

SOMETIMES, WHEN HEARTS ARE ON THE LINE,  
DESTINY TAKES EXTREME MEASURES.

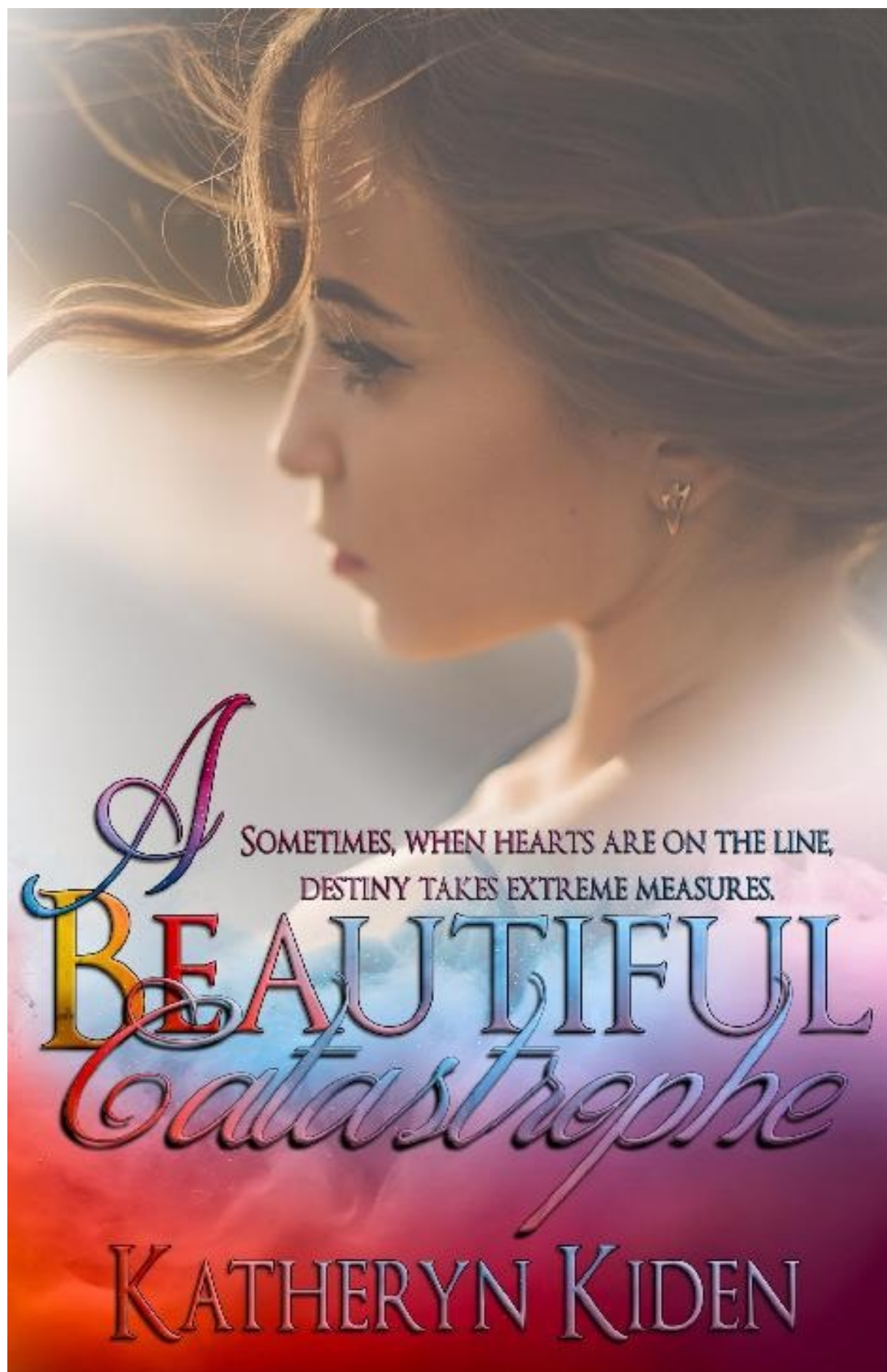
# *I* **BEAUTIFUL** *Catastrophe*

KATHERYN KIDEN









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DESTINY TAKES EXTREME MEASURES.

# A BEAUTIFUL *Catastrophe*

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A Beautiful Catastrophe

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Katheryn Williams as Katheryn Kiden

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# **In Honor of**

Jesse, for teaching me that even at a young age, heartbreak is heartbreak even though every one of them is different. You taught me that I am unbreakable and can make it through the unthinkable.

Adam, for teaching me that it doesn't matter if it's one "I love you", or a million, it meant the same thing. You were my best friend. You taught me how to deal with my heart slowly shattering into a million little pieces with a smile on my face.

Without you two I would not be me. You two are my ultimate heroes.



# Dedication

To Julie, for dealing with my overly-emotional ass while I was writing this. I'm going to go back to being a heartless asshole now.



The tragedy of life is not death but what we let die inside of us while we live.

—Norman Cousins



If you're looking for a hero, you won't find one here.  
They saved us by breaking us into a million little pieces when they left.  
They brought us together by leaving us alone.



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## **Playlist**

Switchback- Celldweller  
Supposed to be- Icon for Hire  
Kindly Calm Me Down- Meghan Trainor  
Hope for the Hopeless- Papa Roach  
Close- Nick Jonas ft. Tove lo  
Horizon- Luna Blake  
The Lonely- Christina Perri  
Black & Blue- Sick Puppies  
Monster- Skillet  
Bother- Stone Sour  
Never Be Alone- Shawn Mendes  
Pieces- Red  
Hurts Like Hell- Fleurie  
In My Veins- Andrew Belle ft. Erin Mccarley  
If I Break- Red  
Help- Hurts  
Guilt- Hurts  
I Found- Amber Run  
I Go To Sleep- Sia  
When I'm Gone- Joey + Rory  
Stay- Thirty Seconds to Mars (Originally Rihanna)  
Chasing Cars- Snow Patrol  
Thinking Out Loud- Ed Sheeran  
Just Give Me a Reason- P!nk ft. Nate Ruess  
Little Sister- New Medicine  
Chasing All the Stars- Fleurie  
Fame- Mree  
I Hate U I Love U- Gnash ft. Olivia O'Brien



Alone- Heart





I didn't hear it at first—the sound of my transplant pager going off from the waistband of my jeans where it has been attached for the better part of the past year. I *couldn't* hear it over the noise surrounding me, and then when I finally could, I swore I was imagining it.

“Ethan, do you hear that?”

I ignore the stabbing pain shooting through my shoulder as I turn my head toward the crumpled up driver's side of our parents' SUV. For the first time in months, a true smile breaks across my lips, but it quickly falls when I look at my brother.

“*Ethan?*” I cry, forcing the words out despite how hard it is to breathe.

His head is leaning to the side, resting against the window. I scream his name as loud as I can again.

*He can't be ...*

For the past hour, he's been talking to me, comforting me so I wouldn't spiral into a panic attack. How did I not realize he had gone quiet?

The sound of ambulance sirens starts up again from the roadside above us, but they quickly grow distant before disappearing altogether. Something that has happened more times than I care to count in the past forty-five



minutes.

*"No. Come back. Take Ethan," I shriek through the shattered window beside me. I watch my breath billow out into the freezing air, mocking me.*

*That should be me, not Ethan.*

I'm well aware I should be the one that doesn't walk away from this, not him. Not anyone in any of the other cars crumpled around us. *Me.*

*"You're fine, Shay," Ethan mutters, brushing a cold hand across my face to get the hair out of my eyes. "A few broken bones, maybe, but nothing major. I promise. You're going to get a heart soon. This isn't how it's going to end for you."*

*"I'm sorry," I sob, choking on the air I inhale.*

*"For what?" He pushes against his door. The grimace and grunting from the pain he's in doesn't go unnoticed, but when I say something, he tells me he's fine and asks me again.*

*"For this."*

*"Shay," he whispers, pushing the deflated airbag out of the way so he can reach my hand. "This isn't your fault. You don't control the weather, babe. You didn't put that patch of ice there. You didn't make that guardrail break. None of this mess is your fault."*

*His words are hard to listen to. Not because they're not what I want to hear, but because it sounds painful for him to speak.*

*"But what if—"*

*He cuts me off by squeezing my hand. "This accident isn't going to be how we go out. Do you understand me? It's going to be something epic, like a skydiving accident or an underground fight gone wrong. Or something amazing, like old age while being held by someone who loves you. Not this. Never this."*

I did understand—for that brief moment, anyway. Now I want to scream, to call him a liar. I want to beat my fists against his chest and tell him he isn't allowed to be the one that doesn't walk away.

None of this is fair. I'm the defective one. I'm the reason we were on the road anyway. If he hadn't been bringing me back to school, we wouldn't be in this mess. I'm responsible for all of this, and if I could, I'd give him my defective heart just to bring him back.

It doesn't take long for my screaming to draw back the attention of the paramedics. They've been working their way through the cars to get to us, but



Ethan can't wait any longer. I haven't seen his chest move since I realized he wasn't talking to me anymore, and I know deep inside he's gone, but I refuse to admit it out loud. Admitting it would make it the truth, and right now, for the first time ever, I'd rather be a liar.

Through hysterical sobbing, I answer all of their questions the best that I can, but even that's not very good. Nothing more than me telling them to help Ethan comes out even mildly coherent. The pager begins to go off again, but this time, no matter how much I no longer care if I get a heart, I can't ignore it because the paramedics notice it the second the sound of the hydraulic cutters stop.

## Deacon

*"I'll see you later."*

*Christine leans down to kiss me but I grab her arms, pulling her back into bed with me. She laughs, throwing her head back—a move that does nothing but mess up her hair and gives me access to her neck. I drag my teeth across her slender throat before kissing the hollow spot above her sternum.*

*I trap her underneath me, pinning her hands above her head and her legs between mine. For a moment, she pretends to struggle but ends up laughing again, and her smile is everything for me.*

*Every ounce of happiness left in my life.*

*Every thought before I close my eyes at night.*

*It's everything I wish everyone in the world could have with someone.*

*She brings me hope; she's always brought me hope, even when there was nothing to be hopeful for.*

*"Don't go in today," I whisper, a hint of promise filling my voice. "Play hooky and stay in bed with me."*

*"I can't."*

*I press my hips harder against hers and waggle my eyebrows.*

*"Make it worth your while."*

*She pats my chest and winks before looking quickly at the clock. "You always do, baby. Unfortunately, I actually have to go in today or I'd take you up on that offer."*



*Christine pushes against me until I roll back to my side of the bed, and I sigh as she climbs out again. I fold my arms under my head and watch as she fixes her hair in the mirror above the bureau.*

*“Did you ever think we’d be here? Together and everything?”*

*Shifting her eyes, she looks at me in the reflection. “Since I told you I loved you when I was thirteen, I always knew I’d end up with you. I guess there might’ve been a moment or two when your mom got sick that I worried I wasn’t enough to make you happy enough to stick around, but we’re meant to be together, Deacon. Can’t fight fate, baby. You’re stuck with me forever.”*

*“Deacon.”*

A strong hand grips my forearm, shaking me until I snap out of my haze. I’m thrust back into the reality that is now my life, and I want nothing more than to live in my daydreams for the rest of my days on this planet.

“We’ve got to get going,” Tyler tells me, handing me my jacket. “We’re gonna be late if we don’t.”

“Like it matters,” I mutter.

“It’s gonna be okay, man.”

“Is it?” I scream. Launching forward, I pin Tyler against the wall and fist my hands into the front of his shirt. His eyes flare, and no matter how many times I tell myself to back off, I can’t. I know this is wrong, I know he’s only trying to help, but I can’t stop myself. “Is it going to be okay, Tyler? Is it really? Is this actually a fucking nightmare? Am I going to suddenly wake up and roll over to find my wife in our fucking bed again?”

“Deacon, stop. Let him go,” Mia, Tyler’s wife, interjects from beside us.

I don’t listen. Instead, I tighten my grip on the fabric and yank him toward me.

“You get to go home tonight with the woman you love. You get to wake up tomorrow and touch her. You get to tell her you love her. Know what I get to do today? I get to put my wife in the ground. How is that fair? How is everything gonna be all right after this?” I shout.

My eyes burn with unshed tears, and I can hear the grinding of my own teeth in my ears in the silence that follows my shouting.

He doesn’t have an answer. I know he was only trying to make things better, but the only thing that would change this is a time machine. I’d chain her to the bed if it meant she wouldn’t get in that car.

Tyler grabs my hands and pulls them away from his chest without saying



anything. A quick sweep of my box-filled kitchen puts me closer to crying, but I don't crack until I look back to him and notice the red tinge of his nose and the tears tracking down his face.

I don't even know how to deal with Christine being gone. I sure as hell can't handle other people missing her too. There's no way for me to help them move on when I doubt I can do it myself.

Like a switch being flipped, everything that has happened hits me again and I break down. Tyler pulls me against him and helps keep me on my feet. I don't know what I would do without him lately. For the past two days, he's worked with me in silence to pack a lifetime worth of things into boxes because I know after the funeral I won't be able to walk back in here.

The sound of a car door slamming outside my house forces me to stand up and wipe my face dry. I tug my coat on and button it as I will myself out the door behind Mia and Tyler. I lock the door behind me for the last time and hand the key over to Tyler so he can give it to the movers tomorrow.

I finally manage to pull my eyes away from the sunshine-yellow color Christine insisted we paint the front door to keep us happy and notice who's standing in my driveway.

My father, who I haven't seen in at least a decade, stands with his hands in his pockets, no doubt fidgeting with whatever is in them. A nervous habit when he doesn't actually know what to say or do.

I meet his eyes and glare at him.

"What the hell do you want?" I snarl.

Both Mia and Tyler's attention snaps back to me. They know minor details of my life before I met them but not the whole story. The only person that knows the whole story lived it with me, and I guess she's not telling anyone now.

Without realizing I was moving, I find myself standing within inches of him.

"Just came to tell you I was sorry—"

"For what?" I snap, cutting him off. "Are you sorry you ran away like a fucking pussy while I sat beside my mother at sixteen and held her hand while I watched her die? Or are you sorry I just lost the one person in my life I don't think I can live without?"

"I didn't come here to fight, Deac, I just came to tell you I was sorry. You aren't the only one that loved them."



Without thinking, I haul back and launch my fist forward. It connects with his jaw, snapping his head to the side, and I take the opportunity to shove him back against his car the same way I did Tyler inside.

Somehow, and I have no clue how, I manage to pull away from him before I do any more damage than I've already done. I've never been a confrontational type of person, and that's probably because I always had Christine around to talk me down. Her voice would soothe me, and maybe that's why I'm backing down now. Today is meant to honor her life; why would I want to fuck that up more?

"You've never once loved anyone other than your god damn self," I holler, gaining the attention of my neighbors as I fist my hands in my hair. "You're nothing but a selfish prick. You don't get to pick and choose your moments in my life and think that will make up for all the shitty things you've done. So get in your car and go back to whatever hellhole you crawled out of and stay away."





## Autumn

Today.

After all this time it's going to be today.

More than two years of keeping doors closed.

Two years of avoiding things that could bring back memories.

Two years of photos lying face down in their spots on the shelf because it's too hard to take them down but even harder to look at them.

Today is going to be the day I finally let Ethan fully rest. I'll open his door, I'll clean out his room, I'll move on.

Yes, *today*, I continue to try to convince myself.

My heart races just thinking about it. Except it's not *my* heart that's racing inside my chest. It's some random woman's. A girl that died in the same accident that took Ethan from me.

The accident wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for me needing to go back to school. It wasn't even that I *needed* to go, I *wanted* to. Ethan wouldn't have been there at all if it weren't for me.

Ethan is gone *because* of me.



The thought hits me like a bullet to the heart. It's not the first time I've acknowledged it. Hell, it's not even the first time today. For a second, the thought knocks the air out of my lungs, sending me searching for something to grab onto so I don't fall to the floor.

I'm alone, like I always am—falling to the floor unable to breathe would be a bad thing. With no one here to help me, though, I force myself to remember Ethan's words as he would help me through an attack like this.

I used to remember his voice so well—it was so clear in my head that I would think everything was a nightmare and he would be there talking to me when I turned around. I was always wrong. Every day it gets a little harder to remember the way he sounded. Every day the tone is a little more like my own. And I can't help but wonder how long it will be until I can't hear him at all. Until he's completely gone and I'm left with nothing but the silence or the hateful words inside my head.

When I finally catch my breath, I straighten my spine and force myself to go to his bedroom door. My hand settles on the knob, and it rattles from the violent shaking in my hand. I let go, afraid the movement will open the door before I'm ready.

For some odd reason, my racing heart settles, a complete contradiction to how the rest of me feels, and if I didn't know better, I would think someone else was controlling it.

Trying again, I grab the knob but the trembling in my hands is worse than before. I try to take a breath to calm myself down, but it feels like someone has a grip on my lungs, squeezing them so tightly that no amount of trying can inflate them.

"I can't," I whisper to myself. "Not yet." Backing away from the door, I grab my keys and my phone and rush out of the house, knowing if I don't get out now I'm going to lose it.



A fist connects with my jaw, snapping my head to the side and sending me backward into the circle of people that surround us. Random hands grab at me to keep me from falling; they allow me a brief second to gain my balance



before pushing me back toward the girl who just hit me. I stumble to a stop as fresh blood fills my mouth, leaking from my lips. The smell of iron permeates my nose as I spit it to the ground and run my thumb across my bottom lip, wiping away any trace that it was there for even a second. It won't take long to be replaced, but that's fine. Unlike some of the women that step foot into these fights, the ones that think this is all for fun, I don't run from the blood. If anything, I chase it—I thrive on it.

My breath comes in shallow spurts as my fists curl by my sides and when I smile and take a step forward, the girl's eyes widen.

She thought she had me.

They always think they have me.

They see the scar down the center of my chest and think I'll be an easy payday. What they don't realize is I come back stronger with every hit. I don't go down without a fight, and my new heart refuses to give up—despite what I put it through in an effort to make it quit.

Launching myself forward, my fist connects with her cheek as hers lands straight against my nose. Once. Twice. Before I jump and my foot makes contact with her neck, snapping her sideways and sending her tumbling to the floor.

I bounce on the balls of my feet, flexing my bloodied hands by my sides while I wait to see if she's getting back up. When the fight is finally called, I block out the cheering going on around me and head toward the door, searching for August so I can get my money. There's no reason to stick around to celebrate—I wasn't here to win.

*You could just stand there and take the punches*, my mind reminds me, but I shake the thought off. Standing there and being taken down is not the epic way Ethan wanted us to go. I've already ruined enough; I'm not going to ruin that plan too.

Grabbing my black sweatshirt, I haul it over my head and shimmy it down into place. Nose, cheeks, jaw, ribs, and hands; they all scream in protest at the movement. I ignore the pain, letting it simmer in the back of my mind, and move forward.

"I thought she had you," August says, laughing as he steps up beside me and leans against the wall. With his dark hair falling in his eyes, he has all the girls here hanging around to see if they can talk to him, but for right now he ignores them to pay attention to me ... like he always does.

"I *wish* she'd had me," I retort quietly, and he ignores my comment.



“Later tonight?” he asks, never looking away from the crowd of people in front of us.

I flick my tongue out over my lower lip where it split to clean away the blood. Holding my hand out, I stay silent until he presses a roll of cash into my palm and I curl my fingers around the paper.

Pushing off the wall, I shrug without looking at him. “Probably not, but I’ll text you if I change my mind.”

I hear him chuckle behind me before he speaks again. “Shay.” Stopping mid-step, I turn and finally meet his eyes. “Hand, face, doctor, go.” His face splits in a bright smile when I roll my eyes and flip him off. I want to tell him I don’t need him to boss me around, but I know if I don’t go and I see him later, he’s going to force me to go anyway.

Pulling my hood over my head, I make my way to my Jeep and pull out of the parking lot. The wind rips my hood down and whips my hair around my face as I turn the radio on and crank it as loud as I can get it when I hear Celldweller’s “Switchback” come through the speakers. I scream the words as I hit the highway, ignoring the pain in my face the best I can.

Physical pain does nothing to me anymore.

When I finally get to the hospital, I make my way inside the emergency entrance and pull my hood over my head again. There’s no use scaring the kids in the waiting room with the mess my face is.

I drop down in the chair at the reception desk as gently as possible and wait to be acknowledged. Without saying anything, the older, blond-haired lady on the opposite side of the desk looks up, her fingers poised over the keys expectantly.

“Shay Daniels. November third, nineteen ninety-three.”

“Reason you’re here?” Her nasally voice makes my head throb, and I’m suddenly glad she hadn’t spoken until then; I probably would have left before she knew my name.

I cock an eyebrow in her direction. *Surely it’s obvious.*

She tilts her head to the side in response. *Guess not.*

“I might have some broken bones.” I shrug, waving my beat-up hand in front of my face.

After typing in my information, she reads the screen for a second, and it’s obvious what she’s read when her forehead creases. Her eyes drift to me, no longer focusing on my face, but dropping to my chest and I’m overcome



with shame. She not only knows I was born with defective parts, but she now knows this isn't the first time I've come in here looking like this.

Finally gaining her wits, she wraps the bracelet around my wrist and sends me on my way. I find an empty seat in the corner of the waiting room as far away from everyone else as possible and lean my head against the wall, closing my eyes. Exhaustion takes over as everything from today settles on me.

"Shay Daniels."

I crack my eyes open, raising my hand as far as I can before wincing from the pain, just so they know I heard them.

Pushing to my feet, I follow mindlessly behind the nurse and do everything she asks. She tells me a doctor will be with me as soon as possible and then leaves me alone in the cold, sterile room. I ease myself down in the chair, foregoing the bed. I've grown to hate them over the years, so I rest my head back against the wall instead.

"I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to be seeing you for another two months."

I groan, squeezing my eyes shut tightly before easing my head up and looking at the doctor. Unlike how I normally see him, he's dressed in jeans and his stethoscope is draped over a black t-shirt. I knew it was taking too long for them to simply assign me to the ER doctor on duty. As always, they see my history and automatically call him in. I wouldn't put it past him to have it noted in my file to notify him immediately.

"I'm not here for my heart. I'm here for my hand," I explain, holding my hand up.

"And your face, I hope." Dr. Tyler Hammond smiles at me brightly. After more than five years of being stuck with me, I guess we're friendlier than most doctors are with their patients.

"You're so mean to me." I pout, making him laugh. "You should probably check my ribs too," I add quietly.

He drops onto the stool as he glides in front of me, silently looking me over. I know he's about to scold me, so I take a deep breath to prepare for it.

"I thought we talked about this fighting shit, Shay," he mutters, not meeting my eyes.

"We did. You said 'Hey, Shay, quit all this fighting'. And I said, 'Hey, Tyler, you cleared me for all physical activity'. Sooo ..."



Sighing, he scrubs his hands over his face. “That means go to the gym. Run a 5k. Go out dancing. Not get the shit kicked out of you so you feel something.”

“Hey,” I interrupt his tirade, “I feel more than just the punches.” *I feel a lot; I just don’t like to admit it.*

He leans forward, resting his elbows on his thighs, and looks up at me. “When are you going to let someone in and let them see what’s going on inside you?”

I shift forward until I’m almost nose-to-nose with him. “You cracked my chest open and installed a new heart. *You* have been more inside me than anyone.” He shakes his head, allowing his hair to fall into his face as I lean back in my chair. “Are you satisfied? Can I go now?”

I didn’t want to be here anyway, but between the possibility of August yelling at me later and Tyler yelling at me if he found out I didn’t, I just don’t want to deal with it.

“X-rays first. I don’t think anything other than your nose has any major damage, but I want to check to make sure. Wouldn’t want anything that actually *protects* your heart to be damaged.”

I roll my eyes, knowing this conversation isn’t over. Thankfully, he leaves me in silence until the nurse comes to get me for my x-rays. I don’t need an escort; I could make this trek in my sleep. I’ve been through this hospital so many times I know practically every inch of it.



“Well, good news—nothing but your nose is broken, like I thought,” Tyler says, holding up the films as he pushes back into the room. “Bad news is you’re going to be sore for a while.”

“What’s new there?” I bark out a laugh.

“If I do what I’m supposed to do here, how long will the splint actually stay on your face?”

I shrug. “The parking lot, maybe. I could be nice and wait until I’m in my car but I probably wouldn’t.”



Eyeing me, he slides the x-rays into my file and leans back against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest. “Should I even waste my breath?”

“Scolding me about my stupid decisions? No, I think I’ve heard it all before, so there’s really no need for you to repeat it. I listen, I remember.” I tap my temple and wink at him.

“But you still keep doing stupid things.”

I shrug and stand, making my way to the door. “What good is a new heart if I do nothing epic with it?”

Smiling, I leave the room but don’t make it more than a few feet.

“Shay,” Tyler calls out, causing me to turn around and walk backward down the hall. “Why don’t you stop the fighting before you do some real damage and use that degree you keep hidden in your back pocket?”

Laughing, I shake my head, raising my arms in question. “What happened to not wasting your breath?”

“It’s not in my nature, I guess.”

I continue to step backward as he waves me off and disappears down the opposite hallway. Turning, I stumble head first into a broad chest covered in a black scrub top, and I lose my balance. My arms flail until finally gripping his shirt as whatever he was holding drops to the floor. My feet get tangled, but before I fall flat on my face, strong arms surround me.

“Oh, oh, shit, I’m sorry,” I hiss, flinching from the pain the sudden movement puts me in.

The man chuckles, his chest rumbling under my fingers. The sound does something to me—like I’ve heard it before, and before I know what’s happening, my heart is pounding against my ribs.

“No need to be sorry.” I quickly glance from his face to his nametag and back, getting lost for a second in the golden-brown color of his eyes. His hands linger on my waist longer than necessary and when he notices, it’s like the contact shocks him and he jumps back, wiping his hands across his hips. “Dr. Hammond was checking out your face?”

“Why would he be checking out my face?”

His head tilts, pulling back a little as he tries to figure out if I’m joking or not. When I finally crack a smile, he shakes his head and graces me with his. His teeth are straight, perfectly white, and his smile makes my stomach flip.

*Well, that’s new.*



“I’m sorry.” I laugh. “That was a bad joke. I’m Shay.”

His eyes drop to my bruised, outstretched hand before easily sliding his into it and gently shaking. “Deacon York.”

“Well,” I say softly. “Thanks for saving me from doing more damage, Deacon York.” Without another word, I step away from him and head toward the exit.

“Hey, Shay,” he calls out, making me sigh as I turn back around. At this rate, I’m never going to get out of here. “If you’re seeing him for those injuries I should probably steer you somewhere else. He’s not a very good doctor.”

Thankfully, I realize he’s making a joke before I say something stupid to defend Tyler and stuff my foot into my mouth. “Yeah? Know of anyone better?”

He nods. “Me.”

## Deacon

My heart pounds. I’m flirting. Jesus, I’ve forgotten what it feels like, so I’m not quite sure if that’s what I’m doing or if I’m simply going insane. Shay smirks, and the movement crinkles the corners of her bloodshot and bruised eyes, tearing her lip open again. Her tongue darts out, running over the split to wipe away the trace of blood.

“Yeah? What makes you so much better?”

Jokingly, I look down the length of my body before meeting her eyes again with a cocked eyebrow. I should be more concerned with the file I dropped and spilled all over the floor when we clashed, but I can’t focus on anything but her. “It’s not just my good looks and stunning personality that got me this far.”

I hope she realizes that was a joke and I’m not some cocky asshole who thinks he’s God’s gift to the world, because I’m not. I know better. If I was, he probably wouldn’t have put me through the things I’ve endured. I wouldn’t be single to begin with. I wouldn’t need to flirt with her.

“Oh, thank God.” Her hand moves to cover her heart. “For a second I was thinking your bosses were so stunned and mesmerized by your smile they simply said yes without checking your qualifications.”



I laugh again, loudly, and damn if it doesn't feel good. It's been so long since I've done that and it wasn't forced just to make someone happy. I close my eyes for a second, reveling in the feeling that might be the closest thing to happiness I've felt in a long time. But at the same time, the feeling comes with a dose of guilt. I silently wonder what the acceptable time period is for mourning. At some point, I need to allow myself to be happy again without the guilt for trying to move on.

"What? Am I that hard to look at?" I lean my elbow against the counter and make myself look at her again. "I'm no you, but ..."

"No, you're no me, but you're not hard to look at, either."

The sound of her quiet giggle hits my ears, and I smile despite how hard I try not to. I wasn't lying. Even though she's bruised and bloodied, she's beautiful. I can only imagine what she looks like when she isn't.

I haven't looked at a woman, much less *wanted* to look at a woman, for more than medical reasons in so long. But standing here in front of Shay, I'm not focusing on what I can find wrong with her to make it better. I'm wondering if I'm going to get a chance to see her when she is. I want to know the color of her skin when she blushes or gets embarrassed not the color of her bruises. And I can't help wondering if her eyes are only that dark because of the pain, but at the same time, I wonder if it's only physical pain she's in.

Taking a deep breath, I do the one thing I didn't think I'd ever do again. "Would you like to grab dinner sometime?"

The words repeat on a loop in my head, making me question if I actually said them out loud or if I imagined it. She hesitates, and I regret stepping outside the comfort zone I've created over the past few years. I work, I sleep, and I play the third wheel with Tyler and Mia, occasionally. That's the excitement of my life. I don't date. I don't even *try* to date.

"I'd like that," she finally says, stepping back in my direction. "I mean, after my face heals, of course, but I'd like that."

"I'd take you out all bruised up. You shouldn't need to hide. You're not that much of a beast all black and blue." She pulls my phone from my pocket as she speaks. Normally someone doing anything like that would irritate me, but for some reason, with her, it doesn't even faze me.

"You'd be okay with all the questioning glances from people wondering if you caused them or not?"

"Okay, good point, maybe we should wait." I chuckle, taking my phone back when she's done doing whatever she was doing.



“Yeah, we should wait.” Shay steps back toward the doors, never looking away from me. “Call me. Text me. Something. Just make use of my number, okay?”

I nod just as she disappears around through the doors and out of my sight.

The realization of what I just did hits me. Hard.

My chest constricts, making it hard to breathe. My knees weaken as an onslaught of memories hit me, making me feel like a piece of shit for trying to move on.

“Breathe,” Tyler tells me. His hand lands on my shoulder with a reassuring squeeze. I tuck my head against my chest and wrap my hands around the edge of the counter to keep me on my feet. I finally manage to fill my lungs before he speaks again. “Now tell me what just happened.”

I look toward the doors and try to figure out if I actually did that before turning back to him. “I think I just asked someone out on a date.” The words get stuck in my throat and come out as barely a whisper.

“Holy shit.” He smirks, slapping his hand against the counter. “Welcome back, man.” He walks away, but quickly turns around and heads back toward me, looking confused. “Hang on, did you just ask out my patient?”

“Maybe,” I croak.

His face blanks as his forehead creases, and for a second, he falls silent, making me wonder what’s going on in his head—briefly taking my mind off what just happened.

“Huh,” he finally says. “Well ... good for you.”

“What was that face for?”

He shakes his head, hesitating. “Nothing, just wondering if dating patients is a good idea or not.”

He’s lying, but I’m not sure why. I’m not sure I *want* to know why. Shrugging it off for now, I force myself to calm down. It’s just a date—one I haven’t even set yet—it’s not like I asked her to marry me. “She’s not *my* patient.” The joke is forced, we both can tell, but it’s out there, floating through the air around us.

“Making jokes about dating and getting back on the horse? I feel like a proud dad.”

I shake my head, rolling my eyes as Tyler tries his best to ease the tension of the situation.



“I’m not getting back on anything.”

My thumb rubs over the empty spot on my ring finger, reminding me of what is missing in my life—a habit I can’t seem to break.

“Do it before you lose your nerve.”

“I will,” I tell him, picking up the scattered file and grabbing a chart off the nurses’ station. “But I have a patient.”



I type out a message to Shay. It’s witty, sarcastic, and everything I want to be, but I’m not—at least, not anymore. So I delete it and retype it as I sit behind the wheel of my car.

I type.

I delete.

I type again.

Nothing seems right. Not a damn thing. I haven’t asked anyone out on a first date in a decade. I give up and throw my phone into the passenger seat. Leaning forward, I bang my head against the steering wheel a few times. *You’re being ridiculous*, I scold myself. Grabbing my phone again, I type out a one-word message and hit send before I talk myself out of it again.

**Me: Hi**

That was my profound message—the text I was so worried about. That wasn’t so hard. It was easier than calling and I’m well aware I took the easy road this time. I drop the phone back to the seat attempting to ignore the silence that surrounds the car as I wait to see if she responds.

It seems like forever before my phone goes off, but in reality, it was only a few minutes. I probably stare at the thing—scared to pick it up—longer than the amount of time between me hitting send and the time the response came back.

With shaking hands, I grab my phone and open the text.

**Shay: Hey**

Another text rolls in before I have a chance to send one back.



**Shay: I didn't actually think you were going to contact me. Figured I scared you off.**

**Me: What? Why?**

I don't even have to think about the fact that I responded because I'm so confused by her last message.

**Shay: Because I just saw myself in the mirror. LOL**

**Me: I've seen worse.**

**Shay: I've had worse.**

I finally hesitate. I don't know if I can do this. Knowing this isn't the first time she's been bruised up like this makes me wonder what she's doing to herself.

**Shay: Come on, doc, I know you want to throw your two cents in.**

And she's bold. That's new to me too. The doctor in me wants to come out, but at the same time, the man in me that wants to take her out on a date doesn't want to scare her off.

**Me: No two cents. I have no opinion. I'm just a guy that wants to take you to dinner.**

**Shay: Mhm ... sure.**

**Me: Two weeks from Friday @ the Back Bay Grill?**

**Shay: Should be back to being pretty by then so that works for me.**

Yeah, she's bold.

I send one more message before telling her I need to get back to work, but that's only half the reason I tell her I have to go. I'm afraid if I keep talking to her I'll start to panic again. I know it's time to move on, but it doesn't make it any easier.

