that’s a firm negative. “No. I don’t want to talk to Gavin. He knows what he did is messed up.”

She levels with me. “You’ve both made choices that weren’t right. Are you going to blame him forever? He’s your brother.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It—” The same number pops up again.

Mom pushes the phone to me. “Just answer it, Kinley. Is it really worth ruining your relationship with him over?”

“Please stop making light of this.”

She just points to the phone.

Reluctantly, I answer to stall from the conversation between us that’s sinking faster than the Titanic. “Gavin, I’m not in the—”

“Please don’t hang up,” a different gravelly tone pleads.

My eyes widen as I push up. “How did you get this number?”

“I need to know you’re okay.”

Mom eyes me curiously.

“Corbin, I—”

Mom shakes her head and walks out of the kitchen with her hands up in surrender. The sound of the closet door opening and jacket rustling against

the others has me following her into the foyer. “I will not condone this behavior, Kinley. You are a grown woman and should know better than this.”

“Mom, stop. Please?”

Corbin clears his throat. “Is now—”

“I can’t do this right now, Corbin. You couldn’t have chosen a worse possible time to check in on me. The answer is no. I’m not okay. If that’s all, then bye.” My voice breaks as I hang up on him. The burning feeling of rising tears stings my eyes. “Mom, would you stop? You just got here.”

She zips her jacket and grabs her shoes, sliding into them before even looking in my direction again. “I was hoping to talk some sense into you and figure out what you’re going to do. But if you’re going to let him into your life like he isn’t wearing somebody else’s ring, I won’t stand by and see you get hurt again.”

I try reasoning with her as she pulls her car keys out of her pocket. “I don’t even know how he got my number. I wasn’t lying when I said I needed space from everybody. Him especially. And don’t you think something I should figure out is how he fits into this?”

“It depends on how you want him to.”

Her disdain isn’t lost on me. If anything, it only feeds into the distance I’ve put between her and I. “Like you said, I’m a grown woman. I can make my own choices whether you agree with them or not. Just like I did with Corbin, college, and Parker.”

She walks to the door. “I wish I would have stopped this from happening. I thought it was a good thing to see you focused on something other than your writing back then. You needed to act your age and have fun. If I had known this is where you’d end up, I would have pulled the plug on it a long time ago.”

I stand still, not bothering to stop her as she opens the door. “You act like my life is over. There are worse things that could have happened, Mom.”

How many times have I told myself that in the past three months? It’s the only reason I’ve pushed through. People go through horrible situations that don’t even compare to mine.

Mom purses her lips. “You’re pregnant with a married man’s baby. A man who didn’t choose you, Kinley. I’m sorry if that’s hard to hear, but you need to hear it. It doesn’t matter what your brother said to him. He should

have looked past it and worked through it with you if it meant that much to him. I'm glad it's not worse, but that doesn't mean it's not nothing."

With that, she closes the door behind her. All I can do is stand there with my palm against my stomach and close my eyes.

I count to three.

And walk away.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHT

CORBIN / Present

BOUNCING the heel of my foot against the ground, I stare between my cell phone screen and the clock hanging on the living room wall. The front door opens as I pick up the phone to redial her, stopping me by glancing up. The impatient expression on my face doesn't mirror the casual nature of hers.

I stand. "Where the hell have you been?"

Lena waltzes in with her oversized designer bag draped over her arm and the matching sunglasses still covering her eyes. She takes them off and gives me a sultry smile, clipping them on the collar of her tight black tee shirt.

"I'm only a few minutes late," is her reply, walking over to me in jeans that are painted on. She's been wearing tighter clothes since I told her I wanted to go through with the divorce. Tighter, more revealing, and undoubtedly eye catching when she asks to meet me out. It never fails that someone with a camera is there to capture each fucking moment.

"Forty minutes isn't a few."

She shrugs and sits down beside me. "I was on the phone with my mother. What did you want me to do? Hang up on her?"

"Tell her you're busy," I grind out. Putting my face in my hands, I stifle a groan over the same conversation. "How many times are we going to put this off? The papers were drawn up a long time ago. We both want this."

"What if we don't?" She reaches for my hand and squeezes it. "We used to be good for each other. Don't you remember?"

I sit back and blink slowly. Once upon a time we were inseparable. Everyone joked that the honeymoon phase would wear off and neither of us believed them. It's why we jumped into marriage so quickly—six months quick. We'd been consumed by what we felt and acted on it like it'd last because, for once, it didn't feel like there was only one person for me.

But that isn't how I feel anymore. That feeling was a mask to hide the inevitable beneath it that would eventually lead us here. Yet another cycle that all leads back to Kinley.

"You don't mean that," I answer. "And while we're on the topic of things you don't mean, you had no right telling the media what you did about us. We can't keep pretending, Lena. Think about this."

Her lips twitch downward as she draws back. "I know we agreed to this, but I think we could work it out. What if we tried counseling? We've never discussed that and I'm sure it'd be suggested if we proceed with the papers."

"Lena." I push away from the table and run a hand through my hair. "Where is this coming from? When we spoke about this you agreed it was for the best. I know you're nervous about your parents, but—"

She frowns, but it doesn't reach her eyes. There's a disconnect that I can't figure out. "I love you. Is that so hard to believe?"

Yes.

I slide the papers toward her. "I love you too, but we both know it's not the kind that warrants this marriage to continue. Counseling won't help us. It'll just be a waste of time and money. What happened to the woman who held my hand and told me she was sorry for not feeling the same as we did when we first met? New feelings don't just grow out of nowhere."

Her nostrils flare as she stares at the paperwork. It's not the first time she's seen them, but her anger displayed so openly toward the documents is certainly new.

"Why do *you* want this?" she asks, one perfectly sculpted eyebrow raising.

"Because you deserve better."

"And why is that?"

"Lena, come on."

She crosses her arms, pushing her breasts up and making me look away. "You used to look at me like you couldn't believe I was real. I felt

cherished. Loved. Maybe not in the way I should have been, but it was enough. Then you got this movie deal, and everything changed.”

I try stopping her before her thoughts stray too far. “Things have been strained for us for a lot longer than when I accepted this role. You know that, Len. How long have we been beating around the bush? I’m tired of it. You were tired of it too.”

She laughs coolly. “So Kinley Thomas has nothing to do with why you want a divorce? It’s all coincidental that you’re asking for it now that you two have rekindled?”

Eyes widening at her brass statement, I study her for a moment before collecting my thoughts. “How do you know about...?”

Her eyes roll. “Don’t act like you haven’t done your homework on me. We both have a past with people that we knew little about. I just dug into yours because I realized your past wasn’t just in the past. Honestly, I would have preferred you slept with Olivia. At least I knew it would have been a fling instead of something complicated like this.”

My fists tighten on my lap. “Are you kidding me right now? I gave you privacy because I trust you. So, no. I’m not acting for once in my goddam life. If you wanted to know something about me, you could have just asked without going behind my back. And *really*? You honestly wish I slept with somebody else? I can’t be the only one who hears how ridiculous this conversation is.”

She leans forward. “Would you have answered if I asked? Be honest with yourself. That’s one thing you’ve never been good at being.”

I scoff and walk into the kitchen for a beer from the fridge. Taking a moment to collect myself, I crack the lid and grab a bottle of water for her before joining her back at the table. “I’m not saying that I don’t have my fair share of issues. I just want what’s best for us, and that’s not keeping this charade up.”

“Charade,” she repeats, murmuring in Greek. Yet another reason we don’t work. Shouldn’t I have picked up the language? Learned a thing or two? I don’t know what her or her family says unless she translates.

I take a swig of my drink and set it down, meeting her distant gaze. “Have you read the book that the movie is based on?”

“Why would I do that?”

I lean back. “Because you’ll see why I took the role. The story is one a lot of people can resonate with. I’m connected to it. Not just because I knew

Kinley in the past, but because I know the characters. Ryker..." I lift my shoulders and play with my beer bottle. "He's the kind of role that I'll be proud of for the rest of my life because he represents the kind of man I want to be. If you read the book, maybe you'll understand what I can't seem to put to words."

The tip of her tongue swipes slowly across her bottom lip. "Let me get this straight. You want me to read your ex-girlfriend's novel?"

"It's not—"

"You've lost it, Callum."

I gesture to her with my hand. "*That*. Why do you insist on calling me by my last name instead of my first? If anyone should call me Corbin, it's my fucking wife."

"Don't be so dramatic." She opens the bottle of water I gave her. "The name just suits you. Are you seriously angry over something so silly?"

"And what about you?"

She just blinks.

I grip the beer. "Why didn't you take the name when we got married if you like it so much? You insisted on keeping yours and I respected that."

"People know me as Lena Dasani."

Seeing that we're going nowhere with this, I tap the paperwork. "This needs to happen. It's about you and me and nobody else. We don't love each other, Lena. We don't even share the same last name after all this time. We spend more time apart than together, and half the time we're arguing over why that is."

She leans back in her chair after crossing one leg over the other. "Don't lie to me like you lie to yourself, *Corbin*. This has everything to do with somebody else."

"Don't bring her—"

She unzips her bag and pulls something out of it, dropping a large yellow envelope on the table in front of me. Hesitantly taking it, I reach inside and pull out pictures. Pictures of me. Pictures of Kinley. Pictures of us together.

I go through one by one, jaw ticking over what I'm seeing. My eyes dart up, lips parted, as I lock my gaze with her victorious smirk. She looks vindictive. It gives me pause for a moment, wondering what exactly I ever saw in her. I come up blank. "What the hell are these, Lena?"

She scoffs. "Don't be stupid."

Glancing back down at a picture of Kinley walking into my trailer on set, my eye twitches. Fingers clenching around the image, I say, “I don’t know who you are anymore.”

Her chair scrapes back as she stands, grabbing the bottle of water. “You know how much my reputation means to me. It’s why we’ve managed to make this work for so long. I will not be made a fool of because of your actions.”

“What do you want from me?” I growl, staring at the stranger standing there. Her pride is hurt, and she wants to punish me. I get it. That doesn’t mean I understand what her endgame is.

She unclips her sunglasses from her shirt and slides them on. Her lips form the fakest smile I’ve ever seen, and I wonder how many times she’s flashed me it without me even realizing. “You can’t give me what I want anymore. But perhaps we can come to an agreement.”

An agreement?

“What are you talking about?”

She positions her purse over her shoulder and grips the strap. “We don’t need to be like other cliché celebrity couples who don’t last. Let the public think we’re happy. Behind closed doors we can do whatever we want.” She shrugs. “With whomever we want.”

My jaw locks. “Absolutely not.”

She hums and backs up. “Then I guess you and your little toy are going to be very unhappy with the results.”

I throw down the pictures she gave me and pick up the divorce papers. “Don’t do this, Lena. You’re better than that.”

She laughs and turns her back to me. “I could say the same thing about you. I never took you as a cheater, but here we are. Consider my offer, husband. It’s the only way you’ll protect your side piece from a world of hurt.”

The door opens and closes before I can get another word in, leaving me with a new type of anger I’ve never felt before. Staring down at the pile of pictures scattered in front of me, I realize some of these are the same ones the press released over the past month.

“Motherfucker,” I growl, grabbing my beer bottle and throwing it as hard as I can against the wall. The sound of glass shattering is music to my ears as I shakily gather the pictures and shove them back into the envelope.

Grabbing my phone, I dial my manager's number and rest my forehead in my palm. He picks up on the first ring. "I need you to do me a favor. Don't ask any questions. Get me?"

He curses. "What did you do?"

Walked away from Kinley Thomas.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINE

KINLEY / 17

ZACH STARTLES me by draping an arm over my shoulder as I walk down the school hall. He pulls me in and rustles my hair until I jab his ribs with my elbow. He knows I hate it when he does that.

“Kinley,” he greets. “You’re still coming to the game tonight right? You promised and I’d hate to guilt trip you.”

My eyes roll as I stop at my locker. “You love guilt tripping people. You remind Corbin every week that you went to see his play on the day he didn’t show up.”

“He deserves it.”

He’s not wrong. Corbin made up missing the birthday dinner he promised me that night by taking me out the day after and then surprising me at his house with a cake that his mother made. She took pictures of all of us, but most of the ones featuring me had my messy hair in a bun, and an even messier smile painted on my face.

One of the pictures is hanging in the living room at home. Mom told me I looked pretty, but I saw past the sliver of teeth showing in the smile I gave the camera. Corbin had gotten a text from one of the girls he shot with, Dalia, and was busy talking to her about another interview they had together. I watched him the whole time his mother took pictures, trying not to be jealous or nervous that he’d forget about me because he had better people to befriend.

If I admit that Corbin’s schedule makes me nervous, my family will ask if supporting him when he leaves is worth it. I ask myself that too, but I

promised to support him no matter what just like he did me. Sometimes, though, it feels like I support him more than he does me.

I think of the Oscars and the RITA Awards—of all the things we said we'd do together. It replants the seed of hope in the pit of my stomach that uprooted when doubt crept in to begin with.

I move out from under Zach's arm as I grab my bag and stuff some books inside it. "I already told you I'd be there."

He opens my locker door wider and examines the pictures and trinkets inside. Corbin taped a selfie of us together in the door next to a picture he took of me writing during one of our study sessions. There's one of just him holding up a script and giving me his signature smirk, his silver eyes full of mischief that brighten them. He also put the origami bird from winter formal on the little shelf by my pencil case.

"You guys are gross," he states, leaning his shoulder against the locker next to mine. "I thought he was going to rip my arm off when I stole you from him during the dance."

I giggle at the memory of a very irritated Corbin watching us dance around the room. Zach was just playing around, but Corbin made sure not to let me out of his sight the rest of the night.

My eyes go to his briefly before I finish getting ready to leave for the day. "He told me you liked me a while ago."

He hums, face flashing with something unreadable before he actually says a word. "Is that so?"

"Yep." When he doesn't say anything, I close my locker and untangle my hair from my jacket and backpack straps. "I told him that was silly. We're friends, right?"

Zach's expression lightens as he nudges my shoulder. "Of course. Tell your guard dog he can stop trying to pee on you. The school gets it."

My nose scrunches. "That's disgusting."

He shrugs and falls into step with me as we weave our way through the crowds of eager students trying to start their weekend. "It's true though. Admit it."

I don't.

"You could stay for practice," he suggests, once we're downstairs. "Some people watch us warm up. You could just chill until the game at six."

I look at the clock and make a disgruntled face. “That’s three hours away. What am I supposed to do for three hours?”

“Watch me. Duh.”

A new arm wraps around my shoulders, tugging me into a firm side that smells vaguely of the French vanilla coffee he consumes to stay awake these days. “Sorry to burst your bubble, Russo, but she doesn’t want to watch you more than she has to.”

Zach smirks at me. “Is he right, Kin?”

I swat Corbin until he drops his arm. “I don’t want to wait until the game starts. I’ll just come back for it. I’ve got to study anyway and try getting some writing done.”

Corbin reaches for my hand and intertwines our fingers together. Zach notices the gesture and winks at me before backing up and barking. Loudly.

My face heats as a few people start joining him for no reason other than conformity. I just shake my head and wave him off as Corbin squeezes my hand.

“I don’t know why I’m friends with him,” he muses, walking us to the front doors.

“Because he’s nice?”

The distant howling coming from the boy’s locker room behind us makes me giggle.

“Dude’s weird.”

I shrug. “So are we. We just don’t bark.”

Corbin laughs. “Want to grab something to eat before we get some homework done? I can order us a pizza.”

“Twizzlers too?” My face brightens with anticipation of my favorite addiction.

Corbin stops. “When have I not gotten you Twizzlers when we go somewhere?”

“Well—”

He holds up his hand. “Beside that one time I *almost* forgot to grab them before we checked out. You didn’t even have to say anything before I snatched a package up from under the counter. I’m starting to think I should try cutting you off though. You’re obsessed.”

My hand goes to my chest. “That’s like trying to get you off caffeine. There will never be a day when I don’t consume my weight in Twizzlers,

Corbin Callum. Remember that when you have to tailor my formal dress to fit me properly for the Oscars.”

His eyes light up as he leans down and kisses me softly. “We’re going to be the couple that the world can’t stop talking about one day, Little Bird. We’ll be famous, in love, and ready to conquer anything.”

I nibble on my bottom lip when I hear the L word before getting on my tippy-toes and pecking his lips. “Bribe me with Twizzlers, and I’ll be there.”

He guides us to his Jeep hand-in-hand.

He says we’ll be in love someday.

The flutter in my stomach says I’m already there.

THE LAST FEW months of the school year pass by too quickly. Impending awareness of what comes after graduation lingered in every post-high school conversation I found myself in at lunch with Zach and Corbin. It was all they talked about while I sat there trying not to show how nervous it made me to know they’d be leaving.

But I *was* happy for them. Zach got accepted to a local college on a sports scholarship that he was excited about, and Corbin made plans with his acting coach about taking his career to the next step. He told me he had big plans that someone he worked with on the movie was helping him with but won’t tell me what. That makes my fear of what comes next worse.

I brush off all the wariness because it gets me nowhere. Instead, I focus on the sweat clinging to my forehead as I search the sea of forest green caps and gowns for the dark hair and silver eyes I’m here for. How many times has Corbin told me in the past two weeks that this isn’t the end? Every time we hang out it always boils down to my nerves getting in the way of having fun. I can’t focus on the movies we put in because all I think about is him, and when we do something intimate my mind gets lost in how I may not feel his touch for much longer. I bottle up every thought because there’s nobody I can voice it to without feeling like an idiot. My family would tell me I’m too consumed, and Corbin would tell me I’m overthinking.

I’m guilty of both.

Forcing myself away from the rabbit hole I’m quickly jumping down again, I lock away my worry and celebrate Corbin’s big day instead. The room is stifling hot from all the bodies crammed in to watch the

commencement ceremony, but it's worth it to see the bright expression on Corbin's face as he locks eyes with me from where he's positioned below.

Lifting my wrist, I point to the blue paper bird resting on it. He smirks and does the same, moving aside his long gown sleeve to reveal the white bird.

Mrs. Callum pats my knee and smiles as she listens to the last speaker give their mundane inspirational speech that I want nothing more than to fast forward through. She leans in and whispers, "That will be you next year, darling."

Nibbling on my inner cheek, I watch the superintendent take the podium to begin handing out diplomas. When the guidance counselor confirmed I'd have the credits needed to graduate next year, Corbin took me to one of my favorite bookstores and bought me whatever I wanted to celebrate. He'd been proud because he used his first check from the movie.

We both celebrated our victories.

It was short lived when the dreadful life-after-high school conversation filled every dinner conversation following the news that I'd be graduating sooner. Gavin thought it was cool, but Mom kept asking what I planned on doing.

College has never been in my plans, no matter how many times I pretended to be a teacher when I was younger. Dreams change. Writing has been the endgame for a lot longer. But telling her that always leads to yet another meal where I shut down because I don't want to share anything about myself that just leads to disapproval.

"You have to go to college, Kinley."

"Gavin didn't."

"Gavin knew what he wanted to do."

"I'll be fine if I don't go to college."

And then she said it.

"If you don't go to college the only thing you'll accomplish when you're older is how to flip the perfect burger."

Dad remained silent.

Gavin just frowned.

I smile at Corbin's mom. "I'm looking forward to it," I tell her honestly, thinking of the second I can go somewhere far away from here.

When Corbin's name is called, I grab the sign from the floor in front of me and stand up as he shakes the man's hand and accepts his diploma. He,

his parents, and I all cheer him on as I wave around the paper in my hands.

He looks up.

And laughs.

In big bold letters, the sign says *Corbin Callum's Biggest Fan*.

Halfway to his seat, he stops in the middle of the stage and takes a bow. Even his father laughs and shakes his head over his son's theatrics. Some of the other families chuckle as Corbin finds his seat again.

After the ceremony ends, we wait for the graduating class to walk outside before everyone follows suit. The fresh air makes me sigh a breath of relief as I look for Corbin. His mother spots him first, gesturing us in his direction. Before I can get a few feet, a pair of arms reach out and yank me forward.

I laugh as Zach spins us around, nearly hitting some of the people standing next to him. He sets me down when I swat his arm and shoots me a dorky grin. "I know you weren't going to walk away before congratulating me."

Giving him a quick hug, I step back. "On a scale of one to ten, how happy are you to be done with high school?"

"Not as much as your boyfriend," he answers, chuckling. "Admit it, Kinley. You're going to miss me."

I roll my eyes. "I'll miss *both* of you. I won't have anyone to annoy me anymore." Taking that into consideration, I smile. "That sounds nice come to think of it."

He gasps and throws a hand to chest. "If I had feelings that would have hurt them."

"Leave the dramatics to Corbin."

He snickers. "You going to invite me to your graduation? I'll make you a sign even though you didn't make me one. I'm thoughtful like that."

I start backing away. "If you're not too busy studying to be a badass physical therapist, there's a ticket with your name on it."

He points. "I'm holding you to that."

Sticking out my tongue, I turn and refocus on Corbin and his parents. They're standing in front of him and some young blonde girl who looks vaguely familiar. Next to her is an older man I've never seen before shaking Corbin's hand.

Brows pinched I walk over.

"Hey, graduate," I greet.

His eyes brighten as soon as he sees me, pulling me into a hug. “The sign was a nice touch, Little Bird.”

Giggling, I step back. “Don’t forget to make me a shirt like you promised. Everyone needs to know I was your first fan.”

“But certainly not his last,” the older gentleman says. He holds out his hand. “Mark King. Nice to meet you.”

Hesitantly, I shake his hand. “Kinley Thomas.”

Corbin weaves our fingers together. “It looks like I just found myself a manager. Mark’s daughter Dalia was in the movie with me. He wants to work with me to get more parts.”

Dalia. I’ve seen pictures of her and Corbin from set that he’s posted on his Instagram account, but hear far more about her than I like. It’s weird having her stand mere feet away.

“Already have one in mind,” Mark adds, drawing me away from my jealousy.

The blonde smiles at the bird perched on my wrist. “Cool bracelet. Where’d you get it?”

I blush, touching the bird. “Corbin got them made from a local woman. It’s sort of our thing.”

Her brows raise. “Birds?”

I just shrug.

Corbin squeezes my hand, redirecting the topic to me. “Kinley is a writer. She got an agent a few months ago and has multiple stories published online and in magazines.”

Everyone turns to my red face.

It’s Mark who says, “Impressive. Is that what you want to do with your life? Write.”

Clearing my throat, I give him an uncomfortable shrug. “I’m not sure. I’d like to, but—”

It’s Mrs. Callum who brushes her hand against my arm and tells him, “I have no doubt in my mind she’ll go places.” Her eyes travel to Corbin. “They both will.”

Mark nods in approval. “I don’t know what’s in this town’s water, but it seems to be creating the kind of dreamers I like working with. Consider what I said, Corbin. We’ll talk more at a later date now that you have my card.”

Dalia wiggles her fingers at him as she loops her elbow with her father's. "Call me when you make up your mind. You and Daddy will make a perfect team."

"I will, Dal. Thanks for coming."

The two walk away, leaving the four of us left staring at one another. I can't help but watch Dalia as she waves at everyone like she knows them. It bothers me more than I like, but I force the wary feeling away.

I turn to Corbin. "I'm really happy for you. A manager? That will be huge for you if you agree to work with him."

His dad grumbles. "Still think the guy came off as an asshole."

Corbin's lips twitch. "You think everybody comes off as an asshole, Dad. Mark is just confident. You need to be, in this business."

His father's matching silver eyes roll at the remark. "There's a difference between being confident and cocky, and that guy was the latter. And I don't think everybody is an asshole. I liked Kinley from the start."

My face heats. "Thanks, Mr. C."

He flashes me a grin before his eyes focus on his son's. "Keep her, son. Best advice I'll ever give you is to never let go of the good ones."

Corbin looks at me, his eyes shining with a different kind of light I haven't quite seen before. "Trust me, Dad. I won't be letting anything happen to her."

I look down at the ground when I can no longer keep his locked gaze. His fingers tighten around mine, his thumb brushing the back of my hand, as we begin walking to their car.

With his parents leading us, he leans down and brushes his lips against my ear. "I know that I mess up sometimes, but I mean it, Little Bird. It's you and me against the world. You're stuck with me even if you don't want to be."

I hold onto his hand and lean against him as we walk together. His lips brush the side of my head, causing my eyelids to flutter.

When we settle into the back of his parents' car, he takes a pen from the console between his parents and grabs my hand.

Across the back of my unmarred skin, he writes, *fly with me*.

Biting my lip, I look up through my lashes and want nothing more than to say *I love you*, but the intense feeling in my chest leaves me speechless as he picks up my hand and kisses over the ink.

No more words are spoken.

None have to be.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TEN

KINLEY / Present

THE LETTERS SCATTERED across the kitchen island stare back at me in vast numbers, but my attention is on the package with Corbin's name in the sender's section. It's bigger than the one he sent with the notebook that I have yet to use. It just sits in my office on display for me to torture myself with. Maybe if I opened it again I would have known the number by heart that he called me from the other day.

Would it have made a difference?

Almost on cue, the phone rings again, and the number in question pops up. This time, his name is sprawled across the screen in bold white letters that blend with my phone's background of Penny.

Sitting straighter, I press the answer button and stare at the package. "You actually picked up," he says quietly.

He called nearly a week ago, and I never found the energy to use his number to return it after Mom stormed out. I only saved his information to my contacts for when I had the courage to break the news.

"Can we talk?" he asks.

"We are."

His sigh is heavy, tired even. "Please? I don't want you shutting me out."

I move from the counter and glance at the package, walking away with only my phone in my hand. "How does Lena feel about these calls? I'm sure she's thrilled. You know, since you two are so in love."

There's a pause that echoes the hurt in my hollow chest as I lay down on the couch. "What she did is not okay with me, Kinley. You have to believe

me. That's why she doesn't know I'm calling," he admits. "But it's not because—"

"Just don't. I'm tired, Corbin." I don't want his excuses. In fact, I can't figure out what I do want with him. I'm just over fifteen weeks along and my patience is already wearing thin.

Sinking into the cushions, I close my eyes and try calming my breathing like Dr. Ray taught me. His *stress is bad for the baby* speech is laughable considering my life is a cement ball of stress that nobody can lessen at this point.

"Did you get the package?"

I swallow. "I haven't opened it."

"Please?" is all he says.

Penny stares at me from the floor, waiting for me to make my decision. My body is worn out from the nonstop puking, gross from the amount I sweat, and fatigued from the lack of sleep. I just want to lay here and pretend like there's no responsibility waiting for me.

It's the way his voice breaks in quiet plea that shatters my will. I don't want to appease him, but I do it anyway. I peel myself off the couch and walk back into the kitchen. The cool floor feels good against my bare feet, so I stay standing and eye the package in question for the millionth time since receiving it.

Setting the phone down and putting it on speaker, I work at the packaging it's wrapped in. "Do I even want to know how you got my address? Or my number? We talked about stalking, Corbin. It's frowned upon in most, if not all, countries."

His low chuckle makes the tiniest smile tip my lips upward. It doesn't last though. "Just open the present, Little Bird. I think you'll like it."

I still want to know the answers to those questions, but I let it go. Eyes narrowing in suspicion, I finally get the packaging off and pull out a white cardboard box with a familiar logo across the top. Brows pinching, I open it and stare at the contents inside. My lips part as I pick up one of the origami birds, holding the blue folded paper carefully in my fingers.

"Kinley?" he asks after a long moment of thick silence.

I blow out a breath and notice the printed words on each one of them. They look like pages from a book. When I read a few, I realize they're pages from *my* book. "Why would you get me this?"

