



us

it's not about you,
it's about us.

portia moore

US

PORTIA MOORE

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Alana

I'VE SHARED everything with her. My whole life, *our* whole life, and when I give it to her she still only wants what's mine. She wants him. The bitch wants him!

How could she?!

After everything I've done.

All I've done to protect her to keep her safe, to allow her to live when I couldn't. She doesn't care about the sacrifices I've made or pretty much anything I've done. It's never enough. Giving her Blue wasn't enough. Letting her have her boring ass boyfriend Kam wasn't enough. She wants what I have. The only thing that I have... that I've *ever* had for myself.

She's a selfish bitch!

You almost killed us!

I'm not the one who ran out into the fucking street!

I hate her. I'll never forgive her. I know what she wants now, but I'll never let her have him.

Ever.

"I'm sorry, dear, we have your name listed as Megan in the chart. You hit your head quite hard. You may not remember things correctly for a little while. Can you tell me what year it is and what state you are in?"

Shit!

I've got to get a grip. I have to think. I need to get out of here while I have the time and the control, since she's gone for now.

"The year is 2019 and I'm in Illinois...my name is Megan. My brain's a little foggy." I try to correct myself as she looks at me curiously.

"Do you remember anything that happened?" the nurse asks, and I muster the most innocent look. I think I can.

I start to speak and realize how fucking dry my mouth is.

"No idea. I just remember seeing a car coming towards me," I mutter quietly.

"Who brought me in?" I ask, wondering if it was Ian. Did he chase her? Did he want to make a grand declaration of his love to her? The thought brings tears to my eyes, and makes me want to hit something.

"You came in by ambulance and was transferred here."

I feel my eyebrow shoot up. Transferred? I look around the room more closely. It's not the run-of-the-mill kind of hospital room I was in when I was younger. It's swanky and large with big picture windows. There's actual furniture, the nice kind, and a big flat-screen TV.

"Look, I feel fine. If I can just get my things and be on my way. I'll sign whatever it is you want," I say, plastering a smile on my face. But the truth is my body is sore and as soon as I make a sudden movement a slice of pain shoots through me. Shit!

"Megan, you're in the psychiatric ward of Rush University. You can't leave until someone comes that we can release you to."

"Psychiatric ward!" I shriek, glaring at her.

"You seem very upset. If you want, I'll see if I can give you something to make you feel calmer."

That's the last fucking thing I want! I shrink backwards, my mind racing.

"But I'm the who got hit by a fucking car. If anything, the driver should be here!"

"The report says that you ran in front of the car on purpose." She looks at me sympathetically.

"That's ridiculous." I roll my eyes. "I wouldn't try to kill myself. I love my life, and I happen to very much like being alive."

"Megan, you really need to calm down..."

"Stop calling me Megan!" I snap, feeling my head start to pound. I feel trapped, and I hate it. "If I wanted to kill myself—which I didn't—that's my own damn right anyway. So let me out of here!"

"I can't do that," the nurse says calmly.

"So Megan, either you can calm yourself down, or I can give you something to achieve that, like I said a minute ago." Her tone is vaguely threatening. I see her eyes flick down to the straps at the edge of the bed.

You've really fucked up this time.

So maybe I overreacted? Megan is a fragile fucking flower of course, but I didn't know she'd almost get us killed. If I'm being honest with myself, that—and not Megan's selfish and stupid choices, might I add—is what made us get hit by the car. But every time I think back to her with Ian, I feel enraged all over again.

Megan has feelings for Ian, regardless of her relationship with Kam, and despite how much she "loves" him. And the entire fucking reason I gave up my life with Ian, that I locked myself away, was to keep her away from him. He's the love of my life, my happy ever after!

"Can I call my boyfriend...Kam, please?" The nurse raises an eyebrow but says nothing, adjusting the IV.

"Please...I need to talk to someone," I try again, keeping my tone calm. But she ignores me. I grit my teeth, glaring at her again. "I want to talk to someone!" I snap, my voice rising to a high pitch. "You have to let me talk to someone!"

She steps back, surveying me carefully. "Your brother is here," she says finally. "If you will calm down, I'll let him in to see you, then the doctor will be in shortly."

"I don't have a brother," I snap angrily. "I want to see Kam!"

"Your brother is the only person that's allowed in," the nurse explains calmly, reminding me I'm in a nuthouse and if I want to get out I'll have to be...Megan. Calm, docile, walked-all-over Megan.

I should have known that Dexter was somehow involved in this.

