

ALL THE SHATTERED PIECES

B. CELESTE

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About the Author

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All the Shattered Pieces

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* Created with Vellum

This novella is for those who loved Kaiden in Underneath the Sycamore Tree and those who share his struggles and understand his grief and anxiety. I see you. He sees you.

The world sees you.

And we're here for you.

PLAYLIST

Demons – Imagine Dragons
F U Till I F U – Call Me Karizma
Always Remember Us This Way – Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper
i hate u, i love you – Gnash
Late Thoughts – Hanx
everything i wanted – Billie Eilish
Half a Man – Dean Lewis
The Diary of Jane – Breaking Benjamin
Bring Me to Life – Evanescence
Meet Me at Our Spot– The Anxiety, Willow, and Tyler Cole

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OTHER BOOKS BY B. CELESTE

The Truth about Heartbreak

The Truth about Tomorrow

The Truth about Us

Underneath the Sycamore Tree

Where the Little Birds Go

Where the Little Birds Are

Into the Clear Water

Color Me Pretty

Tell Me When It's Over

Dare You to Hate Me

Tell Me Why It's Wrong

Make You Miss Me

CHAPTER ONE

I WAKE IN A JOLT, cold sweat sticking to my forehead as moonlight streams through the broken blinds.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I pinch the bridge of my nose and rub my eyes with the heels of my palms until reality seeps back in. I sit up in bed, listening to the springs creak under my weight and turn to look at the time on my cell phone.

"Fuck," I groan, dropping back down and draping a bent arm over my eyes. I've only been asleep for three hours. An entire hour longer than I managed to sleep last night.

My heartbeat thumps loudly in my chest, echoing in my eardrums until I can't take it anymore. I drag myself to the bathroom, dig through my medicine cabinet until I find the nearly empty bottle, and twist the cap.

Two pills.

A glass of water.

My eyes focus on the number of refills.

Zero.

I close my eyes and grip the edges of the countertop before pushing off it.

It's been two and a half years since I was prescribed the antidepressants. I'd milked them out even after I stopped going to Dr. Brown. I knew if I was smart, I'd call the number on the crinkled business card stuffed somewhere deep in my closet to get another one called in by him, but that would require opening old wounds that I'd like to think I moved on from.

More "how does that make you feel?" and other dumbass questions that only fuel the flames sparking deep inside me.

Because how the hell am I supposed to feel? Death leaves a heartache that nobody can completely heal from, no matter the amount of therapy sessions or medication. There are too many memories left behind of the people you lost that nobody could steal.

No matter how badly I wish they could.

Because then I'd forget.

I'd sleep.

I'd stop obsessing.

I sit down at my kitchen table and stare at the project I'd worked on before crawling into bed. Paint is splattered against the chipped walnut table—purples and yellows dried into a messy pattern that I find myself staring at harder than the canvas itself.

When I do lift my gaze, I see her.

Blonde hair.

Hazel eyes.

White smile.

Frail.

Strong.

I grab my paintbrush and clench it in my hand until my fingers turn white. Then I slash the end of the handle through the middle of the stretched canvas until there's a gaping tear distorting the image I spent hours working on.

Only then does the pressure in my chest start to subside. Destruction will do that to you.

Give you breath.

Momentarily relief.

I don't know what the fuck that says about me.

And I'm not sure I care.

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CHAPTER TWO

"SOPHIA TRIED CALLING YOU EARLIER," Mom says in a tired tone. My charcoal pencil halts for a brief second when she adds, "She was upset you didn't pick up. That's the third time, Kaiden."

I stare at my sketch, lips twitching into a frown that I swipe away with my palm. "I'm sorry. I was busy."

She sighs. "You said that last time."

"I'm a busy guy," I reply tartly. Mom's silence makes me toss my pencil onto my sketchbook and throw them both onto the coffee table littered with empty takeout containers and beer bottles. "I'll call her tomorrow. Promise."

"I wouldn't normally make such a fuss about it, but your sister is getting old enough to understand when somebody is avoiding her."

"I'm not—" I cut myself off before I spew yet another lie.

I'm fine.

I'll be home for the weekend.

I'll visit more often.

She's heard enough of my bullshit by now. I don't need to keep adding to the pile. "I really was busy. That interview for that job I mentioned went so well they asked me to come back for a second one to meet the big boss."

Four years at the University of Maryland got me a bachelor's in physical therapy. It wasn't easy. There were classes I nearly flunked in my first year. Some I lost interest in and stopped showing up to until my mother sat me down during Thanksgiving break and told me she was done watching me self-destruct. "Don't let what she's given you go to waste, Kaiden. That's not what she would have wanted."

"What'd she give me?"

"A chance to live your life."

To the world, losing the girl who'd become my best friend was a beautiful tragedy. They saw our weird relationship grow until the very last second, saw how she managed to break past barriers I'd built since losing my father.

Then she became another casualty.

The therapist I was forced to see said I had abandonment issues. Dr. Brown's professional opinion was that I didn't trust people enough to let them get close to me.

It's not people I don't trust, though.

It's life.

The unknown.

"...wonderful! Henry will be so excited when I tell him. He was hoping you'd hear good news."

She never stops to celebrate what I've managed to accomplish no matter what I do to frustrate her. Shutting her out. Closing myself off. She sticks with me through everything, never once giving up on me. Losing Dad had been hard, and I'd unfairly taken out my frustration on her and our relationship. But losing Emery...

It put things into perspective.

Dad used to say that life was ten percent what happens to you and ninety percent what you do about it. I hadn't remembered it until a couple years ago when Dr. Brown asked me who the most significant person in my life had been.

I thought I was lying when I said my father, but then little memories would resurface that I hadn't let myself think about before. His quirks—how he'd collect whatever prizes were left inside his Cracker Jack bag. How often he'd change the lyrics to famous songs to make them funnier to get a laugh out of me. He wasn't always a bad guy, even when I'd questioned him.

Because questioning his character made it easier to let him go. To stay mad.

Yet he's still here. Lingering in my subconscious, poking at me whenever I second guess myself. Whenever I do something stupid, which is more times than not these days.

The point is, Mom is still alive even when he isn't. She's still the cheerleader I never asked for. Sometimes it's embarrassing. When she, Henry, and my half-sister Sophia attended my lacrosse games, they cheered the loudest. During college graduation the three of them brought whistles and signs that were louder and bigger than everybody else's in the crowd.

Sometimes I feel bad for my mother.

Because she's stuck with me.

Me and all the shattered pieces.

Not even Dr. Brown could glue them back together, even if I painted on a smile and acted like his sessions did something positive for me when all they did was make me drown deeper.

I clear my throat. "The job will be a great opportunity for me if I get it. The pay is good, and I'll get full benefits. You won't need to worry about health insurance anymore."

With Dad's health history, she's been concerned about me phasing out of her insurance next year when I hit 26. Physically, I'm fine. But no matter how many times I deliver that line, she knows there's more to worry about than my physical health.

If there's one thing I've learned from Emery in the short time I knew her, it's that what people see on the outside doesn't always match what's on the inside.

Pain.

Grief.

Anger.

"When you get it," Mom corrects.

My eyes train on the drawing I started late last night when sleep evaded me again. The pill bottle in my bathroom is empty now, taunting me. The sheets on my bed slick with sweat from the amount of tossing and turning I do until I give up.

It's always bad this time of year.

But it's getting worse.

Time is supposed to heal people, but all it really does is cover the wounds until only scar tissue is left.

"I wasn't sure how you'd react about me applying since it's hours away from you guys. I know I said I'd come back..."

"Oh, Kaiden." Her voice is light, and I can picture the soft look she must have on her face. I'd seen that look a lot over the past few years. It's

maternal and sympathetic—genuine and fearful. "We want you to be happy. Henry and I know that coming home isn't easy for you since—"

"Don't," I cut her off, jaw clenching.

"Sweetie, I think—"

"Please, Mom."

We're both quiet as I stare a little harder at the form I'm drawing. *Fuck*.

I take the paper and tear it out of my book, balling it up and tossing it at my overfull wastebasket. It bounces off and lands on the floor along with other pieces I sacrificed to frustration.

"Henry still doesn't sleep that much," she tells me when I offer no contribution to our conversation. "He says he stays up thinking about her. About how many years he lost because he was too afraid of making things right. Grief does funny things to people."

Christ. "You know how I feel about him and this conversation. I'm never going to sympathize with him. He had plenty of time to get his shit straight and he wasted it by being a coward. Not all of us were lucky enough to get that same amount of time with her."

"I'm not asking you to sympathize." All she's ever wanted is me to be civil to my stepfather. It took a lot out of me, but I've put in the effort not to completely hate the guy's guts over the past couple of years.

It's not just for her that I'm doing it.

Somebody wise told me once that being angry got us nowhere. It was a waste of time. And I wasn't about to follow in Henry Matterson's footsteps and waste mine.

Mom sighs. "I'm simply saying that you both have something in common. Something you could talk about if you'd just let him. He cares about you, even if you don't want him to." My jaw ticks. "The difference between the two of you is that he can say her name and share memories about her without going to a dark place. I'm not saying I don't understand, sweetie. You were close with Emery. More so than I probably caught on at the time. But it makes Henry happy knowing what impact she had on people's lives. His. Yours. She left a mark. When are you going to allow yourself that same gratification? That relief?"

My nostrils twitch and, for once, I answer honestly. "I don't know. I'm trying."

"That's hardly true. You've barely tried. You've seen so much loss in your life for such a young age, but you're still alive. Just because your father and Emery aren't doesn't mean you have to quit living. You know both of them would want more for you than that."

My throat tightens. "I need to go."

"Kaiden—"

The tightness in my chest is back, constricting around my heart and squeezing. I suck in a breath and bend forward, resting my forehead against my knees. "I need to go," I rasp. "I'll call Sophia tomorrow."

Before she can press, I hang up and toss the phone on the other end of my beat-up couch. My hands cup my face, fingertips digging into my hairline before yanking at the longer strands of brown locks I haven't gotten cut in a while.

I try to breathe.

Try to think.

But it's too much.

When I lost my father, I thought nothing else could compare to the pain I'd felt. His death left a crack in my heart.

My stepsister's left a gaping hole.

I go to the bathroom and shuffle through the bottles of medication I've collected from over the years until I find one buried in the back from an old surgery I had to repair my torn ACL junior year of college.

The large white pills nearly fill the top because I never liked taking them. My body would become too uncontrollable. I'd fall asleep for hours and wake up feeling anything but myself.

I glance at my reflection in the mirror.

Baggy eyes.

Bloodshot.

Panicked.

I pop a pill.

And crawl into bed.

Right now, I don't want to be myself.

CHAPTER THREE

THEY SAY blue is the saddest color, but the hazel brown color staring at me through a phone camera may just top any shade of blue in existence.

"Kai!" my five-year-old sister says, holding up a picture. "Look what I made you in art class!"

My lips twitch upward at the corners as I examine the colors spread across the page. "It's really nice, Soph. You're definitely an artist."

"I told her I'm gonna be just like you."

I sure as hell hope not.

Talking to Sophia is easy because I never have to feel bad about not saying much. She says enough for the both of us, finding every topic under the sun to talk about until Mom or Henry takes the phone from her.

"Mommy and Daddy are going to take me to the art galaxy."

From somewhere in the background, I hear Mom say, "Art gallery."

"One day, I'm going to have my artwork there. Everybody will know my name and pay me lots of money for my art. I'll be rich and famous."

I refrain from snorting. "Dream big, kid."