## **Two Weeks Later**

I've been standing outside the restaurant for nearly thirty minutes. I can see Shay through the window, but it's dark enough out that she can't see me. It's kind of stalker-ish, but no matter how hard I try to convince myself to go inside, I can't. I want to, but I *can't*.

She looks confused as she sits alone at a table for two, a little pissed off, and absolutely beautiful. Her dark hair is curled over one shoulder, and the black dress she's wearing looks nearly painted on. I know if Tyler were here right now he'd probably smack me upside the back of the head for not going



in but my finger keeps running across the bare skin where my wedding band should be.

*I'm not ready ...*





I park on the street in front of Tyler's address because there's no room in the driveway for another car. Grabbing the six-pack from the passenger seat, I slip out and shift my shorts back to where they belong on my hips before making my way to the door. I don't even get a chance to knock before the door is being pulled back and I'm met by Mia.

With one arm braced against the doorframe, the other squeezing the knob, she looks at me with desperation filling her eyes.

"Shit, it's about time you got here."

"Why?"

She grabs my arm and hauls me into the house, linking my arm around her elbow. "Because I'm outnumbered, and it's no fun being the only girl in the boys' club." The slight push of her bottom lip I see out of the corner of my eye makes me chuckle. She's fun—exactly what I need in my life.

We met a few years ago when she brought Tyler lunch during one of my appointments. She made fun of him for the funny way his hair was sticking up that day. I laughed, and we bonded over our mutual love of picking on him.

The smell of the grill hits me as we walk through the kitchen, and as if on cue, my stomach growls. I drop the beer on the counter as we pass through and grab one for myself. I come to a dead stop when we step through the back



door because Tyler is bickering with Deacon and a few other guys near the stairs of the deck. The sting of being stood up still sits heavy on my mind. I don't understand the feeling at all since I didn't actually care about dating before Deacon asked me out ... so there's no reason for it to bother me so much.

Masking my feelings, I wave at the guys and follow Mia down the stairs toward the water.

"Shay," Tyler calls my name from above us and when I turn to look at him, he cocks his head to the side. "Beer?"

I raise it above my head and smile sweetly. "One for me, five for you."

"That's my girl."

I spin back around and drop into an Adirondack chair beside Mia, pulling my knees up so my feet rest on the wooden seat.

"I didn't know he was going to be here."

I roll my head to the side, looking at Mia as I drop my sunglasses into place. "Who?"

"Deacon." She tips her head in the direction of the house. "Tyler told me that you were supposed to go out last week but he stood you up."

"It's not a big deal." I shrug it off, trying not to show how irritated it really makes me. "It was just a date."

"It is a big deal, Shay, for both of you."

I narrow my eyes as I try to figure out what she's talking about. I know nothing personal about Deacon because our texts never got that deep. Before I have a chance to ask her, Tyler rushes the chairs, lifting her before carrying her into the water as she screams and flails in his arms.

They make me laugh—they're part of the reason I went through with the transplant. I'm envious of what they have, and part of me wants to know if I have any chance at having that myself.

"I need another drink," Mia mutters a little while later, pushing out of the chair. I grab her hand and tug her back to her seat.

"I'll get it. I need some water anyway." Truth is, I need a break from the silence Deacon is sending my way. We've sat nearly side-by-side for hours, and he has yet to say anything to me. I'm not sure what to think. I've tried to talk to him, but I get nothing in return. Thankfully, Mia manages to step in



every time and keep me from looking like a fool.

Everything I could've done wrong over the past few weeks we've talked runs through my head. Anything I could've said to make him rethink our date, but I come up short and find myself staring out the window at him.

"Keep that water running any longer and you're bound to put the town in a drought."

Tyler's voice startles me, and I end up dropping my overflowing glass into the sink. Thankfully, it's plastic so it doesn't shatter and add to my shame. Lost in my own thoughts, I didn't see him come up the stairs.

He leans his hip against the counter and moves to where my gaze just was.

"Your face looks good."

I grunt, nodding as my eyes focus on my reflection in the darkening window for a brief second before looking back to where Deacon is moving toward the water.

"Don't take anything he does or says personally right now."

"I'm more affected by what he *isn't* saying," I mutter.

"The fact that he even asked you out was a huge step for him."

"And that makes blowing me off okay? He gets a free pass because he doesn't get around?"

"No." Tyler grips my shoulder, turning me toward him. "Not at all. I'm trying to tell you that you got him to take that big step, one that I've been trying to get him to take for a while. You've both been through a lot in the past few years, maybe there's something about you that draws him in."

I narrow my eyes. "Two damaged people don't make an undamaged one if thrown together, Ty."

"I never said it did. But maybe having someone to be damaged with might make you feel not so alone." He picks up the bottle I grabbed for Mia and replaces it with one of the ones Deacon has been drinking all afternoon. With a shrug he backs out of the doorway slowly. "Try again."

"Why are you pushing this?"

Without turning around, he yells back at me as he descends the stairs, "Doctor knows best."

I roll my eyes and grab his beer after drying the outside of my glass, and head toward the water, glaring at Tyler as I pass. I nudge Deacon's shoulder



with the beer bottle and drop down next to him, dipping my toes into the cool lake.

“Did you wait for me to separate from the herd so you could yell at me?”

“Why would I yell at you?”

With a confused look, he responds quietly, “For standing you up.”

“It’s not that big of a deal, Deacon. Am I confused and a little pissed that I sat at that table alone for close to two hours, yeah. But it’s not like you stood me up at the altar.” His eyes widen at the thought and it makes me laugh. “Calm down, I’m not asking you to marry me.”

“Sorry,” he finally says, brushing his hand through his hair. “I was there. I tried to go in. I stood outside for a while, but I just couldn’t. For that, and for not letting you know, I *am* sorry. It wasn’t fair to you.”

Digging in my pocket, I pull out the loose change and push two pennies into Deacon’s hand.

“What’s this for?”

“I’m giving you my two cents. You know, since you don’t have any.”

His shoulders shake with laughter as he scrubs a hand over his face, hiding his grin. “Okay, give it to me.”

I take a deep breath before launching into it. “I’m not asking you to fall in love with me—in fact, I encourage you not to. I’m broken, fucked up, and I’m just a complete mess. But it’s one date, and I feel like if we don’t give it a shot the meddlers behind us won’t stop throwing us together.”

We both turn and find Tyler and Mia watching us like hawks.

“You’re probably right. Tyler’s known for pushing me past my comfort zone.”

“How did you meet him?” I ask.

Leaning back, I try to ease into a conversation that isn’t going to scare either of us away. He leans forward, resting his arms on top of his knees, but turns so he can still see me out of the corner of his eye.

“I did my surgical rotation under him when I was in med school. You?”

He peeks at me out of the corner of his eye, and I try to hide my smile. The nerves fluttering in my stomach are new, and I’m not sure how to handle them. I touch the neckline of my shirt, making sure it’s high enough that it is still covering my scar.



“He did my heart transplant a few years ago.” His eyes widen a bit, but he stays quiet, waiting for me to elaborate and answer the question every doctor wants the answer to. “Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah.” I swallow a drink of water. “Doctor appointments and surgeries weren’t exactly how I wanted to spend my high school and college years, but what are you gonna do, right?”

Thankfully, that was the last of the uncomfortable conversation for the night. He seemed to distance himself a bit more after I told him what I had wrong with me, but that’s nothing I’m not used to. Unlike some of the people that know, he wasn’t all questions or lingering glances, so there’s that, I guess.

After talking the majority of the night about easy things like school and music, we figured we’d give it a shot and meet up tomorrow night before he loses his nerve again or Tyler and Mia step in once more.

## Deacon

The pile of clothes tossed on the end of my bed is ridiculous. I thought only women questioned the way they looked for a date this much. I think I’ve probably changed clothes more times tonight than I have in a week, and I’m still not sure what to put on. I don’t want to seem like I’m trying too hard, but at the same time, I don’t want to seem like I don’t care.

The doorbell rings as I begin straightening the collar of my black, button-down shirt. I jog down the stairs, my sock-clad feet slipping when I hit the hardwood floor at the bottom.

Pulling the door open, I stumble to a stop as the air lodges in my lungs.

“Shay.” My eyes widen as they run along her curves covered in a tight, black dress, and I mentally smack myself. “What are you doing here? I thought we were meeting at the restaurant.”

Placing a hand on her hip, she tips her head to the side, letting her dark hair spill over the shoulder left bare from her dress. “I wasn’t giving you a chance to stand me up again.”

*Shit, I’m really going to be in trouble with her.*

She glances at me from under her dark lashes before stepping around me and waiting until I close the door. Killer heels, killer legs, killer body ...



“Are you trying to kill me?” I mutter, making her laugh.

“And waste this dress twice? I don’t think so. Watch out for my right hook, though.”

“Noted.” I nod, tensing as she steps close to me, lifting her hands until she has ahold of my collar. I can’t breathe, afraid of what she’s going to do, and I’m well aware that makes me the biggest pansy in the world. My mouth goes dry as she fixes my collar and steps back without a word.

My body’s at war with my mind, and they’re both battling it out with my heart simultaneously.

*No one has fixed my collar since ...*

I shake off the thought, not wanting to cloud my mind with memories that will make me run again. Shay deserves better than that—she deserves better than me.

“Ready?”

I nod and wave her out the door, stepping out onto the porch behind her.

“Deacon?”

“Yeah?”

She turns around and looks down before meeting my eyes again. “You forgot your shoes.”

As if the fact that I was nervous wasn’t settling in my stomach well enough, I have to go and do something stupid. She doesn’t laugh, but she smiles, and it eases the fear of me making a fool of myself.

“I’ll drive myself,” she calls out over her shoulder as she makes her way to her Jeep. “You can either get in the Jeep next to me, or you can take your car in case you want to run away before dinner’s over.”

After putting my shoes on, I step down into the driveway and my eyes drift between my car and where Shay is waiting in her vehicle.

*Don’t be an idiot. Just get in the car with the girl.*

Shay smiles as I climb in next to her and sit silently with my hands resting tensely on my thighs. Her hand caresses the shifter, the muscles in her legs tensing and releasing as she shifts into gear and pulls out onto the road.

I try to keep my eyes focused ahead, but it’s hard as she shifts through gears. I haven’t actually *looked* at a woman in so long I must have forgotten how to do it discreetly. Luckily, she doesn’t say anything about it. Instead, she turns the radio up to drown out the silence and sings along to “Supposed to



Be” by Icon for Hire.

The sound of her off-key singing makes me laugh. I rest back against the seat as whatever fear I had about tonight begins to settle deep in my stomach and I will myself to relax. Maybe if I think of it like a night out with a friend instead of a date I won’t be so focused on the fact that the woman that will be sitting across from me at the table won’t be who I really wish it was—who it will never be again.

“It’s just dinner, Deacon,” Shay yells over the sound of the music and wind. “I’m not asking you to fall in love with me.”

“So you’ve said.” I laugh, rolling my head to finally let myself look at her. She’s gorgeous. She looks so much better than the first time I saw her. The swelling in her face is completely gone, the bruising no longer coloring her skin.

Pulling to a stop in the parking lot, she rests her head against the seat and turns to look at me. Her face softens in the red glow from the stoplight across from us as she reaches up and pushes my face so I’m no longer looking at her.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Keeping you from doing something stupid like falling in love with me in a parking lot.” Her fingers linger against my jaw as she speaks so I reach up and pull them away. My heart kicks into overdrive behind my ribs, a sensation I’m not used to anymore. I drop her hand when I realize I still have ahold of it, trying to make it stop. I’m not used to feeling my heart at all, and I’m not sure I like that she has it racing the first time her skin touches mine.

Shay begins to climb from the Jeep but stops, looking back at me with a sadness filling her eyes. “She’ll hate herself one day.”

Confused, I shake my head. “Who?”

She slides the rest of the way out and turns back toward me, one side of her lips perking up. “Whoever it is that broke your heart.”

My eyes drop to my vacant ring finger and I smile sadly. “I hope not.”



“Why do you keep your chest covered?” I ask after we’ve ordered and



everything has been delivered.

Shay raises her eyebrow at my out-of-the-blue question as she tips her water glass to her lips. The look in her eyes causes me to laugh. I know exactly what she thinks I'm thinking.

"Not like that. I mean, why do you keep your scar covered?"

"Why does it matter?" she counters.

"Does it make you uncomfortable?"

She shifts in her chair, as if she's readying herself for a debate. "Are you always this invasive on a first date?"

I take a bite of my dinner as she leans forward on her elbows, smiling as she waits for me to answer.

"You're the one that showed up on my doorstep to ensure I didn't bail."

"*Again ...*"

"Yeah, *again*, but I think you doing that entitles me to this question."

She fingers the hem of her scarf for a minute before meeting my eyes. "No, it doesn't make me uncomfortable. It's just easier."

"Why?"

She shrugs, her gray eyes drifting around the restaurant before landing back on me. "It makes other people uncomfortable so I keep it covered most of the time."

My body moves on its own, and I don't realize what I'm doing until I've reached over the table and tugged the scarf from around her neck, pulling it into my lap.

"Screw how it makes other people feel. If you're comfortable, that's the only thing that matters." The cut of her dress is deeper than I expected, and it shows off the entire length of the scar. I inhale deeply as my eyes trace the marred skin. "That right there makes you strong, and if anyone has an issue with it, they should be the one covering their eyes. You shouldn't need to hide."

She holds my gaze for a beat longer than I'm normally comfortable with before she speaks again. "Neither should you ... not with me, anyway."





I take a deep breath and force myself to step up to Shay's door. With five dates with her under my belt and the night at Tyler's house, you'd think I wouldn't be so nervous.

I shuffle the bag in my hand to the other side and knock against the glass portion of the door, taking a step back as I wait for her to answer. She didn't know I was coming by, but I wanted to do something for her for dealing with me even after I stood her up.

"Hey," she says when she sees me. She's smiling, but at the same time, she looks confused—the same look she had as I watched her sit alone in the restaurant. "I didn't space on a date, did I?"

"No." I lift the paper bag and shake it a bit. "I was hoping you were hungry."

She smirks and steps to the side so I can slide in past her. "Good. I wouldn't want to leave you sitting at a table alone for hours."

"I *knew* you were mad about that." I sigh. "Okay, how long until I live it down?"

"I'm *not* mad." She chuckles, knocking her shoulder against mine. "I just find the look on your face when I bring it up hilarious."



“Are you hungry?” I attempt to change the subject; wanting to talk about anything but the night I stood her up. As the words come out of my mouth, the microwave beeps, and Shay chews on her bottom lip to keep from smiling.

“I was just cooking dinner actually.”

“In the microwave?”

She shrugs as I pass her and head into the kitchen. “It’s food,” she defends when I open the microwave door and find a half-frozen dinner tray.

I purse my lips and set the bag of food down before moving through her kitchen, most likely overstepping my bounds, but I don’t care. Gripping the handle of the refrigerator door, I look at her and wait for her to attempt to stop me. When she challenges me with her gaze but stays silent, I pull back the door to find it nearly empty.

“A jar of pickles, half a thing of ketchup, and—” I pull out the milk jug and crack the lid, trying not to gag when I smell it “—a rotten gallon of milk. This isn’t food, Shay. Does Tyler know you eat like this?”

She pushes the door closed and slides between the refrigerator and me so I can’t open it again. For the first time, I notice the backward Polaroids but I can’t find the words to ask her why they’re upside down. She’s closer than she’s been since the day she ran into me at the hospital and the nearness seems to suck the air out of the room. Despite the smile on her face, her eyes are stone cold—emotionless. It’s the same look I see every time I look in the mirror. *Maybe she’s just as broken as I am.*

But I have no clue why.

I swallow hard and force myself to pull back. I know I’m not ready to lean in despite how much my body wants to.

“I eat,” she mumbles.

“*What* do you eat?”

“Food. Frozen meals and ramen are just easier because I don’t like cooking for one person. It’s not fun for me. I always make too much, and it goes to waste.” Her head drops, and her voice becomes quiet. “Please drop it.”

I step back, moving to the bag I brought and begin unloading it. “Okay, but you’re eating Chinese with me tonight.”

She slides her arm around mine and rests her head against my shoulder as she looks over the choices on the counter. I take a deep breath and hold it



before slowly releasing it. I'm waiting for my mind to take over and throw me for a loop, but it doesn't, and that's when I realize this feels ... *normal*. I've missed normal.

"Mmm," she hums, still resting her head. "Mandarin chicken."

"I didn't know what you liked so I got a little of everything."

"Good thinking." I feel her smile against my shoulder as she reaches for the box and lets go. The space she puts between us eases my fear of a sudden freakout, but at the same time, I want it back.

I grab a thing of General Tso's chicken and follow her out the back door. She drops into the seat on the corner of the screened-in porch, folding her legs under her, and waits for me to settle across from her before digging in.



We make small talk through dinner but both of us can tell something different is happening tonight. I think we knew it the moment she slid between the refrigerator and me. The second she finishes her dinner, she smiles before uncurling her legs and taking off down a set of stone steps, heading across the lawn toward a trampoline that has seen better years. Her hands grip the frame as she flips herself and lands on her feet. She raises her arms above her head like a gymnast when she sticks her landing and continues to bounce.

"I've always loved this damn thing," she tells me as her hair flies around her face. "Until I was cleared after my surgery I would bring a stepladder out here and climb up just so I could lay on it. It didn't matter if there was snow on the ground, I wouldn't let my parents tear it down. It was my safe place to run to after Ethan died since I couldn't go anywhere else."

The smile on my face falls, but luckily, her back is to me for the moment. "Who's Ethan?" I try to remember everything we've talked about over the past few weeks, but I don't remember her mentioning the name until now.

She stops bouncing, keeping her back toward me so I can't see her face. The sound of her laughter and the springs creaking dies out and is replaced with her labored breathing and the leaves rustling around us.

"Shay?" I feel like I've lost her as she silently sits then lies back in the



center of the trampoline.

“I’m tired of feeling broken,” she finally admits in a whisper. I’m not sure if it was meant for me or not. I hoist myself up and shift so I’m laid out beside her, leaving room between us so we don’t accidentally touch.

“Me too,” I confess quietly. I stare up at the darkening sky, counting the stars that are beginning to appear to distract myself from what I’m about to say. “I lost my wife a few years ago. I threw myself into working and moving on, but I don’t think I’ve actually moved on.” My stomach clenches as the words leave my mouth, and it takes everything in me not to get off this trampoline and leave without another word. I feel the weight on my chest holding me down as I bare my soul, forcing me to stay lying next to Shay.

“The girl that broke your heart?” I nod but stay silent because I don’t want to encourage more questions about Christine.

After sitting in silence for a few minutes, she finally clears her throat. “Ethan was my brother, but he was more than that—he was my best friend. The night I got my transplant he was driving me back to school when we hit a patch of ice and went off the road. He died while my transplant pager was going off ... he died but I got another chance to live ... and that’s not fair.” Her voice fades off on the last few words, and I barely hear them before the wind carries them off, but the sadness in her words matches how I feel.

“Everyone keeps telling me time will make it better—”

“But no one ever tells you what to do to get through until then,” she finishes for me, knowing exactly what I’m talking about.

“I need to know how long it’s going to be until I can make it through a day without feeling like I’m losing my mind without her,” I continue like she isn’t even there. Once again, something with her feels normal—easy. I haven’t had an easy conversation in years—definitely not one like this. The words I’m speaking out loud are the ones I usually reserve for myself when I’m alone in bed at night.

“I’m afraid to know how long I have until I can’t hear the sound of his voice anymore.”

The backs of her fingers graze mine, and instead of retreating from the contact, afraid to let anyone be close to me, I let her slide her fingers through mine and squeeze. The touch grounds me, letting me know that I’m not alone anymore. The way she strokes her thumb over my wrist while sitting in silence is familiar—it’s comforting.

“I don’t know how to make life work without her, but being with you is



the only time I feel normal, and I'm not sure why," I finally admit. The words have been racing through my head since we were in the kitchen but I hadn't been able to voice them until now. She rolls in my direction, and I know she's looking at me, but I don't feel like she's invading a personal moment like I do when other people do it.

Reaching out, she turns my face toward her, stroking my cheek with the tips of her soft fingers as she pulls them away. "The only time I don't want to run away anymore is when I'm near you, and that scares me."

## Shay

Sitting in silence has never been comfortable for me. I've always needed to fill the dead air with something—anything to occupy my mind with something other than my thoughts ... until now. Silence with Deacon isn't overwhelming like it is any other time. It's comforting and quiet, and as I lie here with my fingers intertwined with his, I feel right. I don't feel the world sitting on my shoulders trying to crush the life from me. I don't feel like the second I stand up the rest of my world is going to come crashing down.

I feel my heart beating for a reason other than to torture me with the fact I'm still alive when Ethan isn't. More and more, I've noticed it beats *differently* when I'm near Deacon; it beats wildly, racing with purpose. It flutters when he's close, sending my stomach flipping right along with it, and it pounds against my chest when he's walking away, almost as if it's trying to go with him.

It scares me.

My old heart never did this. I hadn't even felt this one beating until the day I fell into Deacon's arms in the hospital hallway. I felt betrayed that first time—I embraced the numbness since the accident. I don't think I should be *allowed* to feel, but I guess my heart has different plans.

Deacon's fingers squeeze lightly, pulling my focus back to him. "Is it different?" he asks when I finally open my eyes. He isn't looking at me, but that doesn't matter; I know he's waiting for my attention just like I know what he's asking about. It's the same thing everyone else wants to know, but for the first time I'm not afraid to answer the question.

"Sometimes," I whisper. "There's times when I feel like myself—how I used to be, anyway. And then there are times I feel like someone else completely. One second I'm loud and outspoken, and the next I'm so quiet



and reserved that I don't recognize myself. I'm not me in some moments, and I think that's what scares me the most. For a second, I forget who I am—who I'm supposed to be. Different food tastes, different music preferences, different everything. It's like there are two people trying to share one body." I roll onto my back, taking his hand with me so it rests on top of my stomach.

"Does it beat differently?" he murmurs, staring at the darkening sky.

"Completely. Sometimes I wonder if there's something wrong with it because I'm still not used to it yet. But it could just be in my head ... maybe I'm crazy."

"You're not crazy." After a few minutes, he rolls his head back and looks at the large house upside down. "You live here alone?"

I swallow around the lump in my throat. I've never actually talked to anyone the way I've been talking with Deacon. He makes everything seem *easier*. "I grew up here."

"It's your parents' house?"

I nod, clearing my throat. "It's been in my family forever, but when Ethan died, my parents and my younger brother, Jackson, couldn't stay here ... but I couldn't leave. They tried to make it work after they moved but ended up divorcing last year. My dad moved to Kittery and my mom and Jackson stayed in their new house in Topsham. I stayed here, admittedly living in the past because I can't get rid of any of his stuff."

"Is that what all the upside down photos are on the shelves and fridge?"

I squeeze my eyes shut, worrying my bottom lip. No one ever comes here so I don't mess with them and am just now realizing that might be a little weird to other people. "Yeah. It's hard to look at them, but even harder for them not to be there at all."

"I get that," he reassures me. "You were born loving him, it's hard to just shut that off." I open my mouth to ask about his wife, but he cuts me off by steering the conversation in a different direction, one I'm much more comfortable with. "How'd you get the scar on your forehead?" My hand slides to my head, running the tips of my fingers along the line that runs up the center of my forehead and into my hairline. Deacon turns his head, finally looking at me.

"When I was little, I would always try to be one of the boys because Ethan was my best friend, so I was always trying to do what they did. When I was seven, I was showing off and flipped upside down on the swing set but didn't exactly realize how tall I was. When I was coming back down I



slammed my head into a rock and sliced it open.”

“And this one?” he asks, gripping my face and sliding his thumb along the scar under my chin. I close my eyes at his touch as my heartbeat slows down. Behind my closed eyelids, I watch how I got the scar play out and smile at the memory.

“I was riding my bike down the trail over there when I was nine and went to jump the creek. I didn’t get my front tire high enough and when I landed, I went over the handlebars. Ended up with that one and a few on my arms from where I tried to catch myself.”



My body shivers, waking me as the warmth I’m surrounded by shifts. I crack my eyes open and realize I’m curled into Deacon’s side and we’re still on the trampoline. When I look up, I meet his wide eyes.

“Sorry,” I mutter, untangling my legs from his and scooting away. I sit up and scrub my hands over my face, trying to wake myself up.

I attempt to figure out when I fell asleep, but the last thing I remember is him asking me about my scars and dodging any personal questions about himself.

Deacon pulls his phone from his pocket before shaking his head and running his hand through his hair. “It’s fine,” he lies, his eyebrows pulling together. “I have to go, though. I should’ve been home hours ago, and I have a shift at the hospital starting in a little while.”

I silently scoot toward the edge of the trampoline and swing my legs over the side. Sliding off, the damp grass sticks between my toes, sending a shiver up my spine. I already miss the warmth of being wrapped around Deacon’s body but by the look on his face, he wasn’t as happy to wake up that way.

I head for the porch, and as I mount the stairs, I hear Deacon clear his throat behind me so I turn to look at him. “I ... uh ... I’ll see you later.”

He doesn’t wait for me to say anything before disappearing around the house, but I’m thankful since I don’t know what to say anyway.





Checking my phone for probably the millionth time in the past four days as I step off the treadmill, I find it the same way it has been every other time I've checked my notifications—empty. Four days, four unanswered text messages. I'm beginning to feel desperate, and that's the most ridiculous feeling in the world to me. One I've never felt because of a guy.

Cursing under my breath, I chuck my phone toward the wall near the heavy bag and dry my face with the hem of my tank top. The fact that my battery and back came flying off when it hit doesn't faze me because I'm so upset with myself for feeling let down by the lack of response I've gotten from Deacon.

Since when does a guy get to me like this?

I swing, putting all my body weight into it, and hit the bag full force. The tension in my shoulders has me locked up tight, but I ignore it and continue swinging—letting all my aggression out through my hands.

Every time my fists hit their mark, it is accompanied by a grunt or growl of anger, and it isn't long before August takes notice and strides across the gym.

Why couldn't I be satisfied with him—with the causal thing we had going before making the mistake of actually trying with someone else? He



was there when I wanted him and left me alone when I didn't. He never got in my head like Deacon, and I liked it like that.

Standing beside me, he crosses his arms over his chest and watches me for a few seconds before speaking.

"You're gettin' blood on my equipment." The words roll off his tongue in a bored manner, and there is no doubt that he isn't pleased I've passed on the past two fights he's offered me. Either that or he found out and isn't happy about me dating Deacon, but I guess that isn't much of an issue anymore.

The thought makes me hit harder than ever, and I scream when my fist strikes against the overused bag. I scream in anger, not pain, and I hate myself for being like this.

Grabbing my hands, August stops me from throwing another punch. "Let's go," he mutters.

I pull my hands out of his grip. "I'm not stopping."

"I didn't tell you to fuckin' stop, Shay. It doesn't matter if I told you to stop or not, you wouldn't. Now, let's go wrap your damn hands so you stop bleedin' everywhere, and then I'll let you throw some punches at me while you tell me what the hell crawled up your ass today."

Annoyed, I follow behind him, rinsing and drying my hands before he carefully inspects them. There's nothing more than ripped skin on my knuckles from hitting bare fisted—something I know better than to do. Placing a pad of gauze on top of the broken skin, he begins to wrap my hands the way they should have been to begin with.

"What's his name?" I narrow my eyes, making him chuckle. "I'm not an idiot. You haven't called me in almost two months. You normally avoid this place during the hours I'm here and you've passed over on fights that would've paid your bills for a few months each."

Knowing I'm not going to get away without an answer, I tell him despite how much it sucks to say his name out loud. "Deacon." My voice wavers, and I instantly regret letting the word pass my lips. I can't figure out when I became *this*. I'm the girl I used to hate. The ones that let men be the deciding factor on their emotions.

"Where'd you meet?"

I take a deep breath. "At the hospital after my last fight."

He keeps his eyes on my hands, and I flex them into fists when he motions for me to. That was the last night I talked to him other than rejecting fights. I wouldn't have even met him if August hadn't pushed me to go get



checked out. Years of friendship pushed aside because of the bubble I put myself in with Deacon.

“Does he make you happy?”

Pursing my lips, I glare at him. “Do I *look* happy?”

“No,” he mutters, finally looking up at me. “You look sad. You might be throwin’ punches fueled by anger but your face looks sadder than hell. I’ve never dealt with you sad, Shay, I’m not sure I know how.”

“I’ve always been sad,” I whisper, admitting something I hate about myself.

“Okay ... but it’s never been like this.”

I walk away without saying anything and make my way to an open mat. I flex my feet, stretching my ankles as he walks up silently beside me and slides his hands into a pair of punch mitts. After a few minutes of him questioning me between hits and me not answering, he shakes his head.

“What the hell did this guy do to you, Shay?” I grind my teeth, and when I don’t answer, he blocks my hit and smacks me upside the head with a mitt.

“I need you to hit me back,” I bite out. “That’s the only way this works for me.”

Irritation surfaces on his face. “And I need you to answer me.”

“He made me hopeful, okay? Jesus, fuck.” I step toward him, swinging again. “Now hit me back.”

“No.” He shakes his head, raising his hands for me again.

“Hit me back,” I scream, squeezing my fists tightly on either side of my head. My voice echoes off the walls around me and the desperation that fills it hits my ears. The gym goes silent around us, and for the first time today, I see another form of emotion in August’s face other than irritation—anger.

“Is that what you need?” he yells back, throwing his gear to the floor as a crowd of people begins to gather around us. “You need to be hit back? You want to be hurt? Too damn bad, Shay. You want to train? That’s one thing, but I’m not going to hit you so you can feel somethin’ other than the emotional pain you’re in right now.”

I lower my head, glaring at him. When he doesn’t budge, I storm toward the locker room. I slam the door back against the wall, thankful the room is currently empty.

Hauling back, I hit a locker, leaving a large dent in the door and scream



out my frustration. August steps into the room behind me. I don't even have to see him to know who it is—his presence fills the room. Turning, I stare as he kicks the door closed behind him and stands in silence—the only sound hitting my ears is my harsh breathing.

"I hate you," I bite out.

"Liar." He waits for me to say something else but when I don't he keeps talking anyway. "It can't be that bad. I mean, you did go almost two months without this happening ... so why now?"

I shrug, dropping down onto the bench.

"Emily is willin' to go a few rounds with you, but I'll only allow it if you answer me."

My eyes fall to the tile floor, running along the grout lines to keep my mind busy. I need this but I hate talking about this type of thing.

"I finally opened up to him after all this time and then he went radio silent on me." August laughs and my eyes shoot to his.

"You're fallin' apart because he isn't textin' you back?"

"Do you like your face arranged like that?" I snap.

He grins but it falls when he realizes I'm serious. "Shay, I was drawn to you because you do whatever you want without carin' what anyone thinks of you. Now you're lettin' one person get in your head and screw with you. When did you become the girl that gave a damn about shit like that?"

Standing, I head toward the door, focusing on the fact that he said Emily is here. I know I can work through things better when I'm fighting than talking but with my check-up tomorrow with Tyler, I know I can't go all out. The last thing I need on top of how I feel at the moment is a lecture from my doctor.

He's right, though. I've always been the girl that did whatever I wanted without caring how others would perceive me. If I wanted something, I took it, because I knew it might be my last chance to do anything. I don't like being tangled up inside because of a man, but there's something different about Deacon. Something that makes me wonder if I hold out a little longer if he could be worth it.

I shrug off the thought as I step up in front of Emily. He may be worth it, but I deserve better than chasing someone that doesn't want to be caught.



## Deacon

I feel my phone vibrate in the pocket of my lab coat, but I ignore it, wrapping my stethoscope back around my neck and keeping my focus on Peter, the six-year-old in front of me. He deserves all my attention even if my mind desperately wants to be elsewhere. I haven't been able to think about anything but how I felt last week when I fell asleep with Shay.

Being that comfortable with someone scared me enough that I can't bring myself to talk to her. A part of me wants to explore how I feel for Shay, but a bigger part—the one that keeps me from moving on—feels like I'm betraying Christine even though I know she would want me to be happy again.

I write out a prescription for an antibiotic that will help get rid of his bronchitis and not interfere with his other medications and hand it to his mother before leaving. After dropping his file off at the nurses' station, I head toward the door to get a minute of fresh air and pull my phone out of my pocket. I fully expect it to be a text from Shay like it has been the past few days about this time, but it isn't, and the feeling that hits confuses me even more than I have been the past week.

**Tyler: Shay's apt is soon**

**Me: k?**

**Tyler: if you're avoiding her like I think you are...**

I ignore him, stuffing my phone back into my pocket. Fuck him and his ellipsis. He thinks he knows me so well ... but I guess since I have been ignoring her messages he does, but I refuse to admit that. Why I thought it was a good idea to work out of the same hospital as him after everything we've been through together is beyond me.

I know I have an hour until my next appointment so I head toward the basketball court to work out some of my anxious energy despite the cold that is starting to settle in the air around me. I pass Shay's Jeep as I head into the fenced-in area and know if I want to avoid seeing her and having things be awkward I can't be out here long.

Honestly, I *don't* want to avoid her, but I don't know how to talk about what I'm feeling with anyone—especially her.

I launch the ball toward the hoop in frustration a while later, missing it by a mile. It hits the fence before rolling back in my direction. It stops about ten feet from me but I can't get my body to move so I can pick it up again.



Footsteps connect with the pavement behind me but I don't bother turning around. I figure it's another staff member on break and I open my mouth to tell them they can have the court since I should be heading back in anyway, but when Shay steps around me I lose all train of thought.

My mouth goes dry when she stops in front of me. I wait for her to yell about how I have been ignoring her but she doesn't.

She takes a step closer.

Then another.

She pushes her sunglasses to the top of her head, sweeping her dark hair out of her face, and takes one more step. It puts her close enough that I can feel her breathe. It puts her close enough that my mind begins to race too fast for me to keep up.