“The woman who made your corsage back in high school still runs her own business,” he explains quickly. “She does paper flowers too, but I thought those would mean more. I hope you’re not mad that she used your book, but I wanted to immortalize it in a way that meant something to us.”

Us. My stomach twists with flutters from the simple two-letter word. This shouldn’t mean anything to me, but it does. He shouldn’t know what makes my heart race, or my fingers tingle, or my stomach flutter, but he does. It’s frustrating to feel like the battle within myself is always a losing one when it comes to him.

Reality tells me to shut this down before I’m torn apart. The fantasy I’ve built in my disillusioned head tells me to embrace it without question. Being stuck in between the two has me split, but I think back to the truest line I’ve ever written.

Maybe we’re addicted more to the pain than to each other. But who says the two need to be mutually exclusive? With Corbin, that’s never the case.

I find the stool and slowly sink onto it. “I don’t even know if there is an us,” I whisper, picking up another bird. This one white.

“Don’t say that.”

“I’ve seen the pictures of you and—”

“Those pictures mean nothing,” he insists, making a dry laugh bubble from my lips.

“Like the ones of us?”

He grumbles under his breath. “Are you free this weekend?”

My eyes widen. “Why?”

“Why do you think?”

I shake my head. “Corbin—”

“I love you,” he says, cutting me off. My heart pounds in my chest hearing those words. He told me the very same thing not long ago. He’d botched lines during filming just to look me in the eyes and tell me how he feels. But I don’t know if he really feels that way or not.

I don’t want him to.

I do want him to.

I just ... *sigh*.

He keeps going when I make no effort to speak. “We need to see each other and talk. I got you those birds because I’m proud of you and want to share your success. You’ve accomplished so much, Little Bird. Let me be there to cheer you on like you always did for me.”

Staring down at my bulging stomach in the tight camisole covering it, I blink back tears and grind my jaw. "It's not a good idea."

"That seems to be our thing."

I close my eyes when I hear the humor laced into his words. "Do you think this is funny? It's not. This is my career on the line. If you come here and somebody sees you..."

"Nobody will—"

"Stop!" Do I have to remind him of the disguise he insisted would hide him at the hotel? Or at the pharmacy when we were there? If he isn't going to think straight, I need to. "You may not have anything to lose, but I do. If you want to support me, then don't come."

There's a knock at the front door. "Shit," I murmur, putting the birds down and walking into the foyer. "Please just listen to me for once."

I grab a blanket from the back of the couch and wrap it around myself before unlocking the door and pulling it open. My jaw drops when a pair of silver eyes greets my frazzled dark ones.

Corbin smiles at me. "What would happen if I didn't listen?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CORBIN / Present

SHE'S pale as she stares at me, her hands winding the blanket tighter around her body. I figured it was a risk showing up unannounced, but I didn't know what else to do. It took a lot of work trying to figure out where she lived without owing Zach a kidney or being seen by the press without draining my bank account from bribed silence.

He cares about her. Enough so to hesitate before giving me her address and I understand why. Mom told me over the years that he's always been there, cementing the biggest reason I stayed away following my encounter with her brother. She made her choice and I respected that the best I could.

"You told me you weren't okay when I called the first time," I say softly into the phone.

Hers is still pressed against her ear as she blinks at me. Slowly, I lower mine and hang up. I wait for her to do the same, but when she doesn't I take the phone and do it for her.

"Kinley?"

Her throat bobs. "You cannot be here."

Ignoring the comment, I step forward and gesture toward the inside of the house. "Can I come in?"

She let's out a sharp breath and stands aside, clenching the blanket to her. My brows pinch as I walk past the large green plant in a wooden pot outside her front door, stepping on the welcome mat with whiskers that says *home is where my cat is*. I smile when she closes the door behind her, and a small calico purring loudly struts over to me.

“You got a cat,” I praise, kneeling to pet its head. It nudges my hand for more attention, turning in a circle and twitching her tail.

“I’ll be right back,” she whispers, disappearing around the corner. I hear footsteps against creaky wood and assume she’s going upstairs.

It gives me a chance to look around the living room off to my right. The open space is warm, with a large brown sofa and matching armchair around a light wooden table near the back wall. The TV is on a matching stand across from them with pictures of her family on the various shelves, and movies lining the bottom. I chuckle when I graze my fingers against a Stephen King movie in the mix, smiling and studying some of the pictures on the wall.

The picture of Gavin with a blonde-haired woman and little boy has me shaking my head in awe. They all look happy as they play in the leaves. Older. At peace. Walking to examine a photo of Kinley and her parents beside it, I notice how much her mother and father have aged. Time feels like it’s barely passed since I last saw them, even though I know it’s been almost a decade. Her father’s hair is white, his beard speckled with gray, and her mother’s once dark locks that Kinley got from her are lined with silver.

But that’s not what I really focus on.

When I hear her behind me, I peel my gaze from the AC/DC sweatshirt she’s wearing in the picture and turn to say, “I can’t believe you wore—” My words fade when I see the very sweatshirt in question covering her body. It’s always been too big on her, and she’s swimming in it now.

“The sweatshirt,” I finish. My head cocks as I approach her, eyes trailing on the way her cheekbones are more pronounced than I remember. “You’ve lost weight.”

She plays with the sleeves. “Stress.”

I blow out a breath and reach for what’s in my back pocket. “I got you something. Figured I shouldn’t come unannounced *and* empty handed.”

When I pass her the red licorice peace offering, I don’t expect her to pale more. “Please get those things away from me, Corbin.”

My eyes widen as I stare down at the Twizzlers. “What do you mean? I thought—”

“Jesus.” She covers her mouth and runs out of the room. This time I follow her until I find her hunched over the kitchen sink in the room over, barely able to hold her back as she empties her stomach.

I walk up beside her and collect her long hair, holding it back and cursing. “What do you need me to do?”

She grips the counter on either side and murmurs something I can barely understand before vomiting again. When she’s done, she runs water and rinses out her mouth, spitting into the sink and making a choked noise in defeat.

After a few moments, she stands up and walks away, my hands letting go of her hair as she grabs a dish towel and wipes off her mouth. I just watch her as she throws it on top of the washing machine that sits off to the side by the end counter.

“Little Bird?” When I step forward, she holds her palm up to stop me. “Need me to get you something? Ginger ale?”

She sniffs and wipes at her face, and it’s only then I realize her cheeks are damp. “What I need is for you to stop doing this.”

“Doing what?”

She walks past me, brushing my shoulder and shaking her head. I follow her up the stairs and two doors to the right. We enter a large bedroom spattered with little color other than blue decorative pillows on the bed, and abstract flower pictures hanging on the otherwise plain wall. I take in the photographs on her black dresser, surprised to see one of us from high school.

A door on the other side of the room opens and she disappears into it, leaving it cracked open. I walk over and see her grab a toothbrush from a small vanity and begin brushing her teeth.

I lean against the wall outside the door, studying the black nightstands, my eyes locking on a stack of books. “For what it’s worth, your house is beautiful. It suits you.”

She makes a sound that doesn’t sound very amused, so I push off the wall and walk over to where the picture frames are. My fingers brush the edge of the frame featuring me and her at the winter formal. One of her palms rests against my chest, the custom corsage on her wrist on full display, and the other is wrapped around my back. One of my arms is hooked around her as my lips press against the top of her head. I’m flipping off the camera, making Kinley laugh.

Zach took that picture of us.

Next to that one is an image of her and the cat that greeted me downstairs. They’re both looking into the camera, Kinley smiling and the

cat glaring. I chuckle and move on to the frame face down.

When I pick it up, I stare at the dark-haired man standing beside Kinley that I don't recognize. He has to be around my age, definitely older than her. The way he holds her tells me that they were more than friends at some point. His hold is territorial, claiming. But not as much as the rock on her finger I quickly spot.

"Fuck me," I whisper, shaking my head.

"What?"

I turn with the picture in my hand. "You never told me you were engaged." My eyes can't help but go to her hand, where all fingers are naked of jewelry.

She walks over to her bed and sits on the edge, pulling the baggy sweatshirt away from her body and staring at me like she can't quite grasp something. "I told you that I've had failed relationships in the past. Excuse me if neither one of us went into more detail about our significant others before we jumped into fucking."

My eyes narrow as I set the picture back how I found it. "Is that how we're going to be? That wasn't just fucking, Kinley."

She shrugs loosely. "It doesn't matter. You have no right getting angry that I didn't tell you about Parker. It isn't like you asked."

Parker. How was I supposed to ask something like that? "I'm sorry, okay? It isn't like I planned any of this to happen between us. But I'm not upset that it did."

Her head turns to look at anything but me. She draws her legs onto the mattress and crosses them under her. "Didn't you though?"

I wet my lips and give her that one. "I wanted the part, so maybe I did plan it in some ways. I just wanted to be in your life. We've been through this."

She stares at her lap, her fingers fidgeting with one another. "I talked to Gavin. You told me to ask him about what happened in Lincoln, but I didn't want anything to change."

I walk over and sit beside her, pushing past the ex-fiancé tidbit for now. "Why not?"

Her head turns to me. "Because I'm sick of everything changing. I wanted to hate you. I wanted to keep you at a distance. If Gavin told me something that changed how I thought of you, then I'd have to admit I was

wrong. When you insisted that you two knew something I didn't, I thought we were finally heading in the right direction. Moving on from the past."

I nod. "We were."

She inhales slowly, blowing it out before flattening her palms against her leggings. "I'm sorry for what he did. You have to know something important, okay?"

I wait for her to say something.

"I was never with Zach."

My lips part as I blink at her.

She stands up and shoves her hands into the large pocket of my old sweatshirt. "How many times did I tell you that him and I were friends? That never changed after you left. If anything, he became the kind of friend I needed. I was happy to have him be there for me, but it was never like ... what Gavin made it out to be. He and I got into a fight over it."

My throat hurts as I swallow. "You and Zach never...?"

She just shakes her head.

"Never?"

Her shoulders drop. "Do you want me to paint you a picture? No. Zach and I were friends. We still are, in case you're wondering."

"I know."

Her brows arch.

I rub the back of my neck. "I was desperate to reach out to you when you didn't use my number. I found him online and asked if he knew how I could get in touch with you."

She laughs when I least expect it. "You thought he and I were a thing and you still reached out to him to get in touch with me?"

I stand. Part of me always knew what Gavin said was bullshit, but I didn't want to question it. I'd always seen how they interacted in school. Zach liked her and she knew it. It wasn't farfetched to believe he comforted her when she needed it.

"Your brother loves you."

She hesitates. "I know."

"He was protecting you."

She kicks the carpet with her toe. "It doesn't change anything. Don't you get it? We would have been together. We could have had a chance. Right person, wrong time. Remember?"

“But look at us.” I gesture around. “We have done pretty good considering. You have an amazing house, a successful career. You’re doing what you always said you would. Could you say the same if we’d gotten that chance before?”

I can tell my words sink in because she blows out a breath and shakes her head. When she doesn’t say anything, I step closer and grab her hand. “Look at me, Little Bird. We have obstacles that won’t be easy to get past, but they’re not impossible. I don’t want either of us to walk away. We need each other.”

Her bottom lip trembles. “You have no idea,” she whispers, voice cracking as I pull her into me. My hand cradles the back of her head, brushing my fingers through her hair. Her hands lock on my sides, keeping some distance between us as I hush her like I used to when she was upset.

Tears soak my shoulder, causing my own emotions to rise up the back of my throat. “Please don’t cry, baby. I’m so sorry for what I’ve done. It *will* be different. I’m not going anywhere.”

She lets go of me and peels herself away, damp face and hollow eyes meeting mine. “I need you to remember that, Corbin.”

I swipe my thumb across her cheeks. “I wish I could make this all better. Tell me what I need to do, Little Bird.”

Moving my hand away from her face, she squeezes it and drops our hold. “Promise me you’ll be there for me no matter what.”

“Done,” is my instant response.

“Corbin—”

“We mess up,” I cut her off, trying to make her see this is it for me. For us. “That’s reality, Kinley. People mess up but that doesn’t mean we have to ruin a beautiful thing. There shouldn’t be a limited number of chances before giving it all up because nobody gets it perfect no matter how many times they try to.”

“Corb—”

“Please.” My voice cracks. “There is a lot I can’t undo—what Lena has said, what the media has said, whatever happened between you and Parker. But I can do my fucking best to make you see that none of that matters. It should only matter what we know to be true. And that’s what’s between us. A past. A present. A future.”

She closes her eyes, letting tears stream in ragged lines down her cheeks. “You’re going to be a dad.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWELVE

KINLEY / 17

FRENCH VANILLA WAFTS in the air as the crackling fire breaks the silence around us. I flutter my eyes and note the soft cotton material I'm using a pillow, before my palm reaches up and caresses a soft rising chest.

"Sorry," I whisper, sitting up and rubbing my eyes with my fisted palms. I glance up at the dark, starry sky. "It's pretty out tonight."

He stays on the ground, hands folded across his chest. "You were tired. Lay back down, Little Bird. I was comfortable."

Rolling my eyes, I do as he says and rest my cheek against him. "I'm going to miss this," I tell him, hefting a sigh.

He wraps an arm around me, leaning his head on mine. "We still have time. I don't leave until the end of the month."

Lips weighing down, I listen to his heartbeat. His eighteenth birthday present to himself was a contract with Mark King, his new manager. He already has three auditions for new parts, all in Los Angeles. Apparently Mark has a place for Corbin to stay in L.A. while he auditions. He's already been guaranteed one commercial appearance, which he's shooting in a few weeks.

"Are you excited?"

His hand stills the gentle movements on my upper arm. "Yes."

"Will you miss me?"

He squeezes me, chuckling. "Are you fishing for compliments, Little Bird? You know I'm going to miss you."

Blowing out a breath, I brush my hands against his stomach. "It's going to be weird without you telling me random fun facts about Stephen King."

“I’m sure you’ll really miss that.”

“For sure.”

We lay like that for another few quiet moments, just holding each other and absorbing one another’s warmth. My hand trails up his stomach, resting just above his heart. Brows pinching when I feel the slightest uplift of rigid skin beneath the pad of my thumb, I sit up and stare down at him in curiosity.

His silver eyes light up as they stare back at me, pressing my hand harder against him. “I want to show you something.”

He sits up and reaches behind him, pulling his tee off with one yank over his head. My eyes trail down to his left pec, where two little black lines rest. They’re still slightly red as I gently brush my finger against them.

“These are real?”

He picks up my hand and kisses the fingers before dropping them back onto his bare skin. “I got them earlier today.”

I sit on my knees and study the simplicity of each line—like tally marks. “Why lines?”

His chest moves in slow, calm breaths. “It represents us. Two entities that are equal to each other. Dreamers. Doers.”

I continue staring at the ink for another moment before moving my eyes upward. “Will Mark have problems with you getting this? Did you clear it with him? I hear that some people don’t—”

He laughs. “Don’t worry about it. We’re remembered for the rules we break, not follow. And I don’t care what he or anyone thinks of them. I didn’t get this for anyone else.”

Listening to him makes me smile. I trace the two little lines and feel a shiver when his breath tickles my face. His lips find my cheek, then slowly trail to my lips until they hover over them.

I breathe him in. “You’re the only one who gets what it’s like to want something as bad as I do. Not having you here to cheer me on or vent to...”

Laying back down, I stare at the sky. The lights are twinkling in welcome rhythms, making tears well in my eyes until they no longer dance with clarity.

“Hey.” He reaches for my hand and looks down at my glazed eyes, squeezing my fingers with his. “Look at me, Little Bird.”

I obey.

Tapping the tattoos on his chest, he gives me a soft smile. "These are forever. Inked on my skin permanently. You know why that is?"

My head shakes slowly.

He reaches down and brushes hair from my face. "We're inevitable. No matter where either of us are, that won't change. Okay?" My heart flutters in my chest. "There are a lot of things that end, but memories are forever. A year isn't long enough for me. I need longer."

My bottom lip trembles as a tear slides down my face. Before I can wipe it away, he does with his thumb. I swallow and say, "You shouldn't say stuff like that, Corbin."

"Why not?"

I take a deep breath. "You're leaving and neither one of us knows what will happen. You'll be busy becoming famous and I'll be stuck here barely getting through senior year. You won't want to be tied down to a girl from the middle of nowhere."

"Stop."

"I'm just being realistic."

"You're trying not to get hurt," he counters instantly.

Isn't it the same thing?

Pursing my lips, I lift my shoulders without bothering to argue. Nobody wants to walk into pain. It's better to anticipate it. But am I any better than my family then?

"Corbin, maybe—"

"I love you."

My lips part.

He rests on one of his elbows, partially hovering over my body. One of my palms goes to his chest, cupping his ink, the other stays on my own to feel the erratic beat of my heart.

"What?"

He chuckles, using one hand to thumb my bottom lip. "I love you, Little Bird. Maybe it's premature, maybe it's late, but it's true and that's all that matters."

All I can do is blink. Goosebumps pebble my skin as I meet his lips and feel his body settle over me, sinking us into the soft grass.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I hold him to me and feel him part my lips with his. The kiss is slow, sensual, all-telling without any words

between us. My hand finds the tattoo and presses against it to feel the healing skin.

I pull away first, resting my forehead against his shoulder. “We’re going to be across the country from each other. Now you say it?”

His fingers comb through my hair. “I’ve always said it. Just without the words.”

My eyes close as I pepper a kiss against his shoulder. “Corbin?”

He lets out a sharp exhale.

“I love you, too.”

His arms wrap around me, curling me against his body as we settle onto our sides. The fire remains the only sound other than our synced heartbeats drumming together. I bury my face in the crook of his neck and soak in the moment.

Words no longer seem necessary.

Just each other’s presence is enough.

And I think, *I want to get used to this.*

But we don’t.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

KINLEY / Present

WE SIT at the kitchen table in utter silence. My eyes are focused on the way his lock with the floor, his fists tightening and loosening over and over as he thinks. Not one word was spoken as he walked down the stairs, me following him thinking he'd leave.

He stayed.

He's here.

So, I accept the silence.

It feels like an eternity passes before I blow out a slow breath and reposition on the chair enough to make it creak. Corbin glances up, his attention suddenly on my hidden stomach beneath his old hoodie. His eyes are distant, pained as he studies my torso.

My words are nothing more than a whisper when they escape my lips. "Are you okay?"

A gargled laugh comes from his throat. "I am a lot of things, but that's not a good word to describe what I am right now."

Pressing my lips together, I wrap my arms protectively around my midsection. "I didn't ask for this, Corbin. You of all people know that. If you think—"

"I'm not angry with you, Little Bird."

I blink, slowly grasping the words I don't anticipate hearing. "You're not? Because this is the last thing either of us needs. I don't want..." Licking my lips, I close my eyes and shake my head. "I'm not forcing you into anything. You said you didn't want kids, and this is the definition of trouble which we can't afford to be in—"

Once again, he cuts off my nervous rambling. “When did I say that I didn’t want kids?”

I part my lips, then close them.

“Kinley,” he repeats. His eyes narrow in inquiry, before he scoffs and brushes a hand through his already messy hair. “I said that in high school. Are you going to hold that against me after all this time?”

“Who said I was holding it against you?”

“You’re answering my question with a question,” he accuses, standing up. “That’s deflecting. Tell me, Kinley. Why?”

I put my face in my hands. “I didn’t mean it, okay? I’m tired. I can barely eat. Sleep has become nonexistent. I’m always fucking puking, horny, and miserable. Do you understand the reality of this? I’m *pregnant* with your *baby*.”

Footsteps near me before my hands are pulled away from my face. Corbin kneels in front of me, holding my wrists so I can’t cover myself again. “Trust me, Little Bird, I know. But just because I said something when I was a teenager doesn’t mean I feel the same now.”

My heart plummets to the bottom of my stomach, and I yank my arms from his grip. His brows pinch as I shut down, shaking my head and trying everything to get away from him.

“Kinley? What—” He curses and stands quickly, catching my arm as I turn away. “I didn’t mean my feelings for you. Those have always been fucking true. Don’t for a second close me out, especially not now. What have I always said to you?”

I say nothing.

“We’re inevitable,” he says firmly, locking our gaze without blinking. The conviction of those two words isn’t foreign to me. In fact, despite our situation, it warms my chest to hear.

And that’s a problem.

He squeezes my arm. “Didn’t you used to believe that things happen for a reason? This is no different.”

My brows raise in disbelief. “You think my birth control failing is some act of fate? We used to say that about our dreams, not inconvenient pregnancies.”

Stomach twisting over the harsh words, I blow out a heavy breath and try collecting myself. I don’t want to make this harder than it is. Corbin just

has to understand that we're only facing one of many uphill battles. Once the public finds out...

My shoulders tense as I carefully pull away from his hold. His warmth is comforting, luring me back in. Deep down I still believe that things happen for a reason, just like I always have. But as I get older, I realize that reason rarely reveals itself. We make things up to justify our actions. Maybe that's all this is.

Forced reason.

"You don't believe that," he says softly, stepping in front of me again. "Come on, Little Bird. You said you'd fly with me. You said you'd soar. What happened?"

I look at my stomach. "I broke my wing."

He cups my cheek, lifting my head up to meet his solemn eyes. "It's not broken. You're just scared. You have to jump."

Shaking my head, I say, "I can't."

He steps closer. "You can."

"You're supposed to be angry."

His shoes touch mine. "Why?"

My eyes close. "Because *I* am. I'm *angry*, Corbin. I..." Balling up my fists, I smack his chest, but he goes nowhere. "I hate this. I hate what we've done. I hate that I put myself in this situation. I hate yo—"

He catches my fists before I can strike him again, frustrated tears coating my cheeks. "I know you're feeling like that now, but—"

"Stop!" Voice cracking, I yank my grip from him and step back. This time he lets me. "I don't understand how you're so calm. We messed up *big time*, Corbin. You're married to another woman. I can't have a baby with you."

"You're already having one." He gestures to my stomach in exasperation. His fingers go to his hair once more. "Christ, Kinley. It's not like we can change what's already been done. And I don't want to. Do you?"

Stuffing my hands into the pocket of my hoodie, I walk around the other side of the table to put distance between us.

His hesitation is heavy in the air. "You can't change that, can you?"

Swallowing past the emotion in my throat when I hear the faintest devastation in his tone, I shake my head. "I'm fifteen weeks. That's too far along to do anything about it, if that's what you're asking."

He cusses. "And if you weren't?"

My jaw trembles as he rounds the table. I step back as he nears me, my back trapping me between his body and the wall behind me. "I don't know, okay? Obviously I didn't want to because I'm still pregnant."

His arms go to either side of my head, face drained of emotion. "I wouldn't have even known, would I? If I hadn't shown up?"

"That's not fair."

"Answer. Me."

"I was going to tell you," I hiss, keeping my arms locked in my pockets.

"When?"

"When I was ready."

"Not good enough."

"When I felt *you* were ready."

He draws back like I stabbed him.

Knowing he won't let me walk away, I lift my shoulders stiffly. "You said you don't love Lena, but you aren't doing anything about it. I've seen the magazines. The tabloids. The stupid e-alerts. You're still with her. Holding her hand. Hugging her. So don't act offended that I made the best decision for us."

Us. Me and baby.

Not me and Corbin.

The taste is sour in my mouth.

His next move is daring, his body pressing against mine as his hands draw mine out of the hoodie and pins them against the wall. "I did not come here to hear you give up on us, Little Bird. You may think your wing is broken, but it'll heal. We'll get through this."

"It's not that easy!"

"Why not?"

"Because we're wrong for each other," I tell him brokenly. "Society will never be okay with this relationship once they learn the truth. We'll be labeled cheaters. I'll be a homewrecker."

"We're right," he argues. "And my home has been wrecked long before you showed up in California. I'm not just saying that."

"Please?" I no longer know what I'm begging for.

Peace.

Salvation.

Closure.

Him.

Always him.

His fingers tighten around my wrist, keeping them against the wall so I can't push him away like I tell myself to. "We're getting a divorce."

Four words.

Four words that change everything.

The way I think.

The labor of my breath.

My train of thought.

And my heart. My heart races and squeezes and warms and expands until I feel like I may combust.

"What?" is all I can fathom to say.

His lips twitch—not into a smile or frown, but the slightest upward slant that tells me all I need to know. "You're right. Nothing about us is easy. It won't be. People aren't going to support us the way we'll want them to. But you know what? Fuck them."

"You can't say things like that."

"Can't I?"

"Those people," I reply, "are the reason you're so successful. It matters what they think, just like my readers' opinions matter to me."

"I'm not saying they don't." He sighs. "I don't know what you want me to say. Do you want me to tell you I'm pissed off that you're pregnant? That I'm angry? I'm not. I'm surprised. But more than that? I'm fucking *happy*. If you don't want to believe that this is a sign, then I will. How many years have we been apart? How many relationships have we failed all to come full circle? Things don't just happen by coincidence. You flew *to me*. Broken wing or not, you found your way back to me."

All I can do is gape at him. We watch each other with mixed emotions on our faces, his coated with something far lighter than mine. He's genuine about this. And I...

Taking a deep breath, I force myself to close my eyes and block him from my vision. "I hate this. What are we doing, Corbin? This isn't how it's supposed to go. We're supposed to fall in love and fight for each other. We let each other go instead. We lived two different lives. We moved on ... or tried to. I hate that this is our story. Our legacy. I just..." I sniffle back tears. "I want so badly to hate you right now."

"But you don't."

I refuse to speak.

“You love me, Little Bird.”

Nothing.

“I hate—”

A warm breath caresses my ear. “There’s more passion in hate, more fire,” he whispers against my lobe. “So, maybe you do hate me and my logic. But every time you say *I hate you*, I’ll know you *burn for me*.”

I let out a ragged breath.

His lips brush my cheek, then trail closer and closer to my lips. “So, tell me. Where is our story going next?”

He stops at the corner of my lips, which part to feel his breath radiate from them. I can practically taste him and it hurts.

I’ll know you burn for me.

“I don’t know,” I admit, afraid to open my eyes and look at the last person I should want.

“Look at me.”

My lids twitch.

His teeth nip at my bottom lip, causing me to suck in a breath and arch my pelvis into his as he rolls my lip into his mouth and suckles. When he lets go, I make a disgruntled noise. “I need you to open your eyes, Little Bird.”

I know what he’ll say.

I don’t know if I can handle it.

But I obey.

I peel open my lids and meet the silver color that weakens my knees and drives me mad. Locking my gaze with his, I feel his hands let go of my wrists and wrap around my waist. Our bodies pressed together soothes my internal turmoil, and the burn he knows I hold deep inside sparks for him.

Caressing my sides, he delivers the three words I’ve told myself not to accept. “I love you. You can push me away, hate me, question me, but I will always be here. Right here. This is where I want to be—where my little birds are.”

He cements his statement by pressing his palm against my stomach between us, holding onto the being that ties us together forever.

He’s always been right.

We’re inevitable.

MY OFFICE FLOOR is littered with plastic totes full of odds and ends that I refused to look through since packing them away. Their familiarity quickens the pace of my heart as I dig through the old memories and pull out the burgundy notebook that both Corbin and I know well.

“Gavin tried getting me to throw this stuff out when he helped me move,” I say, staring at the notebook before turning it to where Corbin stands at the doorway.

His lips part. “Is that...?”

Walking in, he takes it from me and studies the gold lettering that says *Most of all let love guide your life*. Flipping through the full pages of blue and black ink, he shakes his head as his lips tug into the smallest smile.

“You kept this?” His eyes scan the handwritten words filling each page, looking between it and me when realization dawns on him. “This is the book, isn’t it?”

My cheeks pinken, as I go back to dig through my bins. Silver bows, and smaller plastic containers holding origami birds from high school makes a lump form in my throat.