She beams. "You can have your art there too. Mommy showed me pictures that you drawed and told me all about how you drawed ever since you were little. Just like me!"

"I do draw," I tell her, faintly amused at her energy. "And you'd really share your spotlight with me? Gallery features are big deals for artists. They usually don't like sharing the space they're given."

I know the little girl bouncing on the other end of the video call would do about anything for me. It's scary how unconditional her love is. One day, I worry that'll hurt her. "Yes! You're my brother and I love you so much, Kai. When are you coming home? Mommy said not 'til the holiday but that's forever away."

I manage to smile. "It's only a couple of months," I reassure her. "But maybe I'll try to make a trip out there sooner than that."

"Really? For me?"

I swallow, knowing Mom won't be happy with me if I can't keep my word. "Yeah. I'll do my best, Soph."

"Because you love me?" she presses.

I nod. "Because I love you," I agree.

She squeals and starts telling me about her new school friend Melissa, everything she's had to eat today, and more about her artwork. When she passes the phone to Mom, I already know what's coming.

"What was I supposed to tell her?" I ask before she can say anything.

She pinches the bridge of her nose. "She looks up to you. If you don't show up before Thanksgiving, imagine what that'll do to her."

"She really needs a better role model."

It's rare I see my mother roll her eyes, but the way she does it now seems fitting. "No, my boy. You need a better attitude. You beat yourself up all the time. Sophia knows a good person when she sees one. She's a great judge of character. You're one of the good ones."

I hear Henry call out something in the background and decide to end this conversation before it can really begin. "I'll let you go. I'll look at my schedule and see when I can make a trip over to see you guys. It's going to depend on this job. I need it."

There's a brief pause. "I know you do. And I sincerely hope you get it. Having you back in New York is better than nothing. Maryland is too far away, baby boy."

"I know," I murmur.

"You look like you're sleeping better," she notes, smiling softly. "I'm glad to see that. I love you."

I don't tell her my secret to getting a few extra hours in bed. "Love you too," I tell her quietly. Last minute, I add, "Tell Henry I said hi. And give Soph a hug for me."

After getting off the phone, I stare at my blank TV screen and then glance over at the abandoned art supplies resting on my kitchen table. I walk over to them and examine the newest paint set Mom shipped to me.

It's hours later the tree forms.

Reds. Oranges. Yellows.

Leaves freefalling.

A sunset sky.

Serene. Peaceful.

Purple flowers in the field.

Half bloomed. Half dead.

Hours after that, two gravestones are painted beneath the partially naked tree branches.

Gray. Grim.

But clean.

Polished.

I stare at the finished piece until my jaw is sore from how hard I clench it.

I don't put my paintbrush through this one no matter how bad I want to. I also don't take a pill that night.

One of those is a lie.

CHAPTER FOUR

MY LEG BOUNCES anxiously as I sit outside the office of a potentially big opportunity. I arrived thirty minutes early hoping it'd give me the edge, but all sitting here is doing to me is feeding the bubble of pressure in my chest.

I pick a piece of lint off my black dress pants—the nicest ones I own—and check my watch again. The receptionist glances over at me with a small smile. She's probably a few years older than me. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Dark skin. Pretty. Beautiful, even. In another lifetime maybe I would have acted on her flirty advances.

But I'm not here for that.

There's too much riding on this.

"He should be almost ready for you," she tells me, noting the leg that hasn't stopped moving for the past fifteen minutes.

I force my foot to remain still. "Thank you." My eyes go to the name plaque on the corner of her desk. "Miranda."

Her smile widens. Leaning forward, she studies me carefully. "You're young. Would this be your first job in the field?"

I itch the column of my throat. "That obvious, huh?"

"You're nervous. It's cute."

Sinking into my chair, I glance at the closed door I'll be entering soon. "I drove five hours to get here. I need this job."

"Wow. You should mention that to Steiner. He appreciates dedication from people. I think it'll give you an edge on the competition."

My eyebrow twitches knowing there are still other people in my way to get this position, but her suggestion is a solid one. "I'll do that. Thanks."

She leans back. "No problem. I'll be rooting for you." The phone on the corner of her desk rings so she gives me another smile and answers it.

Thankfully, the door to Dr. Steiner's office opens and the gray-haired man himself appears shaking hands with an older woman. "Thank you, Denise. It was nice meeting you. We'll be in touch."

He turns to me as she walks away. "You must be Mr. Monroe."

"Kaiden, sir." I stand quickly, offering him my hand. I'm grateful it's not clammy when he takes it in a firm shake.

"You can call me Steiner. Come on in."

Miranda gives me a wink as I walk inside the small office space.

I'm pointed toward one of the upholstered chairs positioned across from his desk, so I take the nearest one. "I appreciate the chance to meet in person, s—Steiner. I know I'm probably not the most qualified person out of the candidates, but I'd be perfect for the position."

Dr. Steiner walks around his desk, flattening his paisley tie out as he sits. "Tell me why that is. I see you're a recent graduate from the University of Maryland. They've got a nice program there. I've got a friend or two who teach courses in it."

Hopefully none that have had me in their class, or this opportunity is as good as dead.

I make sure not to fidget no matter the pressure from the claws raking down the forefront of my mind. "I suppose it's like you said. The university is known for its physical therapy program. I did well. The professors seemed to like me." *For the most part*. "And when I interned, it was at Rodman's Center in Washington D.C. under Rodger Rodman himself."

The man was a dick, but he promised me a good recommendation because I took his shit and then some. It takes an asshole to know one, which is why I lasted longer than the previous interns. Unfortunately, there were no positions open that paid by the time I graduated. Probably not a bad thing. I'm not sure I could have taken a long-term position there if I had to work closely with the namesake himself.

"That is quite impressive," he agrees. "I saw on your application that your specialty is sports therapy, not general. Why's that?"

"I played lacrosse. Like any player, I've been hurt more times than I can count. I know what it's like. How frustrating it is to be sidelined while other people do what you want to be doing on the field. Being restricted isn't any

fun. I can help people get through it using what I learned. Guide them. Strengthen them."

He hums.

"Look," I say, unsure of where his mind is. "I'm sure compared to the others you've met with already, I'm not much to look at. But Rodman said I have a lot of potential under the right leadership, and I'd like that to be you. I've got family in New York. I woke up early and drove all the way here from my crappy apartment outside of Baltimore. I'd be a good fit regardless of experience. I'm a fast learner. People don't hate me."

Not as much as I hate myself.

He sits back, interweaving his fingers on his desk. "You'll need to be certified in the State of New York. Your application shows your certification is only for Maryland."

"I've already looked at exams."

"Optimistic."

"Desperate," I admit openly.

He chuckles. "I like you, and from what I saw, Rodman did too. That man hardly likes himself, so you must be one hell of a hard worker to get his praise."

Kissed his ass is more like it, but I don't bother telling him that. "I did what I was told and learned alongside him. I like what I do. I like fixing people."

He cocks his head. "Why?"

The question isn't one I anticipated, but the only way I can secure one of the last positions is to be honest with him. "I know what it's like to be defeated. Broken down. Helpless. It's our job to get people out of the woods, isn't it? The rest is up to them, but we get to be part of the journey."

"You find it rewarding."

It's not a question.

"Yes."

"Sounds like you've been in those woods a time or two yourself, son." The man can't be more than mid-forties. Probably younger than my own father would be. Yet his term of endearment hits me square in the gut.

Drawing my shoulders back, I say, "Like I said. I know what it's like to be defeated."

He studies me in silence, contemplation evident on his face. "I'm not going to lie. I was skeptical when I looked over your application. I planned on hiring seasoned therapists for my practice, but I know what it's like to be in your shoes. You can't gain the experience people want for their hires if nobody gives you a chance in the first place."

I sit up straighter.

"I'd like my new hires to start no later than two months from now. Does that give you enough time to get your certification for the state and figure out your living arrangements?"

The anxiety rippling within my bones slowly subsides for the time being. "Yes, sir. I'll make sure to arrange things right away."

We both stand, grabbing each other's hands. "I think you'll be a good fit for this team as well. Congratulations, Kaiden."

When I walk out, I take my first real breath in weeks. Miranda must see the relief on my face because she says, "I knew you'd get it."

Dr. Steiner tells me he'll talk to me soon and heads back into his office. Before I can leave, Miranda holds something out to me.

Grabbing it, I note the number scrawled onto the back in blue ink. "In case you need a friend around here. Or whatever." It's obvious friendship isn't what she's really after.

"You don't want me as a anything," I tell her, handing it back. "Trust me. I'm doing you a favor."

She slowly accepts it, watching me as she wraps her fingers around the card. "I don't think that's true at all. Everybody has baggage. And I look forward to figuring out what yours is."

My eye twitches.

I look at the door for a second before shoving one of my hands into the pockets of my slacks. "There was a girl..."

Miranda holds up her hand. "Ah. Say no more." The smile she gives me is genuine enough. "Lucky girl."

I shake my head, pressing my lips together. "No. I was definitely the lucky one."

She doesn't get a chance to reply before I turn on my heel and walk out the door.

I pull out my phone and dial my mother's number once I'm inside my car. When it goes to voicemail, I say, "I'm heading to the house now. It'll be a few hours. I need to make a pit stop first."

CHAPTER FIVE

MY THROAT TIGHTENS at the sight of the two gravestones side by side. Both clear of dirt and grass trimmings.

Sitting in front of the newest one, I stare at the engraved letters and let the sun soak into my already overheated skin.

"I got a job today," I tell the stone. It wouldn't be the first time I've talked to an inanimate object. Usually, it's my father's name in front of me, though. "It uses my degree. It'll get me a decent apartment. Full benefits so Mom can stop worrying about me."

Well, that's not entirely true. Mom will always worry. I've given her every reason to over the years.

I chuckle to myself before laying back and staring up at the clear sky. Only a few clouds skirt across the open blue space above me and I remember a time when I used to do this very thing with the ghost I'm talking to. "I never thought I'd come back. To New York. Here. I thought staying away would be easier. I promised myself that..."

My teeth ache from how hard I grind them against each other. I'd promised myself years ago in the ICU that I wouldn't forgive Emery for giving up. I was sure I'd take that to my own grave someday.

Not hers.

My fingers begin drumming erratically against my stomach before I force them under my arms to stay still. "I made a promise to myself about you. Maybe I thought it'd be easier to hate you if I kept it. Look where that got me."

Silence.

No wind.

No birds.

No rustling of leaves or animals.

I sigh.

I hate the silence now. I used to love it. The spot just below the sycamore at the cemetery back home in Exeter was the one place I could go and think without being bothered. Now it holds too much sentiment because of the hours I'd spend sitting under it with a soft, warm-blooded blonde curled against me.

I try swallowing the words before they escape, but it's too late. "You ruined everything. My favorite spot. My plans. Drawing." Every picture and painting end up being her. An outline of her soul—an empty space within thick charcoal lines and brushstrokes surrounded by bursts of bright color. The tree. The field. It all winds up on a canvas in front of me before I can help myself.

My nostrils flare open. "Your dad is pretty fucked up. He tries to play it off, but I can see right through it. Takes one to know one. He's being strong for Sophia. For Mom."

Sophia. She barely looks like Henry except for the eyes. Eyes like the girl whose headstone I'm talking to like I'm waiting to hear it talk back.

I'm grateful she doesn't look like Henry—grateful she takes after my mother. Because then I wouldn't have to wonder how much in common I'd have with Emery's mom and the struggle she faced having to watch her daughter grow up when her twin sister was gone. After resenting Joanne for how she treated my quiet Mouse, I don't want to be anything like her.