Without asking and without hesitation she wraps one hand around the back of my neck and pulls me down, and before I can stop it, her lips land on mine. For the first time, my mind blocks out everything and all I know—all I *feel*—is the way her lips mesh against mine. Her free hand comes to rest against my cheek, her fingers dance across my skin, but no matter what I want, I still can't move and she pulls away far too soon.

"Why did you do that?" I ask and mentally slap myself. I hope she takes it as a joke and makes her smile, but it doesn't, and I know I'm at fault for that.

She keeps her eyes on mine, and the emotions I see in them keeps me rooted and renders me speechless.

"Because I wanted to," she says, trying to keep her voice strong. "For the first time in two years, I actually *wanted* to do something other than *hit* something, and I've been talking myself out of it for weeks because I knew you weren't ready, and I respected that. But I don't care right now because I know from the lack of returned messages that whatever we did have going ... is over. I've never chased anyone until you but I'm not going to keep chasing you so I can keep getting hurt. I can't do that to myself."

I open my mouth again, but she shakes her head quickly, silencing me before I even speak.

"I know you have a broken heart, Deacon, but so do I. It might be broken in a completely different way, but it's still in pieces inside of me. There are nights I can't sleep. And more often than not I have mornings where I can't even force myself to get out of bed and face the world. There are a lot of days I wish I hadn't woken up at all. Days I can't focus and my mind hates me. I'm



more angry than not, sometimes for absolutely no reason at all, and it baffles me and makes the days that I don't want to get out of bed even harder. And then you happened, and I'm still broken hearted but I actually look forward to waking up because there's this tiny chance I'll be able to talk to you or possibly see you, and that makes the day a little less hard."

She swipes her hand across her cheek before I have a chance to realize she's crying and takes another step back. I want to reach out and grab her so she can't leave, but once again, I can't seem to get my body to cooperate.

"I barely know you," she tells me softly, letting the tears pool in her eyes. "But when I'm near you, my mind doesn't race and I don't get tangled up in my thoughts and I don't feel like I'm falling apart. And I can't help but think that maybe, just maybe, there's a reason that on the worst night of my life—the night I usually wish I had been the one that died instead of Ethan—that maybe I got this heart for a reason. I trusted you enough to open up to you and tell you things I normally keep locked inside, and you couldn't even tell me to stop trying to contact you. But I know when I'm fighting a fight I can't win and I back out before I get knocked out."

She turns toward the hospital, and I can't breathe as I watch her walk away from me. I need to get a grip on myself because I know if she leaves before I say something, this, whatever *this* is, is over completely and after listening to what she just said—I don't want it to be.

I race after her, closing the distance between us quickly, and I reach out, capturing her hand and pulling her to a stop. Fresh bandages cover her knuckles, making me wonder what she's been doing since I last saw her, but I can't let myself think about that and get off track. Shay's body tenses, her hand shakes in mine, but she doesn't turn around to look at me. Her head drops, and I watch the side of her face as she squeezes her eyes shut and pulls her bottom lip between her teeth.

I did that.

I caused the pain she's in right now, and that doesn't sit well with me at all. With everything racing through my mind, the only thing I can focus on is the fact that I want to take the pain away from her. I'd bear every ounce of it on top of everything I feel just to make her life a little easier for a minute.

Working my way around her, I step closer, backing her up until she's pressed against the chain-link fence. I stare down at her for a minute but she keeps her eyes cast down. With one hand still trapped in mine, I drag my fingers across her forehead, running over the scar she told me about and pushing a piece of hair out of my way.



“Please don’t give up on me that easy,” I beg her softly.

I lift her chin, nudging the tip of her nose with mine and barely brush my lips across hers. Letting go of her hand, I frame her face as I deepen the kiss and just like before, nothing else matters but this.

Right now, in this moment, I rethink every thought I’ve had about falling in love again over the past two years. At this very moment, the world could fall down around me and I wouldn’t care because the only thing that matters is the way she clings to me as she kisses me back.

And I don’t know if I love her. I don’t believe anyone can fall in love this quickly. What I do know is I don’t want to live in a world where I didn’t try to find out if I could.

I pull away and wait for her to open her eyes. “You scare the hell out of me, Shay,” I finally admit. “I’m comfortable with you. I’m *happier* when I’m with you. I feel like myself again, and that scares the hell out of me. It wasn’t what you told me, or that you opened up to me, that made me act like an idiot this week. It was the fact that I’m scared.”

“And you don’t think I am?” Her eyebrows rise as she speaks, making me question my answer.

“You don’t act it. You’re confident and cocky and everything I’m not used to—”

“And I *fake* it,” she interrupts me. “That’s how I always was but for two years that’s all I’ve done. I fake my way through the days because forcing a smile and acting like I don’t care is easier than coming up with an answer when someone asks me what’s wrong. I *hate* being asked if I’m okay. But, Deacon, when it comes to you, I’m scared beyond reason because you make me feel something, and that’s the last thing I ever wanted.”

I don’t ever want her to feel like she has to fake anything with me. It isn’t fair to her that she’s had to at all. Nothing about anything either of us has been through is fair, but it’s what got us here.

“Don’t run away from me,” she whispers, gripping my shirt so she can pull me closer. “Don’t run away, don’t hide, tell me when something’s wrong—that’s the only way this is going to work.”

My pager goes off just as I’m about to say something, and I know I’m late for my next appointment. Shay uses the distraction to slide from between my body and the fence and pulls her keys from her pocket. I step toward her but she holds her hand up, stopping me mid-step.

“Go to work, Deacon,” she says with a small smile, walking backward



toward the Jeep. “Figure out what you want because I’m not going to chase you if it’s not me.”





Everything is changing. Even if Deacon doesn't show up tonight, I still know everything is going to be different from here on out.

Grateful for the heat pumping through the house, I fiddle with the frayed hem of my shorts as I stare at the upside-down photos covering my fridge door. The nervous energy that usually sends me running out the door and away from what I want to do is building inside, but I'm determined to win this time.

Taking a deep breath, I unfold my legs and slide off the kitchen island, stepping toward the refrigerator. Gripping a magnet, I hold my breath and quickly flip the photo over and let go.

"There," I muse aloud over the sound of Linkin Park's "Numb" blaring loudly from the television in the living room. "That wasn't so hard, right?"

Ethan's broad smile stares back at me. I flipped them the day after his funeral, and it's the first time since that I've see that look—the crushing feeling inside makes me realize just how much I've missed it.

I trace my fingers along the edge of the photo, staring at it as my vision begins to blur, making it hard to see through the haze of tears filling my eyes. I quickly flip the rest of the photos until they're all face up again and swallow around the ginormous lump that quickly formed in my throat.



Drying my eyes, I clear my throat and breathe through the need to cry. *This is a good thing*, I remind myself. I needed to do this. It should have been done a long time ago. The thought makes my mind race, making me wish that Deacon was here to make the rapid thinking stop.

But I can't count on him to make things better; I can only count on myself.

Before I lose my nerve I work my way through the rest of the house, righting all the photos that have spent way too long in hiding, and when I finally finish, I collapse on the couch.



The hours tick by slowly, driving me insane—I can *hear* the hands on the clock move. That coupled with the new feeling of being stared at again thanks to the photos, is driving me out of my mind. Pushing off the couch, I restart the music, cranking it, and begin to power clean my already immaculate house.

The front door closes a while later, making my heart speed up because I didn't hear anyone pull up the driveway.

"It's just me." He smiles awkwardly.

"Hi," I mutter nervously.

My foot lifts, trying to propel me toward him but my mind can't decide what it wants to do. I don't know whether to kiss him or wait to see what he does. Deciding to take the safe route, I lift myself onto the island and wait for him to speak—something I don't often do.

He sets the paper bag he carried inside on the counter and settles his hip against the island, wringing his hands together before meeting my eyes. "I thought about what you said all day and realized that it doesn't matter how scared I am, I want this. I don't want you to give up on me, Shay, and I'm not going to let you chase me unless I'm willing to chase back."

"You don't have to chase me," I whisper. "I'm right here."

Without a word, he steps between my thighs, resting his cold hands just below the edge of my shorts. It dawns on me that this is the first time he's



initiated contact. Even earlier today when he grabbed me and kissed me, I had kissed him first. I highly doubt he would've pinned me against the fence if I hadn't done that and walked away.

He leans closer, running his nose along mine, and I part my lips to meet his kiss, but words tumble out instead.

"I don't want to be your rebound girl."

*Wait, what?* I shake my head in confusion over my own words. *Where the hell did that come from?*

Deacon looks as confused as I feel. "Earlier I swear you said something about wanting this," he says without backing away. With each word, his breath fans across my face, drawing me in to close the gap despite what I just said.

"I do."

"But you just said ..."

"I know." Sliding my hands over his, I wrap my fingers around his wrists, holding him in place. "Two years and I haven't wanted anything other than to go back and change the way things happened. I want you. I want *this*. But I don't want to fall in love with you and realize I was just the girl that helped you move on."

The vulnerability in my voice surprises me. Swallowing hard, I wait for him to say something. Watching me, he brushes his thumbs across the inside of my thighs—a touch I haven't felt in a long time.

"Listen, I'm not a rebound guy, and if I thought for one second that I would do that to you, I would turn around and walk back out that door. But I didn't even realize I could feel like this again until you."

He leans closer, resting his forehead against mine, and I take a second to slide my hand up his arm, wrapping my fingers around the back of his thick neck.

"I kept joking about you not falling in love with me ... I never realized that I was at risk too."

Closing my eyes, the realization of what I just said hits me and is probably why I had such a hard time letting go when he wasn't texting me back this week. I'm falling for him, and I've never felt like this before. I'm not quite sure how to handle everything.

Deacon clears his throat. "I can't tell if you're trying to talk me into loving *you*, or talk yourself out of loving *me*."



“Probably a little bit of both,” I admit.

## Deacon

“Well ... don’t,” I mutter, gliding my hands over her hips and across the small of her back. Her breath shutters as she releases it. It takes every ounce of restraint I have to hold back. I want to kiss her more than I want to analyze what’s running through my head.

Shay’s lips part, and I can feel her exhale against my skin. “Why?” she questions, inching her mouth closer to mine. Her downcast eyes stay locked on my lips.

“Because if I’m not allowed to run away and hide, neither are you. I’m scared as hell, but I’m not about to start half-assing shit now. It’s all or nothing, Shay.”

The words, even though they are true, are hard to say. I met Christine when I was twelve and I never thought I’d ever want to love someone again. I never thought I would need to. My heart belonged with hers, and I’m not even sure there’s enough left to give to Shay. Then again, as my lips graze hers with each word, I never thought I’d want to kiss someone this much again, either.

She smiles as the music coming from the living room dies down.

“All.”

That one word is going to change my life, I can feel it, and whether I’m ready or not, it’s happening.

She tightens her grip around my shoulders, pulling me closer until I can’t hold off anymore. I close the gap and kiss her again. Like earlier, my mind goes blank, and the only thing I can focus on is Shay. The way she moves in my arms, the way her tongue slips between my lips and her taste lands on mine, the small sounds she makes; they all spur me on. They’re familiar, like I’ve kissed her my entire life, and I love that feeling.

I press myself into her more, forcing her to lean back and brace myself with one arm behind her on the island. Her thighs tighten around my hips, inching their way up my waist until they’re hooked behind my back. Slipping my hand under the hem of her shirt, I stroke my fingers across her skin. It’s soft and warm, making me want to feel more of it against me.

Breathless, I pull back, knowing I have to stop. As much as it physically



hurts to pull away, I know I need to before we do something stupid and it breaks us before we have a chance to see if this is going to work at all.

Her chest rises and falls harshly but she lets me back off.

“You okay?” she asks between breaths, and I simply nod before pressing my forehead against her shoulder. Obviously realizing I need a second, Shay squeezes her thighs once before easing them from around me. The tips of her fingers glide across my tense shoulders, into my hair, then down my spine before retracing their track. It does nothing to calm the racing thoughts in my head and only makes me want to continue doing what we were doing a second ago.

“What’s in the bag?” Her hands stop moving and fall away. I lift my head, following her gaze.

“I figured I’d cook burgers if you haven’t eaten.”

Grinning, she pushes me back and slips off the counter. Her body slides along mine as she moves. I have no strength to make myself get out of her way. Her eyes run down my chest before she meets my gaze and smirks, tugging on my shirt.

“Your scrubs are pretty sexy.”

I laugh. “Well, you know, I had to wear them and prove that I’m more than just good looks today.”

Shay steps away from me and shuffles through the bag I left on the counter. “Good to know you can back that doctor title up,” she quips.

“Only when people start to question it.”

She laughs silently, pulling the groceries from the bag and setting them near the stove. I force myself in front of her so I can cook instead of letting her take over.

A few minutes later, she steps up behind me as I’m flipping the burgers. Pressing her chest against my back, she slides her hands around me and across my abs, kissing her way across my shoulders.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to stay focused on what I’m doing, but she’s making it hard. Christine’s face flashes through my mind, but I shake it off. I know I’m never going to be able to forget her or even stop loving her, but Shay deserves for me to try.

She settles her forehead between my shoulder blades, and I grip the edge of the counter to keep from turning around. She shifts her hands, inching them under the hem of my shirt. I close my eyes, dropping my chin to my chest and



don't let myself think about anyone but Shay.

The burgers are burning—I can smell it, but I can't seem to do anything about it.

Shifting her head, she lifts onto her toes, pressing her lips to the shell of my ear. "Am I distracting you?" she whispers huskily.

"A little," I admit, tightening my grip.

She moves her hands again, tracing my abs. "I can stop ... if you want me to."

"No."

Without even thinking about what I'm doing, I reach behind me and grip the collar of my shirt, pulling it over my head. Dropping it to the floor, I grab for one of her wrists, pinning it where it is so she can't pull it away.

*I shouldn't have done that.*

Her nose runs up my spine, followed by her lips and I sink into the feeling.

"You should work like this. I doubt anyone would ever question your qualifications then." I laugh, loving how she seems to know when I'm about to spiral into my own mind and she manages to pull me back with a smartass remark. "Although, I don't think you'd make a good chef."

"No?"

"No, I think they frown upon topless cooking in most establishments." She moves again but this time she closes in on the opposite ear. "Plus, you're burning the food."

Dragging her teeth across my earlobe, she chuckles when I groan.

"Fuck the food," I mumble.

I chuck the frying pan into the sink with one hand and shut the stove off with the other. Spinning in her arms, I back her against the island.

Her eyes narrow.

Her mouth parts.

Her tongue darts out over her lips.

It's all the permission I need from her, and I don't dare to dwell on what I'm about to do because I'm afraid I'll somehow talk myself out of it.

*I want this. I want her, I remind myself.*



Using her fingertips, she pushes me away, and I stare down at her in confusion, wondering if somehow I misconstrued the signals. Silently, she threads her fingers through mine and walks backward toward the living room, tugging me along with her.

I fall back on the couch when she pushes gently against my chest again. I wait without saying a word while she settles on my lap, straddling my thighs, and my hands fall to her hips like they belong there.

I'd be lying to myself if I said I didn't like this. The truth is, touching Shay is the easiest thing I've done in the past two years—it's the guilt that usually accompanies it that is hard on me.

She bends to whisper close to my ear, running her hands from my shoulders to my chest and back with ease.

"Promise me something." I nod, wondering where the hell she's going with this. "Promise me that you'll stop me if I take this too far, because I doubt I'll be able to do it myself."

I agree, praying I have the strength to stop her like I did myself in the kitchen earlier.

Her lips brush against my cheek, running over the stubble that has regrown since this morning. She moves, pressing them to the dip above my sternum.

"Should I stop yet?" she mutters. When I stay silent, she makes her way up my throat, forcing my head to fall back and expose more to her. Wrapping her arms around my neck, she pauses when her mouth is right at the corner of mine. "How 'bout now?"

I shake my head, capturing her mouth with my own instead of voicing my answer. The faint taste of the Coke she was drinking in the kitchen still flavors her tongue, but it quickly disappears.

Tightening my grip on her hips, I shift us so she's pinned underneath me on the couch. Her leg bends, hooking over my hip, and I trace my fingers along the lines of her thigh muscles, making her body shudder.

I never realized what I was missing by not having the physical contact with someone I needed. And no matter how much I try to deny it to myself, I need Shay.





I hear a door shut and shift to get into a better position on the couch when I hear the water turn on upstairs. Sleeping too deep on the couch may not have been the best idea, but when she asked me not to leave halfway through the night, I couldn't say no. I also couldn't climb into a bed with her. It was hard enough managing to stop us before things went too far.

I sink into the spot that was filled by Shay and keep my eyes shut for a few more minutes. I know the second I open them and start moving, reality is going to set in and I'm going to have to leave and get back to the real world.

The real world that doesn't involve making out with a gorgeous woman until all hours of the morning. Instead, it involves cancer, and blood, and the reality that I still need to work through the loss of Christine before I can truly make any promises to Shay.

That's going to be the hardest.

The smell of coffee seeps through the air, promising to help keep me awake through this shift. Forcing myself off the couch, I trudge toward the kitchen, noticing all the photos I haven't seen before. Something was different last night but I was more focused on what I was doing than what was around me.

Ignoring my need to stop and stare at every single image, I search through the cupboards until I find the coffee cups and pull two out. Pouring us both a cup, I drop onto a stool and sip it, starting at the Polaroids that now stare back at me from the fridge.

My focus continues to be pulled back to one of Shay with two guys on either side of her, one older, one younger. All spitting images of each other. All squeezed onto a hospital bed.

"Ethan, me, and Jackson, almost three years ago. That was taken right before Tyler came in and told me my first transplant had fallen through."

My attention shifts to Shay as she steps closer. The water dripping from the ends of her hair runs down her arms and chest, dampening the edges of her tank top. I turn, resting my hands on her waist when she steps between my legs.



“You looked happy.”

She sighs, closing her eyes for a second. “I was. For the first time in months, I had hope. It was short lived, though—didn’t last long after the photo developed.”

I wait for her to look back at me and kiss her. A few more minutes in a false reality won’t hurt.

“You look happy now,” I whisper against her cheek.

She sighs again, but this time, it’s different. This time it doesn’t look like she’s trying to breathe with the weight of the world on her chest.

The corners of her mouth twitch before curving up. “I am, I think. It’s hard to remember a feeling you tried to block because you don’t think you deserve it.”

*I know ...*

The smile falls and is replaced by creases between her eyes, making me wonder if she meant to say that out loud. Deciding not to dwell on her words and make her uncomfortable, I switch subjects. Running my hand down her arm, I trace lightly around the clean bandage covering her knuckles.

“What happened?”

Shay chuckles, scrunching up her nose. “I got in a fight with a punching bag.”

“And the bag won?”

“I let it.” She shrugs, and I know there’s more to the story, but when I look at her I know I probably shouldn’t push.



“Deacon?”

Shay’s voice tries to break through the fog I’m in, but I can’t lift my head, let alone open my eyes to focus on her. Her fingers slide along my cheek, and for a second, I lean into her touch. There’s something different about her voice, something upbeat, and it forces me to open my eyes and see her smiling down at me.



The look quickly fades and a crease forms between her eyebrows. “What’s wrong?”

Sliding back against the wall, I make room for her on the tiny lounge bed and pull her down next to me. Her hands flatten against my chest, and I feel like shit for ripping the joy from her eyes because she’s worried about me. I hitch her leg over my hip, pulling her closer.

“I should’ve called before I came but I wanted to surprise you with dinner since I knew I wouldn’t see you tonight,” she explains, trying to push herself out of my grip, but I don’t let her move.

“I’m glad you’re here. I lost a seven-year-old patient while he was on the table today,” I whisper against the top of her head. “You being here is exactly what I needed.”

I hate this part of my job. Losing people is hard, but it’s harder when it’s a kid and you promise them you’re going to make everything better. I wish someone would’ve slapped me when I decided I wanted to be a doctor.

“I’m sorry.” Lifting her head, she kisses me before tucking her face back under my chin.

Why the hell she continues to want to see me baffles me. I can’t move past the fact that I’m moving on without Christine so Shay doesn’t get the man she deserves. She should have someone that takes charge instead of letting her take the lead on everything in our relationship. I’m afraid if I keep letting it happen it’s going to break us.

“Part of the job,” I mutter. “Shouldn’t let it get to me like this.”

She quickly pulls back and meets my eyes. “You’re human, and I’d worry more if you didn’t react like this.”

Sighing, I shift us so we’re sitting and she leans her head against my shoulder.

“Are you wearing perfume?” I blurt out randomly, trying my best to change the subject. I feel her smile against my shoulder.

“I am. I found it while I was looking for new clothes so I have stuff to wear to my new job. It’s—”

“Red plum and freesia,” I finish for her without thinking.

“Yeah ... how’d you know?” Shay lifts her head to look at me, and I quickly think of how to answer without telling her the real reason I know.

“I knew someone that used to wear it.”



The truth is, it was Christine's scent. She wore it every day, and I bought it for her on multiple occasions. The label from the Victoria's Secret bottle is burned into my brain and the smell brings on an onslaught of memories that I force back to where they belong.

I need to stop comparing them—Shay isn't Christine. And my wife isn't coming back.

She seems to accept my answer, for now, at least, so I pull her closer again. Partly so I can keep the smell near me for a minute, and partly so she'll stop looking at me like she's trying to put together a puzzle where the pieces don't quite fit.

"New job?" Her words finally sink into my brain and I realize what she said before I got stuck in my own shit.

"Yep, they had an English teacher leave so I start at the high school next week." Leaning forward, she grabs the bag she came in with and pushes a container of food into my hands. "I decided to take Tyler's advice and use my degree."

"Tyler's smart sometimes."

She laughs and meets my eyes, pulling me a little further out of the depression I was sinking into when she arrived.

"He hasn't steered me wrong yet," she whispers.





“Is this too tight for a high school teacher?” I yell as I rush into the living room, waking Deacon for the third time this morning for something stupid.

Cracking his eyes, he takes a look at my outfit before biting his lip and shaking his head. “Jesus.” He scrubs his hand over his face, pushes off of the couch, and stalks me from across the room.

I’ve never seen him look at me the way he is right now—like a man starved—but I love it. It dawns on me as he slowly steps closer that if he was the last person to look at me like that and everything ended right this very second, I’d be fine with that. Thankfully, it isn’t, though, because I unfortunately have no time to act on the look in his eyes.

His eyes drag down the length of my gray dress and land on my matching peep-toes before making their way back up at an agonizingly slow pace.

I chuckle nervously as he steps closer. “I’m going to take that as a yes and go change again.”

He makes a sound low in his throat before pulling me against his body, trapping me within his arms. “Don’t you *dare* change.”

“No?”



He shakes his head. Dropping his face into the crook of my neck, he drags his nose along my throat, inhaling deeply until he gets to my ear. “You better be dressed like that when you get home.”

The low gravelly-tone of his voice sends a shiver down my spine, a sensation that has happened a lot but we always stop before going too far. I have no clue if this is leading up to anything good, but I think I could survive on the feeling alone and be okay.

With a kiss, he pulls away from me, telling me I’m going to be late if I don’t get going. I smile and grab my scarf from the coat rack by the door and wrap it around my neck before pulling on my coat and heading out.



Nerves flutter through my stomach as I set up my classroom. The bell rings, making them worse.

High school wasn’t my favorite time in my life. It’s when I first found out I was going to need a new heart and I closed myself off to a lot of the perks of this place. Coming back and being colleagues with people that used to be my teachers is ... weird to say the least, but hopefully, this time in this school won’t be so hard.

I adjust my scarf again and slide back on the front side of my desk, crossing my legs as students file in and take their seats. They separate into cliques, ignoring the other people or beginning arguments with each other. Not at all how I plan on letting things happen.

“Forget everything you know,” I begin without introducing myself. “Forget everything Mrs. Kessler taught you. When you walk through that door, you’re adults, and I will treat you like adults as long as you act like them. I’m not going to teach you like other teachers. If you have an idea, tell us. If you need help, reach out—to me, to someone else in class, it doesn’t matter. But check your drama at the door because in here you’re a family.”

“I have a family, I don’t need another one,” a slim brunette snarks from the second row of desks.

“You’ll need this family too, I promise,” I respond calmly, knowing this wasn’t going to go over well with everyone. It doesn’t exactly sit well with



me, either, considering how I've pushed my own family away. Maybe that's why I'm gunning so hard for this.

"In here, while we'll still read and discuss the mandatory curriculum, we'll mainly focus on creative writing. I've found it's easier to learn through your own words than anyone else's."

Standing up, I brush my hands over the front of my dress. "Show of hands. How many of you believe in destiny?"

A few hands slowly pop up, but most stay in their laps, fiddling with what is most likely their phones.

"I'm not talking about your future jobs or anything like that. I'm talking about the destiny that decides in a split second if you live or die."

A few more hands, but still not what I'm looking for. "I do," I continue anyway. "When I was a freshman, I sat in that seat." I point to the back corner desk. "When I was a sophomore I sat there." I move my finger to the middle row. "When I was a junior I was so enthralled with words that I moved to the front row. I *clung* to Mrs. Johnson's words. But when I was a senior, I was back in the back row. Nothing mattered anymore because my life came crashing down around me. I needed people more than ever, and do you know how many people I actually knew in my classes? Maybe three. My life was falling apart, and those three people had better things to do than help me through. Instead, someone that I didn't even realize I had most of my classes with stepped in."

*August.*

I smile when I think of how much he's helped me over the years. I pull the scarf slowly from my neck and drop it on my desk, revealing my scar. "When my life fell apart, the one person I didn't even know was one of the only ones I could count on, and he still is. I believe that no matter how much I hate it, I was destined to end up with someone else's heart and I was meant to end up back in this classroom. I don't know why yet, but I know there's a reason."

I finally have everyone's attention and even though it probably makes no sense now, I hope they remember it all in the future.

"I'll give you two minutes to find someone you don't know anything about and sit next to them. We're a family, find reasons to love each other."





Pulling up the gravel driveway, I smile when I see Deacon's car sitting near the swing. I must say, I like having him here. It's been me coming home to nothing but an oversized house and silence for so long that this is nice, and I find myself liking it more and more each time.

But just because I like it doesn't mean it isn't still terrifying.

The light in my bedroom is on so when I get inside, I head in that direction, noticing the sound of running water on my way. My heart speeds up knowing he's in the shower and the fact that he's naked makes my skin heat.

After the way he tempted me this morning, I might die if he stops us tonight.

Deacon's bag sits against the bedroom wall with clothes spilling out. His scrubs are thrown haphazardly next to it, and I know if I picked them up and sniffed them, they would smell like antiseptic and my shampoo.

"Shay?" Deacon hollers, shutting the water off.

I open my mouth but hesitate. I could ignore him, not answer, and simply walk into the bathroom where I know the water is still dripping down his chest. I close my eyes, imagining all the ways I could dry him off myself.

I shake it off and walk the rest of the way into the bedroom. As much as I wish I could take complete control of how things go with Deacon tonight, I know I would stop if he told me to. As much as I wish things were different, I know everyone heals at their own pace and he isn't over his wife's death yet.

I can't say anything ...

Who knows if either one of us will ever fully be over what we've been through.

At the same time, no matter how much I hate the fact that we keep stopping, I love it. I know he's here because of me—not what I do for him in the bedroom. I wasn't sure I would ever let anyone close enough to make me feel the way he does.

I hear Deacon's footsteps fall behind me but I don't turn around.

"Good lord, I'd kill for detention with you."



I chuckle, but the sound gets lodged in my throat when he pushes me chest first into the wall in front of us. His body presses against mine, holding me in place as he shifts my hair over my shoulder and runs his lips down my neck to my shoulder.

Sliding his hands around me, he splays his fingers across my stomach. “How was your first day?”

“Good,” I whisper. He bites down on my shoulder, eliciting a moan from me when he moves to cup my breasts. “But this is better. So much better.”

He hums low in his throat and spins me, pushing me back into the wall so he has me where he wants me. The look in his eyes has my stomach flipping, tightening with nervous energy. My breaths shorten, coming in quick spurts as his lips crash down on mine and I sink into him, letting him take control.

This is what I need.

The feeling of being wanted—*needed*—after all the times he’s kissed me while I know he was thinking about someone else. His focus is solely on me, and I love it. He may think I don’t notice, but I do, I just don’t say anything about it.

There’s something about being pinned against a wall and kissed by someone. I’m not quite sure what it is, but every woman deserves this feeling.

Pinning my hands above my head, he slides his free arm around me, lowering the zipper on my dress at an agonizingly slow pace as he continues to kiss me.

He’s wearing nothing but a towel around his waist, and just like I imagined, there are water drops still lingering on his skin.

My hands fall to my sides as Deacon shifts my dress off my shoulders, exposing my body inch by inch until it pools around my feet on the floor.

Tipping my head, he burns a path down my throat to my chest with his lips before continuing down, caressing every inch of my scar—something I’ve never been comfortable with until now. His hands run along my sides to my thighs before tracing their way back up, touching me everywhere but where I actually need him. No one has ever touched me like this, though. No one has ever made me *feel* like this—like my body is on fire from a simple touch.

**Deacon**



I pull away from Shay's naked body and the look in her eyes is desperate, like she thinks I'm pulling away again to stop us completely. There's no stopping this time, though. For the first time, it's not a competition in my head between Christine and Shay, it's all Shay. I feel like shit for letting the war go on in my brain for so long.

The truth is, I backed up so I could look at her—at every inch of her—something I haven't seen in the time we've been dating. She's perfect despite the small scars that litter her body and the large one down the center of her chest. She's a perfect disaster—a beautiful catastrophe.

Grabbing her hand, I tug her against me, feeling her sigh in relief when she realizes that I'm not stopping us.

I back her against the edge of the bed, pushing her down, and hover over her. Her chest moves rapidly as I kneel between her thighs, running my hands across every inch of skin I can reach. She moans when I lean closer, pulling a nipple between my lips and sucking.

Lifting her hips, she grinds against me, making my slow movements harder as my erection grows with every touch. I want to take my time, to burn the memory of how she looks right now into my mind. Her dark hair fanned out around her head, her fingers wrapped tightly around my biceps—I want to be able to close my eyes and see it whenever I want.

Shay pushes my arm, silently demanding me to move faster. I smirk, she scowls. There's no need to say anything. I continue my slow, torturous movements, and she finally closes her eyes, falling into the feeling. For the first time, I'm in control, and she's letting me have it—something I never thought would happen.

This needed to happen. I needed to show her that I could lead so she can let go. She needed to know that I've got her no matter what is going on in my head.



Waking up to an empty bed was the last thing I thought I would do, but Shay's side is vacant. I'd kill for one day where neither of us had to leave this



bed and I could make up for all the times I put the brakes on.

Sadly, the sound of the water running and the smell of coffee tells me that isn't happening today. My feet hit the floor just as the water shuts off. I make my way to my bag to grab clean clothes, and when I bend over, the end of a towel strikes my ass, stinging the skin.

"What the hell was that for?" Turning around, whatever thought was in my head vanishes when Shay drops the towel. Her hands rest on her hips and she smirks when she notices me tracking the beads of water rolling down her chest.

"I'm sure I can think of something." She shrugs. I charge her, tossing her onto the bed. Leaning up on her elbows, she smiles as I crawl between her thighs. "You're gonna be late for your rounds," she whispers.

She's right, I know if I start this now I'm going to be running behind all day, but all I can think about is drying her skin between the sheets and my body.

"Guess I'm gonna be late then."





“Can you call my phone?” I yell to Deacon as I dump my purse on the bed, searching through the massive amount of stuff I don’t need to carry with me.

“Mine’s on the dresser,” he shouts back from the bathroom where he’s busy shaving.

“This isn’t a good way to start today,” I mutter to myself. *Happy Thanksgiving.*

I hate holidays since the accident. More so because of the way everyone acts around them than the fact it means we’re closer to the anniversary. I hate them so much I simply stopped attending anything that involved my family. I hated the way I was looked at so I stopped putting myself in that situation.

I didn’t let anyone know we were coming because part of me is afraid I’m going to chicken out and make Deacon turn around.

I shake off the dread settling over me and grab Deacon’s phone. Unlocking the screen, I’m met with a picture of us I didn’t know existed, let alone that his background was a photo of us.

Standing in the hallway of the hospital, I’m pressed against Deacon in his white lab coat, staring up at him.

I look ... *happy.*



I'm not used to seeing that look anymore. I wasn't even sure I was *capable* of looking like that anymore.

Closing my eyes, I let that feeling wash over me and know that no matter what happens today, I'll be okay.

I dial in my number, waiting to hear the sound of Meghan Trainor's "Kindly Calm Me Down". I hit redial four times before I find my phone tucked between the cushions on the couch. I toss them both on the coffee table and head back upstairs to the bathroom.

Pushing my way between the counter and Deacon, I slide my hands into his hair and pull him down so I can kiss him. I don't care that his face is covered in shaving cream and now I am too. I don't care that I'm going to have to change because of it. After seeing that picture, I needed to kiss him. I needed to feed on the energy he gives me when he touches me—it's almost the same feeling I get when I'm fighting.

Shifting, Deacon tucks a strand of hair behind my ear before settling his hand against my neck, his thumb rubbing back and forth against my jaw.

"What was that for?"

I shrug. "I had to kiss you."

"You're covered in shaving cream now." He wipes some off, showing me.

"I don't care. I needed to kiss you."

His eyes narrow, and I can see the worry building behind them. "Why?"

I open my mouth without thinking about what I'm going to say.

"Because I wanted to." I shrug.

With a smile, Deacon wipes his face clean and kisses me again.

"Are you okay?" he whispers, leaning back. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I tuck my face into his chest and inhale, letting his clean smell calm me down.

"I'll let you know later."





I haven't been here in months and it wasn't for more than a few minutes then. I stopped to drop something off and got out as soon as I could.

Good daughter, right?

Staring intently at the front door, I grip Deacon's hand, praying no one opens the door before I'm ready. He rests his head back against his seat, turning to look at me.

"You don't have to do this," he tells me, pulling my hand to his lips. I meet his eyes, and I know without a doubt if I asked him to back out of the driveway and go home he would without hesitation.

"Yeah ... I do."