This room screams VIP. I should be grateful, but I'm only irritated. I grit my teeth. "Fine. I'll see him," I mutter under my breath. The nurse smiles, looking pleased.

"I'll go get him then," the nurse says, a little of the kindness returning to her tone.

I expect to see Dexter walking through the door, but instead another man strides into the room, looking at me with concern—veiled by irritation. I have vague recollections of this guy. I had meant it when I told Blue that I planned to not be cognizant once I let Megan

take control again. There were a few times when I just couldn't stay dormant or block it all out, but those are parts of Megan's experiences that I remember. Except that one time I couldn't help...but other than that it was all just a blur—like a thick fog that I saw and heard things through.

I think I remember Megan calling him Cain or Cooper.

I look at him more carefully. He looks more like me than Dexter does. From his thick dark hair to his light eyes, he's tall too, maybe 6'2".

He's hot—like me, but a guy—and from his swagger he knows it.

"So you ran into the middle of traffic?" he asks shortly.

I arch a brow at him.

So he's a smart-ass?

Great.

"Have they told you when I can leave?" I ask, feigning an innocent voice and ignoring his dig.

"You're in the psych ward," he says flatly. "They're going to keep you until they determine that you're not a risk to yourself. You're stuck here for at least three days," he says matter-of-factly.

"You know I'm not a risk to myself," I add with a laugh, unsure if he knows it or not. I try to think of his relationship with Megan. I don't know if he likes her, but he has to care or else he wouldn't be here. I wonder if he's rich too, or if Dexter called this one in.

"Seeing as you ran into the middle of traffic, you're either crazy or stupid. So which one is it?" he asks, leaning against the large bright window, his arms folded across his broad chest. I glare at him, trying to figure out this guy's deal. He's sort of unreadable, which really irritates me. I'm used to reading guys and knowing what they want, what they're thinking, etc., but he's hard to crack. I know he doesn't want to fuck me, since we're related, but he doesn't seem that happy to be here. And what type of jerk-off implies their sister, who was just in an accident, is stupid or insane? I swallow down the urge to tell him to go fuck himself since he seems to be my only way out right now.

"Who said I ran in front of the car, the driver?" I ask him sarcastically.

"Hillary saw you," he says flatly.

Who the hell is Hillary?

"Hillary was mistaken," I say, my voice tight even though I'm trying to keep it even. Then his apparent bored expression, indicating this is the last place he wants to be, morphs into one of intrigue.

"You seem different," he points out, positioning his body towards me, his brows drawing together and the corner of his mouth beginning to turn up. My face goes blank.

"Well, I did just get hit by car," I reply, stating the obvious.

"Tell me if I'm wrong here...but...you don't know who I am, do you?"

He sort of squints at me and smiles wide enough to display his perfect teeth.

Shit! Is it that obvious? I've got to think. The last thing I want is for them to think I have memory issues and keep me here longer.

"The nurse said I may have a foggy memory. It's totally normal," I say, trying to keep my tone nice and neutral how Megan would.

"You're not Megan are you?" he asks, amused.

How the hell would he know that? Who does he think I am... does he know? I try to think hard, slogging my way through a haze of Megan's thoughts.

Did Megan tell him about us?

She did!

I think....yeah because...

"Hmm, interesting. I always knew what Chris did but you don't seem like you know what she does." He's grabbed a chair and slogged it over so he's near my bed.

Cal!

That's his name, and he knows.

He knows about me and Megan and he knows because...he's like me. My heart starts to pound and his smile softens. I'm glaring back at him now. I've never met anyone *like me*. Who knows what it's like, who possibly understands. I let out a small breath and angle towards him as best I can.

"You're like me..." I say quietly, our eyes meeting. He gives the slightest nod.

It's surreal.

I always knew that something was wrong with us even before I was old enough to find out there was an official name, that there were others that went through what me and Megan did. But I never

met anyone who understood, and I never thought that an actual sibling of mine would understand. I'm simultaneously relieved and sad as fuck for him.

"So are you the savior or the screwup?" I ask him bluntly.

He smirks and walks over to my bed. "You know, I think we're going to get along just fine."

"You haven't gotten to know me yet," I say, giving him a much needed warning.

He just laughs and without missing a beat, holds out a hand, grinning. "Nice to meet you, Alana."

Kam

ALANA. Married? How the hell is that possible? I try to get my vision settled because for a moment everything around me is spinning. I can hear my dad's voice calling my name, asking if I'm still there, and I hesitantly lift the phone to my ear again.

"Can you say that again?" I ask quietly, my voice dull. Praying that what he just said will change. Knowing what he said can't be right, feeling everything that I planned, everything I wanted, starting to crumble around me.