Sitting on the edge of my desk, Corbin turns the pages of the notebook he gave me for Christmas in high school and begins reading from it. “I was stupid. Stupid for the way I loved so easily, hoped too deeply, and expected too blindly. I was naive for feeling so carefree, smiling so widely with a simple text, and losing myself so quickly to a man I knew would leave me one day.”

He pauses, running his fingers down the page before continuing. “It was silly to believe that things would be different than any other heartache humans experience. I’d been warned, but I ignored the signs. All or nothing—that’s what I gave. He took all. I got nothing.”

I know for a fact that the ink on the page is smudged and faded in certain parts. To the bottom right is the faintest water stain in the form of a small tear droplet, and I wonder if he can feel my pain if he touches it.

“And through it all,” he reads through a hollow voice that wavers, “I wonder, why not me? I inspect my flaws because there are a lot of them and study my mannerisms because they’re vast. And I think ... it was always meant to be this way. Lonely. Trying. Inevitable.”

Pressing my lips together, I think of the last word and swallow my emotions. *Inevitable*. Ironical how that word likes to reappear between us—the same word with two different contexts.

“I don’t remember that in the script,” he finally says, clearing his throat.

I play with the silver bow in my hands, running my fingers over it without looking at Corbin despite the way he stares. “It didn’t get added into the book.”

“Why not?”

My eyes trail over to him slowly, surely the dark brown color of them wary and distant as we lock gazes. “That was the first thing I wrote when I realized you weren’t coming back. My heart hurt from thinking about you and my eyes hurt from crying all the time. Mom told me to write to make myself feel better, so I did. I bled onto that page with anger and betrayal because you left me like everyone said you would. I put myself in the position to be broken like Gavin always said I’d be. I was angry with myself. I just felt so stupid.”

He abruptly closes the notebook and squats in front of me, brushing hair behind my ear that escaped my messy updo. “I’m sorry. I know those words don’t mean much now, but I am for what it’s worth.”

I lean into my palm. “That notebook went everywhere with me. Every time I thought of one-liners or quotes or scenes, I’d stop whatever I was doing to jot it down. I did what Jamie told me when we met. I wrote a story worth telling, putting it all down no matter how much it hurt. And you know what?”

I move my head away from his touch as I place the silver bow on the carpet and pick up a plastic container. Opening it, I reveal the origami corsage from winter formal. “I used writing as an outlet. We both succumbed to our vices.”

He repositions to sit down beside me, grazing his fingertips across the old relic like he can’t believe I’ve kept it. Honestly, I can’t believe I was strong enough to either. “I wouldn’t exactly call writing a vice.”

I set the bird down and rummage through my other saved memories. “It is when you use it like I do.” I laugh softly and grab the same worn Stephen King book I used to read to him at night like he’d ask me to. “Writing was supposed to be an escape. It was meant to let me get my feelings out in a therapeutic way so I could move on. And instead, I wrote about the very thing I was supposed to forget.”

He grabs the book from me and flips through the pages, seeing the random notes littering the margins. I hated when he wrote in it, so it became a habit of his just to irritate me.

“You did what you had to do,” is what he thinks to answer, closing the book and resting it in his lap. I stop digging in the bin, soaking up his words. “I think what you did was the best thing you could have done. Think about it, Little Bird. The reason so many people resonate with your characters is because there are thousands of people just like Beck and Ryker out there. You gave your readers an outlet too.”

Drawing in my bottom lip, I give him the tiniest shrug. I know he’s right, but something is holding me back from admitting it. “Tell me why you gave them a happy ending. Explain to me why you made them go through years of never knowing how to be happy, just to come full circle and get that happiness.”

My eyes focus on the plastic bin.

“Kinley,” he presses.

Hands going to my hair, I pull it out of the ponytail and redo it into a messy bun so it’s out of my face. “A lot of reasons. I wanted to give people hope that you could still find that person meant for you even after the trials you face together. I wanted to show that relationships aren’t some clear, clean thing. Sometimes you do bad things to get what you want and end with the person you’re determined to have. And...”

His brows raise.

“And I wanted to live out the ending I’d dreamt for us in any form I could,” I add in an audible tone.

Moving the book off his lap, he reaches forward and pulls me into him. I nearly topple over but catch myself on his shoulders. He grins and tugs me onto his lap, so I’m sitting sideways. His lips find my jaw, peppering kisses along the edge until his teeth nip my earlobe.

I inhale sharply when he brushes his lips against my ear and whispers, “We were always meant to get there, Little Bird. It just took us some time.”

Squirming from the heat between my thighs, I lift and swing one leg over his lap to straddle him. His hands find my sides, resting on my waist, as I wrap my arms around his neck.

Gnawing on my lip for a moment, I say, “This wasn’t exactly the ending I envisioned for us, Corbin.” I look around the room before meeting his curious eyes. “Sitting on your lap in the middle of my office, four months pregnant, wondering what’s going to happen when the truth comes out. Will our parents freak? Will they judge us? Forgive us? What is Lena going to

say or do? How are our careers going to be impacted by it? I have so many questions in my head that are giving me a headache.”

“We’ll figure those out together.” His fingers twitch into my sides as he draws my lips toward his. “Let me help you relax, Little Bird. No thinking. Just us.”

“Maybe I’m afraid of us.”

He hums against my lips, parting them to taste me. I don’t pull back, just tighten my hold around him and deepen the kiss. Once upon a time this intimacy wouldn’t have come with consequences, but we’re too far gone to care.

Moving everything out of the way, he lays me down and hovers over my body. One of his hands cups my cheek, his thumb brushing my bottom lip, while the other goes to the hem of my sweatshirt.

I freeze, realizing the evidence of our indiscretion would be clear as day once he strips me. Nobody has seen my belly. I can barely look at its roundness in the mirror without breaking down. “Corbin...”

He stops. “Let me make you feel good.”

We stare at each other, something burning in the air between us. My eyes glaze over with tears and unspoken emotion, causing him to lean down and kiss me the way I need him to. With love. With lust. With passion. With yearning. With Corbin, I feel every little thing and it terrifies me.

“I don’t want you seeing...” My eyes flick down to my stomach, which he reaches out and brushes over the thick cotton covering it.

“I love all of you.” His palm flattens against the bump. “Especially what’s happening right here. There’s a part of us in there, Little Bird. Someone we can teach to fly, and love, and work hard just like we did.”

My jaw quivers as my head slowly nods, giving him all the permission he needs to peel the sweatshirt and camisole underneath off me. I help him by sitting up, revealing the stretched skin beneath, curved and rounded in the slightest way it wasn’t before.

My throat closes as he stares, his hands caressing the smooth skin in such a gentle way like he’s afraid I’ll shatter. “That’s our baby in there,” he repeats, words cracking.

He looks up at me, catching me staring back with glassy eyes. Climbing over me, he claims my lips and threads his fingers through my hair to mold my mouth to his. My pelvis arches to grind against the hard cock trapped in

his jeans, squirming to get friction and relieve the pressure that's built inside me.

He works his way down my body, spending time reacquainting himself with my pebbled nipples. Rolling one between his lips rewards him with a breathy moan that feeds him to do the same with the other until I'm writhing.

"I need more," I pant, weaving my fingers in his hair and tugging.

His tongue makes a trail between the valley of my breasts, over the bump of my belly, until he teases the waistband of my leggings. Tracing his palms down my sides slowly, he works further down my legs and spreads them wider to fit his broad body between. His finger dips underneath the elastic, moving it down and letting his tongue taste the uncovered skin. My legs try closing as I grind into him again, needing everything from him and more.

I yank his hair with impatience, causing him to relent on his torture and pull my leggings off. Helping him rid them, he guides his palms up my ankles, calves, and thighs, spreading me wide and nipping the skin as he works his way up to my pussy.

Licking a trail up the apex of my thigh has me panting, but not as much as when he shifts to brush the tip of his nose against the seams of my lips. I gasp as he blows on me, the faintest whisper of his name greeting the air in a choked plea. He groans at the taste of me when he spreads me open and swipes his tongue from my bundle of nerves to my soaked entrance, learning just how much my body needs him right now.

He peels himself away and looks up. "I want you to come in my mouth, Little Bird."

My head tips back and the air swallows a strangled curse as he works my clit into his mouth and sucks hard. His fingers trail up one of my thighs, kneading the skin, before finding my entrance again. He plays with my arousal, circling his finger around the wetness without entering me. My hips move forward, trying to get as much as I can, causing him to move his tongue toward where his fingers play with me.

I moan loudly when his tongue enters me as his fingers go to my clit, pinching, teasing, anything to make my noises fill the room. My fingers dig into his scalp, guiding his mouth to the rhythm I want as I ride his face to chase my building orgasm. My knees lock on either side of his head as he inserts a finger and licks his way back up to my clit.

Hooking a second finger inside me, he fucks me with his lean digits again and again as he nips my clit until I tighten around him and yell out incoherent words.

“I’m going to come,” I gasp over and over, yanking on his hair harder and pulling him away. He removes his fingers and replaces them with his mouth, wanting me to do just as he said.

My legs struggle to stay open, so he holds them as I writhe beneath him. His tongue penetrates me until I clench it with my climax.

“Please,” I whisper on repeat as my orgasm takes over my body. I spill into his mouth, his tongue not stopping until my hips stop moving and my body becomes sated on the carpet.

Pulling away, he caresses my legs and looks at my flushed face before I cover it with the crook of my arm to catch my breath. “Baby, I’m just getting started.”

He shows me just that when he slides out of his clothes and positions himself right where he’s meant to be between my legs, thrusting his cock into me over and over until I’m screaming his name in as many positions as he can bend me.

And every time he empties himself into me, he kisses my stomach and whispers sweet nothings to the baby inside, telling us both how much he loves us before making me come again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CORBIN / Present

BREATHING IN A FAINT PEACH SCENT, I pull a warm body into me and smile. My eyes crack open to see strands of light brown hair hiding a peaceful sleeping face where we rest in her bed. Her lips are parted as she snuggles closer into my side, her cheek using my chest as a pillow.

Closing my eyes, I soak in the moment. How long have I been searching for this contentment without realizing it? Nuzzling my nose against the crown of her head, I pull her closer to my body. She groans and moves her hand up my chest, placing it just above the tattoos that rest on my pec.

Just like she did before.

Her body stiffens in my hold as I rub her arm, her cheek lifting from me. “Corbin?”

I hum, not really wanting to ruin the moment with words. Sometimes it’s better not to say anything. She could change her mind about me staying here for a while. I saw the contemplation in her expression when I proposed the idea, but something inside her beat back the reasons she was going to argue against it.

She doesn’t say anything more, and I continue my soft strokes over her arm. Her head rests against my chest, a sigh stretching out the silence between us. Her thumb caresses my shirt and I wonder if she’s doing it on purpose or has no idea.

I’m not sure how long we stay like that, afraid of speaking—of the reality that lingers. If we could avoid the topic, I have no doubt that we both would. But that reality isn’t ours. Like always, she’s the one who speaks it.

“We need to come up with a game plan.”

“Or,” I counter, brushing my fingers through her hair slowly, “we could just lay here and not do anything.”

She sits up, making my arm drop onto the mattress behind her. Her eyes don’t look nearly as tired as they did when I arrived yesterday, so I glance at the time on her alarm. My brows raise when I see we slept in until noon.

“If you insist on talking, we need food.”

She groans and pulls back, sitting cross-legged next to me. “Food and I don’t get along these days. There are takeout menus downstairs if you want something.”

“We could go somewhere.”

She deadpans, leaving me considering my words. Her expression breaks when I laugh, palming my face and sitting up. “What’s so funny?”

I stretch my arms and settle against her headboard. “Everything feels normal when I’m with you. We’re not Corbin and Kinley, public figures, we’re just two people who are about to be parents. Normal. It’s ... nice.” I never used to crave such a thing, but now I’m beginning to realize maybe this is what I’ve needed all along.

She laughs and slides off the bed. “We’re anything but normal.” Gesturing to her midsection as if to make a point, she walks toward the bathroom door. “But I get it. It’s like that for me too.”

When she closes the door, I yell, “Normal is boring anyway, Little Bird. We’re meant to stand out.”

I’m pretty sure she scoffs, making me chuckle to myself before pulling off the blanket and standing up. Rolling my shoulders back, I grab my phone and notice the messages listed across the screen.

Eddie: *Don’t mess this up*

Lena: *Where the hell are you?*

Zach: *She hates roses*

Lena: *You better call me. Now*

Eddie: *Son, answer your phone*

Mom: *Your father and I want to talk*

Zach: *She still loves pizza*

Lena: *I swear I’ll release more pictures*

Grinning over Zach’s texts, I thumb out a *thank you* to him and ignore the others. I’ll deal with everyone else when I’m ready, but today is between Kinley and me. Nobody needs to ruin the olive branch that’s been extended.

“What are you smiling at?” she asks, leaning her shoulder against the doorframe.

I note the five voicemails I have yet to listen to, switching off my screen and depositing my phone into my back pocket. “Something Zach said. Would you eat pizza if I ordered it?”

Her arms cross over her chest. “You guys still talk? He’s never mentioned that before.”

“It’s a new development.”

“Seems to be a lot of those,” she murmurs, walking toward the door. Her cat appears by her feet, yowling. “Come on, Penny. I’ll give you some food.”

“What about pizza?” I repeat, following her down the stairs. She goes to the kitchen and opens one of the cupboards. Penny rubs against her shin as Kinley grabs some treats from a container. “Why Penny?”

She doesn’t answer right away, taking her time to pet the cat and close the cupboard before finally turning to me. “It’s short for Pennywise.”

My lips pull into a quirked grin. “You don’t say?”

“I’ll eat some pizza,” she redirects.

I wink and pull out my phone as she passes me the menu for a local delivery place. She busies herself with getting something to drink, gesturing toward the other room. When we find our way in the living room she tucks herself in the furthest corner of the couch with Penny climbing onto her lap.

After putting in our order, I hang up and examine her movie collection again. Pulling out a comedy, I turn and smile when I see the two of them snuggling close.

“I’m glad you finally got a cat.”

Her hand stills over Penny’s fur. “She makes it less lonely here,” she admits quietly, nuzzling the rumbling feline. “I was sorry to hear about Fred. Your mom ordered a beautiful sign for him.”

I put the DVD in and settle in beside her, not wanting as much distance as there is between us but also not wanting to push. “She’s always appreciated you keeping in touch with her. Mom loves you like her own.”

She focuses on the cat. “I love her too.”

I’ve always wondered if she latched onto Mom the way Mom did her. Her parents are good people, hardworking, and love her. But I always saw the way Kinley’s face lit up when Mom told her she was proud or bragged about her writing to people.

They've always been family.

Even when I wasn't in it.

Especially when I wasn't in it.

"Your dad has been doing better," she comments, daring a peek at me. My expression hardens, but she doesn't stop. "He's been getting the help he needs, Corbin. You should give him a chance."

My attention turns to the television screen, brushing off her burning gaze. "I don't want to talk about my father."

"But—"

"Kinley."

She sighs. "If you want to be part of this baby's life, you need to talk to me. Your parents have been supportive of me from day one. I want them to know their grandchild. That includes your father. Doesn't our baby deserve that?"

My nostrils flare. Tightening my hold against the remote, I answer, "You're not playing fair right now, Little Bird. If you want him to be involved in our kid's life, then fine. That doesn't mean I have to be."

Reaching for the remote, she plucks it from my hand and turns off the television. Penny jumps from her lap and twitches her tail, showing us both her butt as she struts away. "Listen to me right now because I'm only saying this once, Corbin Callum. Your father isn't perfect. Nobody is. But he finally acknowledged that he needed help figuring out how to handle his anger. He can't help it—"

"*He* stopped talking to *me*," I cut her off, standing from the couch abruptly. "It was Mom who made it seem like there was an inkling of interest in my life from him, but there wasn't."

She blinks. "He has a traumatic brain injury. That sort of thing doesn't heal. It's hard on him. Have you tried talking to him?"

A strangled laugh rises. "Tried? Do you know how much money I've spent on plane tickets that he's never used? Or how many gifts I've given him thinking he'd say something and never did? I wasted a lot of things on him, Kinley. Brain injury or not, he doesn't give a shit. And you know what? It wasn't just hard on him."

Her lips weigh down at the corners. "Did you ever think to try something else?"

I relent. "Like?"

"Going to Lincoln?"

I'm silent.

She plays with the hem of the oversized sweatshirt while looking up at me through her lashes. "Your father made a home there. It's where he got to see you graduate and flourish." I'm about to cut in when she shakes her head before I can. "Did you know that he has news articles of you cut out in a photo album? Your mom gave it to him when she saw everything stored in a shoe box in their room. The school play, your first movie, high school graduation, commercials—he kept track of it all.

"I've read up on people who have injuries like his. They don't process things right depending on where the bulk of the trauma is. Your father doesn't like going anywhere because he doesn't want anyone seeing him like that."

I stand still in the middle of the room, unsure of how to react. Mom's given up on updating me on Dad. She knows the tension between us is too thick to break. I used to feel bad for putting her in the middle but overtime his lack of effort just made me distance myself from any remorse that used to nag me in my spare time.

"One day," she adds, her voice no more than a whisper in the air, "we'll both have to walk back into that town. The second we show up in Lincoln together, everybody will know. If you really want us to work this time, we need to face our demons. We can't start the next chapter if we keep re-reading the last one."

Knowing she's right, I walk back over to the couch and sit down. She reaches out and threads our fingers together. It's only then I find my voice, thawed of my anger by the touch of her warmth. "When this goes public, the world will know what I've tried protecting you from."

"What is there to protect me from?"

Myself.

My love.

Everything.

Instead, I say, "This life. I thought..." My shoulders lift slightly before dropping. "I thought you wanted something else. You kept trying to give me an out before I left, and then when I came back your brother had mentioned Zach. I'm not going to lie, Little Bird. I could have found you anyway that day. We could have talked. But I told myself it was better to let it go."

"I already told you—"

“I know.” Squeezing our hands, I pick it up and kiss the back of hers. “I let myself go when I got back to California after that. The people I was staying with took me out to parties. Some of them got into drugs. I never did more than smoke a few joints between projects I was cast for. It helped let me focus on something other than the life you were living without me.

“When you blocked me from being part of your accomplishments, it felt final. I saw girls. Slept around.” Her hand twitches, but I won’t let her pull away from me. Not now. “I’m not proud of what I did, but it all led me to the same conclusion. It was always you.”

There are a few moments of silence between us as she stares at our interwoven fingers. “What about Lena? You said it was different with her. It helped.”

Her expression shadows over the topic. “I found someone like me. Broken. Looking for a distraction. I met Lena over six years ago and connected with her. I think we both wanted someone to fill the gaps and settled by pretending we were enough for each other. It worked for a while. Until ... it didn’t.”

“Because of me?”

My thumb caresses her. “It went downhill before you, Little Bird. Her and I never see each other. We keep busy schedules because neither one of us wants to be stuck with the other’s problems. What worked for us before stopped working because we couldn’t keep pretending. I didn’t lie when I said we’d decided to stop trying.

“Lena ... is very serious about her reputation though. Before it was about her parents and what they’d say, but we worked past that. Her parents love her and never liked me. I guess they saw through me and knew I was never good enough for their daughter. But when things with the movie started, she saw a change in me. I want to give her the benefit of the doubt because I think getting the divorce papers made it final. And speculation regardless of why two people split up is always ridiculous in the media.”

Kinley intervenes. “She’s worried about what she’ll look like? Let’s be honest, Corbin. I never see anything bad about her. But you? Us? People won’t blame her.” She sinks into the cushion. “And they have no right to. I don’t care what you tell me. We’re both the bad guys. Whether this is some weird act of fate or not, it’s never okay to do what we did. Even you have to admit it.”

“You’re right, Kinley.”

We say nothing.

I blow out a breath. “I’ll see my parents in Lincoln if it means that much to you. For us. But I think you and I need some time to grasp just how much our lives are about to change.”

She bites down on her bottom lip, slowly shaking her head in acknowledgment. The silence is thick, knowing, because what we’re walking into will test everything.

Her.

Me.

Us.

The world isn’t ready.

I’m not sure we are either.

“Give us time together,” I plead softly, wanting nothing more than to experience what it’s like to be with her before everything changes.

Her throat bobs as she closes her eyes, and there’s an unspoken understanding that lingers in the softest touch shared between us.

Someone knocks at the door.

The pizza arrives.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KINLEY / 17

I YELP when something red smacks me in the cheek, causing my laptop to nearly crash onto the floor where I sit on the carpet against my bed. Thankfully, I catch it in time and note the licorice sitting beside me. Nose scrunched in confusion I glance up at the door expecting to see Gavin.

Zach grins from where he leans against the doorframe. Pulling another Twizzler from the pack, he gets ready to launch it at me. I wince and peel the earbuds from my ears and frown at him.

“What are you doing here?” I look at the time in the corner of my laptop screen, surprised to see that it’s already past noon. “And why are you wasting perfectly good candy by throwing it?”

He walks in and plants himself beside me, picking up the first piece he threw. “I wouldn’t call it a waste.” Brushing off a few pieces of animal hair, he shrugs and takes a bite.

I make a face.

His eyes go to my laptop screen, then the notebook resting beside me. “Your mom told me I could come up.”

Eating the tainted candy, he studies my room, noting the various movie posters on the walls and books on the case across from us.

I don’t want to stop writing after spending the past few weeks locked away finishing this book. Three notebooks full of ideas left me yearning to pull it all together. It’s my escape from the constant staring contest I have with my cell phone, waiting for it to show a message from Corbin.

And as each day passes, nothing appears.

Mom told me to focus on getting something to Jamie, so that's what I've done. She was happy to see me being productive the first week, but then I refused to go out with them or come downstairs for more than a few food breaks. Gavin showed up and tried bribing me with pizza just to see me leave the confines of my bedroom, but I wouldn't budge.

"Your room isn't what I expected," he admits, pulling out more Twizzlers. He offers me one as I close my laptop.

"Do you imagine my bedroom often?"

Hips lips quirk into a devious smile that leaves me rolling my eyes. "Only every day, Kinley. Come on. I'm breaking you out of here."

My eyes widen as I clench my laptop in my arms. "I don't know, Zach —"

"I'm going to be honest with you for a minute, so don't hate me." His brows go up in warning. "Your room smells bad and you look like you haven't seen the sunlight in years. I'm worried about you."

I scoff and get up, setting my laptop on my nightstand and close my notebook. "I'm fine. You don't need to worry."

"When was the last time you went out?"

Blanching, I cross my arms over my chest and silently consider the answer. Truthfully, I don't remember. It must have been when I went to Corbin's house to see him off two months ago, which had been as bittersweet as I expected.

He kissed my cheek, gave me a hug, and held my hand as we walked out to his parents' car. His dad grabbed his suitcase and looked between my red-rimmed eyes and Corbin's sullen silver ones and gave us a minute to ourselves—a minute where Corbin told me he'd be back because he loved me.

If I'd only known...

"Exactly." He jumps up, putting the candy down on my laptop. "That stuff isn't that great. I don't know why you guys like it. Get changed and brush your hair, we're leaving."

"Zach—"

"My mom is part of a craft fair about twenty minutes from here," he explains, jabbing his thumb behind him. He stuffs his hands into the pocket of his jeans. "I guess they have a lot of different vendors who sell stuff. It's supposed to be cool and I told her I'd swing by."

Seeing my reflection in the mirror attached to my dresser, I cringe at the state of my hair. He's right, I look awful. I've lost weight which my family has scolded me for and I'm paler than normal.

Sighing, I walk over to my dresser and pull out a pair of jeans and a tee. I notice the victorious grin on his face in the reflection of the glass. "I don't want to stay long. And I'm doing it for my mom because I think she's going nuts seeing me here all the time."

He chuckles. "I'll take it."

Walking to the bathroom down the hall, I quickly get ready and try looking halfway presentable. My hair is combed and pulled back into a ponytail instead of a bun that resembles a rat's nest, and a little gloss adds some color to my lips that wasn't there before.

When I walk back in my room, Zach is sitting on my bed and reading the Stephen King book that I keep on my nightstand. I don't know why I haven't put it away. It isn't like I cracked it open since Corbin left.

"Did he corrupt you?" he asks, waving the thick novel around.

I force a smile. "Can we go?"

His shoulders curve downward, but he nods and places the book where he found it before following me downstairs. Mom tries not to look excited when I tell her we're going out for a while.

There's no interrogation.

No questions asked.

She just says she hopes I have fun.

When we're at the stoplight down the street, he gestures toward the gas station. "Do you want anything to snack on? There might be food at the event if you're hungry, but I don't know for sure."

I notice Gavin's truck parked outside and find myself shaking my head. I've been avoiding his *I told you so* lecture ever since I realized he was right. The first day with no word from Corbin, I told myself it was no big deal. He was settling into a new place and probably busy getting to know people.

Then the second day passed with no text.

A third.

When I called him it went to voicemail.

When I texted it was left unanswered.

A week passed.

A week and a half.

No emails.

Nothing.

Each day, Gavin's stares would become heavier as he watched me break a little more. I knew he didn't want to see me hurt, but he saw it coming from the start. I was just stupid enough to believe that he'd be wrong.

"I'm good, but thanks."

Leaning my head against the warm window, I watch the scenery pass as we turn onto Main Street and let the gas station fade in the rearview. And when we pass a little yellow house that I know too well, I close my eyes.

Zach's burning gaze tells me he notices.

But he's always been a great friend.

He doesn't say a word.

MY EYES TRAIN on the table covered with vases of paper flowers. Zach must notice my attention because he steers us away from his mom's station and walks over to the one that's caught my interest.

When we near the blonde woman, she smiles at Zach. "I haven't seen you come to one of these in a while. Did your mother finally guilt you into it?"

Zach's cheeks tint. "Yeah."

I grin. "So, that's where you get it from?"

His shoulders lift as he reaches for one of the paper flowers closest to him. There are so many colors and shapes that my eyes can't focus on just one item.

"These are beautiful," I tell her, picking up one of the roses and toying with the paint-spattered petal.

"Thank you, sweetie." She grabs a blue binder from in front of her and passes it to me. "I do other things as well. Take a look and see if anything suits your fancy. I give all new customers a discount on their first purchase."

Zach looks over my shoulder as I flip through the different crafts she creates. My fingers still when I turn to a picture of an origami bird—blue, just like the one I have. My lips part as I grip the page, crinkling it in my grasp.

"You made this?"

Zach gently takes the binder from me before I can damage the page any more than I already have.

The woman glances at the page. “Oh, yes. A boy around your age asked me to make a custom one for his girlfriend. It was the sweetest thing.”

I hear Zach cuss under his breath as he closes the binder and passes it back to her. She accepts it with an easy smile, unknowing of the sick feeling in my stomach. I try to brush it off, but it settles until I feel the familiar threat of tears rising.

“We’ll be back, Mary,” Zach tells the woman, draping an arm around my shoulder and steering us away before I can start crying.

Sniffing back tears, I whisper, “Sorry. I know you probably think I’m being stupid. It’s just been...” Not having words to describe what it’s been like, I just shrug. “Have you heard from him at all?”

We walk over to a table of refreshments where he grabs us water. “No. I honestly don’t think it’s personal, Kinley. He hasn’t spoken to anyone from what I know. Especially if you haven’t heard anything.”

It’s been almost two months. How could he just ghost me? *Us*? It doesn’t make sense to me after I cheered him on all this time. Thinking back to what I wrote in my notebook, I think, *stupid. I’m so stupid.*

Thanking him for the water, we walk over to another table and look around at the jewelry. It’s a lot of beautiful bead work that has me running my fingers over the various bracelets.