I don't want to understand.

Because if I understand, then what?

I'd move on.

Forgive.

Am I ready for that?

My words come out hoarse. "Nobody can replace you or Logan. Not that I think Henry is trying to. Having Sophia was a second chance, though, and he took it. He's happy. As happy as he can be, I guess. I don't think he ever will be without you in his life."

Mom too. She's always wanted a daughter. When they told me they were expecting, I had mixed emotions. I'd been dealing with enough stuff that put focusing on a sibling on the back burner.

Then I saw the photos of Sophia.

Witnessed the three of them together.

One unit.

One family.

Me included, not that it always felt like that. Half the time, it felt like I was a stranger looking in. And I was okay with that because it meant they had a chance.

To be happy without my baggage.

My issues dragging them down.

I genuinely wanted that for them.

Because I know Dad would have wanted that for Mom. That Emery would have wanted that for father.

"Why'd you have to fucking ruin it?" I whisper in cool accusation, clenching my fingers into fists. My fingernails dig into my palms until there's a bite of pain, but it grounds me.

I don't know how long I lay there, letting the swarm of emotions take over until they're choking me. I don't stop them. The suffocation reminds me that I'm alive. Breathing with struggle, unlike the person I'm angry with.

The blonde could have fought—*should* have fought. She should have tried. For me. For her mom. Her grandma. Hell, for Henry.

I've been able to spend the past six years pissed off at the girl to keep myself grounded to reality. And reality is a cold, hard bitch.

Emery didn't ask to die.

But she didn't fight to live, either.

For that, forgiveness will always be hard.

Mom told me it wasn't that simple, though. The therapist I saw mirrored that sentiment. I'm not interested in the logistics, though.

The what ifs.

The whys.

What's done is done. She's gone. I'm here. And my pent-up frustration is along for the ride every single day, morphing into anxiety that likes to wrap around every piece of me and squeeze as hard as possible until I think my last breath is right around the corner too.

Would I welcome it?

I huff at the question, amused I'd even let myself wonder. "You fucked me up. Everybody says you gave me a gift, but it doesn't feel like that." I scoff at the ridiculous notion. "You're haunting me. Your choice. Your words. You *lied* to me."

I'll be at every game, she'd told me.

As fucking what? A ghost?

I remember the sunshine.

The faded rainbows.

How many of them graced me and my teammates during game days? Championships? I don't want to believe that was Emery. I don't know what I want to believe anymore.

Something crunches under the weight of footsteps that has me sitting up quickly. When I turn to look over my shoulder I see an older, wrinkled face appear that I haven't seen in a long time.

"I thought that was you, boy," Emery's grandmother says, putting her hands on her hips.

How long has she been here? Has she been listening?

I don't know what she sees when she looks at my face, but she gestures toward the house after a few moments. "I think there's some sweet tea inside. C'mon in. Looks like you could use some."

I tell myself to go home.

But I follow her inside the house.

THE WOMAN who reminds me a lot of my own grandmother looks out the window. "Joanne cleans the stones almost every day."

Joanne Keller. Emery's mom.

The last time I saw her was at the funeral. She'd been crying at the front, barely able to say a word when the pastor asked if she'd like to share her fondest memories of her daughter. I'd lost it. On her. On Henry.

On everybody in listening distance.

As far as I was concerned, she didn't deserve to play victim. She didn't deserve to feel the pain of her loss when she'd acted like Emery was dead for years before then. Mom and Henry had to escort me out after apologizing on my behalf to the horrified crowd.

Weeks later, there'd been a voicemail on my phone from an unsaved number that ended up being Joanne. It was fifteen seconds long. An apology, even though I know it was me who should have been the one saying I was sorry. I deleted it five seconds in, not interested in hearing what she had to say.

"It's the least she could have done," is all I say, gripping my glass tighter. The condensation sliding down the side holds my attention. Anything not to meet the eyes I know are pinning mine to my seat.

Her sigh is heavy. "Nobody blames you for what happened at the service. Emotions were high that day for everyone."

"Does it look like I care if people did?"

When I finally look up at her, there's a disapproving look on her face. "Boy, don't start with that attitude. That may work on your own mother, but it ain't gonna work on me."

My eye twitches.

She walks over to the table and pulls a chair out across from me. "Last time you were here was an entirely different lifetime. I'm sure you don't want to talk about it, but we're going to. You lost a stepsister. I lost my granddaughter—both of them. And with them, my own daughter. Mentally. Emotionally. Do you think it's easy for her? Joanna has battled depression her whole life and it's only gotten worse as time goes on."

"Joanne is—"

"The only family I have left," she reminds me firmly. "She's a flawed human being like the rest of us. I know you don't like her and I'm not asking you to. I'm simply asking you to see it in her perspective. We get one chance at life. I know my little Emmy made that clear to you. We all get one opportunity to make the most out of the years we have here on God's green earth. And Joanne lost nearly everything. She lost her children. She lost her husband. And with those losses, she lost a vital part of herself.

"If you don't want to feel sorry for her, that's on you. I know the reasons you won't be waving a number one fan sign in her direction anytime soon. But if you can't see that she's suffered more than any person deserves to in one lifetime, then maybe you should reevaluate yourself."

Is she serious? "How could you say that? Emery went through hell because of her mother. Why would I offer her any kind of pity?"

"Emery forgave her, which is more than you'll ever do clearly. My granddaughter isn't here any longer, Kaiden. I don't need to remind you of that. She forgave her mother because she loved Joanne. You don't need to give her justice because she never asked you to avenge her for anything.

She only ever wanted you to live. To be happy. You need to move on and honor that."

My jaw ticks. "Does anybody really move on from these situations? Did Joanne?"

"They do their best," she answers. "Even my daughter. It doesn't come easily. There are good days and bad. But do you remember what I told you all that time ago when you were here with Emmy last? We talked about healing. It may not have been about you at the time, but the same thing applies to this."

Healing doesn't mean the damage never existed. It just means that it can no longer control our lives.

"You told me I was a hurt soul."

My brows arch when she chuckles to herself. "Boy, your soul is more than that at this point. It's broken if I ever saw it. I know you went through the same loss as the rest of us, but we're figuring out how to get through it. You're not. So, what are you going to do about it?"

I stare at her in silence. What answer could I give her that would appease her? Not an honest one.

She taps the table. "Your eyes are screaming for relief. Whether you like it or not, they remind me of my Joanne's eyes. Full of sadness. You're too young to stop existing like she has all these years. Whatever you need to do, do it before it's too late."

What does that even mean?

We're quiet for a long time.

"I'm moving back to New York," I tell her, tracing some of the condensation on the glass. "For work. For...family."

"That's a good start, boy."

I go back to staring at my drink. "What if I don't want to move on?"

The older woman shakes her head. "Then you're living life wrong. We all need to move on at some point, to some degree. There ain't no point in being stuck in purgatory when you have the opportunity to flourish elsewhere. Didn't Emery want you to go to school? Get your degree? Live life to the fullest?"

Emery wanted a lot of things. "Yes. And I've done that. I got the degree. Went to parties. Made friends. I've..." Well, I haven't dated or even slept around like I made people believe I have. I barely even looked at a girl

during college. It didn't feel right. "It just doesn't seem fair that I can do those things when she can't."

"Boy, if you haven't figured out that life ain't fair, there's no hope for you after all."

CHAPTER SIX

THE FIVE-YEAR-OLD dirty-haired blonde hurls herself at me at record speed, barely giving me time to set my bag down before catching her midair. "What are they feeding you?" I ask, pretending she weighs too much for me to handle.

Sophia giggles. "Daddy gave me candy! But I told him I wouldn't tell Mommy because she says it'll spoil my dinner."

Mom walks into the room and sighs. "It *will* spoil your dinner. Like when a certain somebody took you out for ice cream right before supper."

I smile innocently. "I didn't know it was so close to dinnertime."

She rolls her eyes at my bullshit response but doesn't call me out on it. "You're in luck. We decided to order pizza tonight. Do you still like Tony's hot wings?"

My little sister wraps her arms around my neck. "Can I have some?"

"You hate spicy stuff," I remind her, tickling her side until she's laughing and squirming.

"But you like it," she says in between her bouts of loud giggles.

I carry her into the living room where Mom is folding a throw blanket and draping it across the back of the couch. "We don't have to like the same things, Soph."

She wiggles until I let her down on the carpet where she's got toys sprawled everywhere. "Good. 'Cause Cooper likes popping heads off the Barbies at school, and I don't like doing that."

Both Mom and I stare at her.

She shrugs, so I let it go.

Mom gestures toward the kitchen, so I follow behind her. "So?" she asks, a hopeful look on her face.

I nod once. "I got it."

The noise she makes is comical as she pulls me in for a hug. Our height difference makes me have to bend slightly as she wraps her arms around my neck. "Oh, baby boy. I'm so happy for you. When do you start? Do you have orientation? Should Henry and I hire a U-Haul and help pack your apartment?"

"Mom," I laugh, pulling away. When I see her wide smile, I shake my head. "Breathe. I need to register for a certification exam that way I can practice here in New York first. Dr. Steiner said his office will send me the rest of the information soon. I'll need to fill out some paperwork with HR once I pass the exam and I'll go from there."

Her hands clasp in front of her. "And your apartment? Do you have leads for new housing? One of my friends lives close to the office you'll be working at. I could ask if she knows anybody renting."

"I'll handle it."

"I want to help. Henry too. We've been talking about it a lot and if there's anything we can do, we're willing. We know money has been tight for you. We've got some old furniture you can have. And there's this gallery in Bridgeport that would be interested in—"

"Mom," I say, stopping her from suggesting what I know she's going to. "We've talked about this."

Her hand grips my bicep. "Your art is too good not to show off. I know it's not your career goal, but people *want* to see your work displayed. And what's wrong with making a little money off it? It'll help you get on your feet. I've told my friends about you. They want to see what you create."

My lips twitch, but I force them to remain neutral. "Did you not just hear me say I got a job using the degree I spent four years working toward? I don't need to do anything with my art."

Defeat starts clouding her eyes. "I'm trying to show that you have options. You've always loved expressing yourself through art. Your drawings are amazing. Your paintings—"

"Aren't up for discussion much less sale."

"Kaiden—"

"You know what they mean to me."

She frowns, looking away for a moment. "Do I? Kaiden, I love you to death but you're too stubborn for your own good. It's been a long time since you've willingly shown me any of your pieces. I think what you're doing is *good*. You're channeling your emotions into them just like Dr. Brown always told you to do. There are people out there who might resonate with what they see if you give them the chance to."

The last thing I want to do is let people see my pain up close. "I don't feel like having strangers pay to see my misery like that."

I'm surprised when Mom says, "Why not? You give the public a free show every day. Might as well profit from it."

I gape at her comeback.

She turns her back to me and grabs a menu from the side of the fridge. "Do you still like the same toppings on your pizza?"

Discussion closed.

I STARE at the closed door that I haven't crossed through in over four years. Not even when Sophia tried getting me to go inside to play with her. The walls aren't gray anymore. The furniture is different. Bedding stripped. Any reminisce of its former occupant is gone.

When Mom asked me to check on my sister, I knew what she was doing. Challenging me. She knows stepping foot into Emery's old room means facing my problems head on.

Cracking open the door quietly, I take a deep breath and poke my head in to see Sophia's sleeping form. She passed out hours ago after filling her stomach with more pizza and garlic knots than even I ate. Henry had to carry her to bed and tuck her in.

