

*How do you survive
when your best friend
takes his own life?*

EFALL

AMBER THIELMAN

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If I Fall
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IF I FALL

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Acknowledgments

About the Author

God, but life is loneliness, despite all the opiates, despite the shrill tinsel gaiety of ‘parties’ with no purpose, despite the false grinning faces we all wear. And when at last you find someone to whom you feel you can pour out your soul, you stop in shock at the words you utter—they are so rusty, so ugly, so meaningless and feeble from being kept in the small cramped dark inside you so long. Yes, there is joy, fulfillment, and companionship—but the loneliness of the soul in its appalling self-consciousness is horrible and overpowering. ~ Sylvia Plath

ONE

March 31, 2018

“Khloe, your phone. It’s ringing.”

My eyes flickered open. I didn’t move, and instead, let my gaze flash around the room. I lay there for another moment under the comforter, motionless and silent, still half-asleep. The air in the room was stale and smelled sour with stifling heat and sweat. My head swam with dizziness, much like it had before I fell asleep, and my stomach churned from the aftereffects of booze and weed.

“Khloe,” the voice said again. I closed my eyes. Maybe if I ignored it, it would stop talking.

The tiny silver cell phone sitting on the dresser next to my bed was nothing short of deceiving. The catchy tune I had momentarily listened to on repeat, now made my eardrums want to explode. How could something so loud and annoying come from something so small and fragile?

“Khloe, answer the fucking phone!”

The male specimen lying next to me sat up, reached across, and plucked the phone from the dresser before tossing it near my head. It was still going off, shrill and violating. Christ. Why hadn’t the person hung up yet? Still groggy, I grabbed the phone and looked at the screen, swiping my finger over the screen before putting it to my ear.

“Carter?” My throat was raw and scratchy and tasted like bile. I cleared it and winced. “What are you doing? It’s four in the morning.”

For a moment, there was silence. An eerie and unnatural silence that made my heart thump against my insides like steel drums. My throat tightened.

“Carter?”

“Hey, Khloe.”

My best friend’s voice was different—quiet, almost poignant. I rubbed my face and kicked the covers off, sliding my feet into a pair of slippers. I padded down the hallway to the bathroom so I wouldn’t wake up the guy who was asleep again and probably drooling on my pillow. I made a mental note to wash it tomorrow if I wasn’t too hungover to function.

“What’s up?” I asked, shutting the bathroom door behind me. “Is everything okay?”

Another long silence cocooned me. I could barely hear him breathe.

“Are you with anyone?”

“Just some guy I met at work tonight. But I’m in another room. It’s all right.” I ran a hand through my tangled brown hair, trying to recall the last time I’d taken a shower and washed it. At this rate, dreadlocks would be my next fashion statement.

“What did I tell you about sleeping with losers you meet at the club?”

“Oh, relax.” I leaned over the sink to survey the mascara stains under my eyelids. I looked like a harlot. “He’ll be gone by morning. You’re going to worry yourself to death. Besides, there’s nothing wrong with scoring free drinks all night.”

“You’re only eighteen,” Carter said. “You’re supposed to be a server. You’ll get fired if you keep it up.” He sighed, and silence led again. I waited for him to say something else, but he didn’t.

“Carter?”

“I’m here.” His voice washed with sleepiness—groggy—as though he were in and out of some dream world. My fingers tightened around the cell phone in my hand until my knuckles ached. “Besides, Ava needs to stop sneaking you booze. She’s a bad influence.”

“That’s beside the point.”

Another long silence greeted me, but I didn’t push it, just waited for him to talk. Sometimes that was all you could do.

“I care about you, you know,” Carter said after a full forty-five seconds. “And you have a habit of doing reckless... things.”

“Only to push your buttons.” I took a seat on the edge of the bathtub and crossed my legs, scanning the mysterious bumps and bruises up and down my skin. Blackout nights and perplexing injuries were not new to me, but they were puzzling, nonetheless.

“It’s not funny.” His voice tightened. I paused, startled by the sudden anger in his tone. Carter rarely snapped, especially not at me. The last time he’d raised his voice in my direction, I’d twisted his arm behind his back until he apologized just to escape the agony.

“Don’t you use that tone with—”

“I worry about you.” He cut me off. His voice was softer now, his anger diminishing. He sounded off somehow. Maybe buzzed or high. But Carter didn’t drink. I’d never seen him cradling so much as a Dr. Pepper at parties. “I really do. I worry about you.”

“You don’t have to,” I retorted. “There’re a lot of things I wouldn’t have been able to get through without you. But the rest is up to me to decide for myself.”

“If this guy in your bed is gone before tomorrow morning, I won’t have to kick his ass.” For a moment, Carter sounded like his old self, and some

of my concerns faded.

“Oh, best friend, what would I do without you?” I stood and turned on the cold water in the sink, then leaned down and filled my mouth, swishing the stale taste of beer and cigarettes out the best I could. I didn’t have the energy to brush my teeth, so this would have to do.

“Carter?” I said, drying my mouth with a towel. “Are you sure you’re okay? It’s usually me calling you at four in the morning, not the other way around.”

“*Jusqu’ a la procaine fois.*” It was our secret phrase meaning ‘until next time’ in French.

“That didn’t answer my question,” I said with a smile. From my bedroom, I could hear the guy snoring in my bed. I didn’t know his name, barely knew his face, and I didn’t care to know either.

“Take care of yourself, *ami.*”

“Will you stop speaking French and talk to me?” I sat back down on the edge of the bathtub. The beer from earlier sloshed around in my stomach. “I know something’s wrong, Carter. You’re my best friend. Talk to me. Why do you sound so weird?”

The loud beep in my ear made me flinch, and I held the phone away from me and stared at it, dumbfounded. Even during our worst fights, sometimes even the ones that had escalated to a screaming match, neither of us had ever hung up on the other one. It was an unwritten rule.

“You ass,” I said aloud, dialing his number and pressing the green button. We were going to get to the bottom of this, upset or not. After the fifth ring, I ended the call, then dialed again. I figured he’d have to forfeit and admit bad-tempered defeat, eventually.

“Carter,” I said to his voicemail. “If you don’t answer this phone the next time I call, I’ll come over there and pound your fucking door down.” I

dropped the phone to my side and sat fuming on the edge of the bathtub, giving him time to listen to my voicemail. He never could bear to hear me upset, so I didn't doubt the phone would be ringing any time now.

Anytime.

I dialed again, a small lump of panic was rising in my throat as the phone rang and rang. I hung up and shoved it into the pocket of my jeans, grateful—though not for the first time—that I'd passed out in my clothes. In my bed, the male still snored, even louder now. I kicked off my slippers, yanked on some shoes, and sneaked out the door, careful not to wake the stranger. I could only hope he'd be gone by the time I got back.

The chill of a Washington morning in early spring hit me as I fumbled in the dark for my car keys and slid into the driver's side of the piece of shit Grand Prix that almost didn't qualify as a car anymore. It started on the fourth try, sputtering and wheezing as it gave in to what sounded much like a mechanical asthma attack. I slammed it into drive and headed toward Carter's place, unwilling to admit my high school car, Missus Betty, was probably nearing the end of her eventful life. We'd all known it for a while, but the reality of the situation still stung, especially when she was still chugging along after two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand miles.

"We're almost there," I said to the wheezing car. "I know it's cold outside, but just a little farther." Missus Betty wheezed up the hill in the direction of Carter's off-campus apartment. The lights were off when we finally arrived, and I put the car in park and turned off the engine, patting the dashboard with a thank you. I slid out of the car, trudged across the lawn to the front door and tried the handle. Locked, per usual. What a girl.

"Carter Drake, open the damn door!" I shouted. In the house next to his complex, a dog began to bark, shattering the stillness of the early morning. I spun around to face the general direction of the barks. "Shut the hell up!" I

didn't care if I woke the neighbors. They were uptight assholes, anyway. A tree obscured the window to Carter's bedroom, and I couldn't see the light on. Maybe he'd fallen asleep midway through our argument.

"I'll break your window!" I threatened. As I stood on the front porch in the dark, the dog's barking grew louder, and I became colder. Too annoyed to stand there until the sun rose, I picked up a small stone from the garden, pulled back my arm, and heaved it at the second-story window. It made a sharp splitting sound against the glass before bouncing off and hitting me in the face. I cursed, holding a hand over my eye, suddenly remembering the spare key hidden under the rock in the garden.

"Damn you, Carter," I mumbled. I fell to my hands and knees to grope around in the dark for the flat stone that hadn't moved for two years. My fingers brushed the smooth surface, and, using my cell phone for light, I grabbed the key and brushed the dirt from my pants before sticking it in the lock and pushing the door open.

The entire apartment was dark—silent. Aside from the buzzing of the fridge in the kitchen, there was no sound. I pocketed the key and felt against the wall for the light switch, flipping it on and shutting the door quietly behind me. The living room lit up, blinding me momentarily. I looked around, seeking some sign of Carter, but the house was still. Just as expected, the place was spotless. Over the suede chaise sofa laid a hand-woven quilt, the quilt I'd made him during my long-ass, torture-filled summer at camp without him. The coffee table in front of the couch was tidy, only brandishing a few stacked magazines and an aloe vera plant. The apartment was clean, cleaner than my place had ever been, which was typical for the two of us.

"I'm coming up," I hollered at the stairs. "I hope you're decent." I waited for some reaction, some grumbled reply or sleepy bitch-out. Instead,

there was silence—a silence that chilled my core. “I know you’re here. I saw your car by the curb.” Trying to ward off the dizzying effects of my hangover, I climbed the stairs one at a time, giving Carter enough time to fully wake before I reamed his ass for hanging up on me. “It’s your fault I’m not sleeping right now,” I said. My head pounded, my vision fuzzy as exhaustion overcame me. I stopped in front of his door and let my hand rest on the handle, pushing it open. “I may very well kick you out of bed and—”

Silence fell over me, an eerie, terrifying silence that seemed to freeze time. In that silence, someone started to scream. For a fleeting second, I wanted to cover my ears and yell at them to shut up, grow up, be quiet, get the fuck out. Shut the fuck up.

Then I realized it was me.

I spotted the bottle of pills first, an amber-tinted prescription bottle lying open on the floor. The lid was off, and it was empty. Next to the empty bottle of pills, he was there.

With a sob, I dropped to my knees in front of him. I could hear my breath coming in quick, short gasps of panic as I reached out and allowed my trembling hand to feel for any sign of life. His lips were tinged blue, his eyes partially open and staring at the ceiling above us. His skin, at one time running so much warmer than everyone else’s, was cooling down, chilled, and waxy.

“No,” I screamed the word until it hurt my throat. “I don’t understand what’s happening. I don’t understand what’s happening. Carter? Carter. Tell me... tell me what’s happening. Carter!” I collapsed onto him, letting my head rest on his chest. “I need to call 911,” I murmured. Jumbled thoughts raced through my mind, none of them making a bit of sense. I pulled my cell phone from my pocket and dialed 911. My hand shook so severely I dropped the phone twice.

“It’s okay,” I said to Carter. “They’ll be able to help you.”

“911, what’s your emergency?” asked the operator on the other end of the line. I touched my face, only just noticing the tears rolling down my cheeks.

“My friend,” I said. I reached down and squeezed Carter’s hand. “He’s... h-he needs help. I need an ambulance. We’re in the Kirkwood Meadows apartments, number sixty-one.”

“I’m sending paramedics now,” the dispatcher said. “Ma’am, can you tell me what happened?”

“No. I don’t know. I just... I need someone to come and help him. I need someone to come and save his life, and I—” The cell phone dropped from my fingers. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I heard it clatter and bounce against the hardwood floor of his bedroom. I reached for him again, resting my hand on his, our temperatures clashing. I could feel my face and fingers start to tingle and go numb, threatening a panic attack.

“It’s going to be okay,” I said, lacing my fingers together over his chest. I began compressions, holding my breath as the seconds ticked by in slow motion. I paused for a moment and checked for a pulse. There was nothing. “I love you, Carter,” I whispered, pumping his chest again. “I’m so sorry, just stay with me. They... they’ll help you.” Then, in the silence of the house, amongst the midst of death, I lost it.

“Don’t do this to me! Don’t you dare do this to me. Please come back. Please, please, please...”

“Ma’am, please step aside.”

“I can’t do this without you!” I screamed. Numbness overcame me. Shocked, I watched the paramedics load Carter onto the stretcher. They’d arrived in decent time, pounding at the door before coming in. It was probably my hysterical cries that alerted them to where we were. They’d

pushed me aside—shoved, really—yelling something that I couldn't comprehend. The first medic, a woman, felt for a pulse. I saw her shake her head at her partner, but she started compressions anyway. The second medic strapped an oxygen mask to Carter's face, and together the two of them loaded his limp body onto a gurney. Compressions continued, but I knew from the depths of my soul that nothing could be done.

"You can't take him. You can't take him away from me. What are you doing? Why are you taking him?" I reached for the gurney, my hands groping the air for Carter like a mother reaching for a falling child. The male paramedic pulled me back, gently at first until I started shrieking again. I fought him for a moment, sobbing, screaming, and pleading. He was saying something in my ear, his arms around my midsection, holding me back, but I had no idea what was being said. I didn't care. And just like that—in a blink of an eye—Carter was gone.

"Where are you taking him?" I whispered. I stood in the middle of the room, tears streaming down my cheeks, soaking the front of my shirt. In my hands was his jacket, the one the paramedics had removed on arrival. I buried my face into it, falling to my knees onto the floor, shaking, sobbing.

"Is there someone the police can call for you?" the male medic asked. His hand was still on my shoulder—warm and comforting. "What's your name? I'm Ty. Can you talk to me?"

"Don't leave me," I whispered to the empty bedroom. I stood, clutching Carter's jacket to my chest, trying not to fall. "What am I going to do without you?"

TWO

The funeral was three days later. Three days. He had been gone from my life for three days and never had I been so lost. Numb. Lifeless.

It shouldn't have mattered that it was raining that day. After all, it was Washington. But for some reason, I couldn't get over that fact. I sat in the front row staring aimlessly ahead as Carter's mom, Melanie, clutched my hand in her lap. Tears streamed down her pale, chalky cheeks, leaving a streak of moisture on her makeup-frosted face. She was squeezing so hard I had the obscure thought she might break my bones. But even then, the pain didn't register. Nothing did. Not anymore.

My eyes flickered up from the floor to Carter's shiny, oak casket hovering feet above the ground. It was an open casket, considering there had been no dismemberment, blood, or broken bones—just Carter. It was my best friend lying in that stupid box, dressed in a suit. Had he been alive, he would have shunned this in moments. The flowers were tacky—roses. Carter hated roses. And now, the red roses seemed to clash with his pale skin. Skin so pale, so cold, that even after the mortician had tried to make his complexion look normal, it didn't help much. I'd often heard people say that in death the person looked just as beautiful as they did alive. That was bullshit. They looked dead. He was dead. He was lifeless. He was gone.

Nothing was normal, not anymore.

Somewhere behind me, away from the crowd, probably hiding behind a tree and its branches, I knew my friend Ava was standing. I had yet to lay eyes on her, but I could already see her in my head. She'd be leaning up against a tree, her arms folded, her features set in stone as she surveyed the surrounding people. Despite the rain coming from the sky, she would be dressed in a white tank top and a thin leather jacket. Her hair would be unkempt and ratty, eyeliner too dark and lipstick too faded, an aftereffect from a wild night before. Although Ava and Carter hadn't been friends—in fact, they had loathed each other—I knew she would be here, anyway. She would be here for me.

“Khloe Daniels?” I looked up, startled from my thoughts. The preacher was staring at me, a sad smile on his face as he shut the Bible on the lectern and nodded in my direction. “It has come to my attention that you might like to say a few words for our beloved Carter?”

My body went rigid as every set of eyes turned to me. I looked around, wondering who had set this up. Surely David Drake, Carter's father, hadn't intended to let me speak at his son's service. It was not a secret that David could hardly stand me. Me, the trouble-making, ignorant, anti-religion, free-thinking best friend of his perfect son.

“No,” I squeaked, and the preacher turned his ear to me as if he hadn't heard. I felt multiple gazes turn in my direction, scrutinizing me like an ant under a microscope. Next to me, Melanie shifted in her seat, and then she squeezed my hand.

“Please,” she whispered. Her warm breath fanned across my cheek as her eyes pleaded. “You were our boy's best friend. He'd have loved for you to say something in his memory.”

His memory. I couldn't say anything to Carter, not anymore—not ever again—but I could say something in his memory. Funny how that worked.

I swallowed my fear and stood up, knowing that if I didn't say anything today, I might regret it for the rest of my life. As I looked around, I caught sight of Gracie, Carter's little sister, huddled under her father's arm. Her blue eyes were wide, terrified, but when she saw me, she forced a minuscule smile. I smiled back, ignoring the pinched expression on David's face. Making my way to the stand, I took extra special care not to let my gaze fall on the casket. I couldn't bring myself to look at it—him. As I stood staring out at the crowd, my chest tight with fear, I spotted Ava in the back, just as I had predicted, leaning against a tree. She was watching me, her eyes narrowed as if expecting me to fall in front of everyone and cry. She wasn't far off. A few rows from the back sat a guy I almost didn't recognize—the paramedic from Carter's apartment. I think his name was Ty. I wondered why he was here—out of respect, probably. I cleared my throat.

"Carter Drake was... well, he was my best friend." I looked down at my hands. They were shaking. They hadn't stopped since I'd found Carter in his bedroom. "He was so much more than that, though. He was my brother, my partner in crime." In the crowd, Melanie smiled encouragingly, wiping at her mascara-stained face. I tried to envision Carter there next to me, teasing and egging me on. It only made me want to cry harder. "I don't know why Carter did what he did." A single tear slid down my cheek, and I wiped it away. My words stuttered, and I struggled to string them together. "I wish I knew, because maybe if I had, I would have been able to stop it. But—"

"Get out."

I hardly heard it at first—the calm, steady voice that came at me from somewhere in the front row of chairs didn't register. I paused for a second,

wondering if I'd misheard. When only silence greeted me, I opened my mouth to go on, when I heard it again.

"I said, get out." Next to Melanie, David Drake got to his feet, handing little Gracie to his wife. His face was contorted into an expression of rage, eyes bugging out of his head. His neck and ears were red. There was a thick, blue vein in his neck that bulged, seemingly ready to pop. I took an automatic step back, startled, wondering what I'd said to upset him.

"David!" hissed Melanie. "Sit down." She looked panicked. Embarrassed, even, as though the very worst thing that could happen on the day of her son's funeral was a falling out. But David didn't sit down. Instead, he headed in my direction, fists clenched at his sides, looking ready to take a swing at whatever human being was unfortunate enough to be in his way. I took another step back, and then another until I was only feet away from the casket. David kept coming. I was certain he wouldn't hit me, but it made no difference. David Drake was a mean man, and he had no problems showing it.

"This is your fault!" he screamed. "This is your fault, Khloe! You're probably the one who gave him the pills he used to kill himself. This is all on you!" It wasn't until he was nearly spitting in my face that someone decided to act. The priest and one of the men in the crowd—the paramedic named Ty—grabbed him and pulled him back, keeping a tight hold on him. I took one more step back, bumped into the casket, and found myself turning around automatically to scope out my roadblock.

Carter.

My best friend.

My brother.

Lying on some stupid red satin pillow, his eyes closed, his face white, his hands folded over his chest like some porcelain doll.

Dead.

Dead, dead, dead.

I fell to my knees, covered my mouth in revulsion, and started to sob.

THREE

“Don’t worry about it, Khloe. It’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal,” I snapped, taking a long drag of my cigarette. “You don’t get it, Ava. Carter is my best friend, and his dad just kicked me out of his service!”

“Was,” Ava corrected me. “Was your *mejor amigo*.”

I wanted to hit her, to make a mark on that flawless complexion of hers. Ava was a looker. Being Hispanic only helped her appeal, I think, as she had long, black hair, thick eyelashes, and perfectly darkened skin. The compelling Spanish accent only helped accentuate her beauty. It was nothing if not short of irritating.

“Is,” I said. “Carter will always be my best friend.”

“Gee, thanks a lot.” Ava pulled a little tin flask from her jacket pocket and took a long swig, handing it to me. “You’re overreacting, you know,” she said, lighting up another cigarette. “We’re all aware David Drake is a *pinchazo*.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “He’s a prick.”

As we walked, I thought again of Mr. Drake’s face—so angry. No, furious. I wondered briefly if he would have hit me had he gotten past Ty and the priest. I had seen him angry a lot. I had grown up around Carter’s family, and David was known for being a little on the rough side. But I had never seen him as angry as he had been today.

“He’s always hated me,” I said. “I knew that, but it didn’t keep Carter and me apart.”

“He’s just afraid of you,” said Ava. “He feared you as soon as he met you and realized you would be a different kind of influence on his son. There’s nothing more terrifying to a Bible thumper than someone who doesn’t need religion or God to run their lives.”

“I only wish he could have accepted how much his son shied away from religion,” I said. “Carter was so smart, you know? He was so open to the world around him. That’s why we became friends so quickly.”

“You guys were two of a kind, that’s for damn sure,” Ava said. She dropped the cigarette butt onto the ground and stubbed it out with the toe of her black biker boot. “People were jealous of your friendship.”

“You mean you?” I teased. Ava rolled her eyes.

“*Celoso*? Of Carter? In his dreams.”

A silence settled over us. It was an uncomfortable, tense silence. Neither of us knew what to say. Joking about Carter would never be the same again. He was dead, gone forever, unable to defend himself against the kidding taunts of Ava and me. If he had been there walking with us, he and Ava would already be bickering back and forth like two siblings over candy. Carter would have his arm flung around my shoulder, bearing his weight on me, challenging my tolerance. I’d shove him away playfully while Ava rolled her eyes, and then we’d head to the theater downtown to see what new horror film was playing. It was always a stupid one—some old, phony show, but we enjoyed it anyway—even if it was mostly for the fried pickles and partially stale popcorn. But those days were gone, and they wouldn’t be back.

“You’re crying again,” said Ava. She rolled her eyes as I wiped at my face, just now noticing the warm, salty tears drying on my cheeks.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. Ava shrugged as if she didn’t care either way. I wondered how she could do that—be void of emotions. But then I’d always been enough of a basket case for the both of us—that’s why we were friends.

“How am I going to do this?” I asked her. “How can I do this without him?” I wrapped my arms around myself, shivering at the chill in the air. Ava looked sympathetic. Well, as sympathetic as Ava could look.

“Take it one day at a time, *cariña*,” she said.



It was after seven in the morning a few days later when I received a phone call from Carter’s mom. I’d been sleeping, though not soundly, huddled under the blankets in my bed, curtains drawn, tears drying on my pillowcase. For the last few days I’d taken refuge in bed, curled up in the fetal position under the comforter, blocking out the world. My clothes were dirty and stale, hair oily and unkempt. Even my face and skin were raw with salty tears. I was a mess, but I didn’t care. Facing the world was too intimidating a thought. The only person who’d ever been able to pull me out of a funk like this was Carter.

As soon as the phone started to ring on the nightstand near my bed, my eyes fluttered open. I reached for it, automatically expecting it to be Carter, probably calling to tease me about never getting out of bed. But, of course, it wasn’t Carter. It was Melanie. I considered ignoring it, but I couldn’t do that. Melanie was one of the few people I had left in this world, and I would do well not to push her away even if it did hurt. She’d always been like a second mother to me.

“Would you be able to stop by?” she asked. I hadn’t spoken to her or David since being kicked out of the service, so I was surprised she was calling. David ruled his household with an iron fist, and in the aftermath of the service, I’d wondered if I would ever see any of them again.

“I can do that.” I sat up, shrugging the comforter from my shoulders. My head was fuzzy with exhaustion, stomach grumbling and cramping from lack of food. Along with everything else, my appetite was lost. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine,” she assured me, and I felt dumb for asking such a question. Of course, it wasn’t fine—it would never be fine again. But she didn’t seem to mind. She did, however, sound exhausted. I knew we all were, but I had only lost a best friend. Melanie and David Drake had lost a child. “I just have some things for you,” she said. “And Gracie would love to see you as well.”

“Oh, okay.” I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, hesitant to go over there and see David again, but I knew I wouldn’t blow off Melanie. Not now, not after everything we had all been through. “Sure. I can be there in twenty minutes.” I hung up the phone and dragged myself out of bed to run a brush through my hair, trying not to dwell too long on my ripped and faded Levi’s, dirty tie-dye T-shirt, and freckled face that the tears had left red and puffy. It would have been about now that Carter would have seen my attire, rolled his eyes, and said, “Take a shower, Ladybug. You look like a hobo.”

As I made my way to the car, swinging the lanyard with my keys around in the air, I thought back to the day I’d earned the nickname Ladybug. Carter and I had only been six, two rambunctious kids playing cowboys and Indians in the park behind the Drakes’ old house. I’d sat down on the edge of the sandbox, out of breath from playing tag, when a red, black-dotted insect landed in my hair. Carter, laughing his six-year-old ass off, had

pointed and laughed until I couldn't take it anymore and had panicked, wailing and dancing around as though caught on fire. When I'd finally settled down enough to let Carter near, he'd plucked the bug out of my hair and allowed it to rest in his palm, opening his hand so I could see.

"Just a ladybug," he said. "A ladybug won't hurt you, Khloe." He transferred it to the tip of my finger, where I'd admired it until it opened its wings and flew away. Twelve years later, "Ladybug" had stuck.

The memory faded, and I wiped the tears from the corner of my eyes as Missus Betty panted up the hill toward the Drakes' house. Outside, the weather was matching my mood—depressed. The sky was heavy with rain and fog. I flipped on my bright lights, which made it worse, so I dimmed them again and hoped for the best.

The Drake house was dark when I pulled up, and I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw David's car missing from the driveway. I wasn't in the mood for his bullshit, especially now. Putting Missus Betty into park, I dropped the keys into my pocket and knocked on the front door. For a fleeting, uncertain moment, I was sure it would be Carter who would answer the door. He'd be in a pair of jeans and a hooded sweatshirt, his iPod in his hand and an earbud in one ear. He would smile and flip me the peace sign before socking me in the arm and saying, "What took you so long, Ladybug?"

It wasn't Carter. It was Melanie.

"Thank you for coming, Khloe," she said, stepping aside so I could walk in. She looked exhausted, of course, sporting extra-large sweatpants and a tattered shirt with a shawl draped over her shoulders. Melanie, generally so smiley and plump, looked as though she'd lost too much weight in the last few days. The skin under her eyes was black, and it wasn't from makeup.

“Where’s David?” I asked. Although Carter had always referred to my parents as Mr. and Mrs. Daniels, I’d never been able to do that with his. The first name was more personal and, if we were getting down to the nitty-gritty of it, I didn’t think that David Drake deserved the title of “Mr.”

“He went...” A strained silence hung between us as she paused for a moment. “Out.” She looked away when she said it, and I automatically knew where he was—at the church—praying. Some people needed God to reassure them that life would be okay again.

“Can I ask why I’m here?” I said gently.

Melanie took my hand and led me up the stairs. On the way, I tried to avoid looking at all the family portraits hanging on the walls. The house was so familiar—a home away from home. I had often run up and down these stairs with Carter, at one point splitting open my knee on the bottom step. Signs of wear and tear in the carpet were evident, brought on by years and years of heavy use. On top of the staircase, in the corner of the wall, was a colored nick in the paint marked with Carter’s name. My name was below his, and Gracie’s was below that.

Melanie pulled me into a bedroom I was all too familiar with—Carter’s room. A room that, since he’d moved out after graduation a few months ago, had been turned into a guest room. There wasn’t a lot in it that was his anymore, aside from a few scattered drawings and paintings still hanging on the walls. Above the bed was a sketch of mine from middle school—a stupid, fat horse eating hay. Well, a stupid stick figure fat horse because I couldn’t draw shit, not then and not now. I’d shown it to Carter out of pure seriousness, and after he’d laughed and laughed and laughed, he tacked it on his wall.

“We had to clean out his apartment,” Melanie said. “Most of it was donated, but some things we brought back here. I couldn’t bear to throw

them out.” She took a breath to compose herself before leaning down to pick up a box with his name scribbled on the side with a black marker. She handed it to me with a sad smile, and my heart felt like it shattered into a million more tiny pieces. “We can’t keep much, and I knew it was only right to give his most precious things to you.”

Sitting on top of the box was a silver-framed photo of Carter and me, taken in fifth grade outside on the jungle gym at our old elementary school. Carter was hanging upside down on the monkey bars, and I was standing on the ladder with my head poking through. Both of us were giggling, looking genuinely carefree and happy. Freckled face and stringy brown hair, I knew I looked the same now as I did then. Carter had grown up, though he never lost that cute charm he always had.

“He had it hanging on the wall in his apartment,” Melanie said, noticing my gaze on the picture. “It was his favorite one.”

“Thank you.” I ran my fingers over his face under the glass, feeling a lump in my throat. “It means a lot.”

“Carter would have wanted you to have it.”

“What does David think of me having it?” I asked. There was no need to be subtle as we all knew his feelings toward me. The older I got, the more David seemed to despise me.

“Oh, well,” Melanie sighed. She folded one of Carter’s quilts before she laid it back down on the bed. Another one I’d made for him during a boring summer without him at Girl Scout camp. Green, his favorite color, laced with a ladybug pattern. He’d loved it, and he hadn’t even laughed first. “David will get over it, dear. His pain is severe right now.”

“Does he think he’s the only one hurting?”

Melanie averted her gaze to the floor, embarrassed, and I automatically felt bad. Carter had always disapproved of my sharp tongue which was

probably one of the reasons David hated me so much, but it was Carter who'd been the peacekeeper, not me. "I'm sorry," I said. "It just hurts. It hurts a lot." Melanie nodded and put her hand on my shoulder, squeezing.

"You two were best friends," she said. "I know that, Khloe. And I'm sorry." She turned and left the room, presumably to let herself cry, and I hoisted the box into my arms to take it with me out to the car. As I approached the top of the stairs, there was a soft squeak of a bedroom door opening behind me.

"Khloe?"

The tiny, familiar voice stopped me in my tracks. I turned around, juggling the box full of Carter's things in my arms. Gracie was standing at the threshold of her bedroom door, a ragged teddy bear under one arm and her tattered baby blanket in the other. She was looking at me with those rounded blue eyes, her blond hair wild about her head. She looked so much like a young Carter that I had to fight the tears to keep from breaking down.

"Hi, Gracie," I said. "Are you okay?" She only stared at me at first, her fragile complexion looking pale and tired. I wondered how she was taking losing her big brother. What kind of things could go through a child's mind at this age?

"Come here," she said. "Can you come here, please?" Caught off guard, I set the box down gently on the carpeted floor. Gracie reached out for me, her tiny, eight-year-old hand wrapping around the end of my fingertips. She tugged, and I followed her into her bedroom where she closed the door behind us and sat down on her princess-clad bed. She set down her baby blanket and teddy bear.

"Gracie?" I said again. "Are you okay, honey?" I crossed the room and kneeled in front of her, taking her hands between mine. Her skin was cold like Carter's had been.

“I have something for you,” she said. I watched as she leaned over and lifted her Cinderella pillow into her lap. Then, moving hesitantly, she reached into the pillowcase and pulled out what looked like a fancy notebook, maybe a journal. She ran her hand over it, looking sad, and then handed it to me. “For you,” she said. I took the book from her, turning it over in my hands.

“What’s this?” I asked. “Is it yours?”

“No.” She picked up her teddy bear and clutched it to her chest as if protecting herself from something I couldn’t see. “Carter wanted me to give it to you.”

FOUR

I took the long route home, making every effort to avoid passing Carter's empty apartment. It probably wasn't a wise decision to push Missus Betty farther than necessary, but I would have rather walked home than see such an empty place. I was tempted to call Ava, to ask her to come over so I wouldn't be alone tonight, but I didn't. Most likely, she was at some party basking in smugness as drunk guys with goatees and IQs below a hundred slobbered all over her.

I pulled into the carport of my complex and turned the car off, sitting there in the silence for a moment listening to the raindrops bouncing off the roof of the carport. In the back seat, the box of Carter's personal things challenged what little sanity I had left, silently mocking. Just thinking about it made me want to break down. I wanted to scream, cry, and curse him. Instead, I got out of the car, gathered the box in my arms, and went inside.

I wasn't a people-person, so the one-bedroom apartment I rented near campus was roommate-free and, for the first time, rather lonely. This was the first time my little home wasn't graced with the presence of my best friend.

I set the box of things down on the couch and turned on all the lights, too shaken up to sit in the dark. I made my way to the kitchen and poured a drink, imagining Carter hovering over my shoulder, tsk-tsking in his obnoxious, mother-hen way. I would pour the drink anyway and then offer

him one, just to be an ass, and he would turn it down and reach for a soda instead. But that's where it stopped. He wouldn't push me too far, wouldn't judge me for my choices, he'd merely stick around to make sure those choices didn't hurt me. That's who he was—a guardian angel of sorts.

Thunder rumbled outside, and a moment after that, lightning lit up the sky. I stared out the kitchen window sipping on my vodka cranberry as the rain came down. I'd need a few stiff drinks to rummage through the box of his things. Had Carter been here, he would have scolded me for trying to drown my sorrows in booze. He'd been good at that, pointing out my flaws, but he never hated me for them.

A loud knock sounded on my front door, startling me. I wiped weakly at the red juice that spilled over the edge of my glass and soaked into my T-shirt, then shrugged. Whatever, it was tie-dye. Setting the glass down on the counter, I headed toward the door, and for another fleeting moment, I expected to see Carter when I opened it. I thought he would be standing there, soaked from the rain, his boyish blond hair plastered against his forehead. He'd be smiling, of course. He loved the rain.

I pulled the door open, my smile melting as I came face to face with the guest on my doorstep.

"Where in the fuck have you been?" he asked. I pushed open the door a bit wider, catching a glimpse of my father's glassy brown eyes. On the step, he swayed where he stood. From my position, I could smell the whiskey on his breath even through the rain.

"I've been here," I said carefully. "This is where I live." I flinched when he made a move forward, but then he stopped, placing one hand on the wall to steady himself. I prayed he wouldn't fall because I wasn't sure I could lift him by myself this time.

“You didn’t feel like you should have stopped by after the funeral of that kid?” he asked. His tone was venomous and slurred, the result of six too many drinks. That kid he was referring to, Carter, had been a part of my family’s life for over fifteen years. Count on my dad to make him sound like a nobody.

“I have to go,” I said. “I have company.” Of course, I didn’t, but having this conversation would get us nowhere. It was the same thing each time, a pattern that had occurred over the years—Frank would get drunk and come knocking, and eventually, the conversation would turn into a screaming match in the front yard. In a case like that, I had always called Carter each time. There was something about the way my best friend had spoken to people that made anyone—and I do mean anyone—stop what they were doing and listen. Melanie used to say that Carter could talk down an entire army, and she wasn’t kidding. But Carter wasn’t here anymore to have my back. And Frank knew it.

“That’s no way to speak to me, you little bitch,” he snapped. “I’m still your father.”

“Since when?” I started to close the door on him, when Frank stuck one foot in, stopping me. I dug my weight into the floor to try to push him back just far enough to get it closed. If I could get it closed and the door locked, he would leave eventually. Maybe this time I wouldn’t have to call the police. “You haven’t been a father to me since Mom died.” Just as expected, that set him off. He shouldered his way into the frame like an angry bull, catching me off guard. I cried out as the door connected with my face, striking me right in the nose. I dropped both hands from the door to cover my face as the warm blood pooled into my hands and squeezed through the crevices of my fingers. Frank stopped where he was, eying me.

“I... I’m sorry,” he mumbled. He took a step back, stumbling, running a hand through his hair as though confused by the events unraveling around him.

“Piss off.” Taking the opportunity, I dropped my hands and gave him a hearty shove in the middle of his chest. Frank flailed backward, out the door, cursing. I slammed it in his face, snapping the bolt and chain into place. I tried to catch my breath as I listened to him pound on the door and shout outside of my apartment. I staggered back, shaking, and turned around, searching for my cell phone, needing desperately to call Carter. Carter could help. He always did.

Carter. No. Carter couldn’t help today.

Heart racing, I covered my nose again, hoping not to get blood on the carpet. Blood was a bitch to get out. I opened the freezer in the kitchen and pulled out an unused bag of frozen peas for my nose. Placing the bag gently on my face, I flinched as pain buzzed through me. My nose would be swollen and multicolored in the morning. I was sure of it.

As soon as I was certain it had stopped bleeding, I washed my face in the kitchen sink, watching the water turn dark with blood. Frank’s pounding on the door had ceased. Either he had gone home, or he was passed out in the front yard. I didn’t know anymore, and I couldn’t bring myself to care. Every time I had to kick Frank to the curb for my safety, I had thoughts of my father wrapping his car around a tree, or worse, killing an innocent person. But despite my fears, I was too afraid to do anything about it, and even if I tried, I knew I couldn’t stop him. No one could stop Frank but Frank.

I picked up the half-empty glass of cranberry juice with vodka and took a generous swig, hoping it would slow my racing heart and numb the sting in my face. From where I was standing in the kitchen, I could see the lone

box of Carter's things on my couch, taunting me. I tossed back the rest of the alcohol, refilled the glass, and headed toward the box. On top of it, sitting next to the photo frame was the journal Gracie had given to me in her bedroom. I picked it up and ran my fingers over the rich, brown cover, admiring the way the leather had started to fade over time with use. There was nothing written on the front of it, no name or signature or tacky, inspirational quote. It was just a cover.

I opened the journal to the first page, skimming my eyes over the sloppy, yet familiar handwriting. Squinting, I struggled to make sense of the words on the page. The paper was thin. The scribbles at one time had been done with a pen pressed down with such force it had gone through multiple sheets. I closed my eyes, opened them again, and began to read.

January 1, 2014

So, here it is. My name is Carter Michael Drake, and I'm fifteen years old. This journal started after a bit of persuading from my counselor. Apparently, writing down your anger is a good way to come to terms with yourself. I think this is a terribly stupid idea, but here goes nothing...

That's all I have for now. More tomorrow.

I let my eyes linger over the last word for a moment before I slammed the journal shut. A whirlpool of emotions slammed me in the gut. My fingers itched at the book, craving more, but I was unable to bring myself to do it. I was overwhelmed with the devastation of missing him, and I was definitely not drunk enough.

For a moment, reading that stupid journal, I had nearly felt him standing next to me, reading over my shoulder, laughing.

I dropped the journal onto the coffee table, reaching again for the glass of liquid courage. My hands shook as I took a sip, unable to tear my gaze from the book that held the last little bit of Carter on its pages. After Gracie had given it to me, she'd fallen silent, refusing to explain anything else. Despite my attempts to drag information out of her, she'd simply smiled sadly, looked away, and stroked the stuffed bear sitting in her lap—the bear her big brother had bought her. So, what was this? Some kind of sick joke? Carter wouldn't do that to me, would he?

On the coffee table, my phone lit up and began to buzz. I swiped my finger across the screen and put it to my ear, the glass of vodka still steady in my free hand. It was Ava.

"How are you, doll?" she asked loudly. In the background, I could hear the pounding of music intertwined with the shouts and hoots of drunken college kids. I rolled my eyes. Ava was always at some stupid party, drunk and wild. I wasn't as into it as she was. Drinking alone at home was much more satisfying than a party because there was never anyone around to judge me.

"I'm fine," I lied, debating on whether to make a liquor store run before they closed.

"Have you had a good cry yet?" she shouted.

"More times than I can count," I admitted.

"No, no," said Ava. She laughed as if something was funny. "Did you cry yet? I'm talking about the big, nasty cry where you throw things against the wall, break shit, and sob your *corazón* out."

I pondered this for a moment, remembering breaking down at the service. Did that count?

"I don't know," I admitted. "But I'm okay, really."

“I doubt that,” said Ava. She sounded distracted. “Come out tonight! I’m over at Tucker’s place on Washington Avenue.”

“I think I’ll pass.” My eyes skirted over the leather-bound journal. “I need some sleep.” As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew it was a lost cause. Ava knew better. Hell, I knew better. If anything, my night would consist of another glass of booze, and then another, which would eventually lead to sobbing into Carter’s old jacket as I watched Friends reruns.

“No,” she said. “We’ll see you in about twenty-five minutes, yeah?”

“No, Ava,” I said. “I’m not coming out to—”

Click.

Frustrated, I tossed the phone away and shot back the rest of my drink. Maybe Ava was right. Getting out tonight would take my mind off things. Or, so I could hope.

FIVE

Just as expected, Ava was already three sheets to the wind by the time I arrived at the party. She was dressed in a mini leather skirt and a sequined tank top, a bottle of beer clutched between her red fingernails, black hair down and wild about her face. She swayed where she stood, almost face planting onto the beige carpet. I reached out a hand to steady her.

“You came!” she yelled. I grabbed the beer from her and took a swig of it.

“Sure did,” I muttered. “You can’t even let me take a break before I have to go back to work, can you?”

“I work there, too,” Ava said. “So, let’s enjoy freedom. Just for tonight.” She took the beer back from me and shook her head, wagging her finger in my face. “This won’t help you tonight, *Hermosa*. You’ll need something stronger.” She turned to scan the room, her chocolate-brown eyes flicking from person to person. “Jesse!” she yelled. Had the beer been in a cup instead of a bottle, I was certain she would have already sloshed it all over herself.

“Ava, my princess,” said a tall, lanky guy with greasy, dark hair and tiny-hoop earrings. He turned in our direction, scoping us out, and Ava pointed at me.

“Can you get the lady a jungle juice?” she called. Jesse gave her a thumbs up and vanished into the kitchen, practically having to swim

through the mob of drunken, sweaty people.

“Jesus Christ, Khloe,” Ava cried, her attention back on me. She got eye level to me, swaying slightly. I reached out to steady her, but she didn’t seem to notice. “What happened to your face?” She said it so loudly that three different people looked in our direction at the same time.

“Frank,” I replied simply, and she nodded, understanding.

“One day I’m going to have my boys shank that man.” She nodded to herself. “If that’s okay with you, of course.” Somehow, I didn’t doubt she had a group of punk-ass Mexican friends just ready to bow down at her feet and cut somebody. It didn’t make me feel better, but I smiled and agreed anyway.

“Here you go,” said Jesse into my ear. He handed me a red cup of fruit punch topped with booze-soaked berries. Jungle juice—as college kids called it—was potent. Only the creators ever really knew what was mixed into it. I raised the cup to my lips and took a sip. I could taste the vodka, definitely. Vodka, peach schnapps, honey rum, and Everclear. I couldn’t pinpoint all of them, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

“Thanks,” I said to the guy, giving him a thumbs up. He smiled and nodded, leaning into me. He smelled like stale cigarettes, flat beer, and mild body odor.

“Let me guess,” he said. “You don’t remember who I am.” Startled, I pulled back, studying his face. He was cute in a young punk sort of way. A bad case of acne, greasy hair, and tacky face jewelry were the first things I noticed, but like a punch in the gut, I realized I did recognize him. Jesse had been the male specimen asleep in my bed, the one drooling on my pillow the night Carter had called.

“I remember you,” I said carefully. “I met you at the club.”

“Most of the time, isn’t it the man’s house that the woman sneaks out of before sunrise?” asked Jesse. “If you wanted me gone, you could have kicked me out instead of bailing. Where did you go that night, anyway?”

Ava, who had been listening halfheartedly to the conversation, whipped her head around, realizing his mistake. Jesse was smiling at me innocently, clearly kidding around. I looked over at Ava, meeting her eyes. Knots twisted themselves into my stomach, which was working to evict the cranberry vodka I’d drank earlier.

“I have to go to the bathroom.” I thrust the cup of jungle juice at Jesse, who looked startled as I turned and made my way down the hall. Behind me, Ava was whispering something to him, but I couldn’t make out her words. I didn’t want to.

Once safely in the bathroom, I slammed the door shut behind me, clicking the lock into place. The tears I hadn’t realized were coming fell hot against my face, drying on my skin. I looked in the mirror, sobbing, watching the mascara run down from my lashes onto my face, clinging to my cheeks. I yanked a square of toilet paper off the holder and scrubbed, desperately trying to cleanse my skin of the black smudges.