“I’d buy you something if I had any money to spend,” he says sheepishly, scratching his jaw. “I’ve been saving up for textbooks.”

I smile at him the best I can. “That’s sweet, but I don’t expect you to buy me anything. Plus, it makes sense to spend what you have on college stuff.”

We walk away from the jewelry and to another booth covered in candles. He picks one up and sniffs it, making a screwed face that I can’t help but laugh at. He shoves it in my face, causing me to wince at the strong scent permeating the air.

Moving his hand away, he sets it back down and does the same with a few others. “You should see the price list for some of the books I’m required to read. It’s ridiculous.”

“Are you excited for classes to start?”

He passes me a purple candle. “I’m looking forward to playing on their football team. Not so much on the classes.”

Grinning, I read the lilac label on the bottom of the candle. It’s Mom’s favorite scent, so I dig for some money and pass it to the man behind the

table. He passes me the change and puts the candle in a little bag for me to take.

We walk side by side down rows of tables covered in pamphlets and business cards. “My parents are trying to get me to apply. I haven’t decided if I am or not.”

“What would you study?”

The guidance counselor asked me the same thing. He went on a ten-minute rant about there always being something to learn. It seems pointless to go into debt for something I’m not set on.

“I’m not sure. English?”

“Would you keep writing?”

“It’s all I want to do,” I answer instantly, finding it easier to divulge that information to Zach. He isn’t worried about my future like my parents, so he’s not going to tell me about the necessity of a backup plan.

“Then do it.”

We stop at a booth with custom signs plastered everywhere. “I’m not sure it’s that easy. I get why my parents want me to get an education, but...”

Zach stares at something closest to him before quickly peeling his eyes away. “Hey, let’s go over—”

Eyeing his dodgy expression, I look around him at a metal sign hanging on a rack where the vendor stands. My lips tilt downward when I see the cutout birds next to black scripted font that says *spread your wings, little bird*.

He clears his throat. “I think I saw someone selling yarn over there. It looked very ... soft.”

Unable to stop my laugh before it bubbles out of me, I peel my eyes from the unfortunate sign and stare at Zach. “Yarn? Do you secretly knit sweaters or something in your spare time? I won’t judge if you do. I’ll just need evidence.”

He grumbles and guides us away.

“Hey, Zach?”

“Yeah?”

I take a deep breath and wrap my arm around his as we walk over to the yarn on display a few tables down. “Thank you.”

He looks over, brows drawn inward in confusion. “For what?”

Grazing the soft green skein of yarn in front of me, I whisper, “Being my friend. I know I haven’t been the greatest one to you, so it means a lot to

me that you did this.”

He pulls on my arm. “You’ll have to make it up to me by buying me food when we leave here.”

I grin and pick up some yarn. “Are you sure you don’t want this instead? I think green is your color, Mr. Russo.”

He groans.

I smile. For real this time.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

KINLEY / Present

MY OFFICE DOOR cracks open as I sit at my desk and read through the words on my screen. Thumb nail between my teeth, I turn to look at Corbin as he peeks his head in. Penny immediately jumps from where she's perched beside me and walks over to him.

Traitor.

He notices the word document pulled up and smiles, kneeling to fuss over the cat. "Are you working on your new book?"

Drawing my thumb away, I turn in my chair to face him. He's been here for almost a week, and in that time he's watched me sit in my office and stare at my computer struggling to find the right words to write. I've managed to write five chapters that I'm proud of, but the rest comes with emotional attachments that I find myself drowning in. When I give up, Corbin kisses me, touches me, and sends my body in a frenzy of need that leaves us in a tangle of limbs and pants, chasing highs with our bodies.

"Something like that. Jamie likes to remind me I have deadlines to make. No pressure or anything there."

His chuckle is light. "I know that well. Eddie does the same thing with me when my schedule is booked up. When does it have to be done by?"

My stomach drops. "Soon."

Instead of pressing, he stands with Penny in his arms. I can hear her loud purrs from here as she nuzzles his chin with her nose. "You'll get it done. I believe in you."

Such simple words go straight to my heart, making it squeeze tightly in my chest. I clear my throat and save my document before closing my

laptop. “What comes next?”

His eyes light up. “I can think of a few things, Little Bird. All involving a lot less clothing.”

I stand up and wrap the throw blanket around me tighter. “We need to be serious. What happens now? What do we say to people?”

We told each other we’d give it time. In that time, three more articles have surfaced with pictures of me and him. Headlines waged a larger war between fans of Corbin and Lena and me, and most of them aren’t in my favor. Since he arrived, we’ve lost ourselves in the mayhem our hearts have walked us right into and formed no real plan as to how to survive it all. Eventually, we’ll have to make those decisions instead of hiding in my house ordering delivery and cooking with what little food I keep stocked.

He sets Penny down much to her dismay, standing back up and reaching out for me. “I think we have to ask ourselves what we’re willing to say.”

Willing? My face screws as he tugs me to the bedroom. I dig my heels in and shake my head, knowing the likelihood of my treacherous body climbing onto his and stripping us bare is too likely if we close ourselves in there. Every morning my body is so worked up it needs release, and more times than not I find myself climbing onto his lap and guiding his hard cock inside of me and riding him until we’re both sweaty and insatiable from the hormones and emotions swirling between us. Neither one of us complains because we need it—the feelings, the touches, the way we hold each other after.

So, I walk toward the stairs instead. He doesn’t argue, just follows with our hands still tangled together.

Guiding us to the living room, I sit down in the furthest corner of the couch near all my decorative pillows and hold one to my stomach. It’s grown a lot this month, and I can only imagine how much larger I’ll get by the time I near the second trimester’s end in less than two months. It’s become second nature to cover myself and I don’t know why. It’s become nearly impossible to hide the undeniable bump under even my baggiest shirts. But I can tell by Corbin’s disapproving stare that he’s not okay with me hiding anything.

He settles in beside me, keeping our fingers interwoven on his leg. “I need Lena to sign the papers. That’s what’s next. Once that happens we can say and do what we want.”

“What if she doesn’t?”

Pressing his lips together, he loosens a sigh. It doesn't make me feel better. If they both truly wanted this separation, those papers would be signed by now. She's angry, rightfully so. I doubt she'll concede anytime soon.

"I can't hide in my house for the rest of this pregnancy, Corbin." My free hand keeps the pillow pressed against me. "I won't be able to hide it. People will see me and ask questions."

His head slowly nods. "We haven't talked about all the details, have we? Like if it's..." To my surprise, his eyes are glassy when I look at him. "Do you know what you're—we're—having?"

Swallowing, I shake my head. "It's too early. They wouldn't be able to see anything until sixteen to twenty weeks in, so the earliest I'd find out is my next appointment if the baby is positioned right."

He doesn't say anything.

"We do that too much."

His head cocks. "What?"

"Rush into the wrong priorities. Struggle to communicate when it matters," I answer quietly, playing with the fringe on the pillow.

"That's not—"

"What happens if she doesn't sign?"

He squeezes my hand. "Then other people will get involved. She can't force me to stay married, Kinley. Eventually she'll get tired of her charade. But..." His thumb brushes the back of my hand leisurely. "You and I are going to need to talk to our managers about the repercussions of a worst-case scenario situation."

The beat of my heart speeds. "Like?"

Instead of looking at me, his gaze stays on our hands. "I used to say we'd be the talk of the town. I didn't mean like this."

"Corbin," I press.

"We both know that things will be rough one way or another for us. My manager already told me that I need to give it time before going public with you, but—"

"What?" I screech, eyes narrowing. "You told your manager about me? Do you really think that's a good idea?"

"He guessed," he insists.

"He guessed." My deadpan expression causes him to shrug like it's not a big deal. Maybe he thinks his money will silence him, but I know what

happened to his first manager. Mark King is locked up for a reason. He isn't a good man. People will do anything for money.

My internal freak out must be lost on him because he replies, "I guess I'm not as good of an actor as I thought I was when it comes to my feelings."

Scoffing, I pull my hand away. "Well alert the damn media. Let that be the lead story instead of my face for a change."

"Kinley, come on."

"I haven't said a word about you," I say, hugging the pillow close to me. Hurt resonates in his features.

My jaw ticks. "All I'm saying is that we need to be careful about who knows what. Jamie has no idea about our current situation because I haven't known what to say. There's a lot I need to tell her, but the time isn't right."

"When is the time going to be right?"

"I..." I look down. "I'm not sure."

He takes the pillow away and pins me with firm eyes. "There's never going to be a good time to tell the world that I married somebody I don't love much less that I cheated on her with somebody that I always have."

My lips part.

"We've done this all wrong," he agrees, blowing out a breath and swiping a palm down the side of his face. "But we're not going back because we've already done that. This is our time now. Finally."

"It's also our battle."

"But we'll survive it."

I know where this is going before he even speaks the words because of the mischievous glint in his silver eyes. "Some people don't survive because they're too busy looking over their shoulder. We have each other."

Rolling my eyes, I shove his shoulder at the familiar lines. "You're such a dork for remembering that."

He winks. "It's my job, baby." His fingers squeeze mine, lining our palms up and cupping our hands. "It's also something I believe. If you wrote it, deep down I think you do too."

"I didn't know I'd see you again then."

"But you wanted to."

He doesn't need me to confirm it.

I just hold his hand.

I FLUTTER my eyes open when I hear a voice muttering from outside the living room. Peeling myself off the couch, I stretch my arms and walk over to the archway. My head peers around the wall, seeing Corbin's tense back.

The house is bathed in darkness from nightfall, but the cell phone in Corbin's hand radiates light against his face. "...not a good time. Don't worry about it, okay? It's none of your business."

I can hear someone talking on the other end, causing Corbin's shoulders to lock up. His hand goes to his hair, a telltale sign he's getting worked up by whatever conversation he's having.

"I don't want to talk about her," he growls, walking over to the window. Moving the curtain aside, he stares into the night. There's nothing to see but an empty backyard and trees.

Whatever the person tells him has his fist forming a ball against where it rests against the wall. Frowning, I study his tense stature and wonder who's on the other line. Lena? Somebody else?

Corbin cuts off the mystery caller. "What the hell do you expect me to do then? Obviously your first suggestion was wasted on deaf ears. I'm not going to apologize for coming here."

He pulls the phone back and cusses. "I have to go, Eddie. Just ... keep this between us, okay? I don't need people figuring out where I am and I'm not leaving until I'm ready regardless of what you say."

Before Eddie can answer, Corbin presses a button and hefts out a sigh. Placing the phone back to his ear, he says, "Hello, Lena."

My eyes widen as I use the wall for support. His forehead is pressed against the wall in pure defeat. Did I do that to him? A heavy feeling settles over me as he listens to what his wife says.

His hand slides down the wall, clenching and unclenching. "Can you please just see reason here. I—" Grumbling something under his breath, he pushes off the wall.

I turn just before he sees me, listening to his footsteps creak against the hardwood. They don't come near me though. I'm not sure if I'm grateful or not. He either doesn't want to wake me or to hear their conversation.

"You already know how I feel."

A pause.

"The answer is no." His voice is hard, definite. I've never heard it that way before. "I know I made that clear before."

Wood scraping on wood must mean he's sitting down at the table. When I dare a peek, his head is in one of his hands. I want to walk in and comfort him, but I have no place.

He's talking to his wife.

Arguing.

Because of me.

Nostrils twitching, I keep my back against the wall and stare at the floor. Wiggling my toes into the carpet, I loosen a quiet sigh and close my eyes.

Corbin's voice breaks the silence. "Do what you have to do then if you're insistent on dragging this out. I'm sorry, Len. I can't keep doing this with you. We had an agreement. I thought we both— Don't you think I get that? It isn't like I wanted to hurt you and deep down I don't think you ever wanted to hurt me. I know a lot of this is my fault, so I understand why you're doing this. But it won't change anything between us. If anything, releasing more of those photos will make us worse."

My front teeth dig into my bottom lip. *Photos?* He sounds guilt-ridden, something I've come to know the sound of well. What does that say about me? About us? That we're ruled by an emotion constantly enough that it can be identified so easily?

"I wish I could make this better," he whispers, voice cracking. "But I know nothing can. Let's be honest with each other, Lena. We're wasting both of our time with this marriage. It shouldn't be a charade to play with the public. This is our lives. It—"

The sound of something slamming against a hard surface causes me to jump, covering my mouth with my hand before I can yelp. Taking a deep breath, I peek around the corner and see Corbin's fist against the table. His body is tight as his hand shakes where it rests.

"I guess that's it then."

My lips part.

"You're not who I thought I loved."

I frown.

His head dips down. "Yeah, I guess you're right. But it should have been more. I accept my hand in what I've done to fail this marriage—fail you. But don't act like you're innocent, Lena. I know you better than that. We can both say we loved each other once upon a time, but it was never real."

My heart breaks for him. One of my hands cups my stomach as I watch him clench his phone before loosening it in his hold. "Goodbye, Len. I'll..."

The phone moves from his ear as he stares at the screen for a long moment before he shakes his head and sets it down. He scrubs both hands down his face and stays like that.

Slowly, I make my way into the room. I don't bother with the lights, letting us stay in the darkness where we belong. When I sit down at the table, I reach over and pull his hands away from his face.

"I'm sorry," he speaks softly.

I shake my head, holding his hand. "You don't need to apologize to me. If anything, I should say I'm sorry for everything."

His brows furrow. "Why?"

My tongue swipes across my chapped lips, embracing the sting that accompanies the subtle movement. "I knew what the circumstances were and didn't stop. We both should have been rational, and we weren't."

"Don't say you regret it."

I shrug. "I regret hurting people."

"And what about us?"

Considering my answer thoughtfully, I take a deep breath and look at our hands. "Your mom told me a long time ago that it's not good to live with regret because it stops you from succeeding. I've never regretted us. Not even now. Not even when I should."

"Mom is a smart woman."

I smile at that. "Sometimes I think my family wonders why I don't hate you. When I told them about the movie deal they were in disbelief but not as much as when I announced the casting."

Mom just blinked at me and Dad grumbled under his breath. But it was Gavin who shook his head and told me it was a bad idea to see it being filmed. I wonder now if he was worried I'd find out the truth.

"I've thought about that too," I admit, playing with the smattering of dark hair on his hand. "But I realize now that you must really love someone when you can't even hate them for breaking your heart."

He flips our hands and webs out fingers together, radiating his warmth into me. "Sounds like a line from your book."

"It's the truth."

"Exactly."

My lips twitch.

Corbin taps my hand with one of his fingers, getting me to glance up at him. His eyes leak the silver tone from them, filling the orbs with melted lead and something else.

Sadness.

My curiosity gets the better of me. “What pictures were you two talking about?”

The muscles in his jaw ticks. “I really don’t think that matters in the grand scheme of things, Little Bird.”

My brows furrow. “Why not?” In my mind, that must mean they matter too much. And I want to know why.

“Kinley—”

“Tell me, Corbin. Now.” I’m tired of him keeping secrets, whether in some twisted way it’s his way of protecting me or not, I still deserve to know.

His head drops down. “Lena hired somebody to take pictures of us on set. The stuff you’ve seen in the media is because of her.”

My lips part but nothing leaves them. I just blink and stare at him as he avoids my eyes, one of his hands scrubbing down his face as he shakes his head.

My conscience tells me, *you deserve that*.

But it doesn’t stop the rest of me from soaking in the shock of it all. Because his wife knew something was going on and led the press right to the story.

“Why?” I whisper. “If she wanted to keep her name clean, then why would she do that? I don’t...”

“This industry is dark,” he informs me, finally lifting his head to meet my gaze. “My wife pretends to be sweet, but she’s as corrupted as the rest of us. It’s blackmail, Kinley. The kind that we can’t afford to feed into.”

I’m not sure what to say to that.

“I know what we have to do, Little Bird.”

Drawing back, I swallow the creeping anxiety that rises up my throat. The way he says it tells me I need to be prepared. But prepared for what? When his lips part, I know.

“They’ll forgive us,” he tells me.

And he doesn’t need to say who.

The world.

One day ... the world will forgive us.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CORBIN / Present

EDDIE: Are you sure about this?

Eddie: A press release of this magnitude isn't going to keep your personal life out of the press. I'm not fucking magic.

Corbin: I'm sure.

Eddie: I sure hope you know what you're doing because I've given up trying to figure it out.

I look over at Kinley, listening to her soft snores and thinking about how I could get used to this. And I can't get used to it Lena's way. So, there's no hesitation or second thought.

Corbin: Lena will make this public regardless

Eddie: Warned you about her, son

Rolling my eyes, I recall the *always watch out for the pretty ones* talk he gave me when I showed him the ring—the ring that Lena hinted she liked multiple times. She'd always wanted this life, and I let her pull me in with the promise of a new start.

I didn't need a fresh start.

I needed a do-over.

Eddie: You better get ready for hell. Kinley too

Corbin: Nobody can get ready for that

Eddie knows he can't argue with me about the reality we're about to face head on. But if there's one thing I've learned best in this industry, it's to take control of the situation. If we give that to Lena, I lose to a rumor mill that will bury Kinley and me six feet under before we get a chance to say a word.

I know that we deserve nothing less than the judgement we'll receive. But it's also plausible that we won't be as bad off as Eddie assumes. The outlets will eat up any statement we make and run with it in any way they can to make money. But that doesn't have to break us.

The truth is, we aren't the first couple to cause a stir in Hollywood, and we won't be the last. It doesn't matter what morals are thrown out the window to wreak havoc in the media. We're human. We make mistakes.

And right now, I'm fixing them.

Eddie: I'll get something drafted to send first thing in the morning. Kinley will need to look at it too since this involves her.

Eddie: This isn't going to be easy

Corbin: It's worth it

Eddie: What changed from before?

Kinley stirs, causing me to peel my eyes away from my phone. She rolls onto her back, the blanket revealing her stomach in the thin sleep shirt she wears. My hand gently rests on the bump, my chest tightening with emotion.

"Everything," I whisper.

Focusing on the phone, I type out a quick reply and turn off the screen. I ignore the oncoming messages that follow because I don't want to spend my night with Eddie.

I want to spend it with Kinley.

My little bird.

My little *birds*.

Laying down on my side facing the girl who's plagued my mind since my first day at Lincoln, I stare at the bump where our baby grows. "I know you probably can't hear me right now, but I promise not to mess up anymore. This is it for us. Your mom, you, me..." I swallow past the lump in my throat and whisper, "We're a family."

Kinley's hand reaches out and finds mine, surprising me. Neither of us says a word when she moves my palm to her stomach and flattens it against her. Her hand stays on mine just like that until we fall asleep.

THE PRESS RELEASE draft arrives in my inbox as I'm cracking eggs into the frying pan. Trying to focus on the sizzling sound, rather than the statement that will speak a truth the public probably isn't anticipating, is hard.

I only slept for a few hours before finding my way to Kinley's office, so I didn't wake her. Insomnia isn't usually a problem I deal with since my long days shooting tend to wear me out by the time I get back to my condo or hotel, but the reality of our situation leaves me too uneasy to rest.

Finishing the scrambled eggs and toast, I plate both our breakfasts and search the cabinets for a tray to carry them upstairs with. Digging through the cupboard under the sink, I don't expect to hear a voice directly behind me.

"What are you looking for?"

Slamming the back of my head against the cabinet as I veer back, I wince and stand up. Rubbing the tender spot, I turn to Kinley and note her sleepy expression. Her gaze drifts to steaming eggs, causing her lips to tug upward.

"I was making you breakfast in bed."

Her nose scrunches.

"What is it?"

She shrugs, walking into the kitchen and examining the food closely. "I'm just not used to this, I guess."

I move hair out of her face. "Nobody has made you breakfast in bed?"

The irrational part of me is happy over something so mundane. It means I get to be that man for her. But the other part feels bad that no other man has thought to do this.

She takes one of the plates and walks into the dining room. I follow her after grabbing two glasses and the orange juice. "Has Lena made you breakfast in bed?"

She has, but I don't tell Kinley that.

Pouring us drinks, I walk back into the kitchen and put away the juice before grabbing my own plate. She's moving her eggs around her plate with the fork, lost in her own world.

"What's wrong, Little Bird?"

She stops fussing and grabs her drink to take a sip. I know her well enough to know that she's stalling, so I wait. "This is just strange. We've never done this before. The whole..." Her lips twitch as she tries finding the right word. "I don't know, the domestic thing."

I chuckle and pick up my fork. "There's a lot we haven't done that I have every intention of doing with you."

Her face turns red, making me laugh. In all honesty, I meant nothing dirty by it. But I can tell the thoughts running through her head are anything but clean. The side of her I've seen since coming here a week ago only cements the fact that we've grown up.

"Anyway," she says, "it feels like we're playing house. Does this feel real to you?"

Clearing my throat, I unlock my phone and slide it to her. "It's about to. I spoke with my manager last night and he sent over a release for our approval. If it looks okay, then he'll submit it to the proper channels. We'll need to do at least one interview."

Her lips part as she skims the email on my phone, shaking her head and pushing it away. She drops her fork onto the plate, the *clink* echoing in the otherwise quiet room. "No."

My brows pinch. "I thought we—"

"We can't do it like this," she states, crossing her arms over her chest.

I look from my phone to her. "But we discussed it and you agreed. Something has to be done before Lena makes the first move, Kinley. We can't wait."

"Gavin announced he was engaged online before he told any of us," she blurts.

I just blink.

Her shoulders drop as she sighs. "My parents were really upset to find out that way. I told myself any big news they hear would come from me first before it goes on social media. It's bad enough I shut them out when I got home."

"You had your reasons," I reply quickly, understanding that she needed time. Telling her that I don't tell my parents everything won't help the situation. We're two different people and the circumstances between our families aren't the same.

"What exactly are you saying?" I ask slowly, knowing where this is going but needing the confirmation.

Her eyes stay locked on the plate. "I haven't been a good daughter lately and that needs to change. Our parents need to hear this from us before the media gets ahold of it."

Appetite wavering, I click my tongue.

"You know it's the right thing to do."

“I’m not the best decision maker when it comes to *the right thing*, Little Bird.” Her frown deepens, making me relent. “We’ll go as soon as you want to. But Eddie says if we’re going to do this, it needs to be soon.”

She picks up her fork and scrapes it around the plate before stabbing the eggs. “When do you need to go back to California? I’m sure you have plenty of work.”

The way she asks has my heart constricting. Does she think I’m going to walk out and that’s it? “Little Bird, look at me.”

She doesn’t.

Holding back a sigh, I push my plate away and stare at her despite her insistence to avoid my gaze. “We are not about to turn our lives upside down for nothing. Think about it, Kinley. How many people in our positions get these chances? Not many.”

“It’s not impossible—”

“Did you try reaching out?”

She presses her lips together.

“We both thought it was for the better,” I say, wishing it weren’t true. We could have been together, but those thoughts are pointless to have.

“Yeah,” she murmurs, picking at her toast. The butter melted into the bread seemingly has her transfixed.

“We’re here. We’re doing this.”

Her head picks up. “So...?”

Shoulders tight, I say, “We’ll go to Lincoln tomorrow and talk to our families. You’re right. They need to hear it from us first.”

I can tell she’s relieved, but the tight feeling in my chest only intensifies. Seeing Mom I can handle. Dad is an entirely different story.

Kinley must sense that. “We’ll get through this together. We don’t have any other choice at this point.”

Licking my lips, I nod once. “How much do you think your parents hate me? On a scale from one to ten?”

She rolls her eyes. “I think they had it out for you for a while, but they’re over it. You may not believe it, but I do. The only people who haven’t moved on from us is ... us.”

Sounds about right.

“And Gavin?” I press, knowing that will be trickier because of our sordid past. He’s made his feelings clear from the start. Regardless of the

rift between he and Kinley, I doubt those feelings about me have changed. I'm sure they've become tenfold.

Her nostrils twitch in the tiniest way, but she sits up and gives me the best smile she can muster under the circumstances. "My mom said something when she came over that made a lot of sense. He's my brother. We've both made mistakes, and I don't want to ruin our relationship by staying mad. Especially not if I want him in our baby's life."

The Kinley Thomas I've always loved sits before me, her heart of gold always offering room for forgiveness. I never thought we'd be here even having a conversation that makes me fall in love with her even harder than I already am. And that's when it's cemented that we'll survive even in the roughest storm. I find new ways to love her when I didn't know loving her any more than I do was possible.

Like always, Kinley proves me wrong.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

KINLEY / 17

WITH SOME REVISIONS, this book will sell, Kinley.

I try taking the news the best way I can, but knowing that I need to change what I've bled onto paper leaves me feeling anything but good. The full notebooks littering my bedroom have this story plotted exactly how I want it.

It's raw.

But it's real.

And Jamie wants me to change it.

"Kinley?" she says, snapping me out of it.

Nibbling on my bottom lip, I hold my cell a little tighter. "Sorry, I'm here. What kind of changes exactly? I thought it was good..."

"It's not a bad draft, Kinley," she insists lightly, typing something on her keyboard. "The editor I spoke to is interested in looking it over again when the suggestions are taken into consideration. In fact, she thinks it'll be a good fit for the company down the line if you just add something a little more to it."

My jaw locks. I know I shouldn't take it personally that somebody wants me to work on my book. This is only the second draft—lightly edited by me and revised when I reread it the first time around. But the story leaks a truth that I don't want altered in any way.

"What about a different editor?"

"Kinley—"

"I know I'm asking for a lot," I cut her off, straightening in the office chair Dad bought me for the spare room. He and Gavin found some

secondhand furniture for me to create a little office next to my bedroom. “I just think the story is good as it is. I mean, sure, there are some typos and errors, but the plot shouldn’t need to be changed. What more could she want?”

She sighs, and I can only imagine what her face looks like. Is it pinched with irritation? Is she fed up with the teenager she took on? I wince at the possibilities.

“As you know, the manuscript was rejected as is by three other publishers,” she finally says. “I told you that some of these houses will be hard to reach, but this woman’s interest is a good sign. You could sign with Rave Publishing if you just work with them on this. Her notes are very helpful, Kinley. She thinks if you added a larger conflict it could heighten the development of the couple. Right now, she feels like Beck and Ryker fall a little flat.”

Pressing my lips together, I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I’d be stupid to turn down this opportunity just because of personal opinions. And, realistically, I had the slightest doubt in my couple’s relationship development when I revised it. I knew it was because the story I started writing was one I felt from the heart, and the happy ending I gave them was forced at best.

“I’m forwarding you her notes,” she tells me, clicking a few times before my phone buzzes with a new email alert. “Look them over and see what you think. I’m telling you this is good news. I have a great feeling about this potential working relationship. In six months, we’ll resubmit—”

“*Six months?*”

“There are limits as to how many times we can submit the same book to a company,” she explains, typing again. “They have a six-month waiting period. That gives you time to focus on revisions without being stressed. Just follow what she commented on in the manuscript and replot certain elements. I know you can do it. Plus, you’re in your senior year now. Don’t think I’ve forgotten about your upcoming graduation that I’m sure your parents want you to focus on more.”

I make a face in the empty room I wallow in. School started last week, and everything is different. I expected to be met by pitied stares because everyone knew that my only two friends graduated. I mentally prepared myself to eat in the library instead of the cafeteria because I have nobody to sit with.

But people talked to me.

Complimented me.

It's ... foreign.

"Do we have a deal?"

I want to grumble under my breath, but showing my age isn't exactly the reminder I want to give Jamie as to what she got herself into. I want to prove that age isn't a limit—that there are no boundaries with me. So, I agree.

"We'll plan another day for you to come up here when it fits into your schedule," she adds, whatever work ceasing as a voice speaks in the background. "We can discuss the notes more another day. The new interns have arrived, and I have feeling half of them will wish they found a different agency to assist."

My lips waver in an almost-smile.