I take a few minutes to glance around, noting the light lavender walls and white furniture fitting for the child sleeping soundly in her bed. There are dolls and stuffed animals scattered. Picture books lined up on a small shelf that she can reach. Pictures of her, Mom, and Henry all wearing Mickey Mouse ears at Disney last year hanging on her wall. She'd wanted me to come with them to celebrate her birthday, but I'd made an excuse not to go.

Mom had been upset with me for weeks.

Swallowing, I back out and close the door until it clicks shut. I rest my back against the wall across the hall and stare at the door.

I used to put sticky notes on it with pictures—things that only Emery could understand. Buried in my closet, hidden away by my clothes and other odds and ends, is the glass jar full of faded Post Its with messages between me and my stepsister that Mom had shipped to me senior year of college when they were redoing the room for Sophia.

Two years ago, I went on a bender with some guys on the team and nearly shattered the jar against a wall at a weak point in my life. I'd been angry. At life. At her. I'd grabbed the container and stared at the wall as if there was a large target painted on it.

Murphy had walked in at the right time and took it from me before I could destroy it. He locked it in his room until I was sober knowing what it'd meant to me, and only then gave it back.

I haven't touched it since.

Haven't trusted myself to.

I should really reach out to Murphy and see what that fucker is up to since graduation.

Slipping into my bedroom, I dig through my bag until I produce the orange prescription bottle and listen to the pills rattle inside. My eyes go to the door briefly before turning my attention back to the escape in front of me.

I twist the cap.

Pour a pill into my palm.

And hesitate halfway to my mouth.

I hear Mom stirring downstairs. Henry's voice. Laughter. Water in the kitchen starts running. A subtle breeze picks up the tree limbs outside my window until they scratch against the glass.

Soaking in the noises, I close my eyes.

Think.

Then put the pill back into the bottle and bury it at the bottom of my bag.

"Not tonight," I tell myself.

Sleep barely comes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HENRY IS in the kitchen when I get up the next morning. He lifts his gaze as he pours a cup of coffee, noting the way my feet drag over to the refrigerator.

"You look like hell," he notes. He grabs a second mug from the cupboard and pours a second one for me as I look to see if there's something quick I can eat.

I spot the egg carton and feel my lips twitch, closing the door and grabbing an apple from the bowl on the counter. "Still like it plain?"

I accept his offering with a gruff, "Yep."

He prepares his coffee, bringing it over to the table and sitting in the same seat he always does. It's still dark out, which means Sophia and Mom are fast asleep.

"Couldn't sleep?" I ask, trying to play nice as I take the seat across from him and bite into the piece of fruit.

He opens the newspaper. "Damn internal alarm clock always gets me up early." There's a pause. "What about you?"

I lift a shoulder. "Same amount as usual."

We're quiet.

For a minute.

Two.

He looks up from the paper. "Cam mentioned going to the cemetery today. Thought you might want to go. She tries heading over once a month to clean up after they mow."

She still goes there? When I lived here, I used to be the sole person who cleaned Dad's gravestone off. Since I left, I assumed she let somebody else

take care of it while she focused on Henry and Sophia.

"Uh...yeah. That'd be nice." I cringe at my awkwardness, gripping the handle of the coffee mug and staring at the steam rolling from the top. Clearing my throat, I take a sip and heft out a tired sigh. "Mom said you don't sleep a lot."

"Funny," he replies casually. "She says the same about you."

He stares.

I stare back.

Henry breaks first with a sigh, folding up the paper and setting it down. "Your mother is worried about you. I know you don't need me to tell you that, but I'm going to anyway. Because I love her, and she loves you. I think going to see your father today will be good for the both of you. Give you time to talk."

For a long stretch of time, I don't say anything. Mostly because I know he's right. Mom and I talk often, but not about anything deep. Anytime she's tried, I've shut her down.

I lean back in my chair, listening to the subtle creak in the wood. "I know." I fiddle with my apple, rolling it in my fingers. "Even though I'll be a couple hours away once I settle into my new job, I think it'll be good that I'm back."

He nods once. "Sophia's already asked how often we can visit you."

My lips twitch. "She's a good kid."

"So are you."

I snort. "Bet you never thought you'd say that to me," I muse dryly. I've never hidden my feelings toward him. Over the years, I've let them fade. They exist, but they're buried under other shit I have to deal with. Not my priority.

"You had your reasons to feel the way you do. Truthfully, I've always admired that about you. You're loyal. To your father. To Emery. You won't forgive anybody that's done her wrong, and I'm high on that list."

My jaw clenches tightly.

"But I can't go back and change that no matter how badly I wish I could. That's something I'll be living with for the rest of my life whether I want to or not. It's my burden to bear. It's Joanne's too. The only people who truly had her back were you and her grandmother. I'll always be grateful to you for that."

I swallow my words, loosening my tight jaw before glancing at the fridge. There are pictures hanging up that Sophia made. Report cards with good grades. Family portraits.

One of them is Emery.

Blonde hair.

Hazel eyes.

White smile.

"I know you two cared deeply for one another," he says, voice barely a notch above a whisper as he stares at the picture that's caught my attention. "I'm not sure to what degree and I don't think I want to know. You gave her a chance to experience what it was like to be young. To be carefree. You were real with her. Honest even if you probably shouldn't have been. Brutally so."

My fingers tighten around my mug, ignoring the sting of main from the heated ceramic. "Henry, I don't need your praise."

"Well, too bad."

I steal a glance in his direction to see the somber expression plastered on his aged features. He looks tired—from more than insomnia.

"My baby girl was a big light in this world. I know you experienced that firsthand. Your mother saw a change in you for the better because of her and you let that slip away the second she passed. The first year we let it slide because you were mourning. By the second year it was obvious you were stuck. The third year, it seemed like—"

"Do you have a point?" I snap.

He levels with me. "You're depressed. You're angry. You're looking for somebody to blame, so you don't have to acknowledge reality. The reality is, Emery is dead. My beautiful baby girl, my sunshine, is gone. Both of them. And because I know what that feels like, the last thing I want to see is Cam go through it too."

My eye twitches. "She doesn't have to worry about that."

"Doesn't she?" he doubts, cocking his head as he studies me. "You're on a cliff, Kaiden. You're not getting any better by pretending you're fine. Avoiding reality won't change anything. Accepting it will."

"How very Dr. Phil of you."

"Mock all you want." He shrugs loosely, taking a sip of his coffee. "But I love my wife very much, and I'll do anything to ensure that she doesn't have to face the same loss as I have. It doesn't matter if it's physical—

mental health is still health. A struggle is still a struggle. And, son, you're on the edge. Of what, I'm afraid to find out. But this is your wake-up call. Take a step back. Don't jump. Not for me. For her."

I push back in my chair, leaving my coffee untouched on the table. "Always a pleasure talking to you, Henry."

I hear his sigh as I leave the room.

When I close myself in mine, I dig out the hydrocodone, take two, and crawl back into bed.

Reality can go fuck itself.

At least for a little while.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I GROAN when something jabs at my chest. Curse when it starts poking my cheek. I go to reach for whatever it is when I hear, "Sophia, what are you doing in here?"

My eyes peel open to see a set of light brownish-green ones staring at me eye level from beside the mattress. Blinking away the exhaustion, I slowly pick my head up to check the time on the old alarm clock I left behind when I moved.

"Fuck," I say aloud, head weighing me down until I have to drop it back into the pillow.

"Kai said a bad word!" my sister exclaims in a loud shriek that makes me bend the pillow in half so it's covering both my ears.

Mom sighs. "Trust me. I heard."

Little feet get ushered away until they run down the hallway.

My blankets start to move. "It's after one in the afternoon, Kaiden. You should get up and eat something. There's leftovers in the fridge you can have for lunch."

I make no effort to move even when she yanks the comforter off me. "I'm tired."

"Are you sick?"

"Only mentally, apparently."

She's silent for a second. "Get up."

I don't.

"Kaiden!"

I groan into the pillow before dropping it, arms like lead as they drop to the mattress. "I said I'm tired. Jesus Christ." Mom mumbles something under her breath before backing up. In the process, she knocks my bag over onto the floor, and that's when I hear the pill bottle rattle and roll.

Eyes opening as Mom bends down to pick it up, I watch as she examines the label. Her eyes flick over to me. "What is this?"

I don't make a smartass remark like I'm tempted to. It'd be misplaced. I can tell by the panicked look on her face as she scans the black ink across the sticker on the front.

"Kaiden Monroe, are you taking these?"

I close my eyes again.

Now she's angry. "I swear to God, if you don't answer me—"

"Yes," I groan, scrubbing my face. I sit up slowly, using the headboard to keep me upright. My body is groggy and dragging from the aftereffects of the medicine. "They help me sleep, okay?"

"No. That's not 'okay.' These are not meant for sleeping. They're addictive." She grips the bottle and starts looking at me like I'm a stranger. "Are you doing drugs?"

"What the fuck? No."

"Well, you're misusing these," she points out coldly, ripping the comforter completely off the bed as if she's searching for something. Grabbing my bag and dumping it out onto the mattress, she begins rummaging through the contents. "How am I supposed to know what else you're using. *If* you're using."

"What are you doing?"

"What does it look like? I'm making sure there isn't anything else in here you haven't told me about." When she sees there isn't, she holds up the bottle. "These are expired. I can't believe you'd be dumb enough to use them at all, least of all for something like this."

My jaw ticks. "Don't call me that."

"I call it like I see it, just like somebody else I know." She walks out of the room and into the bathroom.

I bolt out of bed and follow her, stumbling over the shit on the floor, just in time to see her dump the pills down the toilet and flush. I grip the doorjamb, staying silent as she tosses the empty bottle into the garbage can.

When she turns to me, her eyes are glazed with tears. "Tell me why you're using them. And be honest. No more lying."

"Mom—"

"There are other ways. You can see a doctor. A specialist. There are medicines you can try at any store, Kaiden. This—" She points toward the trash. "—is not the answer. How long have you been taking them?"

My nostrils twitch.

"How long?"

Fingers raking through my hair, I squeeze the strands and admit, "About a month. I don't take them every day. Just when I need to get some sleep. They knock me out for a little while."

She shakes her head in disbelief. "I'm calling Dr. Brown."

"I don't—"

"Don't you dare argue with me. You should have never stopped seeing him, but I let it slide. I didn't want to push you. I wanted to believe you were fine. But this? This is the final straw. You're going to see him or else."

I scoff. "Or else what?"

She eyes me, something dark in her eyes that I've never seen before. "I'll call your new boss and tell him what you've been doing. We'll see if they're still interested in giving you the position when he finds out you've been self-medicating instead of handling your problems the right way."

Shock straightens my spine.

She jabs her finger in my direction, rage seeping into her features. "Do not test me. I will not watch you do this to yourself. I shouldn't have let you get away with it for so long. This is *dangerous*. First it's hydrocodone to help you sleep. Then it's pot to calm your nerves. Maybe you already do that. But what then? Coke to get you through the day? Heroine for energy? What, Kaiden? When does it stop?"

"You're overreact—"

"One call, Kaiden. It will take one phone call to ensure you're stuck right here with me and Henry. I've been understanding, but this is where I stop. You need help. Serious help. Help that I can't give you. Help that you'd never in a million years let Henry give you even if he can understand your situation better than anyone. I'm calling Dr. Brown and you're going to see him as soon as he can fit you in."

I'm smart this time and remain silent.

Sophia comes up behind me a few tense moments later, tugging on the pantleg of my pajama pants. "Kai, why does Mommy look so sad?"