On the other side of the door, people were laughing. Ava was shouting something loud and obnoxious as usual, flirting with one of the guys—probably Jesse. If only I could get over something as quickly as she did, like the death of my best friend.

I closed my eyes and took a shaky breath. My heart pounded in my ears, so distinctive it was almost unsettling. I opened my eyes to face myself in the mirror. The person looking back wasn’t me, it was Carter. Carter, smiling sadly, his cheeks flushed with the pink of life, his eyes sad, disapproving.

I took a step back bumping into the magazine holder behind me. I spun around to size up the inanimate attacker, and when I turned back, Carter was gone. There was just me, still crying, staring numbly into the reflection of the mirror. I swallowed and closed my eyes, trying to regain control. Near my foot, an amber bottle of prescription pills had clattered from the shelf and to the floor. I looked down at it, feeling a stab of emotions I couldn't place grip me. Without thinking about it, I reached down and picked up the bottle from the floor, scrutinizing it. It was a popular opioid painkiller.

On the other side of the door, another laugh echoed down the hallway.

I could end it all right now, and nobody would even know. Maybe not even care. But was there a heaven? Was there a hell? I didn't believe in such things, and there was one thought that scared me even more than death itself. That thought was never seeing Carter again, even in the afterlife.

Hands shaking, I unscrewed the cap from the bottle and dumped some of the pills into my hand. I tossed a few back and held my head under the sink, swallowing them down. I hadn't had a prescription pill in years, and now, I had just taken four. Heart racing, I dumped another small handful of the pills into my palm and then slipped them into my pocket, hesitant to take the entire bottle. I steadied myself in front of the bathroom sink and looked again in the mirror. By now, six different people had pounded on the door, yelling about having to go pee. Whether they ended up pissing their pants or just going outside, I'd never know.

I took a deep breath and splashed some icy water on my face before replacing the bottle of pills on the stand. Running my hands through my hair, I made a half-assed effort to pull myself together and look presentable. After I was certain I wouldn't be called out on anything, I double-checked my pocket for the pills and opened the bathroom door, ignoring the death

glare that a skank in too-short shorts and a strapless blouse shot me. I found Ava sitting propped up on the edge of the couch. She had switched out her bottle of beer for a fifth of tequila, and there were two men on either side of her, both groping her like dogs. In her free hand, she was holding a joint. Typical Ava.

“There you are,” she called, giggling. Her already dark complexion was flushed with red, eyes even glassier than before. “Jesse has your drink. I’m not sure where he went.”

“It’s fine,” I assured her. The painkiller already rushed through my veins, creating a euphoric effect. “I’m going to go home anyway. I need to go to bed.”

“Party pooper,” one of the people slurred. I didn’t even recognize his face, let alone know his name, so I figured it wouldn’t be my wisest moment to punch him in the face.

“Yep, that’s me,” I said instead. Ava, looking sufficiently butt-hurt, pushed out her bottom lip in a pout. For a man, it would have worked. For me, I knew better than that. “I’ll see you later,” I said.

“Going so soon, Ladybug?” she asked, mocking me. Anger like a boiling pot of water bubbled in my chest when the familiar nickname slipped off her tongue. I felt my fists clench unintentionally, and for nothing more than a split second, I tried to imagine which of us would win in a smackdown. Probably Ava. Fortunately, before I had the chance to find out, I saw her chocolate-brown eyes flutter to the floor, and for a moment, she looked almost ashamed.

“*Lo siento*,” she said. “That was insensitive.”

“I have to go.” Unable to acknowledge her apology, I waved a brisk goodbye and headed out the door, grabbing my jacket on the way out. Missus Betty wouldn’t start until the fifth try. On the fourth try, I had a

moment's thought to call Carter and have him come and jump-start me. But by the fifth try, when the engine roared to life, I realized that never, ever again would that be a possibility.

SIX

January 5, 2014

Mrs. Dunham told me that I should try to write in this book every day. She seems to think that if I treat it as though I'm talking to a friend, it will help steady my emotions. Whatever. I'm not sure what to write, so I'll start with the basics and go from there, I guess.

Well, like I said on the first page, my name is Carter. It's the year 2014. I live on the outskirts of Seattle with my parents and my little sister Gracie. I'm 15.

I attend Timberlake High School downtown. I get good grades, for the most part. Dad would kill me if I didn't. He wants to see me make Valedictorian at graduation, and everyone agrees. Most people think that's awesome and wonderful. They tell me how proud they are of me and how successful they think I'll be. Most of the time, I find myself smiling and nodding and then rolling my eyes behind their back. If Mom caught me doing that, I'd probably be smacked. No child of hers acts like that.

There aren't many people in this world I feel close to, but my friend, Khloe, is one of them. She's not just a friend. She's my best friend. She's my family. My family and hers have

known each other forever it seems. Since we were 3. There have been many moves & many goodbyes, but in the end, it worked out for the best. I get to see her all the time now. Khloe is a good kid like me. She does well in class and has a lot of friends. She and her mom are close, which is nice. I like her mom, Charlotte. Her dad, Frank, is pretty cool too, but he's gone a lot driving a truck. That's okay. I think Khloe likes being around her mom most.

I closed the journal, feeling the tears pressing against my eyeballs and threatening to spill over. With the sorrow came anger, and with a powerful heave, I threw the book across the room, fuming. It hit the wall with a pathetic thump, landing on the floor, open, resting on some random page. My legs went weak beneath me, and I fell to my knees, gasping for air.

"I hate you!" I screamed at the book. "I fucking hate you!"

The journal didn't answer. It only sat there like a lump of coal, taunting me. On the coffee table in the living room, my cell phone buzzed again, vibrating against the hard wooden surface. Ava had been trying to call me since last night when I'd stormed off after her stupid comment. I couldn't answer. I had no desire to talk to anyone if it wasn't my best friend.

Eyes still on the book, I cradled my knees to my chest and began to rock back and forth, fighting to compose myself. Mrs. Dunham. Traci Dunham. Our high school counselor. I hadn't seen her in months, though I'd frequented her office as a student. But why her? Why had Carter turned to her instead of me?

There was no calm I could grasp, no rational thought that could settle me down. I craved having him there to comfort me. I needed him. Somewhere in the racing thoughts of my mind, I imagined him walking in. I could see it

now, his face twisted in concern, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise. He would walk over to me with that cocky swagger of his and wrap his arms around me, and say, “Chill out, Ladybug. I bet you that whatever it is, it’s probably not as bad as it seems.”

But now, while I rocked and sobbed on the floor, my eyes stinging with tears, it wasn’t just as bad as it seemed—it was a lot worse.



I couldn’t bring myself to read the next entry in Carter’s journal for the rest of the night. Instead, I picked it up, still crying, and stuffed it under the sofa cushion with a satisfied sniff. But despite it being out of sight, it certainly wasn’t off my mind.

Ava came over around ten, pounding on the door like a terror. It wasn’t until she started shouting at me in Spanish that I finally gave up and let her in.

“I bring a peace offering,” she said, holding up a twelve-pack of Bud Light. I couldn’t resist. Pulling two of them out for us, I shoved the rest into the fridge and settled into the recliner in my living room, popping the cap off the bottle before taking a drink.

“That’s good,” I admitted. Ava, who had claimed the comfortable corner of the couch, nodded in agreement. Neither of us spoke of the night before. There was no need to. Ava was like my sister, and we seemed to fight as much as we got along, but we always made up in the end. For that, I was glad. Without Carter, I had no one else but Ava. I would do well not to shun her from my life.

“So,” Ava said after another few minutes. “Are you okay?” I didn’t say anything at first as I pondered my answer. No, I wasn’t okay, but she knew

that, and so did everyone else.

“He kept a journal,” I said instead. I took another drink from the bottle of beer, thinking of the worn, leather-clad book under Ava’s butt. “He kept a journal and never even told me.”

“Carter? Why would he tell you something like that?” asked Ava. She lit a cigarette and inhaled, and I could almost hear Carter’s voice in my head, reaming her for smoking inside. “You weren’t his *compañera*.”

“You don’t get it,” I said. “We told each other everything. Everything. He didn’t even tell me he was in counseling at school. He always acted so... normal.”

“Maybe he was embarrassed.”

“I don’t care if he was or wasn’t.” I tossed the lone bottle cap into the ashtray and took another drink. The beer bubbled in my throat and stomach. “He should have told me.”

“I think you’re giving yourself way too much credit,” Ava said. Count on her to get me irritated all over again. I watched her take another puff on her cigarette and then blow out, forming smoke rings in the air with her lips.

“Maybe I should visit the school and talk to Ms. Dunham,” I said. “Maybe she can help me sort this out.”

“Sort what out?” demanded Ava. She put the cigarette out in the ashtray, looking irritated. “He killed himself, Khloe. He swallowed a bottle of pills and then died. I’m not sure what needs sorting out.”

“People don’t just end their lives when they have a bad day,” I snapped. “No one saw this coming, Ava. No one. So why? Why did this happen? What did we miss that drove him over the edge?”

“Maybe he misread the correct dosage on the bottle.” Ava shrugged, and I had an overwhelming urge to smack her. Had it been anyone else, I would

have. But I knew that Ava's defense in awkward situations was humor, even when it infuriated me.

"You can't take anything seriously, can you?"

"I can, too," Ava argued. "Just not this." She sat up and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her thighs. "I know you're hurting, Khloe," she said. "But do you think that dwelling on this is going to bring him back? Do you think that digging up unnecessary information from his past will help you come to terms with the fact that he's actually gone and won't be coming back?"

"Fuck you." I raised the beer to my lips and chugged it until the bottle was empty. Ava rolled her eyes and fell back against the couch.

"I think deep down, you know I'm right," she said. "And it fucking hurts because I'm always right. So, for once, Khloe, just roll with the punches. Besides, why are you putting yourself through this anyway? Skip to the back of the journal to see if he had anything to say to you. Don't put yourself through the whole damn thing." I was silent as she rummaged through her purse for a moment, finally coming up with a glass pipe.

"I can't skip the pages. I don't know why, it just seems like Carter would have wanted me to read it from beginning to end. It seems like it would be... cheating, to skip to the end. Also, I'm not in the mood to smoke, Ava."

Ava grinned, looking a bit too sly for my comfort.

"I don't have weed, *hermosa*. I have ice."

I stared at her, hoping she was joking. It didn't appear so. "You brought meth to my house?"

"Don't look so shocked." She pulled up a small bag filled with white granules and tossed it at me. "It's not like this is unfamiliar to you."

"I'm off this shit." I threw the bag back, angry with her for bringing it. Even more so, I was angry with myself for even considering the possibility

of doing it.

“There’s no one here who’s going to judge you,” said Ava. “Not even Carter.” I felt a stab of sorrow at my heart when she said his name, and yet again, I found myself fighting back the brutal tears. Ava was already loading the pipe, her slender fingers expertly preparing the bowl as I looked on. She was right, and I knew it. We both knew it. Had Carter been there, I wouldn’t have even considered it. I hated disappointing him, and to keep myself from it had done me well. But now? Well, now he was gone, and I had an escape even if it was the wrong kind. But again, no one had ever accused me of making good decisions.

“For the pain that you’re feeling over this, Khloe, the doctor must order something stronger than a beer.” She held the pipe and lighter out to me, nodding, encouragingly. An image of Carter’s face flashed in my mind, and as quickly as it had appeared, it vanished. I’d been clean for a year, thanks to Carter. One long, successful year of being drug-free. A year of complete and utter happiness.

Too bad happiness was overrated.



It had been a brilliant array of colors and emotions that flashed into my mind that first night, years before. Beautiful colors like blues and greens and pinks had popped in front of my vision, and then, all at once, dark colors like black and gray, the color of sadness and death.

The moment I’d succumbed to the drug had been the moment that started it all. It was a downward spiral, like speeding down a hill with the brakes cut on the car—horrifying, and yet somehow so exhilarating. And,

just like a car wreck, one could either survive it and do it again or crash and burn but never just once. Over and over again.

I don't remember seizing, couldn't remember foaming from my mouth or my eyes rolling back in my head. I could remember hearing Carter's voice, though. So close, and yet so far away. He had been shouting at someone. At me? Maybe. No, he had been shouting at Ava, screaming at her, asking what I had taken and how much. Another voice had asked about an ambulance, and then someone else had denied me one. With an ambulance came cops, and with cops came handcuffs and juvie.

It hadn't lasted long, the glory of the high. Before I knew it, I had been put into bed, tucked in, a glass of melted ice water on the nightstand near my head. When I had woke that following day, my brain pounding against the inside of my skull, tongue swollen and cut from where I had lacerated it during the seizure, Carter had been sitting by my bed, headphones in his ears and an artist's sketchbook in his lap. He'd been bobbing his body to the music as I watched, so taken with the lyrics and moved by whatever he'd been drawing. He'd seen me wake up, saw my eyes flutter open, and he'd leaned in toward me, yanking the buds from his ears.

"Without you, my life would be void of ladybugs and freckled cheeks," he'd said. "Please. Don't do that again. Ever."



Between the meth I'd smoked with Ava and the vodka shots we'd taken, I was blasted by the time two in the morning rolled around. Ava, who was kicked back on the sofa now dressed in nothing but her black-laced bra and Levi's—apparently, stripping while high was still her thing—brought it up first.

“Where’s that journal?” she asked. I looked up as her voice echoed in my head, her words fading in and out. For a moment, there was two of her. And then, three. And then just one.

“What journal?”

“Carter’s journal, silly.” When she stood up, I couldn’t help but admire her half-naked body. My attraction lay solely with men, but Ava’s flat stomach and toned legs were the envy of the neighborhood, even for the women. Most likely it was envy and not attraction, but with my head swimming, I couldn’t pinpoint it either way.

“I’m not sure.” Frowning, I looked around trying to remember where I’d put it. “Oh, it’s under the couch. The cushion. The couch cushion where your ass just was.”

Ava backed up a few feet and lifted the cushion, pulling the precious leather-bound journal from its hiding place. Seeing it, my heartbeat sped up, but I tried to ignore it. I hated how it made me feel—so alone and way too sober.

“How far have you gotten?” she asked. I squinted, trying to rack my memory. It was amazing to me how clueless getting high left me. But then again, sometimes not being able to think straight was exactly the therapy I needed. Thinking, I had come to realize, was just as overrated as happiness.

“January 5th, I think,” I said. “That was the second entry.” Nodding, Ava opened the book and flipped over a few pages.

“The next one isn’t until October 25th,” she said. She squinted, mumbling something under her breath in Spanish I couldn’t make out. Not that I ever could, really. She could have been cussing me out, and not for the first time, and I wouldn’t have had a clue.

“You mean he didn’t write in it for nine months?” I asked.

“Almost a year,” Ava said. “The entry jumps from January 2014 to October 25th.”

“October?” I repeated. “October 25, 2014?”

Ava nodded, confirming, and my hands automatically started to clam up. “What does it say?” I asked, though hesitant to hear the answer. She cleared her throat dramatically as if getting ready to stand up on stage and give a speech.

“October 25, 2014,” she read. “Khloe’s mother died today—” Ava stopped, caught off guard, suddenly looking uncertain. Her eyes fluttered up from the page, and she looked at me. I nodded, encouraging her to go on, despite the desperate urge I had to cover my ears and hum. She did.

“My heart hurts for Khloe and Mr. Daniels. They were close, and it’s hard to see her in pain. I just wish I could take it away from her. The pain, I mean. She means so much to me, and I hope she knows that.” Ava stopped again, looking uncomfortable, and then handed the journal over to me. I took it, my finger marking the page she had been reading from. My hands were shaking, but I didn’t know if it was because of the meth or the circumstances.

“You don’t have to read it out loud,” she said. “Just read.”

I looked down at the entry.



Khloe’s mom, Charlotte, had cancer. In the last few months, she’d been getting sicker. Poor Khloe. It hurts her. I know it does, especially because she had to take care of Charlotte at the end. No fourteen-year-old girl should have to go through something like this. I’ve tried to be the best friend I can to her,

but there's only so much one person can do. I know that from experience.

When Logan was killed, nobody was ever able to make it better. It sucked. It sucked for everyone, and it still sucks now.

An odd, tight sensation gripped my chest. I handed the book back over to Ava. She glanced down, skimmed it, and then closed it before setting it down on the coffee table.

“Who’s Logan?” she asked. I picked up the bottle of vodka, poured myself a shot, and took it straight, grimacing.

“Logan was Carter’s older brother. He died.”

“How?”

“He was shot.”

“Really? Bummer.” Ava took another hit off the pipe, inhaling deeply. “I bet Carter’s tight-ass dad had a field day with that.”

“He did,” I murmured. “He never let us forget it.”



I'd known at the time that being downtown around the Three Mile Station was a bad idea. Three Mile was off the map, prime realty for drug dealers, gangs, and thieves. But even at seventeen, the thought of buying liquor and not getting ID'd compelled me. You couldn't do that anywhere else in the city, and I was up for the challenge. Being a rebel was what I had become best at, just to spite my father, who had become cold and withdrawn after Mom's death a year before.

“Let’s go home,” Carter said. “I don’t think we should be down here. I told you it was a stupid idea to skip school.”

“Quit being a pussy.” I hitched my purse over my shoulder and lit another cigarette, more anxious to get drunk than worried about being caught.

“Don’t go in there, Khloe,” he begged. By then, his tone had taken on a hint of desperation, which compelled me even more so to do it. “I don’t think we’re welcome on this side of town.”

“If you want to go home, then leave.” I was angry, irritated, and ready to punch him in the balls.

“You should both leave,” someone said, approaching us from the other direction. It was Logan, Carter’s older brother. Logan, the good guy. The sweet guy. The man with so much potential and so much drive that he made the rest of us look like losers.

“This isn’t any of your business.” Reaching for the door handle, I told myself that I wasn’t about to leave without a cheap bottle of booze tucked into my bag. I had something to prove, though at the time I had no idea what. Just something, I suppose. As I started to pull on the handle, a man dressed in sagging pants and a dirty white T-shirt opened the door before I did. He smiled, and for some reason, I noticed that three of his teeth were capped with gold.

“You kids looking for something good?” he asked Carter and me.

“I’m sorry,” Logan said, and he stepped in front of me. “They’re minors. We were just about to be on our way.”

“I wasn’t asking you.” Suddenly, the man with the gold teeth looked less than trustworthy, and every speck of confidence I’d previously had vanished like water on a hot sidewalk.

“No, it’s okay,” I stammered, finally realizing my mistake. “We were just leaving.” I backed away from the door, my eyes on his, wondering what I had dragged us all into and if it had been worth it.

“C’mon, Khloe,” Carter murmured. He’d taken my arm in his grasp to steer me away, and Logan had rested his hand on my other one. Count on those two boys to protect me like a sister. They always had my back.

“I don’t think the lady was done doing business,” the black man said. Carter stalled, but Logan kept pushing me forward, ignoring the guy with the over-sized clothes and gold teeth. We had about vanished around the corner when I heard the click of the gun. Instead of stopping, Logan had pushed us faster, somehow managing to place himself behind Carter and me, shielding us. Under his breath, I could hear him mumbling a prayer, but I couldn’t bring myself to join. I was too terrified to think straight.

“Your God won’t save you today,” said the man with the gold teeth. And then he had fired the gun.

Just because he could.



“No wonder David Drake hates you,” Ava said. She opened another bottle of beer and took a drink. I wasn’t sure how she wasn’t passed out all over my couch yet. Although I had come to find that underestimating someone like Ava was a beginner’s mistake. She could run with the big dogs. That’s why we’d become friends.

“Carter took it upon himself to keep me out of it,” I said. “He told David it was his idea, not mine.”

“Did he believe that?”

“Not even for a second.”

“I’m surprised Carter stayed friends with you,” said Ava. I looked up, caught off guard, suddenly defensive.

“Why do you say that?”

“You got his older brother killed,” Ava said with an innocent shrug. “I sure as hell wouldn’t keep you around.” As she took another hit from the pipe, I pondered what she’d said. Despite my resistance, she had a point. I’d been an outcast during my teenage years after the death of my mom—a rebel, an attention-seeker in a world of evil and mishap. Carter was my angel in disguise. He’d pulled me up, brushed me off, and sent me forward. Thanks to him, I got clean. Thanks to him, my world had slowly started to piece itself together again. Thanks to him, I was still alive.

“I wasn’t always like this,” I told her. “My world started to crumble when my mom got sick.”

“I’m not sure I believe you were ever a precious angel.” Ava laughed. I looked down at the glass of vodka in my hand, tracing the rim with my fingertip.

“I did really well in school, actually. My mom was my biggest supporter. She was behind me every step of the way. It didn’t matter what choices I made.”

“And your dad?”

“Frank wasn’t around much, even when my mom was alive. But when he was around, he was great.” My eyes drifted to the journal on the table, and I sighed. “He wasn’t always the way he is now. My mother’s death drove him over the edge.” Ava, noticing my eyes on the journal, leaned forward and picked it up. She opened it again, skimming through it.

“Well?” she said. “What are you going to do now?” I reached for the book, flipping to the beginning to re-read the first page.

“I’m going to go to school,” I said. “And I’m going to get some answers from Traci Dunham.”

SEVEN

Ava and I were back to work at the club Monday night. The weekdays were slow, and for that, I was relieved. I was getting tired of all the sympathetic looks and sad eyes. It was no secret in a place like that. Everyone had known Carter for the amazing person he'd been, and now he was dead, leaving his pitiful excuse for a friend to fend for herself.

"Khloe, check this out," Ava called. I glanced over at her, still dusting the beer glass in my hand, trying to rein my thoughts back in. Ava had a streak of liquor shots lined up on the counter and, as I watched, she proceeded to take them all in a row, shooting back the little cups of booze with an expression of triumph. She shot the last one and slammed it back down on the counter before raising her slender arms above her head in a silent cheer.

"You're pretty skilled," I said, listening to the applause her show received. Ava was always the first to put on a good show, which is why our boss hadn't fired her yet for always being sloshed on the job. Lots of men came into this club, and men liked women like Ava.

"I need to get laid," Ava said as I filled an ice-frosted glass with beer for a customer. "I just need sex, you know? Sex is good. Sex is great."

"I volunteer as tribute!" Jesse called from where he was sitting at the end of the bar, quoting a popular movie. He was playing on his phone, hunched

over the counter with a drink in his hand as he eavesdropped on our conversation. I rolled my eyes, but Ava looked smug.

“I would consider taking you up on that if you weren’t already spoken for,” she said. Ava didn’t tend to care who was hitting on her. If they’d give her a good screw and get her high, she was sold.

“I don’t think anyone’s spoken for you, have they, Jesse?” I said, shooting Ava an icy stare. Being set up was not on my agenda, not by far.

“Oh, come on!” Ava cried. Her pitch was high and whiny, like a teenager being grounded. “Jesse’s nice. Aren’t you, Jesse?” She looked over at him, and he gave us a thumbs up and a grin. I turned away from Ava, annoyed, and poured a shot of tequila for myself, but not before glancing over my shoulder to make sure our supervisor wasn’t watching. He wasn’t, per usual. I didn’t even know where he was, actually, and that was part of the reason I still worked in this shithole. Despite being underage, I worked my ass off for under the table wages accompanied by the occasional drink on the job. Our boss was a skeezy loser, but it’s the reason I’d been hired in the first place. I could make enough money to live and our boss could turn the other cheek on the legalities of it.

“Stop trying to set me up,” I said. “I don’t need to be with someone, Ava.” Across the club, the front door opened, and a group of men piled in. I had my head down scrutinizing a broken mug when I heard Ava purr. I looked up, trying to pinpoint what she was drooling over.

“Firemen,” Ava said. “Men in uniform get me all hot and bothered.”

“Men, in general, get you hot and bothered,” I said, but she wasn’t listening anymore. Granted, it was nice to be able to feast our eyes on a group of men who weren’t in their sixties or drunkenly slobbering over every female in the club. That seemed to be the norm here.

“Hi,” I said as the men made their way up to the bar. “What can I get you?”

“Beer all around,” one of the guys hooted, and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Typical men. Loud and slobbery, and did I mention loud?

“No beer for me, thanks,” one of the men said, stepping around his friend. “I’m the designated driver.” He flashed a smile as his eyes met mine.

“You,” I said. “I think I know you.” The guy with hair as dark as night leaned forward, his vivid blue eyes seeming to sparkle mischievously.

“You look pretty familiar yourself,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“This is Khloe,” Ava said behind me. Christ, she was as loud as they were. “She’s pretty amazing.”

“She definitely looks it,” the guy said. He smiled again, and it dawned on me where I recognized him.

“You’re the paramedic,” I said. “That’s how I know you.”

“Guilty,” he said. “Do I know you from a job?”

“You probably don’t remember.” My chest tightened as I stared at him, memories from that evening wrapping my chest in a suffocating vice. “My best friend committed suicide, and you were one of the medics who arrived at his apartment.” A moment of silence settled between us, and I saw the guy’s face slowly start to melt into realization.

“I do remember you,” he said softly. I tried not to think too hard about how disturbingly terrible I’d acted in front of this guy after finding Carter dead and getting kicked out of the funeral. I was sure that was all it was going to take for this person to back away politely and never look in my direction again, but he didn’t. “I’m Ty,” he said instead, offering his hand. I took it in mine, both of us caught off guard. I was flattered that he hadn’t gone running for the door.

“Khloe,” I mumbled, and Ty smiled.

“Nice to see you again, Khloe,” he said. “I’m sorry about your friend.”

“Thanks.” I smiled back at him, but I didn’t feel I wanted to get too far into that discussion. I filled a glass with cranberry juice and slid it across to Ty, who had taken a seat next to a few of his friends at the bar. Down at the end, Jesse was staring Ty down, looking less than impressed. I wondered if it would be too mean to kick him out for being a jackass.

“So, are you a firefighter, too?” Ava asked Ty, leaning across the bar counter. Her shirt was low cut, cleavage peeking or falling out of the tank top she wore. I rolled my eyes, but I knew it was a lost battle. If it had a penis, Ava was sure to be all over it.

“I’m not, actually,” Ty said politely, and I was a bit surprised to see that he didn’t do a double take when looking at my friend. Every man did. “We work with the firefighters, but my adrenaline buzz comes from helping people.”

“Well, that’s cool, too,” Ava said, turning away with disinterest. The nice guys weren’t exactly her type.

“I think it’s really cool,” I admitted when Ava walked away. Apparently, she was planning to throw herself at every firefighter in the club until one took the bait. “Being a paramedic would be fun, I think.”

“It is fun,” Ty said. When he looked at me, he was smiling again. “I mean, it can be really trying at times, you know? It can be hard.” I nodded, remembering the night I’d found Carter, his skin so cold and pale, eyes vacant. I felt sick to my stomach, and I knew he was right. I couldn’t imagine having to see something like that daily.

“I used to want to be a doctor,” I told him. “But I don’t know if I’m any good under pressure.” I refilled his juice, trying to ignore Ava’s loud flirting from the other end of the bar.

“What kind of doctor?” Ty asked.

“A surgeon,” I said, and my cheeks flushed red. “A trauma surgeon. Fat dream, huh?”

“No,” Ty said. “I think that’s amazing.” And I could tell he meant it. Across the bar, someone shouted a profanity, and a beer mug shattered into pieces on the floor. I jumped, startled, and looked over to see Jesse and one of the fire guys sizing each other up.

“Jesse!” I shrieked, and Ty looked over just in time to jump up from his seat and pull his buddy off before somebody took a hit.

“Jesse, get the hell out!” Ava shouted at him. “That is not okay!” I watched Ty pull his friend back, murmuring something in his ear as he patted his shoulder. The firefighter Jesse had tangled with was a huge guy, probably over six feet two with bulging biceps and a deadly smolder in his eyes. I almost wanted to call Ty off so that I could see him slam Jesse into the ground.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “Jesse probably started it.”

“I think booze started it,” Ty said with a smirk. “But we better go. If they clock into work tomorrow with battered faces, I’ll be hearing about it from our chief.” I opened my mouth to respond, but it was already too late. The entire group of firefighters and medics had thrown money on the counter and walked out of the bar. Jesse, unfortunately, was still standing at the end of the counter, looking pissed.

“You’re fucking *loco*,” Ava said to him. “Chill.” I glared at Jesse, trying to decide if I would rather punch him in the face or groin.

“Thanks a lot,” I said to him. “You’re an ass.”



Despite Ava's begging, pleading, and bribes with beer, I refused to read more entries in Carter's journal until I could figure the first thing out. Though it seemed silly to her, and probably everyone else, I just couldn't bring myself to read the whole thing at once. I felt like once I finished reading, and I was done, then Carter would be done too. The last bit of him that I had was in that stupid, leather-bound book, and I couldn't bear to see it end.

I'd decided to go back to our high school to meet with Traci Dunham. It seemed to me that her involvement in my best friend's life had been so much more than I'd ever known, and if anyone had answers for me, it would be her. I had no idea why, or even what to say to her, but I couldn't leave it alone.

Tucking Carter's journal into my coat, I took the bus downtown to my old school, the very same school I'd dropped out of my senior year, months before graduation, much to Carter's dismay. I'd hated school and hated the bullies, the misfits. I'd hated the mere atmosphere of a toxic, violent building full of imposters. Part of me wondered as I walked up the front steps of the high school how more people hadn't committed suicide in school. High school was brutal.

As I walked, I tried to imagine what I'd say to Mrs. Dunham, how I could approach her, but my mind was blank. A few times I even considered turning around and going home, but I forced myself to stay on the path until I finally checked into the office and took a seat, ignoring the snide look from the high school receptionist—a young woman who I didn't recognize and yet who still seemed to hate me just for existing. I looked away from her and at the wall instead, biting my fingernails.

"Stop nibbling on your fingers," Carter would say. "Soon, you won't have anything left to chew."

After another fifteen minutes or so, the blond receptionist stood up and glanced over at me. “Khloe? Mrs. Dunham is behind today with student meetings. Is there any way I can schedule you a later appointment?”

“No.” I stood up, annoyed. “I really need to talk to her today.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. I—”

Without thinking twice about it, I glanced in the direction of the closed office doors and made a run for it, my mind buzzing.

“You can’t go in there,” the receptionist huffed, but the time I’d spent in the general vicinity of the principal’s office meant I knew where I was going probably better than she did. The blond-haired girl was hot on my tail, still shouting something that I couldn’t quite hear, but I twisted the handle on the door and pushed it open.

“Traci Dunham,” I announced with a gasp for air. The woman sitting at the desk looked up at me from her stack of papers, peering over the top of her reading spectacles. She looked puzzled, but not as caught off guard as I would have expected. She let her hands fall onto the desk, folding them gently as she stared at me.

“Khloe Daniels,” she said. “It’s been a while.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Dunham,” the blonde said, coming up behind me. She reached for my arm, and I yanked away. “I told her to come back another ti—”

“I came to see you for a reason.” I took another step into the office, wary, perhaps fearing a big, fat rejection. Carter’s journal felt like a brick between my fingers. I stopped short of the door, biting my lip, hoping I had time to state my case before the blond bimbo called school security—the blubbering halfwits they were—and had me thrown out on my ass.

“Can I help you, Ms. Daniels?” Traci Dunham asked. “You don’t go to school here anymore.” She had yet to lay eyes on the book in my hand.

Behind me, the receptionist was still standing there at a loss for what to do. She looked like a confused, pitiful thing.

“I’m here about a student who came to you,” I said finally. “Carter Drake. This is Carter’s journal.”

“Carter?” she repeated. A clear flicker of recognition crossed over her features. Her gaze darted from me over to the student-aid receptionist, and she forced a smile and waved her hand. Quietly, the blond-haired girl backed out and shut the door, but she didn’t seem happy about it. Traci looked back at me and smiled. “I’ve been expecting you.”

“What do you mean?”

Traci got to her feet and crossed the room then, reaching out for the journal clutched tightly in my grip. I held it to my chest, wary of letting it go, wondering if she’d take it away from me before throwing me out.

“Please,” she said. Her voice was soft, eyes kind. It was easy to see how well she did her job. “May I look at it?”

Hesitantly, I handed it over, feeling somehow incomplete as the journal was taken from my hands. She took the book from me before returning to her chair, letting her fingers run over the cover without opening it. After a moment of silence, she looked up at me. “Khloe, I didn’t see you nearly as often as I saw Carter, but I know who you are. Your name came up frequently.”

Feeling both shocked and relieved, I took her words as an invitation to sit down, so I did, trying to make myself comfortable in the chaise lounge across from her desk.

“I’m sure it was all bad,” I said with half a smile.

Instead of opening the journal to read it, Mrs. Dunham set it down on her desk, one hand resting on the cover. “I’m sorry for your loss,” she said. “The whole school is. Carter was a wonderful young man.”

I had sincere doubts that the high school cared whether Carter was gone, but instead of climbing up onto my soapbox to tell her all about it, I simply nodded.

“He was,” I agreed. “He was wonderful and happy. Was. Now I need to know why he did what he did because suicide doesn’t seem like something a happy, wonderful person would do.” Speaking of Carter’s death so lightly made my insides twist into knots, but I couldn’t afford to break down now. I had to hold it together if I wanted answers.

“Khloe, I’m afraid I can’t disclose any more information to you about Carter.” She shifted in her seat, her eyes gazing at me over the expensive spectacles propped up on her nose.

“I don’t think he’ll mind,” I said, then wished I could take back those words. I took a deep breath, very much aware of Mrs. Dunham’s soft, sympathetic eyes on me. For some reason, while she stared, I felt like crying. “Please don’t say that,” I said, struggling to compose myself. “I need your help. You’re my last resort. I need to figure this out. I need answers.” With a soft sigh, Mrs. Dunham picked up the journal from her desk, stood up, and handed it to me.

“I think you have exactly what you’re looking for.”

November 15, 2014

I know I shouldn’t worry about Khloe, but I find it hard not to. She’s impulsive. I keep telling her that one day it’s going to get her hurt, but she doesn’t take it seriously. I just want to shake her and yell in her face, but I don’t because I know how fragile she is. How vulnerable. I could break her. So instead, I just have to be there for her... just have to help her through the pain and pray that she makes the right decisions. I don’t know

if there is a God or not, but if there is, I hope he stays by her side... even if I'm gone.

I set down the glass of orange juice and vodka on Ava's dirty, ash-stained coffee table and looked over at her.

"Am I impulsive?" I asked. Ava glanced up from the joint she was rolling, her expression completely serious.

"Yes."

"No, I'm not."

"Then, no. You're not." She shrugged, ready to lay down whatever I wanted to hear so she could get back to her pot. I rolled my eyes and closed the book, reaching for my drink.

"Carter thinks I am," I said.

"Not anymore," she cracked. I picked up a soiled pillow and threw it at her, but she dodged it.

"You're a bitch."

"That's why we're friends," she said, and I knew she was right. Somewhere outside of her shoddy apartment, a dog started to bark. Through the thin, cheap windows with cracks in the glass, it was irritatingly loud, and I wanted to slide open the window and scream at it.

"How do you listen to that all night?" I asked. Ava shrugged and lit the joint between her fingers. The barking didn't seem to bother her as it did me.

"Not all of us had a rich mother who left us a wad of dough before she bit the dust," she said. "It's all I can afford."

"I work at the same club you do," I said, hoping I hadn't already managed to sound too insensitive. I closed my mouth and kept it shut. Ava had been a foster kid, bouncing from one home to another as a young child

and then again as a teen. She never knew her real parents and had no family. She'd been a loner when we'd met, too mean to make friends and too aloof to try, so of course, we'd bonded at once. Her past, however, was not something she was always thrilled to talk about.

"I take it that the head shrink wasn't much help?" Ava inhaled on the rolled paper between her lips and looked at me. "You've hardly said a word about it since you got here."

"No, she really wasn't," I admitted. "Something about patient-counselor confidentiality. As if it even matters anymore."

"That's just a polite way of saying, 'kindly fuck off.'" Ava sat up from where she had been laying on the torn and ratted couch and reached for her cell phone. "I'm having some people over tonight. You game?" I shrugged, sipping my drink. I was never 'game' for her extravaganzas as I didn't much care for people in general, but more booze sounded like a promising idea, so I would go along with it.

"Sure. Whatever."

Ava's definition of "some people" turned into a living room full of drunk, high, slobbering college and high school kids. How she'd managed to pull that off was beyond me. Neither of us was even in school, let alone had any friends. But Ava was good like that. She could always provide the goods for these lost students, people just like me who needed the next fix to continue surviving in a world of endless hurt. Of course, they were here. So was I.

It was nearing midnight when I spotted a familiar face in the crowd. The party was still in full swing, and I was shit-faced as I stumbled over, feeling unnaturally chatty.

"What are you doing here, Jesse?" I asked. "Are you stalking me?" He smiled and pointed a finger in my direction as if racking his brain for my name.

“Kimberly?” he said. “No, Kelsey.”

“Khloe,” I muttered, less than amused. He leaned into me, and I could smell the booze on his breath. At least, I think it was his. It could have been mine.

“I’m just fucking with you,” he said.

“I’m flattered,” I murmured, keeping a straight face.

“Sharp wit. I like that.” He handed me a drink, a beer, and settled back next to me, propping himself up against the wall where I stood. “Wanna go out sometime?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” I tried not to think about Jesse starting a fight in my bar and running that guy, Ty, off. I could almost see Carter now, hovering next to me, rolling his eyes.

“He’s a loser, Khloe,” he’d say. “You can do better.”

“Maybe this will spark your interest.” Jesse slipped a hand into his pocket and pulled out a small bag of pills. I didn’t recognize them, but I figured it was something I would do well not to have, and since that was the case, I wanted them. He waved them under my nose and then stuffed them back into his pocket, teasing.

“You think I’ll sleep with you for pills?” I said. He laughed as if I’d said something funny.

“I don’t think you’ll be able to resist.”

“Bite me,” I said. He leaned in again, his breath tickling my neck, and a flush of desire spread over my skin. That, I knew, was just the booze. Had I been sober and talking to Jesse, I wouldn’t have any interest at all.

“With pleasure,” he said and grinned again. “So? What do you say?” I glanced down at my drink, feeling a whirlwind of emotions. I realized that if Carter had been there, the thought wouldn’t have even crossed my mind. I would have blown Jesse off, rolled my eyes, and walked away.

“I’m proud of you, Ladybug,” Carter would have said. “Now let’s ditch this joint and order a pizza.”

But Carter wasn’t here. The pain that he’d left for me to endure was overwhelming in some moments. No, not just overwhelming. Suffocating. Raw. Devastating. Without Carter, I was nothing. Without Carter, there was no one here to hold me up when I started to fall. The decisions I made no longer affected anybody but me, and I didn’t care what happened anymore. I was inches from the top, flailing, trying to reach for air, and every time I thought I might be closer, thinking of him only dragged me down again. Eventually, I knew I would drown. It was inevitable.

I looked at Jesse.

“I’m in.”

EIGHT

“Khloe, I don’t think you can get that tabletop any cleaner.”

I ignored him, allowing my hands to scrub effortlessly over the marble countertop. Jesse was sitting at my kitchen table, his nose in a bowl of cereal, watching me clean. As he stared at me, a drop of milk dribbled from his mouth and down his chin. I flinched, throwing a wet rag at him. It hit him square in the face, but he made no move to catch it but simply continued to stare forward as the rag fell from his face and onto the floor. He grinned.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” I said, turning back to my countertop. “Marble. That’s why I got this apartment. The marble. I love marble. My mom loved marble, too. We both just loved marble.” Jesse looked on, more milk dribbling down his chin.

“It’s nice.”

“It’s not nice.” I straightened up, glaring at him. “It’s beautiful. And it’s very expensive.” I turned to dip my sponge into the sink filled with hot, soapy water. The heat scorched me, scalding my hand. I removed it, watching the skin on my fingers turn from pink to crimson.

“Did you just stick your hand in a sink of nearly boiling water?” Jesse asked. His chewing was aggravating, and I wanted to throw something else at him.

“I did,” I confirmed. Ringing out the sponge, I turned back to the countertop to resume my scrubbing. Behind me, Jesse was pouring his fourth bowl of cereal.

“Who’s Carter?” he asked. The words stopped me short. My cleaning came to a halt, and I stood hovering over the counter, my eyes pinned on the hand holding the sponge. A few inches to the right, a tiny hard-water stain mocked me.

“How do you know that name?” I asked. From the corner of my eye, I saw Jesse shrug.

“Ava mentioned it the other day,” he said. I said nothing to this but simply resumed my scrubbing. Sweat sprang sticky on the back of my neck. Despite the chill in the house, my face felt like it was on fire. I had the Adderall Jesse had given me to thank for that and my obsessive cleaning, which only came out after I’d been popping pills.

“He’s just a friend,” I said. “Can you please get me the vacuum? There’s dirt on the living-room floor.” I straightened up, caught off guard when Jesse was suddenly in my face, his eyes meeting mine. He reached for the hand that was holding the sponge and gently pried it from my fingers.

“Relax,” he said. My heartbeat seemed to flutter unnaturally as he leaned in, his cracked lips touching mine. The pills we’d popped were working. I found myself leaning in to him, too, suddenly hungry for him—hungry for passion. Hungry for sex. Jesse reached for the button on my pants, and I didn’t stop him. My body was on fire, craving a man’s touch. I needed this.

Desire fluttered through me as Jesse pushed me back against the wall, hard. Beside us, a framed photo fell to the floor, crashing, splintering into pieces. Neither of us made a move to pick it up.

“Do you have a condom?” I whispered. Jesse shook his head, desperately trying to untangle his pants from his ankles as he tugged at my

shirt and bra. For a fleeting moment, I almost stopped him. I almost pushed him away. But I didn't. I closed my eyes instead, not caring. Not caring about anything. I realized, in that painstaking moment, pushed up against my kitchen wall, that the only thing I had really cared about was gone forever.

December 10, 2014

I hate him. He never fails to remind me of Logan's death. Not now, not ever. Will he ever let it go? Will he ever move on and leave our family in peace? I doubt it. Why would he do something like that when he gets off on making my life a living hell?

I miss Logan every day. My family does too. Mom cries herself to sleep, but dad just prays a lot. He seems to think that if he prays, everything will be fixed. I don't think there is a God. I don't think any god could take away people like Logan and Charlotte for no reason.

God can go and screw himself.

Next to me, snoring, Jesse was, yet again, drooling all over my pillow. I closed Carter's journal and rolled over, considering waking him and kicking him out. But that would be mean. Instead, I yanked the blankets free from under his sweaty body and wrapped myself in them, sure to keep a comfortable distance between us. On the nightstand next to my bed, my cell phone lit up. I reached for it quietly, realizing that if I did wake Jesse, he probably wouldn't leave, and I'd just end up having to entertain him.

Ava: R u ok?

Sliding down under the covers, I typed back a quick response.

Khloe: Jesse is in my bed. Tlk 2 u later.

After another moment, she responded.

Ava: Kinky. Don't do n e thing I wouldn't do.

Rolling my eyes, I set the phone aside, not wanting to think hard about what Ava would or wouldn't do. With her, the possibilities were endless. Thanks to Carter's wisdom, I had learned to err on the side of caution.

Used to. I used to err on the side of caution. A dart of desire rocketed through me, and I kicked the blankets off my feet and rolled back over toward Jesse, shaking him awake. He groaned, eyelids fluttering open, and I didn't care if I had to entertain him anymore. Maybe he could entertain me, too.

"Sleep," he mumbled.

I reached my hand under the covers, trailing my fingers gently down his chest to his abdomen.

"Aren't you tired?" Jesse asked, but I could feel him getting hard under my touch.

"I feel like I could stay awake for days," I murmured in his ear. Smiling, Jesse leaned in, meeting my lips with his. I parted my mouth slightly, allowing him to slip his tongue between my teeth. In one swift motion, Jesse flipped me over and pushed me down against the mattress, his body meeting mine in a wave of desperate desire. He reached down to tug my underwear off, his fingers working effortlessly over the fabric. I groaned and closed my eyes, a fire starting in my abdomen as Jesse's fingers quickened. The pills we'd been taking earlier magnified the intensity and

desire. I clutched the bed sheet between my fingers, writhing against the mattress, as the heat rose to my face. Jesse pressed his lips to mine, slipping his tongue in and teasing me. I pulled him against me, my breathing escalating, moving my hips up against his body.

“Take me,” I whispered. “Now.”