I can hear shuffling on her end. "Maybe you'll meet some of them when you come here next. Until then, please keep an open mind when you go through the notes."

I want to tell her that's unlikely but say goodbye instead and stare at the email. Rather than opening it, I walk out of the room and down the hall. Changing into something warmer for the cooler weather, I slip into my shin-high boots and walk downstairs.

Mom and Dad look up from the papers they read at the kitchen table, their eyebrows raised. It's Dad who glances at the large silver watch that always rests on his tan wrist and asks, "Where are you off to?"

"Meeting with Zach?" Mom guesses.

I nudge the floor with my foot. "I was actually wondering if I can get another driving lesson. It'll be good for me to practice more."

Dad folds up the paper and sets it down on the table. "We can go down to the old Game Club and drive around."

I smile. "Okay."

I try to ignore Mom's growing smile as she goes back to her paper. She's been hinting at me getting out more all summer. Then Zach would magically appear within hours like they have some code word.

But I always go.

For Mom, not for me like I should.

Dad drives us down the street, turning onto a dirt road that leads to a cabin and pond where the town used to host a lot of events. There is still

quite a bit of hunters that use the land during the season, but the cabin is run down and the pond doesn't offer more than tiny sunfish and litter these days.

Once we're far enough up the road, he pulls over and switches spots with me. When we're both buckled in, he gives me some initial instructions before I begin the lesson.

It's a few minutes into me just driving around and getting a feel for everything when he asks, "What made you want to do this?"

I glance at him for a moment before maneuvering a three-point turn like he told me to. The last time I did this I almost landed us in a ditch. Gavin would have had a field day if we called him asking to tow us out.

Freedom, I answer silently.

"It's time," is what I say aloud. "Gavin got his license when he was sixteen. I've barely driven anywhere, and I suck at it."

Dad laughs. "Your brother has also been driving a tractor since he was ten. Don't give yourself a hard time."

He doesn't need to remind me about how much Gavin's done. When I turned sixteen, Gavin gave me his driving manual to read over so I could take the written test for my permit. I didn't have interest then and got lectured about how he's been driving for years on the farm.

"Yeah, I know he did."

We drive around in silence for a few minutes. "How's the writing thing going?"

Half of my lips quirk up. I love it when Dad asks me about my writing. Unless I offer up the conversation at home, the only time I speak about it is when it's just him and me.

"I spoke with Jamie before we left."

"And?"

I try not frowning but fail. "The woman she submitted my book to told me I need to revise it. It'll take at least six months before she even reads it again. Maybe more."

Dad shifts, looking out the windshield. "I suppose that's not a bad thing. You're going to be busy with school anyway."

Humming out a non-reply, I nod my head.

"It sounds like she's interested though."

"Six months is a long time."

I remember having this very conversation with Corbin when he complained about graduation being so far away. Now that he's gone, it feels like the time I had with him passed too quickly. But I bet he preferred it that way since he wanted out since the day he stepped foot into our small town.

My grip tightens on the wheel.

"It'll pass before you know it," Dad promises.

I don't agree, but I let it go. It's just my bitterness leaving me in a foul mood. I thought I'd have better news to share with my family by now—something to show for all the work I've done the past few months on my book. Like I'd have a book deal or promise of one to celebrate so my parents would smile and congratulate me. Maybe we'd go out to eat to celebrate like they did when Gavin first got co-ownership of the farm.

Instead, I have nothing except revisions plaguing me. Revisions that still boil my blood the more I think about it. What kind of conflict does she want me to give them? Their love story is already riddled with tension.

When Dad clears his throat and shifts for a third time in the short amount we've been here, I know I'm about to have a conversation I don't want to. "Have you heard from him?"

Staring at the road ahead of me, I debate on lying or stalling to answer. Dad would know better though. If not by my hesitation, by the strong grip that turns my knuckles white. "No. From what his mom says, he's been put to work quite a bit doing small roles and commercials."

He makes an effort with me that nobody else has, but it's feeble at best given my reluctance to entertain the topic. "That sounds exciting for him."

"It is," I relent.

Silence.

"You know—"

"Can we not?" I ask awkwardly, twisting my grip on the wheel until an eerie squeal sounds from the movement.

He sighs, clearly not wanting to relent but doing so anyway. He's told me before that bottling up my feelings doesn't get me anywhere. But he told me that when I'd gotten into a fight with Mom. Not Corbin. It's different. "Sure, kid."

I turn on the radio and let the music drown out the silence between us. It doesn't ease the screaming thoughts haunting my mind.

THE LIGHT LAYER of fresh snowfall coating the pavement and small tree branches planted along the side of the bustling Big Apple streets has me smiling as I walk toward the familiar skyscraper. It no longer intimidates me as I near its large structure because I know today is different.

Gavin and his new girlfriend Kayla agreed to stay behind and look around some of the storefronts while I met with Jamie, and I was thankful. If it hadn't been for Kayla insisting that I didn't need a babysitter, Gavin would have planted himself in the same chair he did last time until I was ready to go.

Shoving my gloved hands into the pockets of my down-filled coat, I walk through the carousel door and smile at the security guard sitting at the desk off to the side. He simply nods in acknowledgment as I walk toward the elevators and press the *up* button.

A dark-haired guy in a fitted black button peacoat and light gray slacks walks up beside me as the elevator makes its decent. Nerves prickle the back of my neck as I offer him a tiny smile. He doesn't hesitate to smile back, giving me a quick once over with his equally dark brown eyes that I think I may have imagined before he looked forward again.

But the corners of his lips twitch into a wider smile that I note from his profile. And it's a nice profile. Full lips, squared face, and a straight nose that looks like it may have been broken at one point in his lifetime. His skin is darker than mine by a few shades, making my already milky skin look worse since winter took over and hid the sun.

I bite down on my inner cheek and wait for the doors to open. When they do, he gestures for me to walk in first. My fingertips tingle in my pockets as he follows me in, keeping a decent distance between us at opposite corners of the elevator.

"What floor?" he asks me, getting ready to press one of the buttons on the panel in front of him.

"Eight," I squeak out, feeling heat creep over my face from the mewled response. Clearing my throat, I wince when his gaze drifts toward me, brows raised.

"Eight?" he repeats. I just nod and swear he says *huh* before stepping back. He never pushed a second button.

We ride up the eight stories in silence, both our hands in our pockets. Once in a while I'll sneak a peek his way, wondering why he's going to

Jamie's floor. He could be another author. I don't know everybody that the agency represents, so it's plausible.

When the doors open, the same receptionist I saw before looks up at us. She smiles at me, but keeps her gaze locked on the man walking directly behind me. "Parker, Ms. Little—"

"Parker," Jamie says from somewhere close by, coming out of one of the side offices near the elevators. "So nice of you to join us."

The guy blushes. "Jeff told me I didn't need to come in the usual time because there were meetings I wasn't needed at, ma'am."

Jamie walks over to us, one of her brows quirked in a way that says *is that right?* "Is Jeff your boss or am I?"

The guy, Parker, swallows. "You are."

"Correct. Just because you're in the publicist division doesn't mean you can come in whenever you see fit. I'll make sure Jeff knows as much before giving the interns free range. And what did I say about calling me ma'am?"

"Not to?"

"Correct again, Mr. Jennings."

I shift on my feet, feeling uncomfortable bearing witness to this awkward exchange. Jamie doesn't seem to care that she's reprimanding somebody in front of me, but I feel bad for the guy. I wouldn't want anyone seeing me get scolded if I were in his shoes.

She finally turns to me as I peel off my winter gloves and stick them in my pockets for safe keeping. "Kinley, I'm glad you could make it. I'm not sure if you've properly met, but this is our last remaining intern Parker Jennings. He'll be with us for the next two years, isn't that right?"

Parker glances at me while nodding.

"Parker, this is Kinley Thomas." I do what I was taught and hold out my hand. For some reason it takes him by surprise because he stares at it before sliding his palm into mine and shaking. Heat blossoms back over my cheeks and nose over his firm grip, only relenting when we drop our hands and I stuff mine back into my coat. "She's one of my authors who's here to discuss the book I'll be representing."

His brows dart up. "Aren't you a little young to be an author?"

Unable to refrain from frowning, I retort, "Aren't you a little young to be a publicist?"

Jamie chuckles. "Parker is twenty-one and fulfilling his internship from NYU. He'll be working here to gain experience."

“Would you like anything to drink?” she asks me.

Before I can answer, Parker says, “I can make a fresh pot of coffee and bring you some if you’d like.”

My lips part. “Oh. Uh...” I force a smile and give him a tiny shrug. “I don’t drink coffee actually but thank you.”

“Hot chocolate or tea?” he presses, unbuttoning his peacoat.

I wouldn’t mind something hot to drink, and since he’s offering... “I wouldn’t mind a hot chocolate. Thank you.”

He nods and walks away, leaving just Jamie and me. She gestures toward her office. When we walk inside, she closes the door behind me and rounds her desk.

I take off my coat and sit down in the same blue chair as the first time. “It’s a lot warmer here than back home.”

“One of the many advantages of living in the city,” she remarks, moving some papers out of her way. “I’d like to talk about the revisions.”

My heart squeezes in a mixture of anxiety and anticipation. It took me two months to rework the entire thing. I started from scratch and copy and pasted bits and pieces from the original manuscript to formulate the new one.

“I love it.”

Eyes popping open, I can only stare.

She nods once, seeing my shock. “What made you choose to add the cheating element? It brings a new kind of depth that was missing before and brings these characters to life. You feel their pain, witness their shortcomings, and still cheer them on.”

“I...” I lick my lips, struggling to admit the truth. I don’t want to tell her that I wrote it out of pettiness and assumptions that might not even be true. The pictures surfacing of Corbin with different women make it hard to deny though. He never reached out, showed up, or even tried.

He moved on.

And I felt ... cheated.

Yet, I blamed myself. I always do that and hate myself for putting so much pressure on my shoulders to be what everyone wants. The truth is, I’m not what Corbin Callum wants. The girls in those pictures are skinner, prettier, and probably have a lot more money and time to offer him. They’re not in high school. They’re probably from his new world—actresses.

“...will do very well. You should be proud of yourself, Kinley. I am. In fact, I sent the manuscript to Kim at Rave as soon as I finished it and told her waiting another three months before reading it was too long.”

Speechless, I just swallow the bitterness of Corbin and the girls and absorb the pride in Jamie’s eyes. It’s the type of pride I need to confirm that this is exactly what I worked for. And it’s ... overwhelming in the best way.

Then reality hits me and I slide forward in a new anticipation that fills the room. “Did she reply? Is she going to read it sooner? Do you think they’ll pick it up now—”

Jamie laughs and waves me down. “She read the first few chapters and told me she was drawn in from page one. The first version was good, Kinley, but not even I knew what you were capable of until I read this one. *Through Shattered Glass* is going to be a huge hit.”

“So...?” I grip my hands together in my lap, waiting for her to tell me something positive.

She grins. “Kim can’t officially confirm that Rave will pick it up, but she’s confident that they will once a few others read it. As soon as I know, I’ll reach out to you.”

My heart is racing so fast that I think it might propel out of my chest. “You really think it’ll be picked up?”

Leaning back, she rests her hands on her desk and levels with me. “When have I ever told you something I didn’t mean? This book is one of the best ones I’ve read in a long time because of the raw emotion you put into it. For somebody so young, you have a talent that amazes me.”

Did she just ... compliment me?

Jamie Little complimented me.

A huge smile stretches across my face until it physically hurts. But I don’t care. Because Jamie freaking Little just told me that my talent amazes her—that my book is the best she’s read.

“We can take this far,” she continues, reaching for a pen and writing something down on the notepad beside her. “There’s no doubt in my mind we can secure audio and foreign deals through Rave when the time comes. And even better, if the sales are as good as I think, we can look into film rights as well.”

“Fi...” I blink. Then blink again.

In fact, I’m tempted to pinch my arm because there’s no way I’m sitting here in her office discussing any of this. It’s too good to be true. Being

picked up by a publisher is one thing, but everything else? A *movie deal*?

It's...

She sets her pen down. "This type of book raises the kind of questions that readers love talking about. The love story you created is rough around the edges and real, and you'll get a vast array of readers."

My lips part, then close, then open again. There's a lot I want to say but can't verbalize. Do I want something so personal on blast? I knew it would be if it was picked up, but the potential of it being brought to life is a dynamic I never in my wildest dreams could imagine.

"Are you sure it'll do well?" I hate the doubt in my words, but at this point that doubt is all that glues me together. "I mean, it could flop. People don't like infidelity, and—"

"But they like drama and real love."

That shuts me up.

"And Beck and Ryker?" She smiles at me, a genuine, honest-to-God smile. "They share the purest love I've ever seen. I don't know how you encompassed something so beautiful at your age, but I'm glad you did."

Thankfully, before I can even try formulating a response, somebody knocks on the door before it cracks open.

"I've got Kinley's hot chocolate, ma'—Ms. Little," Parker announces, walking in with a large Styrofoam cup in his hands.

The humor on Jamie's face as he passes me the warm cup is lost on me. Parker just smiles at me, nods at Jamie, before walking out and closing the door behind him.

I eye the cup. "I would have thought offices have those smaller cups you can buy in bulk for cheap." Taking a sip of the rich chocolate, I lick my lips and sit back. "Why are you making that face?"

Jamie's lips waver. "We don't have hot chocolate here."

Brows pinching, I look from her to the cup, before meeting her eyes in confusion. "What do you mean?"

She points to the cup, which I spin to see a logo printed on the side. "That looks like it's from the café down the street. We only have coffee and tea, and frankly, not very good options of either."

Oh. Oh. "Well that was nice of him," I murmur, glancing over my shoulder at the glass wall behind me. I don't see him anywhere, so he must be shadowing whoever he's assigned to.

"Very," Jamie muses.

I try to refocus the conversation. “So, you’ll let me know when Kim gets back to you about the book?”

Despite my nerves, I know I want this far more than I don’t. No matter how much of myself is inside those pages, my hesitation is the only thing between me and proving to everybody that I can make it just like Corbin.

And I will.

But I won’t forget anyone.

“I promise,” Jamie confirms.

And just after the new year, I get an email with *congratulations* in the subject line, followed by *here’s to the first step of many*.

I’ve been signed.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINETEEN

KINLEY / Present

CORBIN'S PHONE goes off for the fifth time in the last half hour as we pass the Lincoln town sign. Population who knows what since someone scraped the numbers off and spray painted a penis where they used to be. Peeling my head away from where it rests on the passenger window, I glance at him with pinched brows.

"Do you need to get that?"

He reaches down where his phone rests in the console between us and glances at the screen after we roll to a stop off the main drag. "It's just Mom."

"What if it's an emergency?"

He sets his phone down again, shaking his head. "If it were, she wouldn't be calling me," he answers quietly.

His phone doesn't go off again, leaving me staring out the window at the businesses that haven't changed at all. The art gallery still resides where it used to, the flower shop and café beside it still bustling with people mulling about the tables outside and talking with bystanders soaking in the fresh air. It makes me smile with nostalgia.

But my smile quickly falls when we stop at the red light in the center of town. If we turn left we'll be at the gas station that the town gets everything from—I've consumed my weight in greasy pizza and overpriced Twizzlers from the very establishment. It's where Corbin and Gavin encountered each other before my brother chased him away with lies. The little white building with one neon open sign flashing like always in the window is where a lot of memories were made.

If we turn right we'll drive down the road that I've lived on for most of my life. The same street I'd walk on when the weather was nice, going nowhere in particular until I found my way to the gas station with what little change I had on me. It's where Gavin and I would ride our bikes up and down the sidewalk until I'd gotten hurt and stopped riding altogether.

Corbin signals right.

My phone buzzes in my hand, making me nibble my lip and study the new email from one of Jamie's people. After calling her yesterday afternoon and admitting what I'd gotten myself into, there was a lot of silence. Even Jamie, someone put together and on top of life, couldn't have seen the bombshell I'd dropped.

Her "*Oh, Kinley...*" is what had me breaking down in the middle of my office after announcing my pregnancy. Corbin gave me the space I asked for to deliver the news because I needed to talk to her on my own. I had to accept that I made this mess and couldn't avoid the consequences—disappointment and all. Especially not with my pregnancy nearing its halfway point and the images popping up every day from Lena. How could I keep pretending like I didn't mess up? Like we didn't?

"You should have told me sooner."

"I didn't know how."

"You understand I can't stop what's going to happen once this makes the news, right? And believe me, Kinley, anything can happen now. No amount of power I hold will stop this train from derailing."

And I'd accepted that, telling her I understood. It was thirty-eight minutes of built up anxiety all pouring from me as we talked. I told her how sorry I was, and she told me apologizing wasn't going to fix this. So, I let her disappointment absorb into my skin and squeeze my heart.

But I did not cry.

I refused to.

When I asked if I could have control of my email back because I needed to reach out to a few people, she'd been hesitant for reasons beyond me but agreed. Hence the current email I just received from the man who'd taken it over, which included a new password to access the account I hadn't needed to think about in far too long.

And when I logged in, my phone was swarmed with notification after notification. My eyes widened when I saw Edward Mansfield's name in one

of the exchange threads dated from two days ago, marked with utmost importance.

But the bump of rough road pulls me away from the email in question, guiding my eyes upward to see us traveling down Alden Street until panic seeps in.

Swallowing my anxiety, I shove my phone in my coat pocket and reposition in the seat to grab the small bag of pastries that I bought before we left Lake Roe. It's not much of a peace offering, but I couldn't show up empty handed.

From the corner of my eye, I see Corbin.

Well, not totally empty handed.

"You're turning blue," he notes.

The same doctor's office sits at the corner, followed by a tiny park with a fountain that broke long before I was born. A few houses have been updated with fresh paint and new colors—some yards planted with new flowers, trees, and bushes. Others never changing at all.

"Breathe," he instructs, reaching over and squeezing my knee. I place my hand on top of his and keep it there.

"It's easier said than done."

His lips quirk at the sides. "I would have thought you worked out all your anxiety this morning when you woke me up by—"

"Can we not talk about that?" I cut him off, feeling my face heat. I'm already sweating profusely under my clothes, I don't need more reasons to drown in my nervous perspiration.

He laughs. "I just wasn't expecting it."

"I'm pregnant and horny," I deadpan, causing him to choke on his laughter. "And that's the last thing I want to think about when we're about to see my family."

"Someone's in a mood," he muses.

My eyes narrow at him. "I'm about to be in a worse mood if you don't be quiet for two seconds. I'm..." Realizing I sound psycho I squeeze my eyes shut and take a deep breath before facing him again. "I'm sorry. I don't know what to expect. A lot of staring. Disappointment. Maybe some cuss words. I need to know what to anticipate."

The red house with large tractor tires filled with flowers makes its appearance. Holding my breath as Corbin slows down and turns on the

blinker, I take in the rusty decorative windmill and chipped white paint on the enclosed porch I used to sit in with Dad and watch the thunderstorms.

Everybody's cars are in the driveway, so Corbin pulls off to the side of the carport. I know once I get out, I'll see just how different his lifestyle is from theirs—a shiny new car among rusted older models. He shuts off the vehicle and unbuckles, but I just remain planted in my seat gripping the pastry box in my hands until my fingertips hurt.

"Little Bird..."

"I should have gotten pie," I blurt, staring at the assortment of donuts and muffins. "Gavin prefers pie. Mom too."

Dad has always loved donuts more. Sometimes my driving lessons would take us to the town over where we stopped at a bakery and loaded up on glazed donuts—his favorite. The same ones that I made sure are inside the box in front of me.

Corbin reaches out and turns my chin toward him. "Your family isn't going to care about the lack of pie. They're waiting to see you, not what you brought. Which is probably a good thing since you brought me."

How can he find this funny? "For all we know you're walking into a firing squad. Why aren't you peeing your pants or something?"

"That'd be embarrassing for one," he replies, shrugging loosely. "And because we can't change anything that's happened. We'll walk inside hand in hand and take their reaction together. Good or bad, Little Bird. We're a team. There's no going back."

He takes the box from me and undoes my seatbelt, giving me a small head bob of encouragement as he opens his car door. Knowing I can't stay in here forever, I do the same and walk around the front of the car where he stands with an outreached hand.

The sound of Mom and Dad's fourteen-year-old chocolate lab barking as we walk up the front steps has me gripping Corbin's hand tighter. He doesn't seem phased even though I must be crushing his bones. We both stop at the door, him looking over at me and me forcing myself to believe we'll be okay.

Twisting the door handle, I walk in first with Corbin directly behind me. Buddy's wagging tale and whitened fur greets me, making me smile as I reach out and rub his head. The hammering of my heart doesn't ease despite his excitement to see me.

Dad's remodel of the mud room makes it more spacious than it was growing up. Bright green walls greet us with homemade signs I know they bought from various garage sales over the years. The wood floor beside the door is lined with work boots and dirty sneakers and hanging above them are hooks for coats that Corbin puts his on before turning to me expectantly.

His eyes tell me what I already know.

With or without the jacket, there's no denying what's under my coat. As I reach for the zipper, footsteps sound on the kitchen linoleum before stopping behind me. When I turn, Dad looks between Corbin and I with his gray brows raised before they drop to my midsection.

"Hi, Dad," I squeak.

His lips part as he blinks, his throat bobbing over the sight of me. I try to keep calm, forcing even breathing, and do my best to smile even though it's weak. He manages to meet my eyes with his distant lighter ones, before nodding his head and rubbing a palm over his graying beard.

Corbin steps forward and stretches his hand toward him. "It's nice to see you again, sir."

He doesn't say it with any fear, and I wonder if I can soak up some of his strength for myself. My chest feels heavy as I watch Dad's gaze lower to Corbin's hand. When he finally lifts his own to shake it, I let out a breath of relief.

"Can't say I thought I'd see you again," Dad admits without any hostility in his words. It's just a casual statement—one that I can't blame him for making. They tried talking to me about Corbin a lot when I was younger, and I always shut them down.

They drop their hands and I take the pastries from Corbin. "I brought you all something. Is, uh, Gavin here? I thought I saw his truck outside."

Dad steps aside after accepting the box, examining the contents through the plastic top. "I told him to stay in the other room for now. It's just him. Kayla and Sam are visiting her parents. We thought it might be best..." His eyes glance at my torso again before quickly darting away to look in the other room. "He and your mother are in there waiting. Better take off your coat. Looks like there's a lot to discuss."

Corbin's hand goes to the small of my back, which Dad doesn't miss. He simply purses his lips and nods before walking back through the kitchen.

With shaky hands, I unzip my jacket and let Corbin help me out of it. He hangs it beside his and takes my hand. “Good or bad,” he reminds me, gesturing toward the voices.

The sweater I wear is loose enough not to cling too much to my midsection, but it’s clear as day what’s going on beneath the scratchy knitted material. Corbin and I walk side by side toward the voices, the light from the dining room reflecting from the black linoleum under our feet. I focus on that.

When we near the archway that connects the kitchen and dining room, all talking ceases. It’s Corbin who powers through and squeezes my hand once before we stop in front of everybody. The pastry box sits open between Mom, Dad, and Gavin on the table.

Gavin blinks as his gaze slowly trails to Corbin. He doesn’t make a face or say a word. His expression remains blank.

Mom’s eyes widen when she sees my stomach, and I want nothing more than to hide behind Corbin. But I don’t. I stick it out and give her a timid smile, but she doesn’t return it. She just stares, unblinking, and I can’t figure out what her expression says.

“Well,” Dad says, gesturing toward the empty chairs at the other end of the table, “might as well come on in, kids.”

My lips part in surprise as I unwrap my hand from Corbin’s and walk over to the first chair closest to Mom. Corbin takes the chair at the end of the table opposite of Dad, leaving only one open spot between he and Gavin.

The room is eerily quiet.

It’s Corbin who clears his throat. “Kinley and I wanted to talk to you all about something important before it hits the papers.”

There’s another pause while my family shifts their attention to me. They all knew the biggest news because of Gavin, and they’re smart enough to piece together that showing up here with Corbin means that something is going on beyond what their eyes can see. Still, verbalizing that isn’t any easier.

But I know I need to. Heart thumping violently in my chest, I take a deep breath. “I know that you aren’t going to be happy with what I’m about to say, but we made our decision. It’s pretty obvious that I’m expecting and soon enough a lot of people are going to learn that too. The things said about us in the news will get a lot worse because of it, and we’ve accepted

that we deserve as much. But what we've chosen to do is final and there's nothing you can say to change anything at this point."

Mom's brows arch like I'm calling her out, making me sink down a little in my chair in discomfort. "Corbin and I spoke when I was in California and buried a lot of bad blood from high school. We both made choices that weren't smart given the circumstances, but..."

Words escape me as Corbin's hand finds mine. He cups it on the table, squeezing once and nodding as I meet his eyes. "The stuff the media is saying is true and even though I'm not proud of it, it made me realize what I've always guessed all these years. I'm not over him."

Now Gavin swears. Corbin doesn't let go of my hand as Gavin's chair scrapes back and he stands. "When we spoke—"

"Sit down," Dad tells him, snapping his fingers and pointing toward the chair my brother occupied.

"Dad!" Gavin argues, throwing his hands up in the air in exasperation. "You can't just sit there and let them tell us this like it isn't fucked up. This whole thing is—"

"If their minds are set, they're set," Dad says, though I can tell he isn't as okay with it as he pretends to be. What parent would be? They raised me to have morals—respect for others. Everything that I was taught disappeared when I set my eyes on Corbin Callum and kept them there.

In high school.

In California.

Right here nine years later.

Eyes watering with the intensity of the moment, I look at all of them. "Things are going to get ... bad. Worse than they already are because we decided to speak up before somebody else can."

It's Mom who presses for what I won't directly say. "Someone else being...?"

Corbin answers for me, knowing the expression on my face tells him I can't verbalize an explanation. "My soon to be ex-wife, ma'am. I'm not proud of what I've done either, but Lena and I have been separated for a while. We agreed long before the movie even started that we would end the marriage."

Gavin scoffs in disbelief. "And how's that going?"

"Gavin," I whisper defeatedly.

He doesn't say anything more to my surprise, sitting down when Dad shoots him another look.

"The media thinks what they want to," Corbin continues, making eye contact with each of them despite the icy look Gavin returns. "Since we're still married it makes things between Kinley and me complicated, but not impossible. And, frankly, I'd go through anything if it meant being with her again. Your anger, the public's anger, anything."

Mom leans back in her chair until it creaks. "Regardless of your separation, you still cheated on another woman."

Corbin nods once, not arguing with her.

I sit straighter and count to three, channeling Dr. Ray's techniques. "We can't deny what the press has been saying about us because I'm pregnant. And I'm ... a lot of things. Sorry. Scared. Guilty. But neither one of us can change what's happened. We can only move forward the best way we can, and we chose to do that together."

All three of them stare at us.

Dad's lips thin, Mom inhales slowly, and Gavin's eye twitches. And then, at the worst time possible, Corbin's phone goes off again. The loud ringtone breaks the silence but doesn't stop the growing tension in the room.

He curses and grabs it from his pocket.

"Wife calling?" Gavin bites.

"Stop," I warn, giving him a look that says I've just about had it with his opinion and so-called 'help'.

Corbin sighs. "It's my mother. Sorry." He presses the ignore button and sets it on the table between us. "Listen, I know none of you are my biggest fans. Truth be told, I'm not my biggest fan either sometimes. But Kinley has always been there for me and I have no intention of not being there for her. Now more than ever."

"So what?" Gavin questions. "Because you knocked up my little sister, you decide to keep her?"