I don't look down at her. Instead, my gaze trails over to the large mirror hanging above the vanity. I don't recognize the man in the reflection staring

back at me. The bags under my eyes are deep and dark. The color of my brown orbs are glazed and bloodshot. I'm a walking corpse. "I did something stupid, kid."

"And she's mad at you?"

My eyes catch Mom's wavering lips.

"She's worried."

"'Cause she loves you?"

I pause. "Yeah. Because she loves me."

Sophia hugs my leg. "I love you too."

My hand falls to her shoulders in silence.

When my eyes meet Mom's again, I simply nod once.

That's all she needs before she pulls out her cell phone and walks past me, dialing a number I hoped I'd never need to use again.

You need help.

You need help.

You need help.

CHAPTER NINE

THE CLOCK on the wall has no numbers. I don't know why it pisses me off so much, but it does. I hear the ticking. See the hands move. The seconds pass. But they point to nothing.

No direction.

No certainty.

Mom is sitting with a book in her lap, reading silently beside me. As if she senses me staring in her direction, her gaze lifts. "How are you doing?"

It's been two days since she found the pills. In those forty-eight hours I've been under surveillance, and she's played dirty every second of it. If she's not in the room, it's Henry. And if they're both busy doing something, they employ Sophia to hang around me because they know I'd never do anything sketchy around her.

Smart.

Tactful.

She hasn't forgiven me for my recklessness. I can tell by the glint in her eye that she watches me with. I know skepticism when I see it, and she's full of it. Not that I can really blame her.

Not knowing what to say, I simply shrug.

I didn't fight when she told me about the appointment, and I didn't argue when she said she was coming with me so I wouldn't bail.

She doesn't trust me.

Probably smart.

Sometimes, I don't trust myself.

My eyes go back to the clock.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

Mom and I sit in silence until I'm called back by the receptionist. An older woman with a soft smile. She's wasting her comfort on me, though. I don't deserve it, and I'm sure Mom would agree. My guard dog gives my arm a gentle squeeze as I pass by her and says she'll be right there when I'm done.

One hour.

That's all I need to sit through.

When I enter Dr. Brown's office, I realize time hasn't changed him one bit. He's still got the same short silver hair, trimmed beard, and thick glasses. Stereotypical therapist as far as I'm concerned. Button down shirt. Slacks. Polished dress shoes. Put together. Proper. Professional.

"Kaiden," he greets, holding out his hand.

I take it, shaking firmly once and walking over to the chair I know all too well and dropping into it.

The layout of the office is the same too. Small desk. Large bookcases. Long couch. Two armchairs. It smells like summertime and lavender. He says it's calming.

"Before you start in on me," I tell him, draping an ankle over my knee.
"I'm not addicted to anything. Mom freaked out."

Dr. Brown sits across from me, an unreadable expression on his face. "I'd hardly say her reaction was unjustified from what she told me. I've seen a lot of cases like yours. Some people get in too deep before anybody steps in like she did."

Pressing my lips together, I glance out the window. "The clock in the waiting room is fucked up."

An amused sound rises from him. "Is it?"

"There aren't any numbers."

"I'm told it's stylistic."

"It's ugly."

A soft chuckle comes from him. "I don't want to talk about the clock for the next fifty-eight minutes."

My leg starts bouncing anxiously. "Last time I was here you told me we could talk about anything. I could say as much or as little as I wanted."

"That was before you were abusing medication. Last time you were here, it'd taken me weeks before I convinced you to even try antidepressants. Clearly, now is different. We're starting over. New. That means new conditions to the visits."

"Visit. Not plural."

He simply stares at me.

I cross my arms on my chest. "I didn't take the hydrocodone for long. And the last time you gave me the antidepressants, I didn't start taking them right away. When I finally did, I didn't like how they made me feel."

"And how was that?"

I roll my eyes. "Tired. Draggy. I didn't feel right. It was hard to get up and go to class and do what I needed to do."

A noise of contemplation rises from his throat. "And how did the hydrocodone make you feel?"

"That's different."

"How so?"

"I wanted them to make me feel that way," I inform him. "Listen, doc. I'm not going to sit here and tell you that what I did was smart. I know it wasn't. But after I ran out of the medicine you prescribed me, I didn't want to call and ask for a refill after I used up the others. I didn't want to do *this*."

"Talk?"

I nod, evading my eyes.

"Talking helps. I thought we agreed on that last time. You told me about school. About your mother. You had big aspirations you were planning on achieving in the coming years. Then you started canceling your appointments."

What does he want from me? "You just said this was starting over. Bringing up last time seems pointless if we're playing by your rules." When he doesn't say anything, my eye twitches. "You're right. College got busy because I decided to focus on my future. The future *you* told me to strive for."

"Something changed," he notes.

My eyes narrow.

"You just said that you didn't take the medication right away. Clearly you did eventually if you ran out of refills and had to start using something else to get by. So, what changed?"

I did.

The answer comes silently, quickly.

I dissect it. Evaluate it.

Dr. Brown watches as I tense up in the armchair, my arms falling to the sides until my fingers grip the ends. "What are you thinking? I have a

feeling you can't walk out of this session, or your mother would storm right back in here with you. So, you might as well tell me what's on your mind."

Considering she's been wearing her war face all day, I'd say he's probably right. And because I don't feel like sitting in silence, I decide to enlighten him.

"I graduated."

His eyebrows raise in curiosity.

My palm scrapes down my face as I sit up straight, shoulders tensing as I draw them back in a guarded stance. "I graduated college and stopped having the distraction of school. I couldn't focus on schoolwork and studying. I didn't have lacrosse. No real job prospects besides part time bullshit that barely paid. My college buddies moved elsewhere. My family wasn't around. You want to know what changed? I did. Plain and simple."

"You didn't have anybody or anything else to fall back on," he remarks, nodding as if he understands.

One of my shoulders lifts. Maybe the moment things really changed was when I started taking job hunting seriously—when I had to accept that my biggest opportunity would mean moving back to New York and facing the demons I was running from.

My mother.

My father.

Emery.

The life I had in Exeter was going to hit me in full force the second I settled back into my old role. Except what role was that? I wasn't the man of the high school. I wasn't some great lacrosse player. I didn't have Emery. Never stayed in touch with anybody I graduated with from my hometown.

I had nothing.

Nobody.

Mom didn't count.

Henry sure as hell didn't.

Sophia was too young to be saddled with the weight of my baggage.

Who else was there?

What else?

I click my tongue. "I'm moving back. Closer to Bridgeport. I found a job that I can use my degree for. Mom threatened to tattle to my boss about the medicine if I didn't come here."

"Physical therapy, correct?" he asks.

I nod.

"So, you graduated and got a job." I'm glad he doesn't say anything about Mom's threats. Knowing him, he's probably happy she made them.

"I haven't started yet. Haven't moved."

"When do you plan on doing that?"

"I don't know. I just found out. Then..." I gesture around us. "Mom found my pills and dragged me here."

Dr. Brown leans forward, grabbing a mug that I know has tea in it. Probably green. He always loved that shit. "I'm glad she did. I could never force any of my patients to continue sessions, but I wanted to with you. When you cancelled on me the first time, I was optimistic. When you continued to do so, I knew you weren't coming back."

"I had it handled."

His brows raise again, this time in doubt.

Reluctantly, I grumble, "I *thought* I had it handled. When I had school and sports, it didn't seem so bad. I had other things to think about."

He hums inconspicuously. "You need a clear plan if you truly want to handle your future the right way. A game plan if you will."

"I don't play sports anymore, so you can quit it with the cliché sports lines."

"Maybe you should," he offers.

I stare.

"There are teams you could join. I'm sure Bridgeport has some leagues you could look into. Physical activity is a great way to let your mind rest and get out frustrations. Football. Baseball. Lacrosse. Anything you're interested in. Sports can be used as distraction method. A chance to breathe and think about something focused instead of whatever going on in your life. You said it yourself, Kaiden. Things weren't so bad then."

"But that shit is always going to be there," I point out gingerly. "What am I supposed to do then when I'm done playing? When I'm home from work?"

"You face it."

The scoff that comes from me is dry as I level him an unamused look. "How the hell am I supposed to do that?"

This time, it's him who shrugs. "You tell me. You can't run from it anymore. And I'd prefer not prescribing you anymore medication right

away either. Not until I know you've tried other methods. Meditation. Distraction. Acknowledging what it is that's causing you distress."

He's got to be fucking with me. "You know what that is already. This isn't our first rodeo. Fresh start or not. My problems are rooted, remember? Dead dad. Dead stepsister. Trust issues. The whole nine yards of fuckery."

Brown shakes his head thoughtfully. "It's not our first rodeo. However, it is the first time you're here telling me you have a problem."

"I didn't say that."

"The second you admitted your issues would always be within you is the very moment you admitted you have a problem. It's that simple. What's not is how to deal with it."

My leg stops bouncing. "What do you propose, doc? If you're not going to offer me the magic pill, what is that scheming mind of yours coming up with?"

He chuckles lightly. "You need to accept help from your mother and stepfather. That's the first step. Then you need to stop fighting me. I've got a lot of years of experience dealing with grief, Mr. Monroe. Which means I know how to get people past the darkest part of it."

I want to make a quip about how he failed the first time, but I know he'd point out the reason for that is because I never gave him a real chance.

I pick at the lint on the denim covering my thigh. "What am I supposed to do? Let Mom help me find an apartment? Let them help me move? That doesn't seem like enough."

"For who?"

"Do you always have to answer a question with another question?" I counter, eyeing him in annoyance.

Instead of giving me another one, he lifts a shoulder and waits for me to answer.

Wetting my lips, I heft out a heavy sigh and consider my answer. "Those things just seem mundane to me. What impact would they have on them? It doesn't seem like enough to do anything vital."

Dr. Brown considers that. "Look at it from your mother's point of view. You haven't asked her for any help before, so even the tiniest thing will be bigger to her than you think. By asking her to help you find a place or asking she and her husband to help you move, would mean the world to her. I'm almost positive of that."

I sink back into my seat, staring out the window and watching the wind blow the leaves on the trees. "You're not wrong," I murmur.

"What do you want from your mother?"

Another question.

Rubbing my lips together, I answer as honestly as I can. "I don't know. I want us to be normal. Whatever the hell that is."

"Everybody's version of normal is different. The relationship you have with your mother was strained for years. Has it gotten better since the last time I saw you?"

Despite the reason I'm here, I nod. If anything, today proves how much she loves me. And Henry's conversation with me days ago hits deep because I know he's right.

Mom doesn't deserve to face the same loss he has. And she won't. I'll make damn sure of that. "I didn't use the pills to cause anybody harm. Me or her. But I did."

My acknowledgement makes him look pleasantly surprised. "Even if your intentions were innocent, the people who care about you will worry regardless. Your mother loves you, and I think you wanting to have a relationship with her is a great thing. It means you're taking the steps to make something of yourself. Build connections. Dare I say, move forward."

But not move on.

"So, what are you going to do?" he asks.

This time, the question doesn't irritate me. Much. "I guess I'm going to ask if she wants to help me out."

Dr. Brown smiles.

I don't.

But I don't scowl either.

CHAPTER TEN

HENRY TAPES up one of the boxes that Mom passes him after filling it with folded clothes from my closet. The only thing left are a few pairs of shoes and some folders and boxes stuffed on the top shelf.

Mom gets on her tiptoes and reaches for one of the boxes, losing her grip on the worn cardboard. I try catching it before it collides with the hardwood, but I'm too late.

I hear the glass on impact.

Watch the shards fly from the opening.