I think of the ring in my bag, sitting in Megan's apartment. How I was going to wait until Christmas to ask her to marry me. Feeling so secure in our future, not at all concerned about the things we haven't figured out yet. Wanting her to know none of it mattered—just us.

But if what my dad says is true, she married someone else. She made those vows—eternal love and devotion, a lifetime spent together—to someone else. To another man, before me.

It can't be true. You don't forget that!

"I found records of Alana's marriage," my father repeats patiently. "Her husband is Ian Hudson.

And she presumably is still married, since there's no record of a divorce decree."

"That's impossible," I whisper, trying to pull myself together. My thoughts are whirling, making it hard to think straight, but I need to figure this out. It doesn't add up.

"It's impossible," I repeat louder. "Megan was a virgin. She'd never even had a boyfriend before me." It's awkward, talking about this with my father. But I need him to understand that something isn't right. His information isn't right.

And then Helen's words in that first therapy session come back to me. Everything she said about the blackouts, about the disconnect between Megan and Alana, about how Alana knows everything about Megan, but not the other way around. My father is silent on the other end of the phone, letting me work all of this out.

It hits me.

Megan didn't know about Alana, or what she did during the blackouts. She might not know about Ian.

For all she knows, I'm her first boyfriend, her first...her first everything. But just because she doesn't remember, just because she thought that, doesn't make it unreal. Everything Alana did when Megan wasn't aware—it was still her.

It makes my head ache, trying to come to terms with it. Two different people in one body but the same person, in the same body. It's been hard to try to think of them as separate. To try to picture it like some other being taking over Megan when she's not herself.

The dancing at the club, the petty crimes, I can push all of that aside. I can live with that. But another man...marriage...

I'm going to throw up.

I remember Megan's innocent face the first time I kissed her, the reactions of her body the first time I touched her, went down on her, slid inside of her...oh God.

I sink down on a nearby bench, my heart pounding in my throat. The emotions crash over me—anger, hurt, betrayal. Megan might not have known, but another man still touched her, kissed her...had her. I clench my free hand into a fist. I remember how good it felt to think that I was the first man to ever be inside of her, the first man to ever make her come. I want to kill him, this Ian Hudson, for ever touching her. For making Megan lie to me, because I can't blame her. If I need someone to blame, it'll be him.

And Alana.

"I want Ian's information," I say tightly. "I need to talk to him about...about this."

"Just come back home, Son," my father says calmly. "We need to sit down and discuss all of this. Figure out what the right path is

from here. Obviously you can't marry her if she's already married to someone.

"We'll come up with a plan of action. But Chicago isn't the place for you right now."

"No." My voice is flat, emotionless. "I'm not coming home. Megan is here. My life is here. Just give me Ian's information so I can talk to the man."

"No, Kameron." I hear the finality in my father's voice. "You're not in any frame of mind to deal with this right now. Come home, and we'll discuss what to do."

I hang up. I know my father well enough to know when he's not going to budge, and I'm not going to waste time arguing with him.

I'm also not going to give up. I think of how Megan will feel when she finds out. What kind of pain that'll cause her. Except, she doesn't have to know. Why should she? If I can find this guy and pay him to stay away...he most likely doesn't give a shit about her or he'd have found her by now. Maybe it was a fling in Vegas that happened when Alana was shitfaced. I can't see how an alter could maintain a full-fledged relationship, a marriage with someone who was a steady presence in their life.

I can fix this. I just need to find this Ian guy.

Who can help me?

I rack my brain of all the people I know who could find someone, but most of them are connected to my dad and knowing him, he's spreading the word about this guy being off limits. Then I remember Blue.

He does this kind of stuff. I don't want him to know what I'm doing, though. He and Megan have some kind of relationship that I'm sure as hell not happy with, but I know not to push it. I trust Megan and know she wouldn't cheat on me, especially with Blue.

I dial Blue's number, hoping that he picks up, remembering Katie telling me about his side work—hacking, tracking down people's information, some private investigating type shit. I recall being pretty dismissive of it at the time, even disapproving. But now I need his help.

To my relief, he picks up the phone. "Kam?" His voice is curious—we haven't talked since I showed up on his doorstep and we fought over Megan.

"Blue...I need your help," I say quietly. "Can we meet up?"

He's quiet for a moment. I hope he isn't going to say no.

"Um...yeah. I guess." I can hear the hesitancy, and I understand—we didn't exactly leave things on the best of terms. I'm just glad he's willing to talk.

"Are you in Chicago?" he asks.

"Yeah."