Jesse nibbled on my lower lip, looking smug as he slipped out of his boxers. I wrapped my legs around his midsection, squeezing, and pulled his body into mine.

“Your wish is my command.”

NINE

“How was the night with Jesse?” Ava asked. She was stirring her cup of coffee with a thin straw, already buzzed from the Kahlua she’d spiked it with. We were sitting in the campus lunchroom, scoping out the college guys on their way to and from class. Neither of us were students, as neither of us had even graduated high school. But college meant hot guys, and we were all over that, specifically at noontime every Friday.

“It was okay.” I sipped my drink, wishing I had something stronger than a vanilla latte. Like a glass of vodka, maybe. “It was... fine.”

“Are you in love with him?” Ava teased. She leaned forward, her elbows supporting her chin in her hands. A football jock passed us, his eyes flicking toward our table, his gaze on Ava. I watched, amused, as he nearly collided with the wall before vanishing around the corner. I couldn’t blame him. Dressed in a denim mini skirt and a sequined top that accentuated her cleavage, Ava was an eye-catcher. The slender Hispanic legs and dark rolling hair helped matters. Not that she needed any help in that department. I wasn’t ugly, but I was no Ava.

“I’m madly in love with him,” I said. “He’s everything I ever dreamed of. Cheap hoop earrings and all.”

“Could you imagine what Carter would think of that?” Ava said with a chuckle. “He’d have a stroke.”

“I know. I’d never hear the end of it.” A girl hanging on the arm of her nerdy boyfriend passed us, making sure to sneer at Ava as she walked by. Ava only smiled and waved, batting her thick eyelashes at the girl’s boyfriend. He looked away, face flaming red, and I watched the girl sock him in the arm with her fist. “Does she know you?” I asked. Ava laughed.

“Her boyfriend does.”

“You’re bad,” I said. “You’re really bad.” She smirked and leaned back in her seat, crossing her legs.

“Baby, life is too short to be good.”

“Touché.” I raised my coffee cup and toasted her. Across the lunchroom, a small group of guys came in through the side doors, talking loudly and laughing about something. Ava and I watched them, content with the show.

“Oh, hey,” Ava said after a moment. “Isn’t that...” I turned my attention back to the group of guys, and before I could acknowledge her question, the person she was referring to spotted us, waved, and came over.

“Khloe, right?” Ty said. “Wow. How are you?”

“I’m good,” I said, caught off guard. “I didn’t know you were a student.” I felt lame suddenly, a total loser. Not only was this man a paramedic, but he was also in school while I was bartending during the week and getting drunk on the weekends. Ouch.

“Oh yeah, I’m almost graduated, in fact,” Ty said kindly. He didn’t seem to care that his group of friends had already vanished out the door without him.

“What are you going for?” Ava asked. I knew she didn’t care, and I wished she’d shut up so he wouldn’t feel obligated to stand there and make small talk with us.

“I’m pre-med,” Ty said, and his eyes met mine. All at once, my entire face flushed with heat. How stupid I must have looked to him at the bar

going on and on about my lost dream of becoming a surgeon.

“Of course, you are,” I muttered. Neither of them seemed to hear me.

“Listen, Khloe, I have to get to my next class, but do you maybe want to go out sometime?” Ty asked. I looked up from my drink, startled, wondering if I’d heard him correctly. I had assumed, if anything, that he had a girlfriend to do that with.

“Um,” I said, and Ava kicked me under the table, sending shooting pain up my shin. “I’m not really in a good place,” I told him. “In fact, I’m still trying to get my life together. I’m not sure if now is the right time.”

“Oh,” Ty said. He straightened up. He was still smiling, but not as widely. “I understand. That’s okay.” He took a step back, lifting his hand with a slight wave. “Maybe I’ll see you guys around.”

“Khloe!” Ava hissed as I watched him walk away. “You’re an idiot.”

“What?” I turned back to her, trying to push Ty’s smiling face far from my thoughts. “I’m not an idiot.”

“He’s totally crazy for you, and you won’t even let him take you on a date?” she snapped.

I sighed and sipped my coffee. “I’m not his type, Ava,” I said. “He just doesn’t know it yet. And besides, I don’t need a guy in my life. They’re like an anchor that never stops dragging you down.”

“But he’s a doctor,” Ava said pointedly as if that was the only thing in the world that mattered. “Doctors are rich.”

“He’s not a doctor,” I said. “He’s a pre-med student.” I looked back over my shoulder to see if I could spot him again, but he was already gone. “No men,” I said. “I don’t need them.”

“Really?” said Ava. “Because it seems to me you were pretty quick sliding out of your panties for Jesse.”

“Jesse isn’t my boyfriend,” I said. “He’s just...”

“Your booty call?” Ava asked, and I glared at her.

“Better a booty call than a boyfriend.”

“I’m just saying.” Ava raised her hands, palms forward as if surrendering. “When a guy like Ty hits on a girl like you, Khloe, that’s a good time just to take it.”

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence,” I said but laughed. Ava had no problem telling it like it was. “He’s better off without me. I’m not exactly a saint.”

Ava shook her head and rolled her eyes, but she didn’t pursue the conversation further. “Do you ever think about going back to school?” she asked instead, looking pensive. “Getting your GED and signing up for classes here?”

I sighed and sipped at my latte. Bland. Too bland. Turned off, I pushed it aside, wondering if I could swipe a sip of Ava’s spiked coffee.

“I hated high school,” I admitted. “I don’t know how college would be any different.”

“It’s lame,” Ava muttered. “A whole bunch of stuck-up snobs waltzing around campus like they’re better than everyone else. It doesn’t seem worth it to me.” I couldn’t help it. I rolled my eyes.

“As opposed to what?” I asked. “Sitting around the house drinking booze and getting high?”

“Well, I enjoy it.” Ava laughed, but I didn’t find the humor. Despite my desire to drink and pop pills, I wasn’t an idiot. I knew it wasn’t good. But admitting it wasn’t good and actually quitting were two very different things.

“Carter wanted me to go back to high school and graduate with him,” I said. “He pushed and pushed for it.”

“He wasn’t your parent, Khloe,” Ava said. “It wasn’t up to him.”

“You’re right,” I said. “But he was my family. He only ever wanted what was best for me.” She shrugged, disinterested. Ava wasn’t exactly an advocate for the best interest of other people, mainly, just for herself. Everyone else was just kind of there.

“If you had enrolled in school, what would you want to study?” she asked.

“Nursing. And then eventually, medical school.” I thought of Ty. “Funny how that worked out, huh?”

“Okay.” Ava raised her hands, questioning. “So, do it.”

“It’s not that easy,” I said.

“Make it that easy, *chica*.” She leaned forward again, her eyes meeting mine. “This is America. I have faith in you. Get your GED and get into college.” Suddenly feeling overwhelmed at the serious tone the conversation had taken, I turned away from her to scope out the place, changing the subject.

“I brought Carter’s journal,” I said. “I take it everywhere with me. It’s been hard to read. I miss him.”

“I know you do.” Ava reached across the table and rested her hand gently on top of mine. It was rare to see her express sympathy, so when she did, I had to soak it up while I could. “Will you read some to me?”

“Do you even want to hear it?” I asked, and she shrugged.

“He might have been a little shithead, Khloe, but he was still our friend.” This, I knew, was true. Despite the way Ava and Carter had locked horns, he’d still cared about her. I knew Ava was a difficult one to befriend, but he’d managed to squirm his way into her life just by being himself, and she’d almost been okay with it.

“All right,” I agreed. “I’ll read some.” I pulled the leather-bound journal from my bag and rested it on the table, letting my fingers run over the faded

top. Ava nodded her head, encouraging me, and I opened it and began to read.

January 1, 2015

Sometimes, I don't understand what's happening to me. I don't know where these feelings come from or why. I was born into a God-fearing family, I go to church every Sunday, and yet somehow, there's still something wrong with me.

I want to tell Khloe about it, but I'm afraid she might not understand. I'm the one who's supposed to be support for her. What would she think of me? What would she think if I told her the truth about me being gay? Different?

The last word caught in my throat, and I shut the book, my gaze meeting Ava's. She stared at me, looking unusually caught off guard. For a moment, both of us were silent, trying to soak in what I'd just read.

"Did you know?" she asked finally. I swallowed and shook my head, unsure of how to react to this. I'd been under some naive impression that I knew everything about Carter's life as he did mine. Apparently, I'd been brutally wrong.

"I had no idea. He never told me."

"Well." She leaned back in her chair and lit up a cigarette, drawing annoyed scowls and disgusted sneers from the students around us. I glanced at the clock, knowing it was only a matter of time before we'd be kicked out. Again. "I mean, it's not like I'm surprised or anything," she said. I stared at her, slack-jawed.

"Really?"

“What?” Ava shrugged, looking like this was public and common information that I should have clearly known already.

“C’mon, Khloe,” she said. “No straight man takes care of a woman the way he took care of you.”

“We were best friends,” I muttered. Ava leaned forward, her arms on the table.

“You were friends, all right? Friends, not lovers. No straight man takes care of a woman as he did you.”

“We were friends!” My voice rose, calling the attention of more stares.

“Oh, shut up.” Ava rolled her eyes again, a signature move of hers. “Carter treated you like a *hermana*. You were not his sister.” I dropped the journal onto the tabletop, still trying to wrap my head around this newfound information. This confession had hit me like a blow to the face. Carter had always been the ladies’ man, the guy who women wanted to date, and the men wanted to be friends with. He had been charismatic, charming, and handsome.

“Holy shit.” I stared at the book. “Carter was gay.”

“It explains so much,” said Ava. “When is the last time you remember him actively pursuing a woman?” I thought about it, my forehead wrinkling with effort.

“Fifth grade?” I said. “Yes. Elementary school.” Carter had been crushing hard on a fourteen-year-old in our school. Angela was her name. Big-boob Angela with the silky blond pigtails and dimples. Stupid, stupid Angela.

“She’s pretty,” Carter said. We’d been at recess, swinging on the monkey bars, and my eleven-year-old old self had disagreed. Just because Angela

spent her time painting her nails instead of digging in the dirt didn't mean she was any prettier than I was.

"She's a sourpuss," I said bitterly. Giggling, Carter had reached over and mussed up my ugly brown hair.

"Don't worry, Ladybug," he said. "You'll always be my best friend."

"Forever?" I asked.

"Forever and ever," he agreed. "You're my BFF and ever."

TEN

It was Sunday morning when I called Melanie Drake, hoping I would be able to pick up Gracie for some one-on-one bonding time. For the first few days after Carter's death, I hadn't been able to face seeing the Drake family, especially Gracie, who looked so much like her brother, it hurt to see her. But eventually, I knew that enough was enough. The Drakes were my second family, and I couldn't keep my self-pity up long enough to lose them. I had already lost Carter, I couldn't lose Gracie too.

"She'd love to see you," Melanie said. "Gracie needs you now more than ever."

The "Khloe and Gracie Date" had been a thing for as long as I could remember. From the moment Gracie had been old enough to bond with people, she'd been attached to my hip, often clutching my hand lovingly or drawing me pictures of stick figures standing under the yellow sun. She had also been close with Carter. She cherished and looked up to him for the great big brother he was. I didn't know what kind of things went on in the mind of an eight-year-old, but I swore I would do what I could to ease her pain, and she could mine too.

"Double chocolate chip or raspberry twist?" I asked as Gracie climbed into the passenger seat of my car and buckled in. I waved to Melanie, who was observing from the front porch, a dim smile on her face. From where she stood, I could see the skin clinging to her bones. She looked frail. Sick.

Pushing aside my sudden worry, I plastered on a smile for the kid and reached over to muss her hair.

“Double double chocolate chip,” Gracie said. She sat up and waved to her mom, looking giddy with excitement. Her wavy blond hair had been pulled back and woven into a French braid, allowing her flawless, eight-year-old features to glow.

“How about triple chocolate?” I asked her. “I’m feeling chocolatey today.”

Gracie giggled. “With sprinkles?”

“Sprinkles galore. So long as they’re rainbow.” I shifted Missus Betty into reverse and pulled out of the Drakes’ driveway. Gracie, despite all we’d been through, was glowing. How easy it must be for an eight-year-old to bounce back after something like the death of a family member. I wished it were like that for everyone. One day, when she was all grown up, she’d remember her two older brothers, the ones who had died too young, too early, and eventually, her memories of them would fade almost entirely.

“I’ve missed you, Khloe,” she said as we drove. She sat up straight and tall, her blue eyes flitting with excitement out the windshield. I wondered if she’d been out much since the funeral, but I doubted it. I could barely drag myself out of the house unless Ava was there to push and shove me out the door. I couldn’t imagine how difficult everything was for Melanie and David.

“I’ve missed you too, squirt,” I said. “How have things been at home?” Gracie shrugged, not seeming interested in much else besides ice cream and sprinkles. It was either that, or she was simply trying to avoid conversation about her brother. I couldn’t blame her. I was even a bit relieved. I couldn’t counsel her if I couldn’t even counsel myself.

“It’s okay,” she said. “Mommy and me do a lot of things at home together, like scrapbooking. Daddy stays down in the basement most of the time. Mom says he’s just tired and that we shouldn’t bother him.”

“Is he mean to you?” I asked her. Gracie shook her head.

“He’s not mean, Khloe. But he’s not nice, either. I don’t know. He’s just there.”

Sounds about right.

I flipped on the blinker and pulled into the local dive—a sixties-themed burger joint called House of Grooves. It had been Carter’s and my favorite place and Gracie’s, too. As she unbuckled herself to exit the car, she caught sight of the journal nestled between the two front seats. She hesitated, her eyes locked on the leather-bound book. I waited, wondering if she would say something about it. After another few trying seconds, she slid out of the car, slamming the door behind her. I followed.

“Two triple chocolate shakes with extra, extra chocolate,” I told the busty server with the fluffy wig. She smiled and winked, sashaying back behind the counter to whip up our treat. Gracie, I noticed, was no longer smiling. Instead, she had her eyes pinned on her hand, slowly chipping the glittery pink polish from the nails. “Are you okay?” I asked, sipping my water. She looked up at me, her blue eyes identical to Carter’s. I felt a chill course through me but pushed it aside. Such a serious look for an eight-year-old.

“Yes,” she sighed. She dropped her hands into her lap as the server set our milkshakes down for us. As soon as she was gone, Gracie met my eyes once more. “Did you read it?” she asked. I licked the whipped cream from the top of my ice cream, savoring the richness.

“Read what?”

I already knew. Gracie leaned forward as if preparing to tell me a secret.

“You know,” she whispered. “The journal.” She sat back in her seat and picked up her shake, sipping daintily through the straw. I cleared my throat, caught off guard, wondering how a conversation like this was about to be held with a child.

“Um. Some of it,” I admitted. Gracie nodded, seeming content with that answer. She dug into her creamy milkshake, licking the chocolate goop from the spoon. Appetite suddenly lost, I pushed mine to the side.

“Gracie,” I said carefully. “What exactly did Carter tell you about his journal?”

She shrugged, kicking her legs against the wooden base below the seat. “He just said he wanted you to have it. And read it.” As quickly as that, the conversation was dismissed. I leaned back in the booth, arms folded, watching Gracie devour her frozen treat. All at once, I realized that there was so much more to Carter’s suicide than I had originally thought.

Much, much more.

ELEVEN

February 13, 2015

Khloe's friend Ava came onto me today. I tried to let her down easy, but it was awkward for both of us. I think she thought I liked her.

“Oh, Christ.” I handed the journal to Ava, who was counting her pills. She tossed back three of the narcotics and took the book from me, her eyes reading over the entry. She dropped it back in my lap, her expression contorted with anger.

“I hate him,” she said.

I laughed. “This is priceless. You never told me you had a thang for Carter.”

“I didn’t have a thang for Carter,” Ava snapped. She handed me a few of the pills, which I promptly washed down with a warm beer. “Notice the date? The day before Valentine’s Day. I just wanted some ass, is all. Maybe a box of chocolates.” She stuffed the bottle of pills back into her purse and rolled her eyes. “Carter just happened to be the nearest male specimen in the area at that time.”

“No wonder you hated him,” I said. “He rejected you.”

“Oh, please. No straight man turns me down. That’s when I should have figured out he played for the opposite team.”

“You’re just bitter because he laid you out,” I said. Ava ran a hand through her straight, black hair, still scowling.

“I’ll admit that I was jealous of the relationship the two of you had. But that’s where it stopped. You two were soulmates without the romantic aspect of it. Everyone craves a friendship like that.” On the coffee table in front of us, my phone lit up and began to buzz. From where I was sitting, I saw my father’s name pop up on the screen. Ava did, too.

“Aren’t you going to answer?” she asked. I shook my head no, and then reached over and hit ignore. The phone fell silent. When I pulled my hand back, I noticed it was trembling slightly.

“That’s the sixth time he’s called tonight,” I told her. “He must be drunk again.” Ava rested her head against her hand, staring at me.

“Do you ever see him anymore?” Her voice was gentle and understanding, unusual for her, but I hated talking about Frank with anyone who wasn’t Carter. Still, Ava was my friend, and she’d asked. I cleared my throat and shook my head.

“Since Mom died, he’s not the same person. All he does is drink. All day, every day. He lost his job last year and never found another one. I can’t deal with it. I don’t want to.”

“He’s still your dad, Khloe,” said Ava. “Even if he’s a drunk.”

“He’s no father to me. I can’t even remember the last time I saw him sober. I don’t want him in my life, and I don’t need him.”

“That doesn’t leave you with many people,” Ava pointed out. I laughed and reached for her hand.

“I have you,” I said, and that brought on another round of giggles. Ava wiped the tears forming from the corner of her eyes, laughing.

“You really lost out on this game.”

“Tell me about it.”

TWELVE

“You have good veins.”

I looked up at Jesse as he poked around on my forearm, squinting in the light. I tightened my fist and looked away, out the window and into the darkness. In his left hand was a syringe, in the right one a tourniquet.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” I asked.

“Pills are all wrong for you. You’re wound up like a rubber band.”

“And heroin will help?” I tried not to sound terribly sarcastic as he applied the tourniquet. The rubber tugged at my arm hair, and I flinched, but mostly just because of nerves.

“It should chill you out a little bit.” Jesse glanced at me as if pondering something. “Or so we can hope.”

“Gee, thanks.” I kept my eyes on Jesse’s face as his fingers prodded the bulging vein on my arm. He squinted and slid the needle in. There was a small pinch, a burst of pain, and I grimaced. I’d never been a fan of shooting up as a means to get high, but Jesse had insisted I take advantage of my “awesomely awesome veins.” Not everyone was blessed, apparently, with such an easy way to get high.

“I never really chill out,” I admitted, holding a cotton ball to my arm as he pulled the needle from my skin. “Carter use to tell me it would take a horse tranquilizer to settle me down.”

“I’ll look into that,” Jesse said with a laugh. “I’m sure we can find one somewhere.”

Disinterested, I watched him play doctor on himself, prepping a new needle so as not to use the old one. It seemed silly to me, but I didn’t say anything about it. Was there such a thing as safely shooting up heroin? Would a different needle really make a difference, or did it just ease our fears and make it easier to accept? Jesse, I noticed, hardly flinched as the needle slid under his skin. I couldn’t decide if I was impressed or totally turned off. Both maybe.

“You’ve practiced,” I said, my eyes on Jesse as he flawlessly bandaged his arm. His gaze met mine, and he shrugged.

“Does that bother you?”

I looked down at the hole in my arm, wondering what a safe answer would be. To be honest, I didn’t really have one.

“What do you think?”

“I try not to think too much, actually,” he said. He laughed again, his eyes twinkling, and I realized that I really liked his laugh. My eyes trailed his movements as he leaned back in the tattered recliner, propping his feet up. He put his hands behind his head and grinned at me. “How’re you feeling?”

“Not too bad, actually.” Pulling the blanket up to my chin, I felt a wave of sleepy euphoria embrace me. Jesse was right, it was a much better feeling than being buzzed on pills.

“Ava tells me you’re on some quest to discover the cause of that guy’s death,” Jesse said after a moment. “What’s that all about?”

I swallowed, hesitating, not sure if I wanted to get into it or not, especially with Jesse, the guy I was screwing and couldn’t stand all at the same time.

“He was a bit more than just some guy,” I said. “He was my best friend.”

“Sorry,” Jesse said. “I didn’t mean it like that.” Shrugging it off, I leaned forward for the bottle of prescription painkillers on the coffee table. It didn’t matter that I had just shot up. Nothing beat those pills. I shook a couple of them into my hand and tossed them back, washing them down with a sip of stale beer.

“He’d murder me right now,” I said. “I would never live it down if he were here to see what I was up to.”

“You’re an adult,” Jesse said. I scoffed, the heroin fogging my head. I didn’t feel like an adult. It was rare I did anymore. Adults were responsible. Adults took care of themselves. I wasn’t an adult, even at eighteen years old.

“He saved my life,” I told Jesse. “A few years ago, I overdosed, and he saved my life.” I took a deep breath, fighting a breakdown. “It was because of him I cleaned up. And then...” My voice broke.

“And then he died?” Jesse asked softly. I nodded, wiping a tear from the corner of my eye. I hated feeling like such an emotional wreck, but that seemed to be the only way I knew how to feel recently.

“It just doesn’t make sense.” I took a shaky breath, making an unsuccessful effort to pull my shit together. “Carter wasn’t the suicide type. Like, at all. And then one night he just ends his life, and no one even saw it coming. I was his best friend. I should have known.”

Jesse’s eyes flickered from me and over to the journal sitting closed on the coffee table. He leaned forward to pick it up, one hand on the cover as he held it.

“I don’t think you have this for no apparent reason,” he said. “In fact, maybe this is exactly what you need to answer your question.”

“Which one?” I joked, taking the journal from him. Jesse smiled sadly, and for the briefest moment, I felt as though someone actually cared.

“The why,” he said.

My head felt fuzzy while my face and hands numb a few hours later when Jesse started to unbutton my shirt. I was too wasted to say no, but I wasn’t sure I even wanted to. So instead, I let him undress me, enjoying the tickle of his clammy fingers against my skin.

“You’re so hot,” Jesse whispered in my ear, and I found myself laughing at his compliment. He pressed his lips to mine to shush me, and I couldn’t resist sneaking my hand below his belt. He was hard, ready, and that turned me on even more. I flipped one leg over him, straddling his body against the couch, and slipped my tongue into his mouth. His hips rose to meet mine, craving more than just a touch. I pressed into him, teasing, listening to the quiet groans escape his lips. As our mouths met yet again, I closed my eyes and thought of Ty instead, and a burning sensation lit in the pit of my stomach.



Later, laying in the dark of my bedroom, with Jesse snoring softly beside me, I picked up Carter’s journal and opened it. Clicking on the dim lamp next to my bed, I began to read.

March 15, 2015

I never thought I’d be this person. The person who was different. The person who people looked down on and judged. I never thought I could love a man. I never thought I’d be gay. I liked girls. I liked a lot of girls. But then it dawned on me... I

never loved a girl. Well, I loved girls. I mean, I loved my mom and Gracie and Khloe too but was never 'in love' with a woman.

Now I know why.

I set the book down, wishing with all my heart that Carter was here. I wanted so desperately to be able to tell him that I would always be there for him, that he could tell me anything and never have to fear my reaction. And then, later, I could hug him, hold him, and cry with him. But then I realized, lying in the dark, that maybe that had been exactly the problem. Maybe, just maybe, it was that Carter had been the one there for everyone else, and no one had been there for him.

THIRTEEN

“Christ, Khloe, you look like *mierda*.”

“You don’t look much better.” I glanced up, my eyes meeting Ava’s as she slid into the diner booth across from me, plopping her over-sized purse next to her on the seat. Her hair was disheveled, eyes bleak and glassy as she reached for my full cup of water and downed it.

“What’s this about, anyway?” she asked. She picked up her phone to check the time, looking like she’d just rolled out of bed. “It isn’t even noon yet. Christ. I should still be asleep.”

“I know. I haven’t even been to sleep yet.” Falling silent, I waited patiently for the server to take our orders. I wasn’t hungry. I hadn’t been for weeks, but I figured I should order something so we wouldn’t be asked to leave. As soon as the server was gone, I turned back to Ava, my eyes scanning the tired expression on her face. “I think we need to sober up,” I said. There was a moment of silence as Ava stared at me. She had one arm tucked under the other, plucking her lip absentmindedly with two fingers.

“I’m not sure I heard you right,” she said finally. “Say what?” I put Carter’s journal down on the table, realizing that this was going to be more difficult than I’d expected.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to continue with drugs,” I told her. I lowered my voice, paranoid someone might be listening. “We know better than this, Ava.”

“Hey, now.” She raised her hands in the air as if surrendering. “What brought this on?” I picked the journal up and flung it at her.

“This did,” I said. “Carter’s dead of an overdose, Ava. Don’t you see that?”

“Khloe.” Ava rested her hand on the journal, refusing to open it. “Carter killed himself. It wasn’t an accident.”

“That’s not my point!” I yanked the journal out from under the palm of her hand, stuffing it—hysterically—back into my purse. I’d never been good at a convincing argument, which had been Carter’s forte, much like everything else.

“I think you’re a bit wound up,” Ava said. I watched as she reached into her own bag and pulled out a bottle of prescription pills. She smiled and offered a few to me. For a long, painstaking moment, I considered grabbing the whole thing and throwing them at her. Maybe a bloody nose would have better succeeded in getting my point across. But instead, I sighed, held out my hand, and let her shake some into my sweaty palm. “That a girl,” Ava said, tossing a few back. “Just chill out, lady.”



Okay, so I’d failed. At least I’d tried. I had to give myself credit for that. I didn’t miss sobriety, and it made it easier that, God forgive me, Carter was not there to tell me how to live. There was no way for me to keep going day to day without him while I struggled with sobriety. It was an impossible task, a feat I knew I would not win. As long as I was drunk, high, or stoned, dealing with Carter’s death was a tiny, tiny bit easier. Not by much, of course, but enough to keep me hanging onto the last little shred of peace I had left.

Later that day, home alone with a glass of cranberry vodka and a joint, I opened Carter's journal. I'd found that it was easier to read if I'd been drinking and/or smoking. That way, at least, I wouldn't burst into bone-rattling sobs and have to fight the urge to flush it down the toilet out of despair.

April 10, 2015

I met someone last week. His name is Jay. He works at a mechanic shop downtown. I've never felt like this before. So drawn to another person ... another man. It's like when I see him, suddenly my whole world is better. Everything falls into place when I look into his eyes. That's crazy, isn't it? No. That's beyond crazy. I sound like one of those high school girls fawning over the school jock.

But he is handsome and kind. And the best part? He asked me out on a date. I'm just not sure if I should say yes.

FOURTEEN

“If that asshole in the red shirt calls me baby one more time, I’m going to unhinge his jaw.”

I looked over at Ava. “What?”

“That guy!” She lifted her finger and pointed across the room to where a burly, hairy man was drunkenly hollering about something next to the pool table. I cringed, yet I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Here,” I said, and handed her a shot glass. “Have another.”

“Men are dogs,” Ava muttered, but she took the shot anyway. “Is it almost quitting time?”

“We’ve still got an hour,” I said. “Things should be okay until then.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized I had spoken too soon when the man in the red shirt took an unimpressive swing at another guy holding a bottle of beer. The guy flew backward into the pool table, the bottle of beer crashing to the floor, sending shards of glass and foam skittering everywhere. I looked around desperately for our crowd controller and bouncer, James, but he was nowhere to be seen. I imagined he was sneaking a cigarette and a swig of his flask out back.

“Khloe, don’t!” Ava called to me, but I was already headed in their direction, fuming.

“Hey!” I shouted at the red-shirt guy. “We don’t do that in here. Take it outside!” The man turned to look at me, face red with fury, and eyes

bugging out with drunken anger.

“Fuck you, bitch!” he snarled.

I took another step in his direction, unafraid for some reason, though I knew I probably should be.

“Leave,” I said. “Now.” He took one step back and then another. He was only a few feet from the door, though, when the beer guy pushed himself off the pool table and charged at the red-shirt guy, nearly knocking me down in the process. Red-shirt guy crashed into the back wall, howling with rage, and I looked over at Ava who had just hung up the landline.

“Police are on their way!” she called to me. Hearing the word “police,” both men stopped fighting for a moment and looked over, letting it sink in.

“Fuck this,” beer guy said. He released red-shirt guy’s collar and straightened up. “I’m out.”

“Don’t come back in here with that shit,” I called after him. Outside the front door, I heard the whine of a police car as two people who had seen the fight helped red-shirt guy to his feet. I made my way back behind the bar, relieved that it hadn’t escalated into a dangerous situation. Red-shirt guy took a seat at one of the tables as the police officers came through the door, their hands hovering around their gun belt in case things got ugly. Behind the cops were two more people—a man and a woman paramedic carrying a bag of first-aid supplies. I felt the color rush to my cheeks in embarrassment when I recognized Ty.

“Shit,” I said, and turned away, hoping he’d forgotten my existence in the time I’d blown him off back on campus.

“Oooh, look who’s here,” crooned Ava. “Mr. Sexy Paramedic to the rescue.”

“Shut up.” I leaned down for another beer glass to fill, trying my best not to pay any attention to how effortlessly Ty was bandaging red-shirt guy’s

busted hand.

“Cute, charming, and a saint,” Ava whispered in my ear. “You better get on that before I do.”

“He’s all yours,” I said, and took a shot of tequila to settle my nerves.

“Oh, look,” Ava said. Her tone was so smug I wanted to hit her. “Here comes Prince Charming now.” She stepped away, leaving me to confront Ty by myself. I looked up as he approached, forcing a smile.

“Can I get you something to drink?” I asked politely. His striking blue eyes were intent on mine, and it was difficult to ignore the tingling sensation in my womanly bits that were slowly kindling into flames.

“Fancy seeing you here,” said Ty. Unlike the last two times I’d seen him at school and at the bar, he was dressed in his work uniform tonight—slacks and a collared shirt with the medical symbol on it. His jacket read *Seattle EMS* on the front and *Paramedic* on the back. I didn’t know what it was about seeing such a distinguished man, but I had to resist the sudden urge I had to jump his bones and rip off his clothes in the middle of the floor of the bar or the pool table. Yeah, sex on the pool table would have been awesome.

“Well, I work here,” I said. “What are the chances, right?”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t just a little bit excited to hear the bar’s address come over my radio,” Ty said. He was still smiling. Damn that stupid smile. “I hoped you’d be here.”

“I’m always here.” I filled a glass of beer for the person sitting next to him. “This is my life. Tending the bar and trying to get through day-to-day existence.”

“Then it looks like you have exactly what you want,” he said. I looked up at him, caught by surprise.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well...” He leaned forward, supporting himself on the bar with both arms. “You told me you wanted to be a doctor. Why aren’t you in school?”

“Oh. That?” I rolled my eyes and mixed a martini before handing it off to its owner. “People don’t really do that, Ty. It’s just a dream.”

“I do it. I’m doing it because it’s my dream.” He sat back, shrugging, and then removed his jacket to sling it over his arm, revealing a sculpted set of biceps. Damn those sexy biceps!

“Maybe someday,” I told him. “When I can get my shit together.” He opened his mouth to say something but was cut off by obnoxious squeal of a pager. He reached into his pocket and pulled it out, holding the speaker to his ear so he could hear the report.

“Car accident,” he said. “I’m sorry. I have to bail.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “Go. Go save lives.” I watched him and his partner leave, trying to compose myself enough to get back to work. Perspiration was accumulating on the back of my neck, and my skin was tingly and buzzing with heat below my waist.

“Jesus, Khloe, do you need to relieve yourself in the bathroom?” Ava teased, coming up behind me. I flushed, feeling the heat rise from my lower body to my face.

“He’s just a guy,” I muttered.

“As I said, men in uniform are just... yum! You better take advantage of that shit before he moves on.” Ava gave me a pointed look, and I scoffed, feeling a wave of disappointment wash over me.

“Moving on would be the best thing for him,” I said, and we didn’t speak of Ty for the rest of the night.

FIFTEEN

“If it’s any consolation, I think you’ve got this whole psycho bit under control,” Jesse said. Ignoring him, I yanked the old tattered phone book from my kitchen drawer and dropped it onto the table.

“She’s always been crazy,” Ava said from where she was standing next to the window. She had a lit cigarette propped between two fingers, one arm crossed under the other. She looked totally composed as I went about my escapade, which was nothing new. Not much fazed Ava. “Just now more than ever.”

“I wasn’t going to do this,” I admitted. “But it’s been a week since I read about this guy, Jay, and I can’t stop thinking about him.”

“Oh, baby, he’s all wrong for you,” Jesse said. “I don’t think he swings that way.” I flipped him the bird and opened the phone book, running my finger down the page, marking with a pen every single auto shop on that side of the city that I could find listed.

“You’re just setting yourself up,” Ava said, putting out her cigarette in the sink and joining me at the table, shoving Jesse’s bare feet off the spare dining room chair as she did. “This is Seattle, doll. There could be hundreds of these places, and just as many of them with an employee named ‘Jay.’”

“Then I’ll call them all,” I said. Jesse looked over at Ava, his face totally serious.

“Has she considered therapy?” he asked her. That caught my attention. I looked up and over at Jesse.

“Carter went to the school counselor, and he still killed himself,” I said. “So, no. I’m not sure some shrink is the answer.”

“What’s that going to prove, anyway?” Jesse asked. “How does finding this guy help you at all?”

“If he knew Carter, maybe he knows something that I didn’t,” I said. “Maybe he knows the secrets that I didn’t. It’s worth a try, isn’t it?” I didn’t get much of an answer from either of them, but I didn’t care. I was determined not to give up yet. If Traci Dunham couldn’t help me, maybe this Jay guy could. After all, Jay was part of some secret life of Carter’s that I hadn’t even known existed. There had to be something there worth knowing.

By the time I marked down all twenty-four auto shops in what Carter had described as “downtown” Seattle, my hand hurt from dialing the phone numbers and my confidence was slowly fading. I took a deep breath, fingers aching, and dialed again, closing my eyes as I pressed the phone to my ear.

“Buckley’s Auto.”

“Hi! Is, uh, Jay there?” I sat back against the kitchen chair, bracing myself for another confused or snippy reply.

“Sure,” the man replied. “He’s kind of busy, though. Can I take a message?” I shot upright, a million emotions bombarding me at once. Ava, seeing my expression, yanked a pad and pen from the countertop and handed it to me. Even Jesse, who was rolling a joint, his feet now propped on my table, looked impressed.

“You know what? I’ll just come in.” I clicked the pen. “What’s your address?” I scribbled the address and phone number down, surprised to see my hand trembling in what I could only assume was excitement.

“We’re about to close,” the guy said. “But you’re welcome to stop by tomorrow.”

“Thank you so much,” I said, and dropped the pen. “I will.” I hung up the phone and took a deep breath, meeting both Jesse and Ava’s curious looks from across the room.

“Well?” demanded Ava. “Did you find him?”

“Yeah,” I said. I picked up the scrap of paper and smiled. “I think I did.”



It became an odd and difficult decision to make over whether I should seek out my dead, best friend’s ex-boyfriend. If that wasn’t a mouthful and a plate full, I didn’t know what was. But even then, looking at all the possible outcomes, I couldn’t not do it. This Jay may have had information I didn’t. Maybe he had some insight that nobody else did. Maybe he knew why Carter killed himself because I sure as hell didn’t.

Ava was still asleep on my couch when I got dressed the next morning, gathered up the journal, and drove my crappy car downtown. A few times, I almost turned the car around to go home, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Not now. Not when I was so close. I was both terrified and ecstatic to learn more about this secret life of Carter’s that he had hidden so well from me, but not just from me, from everybody. It was time to get to the bottom of this. I knew that if I didn’t, the questions would haunt me for the rest of my life, and that wasn’t something I could live with.

Buckley’s Auto was a shitty hole-in-the-wall business, tucked between a sketchy looking pizzeria and a strip club. I parked Missus Betty and then stood in the middle of the parking lot, hesitating with the journal under my arm, still debating on this. What kind of person would Jay be? Would it

even be the right Jay? Would it be the Jay my best friend was in love with and had never told anybody about? Would he be nice? Would he hate me?

“Can I help you, miss?” a man asked, pushing open the front door to the shop office. A bell rang, startling me.

“Uhm. Yeah. I’m looking for Jay. Jay... um. Jay?”

The man with the potbelly and sweat-stained baseball cap eyed me as if he was expecting I was pulling some mean prank.

“Sure,” he said finally. He scratched his belly, and I resisted the urge to grimace. “He’s in the back.” He hitched an oil-clad thumb over his beefy shoulder and then turned away, not bothering to offer any more help. Fine. I didn’t need help. Squaring my shoulders, I went around to the side of the building. I could hear someone in the garage working with a loud machine. I ducked under the partially opened garage door and stepped inside, looking around. The smell of gasoline and oil engulfed me, and I coughed, feeling my eyes water. There were a few men around me, none of whom looked interested in the fact that I was standing there with an expression of full-on dumbass. My eyes flickered from one hillbilly man to the other, wishing I had more information than just this guy’s first name. God forbid if Carter never told me he’d ended up falling for some overweight, grease-stained, tobacco-chewing redn—

“Can I help you?” someone asked. I looked around, wondering where that voice had come from. Ducking my head, I caught the gaze of a person looking at me from the other side of a van that was lifted in the air. He had his eyebrows raised, waiting for a reply.

“Hopefully!” I ducked under the car that was elevated in mid-air, wondering for a moment if I would be so lucky to be flattened like a pancake before my quest was over. “I’m looking for someone.”

The dark-haired guy kept his eyes on me, wiping his hands on an oil rug.

“Does this someone have a name?” he asked.

“Oh, yeah. Jay. Do you know where I can find Jay?”

“That’s me,” he said, and he didn’t seem startled at all. “Please don’t hang around under the lifts for too long. Can I help you?”

I tucked Carter’s journal even deeper under one arm and held out my free hand to him. He eyed it carefully before giving a half-shrug and returning the shake. His hands were rough, dirty, yet somehow, I couldn’t bring myself to mind as I took him in.

“You’re really cute,” I observed. And he was. The guy I assumed was Jay had that high-school quarterback look to him—coal black hair, vibrant green eyes. He was tall and filled out and looked like he lifted weights. He dropped my hand as one eyebrow shot up.

“I’m sorry?” he said politely.

“You’re really cute,” I repeated. “I mean, he said you were, but I had to see it to believe it, and I—”

“Excuse me,” Jay cut me off. He glanced over his shoulder as if making sure we weren’t being watched or heard. “Who in the hell are you?”

“Duh to me,” I said with a nervous giggle. “My name is Khloe.” I smiled again like a love-struck idiot, admiring the muscles that bulged under his shirt. “I believe you were dating my best friend before he killed himself.”

SIXTEEN

“Phil!” Jay called. “I’m taking my lunch.” He reached out and took hold of my upper arm, steering me out of the shop and out the door. “Are you crazy?” he snapped as soon as we were out of range. “What makes you think you can come around my place of employment spouting shit like that?”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!” I snapped and yanked my arm away from him. “What’s it with you gay people always walking around so shameful? Whoever doesn’t like it can stick it up their ass!” Face flaming red, Jay pulled me away from the shop, glancing back nervously over his shoulder as a few of his coworkers watched us leave. He pointed at a little red Neon and opened the passenger door.

“Get in.”

“Why?”

“Please get in?”

“Fine.” I slid into the car, content that he was even willing to give me the time of day. I settled into the front seat and rested the journal on my lap, smiling brightly as Jay slid in next to me and started the engine. He still looked flustered, paranoid that someone was still watching us. Judging.

“I’m just a girl,” I said as he backed out of the lot. “The boobs won’t bite.” He glanced over at me, scowling, looking so much like a scorned

woman that I had to laugh. As soon as we were safely out of sight of the auto shop, he turned to me.

“I don’t know who you are,” he said. “But you have some explaining to do. You can’t just walk into my place of work and start rattling my personal business off to the entire world.”

“Fine,” I said. “But first thing’s first, will you treat a lady to lunch?” I figured he’d turn me down at first, but he didn’t. With a heavy sigh, Jay drove us to a quaint Mexican restaurant, one that looked sketchy, but probably had the best food around. I couldn’t complain. It wasn’t as if I were the biggest straight-shooter in the area. The host sat us in a private corner booth, presumably under the impression that we were lovers on our lunch break. Not that I could blame them.

“Now,” he said, resting his elbows on the table as soon as the server had delivered our drinks. He was staring at me expectantly, his green eyes no longer angry, but questioning. “Please tell me what in the hell is going on.” I took a sip of my Diet Pepsi and then reached into my bag to pull out Carter’s journal. I set it down on the table. He eyed it, still looking confused. “I don’t understand,” he said. “Is this some kind of joke?”

I reached forward and flipped open the journal, dog-earring the last page I’d read. I handed it to Jay. He took it, almost hesitantly, and began to read. As his eyes skimmed the printed words, his expression melted into one of shock, then sadness. When he finished, he closed the book and set it back down on the table.

“You’re Khloe,” he said. I smiled and rested my hand on top of his. He didn’t pull away.

“That’s me.”

“You’re his best friend.”

“Yes.” I tucked the journal back into my purse, out of sight. “I’m trying to figure out what happened to him, Jay, and I’m hoping you can help. I need to figure out why Carter killed himself.”



Two hours into a meal of foot-long burritos and chips and salsa, we were finally getting somewhere. Jay called out of work claiming he’d been needed for a family emergency, and I’d already switched out my soft drink for a margarita. Jay, on the other hand, stuck with ice water.

“I thought I made him happy,” he was saying. He looked down, his eyes wavering over the half-empty plates and soiled napkins. He sighed and shook his head. “I really thought we were happy together, Carter and me. I was happy, anyway.” He shrugged and ran a hand through his shaggy, dark hair. He smiled, but it was forced. I knew a fake smile when I saw one. I was good at them too. “He talked about you a lot,” he continued. “If you didn’t already know his secret, people would assume he was in love with you if they heard him talk.”

“We were best friends,” I said. “Two peas in a pod, my friend Ava says.”

“It must have been hard for you.” Jay picked up his water, but didn’t take a drink. “You guys were so close. I couldn’t imagine.”

“We were close, yeah,” I admitted. “But I wasn’t in love with him.”

Jay met my gaze then, and as the words sank in, his eyes misted over with tears. He closed them, probably to ward off the sadness, but it failed.

“I thought we were happy,” he said again. “I thought that finally, once he was able to accept who he was, everything would be okay.”

I took his hand in mine, squeezing it gently. “So, what happened?” With a sigh, he drew his hand back as if protecting himself.

“My family are strict Christians, just like Carter’s. When my mother caught wind of my relationship with, God forbid, another man, she threatened to tell my father unless we broke it off.”

“So, Carter left you?”

“No.” Jay closed his eyes. “I left him.”

“Oh,” I said, sitting back against the booth. “I guess I can understand that—”

“No,” he cut me off, looking ashamed. “I let my family blackmail me into losing the love of my life. He wasn’t ready to give up. I was.” He leaned forward suddenly, looking intense. “Do you think I’m the reason he... he...?”

“No.” I lifted the margarita glass to my lips to take a sip and then ended up chugging the last bit of it. I set it down, feeling a brain freeze coming on. Carter, if he’d been there, would have pointed and laughed.

“Taste it, Ladybug,” he’d have said. “Don’t inhale it.”

“There’s more to this,” I said. “There has to be more to this. Right?” Jay closed his eyes briefly as if trying to think of the right words to say, preferably without upsetting me.

“What if there’s not?” he asked finally. “What if, no matter how far into this you look, you’ll never really know why he did it?”

“Not only do I not believe that, but I can’t,” I told him. “If it had been me, Carter would have climbed mountains to figure it out. I can’t let this rest without giving him the best attempt I’ve got.” Jay shrugged, then reached over and took my hand in his. It was warm, and for the first time in a long time, I felt oddly comforted.

“Just... don’t be disappointed when this doesn’t turn out the way you wanted it to.”

SEVENTEEN

“Dear Lord, this is good shit.” Ava put the glass pipe to her lips and lit it, inhaling the thick smoke protruding from the end. She pulled it away, eyes glassy, and looked at me. “He’s a keeper, this one,” she said, tilting her head in Jesse’s direction. “If his drugs stay this good, never let him go.”