My fists clench so tight my fingernails cut into the heel of my palm. "If you say one more word I'm leaving. You've never liked Corbin and I never understood why. He didn't do anything to me, Gavin. You were always so bitter over your own failed relationships that you tried protecting me from mine before they even happened. You need to admit that your actions toward us were unfair from the start. You labeled us doomed because of

Aimee and ruined what we had. It was vindictive, and honestly, say what you want but I think a part of you did it on purpose.”

Corbin squeezes my hand. “Kinley...”

Gavin’s face turns red and the muscles in his neck pop like Dad’s do when he’s angry. “I did you a favor whether you accept it or not.”

“A *favor*?” I spit, feeling my hands shake. Maybe it’s the hormones, or maybe it’s the years of pent up anger, but I’m about to lose it on him. I’ve *always* held my tongue when it comes to Gavin, but I’m tired of it. He’s constantly intervening where he shouldn’t, and whether he wants to admit it or not, he did lead to the ruination of my relationship with Corbin. Maybe at that time, even if I had seen Corbin the day my brother chased him away, we would’ve still inevitably ended up right where we are, but I’m not so sure.

“Kids,” Dad tries intervening.

“You know what,” Gavin states, leaning forward and ignoring Dad. “I take full responsibility for what I did if that makes you feel better. I did what I had to do to protect my little sister. And I don’t regret that because I *never* want to see you hurt, and that’s exactly what you were when *he*—” He points to Corbin. “—left. I’m sorry for upsetting you, but if you’re both sitting here then can you honestly say I ruined you?”

My jaw is strung so tight I worry I’ll break it when I grind my teeth.

Mom sighs heavily. “This is blowing out of proportion. You two love each other. The last thing I want to see is your relationship torn apart because of something that happened almost a decade ago. You’re both adults. Act like it.”

I throw my hands up, ready to explode. “Why do you always take his side? This is why I hate talking to you guys about anything. The minute I want to open up, it becomes a joke.”

Her eyes narrow at me in offense. “Who said this was a joke? Quit being melodramatic, Kinley. We’re all talking like you wanted.”

“You think Gavin meddling in business that’s not his own and then calling him out on it is being melodramatic?”

She scoffs. “What do you want from me, Kinley? Nothing I do or say seems to be enough for you anymore.”

Corbin’s hold tightens on me again, grounding me enough to take a moment before I say something I’ll regret. I didn’t come here to yell. To be

yelled at, sure. But not to wedge distance between us more than it already is.

“I just want you guys to know that this is happening and I’m sorry for disappointing you,” I say instead, voice drained of all emotion. There’s nothing left in me at this point and I don’t know how to take that. “Sometimes we choose to do things no matter the consequences because we know we’ll withstand the storm. And I believe that to be true with us. We’re having a baby, and I’d like all of you to be part of his or her life when the time comes.” I make a point to look at Gavin, whose eyes are dark. “But you’re going to have to accept that this is final regardless of your own personal opinions because I love Corbin and I love our baby we created despite the destruction.”

The room falls to silence, leaving me giving a limp shrug before leaning against Corbin as he presses a kiss to my temple.

His phone goes off again, leaving me wincing. This time, he curses and picks it up to answer. “Mom, now isn’t—”

I recognize his mother’s voice on the other end but can’t make out the frantic words. Corbin’s face twists over whatever she’s telling him as we all watch him.

“What kind of situation?”

Worry fills me.

Something dark washes over Corbin’s face as he stands up abruptly. “I’ll be right over. Just ... don’t say anything to her. Give me five minutes.”

He hangs up and stuffs the phone into his pocket, looking at me with distant eyes.

“Corbin, what—”

“I need you to stay here.”

I blink. “What? Why?”

“Leaving so soon?” Gavin quips.

“Not now,” I hiss at him, standing up. “I want to know what’s going on. What’s wrong? Are your parents okay? Did something happen?”

Corbin’s hand webs through his hair, and I know something isn’t right. He leans into my ear and whispers two words that freeze my insides. “Lena’s here.”

Lena’s here.

Lena’s here.

“In Lincoln?” I whisper.

“Kinley?” Dad prompts.

I brush hair behind my ear and look at Corbin. “I’m coming with you.”

“That isn’t—”

“Good or bad, remember?”

His lips purse.

“Kinley?” Mom asks.

“We have a situation,” is all I say before grabbing Corbin’s hand and steering him away from the table.

“So that’s it?” Gavin calls out.

“Not now, Gavin.”

Mom and Dad stay at the table, but Gavin follows us into the kitchen. “Then when? I’ve wanted to talk to you but gave you space. Now you’re just leaving without any explanation?”

I turn around, nearly smacking into his broad chest because he’s so close. “I’m coming back, idiot. Unless you want to piss me off by saying something that’ll make me change my mind, I suggest you close your mouth and let us leave.”

He obeys, though his jaw ticks.

“Kinley, you should stay here,” Corbin tells me quietly. “I don’t know what’s going to happen with Lena, and—”

“Jesus Christ,” Gavin blurts, glaring at him. “Your fucking wife is here in Lincoln?”

Mom and Dad come into the kitchen, no longer giving us their space.

“Come again?” Mom says, eyeing me skeptically. Dad just stands beside her looking off, and I know his wariness is justified.

“Soon to be ex-wife,” I repeat, though there’s a lack of confidence in my tone that does the moment no justice.

“Kinley, come on,” Gavin tries to reason.

Corbin brushes my hand. “I’ll be back as soon as things are handled. I promise. Your family and you should talk about this. I can speak to mine—”

I give my family my back, putting my hands on my hips. “How many times have you asked me to fly with you? If we’re a team, we do this together. Birds travel in flocks. *We’re* a family now.”

The room is quiet as Corbin nods.

Mom and Dad don’t try to stop me. I think they’ve figured out that I’m not going to let them. But Gavin still follows behind us as we walk out the door, keys in hand, and head to Corbin’s car.

“Think about this,” my brother tells me, holding the passenger door open.

“I am.”

“You’re not.”

“We need to go,” I say through gritted teeth, tugging on the door for him to let go.

“Fine.” He lets go of it and promptly opens the back one, sliding in and leaving me speechless.

Corbin doesn’t say a word as he starts the car and backs out. I can tell by his terse face that he’s got too much on his mind to even think about the fact that my brother is third-wheeling this unwelcome adventure. Even my mind is racing too fast to even think about what this means.

The drive is fast because Corbin runs the red light and goes well above the speed limit down Main Street. I want to say something but have no words. I just let him grip the wheel and grind his teeth as we slow down in front of his parents’ yellow house.

He gets out immediately, storming to the house as Gavin and I both climb out at the same time.

“Kinley Thomas!” an unfamiliar voice calls from somewhere off to the side. I turn just as a huge camera points in my direction, blinding me with bright flashes.

Instinct has me covering my stomach that is no longer hidden by the jacket I left at my parents’ house. The photographer instantly notices the reaction, aiming his camera at the way my palm covers the round belly under my sweater.

His eyes light up like he just won the lottery. And in his world ... he did. “Jesus Christ,” he muses, snapping more pictures as I stand frozen in shock.

Gavin quickly pushes me behind him, covering me from the camera’s view as he guides us inside. When the photographer gets closer, Gavin doesn’t hesitate to curse him out and shove him back so I can get into the house without the lens being shoved in my face again.

But the damage is done regardless of my big brother protecting me like he knows best. And in that moment I chip at the anger held toward him because I know he was just doing what he thought was best back then, just like he is now.

When I walk into the Callum's home, Corbin and Lena are standing face to face at the end of the hall and the tension in the air is so thick I may suffocate.

Corbin is seething.

Lena is smiling.

"You must be Kinley," she says in a thick accent, turning to me with inquisitive eyes raking down my body. "Oh, my. Looks like my friend outside is going to be paid well."

Gavin puts an arm in front of me, blocking me with his body in a protective stance. And I let him, burrowing behind his bulky frame and letting the tears that well in my eyes escape from the ducts I can no longer control.

Because we're screwed.

Absolutely screwed.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY

CORBIN / Present

AS MUCH AS I want to strangle Lena for showing up unannounced at my parents' house, Kinley's damp cheeks are all I see from where she cowers behind her brother. Walking away from my wife, I make my way to Kinley and ignore her brother's tense posture as I pull her toward me. Threading my fingers through her hair as I cradle her head, I hold her tight against me.

I whisper, "Are you okay?" into the crown of her head and feel her nod slowly. But I know she's not. Like always, she saves face the best she can like she's not allowed to feel anything.

Drawing back, I stand beside Gavin and help him block Kinley from Lena's view. Her brother is a few inches taller than me, and certainly built bulkier. But in this instant it comforts me more than anything because I know he'll protect his sister no matter what.

"Why would you bring somebody here?" I ask Lena as she studies the three of us with narrow eyes. "You had no right coming here at all, Lena."

One of her brows arches up. "No? I am your wife, last I checked. I haven't seen your family since our wedding. Maybe I missed them."

The way dad scoffs from where he and Mom stand behind Lena makes it evident that they didn't miss her. How could they when I separated my life from here? I thought the less I shared with anybody about Lincoln meant the small town kept their privacy.

"Lena," I warn through clenched teeth.

She struts toward me slowly, her painted fingers like talons scraping across the wall as she nears us. Her head cocks at a few discolored patches where Mom and I fixed the holes Dad left behind in his many mood swings.

The slightest tug of her red lips as she traces the circular outline has my brow twitching.

Her gaze shifts from the wall to my parents, where Mom stands frowning and Dad keeps a close hold on her. “Did you know your son has anger issues? We have these same patches in our condo from where he punched the walls.”

I step forward. “Say what you came here to say because nobody has time for this.”

“Oh, I know.” Her eyes go to Kinley, traveling down her front. “It seems your time is up anyway.”

From the corner of my eye, I notice Gavin grab Kinley’s hand and squeeze it. She doesn’t pull away, just absorbs her brother’s comfort as this all unfolds.

“Is that what you want?” I prod, gesturing around us. “Did you think coming here and making a spectacle would get me to listen to you and the fucked-up blackmail you have on me?”

Mom winces when I curse but doesn’t scold me like she normally does. Nobody says a word as I stare at my wife, who gives it right back to me as she crosses her arms over her chest. We stand like that, and I have no idea what she expects me to say.

“Well?” I step forward again. “That guy out there can get arrested, you know. He’s on private property which means he’s trespassing.”

“Do you think I really care?” she retorts, tilting her head. “He’s going to make enough bank to bail himself out ten times over because of your little secret. If you must know, I came here to see if talking to your parents would get you to see reason.”

Mom steps away from Dad, but he keeps one hand on her arm still. “I called you as soon as she showed up.”

Voice grim, I nod once. “I know, Mom. I’m sorry I didn’t pick up sooner. Kinley and I were at her parents talking about...” My nostrils flare. “...things.”

Mom’s gaze falls on Kinley, and a sympathetic smile stretches across her face. She doesn’t have to say a word for Kinley to know that she’s here for her. I can see the way my mother’s gaze glosses with tears as she notes the baby bump staring back at her.

Swallowing, I shake my head. “It’s over, Lena. It’s been over. It’ll always be over. Your games are over the top and make you look pathetic.

We. Don't. Love. Each. Other."

Her face darkens, lips falling into a flat line as her lips narrow into slits. "And I told you if you don't agree to—"

"You know what?" I back up. "I don't give a shit what you told me. Want to know why? Because as long as Kinley and I have each other, there's nothing for me to lose."

I turn toward the door and open it, shouting at the guy who's standing on the sidewalk. His camera is already facing me, snapping pictures of my irate expression.

"You want a story?" I yell.

The guy's eyes widen.

"Get out your fucking phone and record everything I'm about to tell you," I demand, walking over to him with multiple pairs of eyes burning into my back.

I can hear my wife's seething warning yelled behind me, which I blatantly ignore as the guy frantically pulls out his cell phone and aims it at me. He swallows nervously and just nods after hitting something.

"My wife, Lena Dasani, and I have been separated since the beginning of the year because we fell out of love. And the truth is, I am, and always have been, in love with my best friend ever since I met her when I was seventeen years old right here in Lincoln, New York. The world may think that I met Kinley Thomas on the set of the movie we just shot, but I've known her for over ten years and made the biggest mistake of my life letting her go. And that's all the world needs to know right now."

I push the camera away and walk back toward my house, where Lena's red face greets me as I approach her. "Get off this property and out of this town before I call the fucking cops. Don't think I won't."

"What did you just do?"

"Ended it," I say simply, brushing past her and to Kinley. My little bird's face is morphed in disbelief. It's not what we planned but it had to be done.

I repeat that to her and kiss her forehead before keeping her tucked into my side. All she can do is nod in stunned silence, blinking at me and then her brother.

When Lena doesn't make a move to leave, my father steps forward and puts his hand on my shoulder. "Young lady, I will not hesitate another

second before dialing the local sheriff. He's just down the road and won't waste time coming here no matter who you are."

Lena's eye bolt to me. "Callum!"

My father's jaw ticks. "His name is Corbin." He produces a cell phone and clicks a few buttons before putting it to his ear. "Frank? John Callum. I'm going to need you to come to my house, there's a situation."

It doesn't take long before he hangs up, leaving my eyes wide as he squeezes my shoulder once.

Lena starts blasting off words nobody understands as she backs down the pathway away from the front door, pulling her cell out. She points to Kinley with pure hatred etched into her features. "You are finished. Do you understand me? *Finished!*"

Gavin grips Kinley's hand and steps in front of her again, obscuring Lena's view once more as the sheriff's car pulls up while she spews insults out and walks down the driveway.

Frank gets out, putting on his hat, and glances between us and Lena. He nods once, walking over and raising his hands to calm her down. All while her little camera guy snaps pictures from afar.

Shaking my head, I look at Kinley. "I know this isn't what we planned, but..."

She swallows. "I know." Her voice is nothing more than a whisper as we watch the mayhem unfold outside. Lena and Frank talk, Frank yells at the guy taking pictures, and said guy ditches Lena in favor of not being arrested.

But not before getting a few pictures of Lena being escorted to the police car. At least there aren't any handcuffs on her. Maybe she can spin it once the seedy asshole she hired turns on her for triple the money.

Dad says he'll handle it as Gavin and I steer Kinley inside and close the door. Mom reaches out and brushes her arm, looking between us with a sad smile on her face.

She doesn't need to tell me I've made a mess. I just nod once, lips in a grim line, before mouthing, *I know* as she walks us to the table in the kitchen. I pull out the chair for Kinley the same time Gavin does. Despite his tight jaw, he lets go of the chair and moves to the seat next to her. Mom looks at the three of us with raised brows before walking into the kitchen.

"Drinks?"

It's Kinley's raspy voice that says, "I'll have a water, please."

I rub her back, kneeling beside her instead of sitting in the wooden chair. “I’m so sorry, Little Bird.”

She just shrugs.

Mom walks over with a glass of water, setting it down in front of Kinley. “A baby,” Mom says softly, eyes watery. “Does this mean that I’m going to be a grandmother?”

Kinley and I nod at the same time.

Leave it to Mom to be excited. She kisses Kinley’s head, brushing hair out of her face before asking Gavin if he’d like anything. When he politely declines, she fixes up Dad and her coffee before joining us at the table.

Clearing my throat, I gesture toward Gavin. “This is Kinley’s older—”

“I know,” she cuts me off, waving her hand in dismissal with a smile. “We met at Kinley’s graduation. I sat with their family.”

I blink, trying to wrap my head around that. I’m sure she told me she went. She loves telling me everything about Kinley. Well, almost everything. Never once did she mention Parker or the fact she was engaged. I guess even Mom has her limits as to what she’s willing to share with me.

Brushing it off, I move forward. “I’m sorry, Mom,” I apologize, rubbing the back of my neck. “The situation isn’t ideal, and we didn’t want you to find out this way.”

She takes a deep breath and pats Kinley’s hand while looking at me, a smile still tilting her lips despite the shitshow I brought to them. “I always wondered what would happen if you two ever saw each other again. Of course, I don’t condone what you did to Lena, but you and Kinley have always had something about you that seemed...”

As she searches for a word, Kinley and I share a glance before whispering, “Inevitable,” at the same time.

Both Mom and Gavin stare at us.

Mom’s eyes tear.

Gavin’s narrow.

But neither of them says a word.

The front door creaks open, causing my shoulders to lock as it closes behind Dad. He walks in and glances at all of us around the table before pulling the chair out next to the one closest to me. Mom passes him a coffee mug, steam rolling off the top of it, and I watch as he brings it to his lips like always. No milk. No sugar.

Dad glances over at Gavin, tipping his chin once. “Good to see you, Gavin. Hope the wife and kid are doing well.”

I draw back, studying Kinley’s brother for a moment as he nods. If Mom went to Kinley’s graduation, I’m sure Dad did too. But their familiarity seems more than that.

Dad’s grip on the mug handle loosens as he leans back. “Get the door on your barn fixed or need me to come look at it?”

What the—

“Might need you to take a look,” Gavin admits, ignoring my questioning gaze. “Kayla mentioned renovating the calf barn next. Maybe you could give us an estimate while you’re there so we can see about moving forward with the project before the weather turns.”

“Sorry.” I clear my throat. “What...?”

Gavin doesn’t spare me a look, but Dad does when he answers, “He hired me a while back to do some renovations. Little projects here and there to keep me working. It’s not a big deal.”

Not a big deal. I shake my head knowing damn well that it is. Gavin, someone who’s always hated me, hired my father to do work for him regardless. I’ve never blamed him for his ill feelings toward me because I’d known that his love for Kinley was why he acted out, but it doesn’t stop the surprise from coloring my face over him being nice to a man I didn’t know he even knew.

Scrubbing my jaw, I look at Gavin. “That was nice of you, man. I know...” I lift my shoulders, knowing there’s no point in hashing out the past. “Thanks.”

He doesn’t say anything to me for a long moment, but with one glance from Kinley, he gives me a terse nod. I’ll take it.

“Dad,” I murmur, standing and pulling the seat a little closer to Kinley before sitting between them. “I’m sorry for what Len—”

“Not your fault, kid.”

I blink. Then blink again.

“Uh...” Brows pinching as he sets his mug down, he shifts in his chair.

“Well, I suppose it is in some ways, but she chose to act how she did on her own.”

It’s Kinley’s turn to comfort me, rubbing between my shoulder blades as Dad and I stare at each other. I don’t expect anything less from her even

though her face is pale, eyes are red, and I can tell she wants to cry. She's always been focused on other people before herself.

Straightening my spine, I guide her hand to mine and intertwine our fingers. "Guess it's pretty obvious what we're here to tell you, huh?"

Kinley's other hand rests on the top of her stomach, her eyes flicking down with color painting her cheeks. I don't want to tell her that it's too late to be embarrassed given the circumstances.

Mom's smile grows. "You can always admit it to us anyway."

Dad grumbles, "Wondered when you'd pull your head out of your ass and get back with her. Honestly, son, it took you long enough."

Eye twitching, I look between my parents. The odd thing is, Dad didn't mean it in a bad way. I know his many tones—especially the ones right before he's set off. And I can tell he's trying just like Kinley told me he has been.

"You're going to be grandparents," I announce, placing my hand on top of Kinley's and smiling at her when she lifts her gaze. "And we decided that too much happened between us lately to brush it off as a coincidence."

Mom's eyes brighten. "So...?" she presses eagerly, eyes dancing between mine and the girl she's always considered her own.

I can't help but chuckle, in awe, surprise, an array of things. "We're not letting each other go this time." My eyes go to Dad's, who's just watching casually from his seat. His face isn't overly eager but not carved with it's usual scowl either. "You told me awhile ago not to let her go and I truly never thought I would. Sorry for not listening to you and for ... not giving you a chance."

His hand squeezes my bicep. "Can't say I gave you one either, so your reaction was only fair. At least that's what this one tells me." He nods toward Kinley, whose cheeks pinken.

One of my brows raise. "Is that so?"

She just shrugs.

The slow clearing of a throat has all of us looking at Gavin. His eyes are on Kinley though, pleading through the softness of his tone. "Can we talk now? Just you and I?"

It's me who says, "Third door on the left upstairs is open. It'll give you privacy."

To my surprise, Gavin's eyes trail to mine. They're not angry or irritated. In fact, there may be even the slightest hint of something kind

hidden behind the brown depths that look just like Kinley's.

All I do is nod once, but he manages a "thank you" that surprises the hell out of me before standing up and waiting for his sister to do the same. She swallows before taking a deep breath and pushing her chair back. I kiss the back of her hand and squeeze it before letting go.

"Love you, Little Bird."

Her watery eyes meet mine, and she doesn't have to say the words back for me to see the truth in her eyes.

But she says them anyway.

"I love you too," she whispers.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

KINLEY / 18

THE SOUND of my phone buzzing in my pocket has me glancing up at my anthropology professor as he drones on about the cultural significance of the Southwest before pulling my cell out and placing it on my thigh. Quickly unlocking the screen, I smile at the name across it.

I give the middle-aged man another head nod like I'm not dosing off in his introductory class before focusing on my cell again.

Parker: *How's the first week of classes been?*

Lips twitching into a frown, I listen to Professor Ripley crack another joke that only two out of the twenty-three kids packed into this too-tiny room laugh at. I feel sort of bad for the guy, but I mostly just want to leave. It's the only elective that fit into my schedule that didn't sound awful, but I already regret it.

Kinley: *Kind of like your first week with Little's Literary Agency, except with dad jokes*

Parker: *Rough*

Kinley: *Yeah*

Someone asks a question that pulls the professor away from whatever rant he went off on. I've caught on quickly that he doesn't stick to the day's lesson plans based on the syllabus because he always talks about some trip he went on with other anthropologists over the years. And while I think traveling and seeing old cultural landmarks and sites is cool, it doesn't keep my interest for more than a minute.

Parker: *Jamie's been talking about the deal to her staff. She's proud of you*

My face heats over the undisclosed *I'm proud of you too* that I know is tacked on. He's told me that a few times since Rave Publishing announced their newest author—me. And though his email to me was unexpected when I'd received it shortly before my eighteenth birthday, I couldn't stop smiling over his enthusiasm for me. He'd promised another hot chocolate, a piece of red velvet cake with white icing, my favorite, to celebrate when I'd come back.

And he kept his word.

When I arrived at Little's Literary Agency during spring break to go over next steps with Jamie, I should have known something was up when the receptionist's desk was empty. I'd hesitantly called out for anyone before noticing the breakroom light on.

Parker was grinning when I opened the door and stared at him, Anne, the receptionist, Jamie, and a few others from different departments. A red velvet cake was on the table waiting to be devoured, with mugs of hot chocolate and whipped cream at everybody's spot at the table.

We'd exchanged numbers after talking half the day, despite him supposed to be working. Jamie didn't raise a fuss even though we'd planned on speaking about what I should expect over the course of the next year before my book was published.

It wasn't until over the summer when we'd moved from texts to phone calls, leaving the occasional email exchange for business related issues that he helps Jeff, the man he reports to, with.

Kinley: *It doesn't feel real yet. I'm sitting in a classroom surrounded by people who are as ready to fall asleep as I am*

Parker: *Have you talked to your parents?*

I tried not rolling my eyes, almost scoffing as I type out a quick *no*. I'm not sure why I relented to enroll at a local college a few towns over from Lincoln other than to please my parents. I'd told them countless times that I'd find a better job than dish washing until my book came out, anything other than wasting my time in classrooms and building debt, but that didn't go over well.

So, here I am.

Parker: *I'm sorry*

Kinley: *It's not your fault*

Parker told me he'd always wanted to go to college, which his parents were happy about. But from what he's told me of the New Jersey natives,

they didn't care what he chose to do as long as he was happy. And it made me dwell on my mother's many conversations about the importance of higher education. If I heard one more time that getting a degree would ensure I'd make something of my life by anyone, I'd rip my hair out.

Parker: *What if I surprised you this weekend?*

Kinley: *Surprised me how?*

Gnawing on my bottom lip, I stare at the bubbles dancing across the bottom of the screen with anticipation. Nerves settle into my stomach and only grow as he continues typing.

Then the bubbles disappear.

"What the—" Realizing I spoke out, my eyes widen, and head snaps up to the front of the room. A few kids around me giggle as Professor Ripley turns to me.

His eyes meet mine. "Is there something you'd like to ask?"

Cheeks burning, I slowly shake my head.

I notice the slight twitch of his lips as he gestures toward my lap. "I strictly said no cell phones in class, or I'd ask students to leave. Unless it's an emergency that can't be helped, I suggest you pack your things."

Someone makes a noise from behind me and every set of eyes locked on my burning face. I don't argue as I gather my things and snatch my phone from my lap before standing up, doing a different kind of walk of shame out of the classroom.

I shoot him a text the same time he finally sends his.

Kinley: *I just got kicked out of class*

Parker: *I have a three-day weekend and was wondering if I could come see you*

I stare at his text. And stare some more. Because surely I didn't just read that Parker Jennings, full-blown city boy, soon to be publicist, wants to come *here* to the middle of nowhere—to see me.

Stopping in the middle of the empty hallway, I grip the phone with my fingers and scan each word carefully twice more before blinking. It isn't farfetched to think he'd want to see me considering he'd admitted as much during our many conversations over the summer.

There were hints when he asked about my family, the town, and where I went to school like he wanted to see where I grew up. I'd mentioned Zach, and sometimes even Corbin, but found the silver-eyed boy a topic I tried avoiding whenever he'd bring him up. Parker understood that Corbin is

someone I want to stay in the past. He respected it, which made me respect him in return.

But there's a lot wrong with him wanting to come see me. For one, my family. I haven't mentioned Parker once since I met him. It isn't because I don't want them to know he exists, but because it didn't seem important. Or maybe I don't want it to be. I barely speak of anyone other than Zach to my family these days, so suddenly mentioning another guy?

Not to mention an *older* guy. Parker is four years older than me, which is something my father will definitely have something to say about. It doesn't matter that he's fifteen years older than Mom, I'm still his baby. And Gavin?

I shiver.

Parker: *Shit. Because of me?*

Brows furrowing, I remember what I'd texted him before blowing out a breath.

Kinley: *How come you haven't gotten in trouble for texting me? Shouldn't you be working?*

Parker: *I'm making copies of something in the file room*

Kinley: *In other words, you're hiding*

Instead of answering me, he circles back to the question that has my heart tightening in my chest. I'm not sure if the way it clenches is because of my family's potential reaction or my own. I like Parker. He's attractive, determined, and knows what he wants. And, I admit, I like that he's in the same industry as me.

I finally found someone I can talk to about books and media and everything that doesn't award me blank stares and empty nods. It makes the hole in my chest close just enough to make the pain a little more bearable.

But that doesn't make the caution soaked deep, deep in my bones any less prominent. If anything, the way I like talking to Parker every day makes it worse—like I'm somehow cheating on someone ... cheating on myself.

Parker: *If it's a bad idea, I get it*

That snaps me out of it.

Kinley: *I think it's a great idea*

Cringing only a little over how this could unfold, I take a deep breath and nod once to myself. There are plenty of places Parker could stay. I'll

show him the town, we'll see a movie, or maybe we can nerd out about upcoming books that we're looking forward to reading.

It'd be no different than our phone calls.

And I'm glad that he shows up in Lincoln less than twenty-four hours later because any more time than that and I would have chickened out and found an excuse to cancel. While my parents noted the visible age difference, their general inquiries over his personal life seemed to appease them in ways that made sense to me only after I had time to think about it.

Because Parker is in college, has a decent paying job, and most importantly ... he's not Corbin Callum.

MY EYES FOCUS on the faint stain on the platinum blond boy's polo shirt instead of what he's saying about his frat. I'm not sure why I'm sitting here other than being peer pressured into an impromptu coffee date by one of the girls, Jane, I've befriended in my lit class. She insisted I'd have fun with him.