As much as I'd rather go home with Deacon and have dinner alone, I know I need to let my family back into my life. They lost Ethan already; it's not fair to make them feel like they lost even more.

Climbing out, I tuck myself under Deacon's arm and plaster a smile on my face when I knock on the door. I don't even have a chance to take a breath between the door opening and Jackson pouncing on me.

"Holy shit." He knocks Deacon's arm away from me as he pulls me tightly against him.

Jackson says something, but I can't understand what it is because his face is buried in my shoulder. Pulling back, he holds me at arm's length so he can look me over before noticing that there's actually someone else standing with me. His chest puffs up but he holds his hand out to shake Deacon's.

Pushing past Jackson before he makes a fool of himself, I pull Deacon into the house and make introductions around being hugged tightly by everyone. As uncomfortable as I was when we first got here, it doesn't take long for everything inside me to settle. Instead of things being tense and uncomfortable, the house is filled with joking and bright smiles—things I didn't expect.

Whimpering from the living room pulls my attention away from the laughter at the table. I stand to go find out where it's coming from and find a baby settled in a car seat in the corner beside the chair.

"You've missed a lot in your self-imposed isolation."

I jump when Jackson's voice interrupts my thoughts and I can see the hurt in his eyes. Hurt I caused—pain that could've been avoided by answering phone calls.

"Can I?" I point toward the baby awkwardly.



“Piper’s your niece, you can hold her if you want to.”

I don’t even get her out of the seat before emotion clogs my throat and my nose begins to tingle. Mentally, I berate myself for letting things get so bad that I didn’t even know Jackson was going to be a father.

Settling back in the chair, I rest Piper on my legs and stare at her. It’s insane how much she looks like my brother.

“That call you ignored two weeks ago was me telling you we were in the hospital and you were an aunt.”

Jackson sits beside me, running his fingers across Piper’s head with a goofy smile on his face.

*Two weeks. I only missed two weeks. I’m not missing any more.*

“Are you scared?” I ask a few minutes later.

“Of what? Having a kid? Yeah, every second of every day I wonder if I’m going to mess her up so badly that she’ll be dysfunctional.”

Laughing, I nudge his shoulder with mine. “No ... are you scared that she’s going to end up with issues like I did?”

“Truthfully, yeah, but even if she does, as long as she ends up half as awesome as you, she’ll be fine. *We’ll* be fine.”

I lean my head against his shoulder and apologize for being such a bad sister the past few years before forcing him to tell me what else I’ve missed.

## Deacon

Shay leans down and whispers in my ear, “Are you ready?” She looks exhausted, but like a weight has been lifted off her shoulders since she got here. I stand and she pulls me down to her, running her fingers through the hair on the back of my head before kissing me. It doesn’t matter that we’re in a room full of people watching us, she’s been doing it all day.

Now that I think about it, she does it no matter where we are. I’m not used to that. Christine was always conservative and public displays of affection weren’t her favorite things.

As Shay says goodbye to her parents, who are oddly spending the day together, Jackson steps up beside me. He slaps my shoulder and grips it as he speaks.



“Thank you,” he mutters low enough that only I can hear.

I feel a crease form between my eyebrows. “For what?”

“That.” He nods toward Shay who is smiling back at us while hugging her mother goodbye. “I haven’t seen *that* girl in a long, long time.”

“What? No hurt her and die speech?” I laugh and his fingers tighten painfully for a quick second.

“Not when she looks like that.” With a smile, he adds, “Just know that no one would ever find your body.”

“Down, Cujo.”

Shay laughs, pushing him away. I hadn’t noticed her walking toward us until she spoke. Slipping her arm around mine, I feel her sigh contently.

After how nervous she was about coming here at all, I’m glad it turned out this way. She needs her family in her life—even if she doesn’t realize it.

Pulling me toward the door, she looks once more at Jackson. “Kiss my baby for me.”

*Her baby.* That phrase, for half a second, scares the shit out of me, but I push it away. We’re nowhere near that point in what we’re doing for that conversation.



Shifting into park when I get back to Shay’s house, I look over at her and smile when I find her sleeping. I thought she was being awfully quiet the last bit of the ride. I didn’t figure either one of us was going to make it long after we got home anyway.

Lifting her out of the car, I cradle her against my chest, not setting her down until we’re in the bedroom. She wakes up the instant I set her down, refusing to let me go when I tell her I’m going home.

I give in and shift out of my clothes before sliding in behind her. She rolls over, wrapping herself around me and the smell of her perfume hits me hard. As the silence settles around us, I find my mind drifting to Christine and I hate myself for it. I have my arms wrapped around a gorgeous woman and I’m thinking about one that hasn’t been here in nearly three years.



*Idiot ...*

“Deacon?” Shay’s voice pulls me back to her and I run my fingers through the hair near her temple.

“Hmm?”

She takes a deep breath, putting me on edge.

“I’m in love with you.” I meet her words with silence but my stomach doesn’t sink like I thought it was going to. I wait for it, wondering when the instinct to run away is going to kick in, but it doesn’t. I’m content even though I’m not sure if I feel the same way. “You don’t have to say it back,” she tells me, surprisingly not sounding hurt. “I’m not forcing your hand. I don’t expect you to say anything, but I needed to tell you.”

Instead of saying anything at all, I pull her tighter against me and kiss her goodnight.



*“Excuse me?” I say nervously. My heart thunders against the back of my ribs as nurses wheel patients on stretchers up and down the hall in a rush. When none of them answer me, I turn, slamming my hands down on the top of the nurses’ station and the sound reverberates around me. “I said excuse me.”*

*A timid, petite nurse finally steps up and dares to make eye contact with me. I should know her name. I’ve seen her, I’ve spoken to her, why the hell can’t I remember her name? “Can I help you?”*

*I clear my throat, trying my hardest to get the words out of my mouth. “Someone called me and told me my wife was brought in. Christine York, her name is Christine York.”*

*Her eyes drop to the computer in front of her as she clicks her fingers across the keys faster than my eyes can follow. Focusing back on her face, I watch her scan the screen and immediately know something isn’t right when her face falls. I’ve known it since the second my phone rang at home, but I refused to let the notion simmer in my mind until right this second.*

*“No,” I answer her silence. I shake my head, taking a step back as if the distance is going to change the outcome.*



*“If you’ll come with me, I’ll grab a doctor for you.” The nurse’s once timid voice echoes around my brain like an out of tune symphony. It’s too loud, too jumbled, and I close my eyes tightly to try to dull the roar. The harsh beating of my heart has disappeared, almost as if it knows it can’t beat without Christine’s.*

*I don’t have to be told. I don’t need the quiet room and the forced sympathy of a doctor to tell me what I already know, but I follow behind her silently because it’s what my mind is programmed to do. The empty pit in my stomach lurches when the door closes behind me, leaving me surrounded by nothing but silence and dull colored walls.*

*I pace.*

*I sit.*

*I pace again.*

*I rest my head against the cool window, watching the snow fall rapidly as I try to keep myself from falling apart.*

*I don’t know how many times I attempt to convince myself that the path my mind has wandered down is wrong. I lose count. I retreat into my mind, thinking about this morning when Christine left for work. I think about anything we’ve ever done. I remember the way her warm lips felt against mine, and the way she whimpered into my mouth as she pulled away this morning because she was going to be late even though she would have preferred to stay in bed with me.*

*I’d give anything to go back to then. To pull her back to bed and trap her within the safe confines of my arms. I’d force her to stay there and call out—hell, I’d call her boss for her and make an excuse. Anything to ensure I’d get to wake up next to her tomorrow.*

*“Deacon?”*

*I lift my head from where it was resting back against the wall and realize somehow I’ve ended up back in the hallway. A soft touch lands on my forearm—a standard move taught in med school. Connect with the person. Connect my ass. It takes everything in me not to forcefully remove Tyler’s hand as he tries to comfort me.*

*“I am so sorry.”*

*That’s all I hear.*

*It’s all I really need to hear because it confirms everything I’ve been trying to convince myself I was wrong about. I slide my hand to my chest, searching for my heartbeat. It was pounding so hard a little while ago, so*



*hard I swore it was going to break through my ribs, now I can't find it. My breath shudders as I drive the heel of my hand harder against my chest but I still come up empty.*

*Why can't I feel it?*

*Can your heart stop but you continue to breath and function? Is that possible to die but continue to live? It has to be. It's the only way I'm ever going to wake up again.*

*"Deacon?"*

*The second my name leaves his lips I break. My mouth falls open but no sound comes out as I slide to the floor, pulling away from his touch, and bury my head in my folded arms. My time alone doesn't last long because he slides down next to me, only staying silent for a few minutes.*

*"I understand how hard this is for you, but I have all the paperwork with me and all I need is your signature and Christine's wishes can be carried out."*

*My head snaps up and I level him with a glare. "Her wishes?" I growl, wiping my face dry. I know there was more to what he had said, but that's all I caught.*

*"She wanted to be an organ don—"*

*"No," I cut him off. "No way in hell."*

*"Deacon—"*

*"No." I shake my head quickly but he continues speaking over me.*

*"This is what she wanted, Deacon. You know it as much as I do. I know how hard this is on you, because I know how much you love her. I've seen it. It's what gives everyone here hope that there's a chance we can have something like it too. But right now you have the choice to give Christine another chance."*

*I suck in a rough breath and cover my mouth with my forearm, dropping my head back against the wall as tears leak from the corners of my eyes. This isn't how this was supposed to happen. We had plans. She has unfinished projects scattered around the house. She wasn't supposed to die first. She wasn't supposed to be gone yet.*

*I hear her sweet whisper in my head and I know this is what she wanted, like responsible adults we've talked about things, but this wasn't how things were supposed to happen. Rolling my head to the side, I force myself to hear him out, knowing that's what Christine would've wanted.*



*“I have a girl who was in the same accident. She’s twenty and has already been let down twice in the six months she’s been on the transplant list.”*

*My jaw clenches as I reach out and swipe the papers from his hand. I hate this. I hate everything about it, but I know if I don’t do it, Christine would never forgive me. I throw them back at him after I scrawl my name on the designated spots, fully expecting him to take off as soon as he has what he wants, but to my surprise, he doesn’t. Instead, he hands them off to a nurse and stays seated beside me in silence until he absolutely has to leave.*

*I sit in that exact spot for so long I don’t even know what day it is when I get up. I sat while they wheeled a stretcher past me into the O.R., and I was still sitting there when they wheeled it out hours later. I sat there until Tyler forced me out and took me home himself.*

*Thankfully, he’s smart enough to listen when I beg him not to take me to my house. I don’t think I could handle that. I want to be home, and I know that it’s the best place to be, but home is no longer that house anymore.*

*Home was Christine.*

*I shoot up in bed, my eyes instantly moving to Shay to make sure I didn’t wake her up. I hate that dream. I hate even more that I’ve been having it more frequently lately.*

*I can’t decide if it’s because of Shay, or if it’s because it’s getting closer to the three-year mark.*

*Dropping back against the pillow, I brush the sweat from my face and close my eyes, trying my hardest to go back to sleep.*





## Winter

“Shay.” I laugh, trying to grab her hand, but she jumps back, putting more distance between us with a wide smile on her face. She stops moving when she steps into the snowbank, putting her hands on her hips as her warm breath fogs the air in front of her face.

“What’s wrong?” She giggles. She *giggles* and the sound makes my heart clench. Every time I hear it, I love it more and *that* is beginning to scare the hell out of me.

“I have to go to work.”

She shrugs, a coy smile tipping her lips. “I’m way over here. I’m not stopping you.”

“Fine.” I throw my hands up jokingly. “I didn’t wanna kiss you anyway.”

I feel her eyes on me as I move to get in the car, and as soon as I have the door closed, I hear her call my name. I look toward her as she bends down to the window. Using her finger, she draws a heart in the frost and snow that has accumulated on the glass before smiling and pressing her lips to the center of it.

My smile falls as my mind retreats and the memory of Christine doing



nearly the same thing hits me. The air around me becomes thick, nearly suffocating me as the memories continue to flood my mind. When I finally pull myself together, I find Shay smiling at me as she says goodbye and heads back up to the house.

I don't know if she didn't notice the shift in my demeanor, or if she is just being polite and not bringing it up. Either way, I'm thankful that she doesn't question me.

*Go kiss her, idiot.*

I start the car, ignoring the words that are on a loop in my head. I ignore them until they're all I can hear before I realize how stupid I'm being by letting a memory control how my day is going to go.

I'm tired of living in the past.

"Shay," I call out as I rush through the door. My shoes leave wet spots on the wood floors as I run toward the back of the house searching for her. I skid to a stop when I see her standing in front of the kitchen sink and the only sound that fills the room is the sound of her sniffing. She reaches up, wiping her face dry. "Shay?"

"Everything I do is going to remind you of her, isn't it?" Her voice is flat, completely emotionless as she stares down at the faucet.

Stepping up behind her, I wrap my arms around her, holding her against me tightly. She keeps herself distant, like I'm not even touching her. I rest my forehead against the back of her head and close my eyes. "I can't promise you that memories aren't going to hit me out of the blue like they did outside. I can't promise you that I'm not going to love her anymore. But I never thought I was going to feel like this again, but you ... you've changed everything."

Her breath hitches but she stays silent before pushing out of my grasp. "I have to go to work," she mutters.

I drop back against the counter and pull at my hair. "Don't leave like this. Don't walk away without saying anything after everything I just said to you."

She surprises me by spinning back around and striding toward me. Pulling my hands from my hair, she replaces them with her own and pulls me down to her lips, kissing me lightly.

"That's the thing, Deacon. You don't even know how you feel but I *know* I love you. I don't even have to think about it. I'm strong enough, even after everything I've been through, to know I love you, but I'm not her, and I'm never going to be her."



*I don't want you to be her.*

The words get stuck in my throat, and when I open my mouth and nothing comes out, she shakes her head sadly and drops her hands.

“I can't compete with her memory.”



Swinging my legs over the edge of the bed in the on-call room, I drop my head into my hands. Shay hasn't answered me in two days, and it's killing me. I hate knowing I hurt her even if I didn't mean to.

Everything that has reminded me of Christine while I've been with Shay is beginning to click into place but I don't want to believe it. I don't want to believe that Tyler would keep something like this from me for all this time, but I can't say I wouldn't put it past him, either.

I shove up and head out of the room, searching for him because I need to know. I find him in his office behind a stack of files but I can't get further than the doorway. I open my mouth to ask him the questions that are burning inside of me ... but nothing comes out. He looks up, waves me in, and drops his eyes back to the file he's working on, saying something about hating paperwork.

It takes him a minute to realize I don't move before he looks back at me and narrows his eyes. His gaze locks with mine as he takes a deep breath. I don't have to voice my question; he already knows what I want to know.

“I couldn't tell you, Deacon. You know that.”

I finally snap out of whatever has kept me silent this long. “Don't you dare pull that doctor patient confidentiality bullshit on me,” I growl.

“It's not *just that*,” he confesses, his eyes softening as he stands from his seat and makes his way around his desk so he can lean back against it. His arms cross over his chest and he clears his throat.

I slam the door behind me before the entire hospital knows my business. “You knew and you didn't tell me. That's why you hesitated the day you found out it was her I asked out. I can't believe it took me so fucking long to figure out.”



“I knew you’d probably figure it out sooner or later, but I *couldn’t* tell you.”

“Why not?” I argue. “Does *she* know? Did she ask you not to say anything?” The thought of her keeping something like this makes my head pound, but I know I have my own secrets that could tear us apart and that’s probably why I haven’t told her so I can’t even hold it against her.

Tyler shakes his head, halting my train of thought. “She doesn’t know but I can only keep it from her for so long now. She asked me the other day to get the information for her to get in touch with her donor’s family.”

“What do you mean she’s just asking?”

He nods. “Up until recently she didn’t want to know. She didn’t want her donor’s family knowing how much of a disappointment she was. Her words, not mine.” He finishes when I begin to argue with him. She’s not a fucking disappointment.

Silence stretches between us as I try to get a handle on everything racing through my head. All my thoughts are running so fast I can’t understand anything and it’s only frustrating me more.

“Do you like her?” he finally breaks the silence. “I mean, before you knew she had Christine’s heart ... did you like her?”

I look down at my hands, wondering if I can actually tell him the truth about how I was beginning to feel, now that I know everything. I can’t help but wonder if somehow I knew the truth all along and that’s why I was drawn to her in the first place. I hadn’t joked or flirted or been happy with *anyone* since Christine died ... until Shay.

“You needed to want Shay for Shay before you knew Christine’s heart was inside of her. You needed to love someone for who they were before you knew, and I believe that you do, a part of you does, at least, or you wouldn’t be freaking out this much.”

I step closer to him, my mouth falling slack as I search for the words I need. “I don’t love her. I don’t even like myself, how the hell could I love someone else.”

“You already do,” he mutters, stepping back around his desk. “You’re just too stuck in the past and what you’ve lost to see what everyone else sees when they’re around you guys.”





“One. Two. Three. Two.”

*Jab. Cross. Hook. Cross.* I follow August’s commands, landing blows exactly where they’re supposed to be. He steps back, I advance, repeating the motion.

“Stop,” he yells over the sound of Papa Roach’s “Last Resort” that is blaring through the empty gym. “Other than when you’re at work you’ve been goin’ non-stop for two days.”

I drop my arms and glare at him while I attempt to catch my breath. The lack of movement hits me like a ton of bricks as my muscles become weak and my arms feel like they weigh a million pounds.

“What is goin’ on with you?”

I drop to my knees since my legs no longer want to support me and attempt to catch my breath. Now that I’ve stopped, I don’t think I’ll be able to get going again.

“I can’t. Do this,” I huff out angrily. “I can’t win. I can’t compete with a fucking ghost.”

August crouches down in front of me, tipping my head so I have to look at him. “You shouldn’t need to compete with *anyone*.”



“You don’t know what you’re talking about, August. You don’t know what it’s like to be called someone else’s name because that’s who they’re thinking about and they don’t even realize they did it so you don’t say anything. You don’t know what it’s like to love someone and know you’ll never be enough for them.”

Pain that I don’t understand flashes in his eyes as I speak but he quickly masks it. Standing up, he helps me to my feet, letting go as soon as I’m stable. I hate telling him things like this, but the truth is, nothing has ever weighed as heavily on my soul as willingly walking away from Deacon, and I had to say something to someone.

“Go home, Shay,” he mutters, standing so he towers over me. “Go home and figure out whatever the hell is wrong because I can’t keep watchin’ you kill yourself over him.”

“You’re not going to work with me because of him?”

He walks away from me without an answer so I force myself to move forward and yell at his back.

“I asked you a question.”

“No,” he bites out, glancing over his shoulder quickly before turning away again. “I’m not gonna help you kill yourself training if you’re not gonna do anything with it.”

“Then get me a fucking fight!”

The words tumble out of my mouth before I even process what I’m saying, and while part of me regrets them the second they pass my lips, another knows the feeling of adrenaline that will be coursing through me.

He stays silent for a few seconds, letting my words sink in. Quietly, he tells me to go home and watch my phone and disappears into his office without saying anything else.

I’ve never seen August like this. Normally, he’s the most laid back person I know, but since I started pulling away to spend more time with Deacon, his fuse seems to be getting shorter and shorter.

I’m not sure I want to be around when he finally explodes.





**August: Augusta Kennebec Arsenal @ 10. Hole in construction fence on right of building.**

I shiver simply thinking about going inside that building, but this is what I asked for. August has been having to push out of Portland more and more because people are catching on.

Checking the clock, I know I have to get going soon. It's going to take a little over an hour to get there, and I don't want to push it. Racing upstairs, I change my clothes and grab my keys. I hear tires on the gravel outside as I take the stairs two at a time on my way down, and my stomach plummets when I see Deacon's car parked next to mine.

Ignoring the fact that he's walking toward me, I keep my eyes fixed on the ground and climb into the Jeep when I reach it. I hear him call my name but I slam my door closed anyway.

*Break, clutch, turn the key.* I repeat the words in my head to keep myself from looking up. I shift into reverse but Deacon pulls my door open before I can move.

"You can't continue to ignore me, Shay. There's a lot we need to talk about."

"Like what?" I shout, exasperated. "Do you want to tell me you love me, or would you rather just call me Christine again? You wanna fuck me again and hold me as you fall asleep thinking about a woman you can't have so you figure you'll just settle for me? I'm not even good enough for myself, I should've known there was no way I'd be good enough for someone like you."

"I can't run away and hide, but you can?" he yells back. "How is that fucking fair?"

I rip the door out of his hold and peel out of my driveway without looking, sliding a bit when my tires hit a small patch of ice. Gravel and snow kick up, hitting my car and flinging into the bushes beside the driveway.

I push the need to act like a hurt girl down as far as I can get it and crank the radio to drown out my own thoughts the best I can. I refuse to cry over



something else that I have no control over. “Black & Blue” by Sick Puppies pounds against my eardrums as I speed up once I’m on the highway.

I figured August would meet me somewhere inside, but when I pull into a nearly-empty parking lot near the address he pulls up beside me. Checking myself in the mirror, I realize despite my hardest efforts my face is a red, blotchy mess.

“What’s wrong?” His question practically slaps me across the face the second my feet hit the ground. I ignore him so I don’t get stuck in my thoughts again, opting to pull my hood over my head and slide my hands into the pocket on the front of my sweatshirt.

He graciously respects my silence. Tucking me under his arm, he leads me down over the hill and pushes against the chain-link fence, stopping me before I have a chance to go through.

“You sure you’re good to do this tonight? You don’t seem like you’re all here.”

“I’m fine. I promise.” The truth is, I’d much rather deal with what I’m feeling by using my fists than my words.

“Shay ...”

For the first time tonight, I meet his eyes and regret it the instant I see the pity hidden in them.

“You love him?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Then why isn’t he with you?”

Sighing, I push past him, sliding myself through the broken spot in the fence and turn back to look at him. I shrug, forcing myself to smirk when all I want to do is crawl into a hole and cry.

“I can’t raise hell with a saint.”

“Okay then.” He smiles back.

Stepping around me, he heads toward the dark building. The silence in the air around us makes me wonder if anyone is even here yet, but when he shifts the plywood covering the door out of the way light streams out along with the faint sound of a crowd.

“Creepy fucking building,” I mutter, earning a laugh from August. The smell of mildew permeates my senses, and I realize why when ice-cold water seeps through my shoes. The paint is peeling from the walls, doing nothing to



help with the weird vibe of the place.

“It’s an abandoned mental hospital. What did you expect?”

The hallway opens into a large room packed full of people and the noise becomes deafening. August stops next to a high stack of boards and lifts me up so I’m sitting on top of it without asking. Shoving his phone, headphones, and a bottle of water into my hands, he tells me to stay put.

I push the headphones into my ears and “Monster” by Skillet is already playing on full volume. It drowns out the majority of the noise around me. For the most part, I keep my eyes closed until August comes back for me, but the few times I do open them, I swear I spot Deacon in the crowd.

I shake off the crazy thought because there’s no way he’s here. There’s no way he followed me.

## Deacon

I didn’t think anything like this was going to happen when I jumped into my car to follow Shay. Then again, I never expected her to drive an hour to an abandoned building. I never thought it would be filled with people there to watch illegal fighting. I never thought Shay would be one of the people throwing punches.

I should just stop thinking because nothing that has run through my mind today has been right.

I should’ve stepped in before things even started because with every hit, every snap to the side of Shay’s head, my stomach knots. My chest tightens when she falls to the ground and doesn’t immediately get back up. The nervous energy builds inside of me, making me feel like I’m going to be sick and it takes everything in me not to intervene as Shay continues to take each punch.

The longer it goes on, the louder the crowd around me gets, the more the nervousness turns to anger and when everything I found out today runs through my mind, I’m fueled by hatred toward her for what she’s doing.

“What the *hell* is wrong with you?” I yell, following her out as she leaves alone once the fight is finally over.

Turning, Shay looks at me through swollen eyes. Her face is covered in blood, as are her hands, and while I want to rush to her and do everything I can to take away her pain, I don’t move in her direction. If I thought she



looked bad the first time we met, I don't know what to think of seeing her now. The amount of damage she *allowed* to happen terrifies me.

It's as if she was trying to get herself killed.

"Fuck," she mutters when she realizes who she's looking at.

"You don't have time to talk shit out with me, but you have time to come get your ass kicked and try to get yourself killed. Glad to know where your priorities are, Shay."

She attempts to take a deep breath and winces in pain, reaching for her ribs. "If I was planning on dying, I wouldn't have won."

"And that makes it okay?" I shout as she turns away and heads for the fence. "That means you can take everything you've been given for granted?"

"What are you talking about? Everything I've been given?"

Stepping around her, I press my hand against her sweat-coated chest, feeling the beat of her heart pounding against her ribs. I close my eyes for a second and try to calm myself down but nothing works.

"Deacon—"

I snap, cutting her off before she has a chance to finish her thought.

"You don't have the right to take that heart for granted. It's not yours."

Pulling away, she walks away from me once again. "What are you talking about?"

"That heart—the heart that you have because someone was ripped from this world and gave it to you—is not *yours*. It's not your heart to put on the line. It's *mine*. It was Christine's, and if I had known you were going to treat it like shit I *never* would've signed those papers. She died in the same accident as your brother. You know what losing someone feels like, so why would you put yourself in this situation with someone else's heart keeping you going?"

Shay stops in her tracks a few feet from her Jeep, and when my words actually process through my head, I hate myself for them. I've never regretted saying anything the way I do right now. There's no coming back from that.

"This whole time ..." she whispers, letting her words drop.

"What?"

"This whole time I thought you were with me because of me but—" Shay shakes her head, taking a shuddering breath "It was bad enough trying to compete with her memory ... now this."



“No.” I lower my voice, trying not to sound so angry and hope that I might be able to fix something here. “That came out wrong. That wasn’t what I meant.”

“No, don’t worry, Deacon, I got the point perfectly.”

Through all the hits she took tonight and all the pain she must be in, she didn’t cry. But now, because of something that *I* said, her face is drenched in tears. She’s always attempted to hide her tears from me no matter why she was crying, but this time it seems like she no longer has any interest in hiding.

“Shay? What’s goin’ on?” A deep voice from behind me pulls my attention away from her. Whoever it is, is the same guy I watched walk her in, the same one that seemed to be behind this whole thing tonight. He looks suspiciously at me before making his way closer to her. “You okay?”

“Never better,” she deadpans. Pressing her keys into his hand, she lets her gaze fall to the ground so she doesn’t have to look at me anymore. “Please take me home.”

I can’t speak despite the words that are bouncing through my head. Everything I want to say, everything I *need* to say, I can hear the words screaming at me to let them out, but I can’t make my voice work.

He helps her into her seat and I hate it because I know it should be me. I should be the one driving her home. I should be making her feel better, and it’s killing me not to be and I’m not sure if it’s because of Shay, or Christine.

I hate myself for the battle between my heart and my head.





The car slows down, and I feel it jerk to a stop before I manage to pull myself out of my daze. I picked a spot on the window and forced myself to stare at it the entire ride because thinking wasn't an option. The second I realize where we are, every single word that Deacon yelled at me in Augusta slams back into me like a Mac truck to the brain.

"Why did you bring me here?" I ask numbly, looking at the hospital parking garage sign. "I asked you to bring me home."

"You have to get looked at. She did a good number on you, and I need to be sure you're okay."

"I'm not going in there."

August brushes the hair out of my face, and I flinch away from the contact. Not because what he does hurts, not physically anyway, but because I don't want *anyone* touching me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him shake his head in aggravation and grip the steering wheel.

"You can either get your ass out of this car and walk in willingly or I can throw you over my shoulder, hurt you more, and forcefully bring you into that emergency room."

I slowly turn my head so I can glare at him but I know the tone in his voice leaves no room for argument. I rip on the handle and shove the door



open.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” I growl when he reaches to open his. “I don’t want to be here let alone want you here with me.”

I slam the door closed as hard as I can, wincing from the movement. I leave August behind but I can feel him staring at me until I turn the corner and am out of his sight.

I know my words probably hurt him even though that wasn’t my intention, but I’m in pain and for some reason can’t seem to control what comes out of my mouth.

I can barely breathe by the time I reach the doors and a nurse spots me. She rushes over, grabbing a wheelchair on her way, and helps me into it.

“If you call Dr. Hammond—” I wheeze “—I’ll make sure you look at least half as bad as I do.”



“Hi, Shay, I’m Dr. Cavanaugh.”

I force my eyes open to see who is talking but can’t get them open more than a sliver. It’s enough to let the bright light he’s shining burn my eyes, though, and I cringe away from it.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“Extreme makeover,” I joke halfheartedly. He doesn’t laugh. Hell, he doesn’t even crack a smile. At least with Tyler he’d understand that I was joking, but I’ll have to thank the nurse for listening and not calling him.

*That’s a first around here.*

“There’s an officer waiting outside to find out what happened and take your statement.”

*“For what?”*

“Shay.” He squares his shoulders, gripping the safety rail on the bed. “You’ve been here for twelve hours and this is the first time since you walked through the doors that you’ve been awake and coherent. You have four broken ribs, a fractured collar bone and a broken nose, and from what I



understand by reading your file, this isn't your first trip in here with these type of injuries."

"There's nothing to report," I mutter, finally letting my eyes close.

"Shay—"

"Might as well save your breath, Rick," Tyler cuts him off. I knew I got off too easy thinking he didn't know I was here. After being here for twelve hours, I figure there aren't many people that *don't* know I'm here, and I'm suddenly grateful neither of my parents are an emergency contact anymore so I can tell them about this myself.

"And you might as well turn the hell around," I growl. "If I wanted you here, I wouldn't have threatened the nurse to keep her from calling you."

I force my eyes back open, glaring at the blurry form that finally shifts into the person I trusted my life with. He tries to rationalize what he did as soon as Dr. Cavanaugh leaves in a huff, but his explanation falls on deaf ears. I don't hear a word he says over the raging pulse in my ears.

"*I* am your patient. *I* should've been the priority in this situation, Tyler, not him just because he's your friend. Did you think that I simply wouldn't care when I found out? I *loved* him, and he only wanted me because I have a part of his wife beating inside of me. You pushed us together. How is that fair?" I sob, unable to catch my breath because the fact of the matter is there is nothing past tense about the way I feel about Deacon. Ignoring the pain that shoots through my face, I wipe my skin dry but whatever I clear away is instantly replaced by new tears. "Please tell me how that is fair."

"It isn't," he finally admits quietly, working his way closer to my bed. "Nothing about any of this is fair, but he didn't even know until yesterday. So don't, for even a second, think that he was only with you to stay close to Christine."

"You didn't think that ... I don't know ..." My shaking hands lift, wanting to strangle the life from him. "This could somehow go bad?"

"I didn't think, Shay, that's the thing. He's one of my best friends, and I had to watch him struggle for over two years. Then he met you, and you were the first person to make him look even remotely happy. So no, I didn't think about what could happen down the road. I thought about the fact that two miserable people were finally happy because they were together. If that's so bad, then so be it."

I watch him carefully, wondering what he's thinking. Up until lately, I never wanted to know where my heart came from. I didn't care. I was scared



—afraid the family that gave me a piece of the person they loved would regret it because I was a complete and utter waste of a life. I'm not sure but something about being with Deacon made me want to know more about the person that made me who I am.

Now I guess I know why.

"That's why you kept stalling when I finally asked you for the donor information, isn't it? You weren't waiting on permission from the family." His face tells me everything that he isn't saying and all the hurt I feel inside comes out as rage. "*Get out,*" I scream. "*Get the fuck out!*"

I curl into myself the best I can, thankful for whatever drugs are running through my IV, and watch Tyler retreat slowly from the room. His head hangs, his shoulders slumping as he trudges down the hallway. He pushes open the double doors, and just when I think I'm in the clear, Mia pushes past him.

*Shit ...*

"Go to hell," I grit out through my teeth before she has a chance to step into the room. "How could you?"

Crossing her arms over her chest, she leans her shoulder against the doorframe.

"I didn't know, Shay, I promise. If I had, I never would've pushed like I did. I wouldn't have let Tyler do anything, either."

Not waiting for me to make up my mind, she crawls onto the bed and settles next to me.

"You look like shit," I tell her, noting the bags under her eyes and messed up makeup.

"That happens when you spend the night screaming at your husband for doing something this stupid. You look hot, though."

Her joke makes me laugh despite how much is running through my head. "Yeah, broken bones and bruises are going to be the new summer trend. I'm just getting a head start."

"Can I stay with you for a while?" she whispers, suddenly sounding like she's on the verge of crying.

"You're not even going to ask what happened?"

Shrugging, Mia brushes the hair out of my face. "If you want me to know, I'm sure you'll tell me when you're ready."

"All I want right now," I tell her, closing my eyes because I'm afraid I'll



reveal more than I want her to know, “is to forget so I can feel better.”



The bed shifts, and for half a second, with my eyes shut too tight, I let myself imagine that it's Deacon. I wait for his fingers to slide along my skin or his lips to touch mine, or for his voice to soothe my pain away, but I know as soon as I open them I'll see Mia's face waiting for me and that makes my heart hurt.

And for the first time since everything happened—since I found out that the heart beating inside of me is Deacon's wife's—I know it's hurting because *I* am sad. I know it hurts because I miss someone that I never should've been with to begin with. It's a feeling that has grown excessively worse over the past few days.

Since the day I met Deacon I wondered if there was something wrong with my heart because of the way it acted. Turns out it was just because they were connected.

Forcing myself to open my eyes and face reality, I'm met with exactly what I expected. Mia smiles, pushing up on her elbow. I reach up and pull a pillow over my face, flinching with the movement shifting my ribs. I feel her flop back onto the bed and allow myself to believe she gave in like she has been, but I know better; I know I'm not getting my way today.

“No,” I grumble through the pillow.

“I'm not asking today,” she tells me before her weight disappears from the bed.

Taking a chance, I peek out from under the pillow just in time to see her pulling clothes from my closet, making me groan. She disappears into the bathroom and I hear the water in the shower start. I know any second now she's going to come back out here and demand that I get my depressed, lonely, defeated ass out of bed.