"You want me to come to Megan's?"

"No!" I cough out. "I'll text you a place we can meet up at."

He hesitates. "Okay. Is everything cool, Kam?"

"It will be once we talk."

Ian

I SAW IT HAPPEN.

I ran out after Megan, but she didn't hear me calling her name. She ran out into that road like she was blind, like she didn't hear or see anything at all, and I was too far away to stop it from happening. When I saw her lying in the street it was the most terrifying thing I ever experienced.

For Alana...and for Megan, too. She was out cold, bleeding. I had no idea if I would ever hear her voice again. If I would ever see her open her eyes.

And now I'm sitting in a hospital waiting room, impatient for someone to give me some kind of information. The ambulance told me they were taking her to Rush Hospital and to meet her at the Emergency Room, but since then she's apparently been moved. No one will tell me where she is. I'm clueless as to what's been going on. It's been seven hours. It's infuriating, because I'm her husband—but I'm not. The hospital has *Megan*, and they don't give a shit that I'm married to Alana.

It doesn't make me any less fucking pissed about it.

I try again, walking up to the receptionist—a new one since the shift change—and giving her my most charming smile. "I'm trying to get information on a patient," I tell her, giving her Megan's full name. Hoping again that it will get me somewhere. And if not, well, my good looks and personality have opened doors in the past.

"And you are?"

Her fucking husband. I smile at her. "A friend, a worried one. I haven't seen her since I put her in the ambulance."

Does that count for anything? I was fucking there when it happened!

"I'm sorry," she says regretfully. "I can't give you any information, sir. You're not listed as a relative, and only immediate family is allowed to have any information about the patient released to them."

I've been calm. I've been calm for *hours*. And I can feel myself losing it. "I saw her get hit by a car," I say firmly, staring at the receptionist. All effort at charming her is gone. "I saw my bloody, hurt, unconscious friend get taken to the ER, not knowing if she was going to make it, and all I can find out is that she's been moved. Moved where?" I grit my teeth and scowl down at her. "Is she alive? Is she dead? I don't fucking know, because this whole goddamn place is locked down like Fort fucking Knox! Someone needs to give me some fucking answers, so I know if I'm ever going to see her again!"

"I...I'll call someone else, sir, I just...I can't tell you anything." The receptionist is stammering, reaching for the phone, and I half expect security to come and escort me out. I know I was shouting, by the end of that. But I can't help it. It's like the night Alana left me all over again, except then I was at least mostly sure she was alive. Now for all I know, she could be dead. My last memory of being close to her might be kissing a woman goodbye that had her face but not her voice, a body I know so intimately with another person inside of it. It's the craziest shit I've ever had to deal with, but I still wanted her. I still do.

It wouldn't be Alana if it wasn't the craziest shit. And I want to kiss *Alana* again. I want my wife. And I don't want her asking me to stop touching her to be the last thing I ever hear coming out of her mouth.

A tall, well-dressed man steps out of the door behind the reception desk, and smiles politely at me. "I'm sorry for the confusion," he says. "What was your name?"

"Ian Hudson," I say. "My friend, Megan, was picked up by an ambulance and brought to the Emergency Room here. She's since been moved, and no one will tell me anything about where she is or how she's doing. She was in critical condition, and I'm losing it." I speak as professionally as I can to him, holding my temper in on a tight leash. But my patience is thinning.

"She's stable," the man assures me. "She's out of danger and doing much better. She's been moved to a different part of the hospital per a VIP order."

Fuck! I know exactly what's going on now—Cal has clearly gotten involved. Lauren was the first person I called after Megan was loaded into the ambulance, figuring that she would pass on the news—and I didn't want to talk to Cal. I had no idea he'd even made it to the hospital yet—I would have thought that Lauren would have texted me to let me know that he was on his way. "Thanks," I tell the man shortly, and walk back to the row of seats where Hillary is waiting for me.

She insisted on riding over with me, telling me that I didn't need to be alone. The last thing I really want right now is company, but it was nice of her. I think of how Megan looked at me when she saw Hillary alone with me. How it wasn't Alana that was jealous, but Megan. And I remember how it wasn't Alana that I kissed earlier in my apartment, who I felt giving in, who let me press against her body, whose hands explored mine. It was Megan. It was also Megan who ran out of the apartment directly into traffic because she was so traumatized.

I call Lauren back, stepping outside for a moment. She answers immediately.

"Ian? How are you?"

"No one is letting me see her," I say shortly, still on edge from my most recent interaction. "I don't even know what part of the hospital she's in anymore. They admitted her as Megan, and so I can't even say I'm her husband. No one is giving me a damn thing."