Henry instantly moves Cam away, so she doesn't step on it.

But me?

I drop to my knees, ignoring the sharp slices of pain as the broken glass cuts into my skin. I open the box and stare at the broken jar inside, quickly collecting the pieces of paper scattered and not caring about the glass with the handfuls I gather.

"Kaiden," Henry says in warning, putting his hand on my shoulder and squeezing. "You're bleeding. Let them go."

Let them go.

My eyes go to the droplets soaking into some of the paper in my hand, then down at droplets on the floor.

Mom carefully squats down, lifting my chin up to meet her worried gaze. "Oh, baby..."

Tears sting my eyes, blurring her image in front of me. I go to clench what's resting in my palms, but Henry stops me from causing more damage.

When I look down again, I see the destroyed Post Its. Images stained. Words slowly soaking in red. Glass woven into the last gift given to me by

Emery.

That's when the first tear falls.

Then the second.

Until a stream floods my face, and the papers scattered across the floor are coated with more than blood.

I'm being pulled up by small hands, guided away from the mess by large ones, and wrapped in two sets of arms.

"Let it out, baby," Mom whispers, hugging me harder than she ever has.

I cry.

Silently.

Desperately.

Clenching onto Mom's shirt.

When Henry puts an arm around my shoulders, I don't pull away.

I haven't cried in a long time.

It's been building.

Building.

Building.

And the dam finally broke.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HENRY SWEPT UP THE PIECES, carefully sorting out glass from the paper. A somber look remained on his face the entire time as Mom held onto me through my breakdown.

And when the tears subsided, so did a piece of the pressure that I thought was woven into my being permanently.

Hours later, each room is empty save for the dust and faded marks on the floors from where furniture has rested for years.

Mom holds my hand.

Henry holds my shoulder.

A box is passed to me.

Glancing down, I take in the carefully placed papers with pictures and wording covered in water stains and blood droplets.

On the top is a picture of a mouse.

Untouched but faded.

The nickname striking recognition deep inside of me until I have to close my eyes and look away.

"She'd be so proud of you," Henry tells me in that gruff voice of his. It's slightly cracked, holding back the emotion that surfaced in the time they were with me today.

Mom pecks my cheek. "She would." Her hand lifts mine, examining the little cuts she cleaned up as soon as she could. My knees have it worse. They'll probably scar over, which seems fitting.

The girl who brought me to my knees the first time scarred them from doing it a second.

She left a mark.

On me.

On her family.

On everybody.

A laugh bubbles up, escaping before I can hold it back and startling Mom and Henry. Their concerned stares pin me to my spot as I shake my head and study the apartment.

It's a clean slate for me now that I'm letting this place go. Maryland. Moving on.

"Kaiden?" Mom asks carefully.

I take a deep breath, repeating that to myself silently.

Moving on.

"I'll be okay."

For once, I think I mean it.

"Come on, then," she urges, smoothing her hand over my back and guiding me to the front door. "Dr. Brown will be happy to know you did this. We can tell him about it during your next telehealth call."

Swallowing, I pull out my keys and stare at the door that Henry closes behind us before inserting it into the deadbolt and clicking the lock into place.

New beginnings.

It's a foreign concept for me.

Bold.

Big.

But if Emery could do it—leaving behind her mother, grandmother, and childhood memories to come stay with Henry, me, and Mom all those years ago—then I could do it now.

Start to heal.

Slowly.

Painfully.

I whisper, "I'll be okay."

Eventually.

BONUS SCENE #1: CHAPTER FOUR

The following bonus content contains scenes told in Kaiden's point of view from Underneath the Sycamore Tree.

For Christ's sake. She's crying. Normally I can ignore that shit, but there's something alarming about the defeated arch to her shoulders as she palms her eyelids to contain the streams of tears rolling down her cheeks.

I took her to my spot—my thinking spot. My quiet place. The sycamore tree at the cemetery is the one place in Exeter I can go without being bothered by life. Bringing her here was supposed to be a temporary olive branch.

Despite the reservations I've had about the quiet blonde, I figured she needed this after how the dinner went.

"You need to breathe, Mouse."

I position myself against the bark, squirming uncomfortably as she cracks her eyes open.

"Why do you look mad?" she sniffles.

I grumble, "Don't do well with crying."

We're quiet as she nudges the grass with the tip of her shoe. She watches me with contemplation as if debating her options before walking over and sitting beside me. Resting her chin on her bent knees, she blows out a heavy breath, expelling the bullshit that led us here.

"Your father is an asshole," I tell her. When she's silent in return, not bothering to refute me, I itch the column of my throat and think about what I'd said at the restaurant. "Sorry about ... shit, you know."

If I'd known about her sister, I never would have said what I did. I'm an asshole, but even I have my limits.

Emery pauses a moment, her lips twitching before going back to neutral. They're unreadable. I don't like that. "She was my best friend," she says out of the blue.

My jaw ticks. How am I supposed to respond to that? Do I should ask Emery about her sister. Do I tell her I'm sorry? It wouldn't matter anyway. She'd still be dead regardless of whatever I come up with.

I remain silent beside her.

My stepsister takes a small breath before whispering, "Did my dad really not say anything?"

I clear my throat. "No."

She simply nods.

Henry really is an asshole. How could he not say anything to me about Emery's twin? About the loss they both shared? Why the fuck did he think he had to hide that?

My fingers tighten into fists in my lap, realizing just how fucked Emery's dynamic is with him. It's no wonder she looks so uncomfortable at the house. I sure as hell haven't made it any better for her.

To my surprise, Emery says, "I found out he was remarried through a friend of the family. This older woman was gossiping at the grocery store when I went to pick up paper plates." She lets out an empty laugh. "Weird that I remember what I was getting, huh? I was in the aisle trying to choose between the off brand or name brand with little blue flowers on the edges of both. Then I heard Mrs. Wallaby tell someone in the next aisle that she heard about Dad getting married to a 'pretty young woman with a son of her own.' She said it must be nice to get a fresh start and new chance at a family."

I press my lips together, unable to trust myself from commenting. I'm not sure how I'd react if I were in her shoes. Probably as pissed as I am for Henry not indulging me on his previous life before he butted into mine.

I eventually shift in my spot, visibly uncomfortable by the direction of our conversation. "I don't usually come here to talk."

Emery's lips part then quickly close again. I don't know what she's thinking, but the slight widening of her eyes is comical. "Oh."

Her flushed cheeks tell me exactly what she's assuming I mean by that. I can't blame her mind for going there. I have a reputation at school. Girls

flirt with me and I don't stop them. People talk—whether that shit is true or not, I let everyone believe what they want. Her included.

It's easier that way.

I chuckle at her obvious embarrassment, swiping at my wavering lips. "I come here to think."

After a while, she settles against the tree and squeezes her arms tighter around her legs. I notice the way she studies our surroundings. Flowers in full bloom, but not for much longer. Leaves turning to autumn colors. Clear sky. Light breeze. It's a beautiful night to share with the broken human beside me.

We're one of the same, Mouse and me.

It's a few moments of listening to the crickets play us their song when Emery makes small talk about people at school. Things that I couldn't care less about talking about. Truthfully, all I want to do is sit here. With her. With nature. With my thoughts.

When's the last time I actually *wanted* to spend time with anybody?

My eyes find their way to her profile. She's lost in thought, unknowing of my interest. That's probably a good thing. Something tells me that she wouldn't know what to do with it if she knew how much of my attention she's really captured in the short time she's been here.

I draw one leg up and ask, "Which paper plates did you buy?"

A relieved laugh bubbles from her.

Her head rests backward, her blonde hair stark contrast against the dark, aged bark. "I didn't buy either."

We fall back into peaceful silence.

She fell asleep. I don't know how. There's no way she can possibly be comfortable. What confuses me even more is how she barely stirs when I pick her up, cradling her too-light body against me as I carry her up the field and around the fence I helped her climb over earlier.

If her scent had a label, it'd be summertime. Light and airy. Fresh. Innocent. An odd combo but perfect for her. It eases the tightness that's been settled into my chest for a long time.

We're halfway home when she starts coming to in the backseat where I laid her down. She's using her hands as a pillow, staring at me in confusion when I meet her gaze in the rearview mirror.

Even sleepy, she's cute.

Never thought I'd admit that.

Not sure how to feel about it.

I grind my teeth at the weird feeling building, gripping the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white. "We're almost home."

She sits up groggily, looking exhausted still. I watch her carefully until she's sitting upright, then return my eyes back on the road lit dimly by streetlights.

"Have you eaten anything today?"

There's a brief pause. "Not since you saw me making something earlier."

I curse and pull into the driveway. After parking, I twist around to look at her. "You have to eat, Mouse. You're too skinny as it is."

A dark look shadows over her features, and it's one of the first times she's shown me that I've struck a nerve. Is it weird I like it? Probably. It means she's got a bark to her bite. That's a good thing when dealing with somebody like me.

"What has my father told you about me?"

I offer her silence.

She scoffs. "Let's just go inside."

I sigh in exasperation, getting out and opening the door for her. "What? Do you have an eating disorder or some shit? You could be prettier if you just gained some fucking weight."

She slides out of the car and storms to the front door, walking in with me close behind her.

I grip her wrist to stop her from storming off like a child throwing a tantrum. "Let go of me, Kaiden."

I do. "Go to the kitchen."

"Don't tell me—"

"Christ, Emery. I'll make you dinner."

She blinks, seemingly as surprised as I am that I'd want to do that for her. "I'm sure they brought back the food they ordered. I'll eat that."

I roll my eyes, crossing my arms over my chest. "You don't even like Mexican food."

"I ordered a salad."

"You need protein."

"I'm sure there are beans on it."

My fists clench frustrated that she won't let me take care of her. Did Henry and her mother fuck her up that much that she feels the need to do everything on her own? "Just get your ass into the kitchen. I'll make you eggs or something." When her brows raise, I shake my head. "Don't let it go to your head. I want an omelet, so I'll make you something too. I won't be your bitch boy again."

Despite my cool tone, she follows behind me as I flick the kitchen lights on. "What do you want?"

"Scrambled is fine."

"You need more than scrambled eggs. Will you eat bacon if I make it? Toast? Cheese, for the little Mouse?"

"Stop calling me that."

I wait for an answer.

"Fine. Yes, I'll eat those too."

I smile victoriously.

"Where are our parents?" she asks.

"They know to leave me alone when I leave for a while," I indulge.

"They don't know that about me."

I shrug, not glancing in her direction to gauge her reaction when I reply, "You were with me."

"How could they know that?"

"Because I told them I'd get you."

Nothing but the butter sizzling in the pan fills the silence between us. I cook effortlessly because I'm used to this. Making things for myself. Anything so I don't have to have family dinners with Cam and Henry.

By the time I'm finished, I set a steaming plate full of eggs sprinkled with cheese, bacon, and a slice of buttered toast down in front of Emery and watch her stare. I stay quiet as I grab silverware and put it beside her plate.

I busy myself with cleaning up my mess, hand Mouse a bottle of water from the fridge, and leave the room.

If she notices I never made myself an omelet, she doesn't say.

The moment I close my bedroom door behind me I realize I want to take care of the girl I left behind in the kitchen.

We'll see if she'll let me or tell me to screw off.

Secretly, I hope it's the second option. I smirk.

BONUS SCENE #2: CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

When Emery walks into her room, I sit up with a scowl on my face. Cam texted me to let me know they'd taken her to the hospital. No explanation as to why. Barely any updates besides the "on our way home" message I got from Henry's number not long ago.