She lied.

"...event. So, would you want to?"

I blink, shaking myself out of it and look at him shooting me a boyish smile. Having no clue what he said, my cheeks heat. "Sorry, could you repeat that?"

His head cocks, smile disappearing off his tan face. He's attractive, but too put together. The only thing he's talked about since we sat down with our drinks has been his friends, the parties at the frat, and some competition they have against the sorority across the street from them. Maybe if he asked me about myself, I'd be more inclined to pay attention. "You're not listening to anything I say, are you?"

"I'm sorry. Classes have me stressed." I don't even cringe through the lie, making me feel even worse that I've gotten used to it. How many times do I lie to myself? Too many.

Eric smirks. "You know what relieves stress? Parties. Come tonight. I'll show you around and we can have some fun."

My nostrils twitch at the *have fun* part. I'm not sure his kind of fun is the same as mine. I want to make an excuse as to why I can't. I could tell him I commute and have a long drive home—it's not a total lie. But I can't help but feel like this is what I need.

Fun.

So, to my surprise, I say, “Sure.”

His blue eyes light up. “Cool. I’ll pick you up at your dorm?”

“Uh...” I wince. “How about we meet at the library? I should get some studying done that way I don’t feel bad about spending a night out.”

He just laughs like I’m joking.

Because he doesn’t know me.

When we part ways, I remain in the little café on campus and pull out my phone. Rolling my eyes over Jane’s insistent messages on updating her with the details of my date, I simply say I’ll be seeing him tonight for a party.

Parker: *Hey*

Kinley: *Hey yourself*

Parker: *I’ve consumed my weight in caffeine to get back into the work grove*

Kinley: *You shouldn’t have stayed up so late talking to me then. I told you you’d be tired*

Parker: *Yeah, yeah. I wanted to though*

Kinley: *We spent two days together...*

In those two days I learned that Parker Jennings has big dreams to be the head publicist of New York City one day—the guy everybody wants to work with. I respect his aspirations, especially because it’s a competitive world there. I know just from the conversations with him and Jeff at the agency that it’s hard enough to break into under somebody else’s company, much less your own.

But I also know Parker is hard working just like me. It’s why we get along so well. He doesn’t fault me for wanting to spend a majority of my time writing, just like I don’t fault him for focusing on trying to master his own trade.

Parker: *What are you up to?*

Kinley: *Not much now. Just had a “date”*

Parker: *...a date?*

Kinley: *A classmate convinced me to get coffee with a guy. It wasn’t a big deal*

Parker: *Huh. You’ll have to fill me in tonight*

Kinley: *I’m actually going to a party with the guy I just saw*

There’s no reply for a few minutes, leaving me staring at my phone in wait. No bubbles appear at the bottom even though it says it’s been read.

Kinley: *Talk tomorrow?*

Parker: *Sure*

I grab my bag and toss the empty cup out as I walk toward the door. Eric is across the street shoving one of his friend's shoulders as they all laugh. When I walk down the sidewalk, I notice Eric point toward the café before one of his friends makes a crude hip-thrusting gesture.

Rolling my eyes, I grip my bag strap tighter and try ignoring them. My gut tells me not to go tonight, but my brain challenges the ill feeling settled in my stomach.

For once, I want to be normal. But the night of the party, Eric's heavy arm draped across my shoulder, I realize too late that I've never been normal. And when I burst into tears after he kisses me and peels off the condom in his bedroom I willingly followed him into, nothing but tortured regret remains inside my conscious.

Eric leaves.

I call Parker.

And things ... change.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

KINLEY / Present

THE LIGHT BLUE walls that greet my eyes as soon as I turn the door handle has my heart aching with nostalgia. I take my time and look around the dusty shelves and patterned comforter set, walking over to where pictures of a young Corbin rest where they always did with the exception of one that I know he hid in his suitcase before he left all those years ago.

It was of him and his parents.

When I finish my assessment, I turn and look at my big brother, whose wary expression pierces my gaze before he takes in our surroundings. “This was his room, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Both of our eyes go to the bed, my face heating, his scrunching. It only makes me blush harder as I walk away from the mattress I know well. Gavin can think whatever he wants. It isn’t like he was abstinent back then either.

Leaning against the wall, I cross my arms over my chest and wait for him to speak. It’s clear he’s uncomfortable and I don’t know if it’s because he’s in the room of the last person he wants to be or because we’ve never been good at having serious conversations. It’s probably a mix of the two.

“I didn’t want you to leave,” he says in such a quiet voice that I almost miss it. Limply, his large shoulders raise. “I was selfish and didn’t want to see you go. I knew it would hurt Mom and Dad if you followed him. The chances of you coming back then were slim since you acted like Lincoln had nothing for you.”

Nothing he says is what I expect, leaving me blinking in silence at him. The hurt is evident in his tone as he speaks, meeting my eyes without any form of anger in his features. “We were here. Your family. And...” He draws in a breath. “I know that his parents meant a lot to you, too. They were here in Lincoln just like us.”

“Gavin—” My voice cracks. “—I never wanted it to seem like there was nothing for me here at all, but career wise... I mean, you know how small this place is. I wanted to be somewhere bigger, with more opportunities. Places with bookstores and restaurants and people that...” I lick my lips and give it my all to try absorbing some of the hurt that was never meant to fall on him or my family. “People who didn’t look at me like I was broken over Corbin. Admit it, Gav. Everyone knew my business. I couldn’t stand it.”

He doesn’t answer right away, giving me some belief that he’s considering my words. Eventually, he nods in understanding. “It isn’t that I don’t understand why you wanted space from the town. But you stepped away from us, too, like we were part of the problem. I thought once Corbin left everything would go back to normal, but then your book took off and you met Parker. Seeing you leave with him ... that shit wasn’t easy for any of us, Kin.”

My eye twitches involuntarily. “*You* weren’t ever the problem. You were the only one who ever offered to go with me to New York City or tell me how cool it was that I was writing like I wanted. But Mom... Well, it just didn’t feel like Mom or Dad really cared. That hurt.”

“They do—”

“They might,” I agree, cutting him off, “but I’m not a mind reader, Gavin. They’re always so focused on you and what you do that it seems like I’m the black sheep for doing what I love instead of going into a career I’d be miserable in. I went to college, dropped out, argued nonstop with Mom about practicability, and it kept putting an even bigger wedge between us. And Dad never really tried to stop her from voicing her opinions because we all knew he couldn’t. She was going to say what she wanted no matter if it hurt my feelings.”

He doesn’t bother countering anything I say because he knows there’s no point. We get our strong-headed stubbornness from Mom. That included our lack of filter. I’ve just gotten better at controlling it over the years.

I step toward him. “I’m sorry for upsetting you, but Lincoln was never my forever home even though you’re all here. Even though things didn’t

work out with Parker, it was good he got me out of here. It put things into perspective for me.”

His lips twitch. “I always knew how upset you were over them not bringing up your writing more. But they did talk about you all the time to me. They’d ask if I heard about what you were doing, how deadlines were, that sort of thing. Dad brags to Rich the mailman still when he drops by packages at the door. I’ve heard him.”

That I didn’t know, and it makes me smile. Dad was always the person to voice how proud he was in ways without outright saying those words. It made me feel like I’d done something impressive in their eyes, and that’s all I ever wanted.

“Things have been tense between you and Mom for so long, but can’t that stop?” he asks, frowning. “I know you two don’t agree on a lot but be honest with yourself, Kin. She just wants what’s best for you. And, as a father, I get it.”

I swallow, glancing down at the bump he’s gesturing to with his chin. “Now that you’re going to experience parenthood, you’ll understand why she’s been tough on you. No parent wants to see their child struggle, hurt, or anything bad like that. She had no way of knowing you’d be supported and happy and it probably scared her. If Sam decides he wants to do something outside of farming, something like what you do, I’d be nervous too.”

My brows go up. “Farming isn’t exactly a money maker last I heard. But I get your point.”

He manages to chuckle. “You’re right. Farming is probably the last thing I’d want Sam to go into after what Kayla and I have gone through since starting.”

We stand in silence for a few comfortable moments. I caress my stomach wondering what I’ll be like as a parent. I’ve been too stressed hiding that I’m pregnant to even think about what happens when I give birth, and this all becomes real. And the thought ... it terrifies me.

My throat thickens. “What if I’m bad at this? I never thought about kids because I’ve just focused on building my career. What—”

“Stop,” he insists, reaching out and grabbing my hand. “We all have those thoughts, but you know what? You and Corbin—” He tries not to force out his name but it’s still rocky at best. “—have the means to make sure that baby is well cared for, and I have no doubt in my mind that my little niece or nephew will be loved.”

My hand twitches in his, uncertainty lingering in my conscience. “What if something happens to that though? I get why Mom was upset that I dropped out to pursue writing fulltime because book royalties are never stable. With everything else going on...”

He deadpans. “You’re involved with a famous actor whose pants probably cost more than my mortgage payment. I think you’ll be fine.”

I blink. “So, are you okay?” I ask, not enlightening him on what he’s okay with. He’s never going to be fine with what boundaries I pushed to get where I am, or what we did to Lena no matter her motives today. But that doesn’t mean I don’t need his support in any form that he’ll give me.

The side of his lips quirk. “I’m okay with spoiling the shit out of your kid, giving them candy even when you tell me not to, and telling them embarrassing stories about you. Like that time when we walked to the store to grab pizza and the lady pulled over to tell you that your skirt was tucked into your underwear.”

I gasp, instantly feeling my body flame from the memory I’d definitely pushed way, way back in my mind. “Seriously?”

He just grins.

“Dweeb,” I grumble.

“Dickwad,” he returns easily.

We smile at each other.

“Whatever happens,” he tells me, tone full of seriousness, “I’ve got your back. You know that, right? I know what I did was shitty, but I did it because I love you.”

“And because you’re selfish,” I remind him.

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah.”

“I know,” I relent quietly.

Glancing down at the carpet, he kicks his boot out and clears his throat. “Is it really him, Kinley? You’re sure? Things with Parker got serious fast once they started happening, and we all thought you were over Corbin because of it.”

I’m surer about Corbin than I am on anything else. Things with Parker happened faster than I had time to process because I got swept up in the idea of moving on. I let the possibility of loving someone other than Corbin someday drive me to make rash decisions. The time we had together mattered, but not enough to dwell on for too long. I found a way to move on

from him. It should have been that easy to move on from Corbin, but for whatever reason, fate chose us. I can't deny it even if I wanted to.

So, I give Gavin a small smile, and wrap my arms around his midsection for a rare hug. "I know you want me to say no, but sorry. It's always going to be Corbin."

He *harrumphs* before winding his freakishly long arms around me and squeezes. "I figured as much. Couldn't hurt to ask."

I just smile against his chest.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CORBIN / Present

THE TALK with my father yesterday left little to be said, yet it was exactly what we needed. He patted my hand, squeezed my shoulder, and sat by me while Mom just watched with glassy eyes. She's wanted this for too long and we finally succumbed to a different kind of inevitable fate.

Because of Kinley.

Because of this baby.

It was Mom who suggested that we turn off our phones for the remainder of the day because even she, who avoids tabloids like the plague since seeing me featured in my fair share of them, knows how this industry works. By the time we turn them back on, they'll be plastered with every kind of article there is to read.

It was Kinley's Mom who suggested we stay another day. And maybe to both our surprises, we agreed. It seemed easy. The place we'd both been eager to escape from a decade ago became the one place we needed to escape to now.

Studying Kinley as she bounces a blond toddler on her lap, I notice the flattened state of her lips as her and her mother speak in low tones in the living room. Based on the straight posture of her mother's spine, I can tell they're laying it all on the table—years of frustration all being voiced today.

But it's what they need.

My eyes go to Dad across the room, where he speaks to Kinley's father about the custom hutch he'd built to store the collectable Holstein cow figurines Kinley's mother collects. I know if I stand up and walk over to the large piece of furniture, there'd be two different copies of large white

checks hanging on the back wall between the model trucks and shot glasses on display.

Gavin's first milk check.

Kinley's first royalty check.

A small hand brushes my arm, snapping me away from the corner of the room where the two men talk, and focusing instead on my mother. "You look lost in thought."

I hum out a reply, leaning back in the chair I occupy with two half-empty boxes of pizzas to my right. "Did you know about Parker when you told me there was a lot about her I didn't know?"

Her expression says it all before she even opens her mouth to confirm it. "Yes."

Swallowing, I find myself nodding. "Did you meet him? Get to know him?"

Her hand falls into her lap. "I only met him once. She kept him to herself for a while, denying anything was going on between them if anyone asked. And after they made things official, she didn't talk to me as much. She moved to the city with him, you know. I think she needed distance from here."

My jaw ticks.

Her smile is sad. "I understood why. It wouldn't have been fair to him if she kept in contact with her ex's mother. But if you're asking because you want to know if he was good for her, then yes. I believe he was exactly what she needed."

Before I can even open my mouth to reply, she cuts me off. "But if you're asking if she was good for him, then no. Regardless of our limited contact, it was clear to see that you were it for her. She and Parker shared something special, but nobody can force love."

Eyes traveling back to the room connected to this one, I notice Kinley and her mother gripping each other's hands. They both look at Sam, Gavin's son, and smile over whatever he's rambling about on his aunt's lap.

Her mother touches her stomach.

And Kinley holds her palm there.

"You told me it was better to let her live her life instead of disrupting it," I mention, turning back to my own mother beside me.

Her lips curve upward. "I did."

My brows raise as if to ask why.

She laughs and pats my arm. “Darling, when have you ever listened to me? I knew as soon as you said you got the leading role that it was only a matter of time.”

I don’t say anything.

Something sparks in her eyes. “Who better to play Ryker than the man he’s based on, hmm?”

I narrow my gaze. “You read the book?”

“I’ll read everything that girl writes,” she answers simply, looking around me at Kinley as she plays with her nephew’s hair. “No matter what, she’s family and I am proud to know her. And the baby ... well, I may not have seen that coming so soon, but I already love it because it’s a mixture of two people I love dearly.”

Not good at the mushy shit, I shift in my chair until the wood creaks. “So, it doesn’t matter what the past is anymore. Lena, Parker, nobody matters but you two. And I think it’s best to realize that when you return to your worlds.”

I lock eyes on the chestnut hair that rests loosely down Kinley’s back. The way she coos at the little boy until he giggles makes emotion swirl in my chest as I imagine it’s our child on her lap.

I choke on the feelings settled into my throat until Mom rests her hand on my arm knowingly and caresses my skin with her thumb like she used to, to comfort me when I was younger. Kinley thinks everybody but us moved on from the past we’d created, but I think everybody always knew, whether they wanted to or not, that we’d end up here.

When I manage to look around at the two merged families together, I realize that we may have a long way to go before we’ve fixed things, but we’re trying.

And that’s more than I ever did before.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

KINLEY / 20

IT WAS THE KISS—A *nice* kiss that felt foreign but welcome. Soft but sure. A little sloppy and awkward in a I’ve-only-done-this-with-one-other-person kind of way but ... nice.

The more I think about the first kiss, the more I accept my naivety. Parker’s lips aren’t as full as the ones I acquainted myself with in the past and they didn’t have an urgency like the ones I knew well did, but as far as first kisses with new people went, it wasn’t bad.

The second kiss was the same.

The third...

They were all just ... nice. Good, even. And good isn’t bad, obviously, so I rationalized the tight feeling in my chest as a pesky cautious feeling since my past two experiences ended badly. It’s the same feeling that has me accepting that Parker’s kisses aren’t just friendly pecks.

My parents would ask about Parker since he visited Lincoln, and I’d tell them he was doing great. They know he graduated NYU because I went to the ceremony, and they know he’s been hired fulltime to work for Jamie because I’d gone to their celebratory party in the city. But I felt wary of offering them more information because I didn’t know what they thought of us and worried it was nothing good after Corbin.

Each break from college I find my way out of Lincoln and in the Big Apple. Parker has a place to stay, so I crash with him and his roommate for a few days and go to Parker’s favorite places—museums, cafes, parks, and restaurants. He showed me freedom. Distraction. He gave me a way to separate myself from everything I only pretended to deal with at home.

Every time we find ourselves together, something shifts. It wasn't like that the first time in my hometown when we hung out as friends without any expectations. There was something lingering that changed how I saw him.

And I saw him ... as an escape.

It was when I called him crying over my reckless decision with Eric that changed us completely. Looking back now, I don't know why I ever told him to begin with. It isn't like I cried because I didn't want to sleep with the guy, but because I regretted it. And I could have called Zach, someone who knows me better, but chickened out when I thought about the mutual friend we shared who he'd seen me kiss and tease and touch in high school.

I found myself struggling to admit my recent choices to Zach because I know he'd congratulate me for moving on. And if he did that, it'd cement the importance of me letting go when I didn't want to.

Swallowing as I look over my shoulder at the dark-haired boy currently reading a book with a pair of thick reading glasses perched on his nose, I manage a little smile. The only light on in his loft bedroom is the lamps by his bed, offering just enough light for him to read and me to study.

He looks up and smiles. "How's it going over there?"

Nose twitching, I glance down at my handwritten notes. They're barely legible. "I'm not sure I'm going to pass this exam."

He knows my struggle over school the past two years. I've managed to suck it up and enroll in classes every semester, but it's wearing thin. I've written a few books when I can, but none that ever made me feel like my first one did. I've shelved one, deleted another, acted on irritation instead of rationality. *Through Shattered Glass* has projected more sales in the first month than anyone expected.

My entire sophomore year of college has been a battle to pass because of my lack of interest. Every semester I sit in classrooms and zone out, jotting down story ideas in my notebooks instead of actual lecture notes. And then I feel bad for myself when I get my midterm grades and notice the way I borderline fail in every class except my literature ones. Nobody cares that I'm a published author here—if anything, my English professors just expect more from me which only adds on the pressure.

"Why don't you just drop out?" he asks, setting his book down and sitting up. Taking the glasses off, he puts them on the hardcover book in his

lap. “You’re an adult. It shouldn’t matter what your parents think if you’re unhappy.”

Rubbing my lips together, I consider how to answer. He’s met my family—knows their views. Mom thinks it’s great Parker graduated from NYU.

“They’d be upset.”

“They’ll get over it.”

I make a face. Mom doesn’t necessarily hold grudges, but she doesn’t let anyone forget about things if they bother her enough right away. “I want to stop wasting my time,” I admit quietly, closing my notebook. “But I care about what they think.”

“Kinley.” He sighs and puts his book and glasses on the nightstand before gesturing for me to move over to him. Giving up on studying, I move my notebook to the floor and crawl over to him until he’s holding my hand. “It’s not a bad thing to care about what your family thinks once in a while, but don’t let their opinions of you dictate your life. You don’t share the same interests, hobbies, or goals with them, so they’re never going to understand.”

And that’s the problem.

I don’t miss the way his thumb slowly moves over the back of my hand. It’s comforting and sweet, but the way he looks at me with those dark eyes tells me it’s more too. “If you’re miserable, do something about it. Don’t pretend like you want to be there when you could be doing something else.”

Voice defeated, I ask, “Like what?”

“Write.” His shoulders lift. “Here.”

I blink. “Here?”

“Here,” he confirms.

I make a squeaking noise as I stare at him in disbelief. “You mean like ... right here? In your loft? In the city?”

His lips curve up at the corners. “Or in this apartment in general. The living room gets good lighting and the couch is pretty comfortable. Or there’s the breakfast bar...”

I have no idea what’s happening right now as he spews off more places I could sit down and work. “So ... you want me to come here and write once in a while?”

His thumb stops moving. “Or you could just drop out of school like you keep saying you want to and then come stay here with me. Brodie is

planning on moving out at the end of the month anyway.”

Did he...? Is he...? “Are you asking me to move in with you? Because I know there is no way that my parents are going to be okay with me not only dropping out of college but moving to the city with you, too.”

“What do *you* want?” he presses, letting go of my hand. “I’m not saying you have to do anything that’d make you uncomfortable but think about it. You’d be here in the city, which you’ve admitted multiple times that you love, and closer to Jamie when you two have to meet up. Plus, there’s way more to do here.”

“It’s expensive,” I cut him off. “I can’t afford it here. My book has barely been out for two months, Parker. It doesn’t matter that it’s doing well now, it could faceplant next month or the month after. I’m still so new to the industry.”

“I’ve got it handled.”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Kinley—”

“This is nuts.” I slide off the bed and stare at him like he’s lost his mind. “As much as I’d love to be here, it doesn’t make sense. My family is in Lincoln. They’d be upset... I just can’t.”

“But what about you?”

I don’t answer.

He gets off the bed and walks over to me, gently brushing his palms down my arms. “You always want other people to be happy, but what about you? Kinley, the world will keep turning if you choose to leave that town. Your family will still love you.”

Again, I say nothing.

“And...” He purses his lips for a moment, his eyes softening. “I want you here. I’ll go there any time you want me to if that’s where you want to stay, but I’m selfish enough to admit I want you here with me.”

I choke on air. “You...?”

“I like you, Kinley Thomas.” His hand goes to my cheek. “You’re like nobody else I’ve met. You’re kind, caring, beautiful, motivated, and I love being around you. So, yeah. I like you, I’m asking you move here, and I’m even willing to beg you to be with me. Because I want that. I want *you*.”

My throat burns with oncoming emotion as he bends down and kisses me for a fourth time. The other three times should have indicated what he

wanted, but I'd told myself they were friendly kisses to protect myself from starting something I couldn't control.

But *this* kiss is softer, slower, backed behind every swarm of emotion vindicated in his words. And for the first time since the boy with silver eyes, I find myself kissing back. And *liking it*—the way his lips move, his hands hold me, and his tongue tastes mine in leisure, gentle strokes. I like the way he pulls me to him, and whispers my name, and peppers kisses down my jaw and throat as he guides us to the bed. Feeling wanted by someone like Parker lets the wariness ease out of my conscience.

And unlike the last guy I let strip me of my clothes and kiss my body and touch me intimately, I didn't cry. I mimicked his every move, kissed him deeply, opened myself up, and absorbed every single thing he made me feel.

Not once did I think about Corbin Callum.

IT GOES AS EXPECTED when I drop the news. Badly. The blank stares are tolerable compared to the yelling. And there's lots of that.

"You need to contact someone in admissions and reverse that paperwork," Mom informs me once her jaw unlocks from the intense stare down she gave me.

"Mom—" My voice cracks under the pressure of her disapproval. It leaks out of her tight expression.

"No." She stands and shakes her head. "I don't understand what you're doing. You've only got two more years left, Kinley."

"But I'm not happy there."

She blows out a breath and closes her eyes, lifting her hand when I try to speak. Shaking her head, she walks away from me, leaving me with Dad and Gavin.

"Kid," Dad murmurs, "do you really think this is a good idea? There's a lot that can go wrong, and your mother is right. You're already halfway done with school. Why not just finish it off?"

This is just one big full circle going nowhere fast. "Because I never wanted to go in the first place. Mom isn't right, but Parker is. I only went there to make Mom happy, but I'm miserable. School isn't for everyone. Why should I rack up more student debt for no reason?"

Dad's lips twitch, but he doesn't say anything to argue my point. It isn't an unreasonable one to make, no matter what I'm springing on them. At

least he can see that.

Gavin on the other hand? “Are you really going to chase after some guy you’re not even dating?”

My eyes widen in hurt, my heart aching over the assumption I should have known he would make. “I’m not chasing after him. He made good points I couldn’t refute. We’re both happier there and I’ll have more opportunities.”

“And if you two get into a fight?”

“Why would we?”

“You’ll be living together,” he says slowly, brows arching. “You’ll always be together and that means you’re going to get on each other’s nerves. Trust me.”

He moved in with Kayla almost six months ago and still winds up here to help Dad with random projects in the garage or house for hours. I always wondered why he showed up out of the blue. Kayla would always come, talk to him, and they’d leave shortly after.

“We’ll be fine.”

“Are you dating?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“You’re my little sister, so it is.”

I scoff, pushing myself up. “I’m doing this and I’m sorry that upsets you. Jamie thinks it’s a great idea, too. She said she can get local bookstores to do signings with me since I’ll be closer. It’ll be great exposure.”

Nothing. Like always, they say nothing about something as exciting as that. And it crushes me little by little to know something I’m proud of is buried under the things they disapprove of me doing instead.

Mom walks back in just as I stand up. In her hands is a steaming cup of coffee filled to the brim. She won’t look at me.

“Mom,” I murmur, stepping toward her.

Nothing.

“I don’t want to disappoint you.”

She finally, *finally* looks at me. With distant eyes that are carved with hurt, she says, “I don’t know what to tell you then.”

And the hurt in her eyes soaks into me over the very words nobody wants to hear. But it doesn’t stop me from looking at my father, brother, and mother, before tipping my head once and walking out their front door.

Those words will haunt me for life.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

KINLEY / Present

I STARE at the email exchange for another ten minutes without saying a single word. Nothing but the harsh drum of my heartbeat fills the room, my ears pounding until my temples nearly explode from the migraine forming.

I knew—we knew there were risks.

This is a termination of contract notice between (publisher) ONE HOUSE UNITED and (author) KINLEY THOMAS. Official termination documentation will arrive within thirty days of the initial notice.

Closing my eyes, I let the tears strain behind my pinched lids fighting for release. But I don't want to spill tears over something I should have seen a mile away. This was always going to be the endgame with them.

The knock on the door is ignored.

Same with the second.

By the third, Corbin doesn't care. He walks into my office and kneels beside me, rubbing my back and asking what's wrong. We both got reprimanded by the people who represent us after Corbin's impromptu statement, which has gone viral on every single site it's been featured on.

His soft curse tells me he read what's stretched across the screen of my laptop. The hand rubbing circles into my back trails up to my shoulder, squeezing it before he tugs my body into his. "Baby..."

The tears pour out of me as soon as his arms wrap around me and hold me against his chest. I drown his shirt with my anger and guilt and sadness and defeat, and he takes it all. Brushing his fingers through my hair, he kisses the top of my head and says nothing while I let it all out.

Words won't help anyway.

We stay like that for a while, and I don't know how Corbin's knees don't hurt from being in a squatted position for so long. But because I need his warmth, his comfort, I don't dwell on it.

Sniffing back more tears, I pull away when my cell phone rings and Jamie's name flashes across it. My lips waver as Corbin nods at me, pulling away but staying right where I need him by my side.

"Kinley," she greets in a distant tone.

Wiping off my face with the back of my shirt sleeve, I force in a deep breath. "I should have known this would happen."

She clears her throat. "Yes, well..." She knows it too, so she doesn't even bother trying to tell me otherwise. "I spoke to my contact there and they felt the negative attention surrounding you was going to impact sales. I'm sorry, Kinley. I know how much you wanted that deal."

Blinking back tears and swiping away the ones sticking to my lashes, all I can do is shrug. It isn't like I can blame them for terminating me because their reasoning makes perfect sense. "I don't know what happens now," I admit, voice cracking from the swell of emotion lodged in my throat.

When Jamie hesitates, I blow out a shaky breath and prepare for whatever's coming. "I'm not sure if you read the full letter, but they're reverting the rights and manuscript back to you. My best suggestion is to do exactly what you and Corbin told the press you were doing in the statement made the other day. Take a break. Take time off. Let things settle down. Right now, your name isn't attached to anything good and if we try reaching out to other publishers the chances are slim you'll get a positive response.

"This is why I always tell you to be careful, Kinley. What you say and do has consequences that impacts more than just you. I'm truly sorry that you lost the One House deal, but this also affects me and this agency. Rave Publishing hasn't spoken up on the news since it went live, but I plan on reaching out and having a conversation with them soon. They're making a lot of money off of your book and movie, so I doubt they'll want to pull anything. But you need to be very cautious over the next few months, especially now that the world has seen the photos of you."