“Our children will be so lucky,” I mumbled, reaching for the pipe she offered me. I couldn’t deny it, though. It was good stuff.

“Thank my dealer,” Jesse said. “He gets it from someplace out of the country.” Yet again, he was half-naked in my living room, smelly feet propped up on the coffee table, hair greasy and unkempt. I took a hit from the pipe, closing my eyes to embrace the buzz of the drugs.

“Who’s your dealer?” Ava asked.

“You don’t have to answer that,” I said. “Ava can’t ever seem to keep her Ps and Qs straight.”

“Oh, that’s rich coming from someone who just stalked down her dead friend’s boyfriend,” Ava snapped, and I knew she was only half-kidding. She yanked the pipe from my hand and took another hit. “Besides, if I can get some of this, my life will be complete.”

“I thought I completed your life,” I pouted. Ava grinned and reached over, taking my chin between her fingers. Then she leaned forward and rested her lips on mine. I closed my eyes, trying not to giggle as Jesse

looked on. After a few moments, Ava pulled back, fluttering her lashes at me.

“No good,” she said finally. “I think I prefer *la salchicha*.”

“What?” Jesse asked. His face flushed under the light of the living-room lamp.

“The sausage,” I told him. “You know. Dick versus vagina. Hot dog and taco.”

His cheeks flushed even darker, and Ava and I laughed.

“I didn’t realize he was so innocent,” she said. “It’s kind of cute.”

“Isn’t it, though?” I stood from where I was sitting and crossed the room, leaning down to touch my lips to his. Jesse reacted appropriately, his body moving toward mine. Not thinking twice about it, I crawled into his lap, straddling him. Beneath me, I could feel him harden. His mouth opened slightly, and I slipped my tongue in, searching for his.

“Hey, people, get a room,” Ava said behind us, giggling.

“I have a room,” I told her, pulling back slightly. “But this could be more fun with three.” I shrugged off my jacket and then pulled off my shirt. When I glanced back at Ava, she, too, had removed a layer of clothing. Jesse’s eyes widened, shocked, as Ava made her way over to us, plopping herself down beside Jesse on the couch. She took his hand in hers and placed it on her breast, teasing him. He was stunned at first, uncertain, but after a moment, I saw his fingers begin to rub her nipple through the bra. I rotated my hips, feeling his erection throb.

“You want this, don’t you?” I whispered in his ear. Taking his free hand, I placed it on my breast, allowing him to rub it until I hardened. One of Ava’s hands had slipped below his waistline, and Jesse inhaled sharply, closing his eyes. I unclasped my bra, and Ava did the same.

“I would never do this sober,” I whispered in Jesse’s ear. “Consider yourself lucky.”



My head was pounding the next morning when I opened my eyes. I looked over, knowing that if I moved too quickly, I would hurl all over my bed sheets. Ava was asleep next to me, stark-ass naked, her arm slung around Jesse, who was on the other side of her, still asleep with only his socks on. I pushed myself into a sitting position, relieved to see that, if anything, I still had my panties covering my lower half, like that was really something to be proud of.

I reached quietly for the cell phone next to my bed, expecting in my sleepy-state to have ten missed calls and texts from Carter making sure I wasn’t doing anything stupid. There was nothing. No texts. No calls. No Carter. I sighed and leaned back, wondering what had compelled me to have a threesome with two people I had to face daily. The drugs had played a part, of course, but was I that stupid? Obviously.

I rolled out of bed, careful not to wake Jesse and Ava as I gathered up some clothes and went downstairs to shower and clean up. I smelled vaguely of ball sweat and rotting garbage and realized I hadn’t showered in about a week. When my mother had been alive, “dirty” was a foreign word in our home. Our house had been immaculate—clothes washed and folded, hair combed, and makeup done. If she could see me now, my mother would roll over in her grave.

I turned the water as hot as I could stand it and stood under the spray, allowing the moisture to wash away all the memories of the night. Fortunately, there wasn’t anything in my head that was solid, just bits and

pieces—blackout moments. I looked down at my arm, scanning my eyes over the black and blue pinhole where I had shot up. I scrubbed at it, ignoring the sting, wondering how much longer something like this could go on before I could officially be labeled a junkie.

Outside the bathroom, I heard the front door open and then slam shut. I buttoned my jeans and headed out to see what was going on. Ava was standing at the living room window, her eyes following something, or someone, outside.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Jesse bailed,” she said with a shrug. “He got a phone call and then took off.”

“He was embarrassed,” I said. “We scarred him for life.”

Ava looked at me, and we both burst into a fit of giggles. Just like that, everything was right again. Well, almost everything.

“Can you imagine how Carter would’ve reacted over last night?” asked Ava. She plopped down on the couch, lighting a cigarette. Her dark features were shadowed even more by the streaks of smeared mascara under her eyes, and her black hair was in tiny, twisted knots. Even then, she still managed to pull off that all-natural beauty.

“He’d have a stroke, I’m sure.” I sat down next to her, willing the pounding in my head to ease up. Getting high was an indescribable feeling, but the aftermath was a joke. I knew people who tried to stay wasted all the time just so the hangover couldn’t sneak in and bite them on the ass. I was tempted to try it.

“He’s a good lover,” Ava said. “Jesse, I mean. You’ve got yourself a keeper.”

“I don’t want to keep him.” I took the cigarette she offered me and inhaled. “And he’s not my lover or my boyfriend. He’s a toy, Ava. I’d like

to imagine myself ending up with someone who has morals. And a job.”

“You may be too late for that,” Ava said. “Ty won’t wait around forever.”

“Who said anything about Ty? Stop bringing him up.” On the coffee table, my phone buzzed once, alerting me of a text. I reached over and swiped to unlock it, skimming over the words.

“It’s Jay,” I said, surprised. “Carter’s ex.”

“What does he want?”

“He wants to go out tonight.”

“Like, go out and hang out or go out and screw?” Ava asked.

“I’m assuming since he’s totally and completely gay, he means just to hang out.” I texted a quick reply and tossed the phone aside. “Want to join us?”

“Will there be booze?”

“Most likely.”

“Then yeah,” she said. “I’m down.”

EIGHTEEN

I should have known better than to encourage Ava to a place where tequila and limes were in full swing, but I hadn't thought twice about it. Now, sitting on the barstool next to Jay as we watched Ava rub up against some guy with sideburns, I regretted my invite.

"She's an odd one, isn't she?" Jay called over the thumping music. I rolled my eyes and sipped my cranberry vodka, my poison of choice. Mixed with a couple of tablets of oxycodone, the buzz was nearing its peak.

"Oh, this isn't the half of it," I told him. "She hasn't started in on the coke."

Jay looked over at me, the bottle of beer held lazily in one hand.

"I'm going to assume you don't mean soda."

"I wish I did." Eyes on Ava, I thought once again of Carter. I imagined him sitting there, next to Jay, bitching about how immature and irresponsible she was being. I wished I could have seen Jay and Carter together. There was no way for him to know now how happy that would have made me.

"Are you into that stuff?" Jay asked. Tonight, he was dressed in Levi's and a T-shirt, his hands rough and nailbeds stained with traces of oil. So simple. So manly. There was nothing feminine about this man—the man who had loved my best friend.

“Um...” I faltered, wondering if I wanted to get into such a conversation with a guy I barely knew. I hadn’t pegged his type yet. Either it would completely turn him off, or he’d be able to relate. I didn’t know which one. Thankfully, sensing my hesitation, Jay looked away.

“Thanks for meeting me here tonight,” he said. “Since I came out and started dating Carter, I lost a lot of people in my life.”

“People fear what they don’t understand.” I cleared my throat, relieved for the turn in the conversation. “And that applies to religion and race, not just sexual preference.”

“People still want to be your friend if you have darker skin,” Jay pointed out. “But if you swing for the other team? Nah. They’ll drop you like a hot potato.” He took another sip of his beer and shrugged. “I can’t blame Carter for not coming out.”

“I can.” I signaled the bartender for a refill on my drink. “I was his best friend, Jay. We told each other everything. This was pretty big.”

“It wasn’t an easy thing,” Jay said. “It was difficult, Khloe, for both of us.”

“How long were you two together?”

“Almost two years,” Jay said.

I jerked my head back, shocked, and force out a long breath between my teeth. “Are you kidding me?”

“Nope.” He shrugged again, unable to meet my eyes. “The best couple of years of my life. Until I screwed it up.”

“I know what it feels like to be judged. Trust me, I understand.”

“We did stay friends,” Jay said. “But it just wasn’t the same. After Carter, I couldn’t bring myself to be with anyone else.”

“I wish I could tell you if he had been with someone after you,” I said. “But I have no idea because he apparently didn’t tell me things like I

thought he did. At least, not until after death. Lucky me, right?”

“It doesn’t really matter, I guess,” Jay said. “Not anymore. I couldn’t have told him who to be with or who not to be with. He was strong. He made his own decisions.”

“He made most of mine, too,” I said with a laugh. “Only, it was okay because they were usually the right ones.” On the dance floor, Ava’s high-pitched shriek grabbed my attention. I turned just in time to see her hand intertwined with another woman’s head of blond hair. She yanked the girl back, screaming something in Spanish. A small crowd had started to gather, onlookers too amused to pull the fight apart. Briefly, I considered sitting back and watching the fight go down while hoping for the best, but that would make me a terrible friend, and I was already teetering on the edge of losing everyone else in my life.

“That would be my cue to leave,” I said. “In a few minutes, she’ll probably have us kicked out of here, anyway.” I hugged Jay goodbye, too tired to deal with Ava’s drunken escapades all night. Not only was it emotionally exhausting, but it was physically tiring as well. “Hey, it’s time to go,” I shouted. She turned to look at me, one hand still tangled in the blond woman’s hair, eyes burning fire.

“I’m staying here!” she yelled. “See you, *mañana*!” I was about to object when Jay rested a hand on my arm.

“I’ll make sure she gets home,” he said. “Let me deal with her tonight.”

“If you were straight, I wouldn’t be considering this.” I stood on my tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. He looked taken back for a moment, but after a few seconds, a charming smile forced its way in. “Get a hold of me tomorrow, yeah?”

“Of course.”

Ava didn't even glance up as I gathered my things and walked out the door.

It was a damp night, cool and bitter with threatening rain. I loved it. The chill in the air soothed me, cleared my head. I'd always enjoyed it much more than the sun and heat, which made Seattle the ideal place to live. Carter had never been a fan, and yet he'd stayed, probably for me.

Taking a deep breath, I started toward home. I never could decide if it was a blessing or a curse to live so close to a bar. Ava and I were there too often, but it kept the drinking and driving to a minimum. That counted for something, right? Behind me, the ruckus and noise from the bar were fading, and I hoped someone had broken up the fight before one of the girls got hurt.

The alley I had often walked through to get home seemed unusually dark. Tonight, I didn't have Carter by my side, my arm linked with this, stumbling drunkenly through the gravel, laughing about something stupid. Tonight, I was alone. I pulled my jacket around my neck, shivering as a breeze tickled my chest. Up ahead of me, near the end of the alley, I saw a figure standing in the dark, watching me approach. I passed the man, keeping my eyes downcast, feeling creeped out.

"Do you know Jesse Holland?" the guy asked. I slowed my pace, automatically becoming aware that there was no one else around as the guy stepped out of the shadows. He was dressed in a leather jacket and ripped jeans. In one hand was a beer bottle, the other was a cigarette. From where I was, only feet from him, I could smell the liquor on his breath.

"Who?" I tried to step around him to keep walking, but I was unsuccessful as he blocked my path, and my heart began to thud as I slowed again and met his gaze.

“Jesse Holland,” he said. His eyes were glazed over with drink, and I could smell the cheap cologne and cigarettes from where I stood. His dark hair and five o’clock shadow looked oily and unkempt like he hadn’t showered in weeks. “Punk ass kid about your age, shaggy hair? Earrings?”

“It doesn’t ring a bell.” Stuffing my hands into my pockets, I made another attempt to side-pass him. As I stepped around him, he dropped his cigarette and snapped his hand out to seize me. I was caught off guard as he pushed me back against the brick wall, one hand gripping the outside collar of my shirt, nearing my throat.

“Don’t fuck with me, girl,” he hissed. I turned my head away, ready to scream, but he dropped the bottle in his other hand and smothered it over my mouth, pressing his body against mine painfully hard. I flinched, revolted, and tried to turn my head away again. “I see you two together all the time, screwing and shooting up,” he said. He leaned in closer, and I almost gagged. “Jesse owes me money, and from what I can see, you’re his bitch.”

“I don’t know anything,” I gasped, and that was the honest truth. Jesse had been tight-lipped about where his drugs came from, and I’d never thought to ask. Some dealers were dangerous, and this guy didn’t seem to be an exception. “Jesse never told me anything about owing money. I’m sorry!”

“Well, I’m telling you now,” the man said. “And I expect somebody to get it to me. I don’t give a flying fuck who.” He released my shirt, and I stumbled, falling to the ground on my hands and knees. Tiny pebbles and shards of glass pressed into my palms and kneecaps, but I ignored the pain, praying he would take that as a job well done and leave me be. I was about to pick myself up when a sharp, rib-shattering kick slammed me in the gut. With a grunt, I rolled to my back, shocked and gasping for air. Before I

could stumble to my feet, another piercing kick was delivered. This one, I was certain, cracked a few ribs. Stars danced in my vision as I crawled back onto my hands and knees, eyes closed, trying to breathe through the pain. The world was spinning now, and nausea flooded through me.

“I don’t know anything!” I cried. Shaking, I pulled myself to my feet, leaning against the alleyway dumpster for support.

“One of you, get me my fucking money.” He was in my face, breath vile against my cheek. I flinched and tried to turn away, but again, I was caught off guard as he yanked the front of my shirt and then shoved me back. Again, I was meeting asphalt. More tiny pebbles and little shards of glass sliced into my hands and knees, such shocking pain for such small cuts. I didn’t bother trying to get back to my feet this time as he delivered another slam in the gut from his steel-toed boot. Unimaginable pain buzzed through my body, like a rock crushing already broken bones. I cried out and tucked my head, hoping, praying, that he wouldn’t kill me. But at that point, death almost seemed like the better option.

“I’ll give you three days,” the man said. He kneeled, his lips near my ear as I cringed in the dirt. “Your boyfriend, Jesse, knows where to find me. Don’t be afraid to let him know I paid you a visit. This is just a taste of what’s to come.”

He walked away then, swaying slightly, not bothering to look back even once. Curled up on the ground in the fetal position, I watched his shadow disappear around the corner as I hugged my midsection, wondering if every rib in my body was broken. I could hardly breathe, let alone walk, and the thought of having to move from my spot on the ground made me sick. Down the street in the bar, I could hear drunken college kids singing, yelling, and laughing. If I could just get to the back door.

Taking a deep breath and then immediately wishing I hadn't, I rolled back onto my hands and knees. The ground dug into the open wounds on my palms, sending tiny slivers of pain through my fingers, but I ignored it, trying to breathe through it. Standing up wasn't an option, and I knew that without even having to try it. Instead, I crawled forward and braced myself against the pain, praying someone would come along and find me. With dread, I realized I didn't even have my phone on me. Ava had been holding it in the bar, probably using it as some sort of weapon now.

I stopped crawling and took another shaky breath, too tired to keep going. I was hurting from head to toe, dizzy with pain, hardly able to breathe. I closed my eyes, sat down on the pavement, and wondered if I would be able to survive this life for much longer.

NINETEEN

It was the whine of an ambulance siren that brought me back to consciousness, and in the dark of the alleyway, I opened my eyes to find a woman in my face, standing over me, shining a bright light straight into my eye.

“Fuck,” I mumbled, and pushed her hand away. I was in too much pain to sit up.

“Can you hear me?” she asked. When I didn’t answer, a second figure appeared, hovering above my head.

“Khloe,” Ty said. “It’s me. Can you sit up?” Somewhere behind Ty, I heard Ava’s high-pitched tone spouting off profanities.

“I can’t fucking believe this happened,” she said. She sounded furious. “What a *chupadora de pollas!*” She was pacing the alleyway, her hands flailing, eyes burning fire, looking like she was ready to rip somebody’s head off. I sat up slowly, embracing my abdomen, trying to breathe through the pain. My head was fuzzy, vision blurred.

“How did you find me?” I asked. Well, wheezed. I raised my hand to my head, coming away with bloodstained fingers.

“Jay saw you,” Ava said. She tried to step around Ty to get to me, but the female paramedic was pushing her back. “We had to call an ambulance, doll. You wouldn’t wake up for us.”

“Who did this to you?” Ty asked. Behind the ambulance, a cop car was also parked, and the officer was talking to Jay, scribbling down notes on his pad. Jay stared at me as he spoke to the officer, one eye never leaving my face. For some reason, I felt guilty as if something I had done egged the strange man on.

“I don’t know who it was,” I said. I tried to shrug, but I was in too much pain. “Some guy.” I didn’t dare tell any of them about the fact that the person just happened to be Jesse’s drug dealer. Getting involved with the police in that drama was the last thing I wanted.

“You could have been raped.” Ava was hysterical. She seemed to have sobered up since her dozen tequila shots at the bar, but now, she just looked like a basket case on the verge of a breakdown. For a while, I had almost accepted the fact that I would die a morbid, painful death out in the middle of some Seattle alleyway after getting the shit kicked out of me like a stray dog.

“I need to examine you,” Ty said. “Can you stand up?” I nodded, wincing in pain as I got to my feet, heavily supported by Ty. He had one arm around me in a comforting embrace, and for a moment, I wished he would never let go. He pointed at the back of the ambulance, and I took a seat, unsure of whether I should have been feeling embarrassed or relieved. He scanned my eyes and face, gently brushing the dirt from my chin. I winced, and his touch became even softer.

“Christ,” he said. “Take off your shirt, Khloe.”

“Hey now,” I said, forcing amusement into my tone. It hurt to talk almost as much as it hurt to breathe. “Do you ask all your female patients to undress?” Ty didn’t look the least bit amused as he helped me shrug off my jacket, and then the blood and dirt streaked T-shirt. I leaned forward, hugging my knees, now only covered by jeans and a bra. The female medic

draped a blanket over my shoulders as Ty examined my bruised abdomen and chest. It hurt too much to breathe, so I made a few unsuccessful attempts to hold my breath to ease the pain. I felt Ty's fingers trail over my skin, but even his gentle touch didn't ease my discomfort. I couldn't cry, though, not in front of them. Crying was a weakness, and I couldn't be weak. With Carter gone, I had to be the strong one.

"Fuck," said Ava from where she was standing. She was lighting her third cigarette, observing us from behind Ty's shoulder as if wary of getting too close. "Whoever this guy is, he did a number on you, Khloe."

I forced a chuckle and then regretted it as my body screamed with pain. I grimaced and gritted my teeth.

"That he did," I whispered. Ty shook his head as he examined what I assumed were bruises all up and down my side, back, and mid-section.

"You need to go to the hospital," he said after a moment. "I'm not a doctor, Khloe, but you could have internal bleeding."

"Oh, please." I reached for my shirt and pulled it over my head, resisting the urge to flinch or throw up. "I'll just, you know, rub some dirt in it."

"In my professional, medical opinion, I think you need to let us take you to the ER," Ty said. I forced a smile and took a breath, trying to play off the pain.

"No. I'm fine. I'm going home."

"She's refusing medical care?" the female paramedic asked Ty. "She has to sign a medical refusal form." She looked irritated, but I didn't care. I was embarrassed enough without being poked and prodded by doctors and nurses.

"Don't do this, Khloe," Ty said. Since I'd known him, this was the most serious expression I'd seen him give. I forced a smile for him.

“Nice try. But I need to go home now.” I slid down from the back of the ambulance and signed the paper the other medic shoved in my face. Jay was still talking to the cop, but I knew not much could be done without disclosing more information about my attacker. The cop spotted me getting ready to go and stepped around Jay.

“Do you know who did this?” he asked. “Was it a friend of yours?”

“No,” I said. “I’ve never seen that man before in my life.”

“Did you get a good look at him? Any physical traits you remember?”

“No,” I lied. “I didn’t even see his face. Sorry.” I turned and waved to Ty, who was putting his medical supplies back into the bag, still looking crestfallen that I’d denied proper medical treatment.

“Will you go on a date with me now?” he called as I took Ava’s arm in one hand.

Jay joined us then, wrapping an arm around my waist for better support.

“Aren’t women supposed to like the knight in shining armor?”

“No,” I called, and then laughed. “Now you’re just trying too hard.”

Ty waved a hand over his head as if to dismiss me, but he was smiling as he and his partner loaded up the ambulance and pulled away. I answered a few more questions for the cop, careful not to give him any information that would force me to be questioned at the station. By the time we were finally done, I was exhausted and ready for bed. “Walk me home?” I asked Ava and Jay. As we headed back toward my place, I knew I had to tell them what really happened. Ava, I knew, would find out eventually, anyway.

“It was his dealer?” Jay asked when I’d finished. “His drug dealer?”

“That’s what he said.”

“Why didn’t you tell the cop?” Jay asked. “They could have caught this guy with that information alone!”

“That’s not how it works around here, dude,” Ava said before I could answer him. “Had this jerk been caught, he would have eventually been released...”

“... and once he was released, he would have come after me again,” I continued for her, taking another painful breath. “This is reality, Jay. This is our world of imperfection. It’s not cozy, and it’s not fair. It’s just... life.”

“What makes you both think that the law can’t protect you?” Jay asked. Ava laughed, but it was humorless.

“The law protects people like you, Jay. Not people like us.” Before he could respond to that, she changed the subject. “Where in the hell is Jesse, anyway?” She was riled up again, and I almost regretted telling her anything. She stubbed out her cigarette on the sidewalk and scowled at me as if I was the one at fault now. “That little prick needs to see what he’s gotten you into.”

“Forget about it,” I muttered. “He probably caught wind of this and is making it a point to stay far away.”

“Maybe that’s for the better,” Jay said gently, and Ava scoffed.

“Sure is,” she said. “If he wants to live.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.” I tried not to make another sour face as I stepped stiffly off the curb, wishing the pain that was shooting through my body would tone down, even a little bit. But despite the pain, despite the assault, despite the possibility of fractured bones, I knew I couldn’t go to the hospital. The fear of being assumed a drug addict outweighed any fear of injury. Had Carter been there, he would have bound and gagged me himself just to get me into the ER to make sure nothing was wrong. I wasn’t that responsible.

“Khloe, I’m serious when I say that maybe we should talk to the police again,” Jay said. “If you knew who it was, they could catch the guy, and I

promise I wouldn't let anything happen to you."

Both Ava and I glanced in his direction at the same time.

Ava looked at me, a sneer lighting up on her face. "He's kidding, right?" she asked.

I looked at Jay. "Sure," I said. "Tell her you're kidding."

"No. I'm not kidding." He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, crossing his arms like a stubborn child amid a tantrum. "If getting you into the hospital means turning this jackass in, you need to do it. He'll be thrown in jail in an instant."

"Yeah," Ava agreed. "Right alongside us." She stopped walking and glared at Jay. "If you haven't already noticed, we're not exactly model citizens. Having the cops there tonight was enough of a close call for me."

"He could have killed her!" Jay snapped. It was the first time I'd seen him convey such an intense emotion. "You're more concerned with being busted than taking care of yourself and your friend?"

"Don't you dare speak to me like you know anything about our lives." Ava was in his face now, eyes burning with livid rage. For a moment, I considered stepping between them, but I was too tired to care. It was difficult to handle Ava when she wasn't riled up, so I'd let Jay have fun with this one. "You don't know anything about us, Jay. You can't just come waltzing into other people's lives acting like you know what's best for them."

"Actually, I took it upon myself to waltz into his life," I said meekly. Neither of them paid me any attention. I wondered if they realized I was still standing there.

"Excuse me for giving a shit," Jay said. "But now that Carter's dead, I may be the best person here for you guys right now." There was a moment of silence. I looked down at my hands, pretending to be absorbed in the tiny

cuts and scrapes in my palm. Ava placed her hands on her hips, nostrils flaring as they did when she was nearing the point of a breakdown. I knew it was only a matter of time before she'd start throwing shit and screaming at us in Spanish, so I cleared my throat and looked over at Jay, but not before Ava spoke.

"Do you really think you can waltz in here and take Carter's place?" she seethed. "I'll tell you now that you've got another think coming." She didn't look at me, but her jaw twitched with anger. "Carter left behind some big shoes to fill, dude, and you won't fit. So, stop trying so hard."

Silence settled over the three of us, and anguish rose like bile in my throat. It was the first time I'd ever heard Ava say anything remotely close to kind about Carter, and only then did I realize how much of a light he was in both of our lives, not just mine.

"I think we've got it from here," I said quietly. "It's been a rough night." I expected Jay to argue, but he didn't. In fact, he looked defeated as he squeezed my shoulder and went in for a hug.

"Goodnight, ladies," he said. His eyes flickered between Ava and me and then rested on me. "Call me tomorrow, okay?" I watched him go, feeling sick, wondering how Carter would have reacted to my rudeness and Ava's temper. I could almost see it in my head.

"Apologize to him, Khloe," he'd say. "And Ava, pull your head out of your ass. There are good people in this world who aren't me, I promise. You just need to let them in."

But despite my regret, Ava only rolled her eyes. She'd won this round. The shrieking would be put on hold until the next thing riled her up.

"What a drama queen," she said. She linked her arm in mine and pulled me forward. I flinched in pain but masked it the best I could.

"He's just trying to look out for us," I said. "It's kind of sweet."

“You won’t think that when he turns us in.” Ava handed me my phone, and I glanced down at it, wondering if by some small miracle, I would have a call or a text from Jesse. I wondered if he’d even heard I’d been attacked by his dealer. Asshole.

“I’m going to bed,” I told Ava as we approached the apartment. I unlocked the front door and stepped in, anxious to crawl under the covers and hide until I could face the world again. “Sorry,” I said. “I’m just really tired.” For a moment, Ava tested me with those pathetic puppy-dog eyes. But when she realized I was serious, she hugged me.

“Call me tomorrow.”

“Of course.” I watched her leave from the window, walking toward the bus stop without a care in the world. When she was out of sight and no longer alone on the street, I drew the curtains, locked the door, and headed up to bed. As I slipped out of my soiled clothes and into a ragged T-shirt, one from high school which had once been Carter’s. The journal sitting on the comforter on my bed taunted me. I slid beneath the covers, holding the book to my chest, wishing, just like every other moment of every day, that he was here to talk to, to cry to, to be comforted by. Flipping on the lamp next to my bed, I opened the journal. I was surprised to find that the next entry hadn’t been written until nearly a year after Carter had met Jay. The date was April 18, 2016, which meant they had been together for nearly a year at this point. And even then, I still hadn’t known about it.

He’s so good to me. Jay, I mean. He cares for me the way I care for Khloe. It’s nice to have that kind of person in your life... and that goes for everybody. We all need somebody to lean on, especially in our darkest moments. Jay is my angel.

I hope I’m somebody’s angel, too.

TWENTY

I didn't hear from Jesse or Jay for two weeks, but I practiced my self-control and refused to text or call either of them. I hadn't been approached again by the dealer, so I could only assume that he'd gotten his money, whether from Jesse or someone else, I didn't care, as long as I was left alone. I figured Jay was still upset at Ava flipping out on him, so I knew I needed to give him some space. Truth be told, it wasn't Jesse whom I missed the most. It was Jay. Besides the journal, Jay was the last thing I had left of Carter. Being around Jay was like being back around my best friend. He was a breath of fresh air, a moment of relief, the light at the end of the tunnel.

Despite my greatest efforts, I couldn't go day-to-day without getting high or drunk. This world was the world Carter had rescued me from. He'd grabbed my hand and pulled me to the top until we were both stable on our feet, on dry land. For a while, I'd been happy. Content. Sober. But without Carter there to hold me up, everything had fallen apart again. There was no one left to please. There was no one around to say 'no, Khloe, do better.' My world was in shambles, my life a black hole of emptiness. Every day felt like another sixteen-hour struggle for air. Moment by moment, I was dragged deeper and deeper, into the depths of black, murky water. Eventually, I assumed, I would just drown, and the misery would end.

Hopefully.

There was one person who did not stop calling, though, and that was Frank, who, by all rights, was still my father. But since the day Mom had died, he'd been nothing to me. In fact, I'd avoided him at all costs. Though he'd never been into the strong drugs that I'd stumbled into, whiskey was his best friend, and when Frank was drunk, he wasn't Frank. I had no desire to answer his phone calls, no need to talk and make up and listen to his empty promises of sobriety. It was a difficult enough task holding myself together, and I knew I couldn't do it for someone else.

On Saturday night, Ava called once, but I ignored it and turned off my phone. I wasn't in the mood for people, not even my closest friend. I hadn't read more of Carter's journal, I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I wanted to find and kill the person who said time heals all wounds. I had come to the very quick conclusion that it was bullshit. If anything, the more time that passed, the harder it became to wake up every day knowing he was still gone.

Huddling up with a chilled bottle of vodka and a blanket, I flipped on the television and surfed through the channels, avoiding letting my gaze wander over the journal sitting on the coffee table. I could see my phone light up from where I had left it on the entertainment center, but I had no desire to get up and check it. I was a long way from caring about anything, and even a longer way from giving a shit while still sober.

The straight vodka burned my throat going down, but I embraced it. I'd run out of juice for a mixer, but at this point, I couldn't bring myself to care. The sting of the alcohol was worth the eventual numbing of the pain. Sure enough, by seven or eight shots of booze, I hardly tasted it anymore, but I was feeling it in my head.

The television droned on in the background, but my mind was restless. The journal seemed to be mocking me from where it sat. On the

entertainment center, my phone was blinking, alerting me of a missed call or text or both. With heroic effort, I sat up, my head spinning. My body ached and stung from where I'd been hit, and it was a difficult feat to force myself across the living room floor. Twice, I almost ate the floor on account of the booze or the injuries; I wasn't sure which, but I was still standing steady as I reached for my phone and skimmed through the messages, reading one from Ava.

Ava: Come see me @ the party. Jesse's house.

I typed back a quick reply, feeling irritated. Of course, she'd be over there, probably just to spite me.

Khloe: Y R U there? He's a dick.

I slipped the phone into my pocket and resumed my position on the couch, taking another shot of booze as I did so. Wallowing in my own self-pity seemed to be the only thing I was good at these days. Carter would have dumped a bucket of ice water over my head and then poured the rest of the vodka down the sink.

"Stop wasting your life, Ladybug. You only get one. Choose wisely."

I took another swig and glanced at my phone waiting for Ava's reply. I was surprised when a few minutes passed, and nothing came in. Sometimes, I was certain that the phone was welded to her hand. It was unlike her to keep me waiting for a reply. Aggravated, I pushed the green button and listened to the ring-tone buzz in my ear, expecting her to pick up.

"Esto es Ava! Usted ya sabe qué hacer. Bye!"

"Ava!" I sat up, flinching, taking another swig of vodka. "Where are you? You should come over. Call me back, dude." I hung up the phone and

leaned back into the couch, feeling some overwhelming desire to have Ava around. I found myself getting extra dependent on her after a drink—or eight. She may not have been the most sympathetic, understanding of souls, but she was company when company was needed, and she was now my best friend.

I dialed her number again and let it ring, feeling a moment of wariness creep into my chest when it cut to voicemail. I jammed the phone into my pocket and stood up, fighting the wave of nausea that hit me like a bag of bricks. If she weren't going to call me back, I would go to her, even if I was nearly shit-faced and only halfway coherent.

I collected the car keys from the nail by the door and made my way to the carport. Twice my toe caught on the wet grass, and I nearly stumbled head first into the pavement, which I'm sure would have done wonders for my already bruised ribs and pride. I slid into the front seat of Missus Betty and cranked the engine, listening to the squeal of the belt grate at my ears. I had meant to get the car in, like, months ago, but other things had happened—things that had derailed my life and made waking up every day almost intolerable. But even then, even when I was about to quit, I knew I still needed to get the car checked. So, not thinking twice about it, I dug the cell phone from my pocket and dialed Jay's number. He answered on the fourth ring, sounding half-asleep and groggy.

“Hullo?”

“Jay!” I slammed my fist on the wheel with excitement, feeling giddy for some unknown, drunken reason. “It's meee.”

“Khloe,” he said. I could imagine him rubbing his face and rolling his eyes, regretting the fact that he'd answered the phone. “What are you doing?”

“You’re a mechanic, right?” I slammed the car into reverse and pulled out, dropping the phone once from my ear. It bounced off the seat and landed face-up, still connected. I picked it up, mumbling something that not even I could understand or decipher.

“You know I’m a mechanic,” said Jay. “Why?”

“My car is being dumb.” I switched the gear into drive and cradled the phone between my ear and shoulder, accidentally laying my elbow on the horn as I did so. The blast echoed down the street, and I looked around, wondering if I’d alerted any night-shift cops on the prowl.

“Are you driving?” Jay asked.

“Yes.”

“Are you drunk?”

“I plead the fifth.”

“Khloe, you need to—”

“I didn’t call for a lecture.” I pulled onto the main road, in the direction of Jesse’s house, ignoring the whine of my car’s engine. “I just wanted to ask if you’d look at Missus Betty.”

“Who?”

“My car!”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Jay said. “But you need to turn around and go home. Sleep it off.”

“I’m losing you, Jay!” I called. “You’re breaking up. Chat later, okay?”

“Khloe, don’t—”

I pushed the *End* button on the phone and tossed it onto the seat next to me, annoyed. A moment later, I saw it light up from the corner of my eye, but I ignored it, instead focusing on the blurry lines painted on the road.

I pulled into Jesse’s place a moment later, a dumpy apartment complex in a ghetto neighborhood. Brown paint peeled from the walls, garbage was

strewn around the lot, and a mean-looking rottweiler barked fiercely from behind a rusty-looking fence. From the parking lot, I could see Jesse's apartment window lit up, and from where I stood, I could even hear the music pounding from powerful speakers. Ignoring missed calls from Jay, I dialed Ava's number once more and listened to it ring, hoping I wouldn't have to go up and find her. I wasn't happy with Ava, and I especially wasn't happy with Jesse. But, when she didn't answer, again, I slipped the phone into my pocket and trudged forward, knowing that I wouldn't be able to leave without her.

The elevator was old and rickety, smelling of dirty socks and wet dog. A few times, I was certain I would vomit in one of the already-soiled corners, but I managed to make it out of the elevator and onto the solid floor before I lost it all over the stained hallway carpet. I supported myself against the wall trying to catch my breath, wiping the bile from my lips. Once composed, I followed the noise down the hallway and wound up in front of Jesse's door. I hesitated, wondering if I should knock or just go in. I hadn't seen or spoken to Jesse after his dealer had kicked the shit out of me in the alleyway. Jesse had refused to show his face. He was a coward, and I was angry. Seeing him tonight was the one thing I had wanted to avoid. If I couldn't do that, maybe punching him in the face would be appropriate.

I reached for the door handle and pushed it open, nudging my way past a drunk redhead who had her tongue down the throat of some jock. Closing the door behind me, I stopped to survey the mess of people crammed into the living room. I had barely sidestepped the redhead only to narrowly avoid a drunken girl in a slutty tank top who nearly plowed into me. I stopped and looked around, trying to clear my head, hoping to spot Ava so I could grab her and bail. My friend was nowhere to be seen, but Jesse was,

and we spotted each other at the same time. For a fleeting moment, I almost turned and bolted, but I forced myself to stay there and face him.

“Khloe!” he shouted over the noise. I watched him swim through the crowd of sweaty people, a drink and cigarette both balancing in one hand. He got in my face, smelling of sweat and booze. “Are you mad at me?” he slurred. His eyes were bloodshot, breath reeking of booze. I knew I didn’t look much better, but at least I was sobering to the point of being able to stand up straight.

“Get out of my way, Jesse.” I pushed past him, feeling my temper begin to boil. He followed, of course, like a scorned puppy dog. If I could have kicked him, I would have.

“Khloe, please.” He grabbed hold of my arm, his fingers digging into the sensitive flesh of my skin. I tensed up as the pain of my injuries intensified. “Let me explain,” he said. I whirled on him then, feeling ready to burst.

“Explain what?” I snapped. “Your dealer kicked my ass because apparently, you owe money. What else is there to explain?”

“I’m so sorry,” Jesse said, but he didn’t look sorry. He looked drunk. He looked high. He looked out of it. His eyes were glazed over, breath lingering with the scent of booze and marijuana. I flinched, trying to pull away.

“Where’s Ava?”

“Khloe, please, just hear me out.”

“I said, where the fuck is Ava?” Jesse released me, taking a tiny step back. That was an excellent idea on his part as I was about to go for his crotch, even if I already was bruised, battered, and ready to fall over.

“I don’t know.” He shook his head. “She’s been around. The last time I saw her, I think she was headed to the bathroom.”

“Thanks.” I dropped my hands to my side and turned to go. “Please, Jesse. Just leave me alone, okay? The next time I see you or one of your dealers, I’ll call the police.” I didn’t hear any sort of answer as I bolted up the stairs in search of Ava. The hallway and stairs were crowded, and I shoved people out of the way. The bathroom door was closed and locked, and there was a blond bimbo standing outside of it, legs crossed desperately as though she were about to piss herself.

“Is someone in there?” I asked.

She nodded, juggling her purse and drink in one hand.

I rapped on the door. “Ava?”

There was no answer, only the running of water from either the sink or the bathtub.

I knocked harder. “Ava? It’s me. It’s Khloe. Are you ready to go home?”

Silence.

For a long, painfully vivid moment, I was back in Carter’s apartment, greeted by an eerie silence and the harsh sensations of doom. The sick, nauseated feeling I’d had that night was back. My hand dropped from the doorknob. It was trembling. All at once, a million thoughts crossed my mind, jumbled and confused thoughts—horrificed thoughts.

“Are you all right?” the blond girl asked. “You look like you’re about to pass out.”

“I...” I faltered, hoping I wouldn’t barf all over the stranger’s pink tank top. Instead of answering, I turned away from her, my eyes scanning the hallway for someone who might be able to help. “Hey, you!” I called, my eyes landing on a guy with bulging muscles and a beefy face. “I think something is wrong in there.” I pointed at the door as he approached. “Can you help me get this open?” The guy hesitated briefly and then made a personal effort to knock on the door as though I hadn’t tried that first. After

a few more seconds, when there was no answer from the other side, we all stood back as the guy lodged himself up against the bathroom door. Once. Twice.

Crack.

The lock snapped, wood splintered, and the door flew open, slamming with violent force against the bathroom wall. Dizzy with fear, I pushed the onlookers aside and stepped into the bathroom. The water in the sink was running hot, steam rising to fog the mirror. I looked down. Down, at the limp, pale body on the floor.

Carter.

No. Ava.

“Oh, Christ. Fuck.” I fell to my knees, reaching automatically to feel for a pulse. Her skin was cold against mine. I held my breath, feeling for the thump of her heart. “Someone call 911!” I screamed. The blond girl holding a drink in one hand and a cell phone in the other appeared at the open door, her eyes wide with horror.

“Oh, God,” she said. “Is she—”

“Call an ambulance. Now!” I pulled my fingers back from Ava’s neck and leaned down near her face, trying to remember everything I had ever learned in CPR and first aid. I hadn’t acted quickly enough with Carter, and that may have been the reason he died. I wouldn’t let it happen again. I couldn’t.

Check for a pulse.

Check for breathing.

There was nothing. Behind me, the girl had finally snapped out of her trance and was holding the phone to her ear, crying into it. I stood for half a second to yank it from her hands before falling back in front of Ava.

“What do I do?” I asked the operator. “I can’t feel a pulse, and I don’t think she’s breathing.”

“The paramedics are on their way, but you need to start compressions,” she said. “Hands in the middle of the chest, between the nipples. Thirty pumps, two breaths.” I handed the phone back to the girl and leaned over Ava, almost certain that she was already dead. I was too late.

Again.

“Come on, Ava.” Up and down my palms pushed into the center of her chest, bringing no relief or reaction. After thirty compressions, I tilted her chin back and breathed into her mouth. I saw her chest rise and fall, but it was only with my breaths. Heart racing, I tried again.

One, two.

“Is she alive?” the girl sobbed behind me.

“Come on, Ava.” Another ten compressions. Twenty. Thirty.

One, two.

I didn’t want to stop. I feared if I did, then that would be it. She would be with Carter. She would be gone. I would be alone. I couldn’t stop. Not now. Not when she still had a chance.

“Breathe, Ava,” I shouted, my breath squeezing from the exertion of pounding her chest. I reached for the point on her neck and rested two fingers there again, praying to whoever was listening.

One, two...

Thadump.

Thadump.

“Fuck.” My hand fell from her neck, quivering. Behind me, the medics pushed their way through the crowd of people, joining me on the floor in the bathroom.

“What are the chances?” Ty asked, falling to his knees beside Ava so he could take a pulse.

“Let’s load her,” his partner instructed. I scooted back against the wall, my knees drawn to my chin as the paramedics got to work, checking again for a pulse and breath sounds before administering oxygen. I watched them load her onto the gurney, working quickly and calmly. I couldn’t even bring myself to speak.

“Ava,” Ty said. “It’s me. It’s Ty. We’re here the help you.” She didn’t respond, didn’t even stir. I put my head in my hands, frozen in fear, wondering if she would somehow die en route to the ER. As the medics cleared the room for the cot to get through, Ty looked back at me. “Good job,” he said. “You may have saved her life.”

The world seemed to be moving in slow motion. There was a buzzing in my head, the kind of sound that was unshakable. It was so intense I couldn’t hear myself think. Jesse stood behind me in the yard, alongside a small group of disoriented people still holding their red cups of booze. Most of them looked shaken, but others didn’t seem to care one way or the other, and that infuriated me. Had it been a close friend of one of theirs, maybe the reaction would be genuine.

“Christ,” Jesse said. “Fucking Christ.” I nodded, trembling, ready to keel over on the lawn. Ty and his partner, Michelle, I think that was her name, passed us with the gurney, loading Ava into the back of the ambulance.

“I have to go with her,” I said. The voice I heard was not mine. It was unrecognizable, part panic, part terror. “I have to go with her.”

“Yeah,” Jesse agreed. “Yeah. Yes. You should.”

“I...” I faltered, digging in my pocket for the keys. The ordeal had sobered me up quite a bit. The buzz was gone, replaced with a chill I couldn’t seem to warm.

“You okay to drive?” Jesse asked, like he fucking cared. Ty looked back at me as Michelle got into the front of the cab and flicked the lights and siren on.

“She’s not driving,” he said. His face was stony. “You can ride with us to the ER.”

“I have to go,” I said to Jesse. My hands were still shaking as Ty pointed to the cab of the ambulance.

“Not back here,” he said. “Ride up front with Michelle. I’ll take care of Ava, okay?” I nodded because I knew there was no fighting it. I wasn’t sure I could stomach seeing Ava so sick, anyway.

“He’ll do everything he can for your friend,” Michelle said as we headed in the direction of the hospital. In the back of the ambulance, I heard Ty speaking softly to Ava between the beeps of the monitors and machines, but there was never any answer on her end. I took out my cell phone, hand still shaking. There were three more missed calls from Jay. I dialed his number, knowing I couldn’t leave him hanging after how I’d treated him earlier.

“Khloe?” he said after the first ring. “Are you okay?” He didn’t sound like he’d been sleeping this time but sounded wide awake—anxious—as if he’d been waiting to hear from me. Guilt swam over me, churning with the panic and terror already filling every inch of my being.

“It’s Ava.” I closed my eyes and took a shaky breath, wondering if she would still be alive when we finally got to the hospital. “Something has happened.”

TWENTY-ONE

Jay met me there in fifteen minutes, dressed in sweats and a white T-shirt. His hair was tousled, his expression masking one of worry. He took my hand outside the doors of the ER, and I had to hold onto his arm to push myself through the front doors without falling to the floor in a heaping mess. Ava had been alive when Ty and Michelle took her in, but barely. I was terrified to ask and scared to know how she was now. When we'd arrived, Ty shouted at me to stay in the waiting room, and he hadn't been back out.

"What if she's..." I paused, unable to choke out the words. Jay's hold tightened on my arm, and I wanted to break down into sobs. Inside the waiting room, the air was still and eerie, like death. A mother with her sick-looking kid sat in the corner, gazing up at the television with a tired expression on her face. On the other side of the room, an elderly man and his wife looked to be half asleep. Aside from them, the place was empty. We approached the front desk, where an ornery looking older woman with glasses and curly hair looked up at us.