“Let's go.” She catches me watching her and purses her lips. When I don't move, she rushes the bed, ripping the blankets away from my body, and hovers over me. I know she feels bad for me, I can see it in her eyes, but she doesn't voice it. “It's been almost a week.”



“So?”

“You have to get out of bed and go to work because they can’t find any more substitutes. Plus, since when does Shay Daniels pity herself?”

I push my bottom lip out and pout. “Do I have to?”

Mia nods. “I have to go home and you have to go to work. We can’t keep hiding forever.”

“I’m sure we can find someone to deliver supplies and then we can,” I suggest, but she laughs it off and stands, holding her hand to help me up. I know I can keep staring at her hand and not move, but sooner or later I have to get up and face the real world.

Sooner or later I have to deal with reality.

And I despise that sooner or later has to start right now.



Checking the clock, I realize I have somehow almost made it through my first day of work since my life went to shit last week.

My body aches, and the silence in the room allows me to escape into my thoughts, making me want to curl up and cry some more but I push through it. Not letting it out, coupled with unspoken questions from everyone looking at me, makes the pain in my chest worse than ever.

*Christine's heart is broken.*

*Christine's heart wants Deacon.*

It's sad—completely pathetic—that I can't even think of the heart that beats inside of me as my own anymore.

If I was given the choice, I'd give it back. I'd trade places with Christine, because I can tell how much she loved Deacon and I don't know if I could ever compete with that. I love him. I love him more than I love myself, more than I ever thought possible, but I never asked, hell, I never *wanted* to feel like this over anyone.

The bell rings before I have a chance to assign anything for homework so this class gets a free pass, I guess. I watch in silence as they filter past me,



excited for the weekend, and all I can think about is the fact that there will be two days that I will be completely alone with my thoughts and that petrifies me.

With a deep breath, I force myself to my feet and gather my stuff. Grabbing the file full of work I need to grade before Monday, I will my feet to carry me outside. Normally, when I'm this tangled up inside I need to move and fight to work through it, so not wanting to move at all is new to me.

I finally manage to make it out the front doors but what I see has my feet frozen in place. In the center of the parking lot is a fight between a student from my last class and one I don't know. Teenagers swarm them like the spectators do at the fights I've been in, and as much as I know this is wrong, I can't figure out how to stop it.

Teachers rush past me but before they have a chance to break things up, Callie, the snarky brunette that argued with me on my first day forces her way into the circle and does it for them.

The girl that said she had a family and didn't need a new one stood up for the person she didn't know anything about until my class. A person she used to pass by without acknowledging is now someone she's standing up for.

For the first time in a week, my lips tug into a smile but it quickly falls when another teacher glares at me.

"Were you just going to stand there and let the fight continue?"

I meet her eyes and I know I need to keep my answer to myself but my mind plays it on repeat as I pass by her and head toward the car I borrowed from Mia since I can't drive a standard in my condition, and told everyone I got into a car accident.

I can't tell these kids not to do something I was doing only a week ago.

## Deacon

"Dr. York?"

I hear my name faintly and turn to find the guy that drove Shay home from the fight asking one of the nurses for me. She points him in my direction, and for half a second, I have hope. Hope that maybe Shay sent him here to finally tell me something good. It's a fleeting thought, though, because as soon as he's within reach, he draws back and uses his whole body to propel his fist toward my face. His knuckles connect with my nose, crunching the



bone as my head flies backward.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” I yelp, covering my face as blood streams out of my nose.

Through watering eyes, I watch as he steps forward, grabbing my collar so he can push me back into the wall.

“I’m tired of pickin’ up the pieces of Shay’s broken heart because of you. If you can’t get your shit together and love her the way she deserves to be loved, step to the fuckin’ side so I can.”

“You lov—”

He cuts me off with a rough jerk. “If you were with her just because she has your wife’s heart, I’ll gut you like a god damn deer.”

Dropping his arms, he wipes his hands across the side of his shirt as if he’s disgusted by having to touch me. In the short amount of time he’s been here, we’ve drawn a crowd around us, and I can hear security jogging up the hallway. They grab him, but I quickly wave them off, letting them know there’s no need for them. Being punched after the way I treated Shay is the least of my worries.

“He’s fine,” I tell them. “We’re good. It’s over.”

With a repulsed look, he turns away and leaves the wing. I grab a pile of tissues and press them to what is most likely my broken nose. As I stare at the doors he passed through, the words he said dawn on me. Not that he loves her or that he’ll gut me, but the fact that he referred to our relationship as past tense.

*Over.*

Nurses flock to me and attempt to help, but I push my way through them and head toward the locker room.

I stand in front of the mirror for what seems like hours before I work up the courage to look at my reflection. I’m not afraid of what I’ll see—blood covering my face and scrubs is a given—I’m more afraid of the person who will be staring back at me.

I’m beginning to hate that person lately.

Admittedly, the way I told Shay was not how I had planned. I had spent the entire day working my way through how I felt and how I was going to *calmly* sit her down and discuss things, but the second I saw what she was doing, my mind went on a rampage, and nothing worked out the way it should have.



The door behind me squeaks as it opens before I have a chance to get cleaned up and figure my shit out.

“Get out,” I holler.

“Fuck you,” Tyler barks back, ignoring my request and pushing me away from the sink. I drop down on the bench, avoiding making eye contact at all cost.

He lifts my head, I drop my eyes and pull the tissues away from my face so he can see the damage.

“One to ten?”

I ignore his question so he flicks me in the chin like an asshole and asks me again.

“It’s fine, just fix it.”

I brace myself for the pain I know is coming and close my eyes.

“On three. One.” Gripping my nose, he forces it back into place with a crack.

“*God damn it!*” I scream out in pain.

“Two, three ...” he finishes, shrugging with a cocky grin on his face as I try to catch my breath. “Hate me now?”

“Not even close to how much I hate myself.”

Resting his hand on my shoulder, he grips it quickly before letting it fall.

“Have you talked to her since she got released?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I wouldn’t even know where to begin without getting all worked up again.”

“Did you find time to tell her that you loved her *before* you flew off the handle?” Sympathy drips from his voice, and I hate it. I hate absolutely everything about this. I stand and step around him, heading toward the sink to wash up and avoid his question. “Figure it out, Deacon, because that girl deserves the truth. All of it.”

He tosses me a splint and a roll of tape before leaving. I wait until the locker room door closes before I take a deep breath and finally look at myself in the mirror. I’m even more of a complete disaster than I thought, but I guess it’s better than it could be.

It’s a million times better than I’ve felt since I watched Shay walk away from me ...



For the second time.



“Everyone has secrets, Tyler,” I shout across his kitchen. Slamming my palms against the counter, I wait for him to yell back at me. I want the shouting, I want the fight, I need the confrontation. Anything to keep me from my own thoughts.

As usual, he refuses to give me what I want. Like a statue, he stands with his arms across his chest and does nothing but stare at me.

Hoping for some compassion from Mia, I turn and silently plead with her.

She drops her eyes to her lap and ignores me.

“Will you at least tell me if she’s okay?”

Sighing, she meets my eyes again. “You already know the answer to that. You have her second guessing everything she thought she had with you. It took me a week to even get her out of bed, Deacon. I only know she’s still going to work because I check.” Her gaze shifts to Tyler when she speaks again, and I know her words aren’t only for me. “Secrets tear people apart. They do more harm than good. If, by some miracle, you do fix this, you better come clean about everything.”

Any hope I had of these two pulling me from the depression I’ve been in lately vanishes, and I’m left wondering if there’s anything left for me to repair. I’m sure she’s better off with someone that can love her without making her constantly question if they’re with her for who she is or what she has.

Just the thought of her with someone else makes me want to be sick.

Sliding down into a chair, I rest my elbows on the table and drop my head into my hands, ignoring the pain in my face, because the thought of telling her my secret kills me even more.

“How do you tell someone that you love them so much that you want to grow old with them but there’s a chance you might not be able to do it?”

My voice catches on the words and as I let them fall, silence stretches



between us all.

“You ask the girl that has to deal with the thought every damn day of her life,” Tyler tells me, settling into the chair on the other side of the table. “She’s living her life knowing that not all heart transplants last forever.”

His eyes are brimming with unshed tears at the simple thought of losing Shay and I know exactly how hard he’s trying to keep himself together as Mia slides herself into his lap and buries her face in his neck. He, more than most, knows better than to get attached to patients because losing them is hard. Shay got to all of us and just the simple thought of ever losing her kills us all.





The lack of noise creeping through the house taunts me as I lie alone in the dark. I never knew silence could be this loud, but it's screaming at me—making my head pound. The house that always creaks and moans with the wind is even quiet.

My phone lies beside me on the bed, silent like everything else, but I keep it there for some reason. Maybe a chance to ignore another call from Deacon despite how much I ache to answer it even though it hasn't been him calling in a while.

I feel crazy. After being adamant about keeping myself single for so long because nothing in my life is certain, missing someone this much—*needing* someone this much—makes me feel like I'm drowning in my own mind.

Like the invisible weight in the air around me feels like it's crushing my chest—suffocating me in loneliness with every breath.

My eyes gravitate toward the side of the bed Deacon has occupied most nights for a few months and find it empty—exactly like the rest of the house.

Like me.

The fact that I know if I looked at the date it would tell me it has been exactly three years since I heard my brother's voice makes me cry for a different reason—a different type of heartache. Three years since my life



suddenly ended and began at the same time. One thousand and ninety-five days that have felt like a lifetime.

And I realize, as always, when I need someone to pull me tightly against them and whisper to me, letting me know everything will be all right, that I only have myself. I count on only myself because I will be the only person that never lets me down, and even if I do, I know I'll be the one to pick myself back up again.

Somewhere along the line I lost the girl that needed nothing from anyone and allowed people in, taking up space and making room for disappointment. But somehow I know I need to be that person too, because being alone and being lonely are two drastically different things, and it wasn't until Deacon that I realized that.

I lie there, silently crying, but inside, I'm suddenly screaming at myself. The words, even though they are my own thoughts, are jumbled, and I can't figure out if I'm screaming because I let myself fall so deeply in love with someone that it hurts this severely because they aren't here, or if it's because I don't know if I can go another year without Ethan here.

I'm not even sure how I managed to go three years without him already.

It's bizarre how when the world around me goes silent, leaving me alone, I can no longer hide from myself. I lose my sanity because my mind turns on me and I'm suddenly no longer the hero of my own story, I'm the villain. I'm wreaking havoc in my own life, on my own heart, because of my refusal to give in—to let myself be loved.

Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I grab my phone and send a long overdue text to the one person I know can help me through the Ethan portion of my heartache. The one person who feels it almost the same as I do. I stand, leaving my phone on my bed, ignoring the pain in my bones, and wander to the other side of the house.

Like so many other times before, my hand settles on the doorknob of Ethan's untouched room, but for the first time, I know something is going to happen today. I know I can turn this knob and open the door. I can do it because I know this sadness will be greater than my overwhelming need for Deacon and I need that.

Palms flat against the wood, I rest my head against the door when I hear footsteps climbing the stairs behind me. They shuffle to a stop when they're close and I choke on a sob when his arms wrap around me.

"How has it been three years?" Jackson whispers, his arms tightening around me.



“Why did it happen at all?” I answer his question with my own because I don’t know how to answer him. I don’t know how to answer anything right now. I reach for the door handle again but Jackson stops me.

“One thing at a time,” he whispers. Confused, I shift enough that I can look him in the eye—eyes that are so much like my own—and am met with sympathy. Not for the loss of our brother, but for me, and I hate it. His hands fiddle with something, and it draws my attention long enough to notice the envelope with my name scrawled across the front. “This was at your door.”

“I-I don’t want it,” I stammer. He grabs me as I try to push past him and forces it into my hand.

“Deal with this, Shay, because that—” he points toward Ethan’s bedroom door “—isn’t going anywhere.”

“Why? Why do I need to deal with *this*?” The envelope feels like it’s burning my fingers, and it takes everything not to drop it to the floor.

“Because you keep running away from things but where has it gotten you?”

“Nowhere,” I whisper hoarsely, feeling the threat of more tears burning in my throat. It’s gotten me nowhere; I’m stuck in my own damn way, and I hate that my younger brother knows this.

“Exactly. You keep running and you keep trying to prove to people how tough you are, but the problem with only showing people how tough you are, is they think they can keep pushing. They never think you’ll break. I don’t know everything that happened and I don’t know if things will ever be okay, but I do know if you keep running, if you keep pretending to be strong, they never will be.”

He’s right. I know he’s right, and I despise the fact that he knows that too.

“And what if this is what breaks me?” I ask, letting my eyes drop to the envelope.

“Then I’ll be right here to pick you back up.” I expect the voice that answers me to be Jackson’s because I thought he was alone, but it’s Deacon’s, and I have to force myself not to run to him. Meeting his gaze, I realize that he looks just as broken as I feel. “And I’ll love you broken just as much as I love you whole. Completely. Maybe even a little more.”

Turning my attention back to Jackson, I shake my head a little. “I hate you.”

He nods, shrugging. “That’s okay. I can work with you hating me, but I



can't take three more years of this."

"Of what?" I ask, suddenly confused.

"Of you being so sad that you avoid anything that reminds you of something bad. I can work with anger, I can deal with you being mad at me, but I can't deal with you not being able to look me in the eyes because they remind you of Ethan. I'm so damn tired of feeling like I'm constantly losing you. He makes you happy. He brought you back. For that reason alone, I'm going to do anything I can to keep you two together."

Pulling me close, Jackson kisses my forehead like I used to when we were younger before making his way down the hall toward his old bedroom. When his door closes, it leaves Deacon and me alone in the hallway. Alone for the first time since he screamed the truth at me. If I thought the air around me was suffocating when I was alone, it was nothing compared to how thick it is with him staring at me. His presence is overwhelming, making it seem like the walls are closing in on me.

Deacon steps closer, and like a wounded animal, I take a step away.

"I'm mad at you," I whisper, never taking my eyes off the floor by my feet.

"I know."

"I hate myself because of how much hatred the words you yelled at me that night were filled with."

"I know," he says again.

"And I hate you ... for everything ... and for nothing ... And I hate myself even more because I can't even hate you because I love you so much. But I can't be with you. I can't because I'm never going to know if you're with me because of me, or if you're with me because of her."

When I finally look up, he's close. Closer than he's been in weeks, and simply having him this near to me puts me at ease but has me on edge at the same time. And I'm a mess because I can't do a damn thing about it.

My heart pounds—thundering against the inside of my chest like it's trying to escape; like it's trying to pull me closer to him. His fingers grip my chin, forcing me to stay looking at him even though it's killing me to.

"It's you, Shay. It's *always* going to be because of you."

I want to believe him. I want that so badly I physically ache for him to pull me against him, but the voice in the back of my head is screaming "no". It's telling me I'm already too broken for someone to love the way I want



Deacon to love me and he'd only break me more. It's telling me I don't deserve to be loved because I've lost so much that I have nothing left to give. It's whispering that I can't even be sad because I'm so empty, and when you're empty you can't be anything, and nothingness deserves nothing in return.

I squeeze my hands to keep myself from reaching for him, crinkling the envelope in the process, reminding me it's there. So with a slight, sad shake of my head, I pull away from his touch and make my way past him. I settle into the corner of the couch and ignore the pain as I pull my knees as close as I can before I unfold the papers inside.

*Shay,*

*If I was only allowed to tell you one sentence ever again it would be that I love you. I'd repeat three words over and over again for the rest of my life simply because they're the truth and you need to know. But that isn't how life works and I'm allowed to say more than one thing.*

*Sometimes that means I'm going to put my foot in my mouth because my past and my present collide and I don't know what to do.*

*More times than not I'm going to speak before I think about my words and make an idiot out of myself.*

*For those times I will never be able to apologize enough.*

*That morning in the kitchen when you told me you thought I had to think about the way I felt for you but you didn't—you were wrong. I didn't have to think about it to find the words. I should've listened to my mind; I should've opened my mouth. I shouldn't have fought it, but I did, and I can't take that back.*

*Just like I can't take back the way I treated you the night I saw you fight.*

*I hate myself for what I said that night and the way I treated you. I hate myself for making you ever question how I feel for you.*

*The truth is I love you.*

*I don't think there has been a second since the day I met you that I haven't loved you. Since the day Christine died in the same accident that Ethan did—the same day you got your transplant—I haven't seen my true self. I lost myself because I lost her.*

*But in a split second I found myself in the stone-cold eyes of a girl who was just as broken as I was.*

*The day we met sparked something inside of me again and that scared*



*the hell out of me. It scared me even more that you told me not to fall in love with you because deep down I knew I already had.*

*I can't expect you to love me back just because I say it, especially not without knowing everything. That wouldn't be fair, and I know I should tell you this instead of writing it but the simple fact is I'm a coward when it comes to knowing how you'll react.*

*I'm afraid to see the way you would look at me as the words came out of my mouth.*

*You see, it's unfair of me to ask you to love me, to promise to love you until we're old and gray, because I have Huntington's and with that there's a chance I may not even make it to gray let alone old. I may not live to be forty or I might make it longer and not being able to promise you a certain future isn't fair.*

*Except I realize you have the same uncertainty, so I can't exactly say you don't know what this feels like. But how am I supposed to tell you I want to grow old with you when that might not be an option?*

*I wish I could tell you I will physically be there to tell you I love you until you take your last breath. That I'll be there to keep you safe—to protect you—but I can't, and I don't want to make you promises I can't keep. But I promise you, with or without you in my life, I will love you until the day I die. I will love you for you, not because you have Christine's heart. It's hard for me to believe that you—the woman who asked her classes if they believed in fate—won't be able to understand that. Because while I thought I loved Christine with all I had, I was wrong, and I love you even more for making me realize that. I know you're questioning how I know I'm in love with you and not with what you bring back into my life...but the truth is I fell in love with you in my mind, and that seeped into my heart, filling space I didn't even know was there, and that burst into my soul because there wasn't enough room to love you the way you deserve.*

*You consume me, Shay.*

*I thought I couldn't live without Christine in my life, but now I know that I don't want to die without loving you for as long as I can.*

*That's how I know this is real.*

*That's how I know I love you.*

*There's no getting over you.*

*Deacon*

*My tears leak down the side of my nose, dripping from the tip and hitting*



the papers as I read them over and over, getting stuck on one line. “I thought I couldn’t live without Christine in my life, but now I know I don’t want to die without loving you as long as I can.” And while I know those words may sound weird to some people, I know exactly what he means with them because I’ve felt the same way. I know what it’s like to wonder if you’re going to wake up in the morning, and wonder like that puts things into perspective. It makes you realize things you may have never thought possible.

Ethan’s voice abruptly fills my mind, making everything else disappear. *“This accident isn’t going to be how we go out. Do you understand me? It’s going to be something epic, like a skydiving accident or an underground fight gone wrong. Or something amazing, like old age while being held by someone who loves you. Not this. Never this.”*

I cry, and then I cry harder simply because I’m crying, because I had everything I could ever want all this time and kept putting it in jeopardy because I didn’t realize it. It’s as if, in the last moments of his life, Ethan knew I could end up here. I never cared about anything but going out epically because I never wanted to be loved by anyone. I never wanted to put someone in the position of falling for me and something happening.

## Deacon

I once believed I had gone through what would be the toughest time of my life. That I had somehow managed to hurdle the challenges set in front of me, but right now, sitting on the stairs while I watch Shay fall apart because of me, I know I was wrong.

This—not being able to fix anything, being part of the problem instead of the solution—not being able to hold her and tell her everything is going to be okay ... this is harder. It hurts to admit, but it is. Knowing I can’t give her what she deserves, that I can’t protect her forever, is killing me.

I lean my head against the wall and close my eyes because I can’t handle watching her cry anymore without trying to fix it. I want to go to her so badly but I’m afraid if I do it’s going to drive her even further away. Unfortunately, only hearing the sound of her crying is just as bad.

Sudden silence followed by the hum of speakers turning on and then blasting Papa Roach’s “Hope for the Hopeless” at the maximum volume has my eyes snapping back open. The physical pain is written across her face as she begins to power clean anything in her path and I know her broken ribs probably aren’t fully healed yet.



I go to stand, to stop her from putting herself in more pain than I've already caused, but Jackson's hand clamps down on my shoulder, pushing me back down.

"Don't." He shakes his head, sitting down beside me. "Just let her do what she needs to do to process everything."

Resting my elbows against my knees, I thread my fingers through my hair and pull at it in frustration. Beside me, Jackson does basically the same thing, and I know watching his sister fall apart hurts him as much as it does me.

It isn't until she begins smashing things he steps in at all. He dodges plates and picture frames until he can pull her against him. His arms tighten as she beats against his chest, screaming at him to let her go.

He doesn't.

*That should be me.*

I can't help wondering while I watch everything unfold in front of me if, on this day—a day I've mourned the loss of one woman—if I'll lose another one completely as well.

*Why didn't I tell her when I was still the person she wanted to hold on to when she was upset?*

I should be the one she beats on while she tries to calm down. I should be the one for her to take out her frustrations on.

Me.

It's my fault she's like this to begin with.

I promised myself I would do anything to make things better even if that meant walking away so she could be happy, but as I sit here with the sounds of agony filling the room, I'm not sure I can keep that promise. Not without her telling me to go. Not without a fight.

I keep my eyes closed, afraid I'll break as I watch her fall apart and that isn't what she needs. She needs strength, and if, for even just a while, I can be that for her, I want to be ready.

I don't know how long I sit there, knowing I'm the cause of her pain, knowing I shouldn't have done this today of all days, before Jackson mutters my name. My eyes instantly snap to where he is sitting on the floor rocking Shay back and forth.

My heart speeds up when he motions for me to come closer, and my pulse quickens with each step I take.



I settle on the floor next to him, resting back against the cupboards and wait for him to tell me what he needs me to do. I wait, even though my fingers itch to touch her. Every fiber of my being knows I'm close and wants to feel her against me.

*Even if it's the last time.*

I shake the thought loose from my mind because I can't let myself believe it and watch as he manages to shift Shay into my lap.

"*I hate you,*" she yells, beating against my chest. Her arms finally snap around my neck, clinging to me like her life depends on it and I feel her breath shudder out against the skin of my neck.

"Me too," I whisper against her shoulder. Dragging my hands along her spine, I attempt to calm her down the best I can while Jackson makes himself scarce. I know he's not leaving, though, and that tells me exactly how much he loves his sister. "Me fucking too."

"How could you not tell me?" she sobs.

I stay silent for a minute because honestly I've been asking myself the same thing since I met her. I could've been honest and told her the day we met or the night we first went out. I could have told her any number of times, or I could've been a coward and not told her at all. I could have walked away and let her live her life. She'd get over me eventually, maybe fall in love with someone else—someone better for her, but I couldn't.

"Because I wanted you to love me more than I wanted my next breath."

It's the truth and I promised myself as I wrote her that letter—as I told her the one thing I hate telling anyone because it defines my future—if I ever got the chance I would tell her the truth about everything.

Her breathing settles a bit and she lets her arms fall, still gripping my shoulders but no longer holding on to me for dear life.

"You didn't think I would understand," she finally whispers, sounding completely exhausted.

I brush the hair back from her face, pushing it behind her ear.

"No, that's the problem. I knew you would, but I didn't want you to have to. I wanted to be normal for once. I wanted for us to be normal. I hadn't had that in a while."

"We'll never be normal, Deacon. Our lives are catastrophic."

"Normal is subjective."



Shay begins to settle into my chest as she finally calms down. I know this isn't the last of the conversation, and I know nothing is fixed, but I can't help but be grateful when her breathing evens out and she falls asleep on my chest.

I wait until I know she won't wake up to move her, somehow managing to get us off the floor without incident. I want to beg her to fall asleep on me every night so I have to carry her to bed because I know sooner or later I won't be able to do it anymore.

When I finally make it up the stairs to her room and settle her in bed, she grabs me, pulling me down with her. She doesn't say anything but when I attempt to lie down behind her, she rolls over, shifting until she's tucked against my chest. It seems like it takes forever for me to fall asleep because I'm afraid if I do I'll wake up and it will all be a dream.



I stir and instantly reach for Shay but end up touching nothing but cold sheets. My eyes snap open thinking my fears were right but I'm in her room, not my own, and that makes me breathe a bit easier.

The early-morning sunlight creeping between the curtains provides little light, but it's enough for me to get down the stairs without breaking my neck. Clicking of a keyboard draws me closer to Shay, and when I find her huddled in her desk chair, I have to stop and watch for a minute.

"It's going to get bad, isn't it?" Shay mumbles, never taking her eyes off the screen in front of her, letting me know instantly what she's doing.

"Yeah." I nod even though she's not looking and I swallow around the lump in my throat as I remember just how bad it gets. "It can. I've seen it, and I'd never ask you to stay when things start getting bad. I wouldn't put that on you."

Making my way over to her, I lift her out of the chair and take her place, setting her on my lap to keep her close.

"I'm still mad at you," she whispers, and I tighten my grip around her, realizing exactly how much I missed holding her.

"You can be mad at me forever as long as we figure out how to stop



running away from each other.”

She scrolls the page, reading more, but I don’t look at what she’s doing. I’ve read every article, talked to specialists, made deals with the devil. Nothing short of a miracle would make this better, and I’m done believing in miracles.

All I want now is to stay like this as long as I can.

“You’ve seen it?” she asks hesitantly.

Taking a deep breath, I drop my forehead to her shoulder. “I lost my mother to it when I was seventeen. I watched how it tore her apart. Not even my father could stick around and do that.”

She closes her laptop and sets it on the desk before curling into me, giving me all of her attention without saying anything. Somehow I know she’s not looking for me to speak so I stay quiet, attempting to force out the unwanted thoughts that are pushing their way into my mind.

For now, I focus on the good.

## Shay

“One.”

I twist.

“Two.”

I push.

“Three.”

I hold my breath.

The door creaks from lack of use as it slowly swings open for the first time in three years. Thanks to my mind still reeling from Deacon’s admission and the research I did last night, I don’t hesitate when I step in. There are envelopes spread across the floor in front of the door but I don’t touch them—one letter in twenty-four hours is enough for me.

Standing in the center of the room, I close my eyes and finally let myself breathe. I’m suddenly overwhelmed by the smell—stunned by the fact that after three years it still smells like Ethan.

“Open your eyes, Shay,” I whisper to myself.



I flex my fingers, clutching the hem of my shirt and twisting it until I can finally peek out from under my lids, and suddenly, I'm transported back in time. Everything—every single thing—is in the exact same spot it was the night Ethan died.

His laptop is still open and on the end of his unmade bed, dirty clothes litter the floor, sports gear lies in the corner. It's all the same, and it kills me because I know it was left like this after I begged him to take me back to school early.

"It's not your fault," Jackson says from the doorway. I turn around and meet his gaze, amazed at how easy being in this room seems to be for him as he steps closer. "Not the accident. Not Ethan. Not Christine. I know you think it is even if you don't say it, but it isn't, and if you ever listen to one thing I tell you in this lifetime, let it be that."

"How is being in here so easy for you?"

"It's not." I don't believe him, and he obviously realizes it. "Those letters are from me. When I'd write them, I'd wait for you to leave so I could sneak in and slide them under the door because I couldn't open it yet, either."

"I come up here and stare at this damn door every day and I still couldn't open it. But you just walked in here like it was nothing."

Grabbing me, he squeezes my arms. "Because you are more important than how I feel about being in here. It's a room filled with inanimate objects that could disappear and not faze the world. You're my sister, and *that* is more important than the fact that I feel like I'm suffocating in here."

I lean forward, resting my head against his shoulder and try to settle my nerves.

"We have to do this, don't we?"

I feel him nod. "We can't move on and be happy if we keep living in the past. No more what ifs. Keeping this shrine isn't bringing him back, and getting rid of it doesn't mean we don't still love him."

Turning around, I tuck myself under his arm and sweep my eyes over his room.

One final look before it changes forever.

One last breath to live in a delusion.

One more second of sadness before I wipe away the tears.





“How ya doin’, pretty girl?” Deacon mutters sleepily. He presses the heels of his hands against his eyes before shaking his head and reaching for me. Willingly, I climb onto his lap, straddling his thighs and force myself to forget everything that has happened between us for now.

I kiss him, running my fingers through the small hairs at the back of his head. I feel his lips curve up and I pull away, smiling back at him and realize I no longer feel like I have the weight of the world sitting on my chest. At least for this moment, I am happy, so I kiss him again.

“Better,” I finally answer. Lying forward, I rest on his chest, listening to the sound of his heart beat behind his ribs. It’s soothing—a rhythmic sound most people take for granted. “Are you okay?” I ask when I realize how selfish I’m being today.

Dragging his fingers up my spine, he kisses my temple and sighs. “For the first time in a very long time, I can say yes and mean it. I just want to be happy, Shay. You make me happy. It’s simple.”

*Simple.*

The word rolls through my head a few times. I want simple. I want happy.

And I want it all until I can’t have it anymore.





## Spring

The sound of Deacon's car pulling into the gravel driveway puts a smile on my face but I don't move from my spot in the middle of the trampoline. He'll find me; he always does.

The back door clicks and he calls my name. When I don't say anything, I hear the sound of his pants rubbing together as he runs toward me and jumps, landing close enough that I spring up a few feet into the air. He bounces to his feet and stands over me before dropping to his knees—the sound of his laughter making me smile more.

My hands settle on his thighs as his weight presses into my hips the closer he gets to kissing me.

"Welcome home," I whisper against his lips as he pulls away and rolls to his back, taking me with him.

I shift closer to his side, resting my head against his chest and it vibrates with a hum as I settle in.

"It's nice not having to go between places to get stuff and live out of a bag anymore."

"Yeah." I laugh. "Now you're just living out of boxes. Nice upgrade."



Deacon's chest rises with a sigh. "You're right, I should go unpack some."

He shifts to get up, but I tighten my grip around his chest to keep him where he is.

"It can wait a few minutes."

I know we need to get his stuff unpacked and put away so we can stop tripping over boxes and so he doesn't have to search for stuff every day, but this seems more important at the moment. Unpacking can wait, lying with him outside in the dark won't happen forever.

The sound of someone else pulling into the driveway forces us back to reality a few minutes later. As I go toward the door, Deacon grabs a box and heads upstairs.

"Hey." I lean against the doorframe, eyeing August carefully. The last time he and Deacon were in the same place, Deacon ended up with a broken nose. The last thing I want is to have to break up a fight now that things are finally at a good place with Deacon.

He looks over my shoulder before closing his eyes and shaking his head.

"So, it's true. I thought you were fuckin' with me when you called the other day."

I step out, leaving the door cracked a bit, and meet him in the middle of the porch. Aggravation is clearly written across his face, and it makes it hard to continue looking at him. I narrow my eyes, trying to see where this is going before anything happens.

"Why would I do something like that to you?"

Shrugging, he looks away. "Who fuckin' knows, Shay. Why the hell would you wanna be with someone that has you in tears every time you turn around?"

"He's not the only reason I cry," I defend, turning to make sure Deacon isn't in sight.

"No?" he shouts. "I've known you for six years and up until you started datin' that asshole I only saw you cry once. *Once*, Shay."

"And you thought that was healthy? You thought breaking bones and almost dying a few times was healthier than crying?"

"Who was the person pickin' you up and tellin' you everything was gonna be okay? Fuck, it wasn't him. It was me sittin' in the waitin' room and prayin' shit would work out. It was me fuckin' lovin' you while you were too



blind to see it. Me, not him. We're good together, Shay. It would be perfect, we would be perfect, so why the fuck can't you love me back?"

Anger mixed with heartbreaking emotion in his voice propels me forward, and I wrap my arms around his shoulders, pulling him close, and bury my face in the side of his neck. He hesitates for a second before finally letting his hands slide around my back.

"I *do* love you, August. You've always been there and I wouldn't trade a second of what we've done for anything. But real love isn't perfect. Nothing about it is perfect. It's messy, and it's heartbreaking, and it's *hard*. You're the best friend I didn't even know I needed and we never should've taken things as far as we did." I pull back so I can look him in the eye and can see how much I'm hurting him by simply reminding him that he's only a friend. "I do love you but not the way you should be loved—not the way you deserve."

He drops his arms from my waist and takes a step back. It's only a few inches but it suddenly feels like there's an ocean separating us.

"You deserve to be loved the way I love Deacon, and I'll never be able to give you that."

"And what happens if the way you love him is the same way I love you?" When I can't come up with an answer for him he shakes his head, running his fingers through his dark hair with a sigh. Dropping his arms, he shrugs, emotionless and resigned. "Someone's gotta lose, right, Shay? It's damn sure never been you, so it might as well be me."

A flash of anger shoots through me. This isn't how this was supposed to happen. August is the person that has always been there for me when there was no one else I could turn to. He wasn't supposed to fall in love with me; he was supposed to be happy when I found someone that breathed life back into me. He should be happy—the same way I would be if he told me he was in love with someone ... anyone other than me.

"I don't—"

His shoulders tense, his back becoming rigid as he cuts me off. "You don't *what*?"

I ball my hands at my sides because they're shaking out of fear as each pointed word falls from his lips. I'm not afraid he will physically hurt me—I know better than that. It's a fear that, despite the things we've overcome in the past, I'm unsure if there's any coming back from this moment right here.

"I don't know how to make this better for you," I reply quietly.

"You can't," he grinds out between his teeth. "Not if you're with him."



“August—”

“You know what, Shay, save it.” He shakes his head, stepping down the stairs and turning his back on me.

“You deserve better than being settled for.”

Silence stretches between us as he gets closer to his car, ignoring the last thing I said. The engine turns over, humming through the night air, and his headlights blind me as he tears up the gravel in the driveway to get away.

I fight the urge to sit down and dwell on what just happened while everything in me screams to get in my car and follow him, to attempt to work things out with him while he’s this upset, but I know that will only make things worse.

Making *anything* worse is the last thing I need to do at the moment, so I suck it up like the adult I need to be and head back inside.

I fall back against the door once it’s closed and close my eyes.

“Everything okay? He tore outta here pretty fast.”