"But I sent Cal to the hospital to meet with you." The confusion in Lauren's voice is evident. "I'll call Cal," she says finally. "I'll talk to him and have him fix everything." I can tell that she's trying to sound confident, but there's some unease in her tone. "Just wait there. I'll call him right now."

All I can do is go back and sit down beside Hillary. She looks at me sympathetically, touching my shoulder in a way that's meant to be reassuring, but just makes me tense. I haven't been this on edge in a long time. "They said she's stable, at least," she says. "So that's good news."

"I still don't know where she is." I look away. "Cal's there. So now he's talked to her, seen her, but I still haven't."

"I didn't know you and Lauren were so close," she says quietly.

I shrug. "We're not but, I guess...not a lot of people get it," I admit with a groan, not really expressing enough for her to understand. I can barely think straight. She nods her head.

"I may not understand exactly, Ian, but...you can talk to me, if you want."

I just shake my head. There's only one woman I want to talk to, and she's somewhere in this hospital.

And I'm not leaving until I see her.

Cal

WHEN MEGAN SHOWED up at the gallery that day it spooked me and for a few seconds I had a glimpse of how Chris felt when Lauren showed up at his doorstep, but thank God she wasn't a girl I screwed from my playboy days with a kid at her side...she was family. It scared the shit out of me and made me angry at the same time.

I'm not a fan of being blindsided, and it was a complete blind-side. I had always planned to find out about my siblings. I remember bits and pieces of them from when I was young. I knew they were out there but the time of all this when it happened—and even now—isn't fucking ideal. I have a wife heavily pregnant with twins, and after all the shit she's gone through I didn't want her to be a part of it until I had it all figured out.

Needless to say, when Megan showed up I had nothing figured out and fuck if anything about our life is ever easy. Just a string of complications. It only makes sense that they'd be as fucked up as I am. I knew it'd be the case but my priority was to protect Lauren and keep her happy and content as long as possible so that my girls arrive in the world happy, healthy, and safe. It's been the one thing we came together to agree on, and it took not only Lauren but two new babies' wellbeing to get us all on the same page. *Our* daughters. Megan made things complicated because once I found out she was who she said she was, I couldn't turn my back on her. Her looks were a dead giveaway. Our features are almost mirrors of one another, just on the opposite sides of femininity and masculinity. I

wouldn't have been surprised if she turned out to be my damned twin.

I couldn't ignore her or set her on a shelf to be picked up until after my babies arrived. Even if I wanted to Lauren sure as hell wasn't having it. The moment she left, Lauren stayed on my ass about finding out if she was the real deal, not leaving her on her own, how important family is. I didn't plan on doing that, I just didn't want my wife to be involved until I could figure out Megan's deal. I expected her to suffer from maybe depression, bipolar disorder—hell, even schizophrenia—but never DID. Once I realized she had the same monster under her bed as me I couldn't let her fight with it alone. Especially since she pretty much had no damn clue what was going on with her. Megan didn't but I have a sneaking suspicion that Alana would have, or did. I believed that up until now because for a while I don't think she knew who I was. Which makes me wonder what part of the brain she's the lord over because I always knew what was happening within me...well, unless I didn't want to.

"How close are you and Megan?" she asks me directly. She's suspicious of me and I can't blame her. I already know how this goes.

"I wouldn't say we are. My life is complicated and obviously hers was too. I made sure she had what she needed and let her know that I was there if she needed me. We're not best friends or anything though," I tell her, and I see her relax a little.

"This is weird," she says gruffly, her eyes going to her lap.

"Yeah," I agree. She lets out a long breath, this time straightening her back out.

"Well it looks like things turned out pretty well for you," she says, condescension and annoyance wafting through her tone. I see her walls that were down briefly being built back up.

"I wasn't always like this," I tell her candidly. She eyes me disbelievingly.

"Yeah, and I wasn't always a bitch but life happens right?" She's pushing herself to get out of bed but winces in pain.

"So you want to tell me what happened?" I ask, getting more comfortable in my chair. She rolls her eyes at me.

"I'd rather you help me get out of here. You're rich, right? I'm assuming you can." She says, disregarding my question.

"You should start by answering my question," I insist. I'm starting to become irritated.

"I obviously didn't run into traffic on purpose...and Megan didn't either. We sort of were having a disagreement and didn't realize we were in the middle of the street," she informs me, exasperated.

"That's concerning, don't you think?" I ask, frowning at her.