"Can I help you?"

"My friend... I... she..." I failed to find anything to say, choking on the words I couldn't bring myself to say.

"A friend of ours was just brought in," said Jay. He stepped up, squeezing my hand.

“Ava Caldera,” I said. “Overdose.” My voice sounded high-pitched and squeaky. The woman turned back to her computer and typed something in. As we waited, my legs began to shake again, and I had to hold onto Jay to keep from falling.

“The doctor is with her now,” the receptionist said, and a breath of relief lifted from where it had been pressing on my lungs.

“But she’s okay?” I confirmed.

“She’s stable now, but I don’t know any more information.”

“Can we see her?” Jay asked.

“I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “Not right now. Her physician will want to keep an eye on her overnight.”

“That’s fine,” Jay said before I could reply. “We’ll come back in the morning.” He steered me out of the waiting room and back into the cool of the night, and I didn’t fight him.

Part of me was relieved that they wouldn’t let us see her tonight as I wasn’t sure I would have been able to keep it together.

“Thanks for coming in there with me.” I stopped and looked up at the dark sky, taking a deep breath, allowing the air to soothe my tear-stained face.

Jay nodded, his hands in the pockets of his sweats, hair falling into his eyes. “Are you okay?” he asked. I took a second breath and dropped my gaze to his.

“I will be.”

“I’m not sure you should be alone tonight,” he said. As I watched him, hands in his pockets, a sad look flitted across his face. I couldn’t agree more. I was glad he’d spoken. I don’t know what I would have done without Jay there.

“Hey, Khloe,” Ty called. “Wait up.” I turned around and saw him heading in our direction, medic bag slung over one shoulder. He jogged forward and stopped in front of me.

“Ava,” I said, feeling the panic rise. “Is she...”

“No, she’s fine,” Ty said quickly. He smiled at Jay, but only briefly. “She’s okay thanks to you. She was lucky.”

“That’s one way to put it.” I folded my arms and leaned back against Jay’s car, shivering in the cold. Jay slid into the driver’s side of the car to crank on the heat and waited patiently.

“For what it’s worth, I think you’d make an amazing doctor,” Ty said. He smiled, a tiny dimple in his right cheek appearing. “Is it something your boyfriend would support you in?” His eyes flashed to the other side of the car where Jay was jamming to something on the radio. I couldn’t help it. I laughed.

“Jay isn’t my boyfriend,” I said. “He’s just a good friend. I think you’re more his type than I am.” Ty flushed, but he seemed almost relieved.

“So, you’re fair game then?” he asked.

I scoffed and rolled my eyes. “You don’t give up, do you?”

“Not when it’s something I want,” he admitted. He shrugged sheepishly, and I had the overwhelming desire to lean over and kiss him.

“We come from different sides of the track, you and me.” I pulled the collar of my hooded sweatshirt tighter around my chin and sighed. “You don’t want to be with me, Ty. I’m not your kind of people.”

“Maybe you’re exactly my kind of people,” he said. “But you won’t know that unless you take the chance.”

“Oh, Christ.” I threw my hands up in the air, overwhelmed and irritated. “Look around,” I told him, my tone raising a few notches. “That girl that you just checked into the ER is my best friend. She’s a drug addict. And if

we're completely honest here, I'm not far from it myself." I paused to catch my breath. "We live two completely different lives. My life won't change, Ty. I'll forever be exactly how I am now."

"You don't believe that, do you?" He watched me, waiting for an answer, his eyes glowing with intensity. I shook my head and crossed my arms over my chest.

"I have to go," I said quietly. "I'm sorry about everything that happened tonight." I leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek, allowing my lips to linger on his skin a second too long. I was caught off guard when Ty cradled my face between his hands, meeting my lips with his. I closed my eyes, melting into him, inhaling the lingering scent of aftershave and the brisk air around us. After a moment, I pulled away.

"Khloe—" Ty began.

I held my hand up in a stop motion as though to ward him off. "I'm sorry," I said and reached for the handle on Jay's car. "I have to go."

"Don't leave."

"Trust me," I pulled the passenger door open and looked back at him. "You don't want to be involved with me, Ty. Just take my word for it."

We ended up at Jay's place for the night, a handsome condominium in the nicer part of Seattle. Missus Betty was still parked back at Jesse's place, but I'd locked the doors, so I didn't have to worry too much. Enough drama had consumed us for one night without a drunk-driving accident. It didn't matter that I'd mostly sobered up—the fear and shock from Ava's escapade had my hands and legs shaking too badly to walk, let alone drive a car.

"You have a nice place," I said, stepping inside the front door. Jay smiled back at me and tossed the keys onto the coffee table as I admired the room. "Maybe I should consider becoming a mechanic."

“If only,” he said with a chuckle. He took my jacket and hung it up in the coat closet near the door. “All of this is because of my parents. I’ve always kind of relied on them. Financially.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that when you get something like this,” I said, looking around. Jay’s cozy little condominium was something I could only ever dream of having. From the suede sectional couch to the marble countertops to the spotless carpet I stood on, it was like walking into a magazine. My place was nice, but his was epic.

“Sorry about the mess,” Jay said. He reached down for an empty coffee cup that was sitting on a doily and set it in the sink.

“No fucking kidding. What a pig sty.” I looked around, admiring the spotless living room with morbid fascination.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Jay asked.

“A nice bottle of chilled tequila sounds great right about now,” I joked.

Jay didn’t smile. I made a mental note not to crack booze-related jokes in his presence.

“You could have been killed tonight when you drove drunk,” he said. I watched him go to the kitchen, get a glass from the cupboard, and pour some orange juice. He came back around and handed it to me. It wasn’t booze, but it would do.

“I’m an idiot when I drink.” I sat down on the comfortable suede sofa and sipped my juice. Jay sat down next to me.

“It could have been you in that ER tonight,” he said. “What would have happened then?”

“Well, it wasn’t.” I finished off the juice and set it on the coffee table, careful to use a cup holder so as not to stain the shiny wooden top.

“What would Carter think?” Jay asked. He looked over, forcing me to meet his gaze. He was awfully intimidating when he wanted to be. I

swallowed, feeling a lump in my throat, unable to imagine what Carter would have thought had he been here. It was too depressing to think about.

“Carter’s not here.”

“That’s not the point, Khloe.” Jay sounded so much like Carter when he was annoyed that I wanted to laugh, but I couldn’t even bring myself to smile. Tonight had been a rough night, one that I did not intend to repeat.

“Do you believe in heaven?” I asked. There was a moment of silence, and Jay looked away as if pondering an answer he thought I would like to hear.

“I don’t know,” he said finally. “Death sounds like a scary fate if there’s nothing else out there, you know?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I know.”

“What about you?” he asked. “Do you believe in heaven?”

I paused, and my eyes flickered over to the wall across from us, a wall holding several framed, personal photos. I squinted, recognizing the blond boys in one of the pictures—Carter and Jay were standing on top of a mountain, apparently after a hike, their thumbs in the air, and silly grins on their faces.

“No,” I said. “With heaven comes God. I can’t believe in a God selfish enough to take someone like Carter away from us.”

TWENTY-TWO

I didn't sleep well that night, tucked into Jay's expensive sofa. My mind reeled as the darkness of the condo smothered me. In the bedroom, I could hear him snoring even with the door closed. I stared at the ceiling, into the darkness, my hand resting over my forehead as I listened to a mixture of snoring and the hum of the refrigerator. I needed a drink. Or a hit. Or both. Preferably both. Compared to my tiny apartment on a busy street, Jay's condo was quiet and peaceful, but I didn't like the quiet, and I didn't like the peace. It rattled me.

"You couldn't be quiet if your life depended on it," Carter once said to me. "Relax, Ladybug, and just try to be..."

"Be what?" I'd asked, and he'd laughed.

"No. Just be. You know, in the moment."

But even then, I hadn't slowed down. My mind had kept on reeling, kept on racing. Sleep had never been normal for me, really, and especially not now. Recently, the only time sleep was gracious enough to come was when I was blackout drunk, and even then, only a few hours of shut-eye was all I could manage. And now, since Carter had been gone, the spinning in my head, the late nights, and the bad decisions—all of it was even worse.



The next morning, we woke early to go see Ava in the hospital. Jay waited outside the door while I went in. It made my heart hurt to see her lying there, pale and sick looking, an IV in her arm. She saw me come in and smiled, her dark chocolate eyes flashing with happiness.

“*Es maldita hora!*” she said. “Where have you been?” Her voice sounded raw and scratchy. I set the bouquet of flowers that Jay had bought for her on the stand near the bed before sitting down and taking her hand. She squeezed it weakly. I couldn’t help but notice that there was already a bouquet before ours—that one was from Ty.

“How are you feeling?” I asked. She laughed, but it was not with amusement.

“Like *defunción* warmed over.”

“I can imagine.” In my mind, I saw her again, lying cold and limp on the bathroom floor, on the brink of death—no heartbeat, no breath.

“I heard you’re the one who found me,” Ava said. “Ty told me.” She caught my eye, her face suddenly serious, and I found myself looking away.

“Yeah,” I said. “When you didn’t answer your phone, I got worried. And when I found you, you were almost dead.” Ava’s gaze didn’t even waver as she stared at me.

“A little *demasiado* at once, I think,” she joked, but this time I couldn’t find anything amusing about the situation. She’d almost died, and I’d had to save her life. What if I hadn’t have found her in time? I’d have two dead friends as if the first one hadn’t almost sent me over the edge. I wasn’t cut out for this. For God’s sake, I could barely take care of myself, let alone take care of Ava.

“We’re you trying to kill yourself?” I asked. Ava looked caught off guard, her face scrunching up in a look of distaste.

“Of course not.”

“Do you realize that if I hadn’t walked in, you’d be dead right now?” An image of Ava lying cold and stiff in a coffin in the rain made me sick to my stomach, and I had to look away. I envisioned her being buried next to Carter—my two best friends. My two best dead friends. Their headstones would be pretty, but the birth and death dates would be too close together. People would stop and stare with pity. They were only kids, they’d say. What a tragically short life. And then eventually, after some time, my headstone would join them. I would be nothing here on earth. Just a memory. Just a distant memory. My name forgotten. I would be forgotten. After Carter’s passing, I was certain there was nothing else in the world I could lose that I cared about. I was wrong. If I lost Ava, that would have been everything.

“You’re being a little dramatic, aren’t you?” said Ava. “I’m fine, Khloe. It was an accident.” I got to my feet so I wouldn’t let my hand slip and slap her for being so goddamn stupid.

“A little dramatic,” I agreed. I turned back around, meeting her eyes. “I had to revive you, Ava. Your heart wasn’t beating.”

“Khloe,” Ava said. “I’m fine. *Relajarse*.”

“No, you’re not fine,” I snapped. “In fact, neither one of us are fucking fine.” That was it. My temper had reached a boiling point, and I wasn’t sure whether to do the smart thing and walk away now or just continue yelling.

“Of course, we are.”

“No,” I said. “We’re not. I drove to Jesse’s place last night drunk, and you overdosed in the bathroom. Which part of that is okay?”

“Oh, please.” Ava turned her head away, her face etched with annoyance. “It’s thanks to you that I’m still in this fucking place, Khloe. I had to get a psych evaluation, and the doctor is thinking about keeping me

in this bed for longer.” She paused, seething. “I can’t do that. I can’t fucking stay here. They think I’m a drug addict, Khloe. They think I’m a fucking drug-dependent whore.”

“I wonder why,” I said, letting the sarcasm flow heavy. “Maybe keeping you in here is a good idea, Ava.” I should have regretted those words, should have wanted to take them back, but I didn’t. I couldn’t.

“You don’t mean that,” she said, and I watched as she struggled to push herself into a sitting position. “You know I can’t stay here.”

“Maybe this is just what you need,” I said. “Maybe this is your chance to detox and get clean.”

“Ugh!” Ava fell back against the pillow, scowling. “Here we go again with your ‘getting clean’ spiel. I don’t know why you insist on being under some warped impression that if you get clean, your whole life will suddenly come together, and shit will be all sunshine and rainbows.”

“I’m not under any sort of impression like that,” I told her. “But aren’t you getting tired of it all? The drugs and the booze and the hangovers?”

“No,” Ava said. She fell back against her bed and folded her arms. “Not even a little bit. So, fuck you, Khloe.” At that moment, Jay came into the room, presumably hearing the emotions on the other side of the door rise. He paused at the door, eyes flickering back and forth between Ava and me.

“Everything okay here?” he asked. Ava sneered at him.

“Oh good,” she said. “I should have figured you’d be here. Khloe can’t seem to get by day to day without at least one fag friend.”

“Ava,” I snapped, but Jay looked unruffled, calm, even. I wanted to smack her.

“Maybe it’s time to give her some space,” he said to me. “We’ll come back tomorrow when she’s feeling better.”

“Don’t bother,” Ava said. “I don’t want either of you here.”

“Done,” Jay said. And just like that, we were heading out of the room and out the ER doors before I could even react.

“She can’t just kick us out!” I cried. “I’m like, her best friend. She has no one else.”

“People need space sometimes,” Jay said. We got in the car and headed toward Jesse’s place so I could pick up my car. “Give her some time. She’ll get over herself.”

“Ha. You don’t know Ava.” I hesitated for a moment, wondering if I should go back to the hospital and convince her of what an ass she was being. But I didn’t. I knew Jay was right. Giving Ava space was the best thing we could do right now, even if it did hurt. It was impossible to help someone who didn’t want help, despite my best efforts.

Jay pulled up to Jesse’s complex, and we got out near my car. I was relieved to see it hadn’t been broken into or sabotaged while I’d been away. The side of town Jesse lived in was sketchy, to say the least. Then again, I’m not sure why anyone would want to steal Missus Betty, anyway. With a sigh, I slid into the driver’s seat and turned the engine. When it squealed, I saw Jay wince.

“You weren’t kidding,” he said.

“I don’t kid about Missus Betty,” I told him with a straight face. Jay’s eyebrows shot up, and I had the urge to laugh.

“I’ve heard a lot of people name their cars, but I’ve never heard one quite like that.”

“I got this car in high school.” I patted the steering wheel lovingly, making a mental note to wipe away the four layers of dust that coated the dashboard. “My sophomore year. Carter helped me pick it out.” Jay backed up, his eyes flicking up and down the old beater.

“I can tell,” he said finally, and I leaned out and punched him playfully in the arm.

“There are a lot of memories involving this car,” I said. “A lot involving Carter, too.” I paused, swallowing the lump in my throat. “We took this car on our road trip to California. It broke down four times, but each time all it took was some fiddling under the hood, and we were back on the road.”

“I bet that was a fun trip,” said Jay. I smiled and nodded, imagining Carter’s playful smile. I remembered us back on the beach, our toes in the sand, the tide rolling up and splashing our feet and legs.

“I got stung by a jellyfish,” I told Jay. “It hurt like a bitch. Carter peed on me. I was pretty sure I was going to die.” Jay laughed, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

“Did the urine help?”

“Much to Carter’s glee, yes,” I admitted. “But that was the last time I put my feet in that damn water.”

“I can’t blame you there.”

“Yeah.” I sighed and leaned my head back against the seat, watching the memory fade from my mind like a worn-out page in a novel. “I miss him so much,” I said quietly. “He was everything, Jay. I don’t know how I’m going to survive without him.”

“You will,” Jay said. “We both will.”

TWENTY-THREE

September 5, 2015

I've done it again. I've fucked up the best thing in my life. I shouldn't have pressured him. I shouldn't have told him to come out. Now he's gone, and I'm alone. I'm an idiot. God, I miss him so much. Khloe keeps asking me what's up, but I just don't feel like now is the time to tell her. I hate hiding this kind of shit though. I know it hurts her. It definitely hurts me.

I don't know how I'm going to survive this.

I shut the journal and looked down at my arm, flexing my hand, watching for the vein to pop to the surface. When it did, I uncapped the needle and pushed it under the skin, wincing. A moment of pain was worth every moment of the high that would come soon after.

"I'll survive this," I whispered. "I'll survive this without you, Carter."

I withdrew the needle and set it aside before covering the hole in my arm with a piece of tissue. For a moment, I kept the pressure on my arm to keep it from bleeding. But as I lay there, the drugs traveling through my blood and into my system, I allowed my hand to drop, and I watched with morbid fascination as the blood pooled to the surface again and dribbled down my arm, seeping like a trickle of water. Outside my apartment, that same stupid dog was barking, and I felt the overwhelming urge to scream at it. I sat up,

dizzy from the shots of liquor I had consumed earlier in the day, before picking up the journal again. On the coffee table was a bottle of pills. I didn't know what they were, and I didn't much care. I reached for the bottle, ignoring the blood running down my arm, and then sat back against the sofa. It smelled of wet dog and rotting food. Funny. I didn't even own a dog.

I took a deep breath, watched, as if in another body, as my hand opened the cap from the bottle and poured some of the pills into my palm. I didn't count how many there were before I tossed them back and washed them down. Closing my eyes, I took a deep, shaky breath. My heart raced. I felt it thudding almost painfully against my ribcage. I opened my eyes and stared up at the ceiling for a moment, listening to my uneven breathing exhale the silence of the house. It wasn't until I had opened the journal, and I was hunched over reading the next entry that I realized I was crying. Silent tears. Tears of pain.

December 6, 2016

It's been three months and it still feels like it was yesterday. The pain of being away from Jay is overwhelming sometimes. So overwhelming, in fact, that I find myself wondering if I'll make it to the next day. Sometimes I feel like Mrs. Dunham is the only person in my life who I can turn to. She is a great listener, but I guess that's her job, huh? She's really nice. I like her. She never judges, never gets angry. Without her I'm not sure I would still be here. She gets paid not to judge people, though. I wish everyone was like that.

“I wouldn’t have judged you,” I said. “I wouldn’t have judged you, Carter!”

I sat up, realizing that I had screamed that last sentence. I slapped a hand over my face, sobbing. The blood from my arm had dried now, clinging to my skin like an unnatural shade of streaked lipstick. I rubbed the tears from my eyes trying to focus on one thing long enough to get my shit together. It was four o’clock in the afternoon. If I were lucky, I would be able to do what I wanted to do before it was too late. Sober, I knew I wouldn’t be able to do it without feeling like a jackass.

I stood and tucked Carter’s journal into my jacket and zipped it up. Then I grabbed a wad of cash from the counter and headed toward the bus stop. I knew I was too fucked up to drive. At least I could think that clearly as I got onto the bus, ignoring the disgusted stares from other passengers. I sat down in the back and put my head down, too ashamed to meet anyone’s judging gaze. I knew they could see right through my facade. I knew they could see the pain, the blood-shot eyes, and the devastating mess that I had become. And yet, I didn’t care. It wasn’t their place to judge me—they didn’t know me. At this point, the only person who could judge me was me.

Twenty minutes later, at my stop, I got off and walked—well, stumbled—through the front doors of my old high school. It was 4:40 p.m. I’d made it in time before the bell rang at five to dismiss the students.

“Miss?” The receptionist looked up when she saw me. She stood from her place behind the desk, looking wary. It was the same girl who greeted me before, the one with the snide expression and bitchy tone. “Are you all right? Can I help you?”

“I need to see the counselor, Mrs. Dunham,” I said.

“Do you have an appointment?” the girl asked. “Are you a student here?” If she recognized me, she didn’t let on.

“No,” I said. “I just... I need to see her.” I took Carter’s journal from my coat pocket and showed it to her as if trying to prove a point. She stared at it, and then back at me, confused. “I just need her to explain something. I need help, okay? I just need help.”

“I’m afraid that if you don’t have an appointment and you’re not a current student of this school, I can’t let you in,” the girl said. She had a name tag pinned to her shirt, and I glanced at it.

“Lucy, is it?” I said. “Listen, Lucy, please. Please, I just need to—” I stopped in mid-sentence as the office door opened, and Mrs. Dunham poked her head out. She saw me standing there like some flea-ridden prostitute and nodded once at Lucy.

“It’s okay,” Mrs. Dunham said. “Come in, Khloe.” I tried not to feel too smug as I followed the counselor into her office, ignoring the stabbing stare of the girl behind the desk. I stopped near the leather couch and caught my breath, feeling suddenly ill, like I might puke all over the nice beige carpet. Mrs. Dunham turned toward me and leaned back against her desk, arms folded across her chest. Her glasses were perched on the edge of her nose, and she looked slightly intimidating as she stared me down. For a moment, there was silence. Neither of us spoke.

“Are you drunk?” she asked finally.

I dropped the journal onto the couch, feeling the room start to spin. “I can’t do this anymore,” I said. My words sounded funny like my tongue was swollen and too big for my mouth. “I have no answers. Carter has no answers.” I sat down shakily on the couch, only just realizing that tears were streaming down my face. Mrs. Dunham picked up a box of tissues and handed them to me before sitting back against her desk, watching. I wondered if it had been the wrong decision to come here, but it was too late now. I was here, and I was an utter mess.

“What are you taking, Khloe?” she asked. “Are you on anything besides alcohol?” I nodded, realizing that I didn’t care anymore about what might come of it.

“Since Carter’s been gone, I’ve...” I hesitated, almost unable to speak his name. “I’ve gone back to the pills. And... other stuff.”

“He told me this might be a problem,” the counselor said. She folded her arms and stared me down, meeting my gaze when I looked up at her, surprised.

“He told you?”

“We spoke of you often,” she said. “He cared for you. Deeply.”

“I don’t want to be like this.” I wiped my eyes, wondering if the tears would ever stop flowing. The nausea was coming and going in waves, bile rising in my throat, threatening to explode. “This isn’t me. I’m not this person.”

“I know,” Mrs. Dunham said. I looked up at her, meeting her eyes. Her expression was one of sympathy, understanding, and kindness. Despite my childish mistake in coming here, she hadn’t turned me away, yet. I knew I looked like some drunken prostitute with mascara running down my face and my hair a rat’s nest, but I didn’t care.

“I need help,” I whispered. “I... I can’t end up like him and Ava. She, Ava, she’s in the hospital. She OD’d. She could have died. I can’t keep doing this every day, every moment. If I do, I’ll die, too. Like Carter.”

“You’re right,” Mrs. Dunham said. I knew she was agreeing with what I’d said, but her admission stung like a slap. “There’s a good chance that if you continue this way, you will end up killing yourself or someone else. Is that what you want?”

“No. I... of course, not.” A sob caught in my throat, and I felt an overwhelming urge to curl up in the fetal position and die. “How do I

stop?”

“With a lot of hard work,” she said. She pushed herself off the desk and crossed the room to turn off the light in the fish tank. “It will take a long time, Khloe,” she said. “And it will be hard. It will be very hard.”

“I don’t know if I can do it.” I rested my head in my hands as a pounding sensation crept into my skull. With a migraine coming on, I knew the only thing that could stop it in its tracks was a bottle of booze. “I can’t survive this.”

“Of course, you can.” The counselor straightened up and crossed the room, putting one hand on my shoulder. Her grip was firm, yet encouraging. “Not only can you survive this, but you will.”

“Oh, please.” I stood then, anger boiling in my chest. “Carter didn’t,” I said. “Carter didn’t survive any of this. If you couldn’t even help him, how in the hell do you think you can help me?”

“Carter was different,” Mrs. Dunham said softly. She didn’t seem startled by my accusation. “He didn’t want to be here, Khloe. He never found what he was looking for in this life. But you? You want to be here. I can tell.”

“Oh?” I took a step back, toward the door, wishing I had never come. “And what makes you think that?”

“It’s simple,” the counselor said. She turned away from me and sat back down in her chair. “You haven’t killed yourself yet.”

“Some days it’s hard not to,” I admitted, and Mrs. Dunham shrugged.

“Life is hard,” she said. “Life is hard, and it’s messy, and it’s devastating. But do you know what else it is? Life is also beautiful and wonderful and fascinating. It just takes opening your eyes to see that and let go of old, dangerous demons.”

“And you think you can help me see the light?” I asked, sarcastically. I started to head for the door, unwilling to listen to any more of her bullshit. “You think you can help me?”

“I’ll help you,” Mrs. Dunham said. “But only under one condition.” I turned to look at her, hesitating near the door. I was almost afraid to hear the answer.

“What?” I said finally.

“You let me.”

TWENTY-FOUR

I didn't hear from Ava for two days, but I knew she was still in the hospital, so I tried not to stress too hard about it. If she weren't in the hospital and instead of somewhere on the streets, it would be more difficult to rest my mind. According to Jay, who had gone to visit twice, she was on suicide watch for a while until the doctor decided she was no longer a threat to herself. I knew that for now, I was not welcome there—not after the falling out we'd had about the drugs. So, I kept my distance and waited for her to come to me. With Ava in the hospital and Jay working at the auto shop every day, I spend most evenings lying in bed, a bottle of booze near the nightstand and Carter's journal tucked under one arm.

Business at the bar was slow, so I was losing hours and money—my mother's life insurance had covered my ass so far, which was good because being a bartender hadn't. Despite Carter's urges to put it away for college someday—a dream which I had at one point single-handedly flushed down the toilet—I continued to spend money on drugs and booze and all-around refused responsibility. So instead of college, savings paid my rent and food, not that I was eating much lately, anyway, and I didn't have to leave the house for any reason except to buy booze and the occasional bag of pills.

A few times, I considered going back to see Mrs. Dunham for a session, but each time I had decided against it. My little “high” escapade had humiliated me enough to stay away and hope she didn't remember that

night forever. Whatever Carter had told her about me was now ringing true. But, fuck it. I didn't need her. I didn't need anyone. So long as I stayed high or drunk, I had no reason to think about life.

At six 'o clock, there was a knock on my front door. I was six shots in and feeling a nice buzz when I stumbled to answer it, feeling more social than usual. Had I been sober, I would have hidden under the couch blanket until the visitor left.

"Khloe?" Frank stood at my door, his head down, and a hat clutched between his fingers. When his eyes met mine, there was sadness and pain that I hadn't seen in him since Mom's death.

"What are you doing here?" I couldn't tell if he was drunk. In fact, he looked almost sober for the first time in a long time. Either that or I was too strung out to tell.

"I just needed to see you," Frank said. "You're my daughter." There was black under his eyes as though he hadn't slept in weeks.

"Now isn't really a good time," I said. "I'm busy."

"Doing what?"

"Drinking," I said. Frank laughed then, but there was no humor in his tone.

"Like father, like daughter," I said, and that shut him up quick.

"I hoped," he paused and then took one small step toward the open door. "I hoped we could talk," he said. "I haven't been very good to you, and I know that. Will you let me try again? I'm sober now."

"You've been sober before, for about four days," I told him. "The next time you come to my door, make sure you've lasted longer than a week."

"Please, Khloe," said Frank. "Just talk to me."

"You need to leave." The liquid courage in the form of tequila made me step toward him, pushing him away from my front door. If it came to it, I

was certain that in my drunken frame of mind, I would be prepared to take a swing if I had to.

“Khloe, please.”

“Fuck off.” I slammed the door in his face and locked it, flipping the deadbolt over and pulling the curtains closed. I pressed my ear to the door, heart racing, listening as Frank started his truck and pulled away. As soon as I was certain he was gone, I made my way back to the couch for another drink. My hands shook as I poured myself a shot and took it, praying that he wouldn’t come back anytime soon. I was a natural basket case, I always had been. The added stress had never been for the better.

At about ten, I was three sheets to the wind and passed out on the couch when my phone rang next to my head. I searched for my cell phone, only vaguely coherent, and put it to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Khloe? It’s me.”

“Ava?” I sat up, rubbing my eyes, trying not to puke as the world began to spin in front of me. “I thought you weren’t talking to me.”

“Shut up for a second,” Ava hissed. “I wasn’t going to bother calling you, but I have news.” I closed my mouth, waiting for her to continue. When she didn’t, I let out my breath in a long sigh.

“Ava? I have things to do. Make it quick.” Okay, so I didn’t really have things to do, but I did have quickly fading patience.

“It’s your dad,” she said breathlessly. “He’s in the ER. I saw them wheel him in.” It took a moment for her words to sink in. I pushed the phone closer to my ear, wondering if I’d misheard her. “He was in an accident,” she said. “A car accident. You should probably come.”



My heart seemed to stop. My breath caught. Only hours ago, he had been standing at my door, begging for forgiveness, and I'd slammed it in his face.

Like a punch in the gut, a million memories flashed through my drunken mind—me, as a child, squealing as Frank tossed me in the air, my mother laughing, the video camera unstable in her hand as she tried to control her giggles. After that, years later, Frank teaching me how to drive, taking me on motorcycle rides around the neighborhood. And, in a moment after that, I imagined him lately drunk and high, pounding on my door, screaming in my face.

“Is he alive?” I asked.

“I think so,” Ava said. “But it looks bad.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. “You’re going to see him, aren’t you?”

“Why should I?”

“He’s your father, Khloe. He still loves you.”

“He’s a drunk and an addict, and I don’t need it in my life,” I said, fighting to keep calm. I wanted so badly to yell at her. To scream. To cry. She had no idea the anger and hurt Frank had laid upon me since my mother’s death, none at all.

“Really?” said Ava. Her voice had softened. “Look at us, *novio*. What’s the difference?”

TWENTY-FIVE

Damn her. Ava was right, and I knew it. If something were terribly wrong, and Frank died before I could see him, I knew I would regret it. It didn't matter that we weren't close anymore. At one time, he'd been a good father. Actually, he'd been a great one. It was something I found myself having to think about when making the decision over whether to see him. I was still his kid despite my reluctance, and he was still my father.

I tried the best I could to sleep off the booze in my system, and when morning came, I dug for all my spare change before getting in the car and heading toward the hospital. Halfway there, I stopped at a convenience store for two bouquets of flowers. If I couldn't be nice to him, at least I could be decent.

"Room 1406," the receptionist told me. It was the same woman who'd been there the night Ava was admitted. She didn't seem to recognize me. As I made my way down the desolate hallway toward Frank's room, I suddenly wished I'd called Jay and had him come with me. Something about having him around put me at ease and made me feel like I could tackle anything just so long as he was by my side, pushing me on. Carter had made me feel like that. Confident. Fearless.

I stopped at Frank's room and took a deep breath, wondering if it was too late to turn around and make a run for the exit. But I didn't. I stayed put. Trying to gather my composure, I knocked lightly and stepped in.

Frank was lying on the bed, barely awake. The skin on his face, the little bit that wasn't covered by bruises and open cuts, was pale. One of his eyes was swollen shut, a result presumably from the force of the steering wheel against his face. His leg, I noticed, was in a cast as was his arm.

"Hi," I said carefully. I set the bouquet of flowers in an empty vase of water, letting my fingers flutter over the silky petals of the roses. Clearing my throat, I turned to look at him, forcing myself to meet his gaze.

"I didn't think you were going to come," Frank said. His voice was raw and scratchy like he was coming down from a bad cold.

"You look like shit," I said, and for the first time in a long time, he smiled slightly.

"You don't look too fancy yourself," he said. I crossed my arms over my chest, choosing to ignore the comment and gazed around the room. Aside from the bouquet I'd brought, there was only one other card. I picked it up. It was from Melanie Drake.

"I still look better than you," I said, putting the card back down on the table. I leaned up against the wall, my eyes on him, wondering how much of a mistake it had been to come here.

"You've lost weight," Frank noted. "I didn't pay attention last night. Are you using again?"

"Count on you for a backhanded compliment." I pushed myself off the wall and crossed the room, feeling uncomfortable, and out of place. "How drunk were you when you hit that pole?"

"Not drunk enough, apparently," said Frank. I cleared my throat and turned to look out the window, unable to keep looking at him. I didn't know what I was more afraid of—breaking down or getting angry.

"I just figured I'd stop by and drop those off," I said, tilting my head toward the vase of flowers. "But I should probably go now."

“You figured you’d stop by, or someone else told you to?” he asked.

“Ava told me to,” I admitted. I couldn’t bring myself to feel bad about it, either. “Apparently, parents mean something to her.” I turned and headed toward the door. My good deed for the day was finished. “It was good to see you, Frank. My work here is done.” I reached for the door handle and pulled.

“I’m sorry about Carter,” he said quietly behind me. “He was a good kid.” I paused, an engulfing rise of emotion swelling in my chest.

“He was,” I agreed. “And he’s gone now.”

“Khloe?”

I turned, fighting the urge to bolt, and looked at Frank. His face was sad, sympathetic. I wondered if he was being sincere or not.

“I may not be much of a father to you, but you’re still my daughter.” He stopped as if struggling to form the words. “Take care of yourself,” he said finally. “I don’t want you to join him.”

“Don’t worry, Frank,” I said. “I’m nothing like you.”

I closed the door behind me, feeling my heart racing in my chest. Down the hall, a nurse was watching me from her station. Her eyes narrowed as if she was expecting me to make trouble for her or something. I took a deep breath to compose myself and started for Ava’s floor. I was just about to ride the elevator up to the psych unit when the doors to the ER opened, and two medics pushing a gurney rushed in. I looked over my shoulder, none too surprised to see Ty straddling the patient on the cot, pumping the man’s chest as his partner pumped air into his lungs. Ty looked over at the ER doc, said something I couldn’t make out, and then ceased compressions. The doctor nodded and glanced at his watch.

“Always a bummer when that happens,” the nurse said to me. The same nurse had been glaring at me only moments ago. “But damn... I’d let that

paramedic pump on my chest any day.” She waggled her eyebrows at me, and I had to fight the urge to roll my eyes. The elevator beeped, and the doors opened, but I was a second too late. Ty looked over, catching sight of me, and he said something to his partner before jogging across the ER floor toward me.

“I didn’t know you were here,” he said. I smiled politely at him and stepped into the elevator, hoping he’d take that as a conversation ender and leave me be. He didn’t. Instead, he stepped up next to me as the elevator doors closed behind us. “What floor?”

“Psych.”

“For Ava?” he asked. I nodded, and the skin under my sweatshirt heated up as the seconds ticked by. Ty was standing next to me, his arm touching mine, and I was surprised to feel a zap of electricity travel through my body.

“Sorry about that man,” I said awkwardly. “I’m sorry you couldn’t save him.”

“Shit happens, I guess.” Ty leaned back against the elevator wall, closing his eyes. For some odd reason, I wanted to comfort him, but I didn’t know what to say, so I kept my mouth shut.

“I’m also sorry about the other night.” I cleared my throat, heat rising to my face. “It wasn’t my intention to kiss you.”

“Oh, I know.” He smiled, and a wave of relief washed over me. He had a cute smile. Like, really cute. “That doesn’t mean you didn’t like it, though.”

“Excuse me?” I turned to face him, annoyed, but mostly because he’d called me out on it. “There was nothing about it that I liked. You kiss like a dog.”

“Really?” Ty asked. “Because I’ve been told I kiss like a god.”

“You must have misheard.” The elevator opened up on the sixth floor, and I stepped out as quickly as I could, holding my breath so I wouldn’t have to inhale Ty’s sultry, manly scent. It didn’t matter, though, because he followed me anyway.

“Do you make it a habit of following women around the hospital?” I asked as we walked.

“Only the cute ones,” Ty said, keeping up with my brisk pace.

“You need to leave me alone,” I said over my shoulder. “I already told you, this isn’t going to work with us.”

“I don’t like that answer,” Ty said. I was caught by surprise when he reached for my arm and pulled me to a stop in the middle of the hallway, forcing me to meet his gaze. “I want you to tell me the truth,” he said. “Can you stand there and look me in the eye and tell me with one hundred percent certainty that you don’t have feelings for me? That you’re totally uninterested?” When I didn’t answer, he went on. “I don’t think this is about me, Khloe. I think it’s about you.”

“Of course, it’s about me.” I pulled my arm away from him, scowling. “I already told you, Ty, you don’t want to be involved in my mess of a life. I don’t even want to deal with the shit I deal with. Why in the hell would you want to?”

“Because that’s what people who care about each other do,” Ty said. He reached up and took my face in his hands, and it took every ounce of willpower I had not to jump on him with overwhelming desire.

“You can’t care about me,” I murmured. “You don’t even know me.”

“So, let me. Let me know you.”

“You’re making a mistake,” I said. I didn’t realize I was crying until Ty wiped away a single tear. “I’m not the person you want to be with.”

“Stop thinking you know me.” He leaned forward and rested his lips on mine, and a sizzling spark traveled through my skin. I leaned into him then, desperate for his touch, my body tingling with excitement. His tongue slipped between my lips, his teeth closing gently around my bottom lip. He pulled me into him, his hands embracing my body as he held me against his own. When I was sure I was about to lose complete control, he pulled back, still holding my face between his fingers. My skin burned where his hands touched me, and I found myself sucking in air, trying to catch my breath.

“I have to go back to work,” he said. “Can I call you later?” My heart dropped to the pit of my stomach, but I shrugged, trying to act nonchalant.

“You don’t have my number.”

“I don’t?” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a shriveled and tattered piece of paper. He unfolded it and handed it to me. “Is this not it?” he asked. I read the number on the paper, glaring at it, recognizing Ava’s flirty handwriting at once.

“She didn’t.”

“She did.” He took the paper back from me and smiled. “She gave it to me the other day when I came to see her after she was admitted.” He winked at me and took a few steps back, teasing.

“So how come you didn’t call me before now?” I asked. He put his hands in the air as if pointing out the obvious.

“You didn’t want me to.”

TWENTY-SIX

February 14, 2017

Some say that Valentine's Day is the saddest day of the year. I happen to agree. Khloe loves it, but I think it's for the boxes of chocolate. And besides that, she makes it a point to egg the floral shops every year on V-day eve. It stopped being funny when Mr. Wilson caught her in the act and called the police, but that didn't stop her from doing it again. I swear that girl asks for trouble everywhere she goes. Maybe one day, when she finds someone to love, she'll start taking things seriously instead of pretending everything is a joke. I love her, but sometimes I wonder if she'll ever grow up. With me here holding her up, probably not. With me here, she doesn't have to.

I wish Jay and I were still together. What an amazing day this could have been with him. I wonder if he misses me as much as I miss him. I doubt it. I think it's hard for him to even admit that he's gay. Why do people fall in love so easy?

It's bullshit.

“I do not pretend everything is a joke!” I slammed the journal shut and tossed it aside, fuming. “And even if I did, someone had to. Carter was so

uptight he couldn't unclench his ass cheeks with a wrench!"

"There's an image I didn't need," Ava said. She looked over at me from her spot on the hospital bed, a nail polish brush hovering over one fingernail. "Thanks for that."

Huffing, I crossed my arms and glared at the wall.

"Just because I lived life with a little bit of fun does not mean I was really as bad as he makes me sound."

"Did you really egg a floral shop?" Ava asked.

"Every year," I said. "Mr. Wilson hated me. I'd get the death glare every time he saw me around the city."

"He was an uptight asshole, anyway," Ava grumbled. "He had to admit it, you kept his life interesting." She shrugged and brushed the rose-red polish over one fingernail. "Anyway, how did it go? How's Frank?"

"Typical," I said. "Like shit." I leaned back against the counter, my arms folded over my chest, staring at Ava.

"I'm sorry I told you to see him, Khloe," she said. I shrugged, wishing this were a conversation we weren't having. I knew I couldn't leave the hospital without stopping in to see her, but seeing her looking like that, frail and pale in the hospital bed, was more difficult than just avoiding her until she was released.

"It's whatever." I turned to admire the bouquet I'd brought her, but even the pastel colors of the petals didn't lighten the mood. Aside from that, the one Ty had brought to her overpowered mine by a mile, and that made me angrier than anything else did. "I mean, it would have sucked if he'd died, I guess."

Ava cracked a tiny smile. "Yeah. Probably." She shifted in the bed, wincing in pain.

“You look a little bit better,” I said. “At least, you look well enough to hand out my number to strange men.” Ava’s gaze met mine. She grinned, proud of herself. I wouldn’t have expected anything less from her.

“He’s not a random stranger, Khloe. He’s a very sexy paramedic slash student slash serious life-saving badass.”

“I must have missed the memo. Anyway. How are you feeling?” I reached to brush off a few crumbs from the blanket that was draped over her lap. She shrugged, her skin unnaturally pale as she rested her head back against the propped-up pillow.

“People in the movies always say hospital drugs are the best,” she said. “But I’m really craving something else, you know?” Her eyes met mine, and I felt a ball of dread fill in the pit of my stomach.

“Ava, that’s exactly the reason you’re in here,” I said. “You have to be kidding, right?”

“Do I look like I’m kidding?” Ava asked. She pushed herself weakly into a sitting position, wincing and straining against the bed. “I can’t stay here if I don’t get something,” she said. “I need it. I’m going crazy.”

“I’m sorry.” I put my hands in the air, guilt tugging at me. “I can’t do that for you. I can’t condone it.”

“Khloe, please...”

“No,” I said. She fell back against the pillow, looking even more exhausted.

“Fuck you.”

“Ava.” I backed up against the door, wondering suddenly why it felt like all I ever did was mess things up and piss people off. “I can’t do that again. I can’t bring you back to life. I can’t. And God knows I can’t lose you, too. Why do you think I would be able to handle that?” She turned her face away from me, and I knew that was it. I had just pushed our friendship over

the edge. I longed to sit down on the bed and hug her, but I knew there was a good chance she would probably punch me in the face. I, for one, didn't want to end up in a hospital bed next to Frank.

"Just get out," she said. "Get out and stay the fuck away from me."

"Please don't be angry. I just can't watch you hurt yourself anymore. You're my best friend, Ava. You're all I have left."

"How dare you." She looked back at me then, her eyes dark and stormy, and I realized I'd just walked into a trap. "How dare you come in here reeking of booze and tell me that what I'm doing is wrong."

"I know," I said. I raised my hands in the air, surrendering. "I'm trying to clean up, Ava. I'm trying."

"That's bullshit," Ava said. She was scowling at me now, looking like she was ready to jump up from the bed and tackle me. I wouldn't put it past her. "You haven't tried for anything since Carter died. Your world has completely fallen apart, and you don't seem to care one bit."

"I do care," I said. "I'm trying to fix things, Ava."

"No, you're not," she said. "And until you do, stop being a hypocrite. Now get the fuck out." There was no fighting it. Not now, not when she was so riled up. I dropped my hands and left the room, shaking slightly as I made my way back out to the car. It was rare for Ava and me to fight, especially over something like drugs. I was worried about her, and there was no way I could live with myself if I smuggled drugs into my best friend. I would only be helping her hurt herself, and that's not what true friends did. If anyone proved that, it was Carter.

I started Missus Betty but didn't go anywhere for a long while. I felt overwhelmed with emotions, smothered by pain. I knew how Ava felt because I often felt the same way. The pain would always be there, but only

one thing could ever help, and that was the drugs and alcohol. It was an addiction, and it was winning.

“Fuck.” I pulled the cell phone from my pocket and dialed Jay’s number, my hands shaking, praying I would be able to hold myself together today. He answered on the first ring.

“I’m sorry I bother you so much,” I said. It was then that I realized I had actual tears streaming down my face.

“Don’t apologize,” said Jay. “Are you all right?”

“Not really.” I leaned forward and put my head against the steering wheel trying to compose myself. “My dad is in the hospital, and Ava just freaked the hell out. I’m worried if I go home, I’ll—”

“Come over to my place,” Jay said, not even waiting for me to finish. “I just got home from work.” I took a deep breath as an overwhelming feeling of comfort washed over me. Jay was so like Carter. Had I never met him, I feared I would be lying in that hospital bed right next to Ava.

“Thanks, Jay,” I murmured. “I appreciate you.”

I hung up the phone and pulled out of the hospital parking lot. Everything in me screamed for a quick release—one shot of booze, a few pills—just something to numb the pain. Instead, I kept the car moving in the opposite direction. Twice I stopped outside of two different liquor stores, and both times I forced myself to drive away without getting out of the car. I wanted to text Jay and apologize for blowing him off. I wanted to tell him that something came up, that I couldn’t make it, and then I wanted to go home and drink. I wanted to go home and drink until I couldn’t think straight anymore, and then I wanted to drink some more. But I didn’t. By the time I got to Jay’s condo, I was sobbing.