Deacon’s voice pulls me back to reality and when I meet his eyes, I can see how worried he is.

“How much of that did you overhear?”

“I didn’t hear anything,” he tells me. I know he’s lying; there’s no way he didn’t hear the yelling with the door open, but I’m thankful he didn’t come out to break it up.

I push off the door and meet him at his spot in the middle of the hallway, pulling him down to kiss me.

“What was that for?”

His fingers slip under the hem of my shirt, and I sink into him, resting my head against his chest. “For not making things worse. For being you, for loving me. Take your pick.”

I want to forget everything that happened outside. I need to lose myself in something, but my normal way of getting out of my head is no longer an option. I’m not going to put myself at risk by fighting when it could jeopardize what I have with Deacon; he’s more important, our time together is more important. Although, I guess fighting would be out of the question now anyway since my only connection is the reason I need to get out of my head to begin with.

There’s no use dwelling on something I can’t make better without tearing



my life apart again, so I don't. I push the thoughts to the side and smile up at him.

"Hey, Deacon."

"Yeah, baby?"

I push out of his grasp and ignore the confusion on his face. Stepping up onto the first stair that leads toward our bedroom, I pull my shirt over my head and drop it to the floor, looking back at him while taking the one thing I know he'll let me have whenever I need it.

"Fuck the boxes, I'm in control tonight."

## Deacon

Every time I turn around it seems like something is trying to pull us apart. This time it was August ... again. Every word had me on edge as they fought on the porch, waiting for something bad to happen, and I had to fight with myself to not storm out and return the broken nose he gave me. I waited for her to agree with him that I was no good for her, but she didn't. She fought for us and then ran to me instead of the other way around.

Maybe we've finally figured out a way to make this all work after all.

I managed to slip out of bed a few hours ago without waking Shay so I could unpack as much as I could before she got up. I somehow managed to make it through everything except the boxes in the bedroom and the one sitting in the corner that I can't seem to touch. It's killing me because I know what is inside it. One box holds every physical memory of my life with Christine.

It's the one box that could cause me to have to repack everything I just put away. It could break us because it could very well break me.

I don't want to be the person that continues to live in the past. Not anymore, at least. Knowing there's a chance I won't be around as long as I would hope makes me want to make the most of what I have now—what I have with Shay.

I take a sip of my coffee, stirring in more sugar when the too-bitter taste hits my taste buds, and turn my attention back to the paper laid out in front of me. I'd go back upstairs and crawl back into bed if I didn't think it would result in me calling out of work today.



A few minutes later, Shay strides into the kitchen, her loose pajama pants and tank top drifting apart more with each step. My attention gets caught on the sliver of bare midriff before being pulled to where she's tapping her index finger against her lip.

"If a turtle doesn't have a shell, is it naked, or homeless?"

I choke on my coffee when I laugh at her off-the-wall joke.

"Weird dreams?" I ask, trying to figure out where the question came from.

She shakes her head, shrugging as she leans back against the counter. "Distraction technique. Just trying to figure out what works for you. In case you were wondering, you shirtless does it for me. Every time." She winks, and when I stand up and make my way closer to her, I swear she's slightly blushing. Her eyes drop to my bare chest, and when I grip her chin to tilt her head up, her breath shudders out.

"You topless would do it for me too, but that would result in us being indisposed for a while." I return her wink, trying not to laugh as I inch closer. "I guess if you're in a bind this would work for me."

I press my lips firmly against hers and tangle my hands in her hair. The taste of mint lingers on her breath from when she brushed her teeth before she came downstairs. She fists her hands in the waistband of my pants, tugging me closer with a groan.

"You're so damn good at this whole distraction thing."

She meets my eyes, and for the first time since I met her I notice they are no longer cold or distant and her smile now meets them instead of falling short and being forced. It's also the exact moment I realize that up until I noticed the box, I hadn't thought about Christine. Not in days.

I don't remember the last time she hadn't crossed my mind at least once a day.

Without forcing me to deal with it, Shay helped me move on from my past.

I smile down at her.

"What?" she asks, fidgeting nervously.

"It's nothing."

"No, really, what?"

I chuckle, sweeping the hair out of her face. "I was just realizing how



much I love you and how much I like the person I am when I'm with you."

"Oh, okay." She laughs. "So nothing important or anything."

"Nothing you didn't already know."

Peeking over my shoulder, Shay checks the clock before pushing me back. "You're gonna be late, and I'm not gonna be the reason today."

"Ugh. Damn this adulting shit. I'd rather play hooky and be distracted all day."

I kiss her once more before stepping away and head back toward the bedroom to finish getting dressed.



"I shouldn't have come to work today," I mutter to myself. I love my job, I love saving people, but I'd rather be covered in blankets with Shay than covered in blood.

Four drop-offs that resulted in three emergency surgeries in the past five hours have my mind reeling as it tries to keep up and not kill anyone. Knowing there was an accident and two more are on their way in only makes my stress levels higher.

"What the hell is it, a full moon or something?" Mia asks, shaking her head as she slides her gloves on.

The sound of sirens fills the air as the rest of the emergency teams step out with us.

"Forty-six-year-old female." A group of nurses and I take over for the paramedics as they fill us in on the woman's condition on the way to the trauma bay.

"Twenty-four-year-old male," I hear from behind me.

I'm not sure why I turn my head to look, but I when I do all my focus gets stuck there.

"Shit."

"Dr. York?"



I ignore the strange looks from the team of people around me and force myself into the next bay.

“No breath sounds on the right.”

“Matt, switch patients with me,” I yell over the sound of another nurse saying something.

Oddly, without question, he backs away and takes over my spot with the woman. Mia looks in my direction and I know she’s about to be the first to step in, but I stop her.

“Call Shay, and do it now.”

She backs out of the room when she hears the tone of my voice and I bend over him to check his pupils.

“Hey, August, it’s Deacon. You’re going to be okay, okay, buddy?”



“Deacon?”

I can hear Shay yelling my name so I meet her in the middle of the hallway, grateful that I had a second to change so she doesn’t grab ahold of bloody scrubs.

“His mom’s on the way. Where is he? What happened?”

I grab her panicked face, sliding my thumbs across her cheeks. “He’s going to be okay so take a breath.” Waiting until she does what I tell her, I pull her into me and press my lips into her hair. I’m not supposed to tell her, but I can’t help myself. “He was brought in after a car accident with a collapsed lung and a broken leg. He’s pretty beat up, but he’s upstairs in a room and stable.”

“Can you take me up?”

Turning, I find Mia. “Page me when his mother shows up.”

Upstairs, I stand in the doorway as Shay drags a chair as close to the side of his bed as possible and grabs his hand. It’s like she forgets I’m here until my pager goes off and she shoots out of the chair.

“I’ll go get her,” she whispers.



I make myself busy while she's gone by checking his vitals—anything to keep me from standing in one spot and wondering how differently our lives would be if Shay chose him instead of me.

“Why are you helpin’ me?” August mutters, cracking his eyes open.

“It’s my job.” I give him the only answer I can come up with that isn’t personal.

“No, really, why? I know you took over downstairs. I know you called Shay, and I damn sure know you heard the conversation last night. So why?”

I drop into the chair Shay just left and lean forward, scrubbing my hands across my face.

“You’re her best friend, August. I love her, you love her. She needs you, and she’s going to need you even more in the future. She’s lost enough. I had to do everything I could to make sure she didn’t lose any more than necessary.”

“I punched you in the face.” His voice is hoarse and quiet and I have to keep my mouth shut and not tell him to stop talking because part of me wants to know where he’s going with this. “I don’t want her to be with you because I think she should be with me, but then you had to go ahead and save me and let her be here. How the hell do I hate you now?”





“I’m pregnant.”

Mia stares at me, jaw slack, barely breathing. I bite my bottom lip to keep from laughing at her facial expression. It’s undoubtedly the funniest look I have ever seen on her pretty face.

I lean close and whisper, “I know, honey.”

“What? How?”

I grab her hand and tug her toward the mirror in her closet. Forcing her to turn sideways, I present the reflection of herself to her, starting at her chest and making my way down to her hips.

“These—” I point at her chest “—have never been bigger, and your baggy shirts do nothing to fool me.”

“I really thought I was doing a good job at keeping it under wraps,” she mutters, smoothing her shirt down over the small bump.

“Does Tyler know?” I drop down on the end of her bed and wait for her to answer.

“Yeah.”

“Then why are you trying to keep it hidden?”



Grabbing a scrub top, she pulls the baggy t-shirt over her head and drags it on.

“We didn’t know how people were going to react.”

*People, yeah ... okay.*

I try to ignore the fact that I know she’s really talking about me because we’ve had this conversation before.

“Why does it matter what anyone thinks, Mia? If you’re happy, be proud of it.”

She smirks at me. “I could tell you the same damn thing.”

“I am, it’s just hard to get used to being happy.”

“Come on.” She tips her head toward the door. “Deacon told me to bring you with me.”

“Yeah.” I sigh. “That makes me nervous. The last time he had me called in was because of August.”

Mia locks the door behind her and drops her sunglasses into place to shade her eyes from the setting sun.

“How’s he doing? I haven’t seen him in a few weeks.”

I shrug, I know she’s asking about more than his recovery from the accident; she’s asking about his recovery from me. “Good, I guess. When I visit he barely looks at me. When I ask him questions he does nothing but mumble. So who really knows?”

“It’s hard to get over someone when they’re always there.”

I stare out the window at the world as it passes us in a blur. I don’t want to admit to myself that she’s right. I know there’s a chance if I leave him alone completely until he finds a way around how he feels for me that there’s a chance I could lose him for good, and that’s not something I want. I wouldn’t be here today if it weren’t for August and I know it.

“Can I ask you a question without you getting mad at me?” I nod, never moving to look at her. “How did you know you loved Deacon? I mean, how did you choose between him and August when you’ve known August for forever?”

My eyes finally drop to my hands before closing. Every difference is right on the tip of my tongue, but it’s so hard to explain out loud.

“Shay?”



I suck in a quick breath before rolling my head to the side so I can look at her.

“Everything with August always felt rushed, like I couldn’t catch my breath and it didn’t feel right. It wasn’t how it was supposed to be. But with Deacon ... God, with Deacon it’s like standing still in the middle of a rave, ya know? Like it doesn’t matter how fast the world is rushing by us, it’s still just us. I breathe out when he breathes in, and for once in my life I don’t feel out of place.”

I’m honestly not sure what I said makes any sense at all, but it’s the only way I could think of to describe it. Mia nods, seeming to accept my answer so I must not have done that bad of a job of explaining it.

The second I step through the emergency department doors, Deacon grabs my arm, tugging me behind a curtain surrounding an empty bed. He catches me as I stumble and keeps me from falling flat on my face.

“I should’ve been a white knight,” he mumbles, pressing his lips against my neck as he sets me down on the bed.

I spin around, trapping his hips between my thighs, and pull him down to me using the collar of his shirt.

“I’m not much of a damsel in distress anymore, though.”

“Anymore?” He chuckles. “Were you ever?”

“I plead the fifth.” Resting my head against his chest, I slide my hands under his white coat and into the back pocket of his pants, pulling him as close as I can get him. It feels like forever since I’ve seen him, when in reality it’s only been a few days because of our schedules. One thing I’ve noticed more and more is how much I hate sleeping alone when I know he should be there with me.

“Come on, we should get going before they realize I’m still here and I don’t get my break.”

“To where?” I ask, narrowing my eyes as he grabs a bag from the corner.

With a shrug and a sly smile, he tells me, “You’ll see.”

I head for the doors, assuming we’re going somewhere outside the hospital but Deacon tugs me toward the elevators.

“I hate surprises,” I mumble to myself.

“Well, let’s hope you don’t hate this one.”



The elevator takes us to the top floor which does nothing but confuse me more than I already am, but he doesn't stop. He looks around us before pushing through an emergency exit door and instead of heading back down the stairs, we follow a sign that points toward roof access.

"Pushing me off the roof is not a good surprise," I joke.

"I guess it's a good thing that isn't what I have planned then."

Letting go of my hand, Deacon drops to his knees and begins pulling things from the bag he carried up here with us. Turning so his back is to the wind, he begins to assemble a kite.

"A kite?"

"Hope you don't mind Batman, but it's the only thing the gift shop could find me at the last minute. I know I'm not usually the spur-of-the-moment type of guy, but I want you to have fun with me too. I don't want our life to be nothing but seriousness."

I bend, gripping his face between my fingers and force his attention away from the damn kite for a minute.

"Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

"At least once a day." He grins. "Usually more."

"Well, I fucking love you, and don't you ever forget it."

## Deacon

The smile plastered across Shay's face is all I ever wanted when I asked Mia to bring her here tonight. It doesn't matter that we're doing something stupid and childish like flying a damn kite; we're doing it together and sometimes you just need to act like kids. Between us both working and her taking care of things at the gym until August is back on his feet, we haven't seen much of each other these past few weeks.

I lean against the edge of the building as Shay keeps her back to me, tugging the string to keep Batman in the air. Her shoulders slowly begin to slump, and I know whatever is going on in her head has a chance to ruin our happy night.

"What's wrong, baby?"

"Mia's pregnant," she murmurs, letting a little more string out, and I barely hear her over the sound of the wind. She doesn't turn toward me. She



doesn't even ask me if I knew; I didn't, but while I'm excited for them, at the same time a piece of me dies a little more. A part I haven't spoken with Shay about—a part that wants something that I'll never allow myself to have.

"I don't want kids," she finally says. Her voice wobbles a bit, making me close my eyes. "Well, a part of me does but I don't want to give anyone the chance of ending up like me. I don't want to put someone through that. It isn't fair when I can keep it from happening."

Taking the few steps that separate us, I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her tightly against me. She fits perfectly in front of me so I can rest my head on top of hers.

"I'm glad we're on the same page with that then."

"You don't?"

I shake my head. "Huntington's is genetic. I've done enough research to know there are ways of weeding through embryos and only implanting the ones without the mutation, but I don't want even the slightest chance of passing it on. Plus, I don't want to hurt more people at the end. I just want to love *you* for as long as I can."

I feel her relax in my arms and it's almost as if she couldn't breathe without me touching her. Tipping her head back, she tells me she loves me with a quick kiss and gives her attention back to what she's doing.



The short amount of time I got with Shay tonight on my break wasn't enough. I want to love her, to spend hours touching her—showing her exactly how I can make her feel.

It's five in the morning when I pull into the driveway. I normally find the house to be dark and quiet at this time because she's in bed, but today all the lights on the first floor illuminate the yard in front of the windows. When I open the front door, the sound of her music blasting hits me in the face but all I can do is smile when I see her dancing at the end of the hallway. After the conversation we had last night, I didn't expect this.

Her body rocks back and forth to the beat in nothing but a tank top and a pair of lace shorts. The closer I get, the louder her off-key singing gets.



It's a sound that would make most people cringe, but I've grown to love it. It's a sound I don't want to live without again.

Shay doesn't stop what she's doing when she sees me; if anything, her moves become more provocative. She cocks her finger, asking me to come closer, and I oblige. My hands drop to her hips, and I lift her, wrapping her legs around my waist.

"What are you doing awake?" I ask against her lips.

"I didn't want to go to sleep without you again this week."

I slide my hands to her ass and squeeze. "And you think meeting me like this was going to lead to us sleeping?"

She shrugs her shoulders and forces a look of innocence across her face. It doesn't last long, though, before she laughs.

"I'm not sure what you're insinuating. I was simply trying to keep myself awake for your arrival." Her fingers sift through my hair as she laughs at me. "So tell me, dear doctor, did you have to save lives today or did you get to skate by on your flawless looks?"

This is how I know we'll be okay—how I know we'll make it. Even though we had to deal with the tough conversation earlier, we still manage to make it through and be better for it at the end of the day.

Even though they should, not everyone gets a relationship like this. Our push and pull brings us closer in the end while someone else's tears tear them apart.





“Again.” I hear as Shay smacks the mitts on her hands together again and holds them back up. The other girl on the mat takes a breath, letting her guard down for a second which gives Shay enough time to reach out and smack her against the side of the head.

“Stop lettin’ your guard down, Ava,” August yells from the doorway beside me. He adjusts his crutches and moves forward into the gym.

“Don’t you tell me how to live my life,” she barks back, taking another hit to the side of her head while she’s distracted.

I step up to the edge of the mat next to him and cross my arms over my chest.

“Ever done this?” August asks me quietly.

“What? Fight? No, I never got into it much when I was younger, and now I have too much to lose if something stupid happens. No sense in tempting fate when she already hates me.”

After he called me to ask if I would bring him here today, it resulted in a lengthy conversation about what I meant when I talked to him at the hospital. Telling him I’m sick—letting him know he was right and I am going to end up breaking her heart—was harder than I expected it to be. I didn’t want to like him but him not throwing that fact in my face makes it a little harder not



to.

“You’re gonna ask her to marry you, aren’t you?”

Without hesitation, I answer him, “Someday, yeah, I am.” I know I probably shouldn’t have said that, but I’m not going to lie to him to spare his feelings.

He takes a deep breath and grins, obviously getting ready to change the subject. “I’ve missed this place. Thanks again for not bein’ an asshole about helpin’ me out. One more ‘are you okay, honey’ from my mother and I’d straddle the console just to drive myself.”

I laugh out loud, and for the first time since I stepped through the door, Shay realizes I’m here. Her face lights up for a second as she steps toward me before quickly stopping and becoming confused by the fact that August and I are together.

“Just fuckin’ kiss. Jesus Christ,” August mutters. “Stop wonderin’ if you’re gonna hurt someone’s damn feelings and just do whatever the fuck you want to. Life’s too short for that shit.”

Shifting my eyes, I look at him, wondering if he’s being serious or if he’s waiting for me to step forward so he can take me out with a crutch. He sighs when I make no attempt to move and shakes his head.

“If you don’t fuckin’ kiss her, I’m gonna. Then what? I’ll tell you what,” he mutters. “Then our bromance will be ruined and all our hard work today will be for nothin’.”

I reach out and grab her arm, dragging her close to me before he tries anything or changes his mind. I lose myself when I kiss her, like I always do, and nothing around us matters anymore. Nothing but her. Her arms wrap around my neck as I cup her cheek, sliding my thumb across her skin.

“Why the hell are you two out here together anyway?” August’s voice breaks us apart and we find him looking at anything but us.

“Well,” Ava says, beating Shay to the punch. She slides her hands to her hips and stares him down. I’ve never met a woman with as much attitude as Shay, but I think I just did. “My trainer is a dumbass that got himself in a car wreck so Shay here took over everything, including working with me in her spare time, while he recovers.”

August mutters something none of us catch but Ava is the only one that says anything.

“What was that? I can’t hear you over the sound of you being an asshole.”



“Someone has her sassy pants on today,” Shay whispers in my ear, making me laugh. August turns and glares at us before moving closer to Ava.

They continue to argue—bickering like an old married couple as August tells her everything she was doing wrong. Shay sinks back against me like there’s no place in the world she’d rather be and we both watch, trying hard not to laugh.

“We’ve gotta get going if we’re going to Tyler’s tonight.”

Without saying anything to interrupt whatever is happening in front of us, she slips away and grabs her bag from the locker room. I know what’s in that bag—I watched her pack it this morning—and I can’t wait to see her put it on.



“How the hell did we get this lucky?” Tyler asks me as the girls walk away from us and step down into the lake.

“I don’t know about you, but Shay literally fell into my life.”

“Lucky son-of-a-bitch,” he mutters with a smile.

My attention drifts back to Shay in the tiny, pink bikini I can’t wait to peel off of her when we get home. She smiles up at me and winks.

He’s right. I am a lucky son-of-a-bitch.

“Do me a favor and quit staring at her tits and go grab some more beer while I check the food.”

I could tell him to shut up and inform him that I was looking at her scar since she no longer feels the need to hide it, but I shake my head and laugh instead. I step to the left to head back up to the house but don’t even make it to the steps before everything goes black.

## Shay

“*Deacon*,” I scream and scramble to get out of the water as I watch in horror



as he collapses.

My feet dig into the grass as I run as fast as I can to get to him. Tyler beats me—thankfully—because the second he starts to seize I freeze. I’m afraid if I get closer I’ll make it worse somehow, so I stay where I am a few feet away from everyone.

Mia rushes past me to grab her phone off the deck as Tyler rolls him to his side and just sits there.

*Shouldn’t he be doing something?*

I hide behind my hands because I don’t know what else to do. I stay silent as Deacon convulses and can barely breathe when the paramedics show up a few minutes later.



I’ve never felt more useless in my life until today. I don’t know anything about what the doctors are saying, and if I didn’t know better, I’d think they were speaking a different language.

I park myself in a chair in the corner so I’m out of the way, both afraid to touch Deacon and to be away from him while I wait for him to come out of it. It seems like forever before he finally wakes up long enough to focus on anything.

“What happened?”

He looks around the curtained off section of the emergency room we’re in before focusing on me.

“You had a seizure walking up the hill at Tyler and Mia’s and hit your head,” I tell him weakly.

“That explains why everything aches,” he mutters. “Why are you way over there?”

I shrug. I’ve never felt this weak—this helpless—in my entire life. “I don’t wanna hurt you more.”

His eyebrows draw together as he taps his finger against the bed. “It’s only going to get worse, Shay. I’m not putting you through that.”



“You aren’t putting me through *anything*,” I tell him, not moving from my spot. I know exactly what he’s talking about, and I’m not going to run away because things get hard. That’s not who I am. “I’m not going *anywhere* simply because things get difficult.”

“You deserve a man that’s always going to be there to take care of you. I can’t give you that, Shay. As much as I wish I could, I can’t even promise you tomorrow.”

“Neither can I and I don’t care if we make it ‘til tomorrow,” I admit. “I don’t care if I die an hour from now as long as I get to love you for as long as I can while I can.”

His eyes drop back to his lap, forcing me to move closer so I can make him look at me. “I don’t want to hurt you more than you already have been.”

“Getting hurt is inevitable, Deacon, it’s a part of life. I’m going to get my heart broken. It’s going to hurt. I’m going to cry, and that’s okay. What’s not okay is you trying to push me away because you don’t want to be the reason. Let me make that choice. Let me love you for as long as I can because no matter how much our ending is going to hurt, I’ll never regret a single second of loving you.”

“Shay ...” he trails off.

“Stay with me,” I whisper, grabbing his hand. I always thought those words would drive me insane to say but with him they don’t. This isn’t a plea to take care of me; it’s a request to love me, to stand beside me the same way I want to stand beside him.

Fearlessly.

Unconditionally.

And without regret.

“Okay,” he finally tells me. Meeting my eyes, he points at the spot on the bed next to him. “But I want you here. You *belong here*. You being afraid to touch me hurts more than anything.”

Doing as he says, I crawl up next to him as gently as possible, having to force myself to keep going when he quietly tries to hide how much pain he’s in.

“You deserve a forever type of love,” he mutters against the top of my head.

“So do you. Don’t you get that? Even if your forever is only one more day, Deacon, you deserve one too.”



Wrapping my arms around him, he draws me tightly against his chest. When he buries his face into the crook of my neck, I curl into his side to feel safe.

“I’m scared,” he admits quietly.

Lifting my face up, I press my lips against his. “Me too.”



“Run away with me,” Deacon whispers against my neck. “Let’s make one of those stupid bucket list things everyone tells you to, and let’s do it. We can each do one, cut them up, and pull them randomly from a bucket or something so neither of us know what’s in it.”

“Are you high?” I laugh, flipping on the light beside the bed. “Did you get drugs I wasn’t aware of yesterday?”

“No, although I could be. I had it offered to me when I was with August. I told you that you deserved a forever type of love, and I’m bound and determined to give it to you even if I don’t make it to forever. I want to do things with you while I still can. Go out with no regrets.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I knew this talk was going to happen sooner or later, I just had every hope in the world it would be later on down the road.

“Okay,” I whisper. “I’ll run away with you whenever you want me to.”





## Summer

I never thought we'd be here. Well, I never thought *I'd* be here. I never thought I'd be standing in the middle of a crowd of drunk, wine-soaked people, looking for Deacon. I never thought we'd be in Spain so we could be part of the rage wine war.

I never thought I could be this tired and this happy at the same time.

A pair of arms slide around me from behind, and I sigh in contentment when I realize it's Deacon. With the rush of drunk people running around us it could've been anyone.

"I love you," he whispers in my ear as he grabs the squirt gun full of wine and brings it to his lips.

I'm already soaked with wine so when a random person runs by and squirts us, it doesn't faze me. My smile only grows because in the past two days we've been here, I've thought about nothing but Deacon.

Not the fact that our days are limited.

Not the fact that both of us are missing pieces of our hearts.

Just us, and that's how it should be.



I'm starting to realize the more I worry about everything else, the less time I'm going to have with the man I love.

I spin in his arms, pressing the side of my face against his soaked shirt.

We're both drunk, and I know I shouldn't be, but we've decided we're going to die anyway, so we're going to have fun while we can. We're going to live the way we want to so we can die without regrets.

Screaming and laughter drown out my thoughts so I simply quit thinking and be present. I let the buzz of the wine rush through my veins—a feeling I haven't really felt this strong before—and it makes me giggle.

Deacon lifts my chin and smirks down at me. "Are you drunk?"

I nod before lifting onto my toes to kiss him. It doesn't matter that we're surrounded by thousands of people we've never met before crashing into us. Because in those few seconds that my lips are on his and I can taste the wine he's been drinking, there's no one else around but us.

"Marry me."

Deacon pulls back, looking at me like I've momentarily lost my ever-loving mind.

"You're crazy." He laughs.

"Probably."

"You're drunk."

I nod tightening my grip on the fabric covering his chest. "Definitely."

"You'll forget you even asked me in the morning when you're sober."

I drop back down so I'm standing at my normal height and shake my head. "That would never happen. I could drink my life away trying to forget everything I've been through, but I'd never forget this."

"You can't be sure of that, Shay."

My heart pounds, making my pulse roar in my ears.

"Are you telling me no?"

"No," he says adamantly. Sliding his hands to my cheek, he forces me to continue looking at him when all I want to do is find a hole and hide in it. How did we get here when just a few minutes ago I was the happiest person in the world? I no longer like being drunk if this is how it's going to screw with my emotions and thoughts. "I'm not saying no. I just want to know you're sure. I'd marry you right this second if I thought you were sure. I'd



drag you back down this mountain and do whatever I could to marry you as soon as possible. But I need to be certain you're sure."

I know he's trying to keep us both from getting hurt, but the thing is you can't break someone that's already broken. Up until I fell in love with Deacon I wasn't living, I was just barely surviving. The pain I was constantly in was the only thing I had to hold onto, but not anymore. Not when I'm with Deacon.

"I don't want a life full of what-ifs. I don't want to die wondering what would've happened if I had done things sooner. I don't want to wait until we're sober and if this is a stupid mistake then we can fix it down the road, but I don't think it is."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

He smiles. "Let's go get married, pretty girl."

I squeal in excitement as the happy part of my drunk comes back and I bounce on my toes. *This* part of being drunk I can deal with. I would happily be like this all the time if I could control it. His fingers dive into my wine-drenched hair as he pulls me back into him and kisses me harder than he's ever done before, leaving me breathless.

Grabbing my hand, Deacon tugs me through the crowd and back down the road, leaving the screaming mass of people behind us. We've been surrounded by so many people this weekend that being alone is weird.

I'd say it's quiet, but my mind is racing and my thoughts are coming at me a mile a minute with no end in sight.

I never thought I'd say yes to spending my life with someone else's name, let alone asking someone to marry me.

In the middle of the silence stretching between us I open my mouth without thinking.

"I wanna blanket fort."

Snorting, Deacon pulls me to a stop and continues to laugh at my random outburst.

"You want a what?"

"A blanket fort, damn it."

"Okay, I'll make you a blanket fort ... right after I marry you."

"Yes!" I pump my fist into the air. Turning, I meet the eyes of a stranger



walking up the opposite side of the road and point at her. “My husband’s gonna build me a blanket fort.”

She probably has no clue what I’m talking about, but in my inebriated state her confused smile and wide eyes are enough for me.

“Oh Lord, you’re a handful when you’re drunk.”

“I’ve never actually been drunk. How have I never let myself feel like this? I think I like this version of me.”

“A chatterbox?” He laughs, tugging on my arm so I start walking again.

“I feel all warm and fuzzy inside. I like that feeling.”

## Deacon

“Ow, my head.”

I chuckle at her groan from the kitchen as I pour her a cup of coffee and head back toward the living room.

“Where the hell am I?” Shay mutters.

I stoop down and flip the edge of the blanket out of the way so I can climb in next to her on the pile of pillows and blankets.

“Home,” I tell her with a smile and hand her the cup. “Here drink this and the water beside you.”

“What the fuck are we in?” Her eyes dart around her, and I can see the wheels turning in her head as she tries to piece things together.

“You asked me to build you a blanket fort. I built you a blanket fort.”

“How long have we been home?”

Smiling, I drop down on my back next to her. “I carried you in last night. You either drank or slept most of the plane ride back and passed out completely in the cab on the way home.”

“Ugh. Why did I drink so much the first time around?”

“I don’t know. You kept muttering something about going to hell for tainting a saint. I should’ve stopped you, but we were having a good time. The hangover will fade but at least we had fun, right?”

“Oh, God.” Setting the glass down, she falls back against the pillow with another groan and scrubs her hands across her face before going silent. “Oh,



God. We got married, didn't we? I asked you to marry me, didn't I?"

She pulls her hand away from her face and stares at the ring sitting on her finger with wide eyes.

"Kind of, yeah," I tell her honestly.

Her eyes dart to me and narrow. "How does one *kind of* get married?"

I roll to my side and watch her carefully, waiting for the regret to sink it but I don't see it. Confusion, yes, but no regret.

"We had a ceremony but we were both extremely drunk and didn't realize it took so long to get the paperwork in a different country. So, we *got* married, but we aren't *actually* married, if that makes any sense. I figured if you still wanted to be my wife when you woke up sober then we'd do it again."

For a second she's silent but it doesn't last long before she starts second-guessing her own mind.

"Do you *want* to actually marry me?" she whispers unsure.

Scooting closer, I pull her leg over my hip and slide my hand across her ass. Shay's hands settle between us, resting against my chest and I press my forehead to her so I'm sure she's paying attention to me and not what's going on inside of her head.

"If I didn't want to be your husband, I wouldn't have said yes. Drunk or not, I know what I want, and what I want is to spend as much time with you as I can. Whether I go first or you do, I don't want any damn regrets pulling us down."

"You built me a blanket fort ... with Christmas lights and everything," she finally mumbles, letting her eyes drift around without moving her head.

"You asked me to. It was right after you asked me to marry you so I was pretty sure it was something you really wanted. If you had asked me for something weird, like to kill someone, I probably would've hesitated. My stylish figure doesn't come from eating bon-bons while sitting on my ass all day. I'm like a caveman. I'll build you fancy things. As for the lights ... well, you've been asleep for a long time and I've had nothing better to do than pretty it up for you."

She smiles and closes her eyes. After being quiet for so long, I assume she's asleep, but just when I think I've lost her for another night she whispers to me again.

"I feel like death."



It's been so long since I've been as drunk as Shay was this past weekend that I don't remember how to get rid of the hangover without waiting it out.

She pushes up and searches frantically for her phone. I reach up and grab it from where I had tossed it on the couch and hand it to her, watching in confusion as she dials and presses the phone to her ear, only to pull it back when the ringing screams in her ear.

"I hate you, Jackson."

I hear him laugh when she pulls the phone away again and she rolls her eyes.

"There is a deep, burning passion for you right now, but at the same time I love you and I need your help." She pauses long enough to rub her temples before continuing. "How the hell do I get rid of this hangover before my brain explodes and you have to clean up the mess?" She nods a few times but I have no clue what he is telling her so I lie back and wait for her to finish talking.

"Fuck you too," she mumbles before hanging up.

"That seemed like a very loving conversation." I laugh. Part of me wonders what it would be like to have a sibling. Knowing they could possibly end up the way that my mother did squashes that want before I let myself dwell on it.

"Dickhead partied his ass off in college. So did Ethan. I never got the chance so I never learned how to get rid of the after-effects."

I follow her out of the fort and back into the kitchen, watching as she slowly moves about to grab everything Jackson must've told her to do.

"Greasy food and hydrate," she mutters, gagging when she opens the package of bacon.

I push her into a chair and turn back around to finish what she was doing.

"We're really going to get married?"

Her voice is muffled so I turn around to see what she's doing and find her resting the side of her head against her folded arms, squishing her cheek and lips to the side. I drop down on the counter across from her and mimic the position she's in.

"Yeah, we are. As soon as you're feeling better."

"If I felt better now and didn't think my head would pop off like a dandelion top, I'd take that hot pan of bacon and toss it in the sink like the



burgers you burnt the first time you cooked for me.”

I smile and stand up. “You’re so damn romantic.”

She forces a grin before abruptly standing and rushing to the bathroom.

“You okay?” I yell after her.

She doesn’t answer me but I don’t hear the sound of her vomiting so I don’t follow her. I move the bacon to a paper towel covered plate before breaking a few eggs into the grease.

“What the hell?”

“Hmm?” I hum as she takes her seat again and I move a plate in front of her.

“I just saw myself in the mirror.” Shay’s eyes go wide in horror before she waves her hand in front of her face. “When did the bus hit me exactly? I’m a hot mess.”

I thought about washing the makeup off her face last night when I carried her inside, but it wasn’t quite as bad as it is now. Rolling around in her sleep is what did her in, I think.

“You agreed to marry me looking like this. Are you crazy?”

I shrug and sweep my thumb under her eye. “I’ve seen you in a worse state than having eyeliner running down your cheeks.”

“I feel as if you’re crazy because I don’t even think I was this bad the night we met.”

Leaning back against the counter, I laugh. “I remember that night, and this is nowhere near as bad. Now, eat so you can start feeling better because I don’t want to look like I’m marrying a zombie when I marry you.”

She stabs at a piece of egg and glares at me. “You’re in so much trouble when I don’t feel like I’m dying.”