"Can we not step into the cliché roles of big brother telling the little sister how stupid she is? I really, really need to get out of here. I hate hospitals and I have a lot to do," she says pointedly. I laugh at her which makes her scowl at me.

"Is it just you two?" I ask. She looks at me, confused.

"I sure as hell hope so," she growls.

Before I can reply my phone goes off in my pocket. I pull it out and glance at it, and see that Lauren's calling me. I want to keep talking to Alana since it seems like we may be getting somewhere, but I know better than to ignore Lauren's call. That's one lesson I've learned well.

"Just hang on," I tell Alana as I answer it.

"Not like I can go anywhere," I hear her mutter.

"Cal!" Lauren says as I answer, her voice shrill and upset, making me wonder why the hell she is letting herself get so worked up. The doctor told her to relax so she doesn't go into labor early. "What is going on? I just talked to Ian, and he said no one will tell him anything, and he hasn't seen Megan! I sent you there to talk to him! Why haven't you done that?"

Fucking Ian.

"Jesus, calm down, Lauren. I'm handling it, alright? Don't get the babies all worked up."

"Don't patronize me," she says, her voice dangerously irritated. "I know you think you can handle everything yourself, but Ian is on the verge of a rampage if he doesn't find out something soon. Think about the other people in this, alright?"

Think of Ian? Ian didn't fucking think to not call and get my pregnant wife's blood pressure up.

"Yeah," I tell her dryly.

"Fix this, Cal," she tells me, and hangs up.

Fuck Ian.

I pull out my phone and text him to not call Lauren again and that I'll meet with him soon. Asshole.

"Who was that?" Alana asks insolently.

"My wife," I tell her shortly, shoving my phone back into my pocket.

"She's pregnant?" she asks, and for the first time no hostility is in her tone.

"Twins," I reply. She nods with a smile.

"How...how do you guys make it work?" she asks quietly.

"Work, compromise...a *lot* of fucking compromise." She looks at me defiantly before rolling her eyes.

"Want to tell me about Ian?" I ask.

Her face goes still and cold. She tightens her arms around herself, shaking her head. She's just about to respond when the door opens, and both Dexter and Helen walk in. Alana's eyes go wide, and I grimace. What the hell are they doing here?

I haven't said a damn thing to Dexter, haven't called him, texted him, or anything else. Helen, either. But of course he would know what's happening; he fucking always does. It's the bane of my existence.

"Good morning, Alana," Dexter says pleasantly.

My head snaps around. "Dexter, my wise older brother. Couldn't pick up the phone to tell me I have a sister?" Him and I haven't been much on speaking terms. He's still a little upset that our dad is in prison and I sort of had something to do with it, but I at least thought something like this would have made him reach out.

"You've had so much on your plate little brother, but it seems as if you figured things out just fine on your own," he says coolly.

He gestures at Helen, and she steps forward. "Alana, this is Helen. She'll be in charge of your care from here on out." Alana stares at her a few moments before frowning.

"I know who she is. She's Megan's *therapist*," she says pointedly. Dexter glances between us all. Helen steps up towards Alana now.

"I've heard a lot about you Alana," Helen says with a soft warm smile that makes you feel like it's going to be alright, that I saw right through, but ensnared Lauren.

Alana scowls at Helen and I recognize that look. She's about to flip out any minute. She glares at Dexter, then me, and then back at Helen. "I want out of this fucking hospital! Why won't anyone listen to me? I didn't fucking try to kill myself, alright? I want to go home, and I want to talk to who I want to, without any of you fucking *managing me*. I can take care of myself!"

"Alana," Helen says calmly, taking a step forward. She's probably used to patients exploding on her. "Listen to me, okay? You have to stay here for observation for seventy-two hours, and then you'll be released if you show you're not a danger to yourself. We can possibly push for you to be released to one of us, but that's a long shot. The more you cooperate, the easier this will be, okay? We're here to help you, Alana."

The look Alana gives Dexter is blistering, enough to make me flinch, but Dexter doesn't seem bothered at all. I guess he's used to getting death stares.

"Dexter," Alana says sweetly.

"Yes, Alana?" he says, consolatory.

"If you're not going to get me out of here, you can go fuck yourself," Alana says with the same sweet smile on her face. Dexter rolls his eyes and seems only slightly bothered. I guess I was good training ground for him to deal with her.

I try to stop myself from laughing but I can't. Dexter and Helen glare at me.

"Alana, I understand that you're not used to having a support system, that you don't trust many people, but everyone in this room is here to help you. We have your best interest at heart," Helen explains calmly.