“Christ.” He opened the door and let me in, his face a picture of shock. I made a beeline for the couch, trying to pull myself together, but the task

was impossible. Jay sat down next to me, and when he took my hand, I cried harder.

“I’m sorry.” I sniffed. “I just...”

“You’re a hot mess,” Jay said. He smiled, but barely. He brushed some hair behind my ear, hair that had been sticking to my cheek with tears. It was the same thing Carter used to do after I’d been crying. At the time, it had been nothing but a friendship thing, and now, with Jay, I knew that’s all it was with him too. I needed the support. At this point, he was the best person to give it.

“I’m glad I have you,” I said. “It’s nice to be able to cry to a guy without wondering if he’s thinking of me naked.”

Jay laughed, his eyes twinkling. “You’re beautiful, Khloe,” he said. “But Carter was cuter.”

“That he was,” I agreed with a sniffle. I wiped the last of the tears from my eyes and rested my head on his shoulder. Jay let me stay there, his body still under the weight of my head. “Sometimes it feels like I won’t survive,” I said after a moment. “Some days, it feels like I would rather die than keep waking up without him. I know he was just my friend, but he was so much more than that.”

“He was your rock,” Jay said. “He was your light in the dark, the moment of good in a life filled with evil.”

“Exactly.” I ran my hand through my hair, realizing then that I could really use a shower. I’m sure I smelled like a cheap hooker, but if I did, Jay didn’t seem to notice. “I’m afraid to be by myself,” I said. “I don’t want to die, Jay, but if I keep going down the road I’m on, I’ll end up just like Ava and my dad. When I’m alone, it’s something I do to numb the pain. I drink. I take pills. And Carter’s not here to stop me.”

“Only you can stop you,” Jay said. “No one else can turn you into a better person. Only you can do that, and I believe you can.” He stood and went to the kitchen, coming back with two wine glasses filled with orange juice. He winked and handed one to me.

“Just what I was craving,” I joked, but the desire to go buy a bottle of cheap vodka or tequila and chug it down was overwhelming. I sipped at the orange juice, pretending I was sipping a mixed drink instead.

“I was never straight with you, Khloe,” Jay said after a while. He swished the juice around in his glass, looking almost shameful. After a moment, he looked up, his eyes meeting mine. “You’re the reason I met Carter,” he said. “You’re the reason we fell in love.”

In a split second, the liquid traveling down my throat caught in my windpipe. I sputtered, certain I would suffer the ultimate death at the moment. Death by orange juice. What a way to go.

“Sorry,” I said, wiping the juice from my chin. “What are you talking about?” Jay chuckled dryly and took another drink from his glass.

“I’m a drug and alcohol sponsor,” he said. “Carter came to the meeting inquiring for someone who may be able to help you.”

“He did that for me?” I asked. The initial shock was wearing off, but the more I thought about it, the less surprised I was. Carter always had my best interests at heart even if that meant putting his own on the backburner.

“Yeah,” Jay said. “He did that for you. I gave him my number and told him that if he could get you there, we could help you.”

“He tried.” My fingers brushed the empty glass before I set it down on the table. “I remember,” I said. “I remember he told me about it, but I turned him down. More than once, in fact.”

“Well, he and I got something out of it at least,” Jay said with a bitter chuckle. I didn’t find any amusement in the situation. Carter was dead, and I

was still a fucking junkie who couldn't hold her shit together without him.

"Listen, Jay, thanks for letting me come over and vent." I got to my feet, leaving the empty glass of orange juice on the coffee table. "I really appreciate it."

"Hold up," Jay said. He too got to his feet and practically raced me to the door. "Do you want to stay here tonight?"

"No, thanks," I hesitated, my hand on the doorknob. "I just needed to vent." I twisted the knob, and Jay's hand shot out to stop it.

"Khloe, you're not going to do something reckless, right?" he asked. I forced myself to look up at him, to meet his gaze. For a moment, it was Carter standing there, staring me down, a look of sadness in his eyes.

"Of course not." I jutted my chin out, stubborn. "I just want to sleep in my own bed."

"I worry about you," Jay said, but his hand fell from the door, giving up. Before I could pull it open, though, he grabbed my arm, forcing me to look at him. "Don't ever think you're alone," he said. "Call me whenever. Come over whenever."

"You know I will," I said, but he looked doubtful. Not that I could blame him. How could I expect someone else to trust me when I couldn't even trust myself? "I'll see you later."

Jay only watched me leave, looking tense, but I didn't glance back even once. The logical side of me pressed to turn around and stay there as I couldn't get into trouble if I were with him. But the rebel inside of me won, and I trudged forward, unable to face the cruel fact of my life—I was nearing the end of the road, and I didn't even know it yet.

TWENTY-SEVEN

July 4, 2017

It's been a wonderful day today. Really. Khloe and I went to a 4th of July BBQ down at the fairgrounds. The best part? She didn't even drink. She was sober the whole time. For the average person, that's no big deal... but for Khloe, well, it is something that doesn't happen a lot. I can't nag at her, though. She stopped the drugs, and I think she only did it for me. I can't force her to stop drinking too. Sometimes, though, I wonder if she drinks to run away from the same demons that I do.

I raised the bottle of vodka to my lips and took a swig, setting down the journal. Next to me, Jesse was forming tiny lines of cocaine on the coffee table with a credit card. He was bent over, concentrating, his brows furrowed and his nose wrinkled.

"Thanks for having me over, Khloe," he said. "I really am sorry about Diesel."

"Diesel?" I repeated. "Your asshole dealer?"

"Yeah," Jesse hesitated. "That would be him." I shrugged slightly and took another drink from the bottle. I should have known better than to have Jesse over, especially after everything he'd put me through. But I'd been desperate and alone, and I'd really needed a good hit. With Ava still in the

hospital, I had nobody around who wouldn't judge me. Jesse, I knew, would be the last person to ever point fingers. He was almost worse off than I was.

"All right, are you ready for this?" He sat back, admiring the lines of white on the table. "This is some grade-A shit right here."

"I don't doubt it," I murmured. The journal I was holding in my hand felt heavy and painful as if it were on fire. Guilt tugged at me as Ty's face flashed into my mind, and then Ava's, but I pushed it aside. I wasn't like Ava, I was smart. I wouldn't OD. I knew when enough was enough.

"Here," Jesse said. "Try some."

I hesitated, unsure if I should take the plunge and snort it. I needed it, oh, God, I needed it, but I was afraid. I was afraid of who I was when I was high. I was afraid of hurting someone. I was afraid of hurting myself. There was no feeling quite as terrifying as being out of control, and yet, there was nothing like just letting go.

"You're a bad influence," I said to Jesse. He laughed, but nothing was funny. In fact, as I leaned over the table and plugged one nostril, I was feeling anything but amused.

"There you go, baby," Jesse said as I sat back. "Welcome to dreamland." I closed my eyes, breathing deep, allowing euphoria to embrace me. I knew it was wrong, but how could something so wrong feel so goddamn right?

"Life is hard, man," I said, sitting back on the couch. Jesse looked over at me with blood-shot eyes. I wasn't sure if he was coherent for the conversation, but I didn't care.

"Fuck yeah, it is," he said.

"It's hard, and it's long, and it sucks. It sucks big time." I closed my eyes again and thought of Ava, lying in that hospital bed, sick, weak, and desperate for another quick fix. I wanted so badly to judge her, to roll my eyes and insist that she was the drug addict, that she was the one who

needed help. But even then, even though I knew that it wasn't just her, that it was me too, I couldn't stop.

It was midnight when a friend of Jesse's stopped by my house to pick up some weed. He was a handsome kid, not like Jay or Carter, but cute in a boyish sort of way like Jesse was. He smelled of booze and cigarettes and walked with his hands jammed deep down in his pockets like a criminal, but I liked him, anyway.

"I'm Paul," he said. I shook his hand and, feeling sociable, stepped aside so he could come in. Had I been sober, I wouldn't have thought twice about turning him away. "Ah," he said, looking around. "The party's been here the whole time."

"Shit yeah, dude," Jesse said. He scooted another cushion over so both Paul and I could sit before reaching for a syringe.

"Is this your woman?" Paul asked Jesse, and I felt myself shifting uncomfortably as his hazel eyes flickered over my breasts.

"I'm nobody's woman," I said. "My name is Khloe."

"Well, Khloe..." Paul leaned into me. His breath was ripe with stale beer and cigarettes. With him in my face, it wasn't so appealing. "What's a pretty thing like you doing with a loser like Jesse?"

"Hey," Jesse said. "Don't be a prick."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Don't be a prick."

Paul smiled at this as if I'd said something funny, and I suddenly wished I hadn't invited him in. Instead of being a bitch, though, I swiped the bottle of vodka from the coffee table and took a long swig, hoping the booze could soothe my nerves. Paul watched me with intense, beady eyes, like a hungry animal scoping out its next meal. What a creep.

I didn't realize how fucked up I really was until an hour or so later when I started seeing double and then triple. Twice I tried to get up to get to go to

the bathroom to throw up, and twice I found myself vomiting into the trash bin instead. I didn't care. I was too drunk to notice, too high to think twice about it. I continued to drink and kept on smoking until Jesse, catching me off guard, decided to say something.

"Maybe you should slow down," he muttered. Despite his hypocritical suggestion, the glaze in his eyes made it clear that he was just as out of it as I was, possibly more.

"Chill out, dude," Paul said. He, too, had been taking swigs from the vodka bottle and shooting up whatever Jesse had put in the syringe. Now, as he leaned in toward me, grinning, I didn't find myself pulling away. I allowed Paul to trail his fingers up and down my arms. Behind him, Jesse watched us, but he said nothing. He was silent as if afraid of telling Paul to back off. I was too drunk to really notice. I watched Paul's hands run down my arms and onto my thighs, feeling as though I was watching myself through the eyes of someone else, another being who would watch the scene play out with accusing eyes. I used to be that accusing person. Not anymore.

I shivered involuntarily as Paul's fingers slipped between my thighs, gently caressing the area between my legs. Sober, I would have pushed him away, possibly even punched him but wasted, I didn't care. It was hard to care about much of anything when the reality was nothing more than a twisted sense of Alice in Wonderland-type shit. Alcohol lowered my inhibitions, and drugs washed them away completely.

I closed my eyes, feeling Paul's fingers on me, and a moment later, his lips touched mine. Behind him, Jesse said something, but I couldn't make out what it was. I didn't care. As Paul kissed me, aggressively, his fingers digging into the sensitive curves of my skin, the world slowly began to fade out.

“No,” I whispered. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Relax,” he said. “You know you want this.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

I was in my bed, face down in the pillow, and I was in such pain from head to toe that I wouldn't have been surprised if I'd been hit by a truck. The house was silent and empty; both Jesse and Paul were gone. I lifted my head as far as I could from the mattress, squinting, trying not to allow the migraine to overtake me. It was almost noon. With great effort, I sat up and swung my legs over the bed, shaking.

I was naked.

I looked down at my body, tracing fingers over the circular black and blue bruises up and down my arms. Jesus. Had I been raped? No. But I'd had sex. Rough sex. Drunk sex. Blackout sex. Not the good kind of sex. Feeling panicky, I looked around my bedroom praying I'd spot at least a used condom, but there was nothing to be found. There was simply a cold, hard reminder that something had happened last night—something I would never remember, and the fault was all mine.

I stood and slipped on a robe, feeling oddly like I'd been violated. As I brushed my teeth, I couldn't help but notice the way my hands shook. The shaking was so severe, in fact, that twice I dropped the brush in the sink and had to start over. As I leaned over the counter, my heart thudded in my chest. A tight sensation gnawed at me as if I was about to have some sort of anxiety attack. I straightened up, took a deep breath, and reached automatically for a half-empty bottle of tequila sitting on the bathroom sink.

I took a drink of it, holding my breath, wondering if I would puke before I passed out or vice versa. I stumbled back to the bed and flopped down. The pounding in my head was vicious like somebody had beaten in my skull with an iron hammer. I reached for the cell phone on my nightstand and dialed Jesse's number, wincing as the ringtone buzzed in my ear.

"Jesse," I said when he answered. "What happened last night?"

"Good morning to you, too, sunshine," Jesse said, and I had the overwhelming urge to find him and punch him in the nuts. "Did you have a good time last night?"

"Sure," I said. I closed my eyes, wishing the pounding in my brain would stop. "All the way up until I blacked out and woke up naked this morning."

"Oh yeah," Jesse said. "About that."

"Did we have sex?" I made a half-assed attempt to sit up, but I was suddenly nauseous. Instead, I reached for the tequila on the dresser and took another drink. My hands were still shaking.

"Not just you and me," Jesse said. He sounded distracted. "You fucked Paul, too."

"Shit." I lowered my head between my knees, feeling weak and dizzy. The thought of having had sex with yet another grade-A douchebag made me want to vomit all over my bedroom floor. It was bad enough I knew that I had forgiven Jesse to the point of sleeping with him, but Paul? He'd been a stranger, and one I hadn't really liked at that.

"You okay?" Jesse asked, and I wanted to snap at him. Instead, I took a ragged breath and another swig of tequila, praying I would become buzzed enough to keep this hangover from completely engulfing me.

"I have to go." I hung up the cell phone and got shakily to my feet in desperate need of a shower. As I shrugged off my robe, I took another drink

from the bottle, anxious and numb. My thoughts ran wild, a twisted mess in a black hole of confusion. I tried desperately to rack my memory, tried to recall anything from the night before. There was nothing.

The water in the shower was warm against my skin, washing away the horrors of the blackout night. As I scrubbed, my eyes skimmed over the tiny pin-hole-like dots in my arms from where I had been shooting up all night. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the wall of the shower, sick to my stomach. I wondered what Carter would say if he were here. He would be so disappointed in me. He would shut down and mope around like a child until I was ready to forfeit and apologize. He'd been good at that. He always knew when it was time to pull away from me. He'd always been able to show me just how badly I'd fucked up simply by shutting down and not talking. I would have gotten desperate and clingy, blubbering an apology while I sobbed into his lap. Not anymore, though. Now, there wasn't anyone who would be disappointed in me.

Well, maybe one.

I turned off the water and stepped out of the shower before drying and dressing. As I did so, I finished off the last bit of tequila while I grabbed some clothes from my drawers and stuffed them into an old gym bag. I slung the bag over my shoulder and stumbled out to the car, not bothering to call him first. I figured that if Jay weren't home, that would be the perfect opportunity for me to turn around and head home.

I tried, I could say. I tried for you, Carter.

My hands were still shaking as I pulled up to Jay's place and shut off the engine. I stepped out of the car and grabbed my bag, taking another steadying breath before heading up to his floor. I stopped in front of the door and raised my hand, hesitating, ready to bolt. My fist swayed where it

hung in the air. I closed my eyes, took another breath, and took one unsteady step back. Then I turned to leave.

“Khloe?” The door to the condo opened. I stopped where I was, flinching. It was too late to escape now.

“Hi, Jay.” I turned back around, letting my bag drop next to my feet on the ground. “I need your help.”

I stood facing him, hands dangling by my side, head pounding with the debilitating pain of my hangover. I knew that if I stood there much longer, I would fall over before I had the chance to sit down.

“Anything,” Jay said. For some reason, he didn’t seem surprised to see me there as if he’d been expecting me. He came out and picked up my gym bag before moving aside so I could come in. I looked around, feeling uncomfortable, wondering if it was too late to bolt.

“I can’t keep doing this,” I said. “I need to get sober, Jay. I need to get sober for Carter, but especially for myself. I can’t keep living like this.” Instead of saying anything, Jay reached out and drew me in for a hug. He smelled of old spice and soap, a comforting smell and a smell I could trust. “I can’t do this without you.” I closed my eyes, feeling the warmth of his skin against my cheek. “I can’t do this alone. I’ll break.” He pulled away then, holding me out at arm’s length, his eyes meeting mine.

“You know how hard this will be, right?” he said.

“I got sober once before,” I told him. “With Carter. I had a seizure and had to be taken to the ER in the middle of the detox.”

“I won’t let anything bad happen to you,” Jay said. He kissed the tip of his fingers and then touched my forehead, smiling. His smile was sad, and guilt tugged at me. So many times before I remembered seeing that sad smile on Carter’s face, and for another trying moment, I considered turning around and getting the hell out of there, but I didn’t. I forced myself to stay

put, glued to the floor, ready to face my demons no matter how petrified I was.

“I’ll try to leave,” I warned him. “I will try to leave when it gets bad. I’ll probably try to get out of the house, and I may be really mean to you.”

“I have experience with this sort of thing. It may take a couple of days for your body to really start reacting to detox.”

“I hope I won’t have to keep you long,” I admitted. Already, I was wondering if this was a bad idea. Jay wasn’t my doctor. This wasn’t his responsibility, and yet I was dumping it in his lap as if he deserved to deal with it. It was something I had done so many times before with Carter, and it was probably me who had driven him over the edge.

“If it takes a week, I’ll be here for that, too,” Jay said. I met his gaze, feeling an overwhelming emotion of trust and kindness. Jay owed me nothing, and yet here he was, putting his life on hold to help his drug-addict friend through a rough patch.

“I hope it doesn’t take long.” I sat down on his couch, wishing already that I had a bottle of booze between my fingers. The fuzziness from the tequila shots from earlier was already starting to wear off, and the reality of the situation was hitting me in full force.

“You would probably be safer in a hospital,” Jay said. He took a seat next to me, squeezing my shoulder. “You know, under the care of a medical professional.”

“No hospitals,” I said. “I don’t want the police involved.” My tone was sharp, but Jay didn’t draw away or flinch. I had to give him credit for that. Most people were intimidated by my temper. Carter had never been. He’d taken my physical and emotional lashings with a grain of salt.

“They could give you something to make detox more bearable,” Jay said gently, but I shook my head. The hospital was too risky, and I couldn’t put

myself in a vulnerable position. If the law were involved, I'd be screwed. I couldn't let that happen.

"I refuse to go to the hospital," I said. "I can do this here, with you." Feeling overwhelmed, I got to my feet, crossing my arms over my chest. "I can do this here with you." But could I? Deep-seated doubt boiled to the forefront of my mind. This was a bad idea. I was fooling myself. My skin began to tingle and itch as though thousands of ants were crawling over me. It was all too overwhelming. I pushed to my feet and crossed my arms over my chest.

"Sit down, Khloe," Jay said. His tone was firm, and I found myself lowering back down onto the couch without argument. "I won't let you do this alone. I just need you to know that it is going to be hard, and it is going to fucking hurt. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"Good," he said. "When was your last drink?"

I glanced at my watch. "Like, half an hour ago."

"Were you shooting up last night?"

I hesitated. "Yes."

"What was it?"

I looked at the ground, swallowing a lump in my throat. "I don't know. Heroine, maybe."

"Have you been taking anything else?"

I almost didn't answer. "Pills. Narcotics. Opioids. Oxycodone." I leaned forward, resting my head in my hands, realizing how deranged that sounded out loud.

"More than once a day?"

I didn't bother answering.

“Detox symptoms can begin anywhere from twenty-four to forty-eight hours after your last hit,” Jay said. “Sometimes earlier.” I sat up, trying not to think too hard about what I was getting myself into.

“I don’t want to go to the hospital,” I told him. “No matter what happens, unless I’m about to die, I do not want to go to the hospital.”

“Fine,” Jay said. “I can respect that as long as I know you’ll be safe without it.”

“Safe? Yes. Happy? No.” I sighed and leaned down, resting my head in my hands. I felt tired. Sick. Emotionally drained. But I knew I was too wired to sleep. “I’m a mess when I drink, Jay. I’m a mess when I do drugs. I do stupid things that I would never even consider while sober. This morning I woke up and heard that I slept with two guys last night, one of them nothing more than a stranger who I didn’t even like. If I’d been sober, he wouldn’t have even been in my house.”

“Funny the stupid shit we do when our inhibitions are gone,” Jay said. “Take it from me.” I sat up to look at him. Jay folded his hands behind his head and leaned back, meeting my eyes.

“Don’t tell me,” I said. “You used to be a drunk.”

“Worse,” Jay said. “Meth. Every goddamn day.”

“Christ.” The pounding in my head was growing worse, and I wanted to slam my skull against the wall just to see if it would ease the discomfort.

“I almost died, Khloe,” Jay said. “Twice.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.” I straightened up, squinting. “You seem to be all I have left.”

“That’s not true.”

“You don’t think so?” I asked.

Jay met my eyes briefly and then cast his gaze down.

I scoffed. “Told you so.”

“Maybe you should stop pushing people away,” he suggested.

I laughed, forcing a moment of lightheartedness for his benefit.

“Sure,” I said. “Let me get right on that.”

“I mean it, Khloe.”

“Yeah.” I met his gaze. “So do I. Carter was the one person who couldn’t be pushed away. He dealt with my shit for years. Day after day, fight after fight. He never got scared off even when everyone else did.”

“I didn’t,” Jay said, and I wanted to lean over and hug him. “Ava didn’t.”

“That’s because Ava is meaner than I am,” I said, forcing a smile. “And you haven’t known me long enough to be scared off. Give it time.” Jay got to his feet. He was smiling, but I couldn’t bring myself to smile back.

“You underestimate me, little lady,” he said. “I can take a lot of crap.”

“I have to,” I said. “If I don’t underestimate people, shit always hits the fan.” I was surprised when Jay kneeled in front of me, taking my hands in his.

“Stop pushing the world away,” he said. “The only battle you’re fighting is the one against yourself.”

TWENTY-NINE

At around ten that night, Jesse called my phone. I sat curled up on Jay's couch, legs tucked beneath me, trying to figure out if I was too cold or too hot when my phone started to buzz. Jay, who had been focused on a Stephen King novel, glanced over at the phone, then at me.

"It's Jesse." I reached for the phone and held it in my hand, an internal conflict rising in my chest.

"I wouldn't suggest answering that," Jay said.

"Why not?"

"I think you know why," he said, and I did.

I knew exactly why. Jesse was a bad influence on me, and I was already struggling without making it worse.

"You're right." I silenced the phone and put it down, feeling a headache come on. It had vanished for a moment, but now it was back. I didn't always want to see Jesse, but when I did, it was only ever for one reason—I needed to get high or drunk or both.

"I'm ordering a pizza," Jay said. He sounded stoked as if it was the best idea he'd had all night. He set his book down and went to the kitchen, digging through drawers for a phone book. "What do you like?"

"Anything," I said. I didn't care about pizza. Food was food. What I wanted—no, what I needed—was a stiff drink.

"Anchovies," Jay called. "Anchovies and onions. Sound good?"

“Whatever,” I murmured. I was hardly paying attention now, but over the phone, I heard him place an order for pepperoni and pineapple. It didn’t matter, though. Pepperoni and pineapple didn’t sound any more appealing than anchovies and onions. I wasn’t confident I could stomach either one. Since I’d been back on the booze and pills, my appetite, for the most part, had been nonexistent.

Jay brought me a glass of ice water a while later, but I couldn’t bring myself to drink it. There was only one thing I was desperately craving, and it wasn’t water.

“Got any vodka?” I joked, but Jay didn’t laugh. I sighed, wishing I had the energy to slap myself.

“The night is only going to get worse from here,” he said. “Drink the water. It will help a little bit.” I raised the glass to my lips to try and choke it down, but I couldn’t do it. I gagged, feeling a ball of revulsion rise in my throat. Setting the water down, I closed my eyes, breathing through the nausea.

“I can’t.”

“It’s worse than I thought,” Jay said, to himself. “Are you going to puke?”

“Probably,” I said. As soon as the words were out of my mouth, the queasiness hit me again, more severe this time. I jumped to my feet and raced to the closest outlet—Jay’s kitchen sink. Dropping my head over the counter, I heaved, vomiting bitter-tasting bile. At the front door, someone knocked, probably the pizza guy. I listened to Jay make the transaction, my head swimming. As he brought it back to the coffee table, juggling the pizza and a container of breadsticks, I caught a whiff of the food and puked again.

“Khloe?” Jay said. “Are you okay? Can I do something?”

“No.” I turned on the kitchen sink and splashed some icy water on my face. The headache was starting to intensify, and the smell of food was only making it worse. “I’m okay.”

“You should try to eat something,” Jay said. He leaned against the kitchen wall, arms folded, watching me as I sank to the floor with my head in my hands. “I know you think it won’t help, but it will.” He held his hand out to me to help me up. I took it, comforted by the warmth of his skin against mine. Jay led me back to the couch, and I sat down, drawing the blanket over my lap to keep the chills away. He sat down next to me and opened the pizza box, shooting me a pointed look.

“Fine,” I grumbled. I reached for a slice of pizza, determined to try to choke something down when I noticed Jay watching me. I glanced at him, and then back down, suddenly feeling irritated.

“What?” I snapped.

“You’re shaking,” Jay said. I looked back down, noticing that my hand was, indeed, trembling. I dropped the pizza back into the box and withdrew my arm.

“This can’t be happening.” I held my hand back up in front of me, trying to focus enough to calm the tremble. It didn’t help, only seemed to get worse. “It won’t stop.” Panic rose in my throat, a moment of terror. I cradled my hand against my chest, feeling my heart thump against my ribcage.

“This is part of the withdrawal process,” Jay said. “And it’s going to suck, but it’ll pass.”

I rested my head back against the couch, fighting nausea, wishing I had something, anything, to help me get through this. But even then, I knew that anything that could help me through this was exactly what I didn’t need.

“Maybe it was a mistake coming here,” I said, my tone quivered. On the coffee table, my cell phone rang again. Both Jay and I looked over.

“It’s Jesse again,” Jay said. My heart rate quickened, and for a second, I wondered if I could convince Jesse to come and pick me up before I was too far into this process.

“He’ll keep calling,” I said finally.

“Will he?”

“Yes.” I watched as Jay reached for the phone and slid his thumb over the answer button. For a moment, I considered plucking it from his hand, but I resisted, knowing that he would probably win that kind of tug-of-war.

“Jesse?” he said into the phone. “My name is Jay, I’m a friend of Khloe’s.” There was a pause, and then, “I can’t have you calling her anymore tonight. In fact, I would prefer it if you didn’t call her ever again.” He looked at me as if waiting for an objection, but I didn’t have the energy to care. Even when I opened my mouth to argue, nothing came out. Jay said something I didn’t catch into the phone and then closed it.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Sorry?” Jay repeated. “Sorry for what?”

“Everything.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” Jay set the cell phone back down onto the table and turned to face me. “You’re doing everything right by coming here, Khloe. No one should ever apologize for that.”

“I’m not your responsibility,” I told him. “You barely know me. I’m some kid who used to be friends with your ex. You owe me nothing.” Jay sighed, but it was not with anger. Instead, he smiled weakly at me.

“When I was caught in this mess, the same one you’re in now, I was in a constant battle against myself,” he said. “If all my friends had decided all at once that I wasn’t worth it and were willing to turn their back when things

got tough, I wouldn't be here today. It was the few people who stood by my side when I was at my worst that I owe my life to." He paused, taking a breath. "If I turned my back on you, I could never forgive myself if you fell back into this because no one ever told you not to. You may not care about yourself right now, Khloe, but you need to understand that everyone else does... Ava and me especially."

"When people get themselves into a mess like this, why should it be someone else's burden to bear?" I asked him. "Why would someone want to hold another person up?"

"Because a person doesn't need to be held up forever," Jay said. He took my hands and squeezed them. "All they really need is a shoulder to lean on until their legs are strong enough."

THIRTY

It was five minutes to midnight when things deteriorated even further. My head screamed with pain, hands still shaking. My legs trembled, and it took great effort to walk from one side of the room to the other without falling. Sweat leaked from every pore, but it wasn't from being too warm. One moment I was freezing cold as though I'd been standing in a walk-in freezer, and the next second, I was having hot flashes along with miserable and nauseating moments of physical despair.

"I can't do this." I made a swift attempt to side-pass him, but Jay was quicker.

He stepped in front of the door, his hands up as if prepared for me to take a swing at him.

"Don't do that," I said. My voice was trembling, but the anger was threatening to explode. "I need to get out of here. I changed my mind, Jay. I don't want to do this." As the words left my mouth, another wave of nausea rolled over me. I rushed for the kitchen sink again, just in time to lean over and vomit. Bile stung my tongue, sour and bitter. Jay kept his position in front of the door, watching me. I heaved again, but nothing came up, only a bit of water. My ribs hurt from coughing, and my throat was starting to swell. Sobbing, I slid to the floor.

"Take a few breaths, Khloe," Jay said. "Relax."

“Please,” I begged. “Please just let me out of here.” My head throbbed. It was a pounding so intensely I was sure someone was living inside my skull, bashing on my brain with a mallet. I put my chin down and clutched my hair in my hands, squeezing, trying to breathe through the pain. Had I ripped every follicle of hair from my head one by one, it still wouldn’t have amounted to the pain the migraine was attacking me with. “Jay,” I cried. “Please let me out of here!”

I clambered to my feet again, unsteady, trying in vain to support myself on the walls and countertops. I made another unsuccessful attempt to get through the door. My vision was blurry as I lunged at him, kicking and screaming. He caught me in a tight embrace, his arms around my midsection. I struggled against him, shrieking something that not even I could make out. Jay murmured something in my ear as he held me, but I couldn’t focus on him or his words.

“I have to go!” I screamed. “I’m leaving, Jay, and you can’t stop me, goddammit! Leave me the fuck alone!”

At that moment, there was a knock on the door, and Jay, still holding onto me, reached forward and opened it.

“What in the hell are you doing here?” I cried, spinning around to face our visitor. Ty came through the door, turning his back to me as he shut it behind him and clicked the deadbolt back into place.

“I’m sorry, Khloe,” Jay said. “I figured he could help.” He released me then, and I was just about to reel my arm back to hit him when Ty stepped between Jay and me, catching my wrists in his hands. Another wave of nausea hit me, and I doubled over, still being held by Ty, and puked up thick, yellow bile all over Jay’s spotless carpet. The smell itself was horrible, like a soggy baby diaper that had been roasting in the sun all day. The odor made my stomach lurch and twist, and I gagged.

“I’m so sorry.” I fell to my knees, crying, shaking, unable to catch my breath. My chest felt like someone was squeezing the air from it, stealing every precious breath away from me. The more I struggled to breathe, the harder it was to get any air. The pounding in my head intensified. I squeezed my eyes shut, wondering if this would actually kill me. Right then, death sounded like a better option.

“Hang in there, babe,” Jay said softly. I watched him lean back against the door, exhausted as he watched me.

“I need to get out,” I whispered. “I just need to get out.” I looked desperately between them, fingers numb with cold, sweat sticking to the back of my neck and under my hair. Ty sat down on the floor next to me. He reached out, wrapping his arms around my body. For a second, I fought him. I yelled. I pushed him away. But when he didn’t let go, I finally allowed myself to fall into him, shaking, freezing cold and boiling hot all at the same time.

“I’m sorry, Khloe,” he said. He pulled me against him and kissed my forehead. His cool hands brushed the sticky, wet hair back from my face. I leaned over the wastebasket in Jay’s living room to throw up but could only gag and dry heave. There was nothing left in my stomach.

“Please just kill me.” Tears slipped from my eyes, soaking my skin with moisture. I licked my dry, cracked lips and buried my tear-soaked face into the front of Ty’s shirt. He rested his chin on the top of my head and said nothing. My ears rang, and my face and hands were now numb and tingly as if my body were trying to fall asleep. I closed my eyes and forced myself to listen to Ty’s heartbeat against my skin. “Still want to be with me?” I asked weakly. “Even after all of this?”

“Every moment of every day,” Ty said, and he looked down at me, his eyes meeting my own as he started to rock. I closed my eyes again,

exhausted, hurting, sick. I let him hold me as the pain faded, and the world began to put itself back together, little by little, piece by piece until the glowing light somewhere miles ahead in the darkness of the tunnel began to shine.

The minutes ticked on into hours, hours blurred by the excruciating pain of detox. My stomach felt iron-hot, like a ball of fire growing in my abdomen, scorching and burning me alive from the inside out. My head, fuzzy and unclear, made it impossible to focus on anything but the mind-numbing pain in every joint, every nerve. Even Ty's arms tightly around me didn't admit relief, nor did the cold rags on my body that Jay kept bringing fresh from the kitchen. Water was forced down my throat, only to be thrown up again mere seconds later. Consciousness appeared and vanished rapidly, sometimes blacking out entire hours that I wouldn't remember later. The fire in my skin soon turned icy cold, and I huddled in a blanket on the floor, shaking so badly that my teeth rattled. I couldn't catch my breath, couldn't speak, couldn't think.

I would have rather been dead.

THIRTY-ONE

I was dead, and this was hell.

Sitting up, I put my hand to my head, trying to cool the overwhelming sensation of death warmed over. It was daylight. I was on Jay's couch, covered by an enormous, fluffy comforter. I had no idea what time it was, but the condo was silent. Well, almost silent. In the bedroom down the hall, I could hear Jay snoring. He was loud enough to wake the dead. I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to clear my head and piece the night together. I was sober, and yet I felt like I'd been drinking and shooting up all night long.

I took a deep breath to steady myself and swung my legs toward the floor, meeting what I could only assume was somebody's face.

"Ouch," Ty mumbled. He covered his eyes with one arm but didn't budge from his spot on the floor. I stared down at him, shocked. I'd almost forgotten that he had come and held me until I'd passed out.

"Sorry." My words scratched their way out my raw throat. Ty lifted his arm from his eyes and kicked off his blanket as he sat up, blinking the sleep from his eyes. Even here, dressed in sweats and a T-shirt with a look of utter exhaustion sketched into his features, he was beautiful, kind, and loving.

"How are you feeling?" he asked. I thought about it for a moment, deep within the trenches of a pounding migraine and an upset stomach.

“I’m okay,” I lied. “What time is it?”

Ty watched me for a moment, chewing on his bottom lip, squinting. “It’s been over forty-eight hours,” he said.

Shocked, I opened my mouth to respond, but nothing came out. I couldn’t force the words. I didn’t have the energy.

“Why are you still here?” I asked quietly.

“Your enthusiasm is overwhelming,” Ty said with a small smile. “Please, don’t make me blush.” He stood and started folding the blankets Jay had lent him. “I’m here because I care about you,” he said. “I’m here because I want to be here, Khloe.”

“Why would anyone want this?” I pushed myself to my feet, nearly face-planting on Jay’s living room floor. Ty steadied me, and for a moment, I was sure I would blow chunks all over him. “Taking care of me isn’t your job, Ty.” I took a deep breath. “As you can see, I can barely take care of myself.”

My feet and legs quivered as I went to the kitchen to get a drink of water. Ty followed, probably to make sure I wouldn’t fall and split my head open. I wanted to ditch this place so badly. I wanted to sneak down to the liquor store for a cheap bottle of vodka, and then I wanted to go home and drink it all. But I didn’t. Instead, I poured a glass of water and chugged it down, figuring that if the dry heaves continued, water would at least give me something to throw up.

“Hi, doll.” Jay poked his head into the kitchen, smiling. His dark hair was messy and unkempt, eyes tired as he greeted me. When he saw that Ty was still there, though, he perked up at once. It was all I could do not to surrender to a fit of giggles, despite the nightmare I was in the middle of. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m not sure you want to hear the answer,” I admitted. Jay smiled and went to the fridge to pour himself some orange juice. Ty, I noticed, was already searching the cupboards for food.

“You look better,” Jay said.

“She really does, doesn’t she?” Ty asked. He smiled at me, but I didn’t have the energy to smile back.

“Well, I’m glad I look it ’cause I sure as hell don’t feel it.” I set the glass down on the counter. My hands were still shaking but not as severely as the night before. I was still craving a drink, still wishing I had a hit of something, anything that could soothe my nerves.

“I’m proud of you,” Jay said. “You suffered through it, Khloe. You’re on the right track.” I put my hand to my head, exhausted, unsure if I wanted to hug him or punch him in the face. It was changing by the second.

“Then why in the hell does this feel so wrong?” My voice broke. Ty stopped rummaging for a moment and turned toward me. He rested his hands on my shoulders, forcing me to face him.

“The right things always do,” he said. “It will get better. I promise.” I rested my forehead against his chest, feeling the tears press against my eyes.

“Thank you for being here,” I said, and looked over at Jay. “Both of you.”

I pulled away from Ty and refilled my water glass. My stomach was in knots, and water spilled over the top of my glass as my hands shook. Jay and Ty sipped their drinks and watched me, but their expressions were neutral and hard to read. I rinsed out my glass in the sink and ran my hand through my hair. My mouth tasted bad of vomit and old booze.

“Do I get to go home now?” I asked. I feared to hear the answer. I wanted to go home. I wanted to go home so badly. I needed a hot shower

and something decent to eat. And yet, at the same time, I was terrified to go, not confident that I could be by myself and still be okay.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Jay said after a long silence. “Do you think it’s going to be as easy as that?”

“That’s your definition of easy?” I felt compelled once again to punch him in the nose, but I resisted the urge. I knew he was only trying to help, and I wouldn’t do good to push away the only friend I had left who wasn’t an addict. On the coffee table, my phone started to ring. I crossed the floor to answer it, not caring who it was. I needed the distraction.

“Khloe?” It was Ava.

“Hey.” I cradled the phone between my ear and shoulder, throwing clothes into a bag so I could go home. If Jay was giving me that option, I would take it, and Ty didn’t have a say one way or the other. I was strong. I could do it. “What’s up?”

“I was released,” Ava said. “Just now.” She sounded distracted as though she’d hesitated even calling me.

“From the hospital?”

“No, Khloe, from the fiery gates of hell.”

“Okay.” I straightened up and looked at Ty. He was still watching me, his expression an abyss of nothingness. He was good. I wished I knew what he was thinking. Jay had already moved on to the breakfast cereal, and I knew he had to be at work in just a few hours.

“I need a ride,” Ava said. “I don’t have anyone to come to get me.” I pulled the phone away from my ear and glanced at the time.

“Give me fifteen minutes,” I said. “I’ll pick you up.” I had barely hung up the phone before Ty was by my side, retrieving his car keys from his pocket.

“I’ll come with you,” he said.

“No, it’s all right,” I argued. “I’m fine to drive.”

“Either Ty goes with you, or you stay here,” Jay called from the kitchen. Scowling, I shrugged on my jacket and gave Ty a halfhearted shrug. He was now my crutch when Jay couldn’t be. I knew I couldn’t do it without them, even if I wanted to. My legs weren’t strong enough.

Not yet.



“Why is he here?” Ava poked her head into the passenger window and glared at Ty. Then she glared at me. “Really, Khloe?”

“He’s helping,” I said. Ty leaned over me and flashed Ava a smile.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m helping.”

Rolling her eyes, Ava slid into the back seat of Ty’s car, arms folded, lips stuck out in a pout. As I turned around to greet her, I was pleasantly surprised to notice how much better she looked since the night she’d been admitted. Her black hair was down around her shoulders, and it shined with a healthy glow. Her skin had cleared up, eyes vivid and bright instead of bloodshot. She had gained a bit of weight, but she looked healthier. Better.

“You look really good,” I said. “The hospital stay helped.”

“Yeah, well, I feel like shit.” She looked pointedly at Ty when she said that as if laying blame on the paramedic who had to bring her in. “I need a fucking drink.”

“No, you don’t,” I said, and she glared at me next.

“I need a drink and a hit,” she said. In the seat next to me, Ty’s expression didn’t change, but I could see his hands tense up over the wheel. The scene from the last two nights played over in my head—the pain, the

terror, the vomiting in the kitchen sink and all over Jay's rug. I suddenly felt sick all over again.

"Ava." I took a deep breath, praying I wouldn't cause a fight. I didn't have the energy to fight with her, not today. "Do you think it's a good idea to get back on drugs and booze?" I asked. My friend looked at me, her eyebrows shooting straight up as if I'd just sprouted two heads.

"Yes," she said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I do."

I pulled my head back and turned around, meeting Ty's eyes. He said nothing, encouraging me to handle it myself, but I wasn't sure I could. The last two nights had been miserable, painful, and a nightmare. And yet, more than anything, I, too, wanted to buy a bottle of vodka and get wasted. Desperately.

"Look, Ava." I turned back around in the seat to face her, overwhelmed and unsure of how to continue from here. She was looking at me expectantly, dabbing on some pink lip gloss, completely oblivious to the one thing that could ultimately destroy her. "I spent the last few nights at Jay's," I said. Ava's eyes flickered from my face to Ty's, her brow furrowing in confusion.

"But, um... isn't he, like, gay?"

"That's not what I was getting at," I said, flustered. "I spent those nights at his place so I could detox as you did in the hospital."

"Oh, God." She twisted the cap back onto her gloss and stared at me. "Why would you subject yourself to that?"

"To get clean," I answered. "Why else?"

"Yeah," Ava said. "But why?"

"Probably to get control of her life back," said Ty. I let out a breath of relief, hoping that, if anything, she would at least hear him out. After all, he'd been the one who had to keep her breathing the night of the overdose.

“That’s exactly why,” I murmured. There was a moment of silence, like standing in a high school hallway sizing up an opponent before a big fight. Ava was staring at Ty with a look that screamed I will shank you in your sleep. I cleared my throat, and she shot me the same look.

“Who in the hell is this guy who thinks he can come in here and fix us?” Ava asked.

“I picked you up off the floor after you overdosed on drugs,” Ty said. “Khloe had to start your heart again, Ava.” He sounded irritated now, and I couldn’t blame him. I was, too.

“He’s not trying to fix us,” I said quickly. “He’s trying to help us.”

“I can’t fix what’s not broken,” Ty said. His tone was calmer now, more patient. He watched her in the mirror, but Ava was scowling. “I just didn’t want to see either if you hurt or killed.”

“Oh, please.” Still glaring at me, she shoved her cosmetics into her purse and rested her fingers on the door handle. “You can let me out here,” she said. “I don’t need this bullshit.”

“Ava,” I pleaded. “Don’t leave. He just wants to help. I want to help you.”

“I don’t need your help, *perra!*” Ava shouted. It took me a moment to realize that Ty was slowing the car.

“What are you doing?” I cried, spinning toward him. “You can’t let her out here.”

“I have to,” he said. “She wants to go.”

“You didn’t let me go!” I shrieked. As the car rolled to a stop, Ava shoved open the door and got out, practically fuming from the ears.

“You wanted help from Jay and me, Khloe. Ava doesn’t.” Ty squeezed my shoulder. His expression was somber, but I wanted to smack him for

giving up so easily. Instead of hitting him, I shrugged his hand off and turned back toward the window.

“Ava, please!” I called. “Just let us help you.”

“*Púdrete!*” Ava shouted. “Screw you, Khloe.” She stormed off, her pace never slowing, then she turned the corner and was out of sight. For a moment, I considered going after her, maybe tackling her, but I didn’t. I was frozen to the seat, shocked, wondering where, during that conversation, it had gone so wrong. Ty and I watched her go, silent as we listened to the cars zoom past us on the road.

“She’s fun,” he said finally. “Like a firecracker.”

“Or a fucking rocket launcher,” I muttered. Ty looked over at me and grinned. I couldn’t resist smiling back. For a moment, we sat in the still silence of the car, not speaking, only being.

“I’m afraid,” I said finally. “I’m afraid of going after Ava because I’m afraid of what I might do.” I hesitated, closing my eyes as Ty pulled back out and joined the traffic on the road.

“You’re afraid of the influence she’ll have on you?” he asked, but it wasn’t really a question. I hesitated but only briefly. It didn’t take much for him to be able to read me. I had come to find that out fairly quickly, even despite my hesitance to open up to him at all.

“Yes,” I said. “Not just afraid, though. I’m terrified.”

“Good,” Ty said and looked at me. “That means you’re doing it right.”

THIRTY-TWO

November 1, 2017

She's determined. And driven. I just wish she could see in herself what I see in her. Maybe someday she will.

I hoped that Khloe would stay sober for Halloween. She didn't. I spent most of the night fighting her to come home, prying the keys from her hands, being yelled at. She's mean when she drinks. I'm worried she'll do something rash one day. I don't know what I'd do if I lost her.

“He didn’t seem to care how it would feel to lose him.” I closed the journal, resisting the urge to throw it, and handed it to Jay, who set it down on the coffee table. Ty had brought me back to Jay’s place after our fiasco with Ava because I couldn’t bring myself to be home alone, and Ty had to go back to work. I knew if I let myself fall back into the black hole of self-pity and loathing, I’d head straight for the liquor store, and we’d be back at square one. I had come to realize that I didn’t want to put Jay or Ty through another night of withdrawals. I was afraid to lose them, scared that if they had to deal with me like that again, they would walk out of my life and never return. Then I’d really be screwed.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Jay asked. I sipped at my glass of soda, feeling the cool of the ice against my fingertips.