Jaw quivering, I nod along as Corbin brushes my arm to let me know he's there for me every step of the way. I can't help but feel bitter over the repercussions I've faced compared to him. I've lost a book deal. Besides a woman that he never should have married, what has he lost?

That thought consumes me enough to pull away and listen to Jamie about staying off social media. Her people, once again, will handle my pages. My job is to stay quiet and take care of myself. *And the baby.*

So, I do.

I spend the weeks following that phone call in my room like a zombie, being watched by Corbin with a careful eye. He'd make me eat, try getting me to go outside, but couldn't stop me from curling up in bed and ignoring the world.

When December begins, the only thing that gets me out of my house is my rescheduled appointment with Dr. Ray since my energy was depleted for the one originally scheduled in November. As soon as Corbin found out about it, he'd all but begged to go with me. And despite my anger, my jealousy over the situation we put ourselves in, I couldn't say no to him when I saw his white-silver eyes flash with a newfound excitement I'd never seen before.

He wanted to go with me.

He wanted to see the baby.

He wanted to be there for us.

And that eased some of the irritation that seeped into my bones, even if the amount is microscopic. It isn't fair to hold a grudge over decisions that he isn't in control of. Maybe Hollywood wants to use his publicity to garner attention, while the book world wants to distance themselves from it. I've always known that our industries were opposite.

Like when I finally succumbed to the torture of my email inbox where I found an exchange between Eddie Mansfield and whoever was controlling my account. He suggested saying the baby wasn't Corbin's. He wanted me to lie to save Corbin's reputation, not caring about my own. And when I admitted as much to Corbin, he'd called Eddie and lost it. I had to convince him that he needed a manager now more than ever, so firing him like he'd threatened wouldn't be a good idea. To my surprise, he listened.

Not before telling Eddie if he ever suggested something like that again he wouldn't hesitate to fire him ten times over. I didn't feel bad for his manager because the idea of me claiming the baby is someone else's still adds to the bitterness of Corbin's life. He had people looking out for him in ways that save face.

What about me?

They put us in a room immediately after showing up because everyone gawked and talked and glared at Corbin and me when we registered. One of the nurses brought us here to get me ready in the same room I'd first heard the heartbeat. That day is when I knew I couldn't be angry over this pregnancy because something beautiful was happening inside me.

Corbin's eyes are attached to a baby magazine he snatched from the waiting room. He's been reading it since they put us in here almost twenty-five minutes ago, flipping through each page slowly and soaking in whatever's inside.

He must sense me watching because he glances up at me with a small smile. "I bought some baby books online to read for after you fall asleep, yet this thing has way more information in it than I would have thought."

My brows arch. "You've been reading baby books?"

His cheeks tint.

His phone goes off, so he pulls his attention to the screen before frowning. Picking it up, he greets his manager. "Yeah. Yeah, I get it. After Christmas?" His eyes find mine. "I'll need to get back to you on that... Well, tough shit. You should know by now that I'm going to do what I want. Not much else they can do about it at this point."

I'm not sure what Eddie tells him, but his lips flatten and eyes narrow as he grumbles out a quick reply before hanging up. Instead of enlightening me on whatever soured his mood, he goes back to whatever he's reading about.

"Corbin."

His brow twitches.

I sigh. "What happened?"

He lowers the magazine. "Eddie wants me to head back to California after Christmas. There were a few interviews I canceled over the past month because I wanted to stay with you. He told me I needed to be on the first flight back on the twenty-sixth because I need to prepare for the promotional tour."

For the movie.

"And you're coming with me."

It's not a question.

"Excuse me?"

"You're. Coming. With. Me." He doesn't even blink as he enunciates each word clearly. "I know what Jamie's team agreed on, but that was

before. You're the brains behind the story, so you deserve to be at these tour spots."

"I'm pregnant."

"The world knows that, babe."

"But..." My lips close. "What else did Eddie say? If he thinks saying this baby isn't yours is going to happen, then he's got steel balls considering your last conversation. You look mad, so it can't just be because he wants you to go alone."

"That's part of it," is all he says.

"Corbin," I hiss through clenched teeth. He is not ignoring me right now. "I'm moody, hungry, and tired. Stop pretending like something isn't bothering you."

"Like you've been doing?" he snaps, jaw locking once the words are out.

I draw back. "I've been under a lot of stress. The deal being terminated hurt me. Not just emotionally, but financially. You don't understand that because nobody has cut you loose from anything over this!"

"Nobody—" He closes the magazine and throws it onto the counter next to him. "I haven't said anything because you were upset and I didn't want to make it worse, but you couldn't be farther from the truth, Little Bird."

I swallow. What?

He swipes a hand through his hair. "I was in the running for the lead role of a new Stephen King movie. Eddie thought I was sure to get it but then all of this happened. He fought for me, but in the long run they didn't want me after the shit they'd seen. They thought I was a flight risk."

Guilt crashes into me. "I'm so sorry." My voice is no more than a broken whisper as I watch him shrug and look anywhere but me. "I'm really sorry, Corbin. I was so caught up in losing the deal that I thought... I just let my emotions get the better of me."

He leans forward, grabbing my hand. "I know this shit is rough right now, but we're going to make it through. We just need to be there for one another. No fighting. No holding things back. The press hasn't run as many features since we went silent and those images of Lena being escorted away in the police car surfaced. The world knows there's more to the story and it's best if we let things die down a little more before we move forward. But the important thing is that we *do* move forward. You'll get another book deal, and I'll get another movie."

“But what if—”

“Nope.”

“Corbin—”

“You’re coming with me to California and doing the tour,” he states, not giving me any time to argue before there’s a knock at the door and Dr. Ray pops his head in.

He instantly notices Corbin in the chair by the wall, his white brows arching before he closes the door behind him. “I heard there was quite a stir in the waiting room. Sorry to keep you two waiting.”

The two shake. “Corbin, sir.”

“Oh, I know,” the doctor chuckles, loading my file on the computer. “My daughters are fans of yours, Mr. Callum. Now, Kinley, you’re far enough along to determine the sex of the baby if that’s something you’re interested in.”

Corbin and I share a look. His eyes brighten even more than they already were, making me smile over his enthusiasm. When I look back at the doctor, he’s waiting. “We’d like that. Thank you.”

My eyes focus on Corbin as Dr. Ray applies the gel onto my stomach and presses the wand against me. When the softest thumps of a new heartbeat fills the room, Corbin’s lips part the same way mine did.

And it’s easy to tell he’s a goner.

He squeezes my hand tighter as he locks eyes with the screen, his throat bobbing as Dr. Ray points out a few body parts he sees on the screen. When the wand stops, I know he must have found what he’s looking for.

“Ah, right there.” He taps the screen, causing me to peel my gaze away from the silver-eyed man beside me and at a spot on the screen his finger points to. “It looks like you’re having a little girl.”

My heart dances. “A girl?”

Corbin raises my hand to his mouth and presses a kiss on the back of it. “A girl, Little Bird.” He laughs and swipes at his face as he watches the screen some more as Dr. Ray captures a few images.

Seeing his reaction makes everything that’s left me bedridden and depressed disappear. We’ve both had our fair share of losses, but I can’t hold onto anger or else it’ll consume me.

He’s right.

We’ll make it through this.

Together.

The *three* of us.

I BLINK at the dress clinging to my body. I've avoided fitted clothing like the plague because ever since I hit the third trimester, I've hated the reflection I see in the mirror. My belly and boobs are huge and covered in stretch marks, and I feel the opposite of beautiful.

My lip quivers as Corbin stares at me from his bedroom doorway. Or ours, according to him. Spending Christmas with our families seemed surreal, but even more so was the flight back to California. We'd both tried keeping to ourselves but were noticed just before boarding, leading to a lot of cell cameras pointed in our faces and questions thrown out.

Now I'm here, in his condo, looking like a beached whale.

"I can't wear this, Corbin."

"You look beautiful." He walks in and trails his eyes slowly down the front of me, the color flashing with lust that I truly don't understand.

"I look like a whale."

An angry expression crosses his face. "I don't want to hear you say that again, understood? You are gorgeous, Kinley. Stop being down on yourself."

I go to open my mouth, but he glares.

Sighing, my eyes look back into the mirror, studying the long black maxi dress. It's plain and simple, nothing extravagant, and under any given day I'd love it. But not today.

"I don't see why I can't just wear what I normally do," I whine, wanting my leggings and oversized sweatshirt. Though the AC/DC sweatshirt, which mostly just says C/D on it from the faded lettering, fits me better than normal because of the size of my midsection.

"Babe." He presses a kiss to my cheek and pulls me into him for a hug. "I promise as soon as the interview is over we'll come back here and watch a movie in whatever you want. Or, you know, don't—"

"Don't even start with me."

He laughs and kisses the top of my head before drawing back. "Was worth a try. Are you ready? I already fed Penny and she has water. We'll only be gone a few hours, so she should be fine for now, right?"

I murmur a *right* as he guides us toward his front door. He helps me into a jacket as I slide into my black ballet flats that barely fit my swollen feet anymore. I just want to soak them in Epsom salt and devour a pizza, not go

get interrogated by people who will almost definitely stray away from the movie questions.

When we're in his car, he looks at me as he cranks the air conditioning. He's gotten to know my hot flashes well, getting kicked a few times a night as I detangle myself from the blankets on his bed.

"Are you okay?"

No. But I nod because I will be.

We kept our silence for two months, enjoying time together and with our families. We worked toward this very moment because we knew it'd come. Eventually, we'd need to speak about what happened—his marriage, the affair, and our baby.

His marriage ended three weeks ago after an ugly divorce hearing. Lena got half his money after the judge pointed out the evidence of adultery, stating that Lena deserved her fair share since her "mental and emotional health" were impacted by his actions. Corbin wanted to fight the claims Lena made, but one look at me in that courtroom—a room I told him I had no place being given I was one of the reasons their marriage failed—and realized that it wasn't worth it. I think Lena wanted him to battle her, and it was clear to see she wasn't okay when he agreed on the judge's terms without saying a word about it otherwise.

It bothers him though. All the money he worked for was his own, and now she has half of it padding her bank account. But neither one of us spoke a word of it on the way home from the courthouse because we knew that there was some justice paid in that room whether we like how she bent it in her favor or not. The pictures that surfaced of her in the cop car only helped her case, making the judge sympathize with her.

I hold my stomach, caressing it with my thumb and wondering if our baby can feel it. "I'm nervous people will hate me."

"They're not going to hate you," he assures, reaching over and grabbing my hand as we pull out of his driveway and toward the locked gate surrounding his property. "If I'm being honest, people eat this kind of shit up. It's ridiculous but true. Eddie has called me everyday trying to get me to do interviews with you about our relationships for weeks, especially once the divorce was finalized."

"What?"

He just nods.

I'll never understand why everyone is so consumed in other people's business. It seems strange that the public wants to know the answers to questions that have been asked ever since the very first article about Corbin and me came out. And the video still circulating the internet admitting our past only sparked people's interest.

Jamie had told me not to do any interviews until the tour started, so I agreed. If she hadn't, I'm sure Corbin and I would have gotten convinced by Eddie to speak up sooner. I'm glad we didn't though.

The past two months have been about us, our plans, and what the future holds. Since his marriage is no longer between us, we've taken it a day at a time. He's mentioned me moving here, I've mentioned him moving back to New York. We disagree on baby names, talk about what's healthy or not for me to eat, and argue about how many interviews on this tour I need to be on.

He says all.

I say not.

"There will be someone to try redirecting questions that stray too far from the movie," he tells me, eyes focusing on the road. "I'm not saying a few won't be hard to move away from, but it'll work out. I've had experience with this, so I'll do what I can to make you comfortable."

But he can't.

He's used to this. I'm not. That'll always be the difference between us. As soon as we step onto the lot they're filming the interview, it's his territory. I get emails from bloggers wanting me to answer questions for them but that's the extent of it—what's my favorite book, genre, and trope, and what am I writing next. What we're about to face is nothing like this.

I look down at my stomach and groan.

"Are you nauseous?"

He quickly gets his answer when I empty my stomach into the purse he insisted I didn't need to bring.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

WKDP REPORTER: Mr. Callum, Ms. Thomas, this question is for you. There was a lot of speculation over whether you'd appear together for this interview since you opened up about your relationship in October. Can you comment on that?

CALLUM: We're both here because Kinley wrote a story worth telling and deserved to get the credit she deserved for it. There's no reason why we wouldn't be doing this interview.

WKDP REPORTER: And can you comment on the relationship that has progressed since your divorce to Lena Dasani last month?

CALLUM: I'm not here to talk about my ex-wife or any other relationship.

WXRZ REPORTER: Ms. Thomas, what was your first reaction when you found out about your book being picked up?

THOMAS: Shock. I spent a long time hoping I'd be able to do something nobody else had and finding out that *Through Shattered Glass* was becoming a movie was something I'd never thought would happen.

WXRZ REPORTER: And what would you say about the assumption that your book is based on real-life events?

THOMAS: All my work is fictional, but there are always going to be pieces that are related to something in my life.

WKDP REPORTER: What are your thoughts on the cast of the movie? Were they who you pictured as the characters?

THOMAS: I couldn't have chosen anyone better to play the lead roles. Corbin and Olivia brought this story to life.

WXRZ REPORTER: Mr. Callum, what led you to audition for the role of Ryker after the string of action movies you were cast in?

CALLUM: I was looking for a change of direction and knew that this movie was one I couldn't turn down.

WXRZ REPORTER: And why is that?

CALLUM: Because I knew that it was Kinley's book and I wanted to support my best friend in any way I could. That's all I'll say about it. Next question.

WBRB REPORTER: Ms. Davies, what was your favorite part of playing the role of Rebecca?

DAVIES: Getting to be part of a beautiful love story. Beck and Ryker have the type of love that is unforgettable because it's real. Plus, Kinley is my favorite author and being able to play a character I admire for her has been a dream.

WKDP REPORTER: Mr. Callum, do you believe that Ryker was written about you like reports have indicated?

CALLUM: I believe that Kinley wrote the kind of man that I hope to be someday, regardless of who he's based on.

WXRZ REPORTER: And what kind of man is that?

CALLUM: The kind that doesn't give up no matter the circumstances. I spoke to Kinley on set about Ryker being my favorite character to take on because of his resilience. His love is raw, and he was able to let Beck go because he knew that's what she needed. But they came back to each other like no time passed at all.

WKDP REPORTER: Does that sentiment relate to how you view your relationship with Ms. Thomas?

CALLUM: My relationship with Ms. Thomas is simple. We've been best friends for ten years despite the distance, and we'll be best friends for life despite the circumstances. Kinley has always been my biggest supporter and being part of this movie has opened my eyes to new possibilities with her.

WXRZ REPORTER: So, you don't regret the people you've hurt during the time you pursued Ms. Thomas?

CALLUM: I'll always regret hurting people I care for, but there's a lot people don't know about my former marriage that I have no intention of revealing. If there's one thing I'll never regret it's being part of Kinley's life in any way she'll have me.

WKDP REPORTER: There's speculation that you two will get married in the near future. Are either of you willing to shed on light on the rumors?

THOMAS [laughs]: Right now, we're preparing for our daughter and trying to mend the past that separated us for the last decade. It's obvious that we're not perfect, we both have regrets, but we're trying to make up for it.

WXRZ REPORTER: Ms. Davies, what was it like working with Mr. Callum and Ms. Thomas on set?

DAVIES: Everyday was amazing. Knowing Kinley was watching always made me push to be my best and working with Corbin was great too. They're both talented.

WXRZ REPORTER: And as a couple?

DAVIES: That's an inappropriate question, but in my personal opinion, I'm rooting for them. If people can fall in love with Beck and Ryker, there's no reason why they can't with Corbin and Kinley.

WKDP REPORTER: Last question. If you could change anything that's happened in the last six months, would you?

CALLUM: No.

THOMAS: No.

DAVIES: No.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

KINLEY / 22

I'VE BECOME ACCUSTOMED to the grumbling coming from the other room as soon as the door closes, followed by a tired voice calling my name, a heavy sigh, and the sound of a bag hitting the floor.

He always brings me a hot chocolate after work on Fridays, setting it down beside me where I work at our island in the kitchen before pressing a kiss to my head. Today is Friday and there's no hot chocolate or kiss. I save my word document and turn in the stool as he walks over to the fridge and pulls out a beer.

Parker rarely drinks.

"Are you okay?"

"The place is a mess," he tells me, looking around at the dishes piled up, the shoes on the floor, and the candy wrappers littering the countertop.

I blush, closing my laptop. "Sorry, I was busy writing. Jamie—"

"I don't care about Jamie right now." His tone causes me to wince, so I press my lips together and nod. Sighing, he sets the beer bottle down and begins cleaning up after me. "You're always writing. Have you even gone outside at all today?"

Lips twitching, I answer, "I haven't been writing *all* day. I finalized the wedding invitations. I showed them to you the other night, remember? I ordered them this afternoon. They'll be here by next Wednesday."

He doesn't say anything.

"You're mad."

"I'm just ... tired."

Tired. He's been tired a lot lately. And based on the way he rolls up his shirt sleeves and gives me his back as he opens the dishwasher to load it with dirty dishes from the past two days, he's more than that.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, walking over to him. Helping him stack the dishes, I grab one of the pods from the cupboard and pass it to him. He closes the front and presses start, going back to his beer on the other side of the kitchen.

"How'd the presentation go?"

"Like shit."

I frown. He's been working hard on it for two weeks now, so knowing that it didn't go well only makes my guilt tenfold. "Do you want to talk about it?"

He's short with me. "No."

Slowly, I nod. "Want me to cook something? I think there's pasta in the cupboard. I can make spaghetti. Or we can order delivery."

He sips his beer and looks at me before rubbing the back of his neck. "I think I'm just going to head upstairs. I'm sure you have work to do. Order something for yourself if you want."

Pulling out his wallet, he sets it down on the counter in front of me and gives me a chaste kiss on the forehead before walking away. And instead of following him like I should, I give him space. Grabbing my cell, I call for delivery, sit down in front of my computer, and immerse myself in a world that's not this one.

I should have thought more about why that is but find myself brushing it off like always.

A FEW WEEKS later I walk home from Jamie's office to see Parker's bag already on the floor by the door. When I walk in further, I notice him sitting at the table, posture slumped, not moving an inch.

And I know. I just ... know.

"You're home early," I note cautiously. It's about two hours before he normally comes home and last I remember he didn't tell me he'd taken time off. He never does.

Then again, neither do I.

I walk over to him and kiss his cheek, but he doesn't respond. He just looks at me with hesitant eyes, his lips pursed, one hand wrapped around a bottle of his favorite beer.

At three in the afternoon.

In front of him are the remaining wedding invitations that need to be addressed and sent out. Stacks of prepared ones rest off to the side in envelopes with addresses printed across them in a mixture of our handwriting.

“Jamie told me to tell you hello and congratulations on the new job,” I say when he doesn’t make a move to speak. I settle onto the stool and watch him. “I hand delivered her invitation. She said she’d be there. Both of our parents also reached out.”

Again, nothing.

“Parker?”

A heavy breath escapes his lips, not really a sigh, but something heavier. “I’m sorry.”

Two words.

Two final words.

I swallow. “For what?”

His head tilts. “You know what.”

I do.

“You’re always so busy with your writing, promoting, Jamie has you travelling...” He keeps going but I don’t listen to all the reasons why this is ending. This. Us. Another relationship that I have to say goodbye to.

Except this is different.

My eyes go down to the ring on my finger, which I twirl for a moment before pulling it off. It feels strange to see the slightest difference in skin tone from where the silver band rested for all this time. And when I put it on the counter and see the slightest reflection of light against the diamond, I find myself not doing anything more.

Not talking.

Not frowning.

Not crying.

I just feel empty as I slide it toward him.

“You keep it,” he whispers, gripping the beer a little tighter. His voice is raspy, like he really is sorry. I’m not sure why. “It’s yours, Kinley. Do what you want with it.”

“I really don’t—”

“It’s yours,” he repeats.

But do I want the memory of him around like I do the small plastic tote of other memories that I store under the spare bed across the hall from our room? Do I want to add it to the origami birds, notebooks, and bows? The more I think about the time capsule of rejection, the more I want to cry.

I don't though.

"I'm sorry," he says again.

Maybe he is.

But not for the same reason I am.

Because for some reason as I stare at him, and all I can think about is silver eyes, dark hair, and a cocky grin. None of those things should cross my mind when my fiancé is breaking off what could have been forever.

So, I close my eyes and try to summon the emotion that makes sense for the moment. The tears. The sadness. The anger. But the only thing I come up with is emptiness, and the hole in my heart that Parker mended a long time ago begins to reopen from the stitches he pulls out as he apologizes again before squeezing my hand.

He's sorry. I am too. For trying but not hard enough. For caring but not hard enough. And for loving him but not as much as he deserves.

I watch him leave.

Stare at the ring.

And crawl into bed.

Once again, my mind goes to Corbin Callum and it becomes impossible to deny that a lot of mistakes were made in the past that isn't the past at all.

I know then that our story isn't over yet.

EPILOGUE

KINLEY / 28

BOUNCING ELLIE in my arms as I read the email from Jamie, I listen to the soft coos coming from my lap before looking down at a pair of big, round silver eyes staring up at me.

“Mommy got a new book deal,” I coo back, tickling her tummy until a big smile stretches across her face and she breaks into a fit of giggles.

Glancing back up at the attached document I need to print, sign, and send back to Jamie, I can’t help but grin until my cheeks hurt.

After the promotional tour ended and the movie released, the public swarmed the theaters and made *Through Shattered Glass* a box office success. Despite my worry that our media attention would garner negativity toward ticket sales, I soon realized it did the opposite. The more interviews we did opening up about our past, the more people wanted from us.

We still have people who make nasty comments about what we did to Lena, but for the most part people are over it. In fact, one news outlet had their entertainment staff write a review on the movie that said we were “the couple that America was rooting for”. It helped that Olivia supported us in the interviews we did together, and even some we did separately, telling the reporters that she wished she could find a love like ours.

Very few people questioned the journey it took to get that kind of love because those who saw the movie believed that even the roughest kind of relationships deserved a happy ending.

Corbin knocks on the door to my office, Penny brushing against his shins and staring at the way I hold our daughter. “What’s the smile for? Did she do something cute that I missed again?”

Ellie notices her dad looking at her and reaches out, squirming in my hold. Corbin doesn't waste time taking her from me, bouncing her in his arms and peppering kisses across her rosy face until she laughs.

She looks just like Corbin in the ways that count—same eyes, same hair, and the kind of flawless structure that makes me worry she'll be a heartbreaker someday. Just hopefully not like her parents.

"Rave sent me a contract for the sequel," I announce, practically bouncing in my chair. "I was afraid they wouldn't want an extension, but they thought that writing about Beck and Ryker's life after the first book was brilliant. They even think a second movie will be picked up. You know, if that's something you and Olivia would be into."

He grins. "I'm so proud of you for writing that. And you know I'm there if the rights are sold, Little Bird." His eyes go to the watch on his wrist. "Speaking of which, we need to start getting ready. Your parents will be here soon to pick up Ellie and then we need to leave for the airport."

My stomach dips knowing I'll have to kiss my baby goodbye for the first time since she was born almost a year ago. "Maybe I should stay home with he—"

"Absolutely not," he cuts me off, giving me hard eyes that make it difficult to argue. I press my lips together. "Your Mom and Dad said they're more than happy to watch her while we're in California."

"I know but..." But nothing. I know he doesn't want to leave Ellie behind either, but he's handling it far better than I am.

"How long have we planned this?"

I don't answer.

"Years. Eleven to be exact." My shoulders slump. "You promised me in high school that you'd be my date to the Oscars. You're not going to back out on me, are you?"

I frown but say, "No."

"Good." He nods once. "Congratulations on your deal, Little Bird. I told you you'd get it."

I honestly wasn't as confident. Rave didn't give me the boot when the world seemed to hate me because they were making too much money to care about morals. And, oddly, I was grateful for that. But that didn't mean they'd pick up a sequel I'd never anticipated writing. How could I? The first book was written from pain, anger, and hopelessness. There was no way I knew back then that I'd be here, living in a house with Corbin and

our daughter, about to go to the Oscars where my fiancé was nominated in two categories.

And I know, deep down, he'll win both.

Corbin walks over and bends down to press a kiss to the crown of my head. "Things are looking up for us. We're in a good place, have a beautiful kid, and families we're on better terms with. We made it, baby."

I swallow and nod, loving this man and everything we've gone through because it led us right where we belong.

"Just remember what you promised about tailoring my dress to fit if I get fat," I murmur, knowing that the baby weight hasn't come off me as quickly as I'd hoped despite my daily workouts.

It's the Twizzlers.

The stupid, stupid Twizzlers.

He chuckles. "Anything for you."

I just roll my eyes.

And less than twenty-four hours later, sitting in the audience surrounded by people I've spent my life fangirling from the confines of my house, I get to watch Corbin walk on stage, accept his Oscar for best male lead, and stare me right in the eyes as he delivers his speech.

His normally gravelly voice is raspy as he fights off the emotion that mirrors my own. "Little Bird, the only person I can truly thank right now is you. This was your book, your story, and I'm just lucky to be along for the ride. Thank you, baby. I can't wait to watch you flourish. I love you."

The audience claps as he raises his trophy. I swipe at my cheeks as Olivia reaches over and squeezes my arm gently, smiling at me as Corbin gets escorted off the stage while the hosts make their way back out to continue the show.

Sniffing back tears, I look down at the little blue origami bird resting on my wrist right above the *fly with me* tattoo written in Corbin's handwriting. Corbin has the same one pinned to his black tuxedo jacket.

When he returns to our table, he kisses me, the people around us whistle, and I get lost in the boy with silver eyes all over again.

STAY IN TOUCH

Want to stay in touch on all things book related?

[Join my reader group here](#)

OceanofPDF.com

ALSO BY B. CELESTE

The Truth about Heartbreak

The Truth about Tomorrow

The Truth about Us

Underneath the Sycamore Tree

Where the Little Birds Go

OceanofPDF.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This duet would not have happened without an army of supporters who helped me polish it off. I never thought I'd do a duet or series, but here we are. I am so grateful to all who helped me beta read and edit it and make sure Corbin and Kinley's gritty love story turned out exactly as it should have.

My homegirl Micalea Smeltzer always gets a shoutout because I would get nothing done without her. She's my sister, my bestie, my Momager, and everything in between who's there through thick and thin. Love you, M!

My personal assistant Jessica deserves a huge shoutout because she takes care of, well, everything when I lock myself away and write. She never bats an eye when I message her in freak out mode about life when the stress gets to be too much for me. Thank you for having my back, Luther.

To my beta readers who help me polish off each book and make it tip-top shape for finals edits and publication – you rock! Micalea, Alisha, and Jess, you girls have no idea how much I needed you with these books. Thanks for helping me make this love story full circle when I had my doubts I could make it happen. We did it, and nobody died. Go us.

Letitia Hasser, my amazing cover designer, always kills each and every cover. I told her I wanted something abstract and unique, and she delivered. I'm so grateful to be able to work with her to bring my covers to life.

As always, I love my readers. I can't say it enough that your support means the world to me. I get to live my dream and be happy for probably the first time ever because I get to write. Thank you for your continued love and support.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B. Celeste's obsession with all things forbidden and taboo enabled her to pave a path into a new world of raw, real, emotional romance.

Her debut novel is The Truth about Heartbreak.

[Join my reader group here](#)

[Follow me on Facebook](#)

[Follow me on Instagram](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)