"Mine or Megan's?" Alana asks sharply. Dexter sighs and glances at me, like a cue for me to say something meaningful, but I don't have shit to say. I'm enjoying the show right about now.

"I think that Cal can speak to the fact that your wellbeing is one and the same even if he's choosing to not participate in our little reunion."

I let out a groan. I guess it's time to wrap this up.

"If anyone can get you out of here, it's these two. Play nice, they like that," I tell her, standing up.

Alana meets my eyes. I don't know if it's that an understanding is beginning to develop between us, or if it's that Megan trusts me and she's still in there somewhere, but Alana looks directly at me, ignoring both Dexter and Helen. "If you can push like hell for that to happen I'd be grateful. I'm sure a wing of this hospital is probably named after you right? But if not...I'd like to be released to Cal's custody." All of their glares land on me. I look at her to see if she's kidding but her face is deadpan, her eyes challenging mine. She wants

to come home with me? That sure as hell can't happen. I have enough shit going on!

Dexter waves a dismissive hand. "Cal has a lot on his plate with Lauren's pregnancy. My home is more equipped for this. We have plenty of space and Helen will be able to monitor you."

"Okay," I say, and the minute it comes out of my mouth I know it's a mistake. Dexter's right. I have way too much shit going on, but if it was me the last thing I'd want is to be a lab rat in Dexter's mansion with Helen nagging me every second of the day. She can't be that bad.

"Cal," Dexter says, his voice low and angry, "Lauren is due in the next few weeks. You're sure you're able to take this on?" he asks, meeting my eyes.

"Take this on? I'm not a fucking three-year-old. He's not going to have to wipe my ass. All of you are rich as hell right? I'm sure he has the room, and he'll hardly know I'm there. Trust me," she says easily.

I give him a bright smile. "I guess that means you make sure she gets out," I say with a shrug. Me and Alana exchange a smile.

We leave Helen and Alana alone, stepping outside of the room. Alana still looks pissed off, but I have faith that Helen can handle it.

The minute we're outside, I round on him. "You knew Alana—Megan—our *sister*, didn't you? Didn't think to let me in on it?"

"Well you know what happened the last time you met up with someone you thought was family," Dexter retorts, wearing a smug expression that makes me want to slap the shit out of him.

"Bullshit." I scowl at him and he sighs.

"There's others. Yours at least." My memories, of course, aren't the most simplistic, but I do remember kids when I younger—more than just one.

"Send me the file."

"I think it's better to handle one situation at a time, don't you?"

"I'm not asking for your permission," I tell him. I'm starting to feel aggravated. Sometimes I think he forgets who he's talking to.

"Look," Dexter says, spreading his hands in a gesture that's meant to be conciliatory, I think. "I know we haven't been on the best terms since our father's predicament."

I let out an amused chuckle that I can see visibly pisses him off, but I don't give a shit.

"By predicament, you mean the asshole who's lucky he's only in prison for slap-on-the-wrist white-collar crimes instead of being there for killing my mom?"

"We're still not sure if that happened," he mutters. Now I'm beyond pissed.

"Fuck you Dexter." I am ready to be done with the situation.

"Look, Alana is a walking disaster. She's going to need both of us. You can't handle this alone, and she's *our* sister—not just yours. I'm sure you both share commonalities that I can't begin to understand but she's my family too and I only want what's best for her." He looks sincere, and the asshole probably is, but his understanding of what's best for people is pretty warped sometimes.

I grimace, but I know she needs all the help she can get whether she wants to believe it or not. Especially if Alana is anything like me—which, from our brief meeting, I'm gathering the apples sure as hell didn't fall far from the tree with us. She needs Helen. She'll need emotional support. And with Lauren and dealing with all the shit I have going on, having Dexter to help carry the load isn't exactly the worst thing imaginable.

"Fine," I tell him simply. I look down at my phone and see that Lauren is calling again. Shit, it's probably about Ian, but I don't have to deal with him anymore. If Dexter wants to help, I've got the perfect assignment for him.

"Have you met Alana's husband?"

Alana

DR. LYCE IS sure as hell different than the doctors we used to see growing up. She's obviously rich, which is evident by the diamond the size of an M&M on her finger. Her outfit is sleek and clearly expensive; her hair long, dark, and shiny. Perfect teeth, perfect tone to her voice, her makeup applied like it was done by a professional artist. She's everything and more I'd have expected a woman to be who's married to Dexter. I wonder how fucking rich they are, and how I ended up on the broke, shitty side of the family tree. But none of that is important right now. What's important is that I get out of this fucking country club psych ward room and then...well, honestly, I don't know what happens after that.