“Do you have all day?” I said with a grin.

“I do,” he said, and I found myself wanting to wrap my arms around him and never let go.

“I’m worried,” I admitted. “I’m worried about losing you, and I’m worried about losing Ty.”

“I don’t believe you’ll lose either of us,” Jay said. “That boy is smitten with you, Khloe. Coming here in the middle of the night to help through a crisis isn’t an easy feat for men. I speak from experience.”

“He probably just felt obligated. I’m sure you do, too.”

“Not obligated,” he said. “We just couldn’t not. Give us both a chance, okay? We won’t leave.”

“I’ll try to keep you around forever,” I said with a slight grin. “I’m not so sure I’m ready for love, though. Ty deserves better than me.”

“You don’t have to be ready for love,” Jay said. He leaned back into the couch and stretched his arms above his head. “You just have to be willing.”

I sighed and rubbed my temples, trying to ward off a headache.

“Do you think Ava is okay?” I asked. “She was awful quick getting away from us today.”

“I think so.” He shrugged slightly. “I hope so.”

“I wish she’d let us help.”

“We can’t help somebody who doesn’t want it.” Jay looked pointedly at the journal on the table, and I felt a pain in my heart.

“Maybe if Carter had told somebody he was hurting, he’d still be here,” I said softly.

“I don’t think he wanted to,” said Jay. “Some people are under the impression that not everything can be fixed. Some people think that they’re just in a dark, black hole that they can’t get out of. Ever.”

“You don’t think that’s true?” I asked him. Jay’s gaze met mine.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think everything can be fixed?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think so.” I sat back against the couch, pulling the quilt to my chin. “I think some people are lost in such darkness that the only way out is to end it all.”

“There are doctors who can help,” Jay said. “And therapists. And medications. Not to mention friends and family.”

“Not everyone has people in their corner,” I said. “Some people only have themselves.”

“Good thing you’re not one of those people, then,” Jay said. He reached over and squeezed my shoulder. “Ava’s not, either. She has you, she has me, and she even has Ty.”

“I only wish she knew that.” I leaned back and closed my eyes, wishing I knew that everything would be okay. But I didn’t know. And Jay and Ty didn’t know. For all we knew, nothing would ever be okay again.



It was seven in the morning when the buzz of my cell phone woke me from my awkward position on Jay’s couch. I opened one eye, grumbling, and pressed it to my ear.

“Hullo?”

“Khloe? It’s Frank.” There was a pause. “Your, uh, father.” I sat up, suddenly awake, pulling the phone away from my ear to look at the caller ID.

“Hi,” I said. There was a long, drawn-out silence, and I thought for a moment that he’d hung up.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” Frank said finally. His voice sounded hoarse like he was coming down from a cold. Or a hangover.

“Are you still in the hospital?” I asked.

“No. I was released a few days ago.” More silence, and then, “I’m cleaning up, kid, and I was wondering if you’d like to have breakfast with me this morning. If you don’t have anything else going on, of course.” Jay came stumbling out of his bedroom, sleepy-eyed and dressed in boxers and a white tank top. He had kitty-cat slippers on his feet that meowed mechanically as he scuffed across the floor.

“I guess we can go to breakfast,” I said to Frank. “But I’ll have someone with me.”

“A boyfriend?” Frank asked. I smiled, thinking of Ty, but it was too early to bring that into the equation.

“Not exactly.” I scribbled down the name of the restaurant and hung up the phone, suddenly feeling nervous. The last time Frank and I had sat down to a meal, he ended up throwing a glass of whiskey at the wall just before I heaved a dinner plate at his head. Since then, family dinners had become few and far between as in, never.

“Who was that, and what am I required to do?” Jay plopped down next to me on the couch, a cold pop tart in one hand and the television remote in the other. Gay or straight, they were all the same.

“It was my dad,” I told him. “My crazy, alcoholic dad. He was in the hospital for a while after a car accident. He invited me to breakfast this morning.”

“Are you comfortable going?” Jay asked.

“I am if you go with me.” I smiled at him, and Jay’s eyebrows shot straight up.

“I’m not so sure I…”

“Carter would have done it,” I said, and Jay glared at me.

“That’s a crotch shot. You have Ty. Take him.”

“Ty is working,” I said. “I need you. Did the crotch shot work?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” I took the Pop Tart from his hand, took a small bite, and tossed the rest in the trash. “Save your appetite.”

As breakfast with Frank drew nearer, I found myself regretting agreeing to go. As we drove, Jay in the driver’s seat singing along to a Britney Spears song on the radio, I tried to recall the last time I’d seen Frank sober besides the night he’d been in the ER. I could think of nothing. I hoped and prayed that he wouldn’t be out of it. Was he sober? Could he sit through a meal in public with this long-lost daughter and act like a father? Or would the morning end with coffee mugs and syrup-clad plates being thrown at one another?

“You okay?” Jay asked. He reached over and squeezed my hand, and at that moment, I realized how much he was truly starting to mean to me. It wasn’t a romantic relationship that I’d needed this whole time, I’d needed somebody like Carter, someone who cared.

“Thank you for being here,” I said. Then, because I felt the need to explain further, “If Carter were here, it would be him with me right now, and it’s still too early to bring Ty into this mess called my life.”

“He might surprise you if you let him,” Jay said. “He looks at you the way I used to look at Carter.”

“Let’s do one thing at a time,” I said, pushing thoughts of Ty from my mind. “Let’s see if I can survive this breakfast first.”



Jay and I stepped into the diner, and I spotted Frank at once in a booth in the corner. He saw us and waved, and I had to make a genuine effort to keep from stumbling over myself as we went to sit down with him. A few times, I almost turned and ran, but I forced myself forward, facing it head-on.

“Thanks for coming,” Frank said. “It’s good to see you, kid.” He glanced from me to Jay.

“This is a friend of mine,” I said, flustered.

“I’m Jay Thompson,” he said, saving me the humiliation of choking on my own words. Frank reached over the table to shake his hand as Jay scooted into the booth seat next to me.

“Um. Boyfriend?” he asked.

“No,” I said quickly. Jay smirked. “He’s just a friend.”

“She’s taken,” Jay said, catching me off guard. “But her boy toy couldn’t be here today, so I’m filling in.” As heat rose to my face, I pinched him under the table, content when his face wrinkled in pain.

“Oh. Okay.” Frank ran a hand through his scraggly brown hair, and I couldn’t help but notice that he didn’t look half bad today. His clothes were clean, and his hair and teeth were brushed. A five ‘o clock shadow showed on his face, but he smelled like soap. I realized that was the first time I’d seen him look human in years.

“Are you guys ready to order?” the server asked, and I was relieved for the distraction.

“It’s on me,” Frank said, looking between Jay and me. “Order whatever you like.”

Once the food was ordered, the table fell into an awkward silence. I had no idea what to talk about, and neither did Frank. Jay, I noticed, was too enthralled with blowing bubbles in his glass of water to take notice. My father had never been the chattiest of people, even sober, and I’d taken after

him in that department. My mother had saved us from inept conversation starters. She'd been able to befriend anybody.

"So," I said finally. I reached for my cup of cocoa and slurped at the whipped cream on top. "Was there something you wanted to talk to me about?"

Frank stared at me for a moment as if debating something in his head.

I felt tense under his gaze. It had been ages since I'd felt comfortable around my father.

"No," he said. "I just wanted to see you." The server brought our food, and Jay looked relieved to have something else to focus on.

"You look good," I said to Frank, picking at my soggy toast. "Sober."

"I was just thinking the same about you," he said, and for some odd reason, I felt a flutter of pride. I couldn't remember the last time I'd given a fuck what he thought about me. Now, for some reason, I did.

"Khloe just went through detox," Jay said after a moment. I looked over at him sharply, but he didn't seem to mind spilling my personal information all over the dining table. "It was hard for her, but she did it. I'm really proud of her."

"Why did I bring you?" I hissed under my breath, but I was taken by surprise as Frank reacted to Jay's statement.

"I am, too," he said. "I'm proud of you." He reached out and rested his hand on top of mine. I started to pull away but then stopped, feeling my whole body go rigid as our skin touched. After a moment, he pulled his hand back. When I looked up at him, I saw a tear forming in the corner of his eye.

"Are you okay?" I asked. My dad lowered his fork and rubbed his face, trying to brush it off. "I just missed you. You're my daughter. You mean so much to me."

“Just not as much as alcohol,” I said. Beside me, Jay tensed up, but he didn’t say anything. Frank and I stared at each other for a moment, silent, listening to the chatter of breakfast-goers around us. Finally, he spoke.

“I made a lot of mistakes,” he said. “But getting in that accident made me realize how much of my life I’d taken for granted.” He leaned forward, reaching for my hand again.

This time I pulled away.

Sadness flickered in his eyes, but he let me go. “I’m sober, Khloe. I don’t plan to go back to booze or drugs again. Your mother may be gone, but you’re still here. As your father, it’s my duty to take care of you.”

“I’m an adult,” I said. “I can take care of myself.” I didn’t believe that was true, of course, as Jay and Ty had been two of the only reasons I hadn’t ended up in a ditch somewhere unconscious and half-naked, but Frank didn’t need to know that.

“Give me a chance,” he said. “I beg of you. Let me show you I can be clean and sober for you.”

Jay glanced sideways at me, encouraging, and it took impressive self-control not to punch him in the face.

Instead, I cleared my throat and took another sip of hot cocoa. “Show me,” I said. “That’s all you can do.” Frank looked relieved with my answer as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. I wanted so badly to remind him that if he hadn’t chosen to become a junkie in the first place, he wouldn’t have to make it up to me, but I didn’t. After all, I was no better. I’d followed the same path, made my own shitty choices. This was on both of us.

“What’s been going on in your life?” he asked after a few minutes. “Anything worth mentioning?”

“Not really,” I said. “Just struggling to put my life back together.”

“Did you ever get your GED? I know you wanted to start college.”

“No,” I said quietly, a bit caught off guard. I was surprised at how much it pained me to admit to that. “I haven’t been to school at all.”

“Oh.”

“But I might sign up for classes.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” I set my fork down and pushed my plate aside. “Once I get my GED. There are things I’ve always wanted to do,” I said. “Like finish school. Travel the world. Join the Peace Corps.”

“So why don’t you?” Jay asked before Frank could open his mouth.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I guess I didn’t think I could.”

“You can do anything,” Jay said. “The only limits in life are the ones you set for yourself.”

“You’re like a motivational poster,” I joked. “Can I take you home and hang you on the wall?” From across the table, my father grinned.

“Sure,” Jay said. He smiled. “That costs extra, though.”

“You guys aren’t a couple?” Frank confirmed. He was watching us now, his gaze flickering back and forth between Jay and me. “You’re just friends?”

“Just friends,” I said. “I’m not his type.”

“Type?” Frank asked. His eyebrows shot up, and Jay laughed.

“Khloe has breasts,” he said bluntly.

It was so funny I couldn’t even bring myself to smack him again. Frank, however, looked mortified to think that his only precious daughter had grown boobs.

“I’m attracted to men.”

“Oh,” Frank said. “You’re a homo.”

“Dad!” I hissed, but Jay only laughed some more.

“Yes. I’m gay. Khloe and I met through a mutual friend.”

“What friend?”

“Carter,” I murmured, and the table fell silent. Frank looked at me then, recalling what had happened during his drunken blackouts.

“Carter,” he repeated. “I remember Carter. He was your best friend, Khloe.”

“He was,” I said. “And he was Jay’s partner.”

“Oh. Wow.” Frank crossed his arms and stared at us. “A lot has happened since you and I talked last, kid.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It has. Funny what can happen while one is blackout drunk.”

Frank closed his eyes as if trying to regain some composure. I felt bad for snapping at him, and yet I didn’t. I envisioned the night he was at my door, stumbling drunk and shouting. He’d been no father to me.

“Look,” Frank said. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. “You need to give me this chance, Khloe. Give me this chance to redeem myself. You can’t hate me forever.”

“I don’t hate you, Dad,” I said. “I just don’t trust you.”

THIRTY-THREE

I didn't know what to expect when we parted ways with Frank after breakfast. I had the overwhelming urge to cry and scream and pout, but the other side of me wanted nothing more than to trust him and at least try to be happy about it. The visit had gone pleasantly well, considering everything that had torn us apart since my mother's death. But I couldn't help but question how truly serious he was about getting sober and clean. Would I eventually have my father back, the man who raised me, cared for me, and who'd actually been a loving father and husband at one time? Could he pull it off? Better yet, could I pull it off?

"Were you serious about getting back into school?" Jay asked as we headed back to his place. "Like, is it something you would consider doing?"

I hesitated for a second, feeling the cool breeze against my face as I rolled down the window.

"I wanted to be a doctor," I told him finally. "Well, a trauma surgeon. I was going to get my bachelor's in nursing and then go on to med school."

"How come you stopped?"

"Lots of reasons. Lack of motivation. Booze. Drugs. Drama. I miss it, but I guess I was always afraid to fail again. I mean, failing once is shitty enough. But twice? I didn't want to face the humiliation."

"You know, they say that the only time someone can fail is when they stop trying," Jay said.

“Did you read that in your book of inspirational quotes?” I asked with a laugh.

“It’s a calendar, actually,” he said with a grin. “An inspirational calendar. It’s hanging on the kitchen wall.”

“My bad.”

“You know it’s true, though, right?” Jay shot a glance in my direction. “I know you’re driven, Khloe. I can see it in you. It’s just a matter of getting you back on track.”

“It’s hard,” I admitted. “Sometimes, all I want to do is lie down and give up.”

“We all do,” Jay said. “But the true fighters are the ones who stand up, dust off, and keep on going.” I turned and watched the scenery outside the window, mesmerized by the beautiful blue ocean glistening under the sun.

“I’m getting there,” I murmured. “Slowly but surely, I’m getting there.”



I was a week sober and antsy as hell. I’d been under the naive impression that dropping booze and drugs would somehow magically transform my life and make me feel better, but I couldn’t have been more wrong. Instead, I found myself craving a drink more intensely now, but I stayed away from the liquor store, unable to handle the thought of disappointing Jay or Ty. Another big part of it was Frank. If he was true to his word and was getting sober, I could do it too. Why I really cared what Frank did or didn’t do was beyond me, but a small part of me wondered if we could do this together. I knew things would never be the same between us, but maybe, if anything, our lives would start to come together again.

I spent the weekends cleaning my house to stay busy, all the while making valid attempts to ignore Jesse's hundreds of calls and texts. I hadn't heard from Ava since she'd bailed on Ty and me, and I had to make a valiant effort to avoid calling her. Jay told me that once she was ready for our help, she would come to us. I wondered if she would ever be ready for our help, or if she'd be ready for it in time. It frightened me to think of the endless possibilities that could happen if Ava stayed with the booze and drugs. Ava only had me, and I couldn't help her if I couldn't find her. Multiple times, I found myself thinking of Carter, wondering if I'd nipped this thing in the bud, would he still be here? Imagining Ava slipping down the same black hole terrified me, but I knew nothing could be done about it. Not yet, anyway.

On Monday, Ty got off work early, and he came straight to my house as I was in the middle of scrubbing the countertops. He poured himself a glass of juice and handed me a pamphlet.

"What's this?" I asked, tossing the dirty sponge into the sink.

"Just read it," he said. I opened the paper and read it silently, feeling both excited and wary all at the same time. "Do you want me to go with you?" he asked after a moment. I lowered the pamphlet and stared down at it, feeling nervous for some unknown reason.

"Yes," I said. "I don't even know where to begin."

"I can help you get registered," Ty said. "You don't have to worry about it."

"I don't think I'm ready," I said and handed it back to him.

Ty put the pamphlet on the tabletop and stared at me, his eyes glistening with determination. I hated that look because it was a look Carter had given me so many times before.

“Sure, you are.” Ty nodded with an assurance I didn’t understand. “You can do this, Khloe. I know you can. Jay knows you can.”

“I can do a lot of things,” I admitted. “But getting my GED? Besides, even if I did pass and was able to sign up for classes, college isn’t like high school, Ty. You actually have to pass.” I laughed humorlessly, but Ty didn’t. He stood up, tucking the paper into his pocket.

“You have an appointment at noon,” he said. “You should put on some pants.”

“Pants?” I repeated. “But why?”

“Trust me.” He stepped forward, a grin sneaking up at the corners of his mouth. He took hold of my hands and pulled me into him, his rock-hard arms embracing my body. “If it were up to me, you’d never wear pants again.” He lowered his lips to mine and kissed me, running one hand through my hair.

I groaned and sank into him, feeling a moment of ecstasy creep up. Being with Ty, I had come to find, was like being on top of the world. I had resisted him so intensely at first, terrified of falling. But alas, he’d won me over with that charming grin and those sharp, blue eyes. He was a kind soul, the kind of man a mother could only dream of her daughter being with someday. Ty was patient with me, and he was compassionate and doting and cared so deeply for the people who were close to him. The best part? He was straight, and he wanted me. But we hadn’t been intimate yet, and that was my fault. I didn’t know what I feared so deeply as I’d never had a problem jumping into the sack with the first male my eyes landed on, but that had been then, and this was now. I was sober, struggling to hold myself above water every day, and I was still frightened that I would lose him as I’d lost so many others. I was so used to people walking away from me that I had an invisible guard up with Ty. I’d allowed myself to fall for him, but

only so deep. The future of this relationship was to be determined, and Ty was as patient as ever.

“Where have you been all my life?” I murmured, resting my forehead against his chest. He smelled of fresh aftershave, a smell I had come to adore.

“Waiting to find you,” he said, tickling my ear with his breath. I closed my eyes and stayed silent for a moment, listening to his heartbeat in my ear.

“Are you really going to make me do this?” I asked. “You know, the whole school thing?”

“No,” he said. “I won’t make you do anything, Khloe.” He kissed the top of my head, letting his lips linger. “But I think this is something that you want, and I’m here to back you up. Okay? I won’t let you do this alone.”

“Fine,” I said with an exaggerated sigh. “I guess it’s time to put on some pants then.”

I don’t know why I was so nervous, but my hands shook as Ty drove us toward campus despite the firm grip he had on them. He parked the car, and I followed him through the student union building and up three flights of stairs, resisting the urge to pull away from him and flee. There were college kids all around us with book bags flung over their shoulders and laptop cases clutched in their hands. I kept my head down as we passed the college lunchroom, a place so familiar to Ava and me as we had spent plenty of time there scoping out the college guys. Even now, I didn’t feel like I would fit in with them. They were the smart kids. The do-gooders. The straight-shooters. I was, well, me.

“I can’t do this,” I said, feeling a buzz of panic zap through me. “I don’t belong here, Ty. I haven’t even studied for this test. I’m not going to pass. People will make fun of me.”

“This isn’t middle school, Khloe,” Ty said. “Nobody is going to put peanut butter in your hair or whisper mean things in your ear.”

“How do you know that?” I hissed. Ty chuckled as he held open a door for me.

“Because in college, people are adults,” he said. “Just trust me.”

I knew it would do no good to argue, so I followed him down the hallway toward the registration office where they were holding the test I needed to take to get back on the right path. It was quiet in there—quiet and intimidating. I could hear my heart beating in my chest as I stopped and looked around, mentally measuring the distance from where I stood to the exit.

“There,” Ty said. He pointed at the front desk. “Go sign in, and she’ll get you set up. I’ll be right here.”

“You’re going to wait here until I take the entire test? It could be hours.” Suddenly, dread welled in my chest. I don’t know what I was afraid of. There was nothing to fear, it was just school. I tightened my grip on his hand, wary of letting go.

“You can do this,” Ty said. He grinned and handed me the pamphlet. “Go.”

I turned and faced the desk, heat licking at my face. There weren’t many ways to screw something like this up, but with my luck, I would manage to do just that.

“What can I help you with, dear?” the receptionist asked. She was a plump woman; plump with frizzy brown hair and glasses, but she seemed nice. No one had shunned me yet. I handed her the paper. Behind me, Ty was leaning up against the wall. I didn’t have to look at him to know that he was still smiling that charming smile that was enough to bring me to my knees.

“I think I’m registered to take my GED test,” I said. She took the paper from me and skimmed over it. For a moment, I considered yanking it from her hand and bolting, but I didn’t. I stayed where I was, fearful, waiting to be rejected or laughed at or kicked out.

“Excellent,” she said finally. I let out a breath of air, relieved. “Have you spoken with a guidance counselor?”

“Not yet.”

“That’s fine, dear. I’ll get you in once you’re finished with your test.” The woman smiled again, and I had the overwhelming urge to lean over the counter and hug her.

“Thank you,” I said. I turned and looked over at Ty, who was watching me, still smiling slightly. “Thank you.”

THIRTY-FOUR

Once everything was said and done, I followed Ty back to the car, practically skipping circles around him. I'd have the results back from my test in just a few days, and if all worked out okay, then I could start in the spring semester. Who in their right mind could be so excited to face three months of grueling and time-consuming college classes? Well, this girl was. As I slid into the passenger seat, I had a sudden sense of relief, and on top of that relief, was pride, hope, and accomplishment. For the first time in a long time, I felt proud of myself.

"Thank you," I said to Ty. "Thank you for bringing me here. I wouldn't have done it alone."

"I know," Ty said. He flipped on his blinker and pulled back onto the main road. "I believe you can do this, Khloe. You're made for it."

"Carter always thought so, too," I admitted. "He said I had the brains and just lacked the motivation."

"I think being sober will help with that." Ty looked over at me, his eyes twinkling with a hint of satisfaction, maybe even pride. It was quite the struggle not to undo my seat belt and straddle him.

"That will be the hardest part," I said. "Staying sober. All it would take is one drink, one hit, and I'd be done."

"We won't let that happen," Ty said. "You're stronger than any drug, Khloe. You know it, and I know it."

“I wish Ava knew it, too,” I murmured. Suddenly, a deep tide of sadness washed over me, and the excitement I’d had for school was lost. “I can’t lose her, Ty.”

“You won’t lose her,” he said. “You won’t lose any of us.” He looked over at me and laid his hand on top of mine. His skin was warm and comforting. He eased the car to a stop in front of a red light and turned in my direction. “We won’t let you fall,” he said. “I, especially, won’t let you fall.” I was caught off guard when he leaned toward me, brushing his lips over mine.

I closed my eyes, content, feeling the world around us fade out as a feeling of euphoria overtook me. His lips were soft, and that familiar scent cocooned me.

“You’re making me fall for you,” I whispered, pulling back slightly. “I can’t fall for you.”

Ty raised his hand to my face, cupping my chin gently in his fingers.

“Keep falling,” he said. “That’s why I’m here to catch you.”



“I’m glad you came in. I was hoping you would.” Mrs. Dunham waved her hand toward the over-sized chair, encouraging me to take a seat. I did as I was told, praying it wasn’t a mistake to come here. Jay had convinced me to come in and visit Mrs. Dunham after I’d told him about our past run-ins and her connection to Carter. He said it would be good for me to have a professional monitor how I was doing and encourage my new life of sobriety. I knew he was right. Mrs. Dunham had offered her help, and I wasn’t about to turn it down, no matter how awkward it might have been.

She was a mere school counselor, a woman who helped young people make it through their days, and she was also my key.

“Thanks for having me,” I said politely. Being in her office while sober was a first for me. It was more intimidating, yes, but not as embarrassing as stumbling in here drunk off my ass had been.

“Tell me how you are, Khloe,” Mrs. Dunham said. “Tell me everything.”

I shifted in the seat as Traci Dunham sat down across from me, crossing her legs as she steadied a pad and pen in her hand. She gazed at me over the spectacles sitting on her nose, looking into my eyes as she had often looked in Carter’s months before. I allowed my hands to drop to my lap, forcing myself to relax.

“I’m starting school this spring,” I said. Hearing that phrase come from my mouth was surprisingly gratifying, and I felt a smile tug at the corner of my lips. “I took my GED test the other day and got the results back this morning. I can officially enroll. My friend, Ty, took me up there. He’s been great.”

“That’s wonderful to hear,” Mrs. Dunham said. “Is Ty a friend of yours?”

“He’s a friend,” I said and felt the heat rise to my face. “Or more than a friend. I’m not sure.”

“A boyfriend, maybe?” Mrs. Dunham asked. She smiled, putting me at ease. “What does he do?”

“He’s a paramedic,” I said. “He helps people.”

“He sounds good for you.”

“He is,” I agreed. “He’s very good to me. He and Jay both are.”

“Jay is...”

“Jay is an old friend of Carter’s,” I said quickly. “Well, they were more than friends. I met him after Carter died. We’re becoming pretty close.”

“That’s fantastic to hear,” the counselor said, and she sounded genuinely pleased. “Tell me about the drugs and drinking.”

“I’ve been sober for almost a week,” I said. For a moment, I regretted even mentioning it. A week didn’t seem to be even close to progress, but I was surprised when Mrs. Dunham’s smile grew.

“I hope you understand what kind of dedication and willpower that takes,” she said. “The fact that you’re even up to trying is more progress than most addicts have ever made. I think Carter would be proud.”

“I know he would be.” I looked down at my lap, letting my eyes flutter over the journal that had taken its usual place in my lap. “I just wish he were here to see it.”

Mrs. Dunham nodded and set her pen and pad aside. She removed her glasses and proceeded to clean them on the hem of her shirt.

“I think he is,” she said. “Even if it is just in spirit.”

“I don’t know if I believe in that stuff,” I murmured.

“You don’t have to believe it to feel it,” she said. “But when two people are as close as you and Carter were, I don’t believe a love like that ever truly dies.” She replaced her glasses and leaned back, smiling again. Her eyes flickered from my face and down to the journal. “How is the reading coming?” she asked.

I sighed and ran my thumbs over the faded, leather-bound cover. “I don’t know,” I admitted. “It’s difficult to read sometimes. It’s hard to find out how much pain Carter was truly in, and I had no idea about it.”

“What would have happened had you known?” she asked. I looked up at the counselor, feeling a stab in my heart.

“Maybe I could have saved him,” I said. Mrs. Dunham’s smile faded, sadness registering in her eyes.

“I don’t think he wanted you to know, Khloe,” she said. “Do you think maybe he was only here to protect you?”

“I don’t believe that.”

“No?”

“No.” I folded my arms, feeling suddenly like a toddler on the verge of a fit. “I don’t think anyone is born only to grow up and die. Carter didn’t even live his life. He was still a kid. Both of us were.”

Mrs. Dunham and I stared one another down, silent, pensive. I swallowed back my hurt and anger, debating on whether to bail from this place and never return. However, before I could force myself to rise, the counselor spoke.

“Carter was your angel in life, Khloe. You must allow him to be your angel in death if you can ever allow yourself to move on.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, unexpectedly missing Carter as much as I had when I’d found him lifeless on his bedroom floor. That night, a life had ended, and a second one—mine—had ceased to continue. In losing Carter, I had lost a piece of myself, a missing chunk from the puzzle of life. Without it, there would be no end, just a never-ending search for that missing piece. I knew right then that it didn’t matter how long I was sober, or how well I did in school. Despite all those things, I knew I would truly never move on with my life until I came to peace with his death.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” I said. “I don’t know if I can just forget about him.”

“No one is asking you to forget.” Mrs. Dunham leaned forward, her vivid blue eyes meeting mine. “No one would expect you to forget Carter. We’re asking you to accept it.”

“I can’t accept that he’s dead,” I said.

“Then accept that he’s still here, in spirit.” Mrs. Dunham leaned back in her chair and scribbled something down on her notepad. Then she looked at me again. “Only then will you truly be able to piece your own life back together.”



“So, how did it go?” Jay reached down to turn the music on low and glanced over at me. I was still holding Carter’s journal in my hands, running over the session I’d just had with Mrs. Dunham in my head.

“It was... okay.”

“Just okay?”

“Yeah.” I hesitated, staring out the window at the cars around us. “I mean, she didn’t have any answers for me.”

“It’s not her job to have answers, Khloe,” Jay said. “It’s her job to help you find your own answers.”

“I guess,” I murmured. Then I looked over at him. “Sometimes, I find myself wondering if there are even any answers to find.”

THIRTY-FIVE

I hadn't seen Ava in a while, even at work. The boss told me she'd taken more time off, and she refused to answer her phone or open the door to me, which only left me anxious and on edge, especially when I didn't have a bottle of booze to drown my emotions in. I found myself constantly wondering about her, worrying, praying she was okay and not dead in some ditch on the side of the road somewhere. I tended the bar without her there, just keeping my head down and my mouth closed so I could get by day to day.

When I wasn't working, I found myself spending increasingly more time with Ty, and by the end of the month, I had come to find that I was spending more time at his place than I was my own. I was relieved to have him. I knew what would have happened had he not been there to hold me up. The result wouldn't have been good. Eventually, Jesse stopped calling my phone, and the texts had ceased.

We were curled up on Ty's couch in his living room, only halfway paying attention to the movie he'd put on for our Friday night marathon. It was ten o'clock. By now, I would have been wasted and stumbling, but tonight I was sober. Week four, and I was amazed at the way the cravings had begun to subside. The physical ones, anyway. I thought about it constantly, using again, wondering if it would still feel as good now as it

had then. To be high, I mean. To not care, not worry about anything or anyone.

I still missed it. I always would.

“I like you here,” Ty said. He reached for a box of chow mien and dug in, clumsily trying to eat with the chopsticks. I giggled, reaching over to brush a strand of dark hair aside. The more time I spent with Ty, the harder I felt myself falling. He was still so charming and kind, funny and intelligent. I kept waiting for something to go wrong—a broken heart or a major fight or admittance to simply tolerating me out of sympathy. But none of those things had happened. Being with him was just as compelling as it had been the first day.

“I wish I had something else besides work to keep me busy,” I said. “I wish it was time for school to start.” I cracked open a fortune cookie and crunched on it.

“Volunteer at the hospital for a while,” Ty suggested. “You’ll be in school for nursing, eventually medical school, that will look great on a resume.”

“I can do that?” I asked. “Volunteer at the hospital?”

“Hell, yeah.”

“I had no idea.”

“You’d be surprised the things you learn when your world stops revolving around booze.” Ty smiled and winked, but it was easy to see his point. Since I’d given up drugs and alcohol, my mind was suddenly concerned with so many other things that had not been relevant before. I often found myself pondering goals, making a bucket list, thinking about life. I felt more driven to succeed now, and not so stuck in a rut, flailing in a black hole of nothingness.

“Ty,” I said, and shifted so I could face him. “We need to help Ava. I know you said that if she’s ever ready, she’ll come to us, but I can’t sit back and wait for it. If she died because I didn’t try and help her, I could never forgive myself.”

“I know,” Ty said. “And I think you’re right. I think your friend is too stubborn to come forward and seek help.”

“We need to do it ourselves,” I said.

“I agree. And I think I have an idea for her and you.”

“Thank you.” I leaned forward and rested my lips on his, inhaling his familiar, comforting scent. I was just about to pull away when Ty caught my chin in his fingers, keeping me steady. I melted into him, hungry for more. A fire kindled in the pit of my stomach. Overwhelming desire washed over me, and I felt a tingling in my abdomen as the need became more intense.

“I’m sorry,” Ty said and pulled away. “I hope I’m not pressuring you.”

“No.” I pulled him back into me, never wanting to let go. “I want this.”

Ty didn’t argue as I pressed my lips to his again, slowly letting my hand slide down his chest, over his abdomen, and then lower. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been this intimate while sober. It was an enchanting feeling, and I found myself feeling so much more aware of every touch, every tingle, every feeling from the top of my head down to my toes. I moved my hand along Ty’s zipper, feeling him harden with excitement beneath my touch. As I teased his tongue with my own, he reached behind me with one hand and unclasped my bra before pulling my T-shirt over my head. I allowed him to do it, squirming with pleasure as his thumb caressed my nipple. I drew in a deep breath of air between my teeth and closed my eyes.

“Please tell me you have condoms,” I whispered. Ty smiled, drawing his hand back, and then stood and went into his bedroom, coming out a

moment later with foil-wrapped protection.

“I’m not sure if I should be relieved or horrified,” I said with a giggle.

“Trust me, this isn’t as cool as it looks. I’m pretty sure they belonged to an old roommate of mine who used to live in that room.”

“Keep the sexy talk coming.” I snickered. “I can’t get enough of it.”

Ty smiled and sat back down on the couch, the condom still gripped between two fingers. “Are you sure?” he asked, and I removed his shirt in silence, allowing my hand to rest on his chest. His muscles tensed and rippled beneath my fingers, and the fire in my stomach grew. My fingers worked their way down his abdomen, until I could unbuckle his jeans and slide them off. In one quick motion, I had Ty pressed down against the couch.. I pulled my hair out of the band that held it together and allowed it to cascade down over my shoulders and breasts. He closed his eyes, groaning in pleasure, and I kicked off my panties before straddling him. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d wanted someone this badly.

I took the condom from Ty’s hand and ripped the foil with my teeth. The feeling of his skin against mine was more than I could handle, and I was more than ready to allow him to take me as I slipped the condom on him and lowered myself onto him, feeling a burst of pleasure zip through my spine.

Ty groaned, which only made me want him more. I rocked my hips up and down, allowing him to fill me completely. His body moved in sync with mine, forcing another zap of pleasure through me. I closed my eyes and rested my hands on his chest as I neared climax. At the last second, before I released, Ty flipped me over so that he was on top. I gasped as he slid into me, panting, and all at once, moments later, we collapsed in each other’s arms, trying to catch our breath.

“Khloe Daniels, I think I love you,” Ty whispered, pulling me into him. I rested my head on his chest, feeling content, and, for the first time in a long time, happy.

“I think I love you, too,” I murmured, but I really had no doubt about it. I was crazy about this man and everything he was. It was a feeling I had never experienced before now, and I didn’t mind it a single bit.

THIRTY-SIX

We sat in the car in the dark, parked on the corner of Eighth Street and Elm. It was Saturday night, but the neighborhood was quiet. I kept my eyes peeled for Jay, knowing that he would be off work and meeting Ty and me here at any moment. As I waited, I reached for my cell phone, skimming through the contacts before pushing green. It rang once, twice, three times. I closed my eyes and silently prayed. There was no answer.

“Try again,” Ty urged. I redialed the number, let it ring, and then called back when no one picked up. After six more times of this game, she finally answered.

“What?”

“Hi, Ava, it’s me.” Relieved that she’d finally answered, I balanced the phone between my ear and shoulder and turned the car off, staring into the darkness. Jay had tuned up Missus Betty for me. Ty knew nothing about cars, possibly his only flaw, but I knew it was only a matter of time before the poor car was done for.

“No shit,” Ava said. Either she was sick as a dog, or she wasn’t glad to hear from me. Regardless of which one it was, I was shockingly relieved to hear that, if anything, she was still alive. Ty looked over at me from where he was sitting in the passenger seat. His eyebrows were raised.

“Are you home? Can you do me a favor?” I asked her. “Can you meet me on Eighth Street?”

“Yes, I’m home. Why?”

“I need to talk to you. There’s a little cafe on the corner. See you in fifteen minutes?”

“I don’t think so,” Ava said. I hoped that she was just tired and not high. Her little place was only a few blocks from here. I knew that if she really were home, she could meet me here with no problem.

“Please,” I said. “I beg of you, Ava. Just meet me there. We need to talk.”

“I don’t think there’s anything that needs to be said,” Ava snapped. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, resisting the urge to start crying or screaming or both.

“Eighth Street,” I said. “You’ll see my car. See you in a bit.” I hung up before she could reply, praying that she would show up. Ava was hard to predict, even for me, her best friend. I knew her better than I knew anybody, and yet sometimes I felt as though I hardly knew her at all. I wondered if that was how Carter felt with me. It’s certainly how I felt with him.

“She’ll come,” Ty said, seeing the look on my face. He reached out and squeezed my hand, which automatically put me at ease. I hated how well he could do that because it made me feel completely dependent on him.

“I hope so,” I said. “But you don’t know Ava like I do.”

My cell phone lit up with an incoming text. It was Jay. He was on his way. I took a deep breath and slipped my phone into my pocket before gathering my keys and stepping out of the car. Ty did the same, putting his arm around me and pulling me in. The air was brisk and cool with a September rush of fall. I couldn’t believe that it had been almost six months since Carter’s passing. Most of the time, it still felt like it was yesterday.

Down the street, someone hooted and hollered, stumbling out of the corner bar. A woman was wrapped around the kid’s neck, practically

hanging on him as he stumbled unsteadily. The longer I watched, the more familiar the kid became. It was Jesse.

“Christ.” I rolled my eyes and turned away, hoping he wouldn’t see me and stop to chat, but I was a moment too late. Jesse paused in the middle of the road, his eyes scanning my face over the head of the blond-haired woman who was still hanging on him like a leech to wet skin.

“Khloe,” he said, and came over. Ty, who was still arm in arm with me, said nothing, only observed.

“Hi, Jesse.” I tried to sound pleasant, but I didn’t let go of Ty’s arm. It wasn’t Jesse who had gotten me into the drugs and booze. He had only been my play toy while I’d been down in the dumps. If anything, I should have been feeling guilty.

“You never call me anymore,” Jesse said. He stepped in front of me, swaying. His hands were deep in the baggy pockets of his jeans. I saw his eyes scan over Ty, but he didn’t offer his hand. The woman with him gave me a once-over, sneering as if sizing me up for a rumble in the park. I rolled my eyes.

“I’ve been busy,” I told him. “Busy getting my shit together.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s good, I guess.” Jesse shrugged halfheartedly, and I forced a smile, hoping he’d take this as a polite goodbye. “I miss you,” he said instead, and I cringed inwardly. “We need to get together, yeah?”

I opened my mouth, about to agree just so I could get him out of my face, but then I hesitated. It was time to start taking responsibility for my actions, even if it meant speaking the truth and standing up for myself.

“I don’t think so,” I said finally. “I’m not the same person that you knew, Jesse. I’m growing up.”

“Oh, c’mon.” Jesse smiled, shrugging the blond girl on his shoulder off. She released him, looking pissed. He didn’t seem to notice. “Where’s the fun in growing up?”

“I didn’t say it was fun,” I said. “But it’s rewarding. And besides, I’m kind of dating someone.” I squeezed Ty’s arm pointedly, and he leaned down and kissed me on the top of the head.

Jesse and I stared at each other for a moment, two souls that at one time had been lost together, trapped in a deep, black hole. Now he was on his own. I couldn’t let anyone drag me down again, not when I was so close to the surface.

“Good to see you, Khloe,” Jesse said finally. He didn’t even bother glancing again at Ty. “Take care of yourself.” He pulled the blond-haired person back into him, squeezing her as if clutching a teddy bear for dear life, before walking away.

I watched him go, watched them sway under the drunken stupor of booze. For a moment, I wanted so badly to call out to him, to tell him that not all hope was lost and that he could still get clean. But I didn’t. I stood back and watched him vanish, wondering if I’d ever see him again.

“I’m proud of you,” Ty said, and warmth exploded in my heart for the man standing next to me. He’d allowed me to fight my own battle but had never stepped back and let me fall without being ready to catch me.

“Thank you,” I said. I squeezed his hand. “I’m pretty proud of me, too.”

“Khloe?” said a timid voice behind us. I turned around to meet Ava’s gaze. She was dressed in faded jeans and a tank top, covered by a ratty shawl that I knew at one time had belonged to her foster mother, the one she had liked a little bit more than any of the others.

“You came,” I said. “Thank you.” Without waiting for an invitation, I threw my arms around her, nearly breaking down with relief.

Ava was tense at first, steady like a statue, but after a moment, she returned the hug, even if it was half-assed. Though I could smell cigarettes on her breath, there was no scent of lingering booze.

“I came,” she said.

“Please come with me, okay? We have something to do.” I tugged her forward, feeling how cold her skin was against mine.

She didn’t say anything to Ty, but he tried to smile kindly at her as we walked.

“What are we doing here, Khloe?” she asked. I could hear the hesitation in her voice, the distrust. As I pulled her, she faltered, coming to a halt right outside the door. “This isn’t a cafe,” she said. “You said we’d be meeting at a cafe.”

“It’s okay,” I assured her. “We need this.” From inside the building, Jay stepped out, holding the door for us. Ava caught sight of him and took a step back, confused.

“What are you doing here? I don’t get it.” She looked over at Ty. “Why are both of you here?”

“Ava,” Jay said. I stepped out of the way as he took my spot beside her, taking her hand in his.

She didn’t even try to pull away. Jay seemed to have that effect on people.

“I’m a drug and alcohol sponsor,” he told her. “Some of us feel that we would really love for you to sit in with us at one of these meetings. I think it will help you. Khloe, too. She said she would go if you went.”

I braced myself, expecting her to scream. Or cry. Or punch somebody in the face. She didn’t. She barely breathed.

“A meeting?” she squeaked.

“Will you do this for me?” I asked. “Will you do this for you?”

Ava looked at me then, and even in the dark of the night with nothing but the light from the street lamp, I could see the tears brimming her eyes.

“Yeah,” she said. “I will.”

THIRTY-SEVEN

I was glad Ava agreed to come in because had she not been there, I wasn't sure I would have had the courage to go in myself. It was intimidating enough for me to be around normal people, let alone an entire room full of strangers with addictions like Ava's and mine. But as much as it was unsettling, it was also right. No one looked at us funny when we came in. No one stopped to stare at the track marks on our arms or the fact that Ava was about fifteen pounds underweight. No one got up close to our faces to see if they could smell booze. No one scowled at us, rolled their eyes, or whispered to one another. No one cared, and yet, at the same time, I knew these people cared more than anyone else possibly could.

"Donuts," Jay said, pointing toward a table that held an assortment of little snacks and drinks.

"I'm not hungry," said Ava.

I knew she was nervous. Hell, I was nervous. Jay and Ty seemed to be the only ones who were completely satisfied with the whole situation.

"Donuts?" Ty repeated, his nose shooting in the air. "Oh, my God. They have donuts?"

"Come with me," Jay said to Ava. "We'll grab some seats."

Ava's eyes flickered toward me, and I smiled and nodded, hoping I could at least try to act encouragingly.

“I’m going to get something to drink,” I said. “We’ll sit with you guys in a minute. Save me a seat.”

Relief flooded through me when Ava took hold of the arm Jay offered her. I was glad she was putting her trust in him—Ava didn’t trust just anybody. I also knew that there was something about Jay that made the world okay, even if it was just for a moment. He had an air of calm about him, a relaxed personality that could settle even the most frazzled of people.

“I can’t believe this is my first time here,” I said, still gripping Ty’s hand. “I needed this a long time ago.” I poured us both a cup of coffee, letting the heat from the liquid warm my fingers.

“You’re a little late to the party,” Ty said with a wink. “But don’t worry, they seem to like stragglers here.” He smiled again, his vivid blue eyes flashing.

His coal-black hair fell into his eyes, and I had the fleeting urge to reach over and brush it back. Instead, I looked away, blushing. I couldn’t remember the last time someone made me blush, but Ty did it every day without even trying.

“That’s good,” I said. “Straggling is what I do best.”

“Good thing I like you stragglers,” Ty teased. He kissed me, his lips leaving my skin tingling with anticipation.

I closed my eyes and begged for another, feeling his fingers tease me as he trailed his hands up and down my arms. He kissed my mouth, and then my neck. I didn’t care if anyone was watching. I was in heaven.

“Hey, guys,” Jay called from where he and Ava were sitting in the middle row. He grins. “You’re in a place of worship for Christ’s sake.”

“Ah,” I sighed as Ty pulled away, grinning, turning my sigh to a groan. Every second of passion we’d just shared was shattered. “Can’t I have five minutes alone with you?”

“Talk to that one,” Ty said. He pointed toward the empty chairs next to Ava and Jay, who were in a heated debate that I had no desire to get involved in.

“Did you know that I use to be into drugs?” Ty asked as we claimed our seats.

“You were?” I almost choked on my coffee, spilling a dribble of it down my front. I tried to envision do-gooder Ty, the paramedic slash med student shooting up meth and boozing until the early morning light.

“Yeah,” he said. “I was really into pot for a while.”