“Looking forward to it.” I wink at her. “I’ll meet you in the fort whenever you think you’re ready to punish me.”





## Autumn

Nurses move past me in a flurry of motion, each rushing to get to another part of the emergency room, but each nodding their head or greeting me.

It feels odd to be in here without a medical bracelet on.

“Well, hello there, Mrs. York,” Mia says, winking as she wraps her stethoscope back around her neck.

*That* is still a bit weird too.

I fiddle with the rings that have been on my finger for more than a month and I try to force a smile. For some reason, sometimes it still feels like I stole the name, and I can’t help but wonder if I’m always going to feel that way.

“Deacon’s in a trauma bay so you’ll have to wait for him.”

I shrug, shoving my hands into my pockets. “It’s not a big deal, he didn’t even know I was coming. We just seem to keep missing each other at home this week so I was thinking we could grab some dinner. I guess I’ll try to catch him for breakfast.”

“Nonsense.” Grabbing my arm, she tugs me toward an empty stretcher sitting against the wall. I follow her when she climbs up and straightens her



bright-pink scrubs over her growing stomach.

“I don’t wanna be in the way,” I mutter.

She shrugs like it’s no big deal. “He shouldn’t be long. That’s actually why I transferred over here. Between my schedule and Tyler’s, it was like I didn’t even have a husband anymore.” Resting her head back against the wall, she rolls it so she’s facing me. “You look exhausted, honey.”

“You too.”

She grins. “Different reasons I’m betting.”

“Yeah, shouldn’t you be home with your feet up? You’re due in like half a second.” My attempt to change the subject gets ignored as she continues to stare at me so I blow out a breath and close my eyes. “When I’m with him, I’m constantly watching him, and when I’m not I’m worrying something is going to happen and I won’t be able to stop it. It’s like I’m waiting for the next shoe to drop.”

“You can’t live like that. You’re going to burn yourself out and miss everything good about what you have.”

Without waiting for me to answer, she slides off the stretcher and stops the bed being wheeled down the hallway. Smiling sadly, she brushes the old man’s hair away from his face before whispering something to him.

“What was that?” I ask as she climbs awkwardly back up next to me.

“He’s been in here three times this month, and he’s not leaving this time. No family around here.” She shrugs, answering me even though she probably shouldn’t. “Makes me sad, I guess, knowing he’s going to die alone in a hospital.”

“That is sad. No one should have to die alone.”

Her eyes linger on the elevator doors long after they close. “Yeah, I’ll go up and check on him a bit later but what else am I gonna do?”

One of the other nurses calls Mia’s name from the other side of the emergency room so she slips away, promising to come back as soon as she can.

I don’t wait for her, though. I slide back to the floor and head toward the door, only stopping when my name is called from behind me. I stop in the middle of the hallway and lean back into Deacon when his arms slip around me.

“Were you thinking you were going to slip out unnoticed?”



I tilt my head to the side and look up at him. “You were busy. I figured I’d see you when you got home.”

“Nonsense.” Grabbing my hand, he tugs me back down the hall and into the doctor’s lounge where he grabs his bag in silence.

“Don’t you have a few more hours to go on your shift?”

Deacon’s lips twitch as he tries to keep himself from smiling but fails. He steps back up to me, running his hands down my back and slipping into my back pockets.

“I’m kidnapping you, okay? We’re running away for a few days.”

I tilt my head to the side and silently wonder what he has planned and how he managed to do it without me knowing.

“Don’t say no.”

*Shit.*

“Well, then that only leaves one option, I guess.”



“Are you going to tell me what the hell we’re doing?”

Laughing, Deacon tugs me down onto his lap while the boat docks.

Getting on a boat was the last thing I thought he’d have us doing, but here we sit.

“Calm down, pretty girl, you’ll love it.”

*Calm down?* We’re on a boat. Headed to an island. With no major medical care. With a backpack he won’t let me near.

What part should I be calming down about, exactly?

“You think you’re so funny,” I grumble, faking a laugh.

“And you’re cute when you don’t get your way.”

“No, asshole, I’m cute all the time. Get it right.”





I could probably kill Deacon right about now. Not only did he haul me out into the middle of the damn ocean to an island, but then he made us hike to the other side of it where there is nothing but the sheer drop-off of the cliff side to keep us out of the water.

The fact that I'm constantly nervous that he's going to have another seizure is simmering at the forefront of my mind as I stare around at nothing but water, but that's nothing new.

*What do I do if something happens?*

"Quit worrying," Deacon tells me. Leaning down in front of me, he slides his thumb between my eyebrows and smooths out the wrinkle that will soon be permanently etched into my skin because of him. "I promise everything is going to be okay so enjoy this."

## **Deacon**

It has taken all the strength inside of me to not laugh uncontrollably at Shay today. Not knowing what is going on doesn't sit well with her, but I love surprising her. I know she's worrying—*constantly fucking worrying*—so I'm hoping a night away from absolutely everything might help a bit.

I drop down next to her and stretch my legs out in front of me.

"Today it's just us. No sicknesses. No worries. I just want a day with my wife to do something from the bucket."

"Oh, lord," she whispers. "What did you pull out this time?"

This is the third trip we've taken based on strips of paper we randomly wrote things we wanted to do before we died on. This is the first one she knew nothing about until we were actually at our destination.

I shift enough to drag the paper out of my back pocket and hand it over to her.

"Are you shitting me? You're going to launch fireworks off the side of a



cliff? What happens if one of us gets hurt? What happens if something catches fire?"

"Quit worrying," I tell her again. I'll worry enough for the both of us, but I want her to have a good day after everything I've put her through. "If something stupid happens, at least we'll both go out at the same time."

I wink. She rolls her eyes, but at least she isn't frowning anymore.

"I promise nothing will happen."

I force her to sit between my legs and I lean back against a tree as the sun goes down, and almost as if on cue, a twig snaps behind us, making Shay jump.

"Simmer down, butterball," Jackson chuckles as he steps into view.

Shay picks up a rock from beside my leg and launches it at him, hitting him in the hip.

"I hate that nickname," she mutters under her breath.

Walking over, he squeezes her cheeks and coos at her like a baby. "You're not so chubby anymore, butterball. No bears are gonna wanna eat your skinny ass tonight."

She smacks his hands away and rests back against me again. He drops his bag beside mine as Tyler, Mia, August, and Ava emerge from the trees behind him and Shay finally turns her head to look at me.

"What the hell?"

I shrug. "We all needed a night away, and there isn't much more *away* than the back side of an island at night."

I'm not the only one that looks oddly at August as he settles back against a rock and Ava cuddles up next to him. He meets Shay's eyes and shrugs with a slight smile.

The words he yelled at Shay the night on the porch run through my head, and I can't help but wonder if he's over her or if he's just trying to play it off until he figures out his shit.

"Next time you ask us to trek across a damn island, please remind me it's a long haul with a case of beer."

"And to say no when I'm carrying an elephant in my uterus," Mia chimes in.

I grab the bottle that Tyler hands me and laugh when Shay does nothing but stare at hers after it's in her hands. There's no doubt in my mind that she's



remembering the last time we drank.

“There isn’t enough alcohol on the island to get you that drunk again so quit worrying.”

Seeming to relax, she pops the top and stuffs it into her pocket.

“Did you invite everyone so I wouldn’t worry so much about something happening while we were alone?”

“That’s a good possibility.”

She nods and squeezes my leg. “Thank you.”

I knew I wasn’t the only one to notice my hands and arms were starting to go haywire, or that my face was beginning to tick randomly. It’s not a lot at the moment, but it’s enough of a warning for me. I love her for not saying anything, but at the same time I want to push her away again because I know things are going to slide downhill here sooner or later.

The thought of pushing her away makes me pull her closer because I know I could never do it after she asked me to stay with her in the hospital after my seizure.

“A toast,” Shay shouts, raising her bottle into the air while looking directly at Jackson. “Here’s to you and here’s to me. If we should ever disagree ... well, then, fuck you and here’s to me.”

I tap the neck of my bottle against hers and settle back while Tyler sets up the first round of fireworks I had hidden in my backpack.

I shift just enough that I can see the side of Shay’s face when the sky lights up in different colors. I wrote this down. *I* wanted to set fireworks off on the side of a cliff, but right now I want nothing more than to watch my wife enjoy herself.

There is nothing better to me than watching her skin change colors after each crack of another being set off. She smiles, turning to meet my eye every few minutes, but for the most part, she’s content sitting with me in silence.

This is all I could ask for out of anyone I could ever spend my life with. It’s *more* than I could ever ask for, because she’s with me despite everything that could go wrong.

She’s with me even if we roll off the side of this cliff in the middle of the night.

That’s all that matters.



A hand is shown with a pulse line running up the index finger. The hand is surrounded by a large, dark, irregular splatter, resembling blood, which is set against a white background. The text 'PART TWO' is on the first line, 'TEN YEARS' is on the second line, and 'LATER' is on the third line, all in a serif font.

PART TWO  
TEN YEARS  
LATER





## Winter

It's never felt this good to be home, but at the same time, it's never felt this final, either. Although it's always a thought in the back of my mind, I've never let myself believe the trip we come home from would be our last ... until now.

"Let me help you with some of those," Deacon tells me as I pop the trunk.

His body jerks, his hands and arms jumping on their own and I know he hates it. I've overheard the conversations he has with himself when he thinks no one is close enough to hear him. It's heartbreaking, but at the same time, we know they could be much worse than what he's dealing with. They're bound to get worse sooner or later.

Lifting bags, I find the lightest ones and hand them to him before he has a chance to grab them on his own. We both know I do it, but neither of us speak about it. Some things are better left alone. I don't want to make him feel like less of a man simply because he can't do things the way he used to.

Deacon stands by my side until I close the trunk and look at him. He smiles, his lips twitching as his face ticks a little and I know what he wants without him having to say anything. After over eleven years, you learn things



about each other that you don't even realize about yourself.

Setting my bags down, I lean up on my toes and wrap my arms around his neck so I can kiss him. Even after all these years, the world around me still falls away when he kisses me back. He drops his bags, and for a second I wonder if it was an accident. The thought fades away when one hand tangles in my hair and the other pulls me against him by the small of my back and he groans against my mouth.

"I love you, Shay Daniels."

"I love you too, Deacon York."

I smile even though my heart hurts. There's a little less Deacon in his eyes every time I look, and the fact that he used my maiden name instead of his last name makes me wonder if he's forgetting even more than I realize. I smile because despite all the shit going on, all the things he forgets, all the pain he's in, all he's ever told me he needs is for me to be happy.

"Mia and Tyler are dropping Ellie off with his mom and should be here in a little while to visit."

He stares blankly at me for a second before nodding and reaching to grab the bags he dropped. "I'm tired. I'm gonna go up and take a nap."

"Okay, baby."

That happens a lot more lately too—him sleeping. All the moving he does seems to wear him out, but part of me thinks he's just growing tired in general.

I grab my bags and walk behind him, trying my best to pretend I'm not watching his every step so I can drop everything and catch him if he stumbles.

"You better be looking at my ass and not my feet," he mutters as we step inside.

"Always," I say. Setting the bags down by the door, I pinch his ass as I step around him. "It is, after all, my favorite part to watch."

A hint of humor—of the old Deacon—comes out when he shakes his hips in my direction and winks.

"I'll see you."

I turn around and make myself busy as he heads toward the bedroom.

"Have a good nap," I yell back.

A few minutes later, I hear the sound of tires on the frozen gravel and a sense of relief washes over me, which in turn makes me feel like an asshole. I



asked for this life. I begged him not to shut me out when things got bad. I promised him I'd stay when things got bad, and I will—I am—but it's hard not to want help sometimes.

"I'm in the kitchen," I yell when the door opens.

Mia grabs me the second she's close enough, and I breathe in the comfort I find when her arms wrap around my shoulders. Tyler drops down onto a stool as I busy myself making coffee.

"How's everything?" he asks, knowing how much I hate that question.

I shrug, mindlessly stirring. "Better than it could be, worse than it should be, I guess."

"You guess? Now tell us the truth."

Mia runs her hand across my shoulders in an attempt to comfort me, but all it does is suddenly irritate me. I want to yell and scream and spout off about everything that is wrong, but I don't want to wake Deacon up. I don't want to give him more to worry about than he already has. If him thinking I'm okay with everything going on is the only thing I can do for him, I'm going to do it.

"I feel like I'm trying to outrun a forest fire by climbing a damn tree."

"What?" Mia chuckles, taking up a seat beside Tyler.

I shake my head and try to wrap my mind around my thoughts before I scream. "You can climb to the top and be free from the flames for a little while, but sooner or later, the tree is going to burn down and you're going to die. That is, if suffocating from the damn smoke doesn't kill you first."

"So things are bad." Tyler's blatant words hurt more than thinking them, but they're the truth and I know I need to start believing it.

"Yeah." I nod once. "Things are bad." My eyes drop to the cup in front of me as I think about just how bad things have actually gotten. "His symptoms are getting worse. He's in more pain. He's losing weight because he's not eating. I want more time. I always knew this could happen, but I need more time."

"You can't—"

"Shut up," I growl, cutting him off. "I'm not an idiot. I know I can't magically get more time. I know this thing works on its own schedule, but I can fucking wish, okay? I would beg and borrow and steal for *any* amount of extra time with him. I would do anything to stop him from falling apart in front of my eyes."



“What can we do?”

My eyes drift out to the backyard, over the trampoline that we replaced a few years ago, and for a moment, I’m stuck in an onslaught of memories. From the first night we fell asleep on it, until now, so much happiness has revolved around that damn spot. Now it simply looks as lonely as the world around me is beginning to feel.

“Nothing. There’s really nothing you can do.”



The sound of Deacon moving around pulls me from the trance I’ve managed to put myself in sitting in front of the television. Tyler and Mia are snuggled into the corner of the couch, watching me as I stand and head for the stairs.

I crack the door open as quietly as I can, afraid that he might not actually be awake, and find him gripping the edge of the dresser. He leans over it and I can tell he’s crying based on the rise and fall of his shoulders.

Inching closer, the spilled bottle of pain meds is all I can focus on.

“I don’t want to do this anymore,” he cries. Balling his fist, he pounds it against the dresser, making the pills bounce.

Tears fill my eyes, but I try my hardest to keep them from spilling.

“Do what, Deacon?” I step closer, letting my fingers trail across his back in an attempt to calm him. Realizing it is doing nothing but angering him more, I step back and take a breath. “What can I do?”

“*Nothing*,” he screams. “Not a god damn thing. This isn’t about you. It’s me. I’m broken. I’m fucked up. I’m dragging you down with me. And *I* can’t do it anymore.” I cover my mouth to keep from saying anything that will make this worse but I can feel my anger building up inside of me. I shouldn’t be upset with him; I don’t have that right.

Deacon sobs, “It hurts too much to do this anymore. Every day I look at this bottle of pills and I know I can make the pain go away forever. It’s better for everyone that way. You won’t have to take care of me anymore, no one will have to worry anymore, I won’t be in pain ... We all win.”

“If you think for one second that you not being here will make *anything*



better, you're wrong." I scream the words through a haze of tears with my hands fisted by my sides. Screaming isn't the way to fix this, I know that, but it seems to be the only thing I can do. Grabbing a handful of pills from in front of him, I throw them as hard as I can across the room.

Tyler forces me out the door, and I don't let myself think twice before heading straight for the front door.

"Shay?" Mia calls from behind me but I don't stop—not until I'm beside our car. "Shay!"

I rest my hand on the hood and take a deep breath but nothing about the icy air filling my lungs calms me down. When nothing else works, I pull back, driving my fist into the hood as hard as I can. I hit again, and again, and again, and it isn't until I hear Deacon yell my name that I stop.

Pain radiates through my knuckles but it's nothing compared to the ache in my chest.

"Why are you doing that?" he yells, stepping down from the porch. "Stop that. Why are you hurting yourself?"

"Because I can't hit *you*!" I shout angrily back at him. It's not rational that I'm mad at him, but I am. I'm so mad and I can't tamp it down. "I'm down here trying to figure out how to get just one more good day with my husband and you're upstairs contemplating ending everything. It's not fair! None of this is fair."

I break and every ounce of hurt I've managed to keep bottled up floods out. There's no stopping it once I start. I slide down the side of the car and wrap my arms around my knees, burying my face so I can hide as much of it as I can. It doesn't matter that the snow under me is melting and freezing my skin.

Deacon drops in front of me and forces me to unravel myself so he can pull me close. I know how much pain he's in, so his doing this only makes me cry harder. His arms tighten around me as he shifts so he can lean against the car.

"I'm sorry," he whispers over and over again against the top of my head. I know there's a big difference between I don't want to do this anymore and I *can't* do this anymore, and I know we're actually getting closer to the can't side of things than we've ever been before and that scares me.

"Not yet, okay?" I look up and meet his eyes. I've gone from pissed off to begging in a few short seconds, and I'm not sure how to handle it. "Just a little longer. I just need a little more time and I know it isn't fair to ask but I



need it.”

Deacon closes his eyes, and when they open again, there’s a brief moment of hope in them—a glimpse of the man I fell in love with all those years ago.

“Okay.” He nods. “For you.”

“For *us*,” I correct him before kissing him. Everything I do is for us, and even though I know this actually is more for me, the selfish part of my brain refuses to acknowledge that he’s going to be in pain simply because I asked.

I feel him begin to shiver and force myself back to my feet, helping Deacon up with a little assistance from Tyler. As soon as Deacon turns away, I drive the heel of my hand into my chest over my heart and close my eyes again. Tyler’s hand drops to my shoulder.

“What’s the matter?”

“My heart hurts,” I tell him as Deacon steps through the front door. He begins to say something about getting me to the hospital, but I stop him mid-thought. “My heart hurts. Because my soul hurts. Nothing more.”

By the time I get inside, Deacon is getting dressed to go back out. He tugs down his winter hat before meeting my eyes.

“Running away to join the circus?” I joke, wiping my eyes dry again.

“No.” He shakes his head as he grabs his gloves. Beside him, Mia is trying to hide her smile. “One more bucket list trip.”

“Deacon, we just got home a little while ago.”

“I know, but I really want to do this one with you and we’ll be home tonight.”

Sighing, I concede with a nod and grab my coat. “Where are we going?”

“Just get in the truck,” Mia whispers, walking past me to grab a pile of blankets that are stacked on the end of the couch.

I follow them out and wait as Deacon climbs into the backseat before following him in. I don’t like being out of the loop.

“Get out,” Deacon tells me, leaning across so he can open the door when we stop at the end of the road leading to Sebago Lake. I eye him, wondering what he has planned, and when I don’t move, he hands me the piece of folded-up paper from the bucket.

*Drive across a lake.*



My stomach drops at the thought of what we're about to do. "Why did I have to get out of the truck for this?"

Deacon smiles when Mia slips out and throws the pile of blankets into the bed of the truck.

"You guys are crazy."

I know this is probably a ploy to get my mind off what happened earlier, and when Deacon shuffles to the end of the truck and drops the tailgate, I realize how much it's working. Even if it's only for a little bit, it's working.

Begrudgingly, I slide myself back on the tailgate and start spreading blankets out. Deacon scoots back, finding a comfortable spot, and pats the blanket beside him with a smile. Tyler shuts the gate to keep us from sliding to our icy death as I curl into Deacon's side and cover us in what's left of the blankets.

My stomach lurches when Tyler pulls down onto the lake. Deacon, feeling me stiffen, tightens his grip around me and kisses my temple.

"You're fine, pretty girl. I've got you."

I roll into him so I can be as close as possible and let the stress of everything evaporate into the cold night air. At least for now, he remembers me—he remembers us—so I force myself to live in the moment. Every creak, every groan, and every crack in the ice echoes around us at the truck moves across the lake, scaring the shit out of me.

Rolling his head back, Deacon lets out the loudest laugh I've heard in months before looking back at me.

"You're insane." I chuckle.

"You married me knowing this."

"And I'd do it again. In a hundred lifetimes, you'd get a hundred more yeses from me."

This—this moment right here where there is nothing but happiness between us—is what I want to remember.

Not the sickness.

Not the hurt.

Just this.

Just us.

Whether we have one more minute or a whole lifetime left, *this* is the



only thing that matters.





A towel cracks across my ass, making me yelp as I leap to get away from it. Deacon chuckles before dropping his weapon of choice and patting his lap.

“Something I can help you with?” I ask as I step between his thighs as he sits on the closed toilet seat. His shaky hands drag up my legs before lightly gripping my ass and massaging away the sting of what he just did.

With a deep breath, he meets my eyes. “I’m a little afraid I’m going to poke myself in the eyes with my toothbrush or cut myself with the razor today.”

This is the first time he has actually asked me for help so I try my hardest not to make a big deal out of it.

“Aw,” I joke. “You wanna be pretty for me?”

“I want to be everything you ever hoped for.”

I run his toothbrush under the water and grab a cup before settling on his thighs like he wanted. I manage to keep my feet under me so not all my weight is on him. The last thing we need right now is another hospital trip.

I kiss him, lingering against his lips for longer than necessary but I can’t pull away any faster than I do. I’m not sure if it’s because I can’t figure out what to say, or if it’s because I’m not sure how much longer I’m going to have



to do it, but my speechlessness doesn't go unnoticed.

I slip the toothbrush between his lips before he has a chance to question me and smile when his hands settle on my hips.

"Spit," I tell him, handing him the cup I grabbed.

When he hands it back, his eyes follow my every movement—almost as if he's trying to figure out what I'm doing. Plugging the sink, I fill it with hot water and spread shaving cream across his face.

My hand shakes as I reach for his face with the razor so I force myself to calm down. Reaching up, Deacon captures my wrist and pulls it into his lap before I have a chance to make a single swipe.

"What, baby?"

He looks at me and there's so much sadness there that I almost break. Tears burn the back of my throat and no amount of swallowing will force them back.

"I forget everything lately," he mutters. I nod and open my mouth to tell him it's okay, but he cuts me off by speaking before I can. "I forget what day it is, or how old I've gotten. I forget where the bedroom is and how to put my god damn socks on ... but you ... I never forget you. I know I forget sometimes that we're married but I never forget *you*. I never forget that I love you."

Not caring about the shaving cream, I kiss him again. I've done it a hundred times—forcing myself into the bathroom so I can kiss him in the middle of shaving—I only wish I could do it a thousand more.

"What was that for?"

I shrug. "I needed to kiss you."

"You're covered in shaving cream now." He wipes a little off, showing me his finger.

"I don't care. I needed to kiss you."

His eyes narrow and I can see the worry building behind them. "Why?"

I open my mouth without thinking about what I'm going to say.

"Because I wanted to."

A sad smile creeps across my face at the familiar words. This exact conversation happened in this exact spot before. Somehow we've managed to circle back to the first day I told him I loved him without even realizing it, and I know no matter what I'll always remember those memories when I'm



here.

“We’ve had a good run, haven’t we?”

I swallow around the lump in my throat, no longer caring that there are tears spilling down my face. Sliding my fingers around the back of his neck, I fiddle with the shaggy end of his hair. The way he’s been talking lately terrifies me to the core and I know I need to start preparing myself even if I’m not ready yet.

“The best, baby.” Truth be told, I couldn’t even imagine a better life than the one I had with him. Despite all the stupid fights we’ve had, all the heartache we’ve dealt with, and the fact that we’re being ripped apart far too soon, we’ve had a better life than I ever could have wished for. “The absolute best.”

I manage to somehow get through shaving his face without cutting him too badly and when I pull the towel away I find him smiling at me.

“Let’s go somewhere the world can’t touch us today.”

Reaching out, I grasp his hand and help him to his feet. I know exactly where he wants to go.

“Bonnie and Clyde style?” I laugh, but he shakes his head and smiles wider.

“Shay and Deacon style.”

“Even better.”



For hours we’ve been in the center of the trampoline surrounded by piles of snow doing nothing but staring at the sky under a mountain of blankets. Thankfully, today isn’t freezing so I don’t have to force him inside before he’s ready.

Sometimes I wonder when I became so soft, but then I realize it’s only with Deacon. I’m putty in his fragile fingers because I know our time is spent better doing anything but fighting.

Rolling in my direction, he uses a shaky hand to shift my hat higher on my head.



“You’re more beautiful today than the day you tried to run me over in the hall.”

I laugh and wipe a tear away. “God, I hope so. I was so beaten up that day.”

“I don’t know what I would’ve done all these years without you.”

I shake my head and as much as I want to get up and walk away, I can’t stop looking at him, and it hurts.

“You need to stop trying to tell me goodbye, Deacon. I’m not done with you yet.”

“I’m never actually gonna leave you, pretty girl.”

After a few more minutes of doing nothing but staring at me, Deacon forces himself to sit up and scoot toward the step-ladder I brought out so he could get up here. I jump over the side, steadying the ladder so he can get down without falling and when he finally has his footing, I reach to grab the mound of blankets.

*Turn around*, my mind screams, and the second I do, my heart lurches into my throat. The blankets get dropped to the ground, forgotten about in a layer of snow, and I dig my toes into the icy ground under me to gain traction.

“*Deacon*,” I scream as I race toward where he’s fallen on the stairs.

It seems like forever between the time I press the emergency button on the security alarm and the time the ambulance shows up.

The sound of sirens—ambulance sirens, at that—have put me on edge since the night of my accident. My stomach knots, my heart beats rapidly, and I can’t focus on anything but them. I chew on my bottom lip as they load Deacon in the back and the way it passes in front of me has me wondering for a second if I’m dreaming.

God, how I wish I was dreaming because wondering if this may be the last night I’ll ever spend at home with him has me ready to collapse, and it’s a shame that falling to my knees and begging wouldn’t fix this.

## Deacon

The familiar smell of antiseptic coupled with the steady sound of a heart monitor tell me I’m in trouble before I even have a chance to open my eyes. My head hurts, and when I reach to touch the tender spot, I’m met with a



bandage instead of skin.

Forcing my eyes open, I blink a few times before searching for Shay. As always, she's the first thing I seek out. She's the first thing I think about no matter what.

My fingers tighten around hers lightly so I don't disturb her where she's asleep, slumped over the side of the hospital bed.

A throat clearing from the other side of the bed gains my attention.

"You look like shit," I mumble, looking over Tyler's disheveled appearance. He laughs quietly, but it sounds empty as he runs his fingers through Mia's hair as she sleeps curled up in his lap.

"Damn, I got all dressed up for you too."

"A for effort," I whisper.

I try to keep up my spirits, but the truth is, it's exhausting. We both know I can't do this anymore and I've told them all I'm going out when I want to, not when this damn disease tells me I'm done.

I stare at Tyler, but he looks anywhere but back at me now. He knows what I want to talk to him about but he also knows I won't talk about it with Shay here. She's done too damn much for me to put her through that conversation. Plus, I know the second she starts to cry I'm going to change my mind.

I hate watching her cry, even more so when I'm the reason.

My body is ready, but my heart isn't—I doubt it ever will be. I'm ready to give in even though I'm nowhere near ready to leave her, but I know I can't keep living like this when I know it's only going to get worse.

"Hey." Shay yawns, dragging her fingers through her hair to pull it away from her face and stands up to kiss me. "How long have you been up?"

"Not long. A few minutes, maybe."

The dark circles under her eyes are evidence that she hasn't slept much since we got here. Hell, she hasn't slept much at all since I started falling apart.

"Want anything to eat?"

I nod, shifting my eyes back to Tyler. He knew as well as I did the second she woke up she would leave to get me something if I wanted it. I don't really want anything but her, but I need a few minutes to demand Tyler's cooperation without her presence begging me not to.



She steps away from me to leave but I capture her wrist and pull her back to me so I can kiss her. One last kiss before I make this monumental change she's going to hate me for.

"No," Tyler tells me, shaking his head the second the door closes behind Shay.

"You promised me when I was ready you'd help me."

"I can't do it, Deacon." He continues to shake his head. "I know I said when it was bad enough I'd help you, but I can't."

"I need to go out on my own terms. I need this to be over before I can't even remember who I am. I don't want that for Shay. I don't want that for you guys. I'm a product of this sickness; I've watched it through to the end, and I don't want that for any of you."

Mia reaches up and wipes her eyes before rolling and burying her face in Tyler's shirt, her body shaking as she quietly cries. I was so focused on the pain writing itself across his face that I hadn't realized she had woken up.

"It's bad enough waking up some mornings and having no clue where I am. I don't want to wake up and wonder who's sleeping next to me. I don't wanna taint her life more than I already have. I barely have any control over my body anymore." My breathing is harsh, harsher than it should be because I'm trying my hardest not to cry but it's so damn hard when I think about everything I'm going to be leaving behind. "Today is a good day but they're getting fewer and further between. I'm not leaving this hospital, Tyler, we both know it."

There's a brief second where he looks at me and he sees it. He sees all the pain and he knows how much the way I am is hurting everyone around me. He gets that I can't keep going like this; I can't put anyone through what I went through with my mother at the end.

He drives the heels of his hands into his eyes and hides behind them for a few seconds. With a harsh breath, he shifts out from under Mia's head and leaves the room. From where I sit in my bed I can see him shifting through papers at the nurses' station before he sadly shakes his head and steps back into my room.

"Please don't hate me," I mutter when he reaches over me and pins the paper to the board on the wall.

Tyler leans against the safety rail and his knuckles whiten as his grip tightens.

"I don't hate you, Deacon. I'm just wondering if I'm going to hate



myself when we actually do this.”

That makes me feel like shit, but I know he didn’t mean for it to, so I don’t say anything. I rest back against the pillow when a rush of morphine hits me, making it hard for me to keep my eyes open.

I never wanted pain medication to begin with. I wanted to feel everything until I couldn’t feel anything at all, but it got too intense for me to handle and now it’s my savior.

I know when Shay steps back into the room. The energy changes; it charges like it has since the first second I met her. I force my eyes to open, but when I look at her she isn’t looking at me; she’s looking at the damn sheet of paper above my head, so like a coward, I close them again so I can’t see the pain on her face.

The edge of my bed dips, and she silently climbs up next to me, shifting so she’s tucked into my side where she belongs. I know she’s trying to pretend to be strong, but when she hides her face, I feel her tears seep through my shirt.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble through drug-heavy lips.

Her fingers trace over my chest, coming to a rest over my heart and I sigh at her touch.

“Why?” She sniffles.

*Why? Because I can’t do this anymore. Because I just want to be better but I know that will never happen. Because I want to grow old with her, not be like this before my time.*

“I wasn’t supposed to fall in love with you,” I tell her instead of telling her everything going on inside my head.

“What were you supposed to do?”

“I don’t know, but it damn sure wasn’t this. You told me not to do it.”

“And look at that ... neither one of us listened to my crazy ass back then and look where we ended up. So in love that nothing could break us.”

Her fingers shift to trace over my face. It’s almost as if she’s trying to memorize the way I look, I just wish she had done this months ago when there was more to me than skin and bones.

I would reach up and do the same thing to her if I could get my body to cooperate, but all I can do is lie here and feel her skin on mine. I make a mental note to do the same thing to her the next time I can function.



Fuck, I can't even get my eyes to open and all I want to do is look at her. She's the only thing right now that gives me any hope even though I know there isn't any. She's my ray of light that tells me the storm won't last forever.

Things may not end the way either of us want them to, but knowing I had the chance to love her for any amount of time in my short life makes everything worth it.

Cheek bone, eyebrow, forehead, nose, lips, chin, and around again on the opposite side. Feeling her touch me, listening to her breathe even though I can tell she's trying not to cry, knowing she's close to me even when she doesn't need to be—it brings me peace.

As hard as it is to know I would never see her again or touch her, that I would never be able to breathe her in again, this is all I need.

Right here.

Right now.

I'd be fine if this was the last thing I ever did. If I could only get my eyes to open so I could look at her.





The first thing I noticed when I walked back into the room this morning was the shift in the mood. What is normally comforting was now cold. I could tell both Deacon and Tyler had been crying even though Deacon looked like he was almost asleep, and Mia ... Well, Mia was still a hot mess.

The second was that the letters DNR were plastered above the head of Deacon's bed.

That piece of paper explained the mood in the room without me having to ask any questions. So I did the only thing I could think of that didn't involve me breaking down and begging him to change his mind—I crawled into bed next to him. There won't be many chances left for moments like this and that sends an ache through my chest that there's no way to fix.

I want to beg him not to leave me, but I can't; it wouldn't be fair. Not to him, and not to myself, because I know it hurts him as much to stay as it hurts me to know he's not going to be here anymore.

So, instead of begging because it will do neither of us any good, I kiss him gently. I promise to love him forever in a whisper, and I rest my head against his shoulder, hoping that even though he's asleep and heavily medicated, he will still hear me.

And as I lie here, wondering how I'm going to make it through every day



without him smiling and telling me he loves me, his fingers tighten around mine.

While the nurses would probably tell me it's an involuntary twitch, I know it was a return gesture of my "I love you", and I smile against his cheek.

I know after he's gone I may no longer hear the words but I know, with every beat of the heart he loved through two women, I'll feel it forever.

And I know this time when I return home to an empty house the silence will not be daunting and I won't suffocate in loneliness.

It will hold joy.

It will be full of the laughter we created.

It is, and will always be, full of love.

Because of Deacon.



They moved us to a bigger room last night and the permanent feeling of Deacon leaving me settled more in my chest—we're not leaving here. More space means more privacy to grieve when he finally leaves us. He's so heavily medicated now that I only get brief moments with him, and soon I know there won't be any at all.

Letting go of Deacon's hand while they moved him was hard, harder because his grip tightened when they tried to separate us. It wasn't until I told him I was still right beside him that he relaxed a bit and I could pull my hand from him. Keeping my voice strong for him was harder than not crying.

The second they had him situated in the new room, I grabbed his hand again and plopped down in the chair next to his bed.

Being here—in the hospital he spent all the years he could working—means everyone knows him. It means everyone knows he won't be here much longer so they're all stopping by the room to say goodbye. Whether they simply pop their head through the door or they stay for a while, it's all awkward. There's no way saying a permanent goodbye could be anything but.