"Don't start right now," she tells me tiredly, not seeming surprised I'm in her room.

It wouldn't be the first time.

Definitely isn't going to be the last even though I'm pissed off at the moment.

I hold out my hand after she's done toeing off her shoes and walking toward the mattress I'm draped on. "Give me your phone."

She stares at my extended palm. "Uh, why?"

Is she fucking joking?

Thankfully, she digs out her cell and places it into my palm, brows pinched in confusion like she generally doesn't understand why I'd want it. I unlock it using the code I've seen her use hundreds of times when checking for texts from her mother—messages that I notice never appear no matter how hard she wills them to—and then pass it back to her after I finish putting my number in as her number one contact.

"Use my fucking number," I tell her, irritated I've been worried for hours since Cam's original text and barely got anything from her now that she's back.

I'd like to think we've become friends. Why else would I stick my back out for her? Tease her as much as I do? I've made sure people at school don't fuck with her. Do I piss her off? Sure. But it seems mutual. We like each other, there's no denying that, but we get on each other's nerves.

Cam says it's like we're siblings.

The feelings I get when I'm around her, though, is anything but familial.

I walk out, leaving her dumbfounded behind me. I don't trust myself not to say something that'll fuck things up with us. I'm too angry to process things right now.

Leaving her for a while is the best thing to do, even if the gaze burning into my back doesn't make it seem that way as I close myself in my bedroom down the hall.

Hours later when I've calmed down, I creep into the bedroom I prefer spending my nights in and watch Emery's body slowly rise and fall from her even breathing.

I wait a second or two before climbing in behind her, wrapping an arm around her waist and tugging her into my front. "Are you feeling any better?" I whisper against the back of her neck.

She wiggles, making me bite back a groan when her ass brushes against my dick. "A little. I've just been getting headaches, that's all."

Something tells me that's not entirely true, but I don't have the energy to call her out on it this time.

I feel her heartbeat against my wrist. "Kaiden?"

"Hmm?"

The small breath she releases has me tightening my hold on her. "I'm sorry I worried you."

My eye twitches as the lie forms. "You didn't."

"It's okay to be worried, you know. I won't tell anyone. It can be our little secret."

It can be our little secret.

I don't know why those words do something to me, but they do. And they're dangerous for more than one reason.

Gently flipping her until she's on her back, I hover above her with a smirk curving the corners of my lips. "I can think of other secrets to keep between us that are a lot more fun."

Emery nibbles her bottom lip, hands moving to my sides to grab ahold of the shirt I'd slipped on before coming in here. "I doubt you want anything right now. I got sick today, remember? Not very attractive."

I fight the growing smirk as I lower my hips to let her feel how wrong she is. "Trust me, Mouse. I want you."

"What if I didn't brush my teeth?"

"I can smell the mint toothpaste."

I lean down closer to her.

"What if I tell you no?"

"Then I'll stop."

My lips are so close to hers I can practically taste her. It won't be like last time during break. No rushing. I'd take my time with her. Savor her. Like she deserves.

"What if I told you that I'm sick?"

My eyes focus on the way her mouth forms each word, unable to really let the words sink in. "Headaches, right?"

Her grip on my shirt tightens as she meets me halfway for a soft kiss instead of answering. It's chaste, barely there but still connecting us where it shouldn't. Do I stop it from happening? No. I don't want it to.

I simply let our lips graze each other's as I settle my weight down on her until my dick is pressed where it desperately wants to be. I only last there a few seconds, tracing my tongue along her lips and grinding my pelvis down on hers to relieve some of the pressure in my dick when she winces. "Wait. Stop."

Red alarms sound loudly in my head as I push myself up and roll my body to the side of hers. "Em?"

Her breath becomes choppy as panic seeps into her expression. "I'm sorry. I just..."

Not wanting her to apologize, I open my arm up for her to curl into. I've thought about this a lot. Cuddling. Never considered myself much of a cuddler before meeting Emery. But there's something about her soft body and warmth that draws me in. Makes me want more.

Makes me addicted.

But then she says, "My sister died of an incurable autoimmune disease. She never showed it, but I know Logan was in a lot of pain, especially the months leading up to her death."

Throat tightening, I rub her arm in comfort and try not letting it break the moment we're in. "Is that like a twin thing? You sensed her pain?"

Her whisper is barely audible. "No."

I keep rubbing her arm, giving her friction. Warmth. Letting her know I'm here.

"I have the same disease, Kaiden."

My palm freezes.

Heart all but stops.

I look down at the blonde in my arms.

What. The. Fuck?

Quickly letting her go, I dart off the bed and stare at her in disbelief. She sits up wide-eyed and silent as I seethe at her anything but casual statement.

"Kaiden—"

"Don't." My voice is sharp. Thick with a betrayal I probably don't deserve to feel. But why hasn't she told me this? Why *now*?

Jaw clenching until my teeth ache, I search Emery's face for any signs. Something I missed. A reason that I've been this clueless for so long. Deep down, I should have known. I spend a lot of time with her. Noticed little things that made her stand out from other people.

And the hospital today...

Jesus fucking Christ.

"You're not going to find anything," she tells me sadly as she watches me examine her inch by inch.

I dissect her pale color.

Her glazed eyes.

Her tiny frame.

Nothing she can say to me right now is going to ease the monster demanding to be let loose, so I curse aloud and throw open her bedroom door not giving a shit if Henry and Cam are woken up by my outburst.

She follows me into the hallway, calling out, "Kaiden, come on. It's—"

I stop halfway down the stairs, pinning her with a warning glare. "Why the fuck didn't you tell me?"

"When have you asked me?"

Her comeback grates on me. "Was I supposed to guess that you're sick, Emery? That you're dying or some shit? I'm not a goddamn mind reader."

Her nostrils flare. "I'm *not* dying. And you knew my sister passed away! Did you ever think to ask how? Did you ever stop sulking from your own pity party of one to consider anyone but yourself? No!"

She really fucking went there. Is she wrong? Probably not. But that doesn't make the anger subside either.

The light downstairs turns on and both Henry and Cam appear at the end of the staircase.

Henry asks, "What is going on?"

I ignore both of them like I always do and focus solely on the person I started his conversation with. "You could have offered up the information. It isn't like you haven't had ample opportunity since you moved here."

She throws her hands up. "You. Didn't. Ask!"

Cam steps up. "Kaiden, honey—"

I whirl around, pointing my finger at her in accusation. "Did you know she was sick? Was this all a big *fuck you* to me while being left in the dark? I bet she was at the hospital for other reasons and you're all lying to me about it."

Cam reaches toward me. "Kaid—"

"This is no different than what you did with Dad. Guess what, Cam? I'm eighteen. I can handle the shit life throws at me."

"Really?" Emery questions in doubt from behind me. "From where I'm standing, I don't think that's accurate. You're so consumed by your anger that you're not even considering anybody else in the matter. Least of all me, who was trying to be honest with you."

There's no way in hell I'm letting her say that without pointing out the obvious. She thinks she's the victim, but she's far from it. How long have I tried taking care of her? *Showing* her that I fucking cared? Does she not understand how rare that is for me? "*After* you lived here for months. Don't spin this around on me like you're innocent."

Henry tries cutting in by telling us we all need to calm down, and I find myself laughing at his pointless endeavor. "I suppose you're going to tell me that you're any better? How long have you known you had a sick daughter? One who has the same disease that took your other daughter's life? This is why you took her in, right? You pity her."

In the moment, I don't care what a low blow that is. To Henry. To Emery. I'm too consumed by the secrets being kept—the darkness everybody feels the need to wrap me in like I can't handle the truth.

Maybe if people trusted me, I wouldn't be this way. Always expecting the worst. Never knowing who or what to believe.

"I've let you talk down to him for long enough," Cam says in disapproval. "This matter doesn't concern you, Kaiden. It wasn't information you needed to know."

If that doesn't tell me everything I need to know about this little family dynamic, I don't know what does. Because if we're supposed to be one big happy family like my mother dreams of, she would have never said that to me.

So, I grab my keys.

And storm out.

Twenty minutes later, I'm staring at my father's gravestone like I always do when I need time to think. I trace the letters of his name with my finger.

Adam Monroe.

I sit back in the wet grass.

Let the cold breeze soak into my chilled clothes.

And close my eyes.

Sometimes I wonder if what Emery says is true—that you can feel your loved ones in the wind. In the warmth of the sunlight. Anything.

But all I hear is silence.

All I feel is...numbness.

I draw my legs up to my knees and shake my head. "What the hell am I doing, Dad?" I ask, wishing he were here. Wishing he could tell me what to do. What not to. Help me process.

But would he?

Toward the end of his life, he was no better than Cam. Keeping secrets. Holding back. He was in pain. Too sick to compute what he needed. From me. From my mother. If I'd known, I would have done something—anything to help him.

I blink.

Blink again.

I would have done anything...

Maybe...maybe Emery is my second chance.

I couldn't help my dad. I was never given the opportunity to do something about his illness. But Emery is here. In reaching distance. A flawed human like me. A breathing being willing to fight for herself—to call me out on my bullshit.

My eyes pierce the chipped stone in front of me wondering if he spoke to me after all.

"Fuck me," I whisper to the wind. I know what I need to do. Be there for Emery. Will she let me, though? I sure as hell hope so.

BONUS SCENE #3: CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

I'm jolted awake by the sound of vomiting and instantly spring into action. The strangled cry escaping Emery as I dart toward the small waste basket and put it under her as she empties her stomach again has panic seeping through every fiber of my being.

I cradle her head carefully, swiping at her damp cheeks as she cries. She's warmer than before we went to bed. Burning up on a level that I know can't be good. "Jesus, Em."

Through her choppy whimpers I hear, "S-Something's w-wro..." Before her body starts to slump over the side of the bed.

"Shit. Okay." I look around, feeling my throat tighten as I try figuring out what the hell to do. Do I get Cam? Henry? I've noticed Emery getting worse. More tired than normal. Paler. Her energy has been limited. "Do you think you're going to get sick again?"

When she shakes her head, I quickly strip the bedding covered in sweat and vomit and help her up and toward the bathroom. She stumbles, dropping like dead weight, and I'm barely able to catch her before she hits the ground.

Something's wrong.

Something's wrong.

Something's wrong.

"Whoa." I catch her, supporting her weight again. "I need to get you cleaned up. Can you walk to the bathroom?"

Flicking the light on as we enter the small room, I help peel off her pajama pants and glance up through my lashes at her pale, tear-stained face. She looks...

I can't look for long.

Sick.

Too sick.

Something's wrong.

The words echo in my head. My chest.

When she has problems lifting her right arm to help me get her out of her top, the only thing I can think to do is pick her up and bring her over to the tub.

Something's wrong.

I know when I dare to look down at her again that this is beyond me. Even when I wash her in the lukewarm water, there's nothing I can do on my own.

I need Cam.

I need Mom.

Swallowing down my fear when she starts murmuring under her breath, I nod in acknowledgment and keep washing her off the best I can while holding her body up. She has no strength. No ability to stand. Can barely sit without sinking down into the water streaming around us.

"Fuck," I whisper under my breath, droplets getting into my eyes.

When I'm able to get her toweled off and balanced on the closed toilet seat, I bolt out of the room.

"Henry! Mom!" My voice is hoarse as I quick things out of the way and examine the stripped bed and sour smell. "Mom! Please Hurry!" Tone cracking as I hear two frantic sets of footsteps pounding up the stairs and to Emery's room, I meet them halfway and point toward the bathroom.