“Marijuana? Oh God, kid, talk about trouble.” I flashed him a smile to show that I was kidding, but Ty was already grinning.

“I know, I know. It would have killed me eventually, I’m sure.”

“Without a doubt,” I said. “Death by stoning.” All four of us laughed. It was nice to hear laughter. For a long time, my life had been an empty abyss of joy and happiness. Being here, tonight, laughing with a man I was crazy for and two of my best friends was only the start of a much better future.

“Honestly,” Ty said after our giggles had subsided. “What’s worse than that?”

“Alcohol,” I told him, and the smile melted from my face. There was no hiding it now. Everyone knew I wasn’t there for the mediocre coffee and stale donuts. “And on occasion some other things. Hardcore drugs. That’s worse than pot.” I watched Ty’s expression, waiting for him to come to the realization that I was nothing but a hot mess, ex-druggie who would just drag him down. Instead of saying either of those things, though, he smiled slightly, then reached over and squeezed my hand.

“You won,” he said. I looked down at his hand and frowned.

“Won what?”

“The battle.” He leaned into me, his breath on my cheek. “You won the war on your addiction.”

“What makes you say that?” I asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he said. “Because you’re here.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

“That Ty dude is really smitten with you,” Ava said as we walked. From the corner of my eye, I saw Jay snicker. “I’ve never seen you with a man who treats you like a queen.” She rolled her eyes and added under her breath. “Besides Carter, anyway.”

“Thanks, Ava.”

“I think you did good in finding him.”

“He’s a good guy, isn’t he?” I checked my phone automatically, bummed that Ty had to report to work after the meeting.

“You caught a good one,” Ava said. “Hold on tight to him, Khloe.” I watched her hug the jacket closer to her chest, shivering. The meeting had ended an hour ago, but we all decided to take a walk and chat in the park before departing. I was curious to hear Ava’s thoughts on the “intervention,” but so far, she hadn’t said much.

“How did you guys like tonight?” Jay asked. “Did it help you?”

Both Ava and I fell silent. I thought of all the faces I’d met tonight—so many people like Ava and me, addicts and alcoholics and even abuse victims—as if the entire city’s group of misfits had come together in one tiny room to talk about it over coffee and donuts.

“Actually,” Ava said, and then she hesitated. Jay and I looked at her, curious. Whatever Ava was about to say could make or break the whole point of getting her there. “Actually,” she said again. “It was kind of nice to

hear that other people go through what we do. Sometimes I feel like no one understands.”

“They understand,” Jay said. “Those people in that room tonight understand better than anyone.”

“They seem like good people,” I agreed. I linked one arm through Jay’s and held out the other to Ava. “I don’t know what I would do without either of you. Thanks for having my back.”



A few days later, I finally felt comfortable enough to go home and live without Ty or Jay constantly by my side. The first thing the guys and Ava helped me do was rid my entire apartment of half-empty liquor bottles. It was day one for Ava, and as we cleaned, I hoped and prayed that she would be able to stay strong through this and remain clean and sober. I wouldn’t be able to take another overdose. I couldn’t survive losing another friend. I knew I wasn’t strong enough to hold myself up alongside Ava too.

“Are you okay to be here by yourself tonight?” Jay asked. He was holding a garbage bag full of trash, and I could hear the liquor bottles clinking together.

“She won’t be alone,” Ty said. “She’ll be with me.” He was clearing the beer cans out of the fridge.

I looked over at him, feeling my heart flutter with an emotion that was so new to me, so charming and beautifully comfortable.

“Even if Ty weren’t here, I would be okay,” I assured Jay. “The cravings aren’t as bad. We’ll make some popcorn and watch a movie.”

“I have faith in you,” Ava said. She came around the corner, dressed in elbow-length cleaning gloves that made her look like an adorable rubber

duck. “We’re in this together.”

“You guys know I’m only a phone call away if you need me,” Jay said. He shook Ty’s hand and hugged Ava and me before getting back in his car and vanishing down the street. I watched him go, feeling as though Jay had been one of the missing pieces of the puzzle in my life.

“You’ve got this, girl,” Ava said. She peeled the gloves from her hands and flung an arm around me, squeezing. “I may not be Carter, and I may not even be Jay or Ty, but I’m still your friend, and I refuse to let you go down.”

I smiled and rested my head on Ava’s shoulder, feeling a relief I hadn’t felt in years wash over me. For a moment—just a moment—everything was okay in the world. “Ditto,” I said.



Ty and I stayed in that night and cuddled on the sofa under a hand-woven quilt. He rented a whole bunch of scary movies—my favorite—and we watched the movies, ate pizza, and talked for hours. My time spent with Ty was so different from any other romantic relationship I’d experienced. Ty was the kind of man a woman could only read about in books or watch on the big screen. As the moments with him ticked by, I waited for the instant I would find his flaw. I kept my eyes open for some unfortunate quirk that would make him a bad person. Maybe he was controlling. Maybe he was obsessively jealous. Maybe he was racist. Even then, even after my mind swam with negative thoughts and deluded my trust, not once did I find one of these flaws I was so scared to see. In fact, as the days went on, the good part of him only shined brighter. Had Carter been around, I know he would

have chided me for being so insecure and trying to sabotage a good thing. I couldn't let my hesitation win. I couldn't lose Ty. I wouldn't.

In all my years of being drunk and or high before sex, the buzz of intimacy and pure desire I felt with Ty was overwhelmingly perfect. The softness of his skin against mine was electric, and when our lips touched, my mouth tingled. There was never a feeling of being pressured around him. In fact, my desire grew for him every moment of every day. I'd even gone in with Ava to the clinic to make sure we were both clean, not just for any men but for ourselves. We'd lived life dangerously, uncaring, and recklessly. I'm shocked we hadn't picked anything up from unsafe sex or needle-sharing with strangers.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Ty asked. I looked over at him, mesmerized by the kindness in his face and the twinkle in his eyes.

"Just thinking about how lucky I am to have met you."

"You know what's funny? I was thinking the same thing." Ty leaned over and cupped my chin in his before kissing me on the lips.

I closed my eyes and sighed with contentment as his free hand traveled down my blouse, over my chest, and toward my lower abdomen. "It's not fair that you do this to me," I murmured. "I couldn't say no even if I wanted to."

"Do you want to?" he asked. "Say no, I mean?" His breath tickled my ear.

I reached my hand down and rested it on the bulge in his jeans. Ty slipped his tongue between my lips, and the tingling in my lower half started up again as I drew him into me, hungry for more. My hips moved restlessly toward him as he rubbed my nipple through my bra.

"Never," I said. And for the first time in forever, I meant it.

THIRTY-NINE

“I’m glad you came back to see me,” Traci Dunham said. She was sitting behind her office desk in the black chair across from me, pen poised on the pad, ready to jot down her notes as she stared at me over those intimidating spectacles.

“Carter would have wanted it,” I said.

“I hope you want it, too,” the counselor said, and I nodded. I did. I really did. “Tell me about sobriety. How is it coming?”

“Almost three months,” I said. “To some people it’s not that long, but for me it’s eons.”

“I’m so very glad to hear that,” Mrs. Dunham said. “You must be proud of yourself.”

“I am,” I admitted, and I realized right then that I truly meant it.

“What else is going on in your life?” asked Mrs. Dunham.

I placed my hands in my lap and looked around, saw the colorful fish darting around in their tank, noticed the polished work desk and the way the room smelled of lavender. I thought of Carter, who, at one time, had sat exactly where I was now.

“My father is sober now,” I told her. “For a while, anyway. He invited me to breakfast the other day.”

“How did that go?”

“It was fine,” I said. “Nice to see him sober, but I don’t think it’ll last.”

“You don’t have trust in him?” Mrs. Dunham asked. I shrugged one shoulder and looked down at my hands, picking at the chipped polish.

“He had a scare in that accident,” I told her. “One good scare is enough to frighten even the most stubborn people into sobriety. That doesn’t mean it’s going to stick.”

“Do you think you’re going to stick with it?” Mrs. Dunham asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I want to clean my life up.”

“What makes you so sure he can’t?”

“I...” I hesitated, unsure of how to answer. “I know him,” I said finally. “I know who he is and what he’s capable of.”

“Carter knew you,” Mrs. Dunham pointed out. “But he still believed you could change.” She hesitated, waiting for me to react. I didn’t. “Was your father always an alcoholic?” she asked. I shook my head, thinking of how life had been before Mom’s death.


“He used to be a good father,” I said. “When my mother died, it drove him to drink. Over the years, we just kind of drifted apart.”

“Maybe it’s time to grow close again,” Mrs. Dunham said. “Is that something you would consider letting happen?”

I was quiet for a minute, trying to figure out if my life would be better or worse without Frank in it.

“I guess I could let him try,” I said. “I just don’t know how serious he is about it.”

“That’s all you must do is let him try,” Mrs. Dunham said. She sat back in her chair and smiled again at me. She smiled a lot, and yet it was comforting each time she did. “Nobody ever got anywhere by sitting back and letting someone else try for them. It’s up to him to change, and it’s up to you to let him.”



I took the bus halfway home that evening and then walked the rest of the way, head tucked down, hood up, and hands shoved into the pocket of my sweatshirt as the rain started to fall softly. Missus Betty was out of service, chilling in Jay's shop waiting to be seen. I found myself worrying if we were closer to the end of her days than not.

Seeing Mrs. Dunham really had made me feel better. I'd gone from having no support whatsoever to suddenly having a bunch of people in my corner, and it was a good feeling. I knew that if I needed any one of them, they were just a phone call away.

Ty was still at work when I finally made it home, and I knew Ava was training a new kid at the club tonight. I was about to unlock my front door when my phone rang in my pocket. I picked it up, answering it before I bothered to check the caller ID.

"Khloe? It's Da... it's Frank. How are you?"

"Oh, hi," I said, unlocking my front door. "I'm good. Just got back from therapy." I closed the door behind me just as the rain started to come down heavy, splattering against the windows. I plopped down on the couch and closed my eyes, trying to determine if Frank was calling me drunk or not.

"Oh, okay," he said. "That's good. That's great." I was surprised to hear that he sounded sober. I could tell because when he was sober, he never knew what to say, like a fumbling high school kid put in the spotlight.

"Was there something you wanted?" I asked finally. I hadn't meant to sound rude, but a nap was sounding very good, and that wouldn't happen until I was off the phone. There was a moment of silence, and for a second, I thought Frank had hung up.

“Would you like to come over here for dinner?” he asked. “I’m cooking. It would be nice to have the company.”

“Oh.” I glanced at the clock. It was still early in the evening. Ty wouldn’t be off for a few more hours, and Ava would be at the club most of the night. Jay, I knew, was on a date with a college guy from school, so tonight I would be on my own until late. I had nothing better to do, and yet I found myself hesitating anyway. “I’m not sure,” I said. “I’m kind of tired...”

“Oh,” Frank said. He sounded crestfallen as if I’d just ripped his heart from his chest and played basketball with it.

“Yeah, I can come over,” I said, then let out a long breath of air. “My car is out of service, but I can take a cab. Give me fifteen minutes?”

“Oh, yeah, of course,” Frank said. “I’ll set the table.”

I bid my father goodbye and closed my eyes, wondering if I’d made a mistake agreeing to go over there. I knew he was trying to be better—to be sober—but some small part of me just couldn’t accept it. I wanted a relationship with him, of course, but it was easier said than done, especially with Frank. But as I sat there in the silence of my home, an internal debate going on in my head, I remembered what Mrs. Dunham had said to me earlier.

“It’s up to him to change, and it’s up to you to let him.”

Groaning, I got to my feet and slipped my shoes back on, feeling worn out and tired, ready to drop into bed. If anything, maybe Frank had made something decent for dinner. Steaks, maybe. Or pizza. Even pizza sounded damn good. I slipped my jacket on and grabbed a handful of crumpled bills before heading out the door to catch a cab.

“This is for you, Carter,” I said to the sky. “I hope you’re happy.”

Frank still lived in the same house I'd grown up in, a quaint little three-bedroom home on the outskirts of the city near the bay. He and my mother had bought the home as newlyweds, and even after I was born, Mom had refused to sell it for a bigger place. Therefore, I'd grown up there, lived in that tiny house through middle school and high school. It wasn't until I was standing on the front porch, letting my gaze wander over the weather-beaten garden gnomes and peeling paint on the door, that I realized I hadn't been back in months, even longer, actually. Since Mom had died.

"Frank?" I knocked on the door and tried the handle. It was open, so I stepped in, hesitating near the front entrance. I could smell something cooking as I looked around allowing a thousand childhood memories to flood me. Despite my mom being gone all those years, the house had not changed much aside from the ashtrays filled with cigarette butts. The paint was the same, as was the furniture, including the rocker and the faded blue couch Mom had snagged from an antique shop downtown.

"Khloe?" Frank called from the kitchen. "Come on in, kid." I shrugged off my jacket and made my way toward the smell of dinner, wondering if I'd made a mistake coming here. Dinner wasn't supposed to feel so unnatural, especially not with your father.

"Thanks for the invite," I said, coming into the kitchen. Frank was leaning over the oven, stirring a pot of something with a wooden spoon. He looked up and smiled as I came in, and I forced a smile back.

"I made your favorite," he said. "Spaghetti."

"Spaghetti?" I repeated. He must have heard the hesitation in my voice because the smile melted from his face.

"That is your favorite, isn't it?"

"I... I'm not a huge fan," I admitted. I figured that if Frank and I were going to try to get on the same page, I would do well to spare him the fake

feelings of gratitude and be nothing short of bluntly honest.

“Since when?” he asked, looking crestfallen.

“Since birth.” I tried not to sound sarcastic, but there was no way not to.

“Really?” Frank said. He stared for a moment as if waiting for me to throw my hands in the air and say just kidding!

“Really, really,” I said instead.

“Sorry, kid.” He looked down at the pot boiling on the stovetop, brow furrowed in a look of confusion.

“Alfredo,” I told him. “You’re on the right track because you knew it was like spaghetti, but it’s not. Mom always made us alfredo with the white sauce.” Frank looked back up at me, and I could see a look of understanding slowly form on his features.

“Alfredo,” he repeated. “With chicken. And black olives. She always made homemade sauce.”

“Yeah.” I smiled and placed the dinner plates that had been sitting on the countertop onto the table, figuring I could choke it down this one time, hopefully, to make him feel better. If he was trying, so could I.

“Thank you for coming tonight,” Frank said. He sat down at the table, and I followed suit grabbing the pitcher of juice from the fridge before I did. I was both amazed and caught off guard to find no cans of beer chilling in the fridge.

“Thanks for having me,” I said. Frank slopped some noodles onto his plate and reached for the pan of burned toast. I did the same. “This is... nice.” I poked at the noodles. What was there really to say? Frank and I had been nothing short of strangers before he’d decided to clean up, and now it felt like we were starting from the beginning instead of picking up where we left off. Only, I had no idea what to say to him anymore. Life had

changed so drastically since Mom's death, and now here we were, expecting some unlikely father-daughter reunion.

"How is your friend?" Frank asked after a moment of silence. "The Mexican... Ava? Are you guys still close?"

"Hispanic," I said. "And she's doing well, thanks for asking. Jay took us to our first Narcotics Anonymous meeting. It's really going to help both of us stay out of the booze and drugs. I hope."

"Those meetings are a godsend," Frank said. "It's AA for me. Without support from those people, I'm not sure I could have stopped doing what I was doing."

"Yeah, they're good people." I hesitated, thinking of Ty's handsome face. "I'm... with someone," I said. For a fleeting moment, I wondered if it was too soon to talk about my brand-new love life with my stranger of a father, but I figured it couldn't do any harm. He was my father, after all, even if it had been years since we'd truly connected last.

"You're really with someone?" Frank repeated. "A guy?"

"No," I said. "A tortoise."

"Sorry." He flushed red and took a sip of his water. "I wasn't sure if you were seeing that Ava girl, especially when your friend Jay came to breakfast the other day instead."

"No, Dad. I'm not gay."

"Well. That's good, I guess." Frank set down his glass and reached for some toast and butter. "So, tell me about this someone who isn't a tortoise or a woman," he said. "I'm intrigued."

"His name is Ty. He's a paramedic. And he's in school."

"And he likes you?" Frank asked.

I looked down at my plate, twirling the spaghetti on my fork. "Yes," I said. "At least, I think so. It feels so good being with him that I guess I keep

waiting for the catch.”

“I don’t see why he wouldn’t like you,” Frank said. “You’re a pretty amazing girl, Khloe.” I chuckled uncomfortably, wondering how this conversation was still in full swing.

“He’s a good guy,” I said. “He’s everything I ever wanted in a person.” There was a moment of silence as we ate, and after a few minutes, Frank spoke.

“If Carter was alive, would he approve of this Ty kid?” he asked. I was surprised to hear my father speak Carter’s name as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I hesitated, thinking about it, trying to envision how a meeting would go between the two.

“Yes,” I said. “I think Carter would have loved him to the point of wanting him all to himself.” I was surprised when Frank smiled, amused.

“How is the Drake family?” he asked. “The last time I heard from any of them was when Melanie brought me flowers after the accident. She had that kid with her, the kid sister.”

“Gracie,” I said. “She’s a sweetheart.”

“She is,” Frank agreed. “How is Mr. Drake? David, I think his name is.”

I twirled the undercooked spaghetti onto my fork, trying not to grimace as Frank chewed heartily on his burned toast.

“I don’t really know,” I admitted. “I haven’t talked to Mr. Drake since he kicked me out of Carter’s funeral.”

“He did what?” Frank put his fork down and stared at me, looking shocked. “Why would he do that?”

“He doesn’t like me.” I pushed my plate aside, appetite gone for good. “He didn’t like me when Carter and I were friends, either. David and I got off on the wrong foot, and it all went downhill from there.” I leaned back in

the chair and sighed, suddenly feeling overwhelmed. “I need to make things right with that family.”

“I don’t know what you can do,” Frank said. “If I remember right, that David Drake isn’t a cakewalk, Khloe. Maybe it’s best just to let it go.”

“I can’t,” I said. “I owe it to Carter to make things right. David thinks I influenced his son’s decision to commit suicide.” Frank set down his toast and looked at me.

“You don’t believe that, do you? I know we haven’t exactly been friends the last few years, kid, but I do know that whatever happened with Carter had nothing to do with you.”

“Even so, I’d rather make peace with Mr. Drake,” I said. “If anything, just for myself.”

Frank shrugged, then, raising just one shoulder slightly. It was a habit I was also guilty of. Like father, like daughter.

“Good for you,” he said. “I guess your mother raised you right.”

“It wasn’t just Mom,” I said quietly. “For a while, you were there, too.” Frank looked at me again and set down his fork. Our eyes met.

“I hope I can be that man to you again,” he said after a moment. “I think I can be... if you let me.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Thank you for trying. I’ll try, too.”

“Try what, Khloe?” Frank asked. I leaned forward, propping my elbows up on the table.

“I’ll try to become the woman Mom wanted me to be.”

FORTY

Monday was a rainy day when I met Mrs. Dunham in her high school office for our counseling session. It had come to the point that I was starting to look forward to our weekly meetings. There was something comforting about being able to talk to the wise woman knowing that she understood what was happening in my life. She had known Carter—she had known his secrets, dreams, and desires—and now it was my turn.

“I’m almost six months sober,” I said. “And back in school, too.” Raindrops splattered against her office window, but it was calming. The rain always soothed me.

“That’s excellent,” Mrs. Dunham said. “Have you noticed any changes in your life because of it? For better or worse?”

“I still want it sometimes,” I admitted. “I used to turn to alcohol and drugs to help me face the world. It felt like I couldn’t even be social without being drunk first. That’s been hard, trying to make friends without a liquid crutch.”

“Have you succeeded?” Mrs. Dunham asked.

I thought of Ty. And of Jay. And even of Ava, who day to day was getting stronger and stronger without the drugs to tear her down.

“The guy I’m with, Ty, he’s so good to me. He’s amazing. I’ve had to get to know him sober, and I’ve had to be intimate with him completely sober.

There haven't been any mornings that I've rolled out of bed with regret because I can't remember who I slept with and whether we were safe."

"How does it make you feel to be able to make friends sober, too?"

"Honestly, it's awesome. Ty sees me for who I am sober and not who I turn into when drunk."

"And he still likes you," she said. It wasn't a question. "I think you're on the right track, Khloe." She set down her pad and paper and leaned forward, her eyes catching mine. "Carter would be proud of you, wouldn't he?"

"Yes," I agreed. "He would." And for the first time since he'd been gone from my life, I believed that.

I was surprised when I got out of therapy to find Ty waiting for me out front in his little white car. He spotted me coming out the front door and waved before getting out to greet me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. Then, feeling like an asshole, added, "I usually just take the bus home."

"Jay told me your car was out of service for a while, so I figured I'd offer my own," Ty said. "He told me where you would be, so here I am." He grinned and opened the passenger door for me, but not before pulling me into his arms and greeting me with a kiss. I allowed my lips to linger on his for a moment, and my heartbeat sped up with a buzz of electricity.

"You're a sweetheart," I said, pulling away. "Thank you for being here." I slid into the front seat, inhaling the soothing scent of vanilla and spices coming from the air freshener on the dashboard. Outside, the sky was threatening to open, and I was suddenly glad that Ty had made an unexpected appearance. Not just for the ride, though, but for him, too.

"I thought you might be working today," I said as we drove. "I always worry that I bother you too much, so I didn't call this morning."

“Bother me? It only bothers me when you don’t call. No work today. I’m nearing my hours.” He smiled at me. His smile was charming, and warmth spread into my face as if I was back in high school drooling over the football quarterback. It was inevitable that his smile would forever get me.

“No damsels in distress to save, either?” I said with a grin.

Ty laughed. I enjoyed his laugh.

“Well, there’s you, Khloe,” he said. “Didn’t I just save you?”

“I don’t need saving,” I told him. “I can handle myself.”

“Somehow, I believe that.” Ty turned on the heat as he drove, bobbing his head gently to the music coming from the radio. I watched his fingers tap on the steering wheel, taken with how laid back and chill he was, even sober. Jesse had always been relaxed, but it was only ever because he was high. I found it so odd that someone could embrace and enjoy life so much without drugs or alcohol.

“I told the counselor about you,” I said after a moment. “I never really know what to call you, though, except for the guy I like. Nothing was ever made official.” The window next to me was starting to fog over. I traced a smiley face in it with my finger, thinking of Carter, wishing he were here to meet and give me the green light on Ty. I knew that he never would have approved of Jesse, but Ty was a different story. Ty was good. Kind. Whole. Ty was exactly what I needed.

“I’m sorry,” he said after a moment. His tone had shifted slightly, the joy and teasing were gone. “I already have a girlfriend.”

“You what?” I whipped my head around, my heart dropping in my stomach. For a reeling moment, I thought I might vomit all over his dashboard.

“Yeah,” he said, furrowing his brow. “I couldn’t leave my girlfriend. She’s too good for me. She’s kind and funny and extremely intelligent.

She's come a long way since I've met her."

"Oh." I dropped my hands into my lap, both humiliated and too shocked to speak. I cleared my throat to say something, anything, but Ty continued to talk.

"She wants to be a doctor," he said. "Well, a surgeon. She's even cooler than me. And really ambitious."

I looked over at him, cheeks flaring with heat. He met my gaze and smiled. The skin around his eyes crinkled up in the corners, and he grinned that silly, lopsided grin. I nibbled on my lip, fighting a smile.

"She sounds like a catch," I said. "Don't let that one go." He reached for my hand, his fingers intertwining with mine.

"Trust me," he said. "I wouldn't dream of it."

FORTY-ONE

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Ava leaned over me to peer out the driver’s side window of my car, leering anxiously at the house in front of us.

“I doubt it,” I admitted. “But I’m going to do it anyway.”

“You’re *loca*,” Ava murmured. “I wouldn’t pick a fight with David Drake if my life depended on it.”

“I’m not here to fight him, Ava,” I said. “I’m here to make peace. If not for Mr. Drake or me, then at least for Carter.”

“Maybe we should have Ty with us,” Ava said. “Or even Jay.”

“Good grief, Ava. Chill. You’re not even coming in. Besides, they’re both working.” I opened the door, wincing as the hinge on Missus Betty’s door creaked and squealed. Jay had managed to tinker with the insides, making her a tiny bit more reliable to drive, but the car’s dingy body was a lost cause.

“Leave the car on,” Ava hissed. “If Mr. Drake comes after you with a rifle, I want to be able to flee the scene.”

“Stop being dramatic.” I slammed the door and glared at her through the window, feeling suddenly worked up and anxious as I clutched Carter’s journal to my chest for support. I knew that coming to make things right with Carter’s father had to be done. It had constantly been nagging me in the back of my mind like a cold case waiting to be solved. I didn’t know if

talking to Mr. Drake would make us friends. I doubted it would even warm him up to me, but it had to be done, if not for myself, for Carter.

I could feel Ava's eyes burning into the skin on my back as I made my way across the lawn and to the front door. Both Melanie's minivan and David's SUV were parked in the driveway, so I knew he was home. I wasn't sure if that was for better or worse. Taking a deep breath, I knocked on the front door and waited. After a moment, the door swung open, and Melanie appeared. I had expected David Drake, so I was both relieved and put at ease when his face did not appear at once.

"Khloe?" Melanie said. "Oh, dear, how wonderful it is to see you!" She drew me into her, squeezing, and I embraced the familiar smell of the woman. It was a smell I had grown to miss after the passing of my mother.

"It's good to see you, too," I said and hugged her back. "Can I come in?"

"Of course, dear." Melanie opened the door for me and beckoned me in, shutting it behind her. Gracie, who'd been coloring in a notebook on the floor, raised her head when I came in.

"Khloe!" she shouted and jumped to her feet before running and flinging her arms around my mid-section. "Where have you been?" she demanded, tilting her head up to look at me. "I've missed you a whole lot."

"I've missed you, too, girlfriend," I said, mussing her blond hair. "Sorry I've been out of touch. I've just been working on getting my life sorted out."

"I like the sound of that," Melanie said. "How's your father? I know he wasn't doing very well the last time I saw him."

"He's much better, actually," I said. "He's getting sober, trying to make up for all the lost time." Melanie put a hand to her heart, looking pleased.

"Wonderful," she said. "I'm so happy to hear that things are better for you. I know it was really tough on you after Carter's passing."

“I still miss him every day,” I admitted. “Some days are okay, and some days are absolutely horrible.”

“I don’t think we’ll ever stop missing him,” Melanie said. “But the pain will fade. Trust me on that.” She squeezed my shoulder, forcing a smile. Gracie, bored with the adult conversation, retreated to her coloring pad.

“Thank you for inviting me in, Mrs. Drake,” I said. “But there is a reason I’m here.” I looked down at the journal clutched between my sweaty fingers. Melanie followed my gaze, but there was no spark of recognition in her eyes. She really had no idea about Carter’s journal. “Is Mr. Drake home?” I asked. “I would really like to speak to him if that’s a possibility.”

“Speak to him?” Melanie repeated. “Speak to David?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh, Khloe, I’m not sure that’s a very good idea. I know you two have always locked horns.”

“Please,” I said. “I just need to make things right. For Carter.” Melanie sighed, forfeiting, and forced a smile. At that moment, I heard David coming up the stairs, listening to the steel-toed boots he’d often worn during work clank against the wooden steps. He emerged through the kitchen door, spotted me standing in the living room, and froze.

“Khloe.” His tone was quiet, a bit of iciness under the surface. “This is a surprise.”

There was a moment of silence as we stared each other down, not speaking. Finally, Melanie cleared her throat and started forward, beckoning for me to go with her. I stepped toward David and plastered the politest smile on my face that I could muster. In my hand, Carter’s journal felt heavy suddenly, like a handbag full of bricks.

“I was hoping I could come and apologize to you, face to face,” I told him. I stepped forward again, but David made no move to meet me halfway.

He stood near the kitchen door, staring, silent, setting my nerves on edge. This, I knew, was yet another situation where a drink before facing this man would have done me well.

“What is it exactly that you want, Khloe?” David asked. As I looked at him, I was finally able to notice the toll that his son’s death had taken on the man. His eyes were dark, skin taut, and he looked to have aged ten years just in the time I had seen him last. He looked run down and ragged, like an old man ready to kick the bucket.

“I want to apologize for any hurt or pain I’ve caused you,” I told him. “I know you never thought much of me, and I know you think that I’m to blame for Carter’s death. I don’t believe that’s true, but I don’t expect you to understand.”

David tossed the oily rag down onto the coffee table and took a seat in his recliner, staring at me. He reached for a mug of coffee sitting on the table and raised it to his lips. I cleared my throat, looking over to Melanie for guidance. She smiled and nodded, encouraging me. At this point, Gracie had risen from her spot on the floor and had crossed the room to sit down on the bottom step of the staircase as if preparing for shit to hit the fan.

“Is that all?” David asked me after a moment. Our eyes met, and there was nothing but coldness in his expression. Anger. Hostility. I looked down at the journal in my hands, feeling sick, wishing Carter were here to back me up.

“Do you think that maybe instead of blaming his decision on his friend, you could come to face the fact that maybe your son just wasn’t happy?” I said. “Do you think that maybe all these years he struggled with demons, but he never felt comfortable telling you about them?”

“What are you saying?” David asked. “You think my own son was too uncomfortable to be able to talk to me? What about you, Khloe? If you two

were so close, why didn't he talk to you about it?"

"David," Melanie warned, but her interjection did nothing. His gaze didn't even flicker in her direction.

"I'm just saying that maybe instead of blaming one another, we can all agree that what Carter did was by his own choice, no one else's," I said. "We all loved him very much, but I feel like the feud between you and me would have hurt him even more if he was still here."

David stared at me for a long moment. The house was silent, so quiet that I could hear the ticking from the old grandfather clock Melanie had bought years ago when Carter and I had been grade school kids.

"I think you should leave," David said finally. "I have no patience for this today."

"You want me to leave?" I stepped forward again, toward the chair, but then stopped. "I've come here to make peace. Carter would have wanted it. Can't we at least give him that? I'm not much of a believer in your religion, Mr. Drake, but if Carter is in heaven right now, maybe this is what he needs to hear. Don't you believe that, too?"

"Heaven?" David repeated. "If that boy has gone anywhere, it's to Hell!" He rose from his chair. His face suddenly flushed with the color of an angry toddler. He heaved the mug of coffee, not bothering to watch as it hit the wall and shattered into pieces. Black liquid pooled on the carpet, dripping from the putrid green paint. "Suicide is a sin in my eyes," David said. "Carter didn't go to heaven. I didn't think you were so naive and stupid."

"You're a monster," I said. Beside me, Melanie was staring at us, her skin ghostly white, lips pursed. "Carter was the best person I knew. How dare you speak of him that way!"

"He lived his life in sin," said David. At the bottom of the staircase, knees now drawn to her chin, Gracie was watching us in wide-eyed fear. "I

did not help create a gay son.”

“You knew he was gay?” I stared at him, my lip trembling. “You knew he was gay, and you shunned him for it!” I stepped forward again. “Out of everything a person can choose to be in this world, you shunned him because he was gay? You found out he wasn’t like you, and you shamed him for it, didn’t you?”

“Get the hell out of my house!” David shouted. He pointed at the front door, practically seething with fury. “You’re nothing but a Christ-less, no-good whore!”

“Daddy!” Gracie sobbed. I saw her cover her ears and begin to rock, tears springing from her eyes. Melanie watched us still, fearful, one hand over her mouth, eyes wide with shock. I hadn’t expected her to back me up, but now I knew she wouldn’t. Nobody could stand up to David Drake.

“Did you know he had a boyfriend?” I said. “Did you know that they were in love and they were happy? Heaven forbid your excuse for a God accepts something like that, right?”

“Get. Out. Of. My. House!”

“Fine. I’m gone.” I crossed the room to kiss Gracie on the head, feeling guilty that I’d stirred the anger up and then bailed, but it was impossible to talk to him. I should have known David Drake didn’t want to hear what I had to say. He was a stubborn man, set in his ways. If anything, I was glad I’d at least tried.

“I’m sorry, Khloe.” Melanie breathed as I passed her to get to the door. “I’m so, so sorry.” I reached for the handle and then turned around.

“None of this is your fault,” I told her. “You and Gracie are my family. I’m sorry I caused trouble.” I stepped out of the house and made my way back to the car. Ava was staring wide-eyed from the passenger seat, looking

both curious and terrified all at the same time. I slid into the seat and slammed the car into drive.

“How did it go?” she asked.

I glanced back one last time at the Drakes’ house, at Carter’s childhood home, and shrugged. “As well as could be expected.”

FORTY-TWO

Despite being shaken over my run-in with David Drake, I forced myself to focus on anything else besides the negativity he had lain upon me. Ty, the sweetheart he was, treated Ava, Jay, and me to dinner at a nice French place before escorting us to the nightly NA meeting. As we walked down the bright Seattle streets, Ava's arm linked with Jay's and my hand being squeezed by Ty, I realized how proud I was of both Ava and I. Since her first meeting, Ava had stayed clean and sober, a task I hadn't been sure she would be able to do. Yet, here she was. She had done it, and she had done it well. I couldn't have been prouder. But even then, even with the progress she'd made, I knew that an addict is only ever one use away from a relapse. We just had to take it one day at a time.

"I think it's awesome what you tried to do today," Ty said as we walked. "That takes a lot of courage."

"Well, it didn't do any good," I said with a shrug. "David Drake was having none of it."

"It's the thought that counts," Jay called over his shoulder. "You were the bigger person, Khloe. Carter would have been really glad."

"Carter's not here," I murmured. Ty glanced over at me and squeezed my hand.

"Jay told me a bit about how close you and Carter were," he said. "I didn't know him well, but I'd met him around once or twice on campus. He

seemed like a really great guy.”

“He was,” I said. “Every moment that passes by without him barely gets easier. They say time heals all wounds, but I call that bullshit.”

“I second that,” Ava said. “I don’t think it ever gets easier.”

“It may not get easier,” Ty said. “But the pain lessens.”

“I just... I wish I knew what he had been thinking when he did it.” I found myself drawing nearer to Ty until our hips met, and I could feel him against me. He pulled me into him, his hand dropping mine and curling around my shoulder to pull me into him instead. “I just wish I knew what the problem was. Maybe I could have helped.”

“I don’t think you could have, Khloe,” Ty said. “I think Carter had a lot of stuff going on that didn’t involve you.”

“He should have talked to me. He should have told me things. I was his best friend.” Tears pooled in my eyes. I was overloaded with emotion, probably because of the fight with David Drake.

“If you blame yourself forever, you’ll never be able to move on,” Jay said. “That’s a fact, Khloe. Do you really think that’s what Carter would want for you?”

“Of course not,” I admitted. “But it doesn’t make it easier.”

“Maybe not easier.” Ava released Jay’s arm and turned around to face me, her warm brown eyes meeting mine. “Maybe not easier,” she said again. “But definitely bearable. We’re here for you, *chica*.” She hugged me then, and it wasn’t until I could feel her tear-stained cheek against mine that I realized she was crying. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for never giving up on me.”



The guilt and frustration I held toward Mr. Drake gnawed at me all week, and on that following Saturday, I found myself back over at the Drake household, determined for the last time to apologize and leave that house without starting a fight. However, as I arrived, ready to try once again to make amends, I found Melanie in the driveway, packing her minivan with suitcases. In one arm, she was holding a sleeping Gracie, and with her free hand, she was loading the car.

“Mrs. Drake?” I called, stepping out of my car. “What’s going on? Is everything okay?”

“Hi, Khloe,” Melanie said. She stopped and smiled at me, but her expression was sad. “I’m very glad you’re here. I didn’t want to leave without seeing you first.”

“What’s going on?” My eyes followed the luggage that Melanie was throwing into the van, and I felt a tug of guilt. “Oh, God,” I said. “This isn’t because of me?”

“Oh, no,” Melanie said. She turned to face me, her eyes welling up with tears. “We’re separating,” she said. I could see that she had been crying, her eyes were brimmed with red, and her complexion was puffy. She clutched Gracie to her bosom, desperately.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Oh, goodness, child. Don’t be.” She handed Gracie to me as she loaded two packed bags into the back of the van. “I love David,” she said. “God knows I love him more than I ever thought was possible. But he needs to fix himself before he can fix our family.”

I glanced back toward the house, and my eyes met David’s over Gracie’s blond head. He was standing at the window, curtain drawn back as he watched Melanie load the car. He looked sad. Sadder than I’d ever seen him, and I felt a stab of pain in my heart.

“I think you’re doing the right thing,” I said, turning back to the car. “You and Gracie deserve a husband and a father. Let him grieve. Some people just take longer than others.” I leaned down and scooted Gracie into the back seat, covering her with a blanket. As I shut the door, Melanie yanked me into a warm embrace.

“You have always been family to us,” she said. “And I don’t know if you believe this or not, but you were family to David, too. Sometimes, Khloe, a person’s pain is so deep that all they can think of to do is take it out on someone else.” I hugged her back, feeling an overwhelming urge to cry.

“Keep in touch,” I said. “When Gracie wakes, kiss her for me.”

I watched the tail lights to Melanie’s van disappear down the road and around the corner, wondering if I would ever see either one of them again. Melanie had been a mother to me and Gracie like a sister. Watching them leave was like saying goodbye to a good friend, but not only that, Melanie and Gracie had been the last part of Carter I had.

With a sigh, I slipped back into my car and started the engine, sneaking a peek back toward the house. David had vanished from the window, and I couldn’t bring myself to go in and apologize. I no longer cared.

FORTY-THREE

Ty worked the night shift on Saturday, so Ava and I found ourselves at Jay's place with a bunch of horror movies and pizza. I sat cross-legged on the floor, Carter's journal in my lap as I halfway paid attention to the creepy music on the screen. Ava was on the couch, her feet propped up in Jay's lap, a bottle of bronze nail polish open and resting between her fingers.

"This movie gets me every time," Jay said. "I don't know what it is about Stephen King, but he's the god of literary fiction."

"He's a creep," I said. "And this movie is creepy. Animals coming back from the dead? It's demented."

"That's what makes it so good!" Jay handed the pizza box over, and I took a piece, immediately dropping a glob of sauce all down the front of my shirt and onto Carter's journal.

"Shit."

"Red isn't really your color," Ava said, admiring her nails. I glared at her and reached for a napkin, wiping the front of the leather-bound book with a cloth.

"It's been a while," Jay said, noticing my eyes skimming over the book. "It's been a while since you've read from there."

"He's right you know," Ava said with a nod. "You carry it around like a crazy person but haven't actually opened it. What's up with that?"

“I just...” I hesitated, unsure of what to say. I hadn’t been able to open the journal recently, and I had no idea why. While things in life were starting to come together and look up, there was still another side of it that was tearing me apart inside. Every day, Carter was starting to fade away a little bit more, and it was something I was starting to notice. I no longer thought about him on a constant basis, and I was terrified. I was terrified that once I stopped thinking of him, once I stopped reading his journal, he would be gone. Forever.

As Jay and Ava watched, I opened the journal, flipping through the pages, not really reading, just seeing. Then, my hand stilled in mid-turn, fingers freezing on the thin paper.

“What is it?” Jay asked. “What’s wrong?” With one hand still on the faded journal, I looked over at him.

“It’s the last entry,” I said. “It’s the last entry Carter wrote. And it’s dated the night he died. I’ve read everything else.” Silence fell around me. Ava looked over, her eyes meeting mine. After a moment, Jay reached for the journal and took it from me, setting it down on the coffee table. It was then I noticed that my hands were shaking.

“I can’t do it,” I said. “I can’t read that entry.”

“You have to,” Ava said. “It may have an answer for you.”

“I can’t.” I paused, taking a deep breath. “That’s all there is left of him, Ava. If I read it, that’s the end. That’s it. It’s over.” I didn’t realize my tone had taken on that of a high-pitched freak-out until Jay reached for my hands and held them steady.

“Calm down,” he said. “We don’t have to do it tonight.”

“I can’t.” Tears welled in my eyes as I stared at Jay. My heart was racing, chest tight like I was on the verge of a heart attack. “I can’t do it. I can’t read the last thing of Carter I have.” Jay pulled me into his arms,

hugging me tightly. I could feel his heart beating against my cheek, but it didn't soothe me.

"I think this is just what you need," Jay murmured in my ear. "And we'll be here to hold you up."



October, my favorite month. It had been seven months today. Seven months since Carter's death. Seven months of pain and turmoil, strength, and friends and family. The cemetery was empty but beautiful. Peaceful. The leaves were crisp and colorful paving our way to the headstones. Ty waited back at the car, leaned back against the door, his arms folded as he watched us walk. He smiled, encouraging. I loved his smile.

"It only seems right to do it here." I lowered myself to the ground, ignoring the feel of the wet grass and crisp leaves against my Levi's. Ava sat down next to me, and Jay did the same on the other side. In front of us was the marble headstone, Carter's name engraved in the rock along with a sketch of an angel, looking up toward the heavens. I opened the journal, flipping it to the very last page, and then reached out and rested my hand on the cold stone. My hands trembled, and a lump rose in my throat.

"Let's read it one by one, in silence," suggested Jay. "I'll go first." I nodded and handed the book over to him, my eyes trained on the grave in front of us. I was trying not to cry, but I wasn't sure I would be successful. Beside me, Jay was reading to himself, his expression perfectly masked with no display of emotion. I pushed back the tears fighting to escape and took a deep breath. The silence was soothing, peaceful. Somewhere overhead, an owl hooted. I leaned into Ava, and she put one arm around me. A moment later, Jay handed me the journal. It felt oddly heavy in my hands,

a reminder of everything that was no more. I closed my eyes to compose myself, took a calming breath, and looked down the read the last page, a page that was dated the night of his death.

March 31, 2018

I'm not doing this to hurt anybody. I'm not doing this to be bitter or angry or deceitful. I'm doing this because I want to. No, I need to. I'm doing this because if I didn't, I don't feel like I would ever truly belong in this world. Who knows, maybe I'll see Logan again. Maybe somewhere up there in Heaven, where the ocean meets the stars, we can fish and laugh and be brothers again.

While I was on this earth, I experienced passion, friendship, and true love. Love for Jay, and love for myself. I pray from the sky above that Jay can make peace with who he is. I pray he can embrace the man he is meant to be instead of hiding from it. I believe in him. I hope he knows that.

Khloe, if you're reading this, I love you. I've loved you since the day I met you. I know you're hurting. I don't doubt it. But please know that this is what I wanted.

Now, you have a decision to make. I'd like you to release this journal to the school. Make copies, print pages, do whatever you have to do put my words out there so other kids know they're not alone. The gay ones, the confused, the sad, the dark-skinned, and the bullied... they're not alone. No one is ever as alone as they feel.

And please, for the love of God, take care of yourself. Make me proud, Ladybug. I will never stop being your BFF & Ever,

even in Heaven.

Jusqu' a la prochaine fois.

Take care of yourself, ami.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dear Friends,

If I Fall is a book so different from the rest, and I hope you have or will enjoy it. I started as a teenager writing dark young adult but then as I grew and burrowed my way into the business, I was told that romance is the way to go. I love romance, and it's why I've written it for so long. But romance was nothing close to what I really enjoyed writing, and that is dark, angsty, real-life stories for those people out there who face these daily struggles. I was an angst-ridden teenager, and it's during those times I wrote this book and then shelved it and never looked back, until now.

Special thanks to Blue Tulip Publishing for taking me on, and for making this book beautiful while working diligently to help me perfect it. I am so excited to see what the future holds.

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And finally, to my readers, reviewers, fans, and supporters. If it wasn't for you, these books I write wouldn't be where they are. I can't even begin to express my gratitude. Welcome to my little world.

xo, A.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amber Thielman is an avid reader and writer of dark, edgy Young Adult and New Adult books that push the boundaries and challenge your comfort zone.

Despite her love for taboo, realistic subjects, Amber reads too much Stephen King and grew up devouring every Fear Street novel R. L. Stine ever wrote. When she's not writing, Amber enjoys traveling, practicing the art of staying on her horse, binge-watching Netflix, and spending time with her husband and their adorable tiny human Aidyn in Southeast Idaho. She also has an undying love for pumpkin-flavored anything, Autumn weather, and all things scary.

You can find Amber wasting her time on social media when she should be writing the pretty words. Join her, won't you?



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