Tyler and Mia haven't left at all, and while I'm thankful, I feel as if I'm



constantly being watched other than when they finally fall asleep.

I know he asked Tyler to help him along even though neither of them will admit to it. The awkward way Tyler has acted since I came back into the room the other day tells me everything I need to know.

While part of me is angry as hell that he would help him leave us before he actually needs to, the part that loves Deacon so much that watching him like this physically hurts, loves him for it.

"Pretty girl," I hear Deacon mumble, and my eyes snap open. The light filtering through the small window in the door illuminates the room enough to see that his glassy eyes are open just a bit and looking at me.

"There you are," I whisper back, pressing my lips against the paper-thin skin on the back of his hand.

"I'm gonna miss you."

"Me too, baby."

His eyes drift closed, and for a second, the room is quiet again, making me believe he's fallen back into his drug-aided sleep, but I'm wrong. Just when I think it's safe to let the emotion clogging my throat out, he speaks again.

"Wanna know what I'm gonna miss the most?"

My mind goes straight to the gutter because he's told me this before but he rips me away from it quicker than ever.

"Your singing."

I laugh through the tears that have officially decided to riot against me.

"My singing is terrible; it's nothing to miss."

The corner of his mouth turns up as he chuckles.

"It's horrible, you're right, but it's the best sound in the world to me."

I push the hair off his face and settle my fingers against his check, feeling his slow breathing against my wrist while he's quiet. Shifting his arm over his chest, he presses something into my hand, and when I look down and see a four-leaf clover dangling from a chain, it's harder than ever not to cry.

"Don't do anything stupid without me, okay?"

"I make no promises but I'll try. It'll be different this time. I know that every night when I close my eyes and sleep, you'll be there. You'll flood my memories; you'll hold me in my dreams. Because even though you're no



longer here, you'll never actually be gone."

"Love you," he murmurs.

"I love you too, baby. I'll see you."

"See you, pretty girl."



With my eyes closed, I arch my back and try to pop it but it doesn't work. I've been sitting in the same spot, in the same position, for three full days. I've only gotten up a few times, and that was just so I could use the bathroom. Other than that, I've sat right here with my fingers intertwined with Deacon's.

I can't bear the thought of letting go just yet because I'm uncomfortable.

"Have you moved since the last time I was here?"

I crack my eye open when I hear my father's voice and smile.

"Nope." I squeeze Deacon's hand a little tighter at the thought of letting go at all. I know I'm going to have to let go completely soon enough, but Tyler told me that we could wait until I was ready.

If we did that, I'd never leave this chair.

While the days have been dragging, they're moving faster than I want them to, and I'm nowhere near ready to be done.

"Have you slept at all?" he asks, moving further into the room. Thankfully, he doesn't ask how I'm doing because I *hate* that. If I talk about how I'm feeling, I'm going to break.

He hands me a bag, and one-handedly I haul out a bottle of Coke and a sandwich. He doesn't even know if I've eaten, but that didn't stop him from bringing me something. It's how he's always been, and I love him for it. He's always told me that if he has it, it's mine.

"Not much. It's hard to sleep sitting up."

"Are you kidding me?" Tyler laughs from the corner and my father joins in.

Leaning down, my father slides his hand between the side of my chair



and my thigh before hitting a lever I didn't know was there. The footrest kicks out and the back slides back a bit, making me feel like an idiot.

"Shut up," I mutter, laughing when they both laugh harder. It feels good to laugh even if it makes me feel a bit guilty. "Both of you can go to hell. I've literally sat here for three days and neither of you said anything about it reclining until now. Bastards ..."

I look over in Deacon's direction, and my laughter dies a bit.

*Just one more night*, I promise myself. I just want to sleep next to my husband one more time before I never have the chance to do it again.



"Can you guys give me a minute alone?"

Without saying anything, the room empties and the door closes, leaving me alone and the silence around is deafening. For days I've been surrounded by anywhere from two to eight people that have managed to fill what should've been a silent, sorrow-filled room with laughter. They've managed to keep the tears away, but now I know that it's time to let go, and I need to do that alone.

I settle back into the chair that I've been in for the past four days. The same damn chair I slept in sitting up because I couldn't figure it out and I have to laugh at it because after all my years in a hospital I should know how to operate the damn chairs.

My eyes drag from where our fingers are still laced together to his face, and if I didn't know better—if I didn't know this is my last moment with him—I'd think he was sleeping.

"You'd probably tell me I'm an idiot right now for talking to you when you can't talk back because you'd have an answer to everything I'm going to say, but you can't and I'm going to take advantage of the first half a second I've had alone since you got here. Don't get me wrong, I love them, but I feel like they're waiting around to catch me when I break. But I don't know when that's going to be. I guess I've been breaking—silently grieving—since the day you started to show symptoms. Maybe even the day I found out. I've



prepared myself for this moment right here for the past ten years but I never thought it could hurt so much knowing it was coming. I hate to say it, but the sudden impact on my heart when Ethan died was a hell of a lot easier than the drawn-out feeling of it shattering more every day over these past few years.”

I breathe through the need to cry because that’s not what I want to do right now. I want one brief moment to talk to my husband without thinking I’m going to break down, but it’s hard knowing I’m so close to that happening.

“I could probably tell you all the corny things you’d see in the movies right now. Shit like I should’ve found you sooner so I could love you longer. Except I don’t think that would’ve worked for us. I don’t think if I had met you even a second before I did that we would’ve ended up together. Not like this. I don’t think I would’ve loved you the way I do if we had met differently. You saved me that day—from falling on my face, from making a fool of myself, from getting hurt more than I already was—and you’ve continued to save me every day since then. You saved me from putting my life on the line with every fight. I know you think I stopped fighting because you yelled at me for taking my heart for granted because it was Christine’s, but I didn’t. I stopped fighting because loving you and having you love me in return was more important than releasing my emotions like that. You taught me how to get it out differently without even knowing it. And I could tell you every reason I love you but we’d be here forever and you already know I love you. So I’ll tell you a few things you may not know instead.”

“You pissed me off. A lot. At times you infuriated me so much that I wanted to scream at you, but I didn’t because our time was better spent not fighting. All those times you told me I better be watching your ass and not your feet, I lied when I said I was. Your ass is nice but I’d rather catch you if you were to fall like you would do for me. I loved you more in the moments when you were a smartass than when you were romantic. I lied a lot; to your face, too. Like when I told you I wouldn’t regret a second of what we went through in our relationship. That was a lie. I regret telling you not to fall in love with me. I regret us spending so much time fighting to keep our distance at the beginning. I lied when I told you I no longer felt responsible for the crash that killed Ethan and Christine because even though I know it wasn’t really my fault, a part of me will always feel like it was.”

Tyler knocks on the door, poking his head in, but I hold up my finger, letting him know I need another minute. He’s not rushing me because neither of us want this to happen at all but we both know it needs to.

My gaze shifts back to where it was, and I force air into my burning lungs.



“I could tell you that I’m going to be okay, but I won’t be. It would be another lie and I don’t wanna go out on a lie. I’m afraid because I know sometime down the road I’m going to wake up and I’m not going to remember the sound of your voice or the way you smelled. I’m not going to be able to feel your fingers on my skin anymore. I don’t want to go back to feeling broken, but without you I will be—I’ll be that girl with the stone-cold eyes again. And I know it’s never going to get better because it hasn’t gotten better without Ethan, so how am I supposed to deal with missing both of you for the rest of my life? Who am I supposed to run to when life gets to be too much without you here? I don’t know how to be me without you anymore. I don’t know who I am without loving you, and I love you more than anything and that’s why I’m stalling because I know as soon as I let Tyler back in the room, this is over. You’ll be gone and I’ll still be here and I don’t know if I can handle that you won’t be a phone call or a car ride away anymore. Or that I won’t wake up and see you anymore. I don’t want to miss you more than I already do. I don’t want this to be over with. Loving you is the hardest thing I’ve ever willingly put myself through but I would do it a thousand times over again just for one more second with you actually here.”

By the time I’m done talking—knowing that all my questions will remain unanswered forever—I can barely breathe and everything is a blurry mess through the tears burning my eyes. No matter how hard I beg myself to keep it together, I can’t. I’m breaking just knowing he won’t be here when I wake up in the morning.

I stand and lean over the bed, resting my lips against his one more time before shifting and pressing them against his temple. My tears drip off the end of my nose and run down the side of his face but I don’t wipe them away anymore.

It’s amazing how hard getting one word out can be—a word that is so horrible that people beg you not to say it. It’s hard because in some instances, that one excruciatingly hard word is all it takes to set someone free.

That, despite how absolutely terrifying, despite how heartbreaking and how hard ... is beautiful.

And that word is, “Goodbye.”

I grab the photo we took the day he woke up, and while it’s sad knowing it’s the last picture I’ll ever take with Deacon, it’s happy. We both somehow knew he wouldn’t be in pain much longer, and you can see it on our faces.

Letting go of Deacon’s hand for the final time nearly cripples me and sends me to my knees, but something keeps me upright. In a moment where I wish my heart would stop beating all together, it pounds stronger against the



inside of my chest. One would think after fourteen years of being inside of me we would be on the same page, but sometimes it still beats as if it still belongs to someone else.

My fingers settle on the door handle, and it takes everything in me not to turn around and change my mind. Instead, I force myself to open the door and step into the hallway full of people waiting for me. All sad, all hesitant to say anything to me, but all still there to catch me if I fall.

Tyler steps toward me, but I can't look at him knowing what he's about to do. It isn't that I hate him for it, but I don't want to know how much he's hurting because of it. It may be selfish, but for a few seconds I need to hurt by myself.

His arms surround me in an awkward, sideways hug and I make myself stand there and accept it for a second rather than fight the affection. His forehead presses against my temple and the hitch in his breathing defies the strength he's trying to exude.

"Promise me you won't hate me forever," he whispers but I can't respond. I want to promise him that but I can't get my voice to work so I grab his wrist and squeeze before shifting out of his grip.

I push past Mia, August, Ava, and Jackson. I walk past my parents who have been here longer than I realized. I ignore looks from nurses and doctors that know what is going on and I head for the elevator.

"Shay," Jackson barks from behind me. I pause in the middle of the hallway and wait for whatever he is going to say even though I want to run. I hear his footsteps fall harshly against the tile until he's close enough that he doesn't need to yell anymore. "Don't push us away this time. Where are you going that's more important than this?"

"I promise I'm not pushing you away again," I whisper. "But right now I need to be somewhere where I can remember being happy with him so I'm going to the roof."

He lets me go, and I take the elevator to the top floor before sneaking through the access door. The cold rush of the morning air hits me the second I step outside, and I breathe it in, trying to cool off the feeling of my lungs burning from crying.

It's different being up here without Deacon but I feel like it's right where I need to be. Standing in the middle, I turn in circles, watching the memories of the times we snuck up here play out like a movie in front of me before sitting down and lying back. The weight of everything happening settles on my chest as I lie in silence and watch the sky wake up.



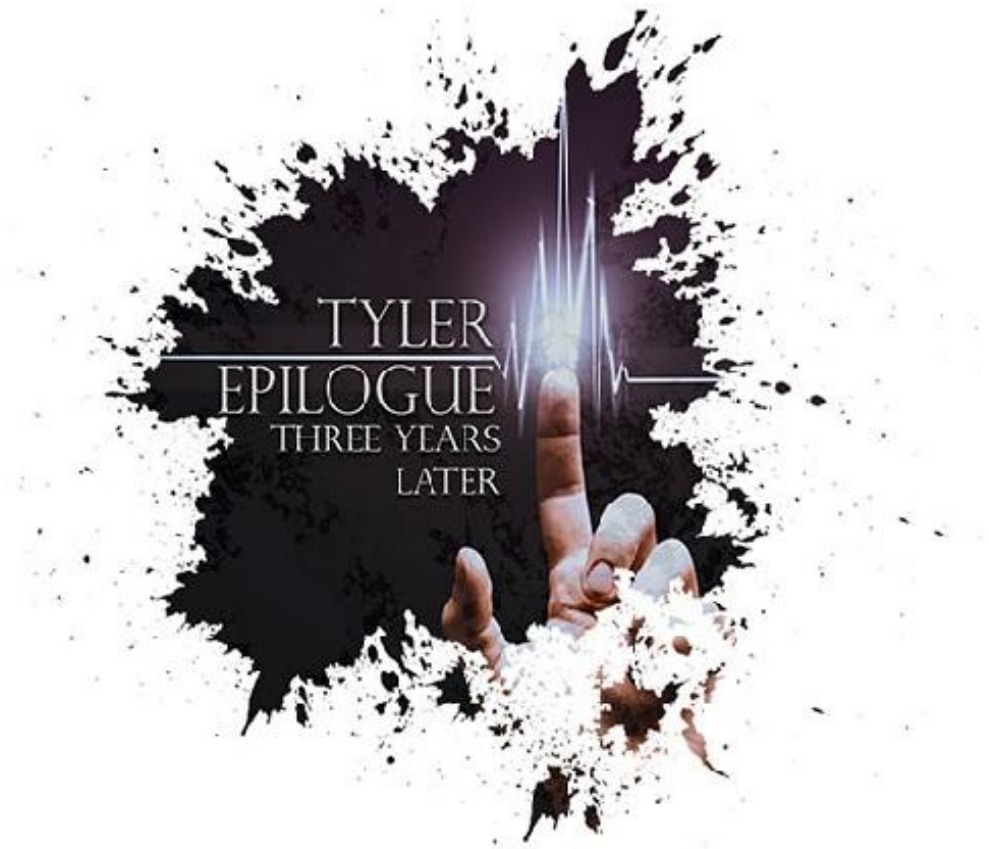
I know the second the door opens he's actually going to be gone and I know I won't be alone up here long. I can feel myself begin to break when it finally happens but the second everyone starts to lie down beside me, I no longer feel the need to fall apart just yet. The fact that I'm surrounded by strength makes me feel a bit stronger. Even if it is only for the moment.

"Now what?" Tyler mutters, squeezing my hand.

My head rolls to the side, and I let silent tears roll without hesitation.

"Now?" I smile slightly. "Now we move forward like he told us to. Now I finish the bucket list like he wanted me to and we try to be as happy as we can be. That's what we do now."





Mia pokes her head through the doorway and smiles brightly. It took a while to get that smile back after Deacon died and Shay decided to take off for a while, but tonight it's there and it's strong.

"Ready?"

I take one more look at the photo of the five of us the day that our daughter, Ellie, was born before shifting to shut off the light on my desk.

*How the hell has it been three years?*

That seems to be a question I've asked myself way too many times since I became a doctor, more so since I became friends with Deacon. It's really too bad that I couldn't be an asshole and hate everyone so it wouldn't faze me when they died.

Unfortunately, my heart isn't made of stone and I break like any other person would. My heart broke when Christine died, and it shattered when I lost my best friend.

I'm lucky to have Mia and our daughter to keep me grounded.

I stand and slide my arms around Mia's waist before kissing her. "Yes, ma'am. Take me home."

"Change of plans, actually."



My eyebrow pulls up as I wait for her to continue, but she doesn't so I decide I better not ask. Sometimes things are better when they're surprises.

She waits patiently as I lock my office door and with a bright smile on her face she grabs my hand while Ellie grabs the other. This is all I've ever wanted—contentment—and I find it every time I escape with the women I love.

After stepping out of the elevator doors on the ground floor, Mia pulls me to a stop just in time to see Shay trip over the rug inside the main doors. She tumbles head first into the arms of my new patient that transferred in from Boston a few weeks ago.

My new patient that has Deacon's heart, and I'm transported back fourteen years to when this happened the first time.

When Mia squeezes my hand, I look down to find her bouncing on her toes in excitement.

I can't help but laugh as I watch Shay and Ryan talk quietly, his hand still holding her elbow like he's afraid she's going to fall again. I've heard the story of how Deacon and Shay actually met more times than I can count and I somehow know exactly where this is heading.

I never believed in destiny until Shay and Deacon. I always figured that things happened just because they happen, but I guess when two hearts are meant to be together, destiny will take extreme measures.

"Aunt Shay," Ellie finally breaks her silence with a yell and sprints forward, slamming directly into her.

Ryan walks away with a nod in my direction, telling Shay that he'll see her around. And he will. I'm sure of it.

"Did you know she was coming home?" I ask as Mia practically drags me across the lobby.

"I may have had an idea that she'd be here at the exact time your shift ended."

"Sneaky bitches," I mutter.

She smirks back at me before letting go of my hand and wrapping herself around Shay.

Shay's eyes meet mine over Mia's shoulder and they crinkle at the corners from her smile. When she pulls away from Mia, she stands awkwardly in front of me.



“It’s about time you finally came home.”

It’s been almost three years since she left, so ignoring the awkwardness on her part, I grab her arm and pull her against me. She promised me she wouldn’t hate me after what I did for Deacon, so I’m not about to let things be weird.

“It took me a while, but I’m finally home for good.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She pulls away from me. “I finished the rest like I promised Deacon I would and I found his two cents at the bottom of the bucket.”

“His what?” It doesn’t go unnoticed that she didn’t retreat away from Deacon’s name like she used to when she would talk about Ethan.

“His two cents.” She laughs. “I gave him two pennies the first time we were both at your house and he kept them. But this time they were wrapped in something he wanted me to do.”

“Do I even want to know?”

Hauling a strip of paper from her pocket, she hands it over to me.

I can tell the folded strip has the pennies in it like she said it did and the outside has one word on it. *Last*.

I unfold it carefully so I don’t rip it apart.

*1.Go home.*

*2.Be happy.*

*3.Fall in love again.*

“I can’t guarantee the last one, but I’m trying my best.” I hand the paper back to her and drag her back into my arms.

“How have you been?” I mutter against the top of her head.

She pulls back so she can look at my face but doesn’t shift out of my embrace and nods with a smile.

“Good. As odd as that may be for me, I’ve been really good. Happy, even.”

**The End**



If you don't think this is a happy ending, I don't think you've been paying attention.

Please be sure to read the letter from the author starting on the next page and excuse the word vomit.



# Letter from the Author

Dear Reader,

You either managed to finish my book and decided to continue on with reading this or jumped straight to the back. Either way, thank you for continuing because there are a few things that probably need to be gone over and a few questions that need to be answered. That's why I'm writing this.

Over the years, before starting to write and after, I've been asked one question over and over again. So I figured it was time to break down and tell you.

I've been asked so many times how I got to be the way I am. Whether it's emotionless, or heartless, heartbroken, or hard—whatever you see when you picture me. Hopefully, it's none since I try so hard to fake my way into being the happy person I pretend to be.

So I wrote this book. The most heartbreaking parts of my life ... broken down into sixty-thousand words. It should've been more, but even these sixty-thousand words crushed me.

I won't lie, I've always put pieces of myself into what I write, sometimes without even realizing it until someone that knows me points it out.

This, however, is the first time that I've actually laid it all out on the line for everyone.

People say that in order to heal—to move past whatever you are grieving—you have to talk about it. I think that's a lie. A huge, shit-covered lie, but hey, that's just me.

I spent thirteen years of my life trying to adjust to the sadness that surrounded me after my older brother committed suicide, only to have to start over again when my oldest brother passed away after being sick in 2012.

While everyone around me dealt with their sadness by talking about it, by trying to move past it, by letting it out, I shut myself off.

The words 'I'm fine', and forced smiles became who I was, who I wanted people to see. Somewhere along the line they eventually became less forced and less fake, but I'm not quite sure when.

I'm not sure I'll ever know.

A few years ago, I decided to start writing. It was right after the death of



my second brother and I couldn't figure out how to shut my mind off after everything we had been through, so I put it to use instead. Tiny bits and pieces of me went into each book that I published, but it wasn't until *American Made* that I decided to actually open up. I poured my heart and soul into that book, nowhere near what I did in this one, but enough to hurt. The few people that know about my past immediately picked up on how much of myself I let out while writing A.M. and this book and I'd be lying if I said that knowing people have that part of me doesn't scare me. Because it does.

I think it always will.

Every day I wake up petrified that someone is going to see through the façade that I put on and call me out on it. I'm scared to death to be thrust into the reality that is my life.

I'd also be lying if I said I'm fine, or that it helped, now that I opened up.

I'm fucking *broken*.

Writing about what I've been through has crushed me beyond anything I ever could have imagined. Without a doubt, if I could, I would shove those feelings back inside and never let them see the light of day.

But you can't take back what happens in life. What's done is done. Sometimes you're handed a shitty card and can only try to make it better. Sometimes you have the best hand dealt to you and you still manage to lose it all.

It's all in how you handle yourself.

Sometimes becoming a heartless asshole is what it takes to get by without crumbling.

Now, after finding out that I was writing this book and putting so much of myself into it, a lot of people have asked me what parts are actually true ... so I'm going to try to tell you.

Bear with me, I had to change some details in the actual book to keep some semblance of sanity over here.

Shay's mind and thoughts are pretty much me. I either shut down and refuse to think, or I scream my thoughts so they can't taunt at me while I lie awake in the dark. I'm petrified to have children because there is a chance to pass along what my brother had. And like her, I lose myself in music and don't care if my singing is horrible, I'm going to do it anyway.

As I said before, I lost my brother Jesse suddenly, but it wasn't a car accident like Ethan.



The part where Deacon wishes he could go back and make Christine stay in bed, well, that's where I wish I could go back and stay inside. Maybe if I had, I would've had at least another day with my brother. The way Shay feels about Ethan's death being her fault is the same way I feel about Jesse's. You can tell me it wasn't, I'll tell you I know, and I'll turn around and believe the same thing that I've thought for the past seventeen years. Just like everyone else in his life.

I hate being told that it's going to be okay. You don't know that and quite possibly, it could get worse.

I hate when people ask me how I am. My response in my head will always be different from the one I speak out loud. My silent response is "shitty", while my spoken one will normally be "fine".

*"You don't get to pick and choose your moments in my life and think that will make up for all the shitty things you've done."*

I've said this on more than one occasion. I've probably said it more times in my head than out loud because I'd rather hide in the background in my real life than anything, but it has been said out loud before.

Yes, I do have a friend like August that helps me through whatever I go through. Everyone should have a friend like August.

As for Deacon, he's Adam. Some of you are going to pull back and wonder what the hell I was smoking when I decided to write what I went through with him as the boyfriend/husband, but I promise I'm not crazy, I just couldn't write it as another brother.

It was too hard. It hit too close. I broke and cried enough writing it the way I did.

Deacon died of Huntington's, a genetic disease.

Adam died a few years after his bone marrow transplant from Dyskeratosis Congenita, a genetic disease.

The cocky joking and smartass remarks ... that's him—that's us. Even toward the end he was still like that. The tattoo on his calf of Foghorn Leghorn was a running joke, in life both inside and out of the hospitals. I'm pretty sure that every nurse and doctor in every hospital he ever stayed in needed to "check his legs" just so they could get a good laugh.

It didn't take me three years to clean out my brother's bedroom. It took me three months with Adam but if I could have left it, it would still look the same as it did the day he died. Nothing got moved in that time despite how many times I was in there. The huge bag of socks stayed on the floor in front



of the dresser. His guns stayed on the racks. His hats hung wherever he left them. All untouched for as long as possible.

The contents of Shay's fridge were what mine were for longer than I care to admit because doctors' appointments and hospital trips were more important than buying groceries. For nearly four years, usually twice a week, Adam and I would pack up and make the four-hour trip to Boston just so he could see a doctor for a few minutes, only to turn around and drive the four hours home.

After everything, he was my best friend.

I can't hear either of their voices anymore, and that kills me every day.

I have moments when it hurts to look at them so I flip their photos down because I know it would hurt more to put them away.

The scar on Shay's forehead recedes into my hairline, and all the other stupid scars that litter my body were probably because I was trying to be one of the boys.

If you follow me on Facebook and saw my #perfectlyimperfect day post, you've already read the majority of Shay's speech to Deacon the first time she kisses him. That's me. All me.

I don't remember how to actually be happy because I've been heartbroken and faking it for so long. But I never cry, not until I started writing this at least. Now that seems to be the only thing I know how to do correctly.

I don't think that your family is the one you're born into or blood-related with. I think it's who you choose and who willingly stands beside you through absolutely everything.

Shay's house is an actual house near me. My family takes care of it for the owner when he isn't around. It's my dream place.

I am Butterball, and the toast she gives is one that was always said when I was drinking with Adam in the same room.

I guess for the most part, there are bits and pieces of me throughout the entire thing, but when you get to the end—when you get to part two—that's where it hits hard.

I was there when my brother decided that he didn't want to do it anymore. I watched him line up bottles of pain meds more times than anyone knows about. I begged and I screamed and I fought to make him keep going ... partly because I was selfish and wasn't ready to let go.



I beat the hell out of my hood the first time he decided he didn't want to do it anymore. And when he asked me why I was doing it, my exact words were "Because I can't hit you."

*Drive across a lake.* This actually happened and being on a frozen lake in the middle of the night in the back of the truck is probably the scariest thing ever. You should do it ... just make sure the ice is thick enough.

The four-leaf clover necklace is real. Adam gave it to me three days before he was admitted into the hospital the last time.

Trying not to cry when I said goodbye to my brother the last night he was awake is by far the hardest thing I'll ever do. For over twenty years, I remember Adam telling me he loved me once—the night Jesse died—but after he got sick, I heard it every time I left him alone in a hospital room.

The hospital chair that Shay sits in while holding Deacon's hand. The one she didn't know reclined for four days ... yeah, I'm pretty sure my body still hates me for that. After spending so much time in and out of hospitals you would think I would know how to work the damn chairs. I even had a conversation with him when I knew he couldn't answer me. I told him everything I had ever kept from him.

It was harder than I ever could've imagined.

And I walked away before he was gone because I couldn't watch my best friend suffer anymore. I couldn't continue to listen to his lungs rattle with every breath. I needed a few more minutes to imagine that he was coming home even though I knew that it would never be possible.

So yes, when I say I put myself into this book and that it broke me, I'm telling the truth.

I've been through the sudden impact death when Jesse died, and I've went through the long, drawn out death with Adam after being sick for four years.

I don't wish either on anyone, but they made me ... me. Sometimes I feel heartless, or I lack emotion, I rarely cry, and I crack jokes at the most inopportune times.

But that's me.

It's how I deal with things.

Our conversations still play out in my head as if they're happening all over again, and I wish nothing more than that they could. I'd give anything—I'd give up everything—just for another day. But at the same time, I don't want more days because I know how much it hurt to lose them the first time



and I don't want to go through that all over again. I don't think I could survive doing it again.

My two younger brothers are what keep me going. Any stupid thought I have of walking away from this life before my time are pushed away at the thought of putting them through what we've been through twice already again.

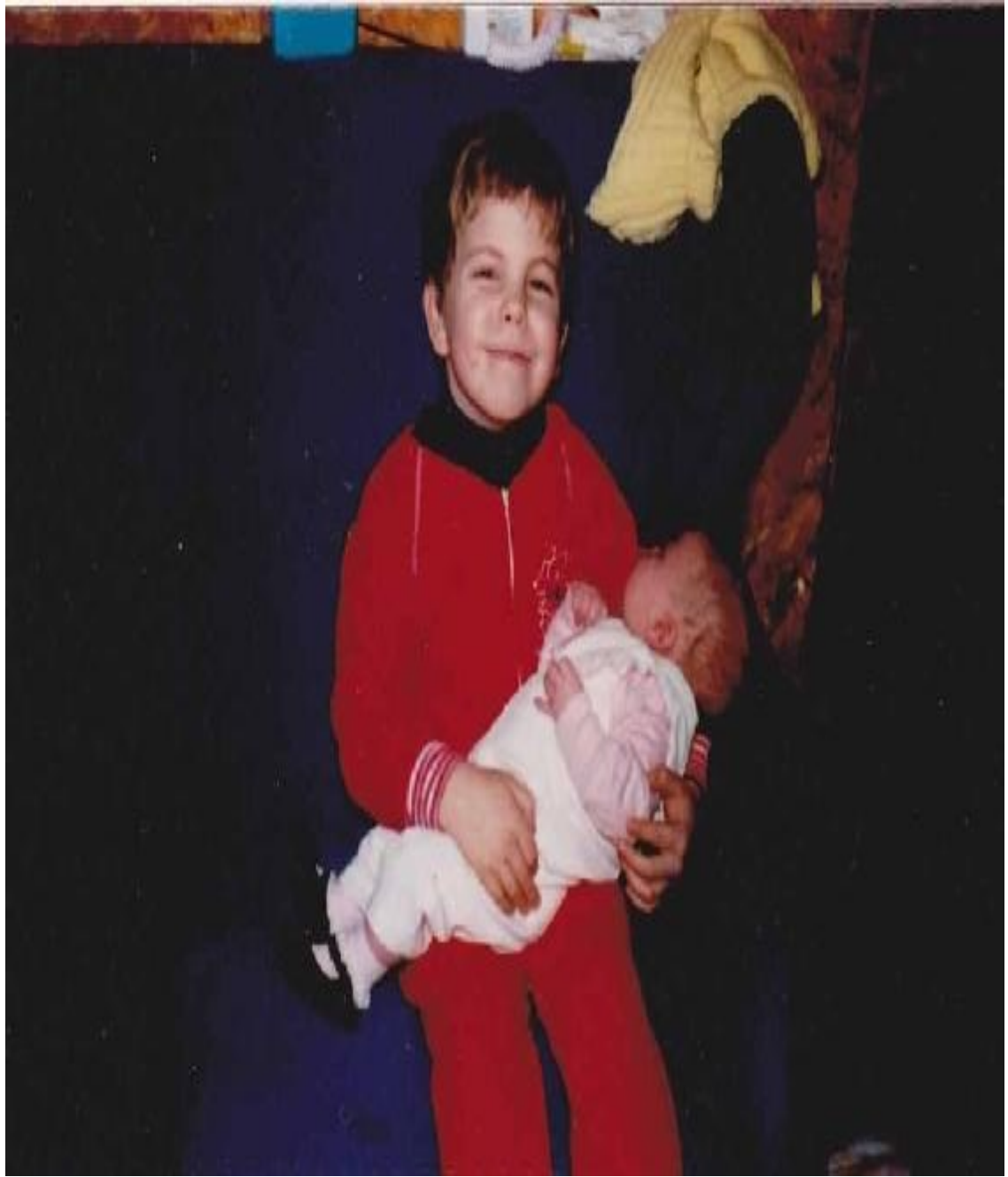
You may see me as emotionless, or heartless, heartbroken, or hard, or whatever else—but don't worry, because every time I look in the mirror, I see all those things too. Most of the time I'd rather be the emotionless asshole that I've become because things are easier that way.

All I can do is take it one breath at a time and try to stop hiding in plain sight.

And this right here, as hard as it may be, is my first breath.

Love,  
Kathryn Kiden













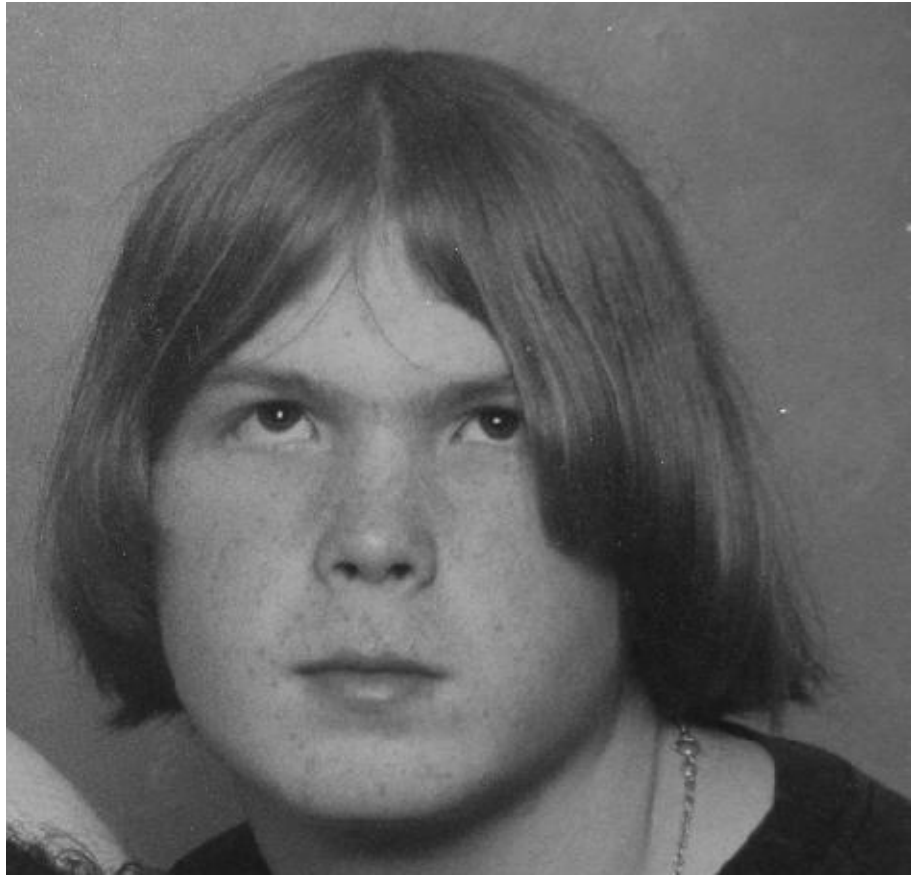








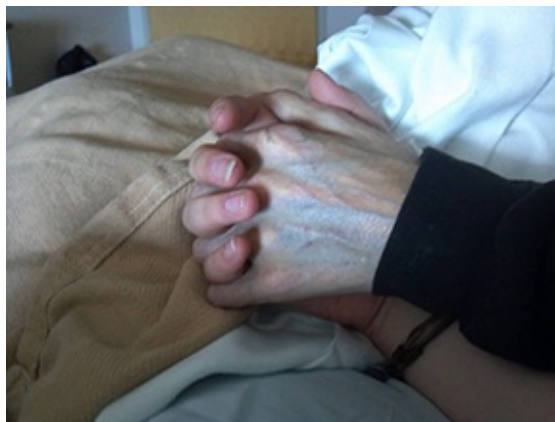




















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