They follow me in, Henry bolting over to Emery's sunken figure and examining her as I hold her upright. My hands go to her limp arms, her bobbing head. I tilt her chin up trying to get her to look at me. Her eyelids flutter, barely able to stay open. Her wet hair clinging to her face. Water rolling down her cheeks.

When I glance over at Mom I see fear matching my own deeply woven into her eyes.

All I can do is shake my head.

Because I don't know what to do.

What to say.

How I can help make this better.

"What happened?" Henry demands, taking my place in front of her by practically pushing me aside. "She's burning up. Emery? Baby girl. It's Dad. Hold on, okay? We're going to get you some help."

"I tried rinsing off the puke," I tell him quickly, dragging my fingers through my wet hair and tugging until my scalp stings. "I tried to...I tried. I tried."

Mom grabs ahold of my arm and squeezes as Henry says, "She needs to go to the hospital. Now. Right now."

I want nothing more than to take Henry's place as he lifts Emery from the toilet and carries her out of the room like she's a toddler instead of a teenager. I'm quick to grab the keys and Em's jacket from the hook and lead everybody outside, unlocking Cam's care and opening the back door.

I want to slide in with her.

To hold her close to me.

Reassure her.

But my body is frozen in fear.

In the uncertainty that chills my bones.

Something inside me is screaming as Henry climbs into the back, and I refuse to let it get to me because I need to help her. To do something to save her. Do something for her when I couldn't for my father.

Save her.

Save her.

Save her.

I'm not wearing any shoes, but the pebbles digging into the pads of my feet barely register.

I speed us to the hospital as quickly as I can because I know I'll feel nothing at all if I don't get there in time.

But what is worse? Feeling nothing? Or feeling too much?

My fist is throbbing. I'm pretty sure one of my knuckles is broken from the punch I delivered to the glass mirror in the hospital bathroom.

Hours.

It's been hours and nobody will let me see her. *Family only*, they said whenever I'd push.

Then who the fuck am I?

Who am I to my mother?

To Henry?

To the girl laying somewhere in the ICU with God knows what attached to her. Doctors are poking her. Invading her space. Trying to find answers.

Do I want them?

If I knew the outcome, would I want to know the truth this time? Maybe ignorance is bliss after all. It would hurt less.

Just when I think I may put my hand through something else, the elevator opens, and I see Cam's face appear. It's somber. I quit pacing in the lobby, shoulders drawn back in a guarded stance as she approaches me.

"Emery wants to see you," she tells me.

The exhausted looking woman in front of me takes my hand and squeezes, unknowing of the damage I'd inflicted on myself an hour ago. I'm sure security cameras will reveal what I did. If she doesn't notice the swelling before then, somebody in a uniform will tell her what I'd done. Probably press charges.

And I won't care.

For once, I don't think she will either.

"Kaiden," she says, throat bobbing. "Em needs you to be strong right now. Whatever is brewing inside of you, I need you to hold it back just a little while longer. Okay? This is important."

My eye twitches. "I need to see her."

She nods once. "I know."

I whisper, "I need her."

Her eyes glaze with a fresh layer of tears.

"I know you do," she replies, guiding me toward the elevators and pressing the button. We ascend in silence.

My mind swirls.

Head full of what-ifs.

Of the future. For me. For her. For Henry. I never cared about him that much, but anybody who loses Emery would be losing something huge. A light. Warmth. Oxygen.

A best friend.

Then I see her—her frailty.

I feel the atmosphere.

I understand the severity.

Her hospital bed engulfs her.

The machines are obnoxiously noisy.

Footsteps from doctors and nurses are too loud as shoes squeak on clean tile outside the room.

She needs you to be strong.

Strong.

I can do that.

For her.

My Mouse.

"I was fucking worried," I tell her, scanning the wires and tubes and lights that fill the room. My fists tighten and loosen at my sides as I fidget them. Too afraid to step closer, but not willing to back out. Not yet. "I was about to risk getting arrested just to see you. Do you know how damn hard it was standing out there while they had you in here?"

"I—"

"The nurses are assholes," I say, sneering at the door as a few of them walk by in their scrubs. "They kept telling me someone would be out to give me answers, and nobody ever did. Not once did those doors open, Emery."

She apologizes, but I don't want her to.

I don't know what I want from her.

To fight, I guess.

I want her to fight.

To win.

For me.

Then she tells me what Mom already mentioned about her health update. And none of it is good. Nothing. The crack in my chest widens.

And when she asks, "Are you going...to go to M-Maryland still?" all I can do is gape at the loaded question.

She's asking because she needs to know as much information from me as I do her. What's next. For her. For me. For us. *Is* there an us? Something beyond the friendship we've formed. The bond that's cemented us. I don't know. I'm afraid to wonder for too long.

If I could save Emery, if giving her up would do that, could I? Could I move forward? Move *on*? Let her do the same?

I would.

In that moment, in a heartbeat, I decide I'd do just that—move on without her if that's what it'd take to keep her here.

It's a promise I make to myself. "We're not talking about college right now, Emery."

"Are you going?"

I blink at her insistence.

"Kaiden... I need you to go to UM, okay? It'll make me h-happy."

It'll make her—

My throat bobs as I acknowledge what she's doing. Mapping out my future. One she won't be part of. My eye twitches and throat gets dry. So dry.

"Cam will be happy too," she continues, wrapping her fingers around mine when I force myself forward. I see our fingers linked, but don't feel them. I feel numb. "I'll v-visit when I can. When you have games, I'll... come see you play and cheer you on."

I'll visit you when I can.

Why don't I believe her?

Emery starts rubbing the back of my hand with one of her fingers, a soft caress that does little to comfort me. "Don't tell Cam I told you this because she wants it to be a surprise, but she already bought a bunch of UM sweatshirts and memorabilia. I'm pretty sure I even saw one of those foam fingers."

She's trying. For me. That's the only reason I try smiling in return. I fail, and my lips flatten, but it's there. The effort, no matter how painful it is. It kills me. Slowly.

Emery keeps telling me about the sweatshirts, but I couldn't care less about them. I flip our hands so mine is squeezing hers. Afraid I'm too rough. Afraid I'll hurt her.

But she's hurting me.

Does she see that?

Does she care?

Do I want to leave a mark on her like she's left on me? Because right now, it seems like that's what we're trying to do. Make sure we're remembered. Take advantage of the time we have in this moment together.

"Kaiden?" she murmurs, her thumb stopping in the middle of its movement against my skin.

"Yeah?" My heart pumps wildly.

"Thank you." I lift my gaze in disbelief of those two words. What the hell could she be thanking me for? "Thank you for being my friend. My best friend. Anyone could have stepped up and...tried knowing me and they didn't. It was always just you."

The gaping crack that'd been in my beating organ becomes a black hole.

If Emery wasn't holding my hand, I wonder if I could have folded into myself. Caved to the wild drum of my heartbeat. Into the abyss.

Emery is thanking me when I don't deserve it. Giving me some sort of award when I don't want it. Because being her friend became second nature to me. Effortless. We worked because we're one of the same. Dark pasts. Battered souls.

Hers just becomes...lighter with every word she passes along.

And I know what that means.

Closure. She's getting closure.

We're not given enough time together before the door opens and a man in a long white jacket walks in.

His expression grim as he starts talking.

"Ms. Matterson," he begins, "I'm sorry to have to tell you this..."

Emery lays there in bed.

Mom is crying.

Henry looks pale.

I start shaking violently.

Emery squeezes my hand like it's *me* being delivered the bad news. When I turn to study her, there's relief on her face.

Why, Mouse? I want to ask.

What are you thinking, Mouse?

I need those answers.

But they never come.

Options come from the expert speaking to us, though they all lead to the same forlorn conclusion. Nothing good.

Tragedy.

But the true tragedy is the acceptance in Emery's hazel green eyes as they go from me, to Henry, to my mom.

Fight for me, Mouse, I want to demand.

She doesn't.

"How long?" she asks the doctor.

"It depends."

"Mouse," I whisper brokenly.

She can't do this to me.

"If I don't..." she swallows. "If I don't do dialysis, how...long?"

I growl at her carelessness.

Dr. Thorne takes a deep breath. "You are at end stage renal failure. To be honest, it's not long. But everybody is different."

Her eyes close. Maybe so she doesn't have to see what she's doing to us by choosing this path. Maybe for other reasons I don't want to think about. "So even if we try adjusting my medication first, there's a chance...?"

"Yes."

The room grows eerily silent.

Too silent.

Thick with anticipation. Fear.

When her eyes open again, they don't find mine at all. They go to Henry. "There's nothing to discuss then."

Look at me, Mouse.

She doesn't.

Look. At. Me. Mouse.

Her eyes never turn in my direction.

"Jesus. *Fuck*!" I slam my bad hand against the wall and storm out of the room.

Because if she won't look at me, how can I look at her knowing what she's choosing for herself?

Mom catches the elevator doors before they close, sliding through so it's the two of us descending.

I slide down the back wall until I'm sitting on the ground, legs drawn to my chest.

She does the same, her legs stretched in front of her. "Kaiden. Talk to me."

"She's going to die."

She's silent, but nods.

"She's not going to stay."

Her arm wraps around my shoulders, pulling me into her body for a side hug. "Inevitably, the decision isn't up to us. I wish it were. I do. But she's eighteen. She's her own person, sweetie. And I think..." She pauses, her hand smoothing over my back. "I think she's tired."

"What about me?"

I'm tired. *Exhausted*. But I'm here. I'm fighting. Every damn day.

When I pull away, her image is blurred by the tears I'm holding back. I blink them away, shifting until there's space between us.

Mom looks crestfallen at the distance.

"You've been here for her the whole time. It's important now more than ever to be with her for what time is left. Don't you think?"

I stare.

Teeth grinding.

Jaw locking.

She's not wrong.

But she's not right.

"I'll never forgive her," I declare.

Her frown deepens. "Oh, Kaiden."

I shake my head, positive that I mean it.

Her hand finds mine again. "Maybe you won't. But you're young. And maybe you'll never understand why this is happening, but someday you may understand her reasoning if nothing else. And that will give you the chance to find some semblance of forgiveness."

How does anybody understand these things? I may be young, but so is Emery.

Death targeted her. It's unfair. Why her? Why not somebody more deserving of the sentence?

"She wanted to know if I was going to UM," I say emptily as the elevator gets closer to the ground floor.

Mom shifts beside me, hefting a sigh. "I think Emery needs to know everybody will be happy in whatever they decide for the future. They'll move forward with their lives even if she...doesn't. Which is another reason why we need to be there by her side when she ultimately makes her choice in what her future looks like."

She already did.

"She says she wants me to be happy." I click my tongue, laughing coldly. "What even is that anymore?"

Mom doesn't have an answer.

I don't think she ever will.

"You'll figure that out," she promises.

But it's one she should have never made.

AUTHOR NOTE

Kaiden Monroe has been on my mind since Underneath the Sycamore Tree released in November 2019. I knew I wanted to write more about him but needed time. I also knew whatever I chose to write would need to stick true to his character.

And Kaiden has always struggled. With his anger. With expressing himself. I knew the next thing I wrote about him would need to show what grief does to him—that bottling things up is not the answer like he wants it to be. That medication isn't always the answer like he hopes it can be. That forgiveness is rarely easy. No matter if you loved the person you're mad at.

Kaiden and Emery's story will hold a very deep part of my heart. And this short follow up means just as much because it means Kaiden is getting a chance to properly heal. To move forward, even if it's not completely moving on.

Thanks for sticking with me and Kaiden

XX

В

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*.

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