I wasn't supposed to be here.

I thought I wouldn't have to deal with any of this shit anymore and honestly it was sort of freeing to let go, to let Megan deal with it all. To not have to save her ass, or hide things from her and keep things functioning.

It was bearable...until Ian.

They weren't ever supposed to happen. Megan was never supposed to meet Ian, she was never supposed to find Cal or Dexter. She was just supposed to be content with starting her own life.

Instead she wants mine.

I can't wait to get my hands on Blue. I'm going to kick his ass! Why would he bring Megan to Ian? Why would he give her the file? How am I going to fix all of this? But who I'm mad at the most out of everyone—other than fucking Megan—is Ian. I saw the way he

looked at her, the way he touched her, it wasn't like he was searching for me. He wasn't bothered at all by who was in front of him. The thought brings tears to my eyes. That's maybe why I went a little insane, why I overreacted. It could have been anyone else but her. Why her?

"Alana." Helen's voice interrupts my thoughts. She's sitting in the expensive as shit large leather chair across from me but it's facing towards me and not the TV as it was earlier. I don't know what to think of her. I know she's not stupid how the other doctors were but there's something about her I don't like and I'm not sure if it's because she met Megan first, or because she's Dexter's wife...and I don't even know what to think of him yet. But I know for sure I don't want to talk to her.

I don't want anything to do with any of these people. I don't need a family. I never have. I've done fine on my own. Where the hell was everyone when I was in foster care having to fight to keep the meager shit the state gave me? Where were they when I had to bite a hole into the arm of my foster mother's brother for trying to feel Megan up? They weren't anywhere around, and now I'm supposed to accept them with open arms because they have money?

The money is fine, I sure as hell don't have a problem with that. They can give me all the money they want if they feel guilty. But their pity, their so-called support, they can keep. I don't need it and I sure as hell don't want it, but I'd say anything to get out of this place, this posh insane asylum. The only one who doesn't seem to have pity in their eyes, who isn't looking at me like I'm a broken doll they can't wait to fix, is Cal. He's interesting and I don't know how to read him. He's said I can stay with him though if it comes to that; I was shocked as hell he said yes. I was expecting to put up more of a fight until someone agreed to just shell out the money for a hotel near them or something.

"How do you feel about staying with Cal?" she asks, and I shrug.

"I don't know him. I don't know any of you, but I don't have much of a choice do I?" I mutter.

"There's always a choice Alana," she says, and I know it's a freaking loaded statement, and I have to fight my eyeroll.

"I introduced myself to Megan but I'd like to introduce myself to you. I'm Helen

Lyce—"

"Dr. Helen Lyce, right?" I correct her, and she smiles almost gratefully.

"Yes. I received my undergrad from the University of Michigan."

"You didn't take Dexter's last name?" I ask, narrowing my eyes on hers. The question must surprise her because her smile falters just the tiniest bit.

"No. I worked very hard for my reputation to stand on its own."

"But I mean even with all your education and training or whatever it is that head doctors like you do, it still doesn't equal being a Crestfield does it?" I ask her with a condescending grin. If she's annoyed or irritated she doesn't show it.

"There is a lot that the Crestfield name means to a lot of people. Tell me, what does it mean to you?"

"I'm not really in the mood to talk, *sis*," I tell her, rolling my eyes. Before she can answer a youngish looking male doctor, who I'm guessing is my attending, comes in. He greets Helen and introduces himself as my attending to her, but he sure knows who *she* is. Either her name or reputation was told to him before even stepping into my room. Is that because of her hard work and credentials or the name she prefers not to use?

"How are you feeling?" he asks as he approaches me, a stethoscope swinging from his neck.

"Like someone who just got hit by a car," I tell him, with an unimpressed scowl. He pulls out a flashlight type thing, looks into both of my eyes, and seems to approve of what he sees. He and Helen start to talk in doctor jargon that I don't really give a shit about. I'm sore but all my body parts work so it could have been a lot worse.

"Anyway, can you guys up the pain meds?" I don't know if it was pure adrenaline coursing through when I first woke, but now the pain from the accident seems to be announcing itself, and it's pissed.

"That's what I wanted to come in and discuss with you." He pulls a chair from across the room and sits in front of me.

"When you were admitted to the hospital we had to run a series of tests in order to properly provide you treatment. And everything came back normal, however, you did test positive for our HCG screening pregnancy test. The levels are pretty low, but were you aware that you're pregnant?"

What the actual fuck did he just say?

"I'm sorry, what?!" He looks a bit uncomfortable and glances at Helen. My stomach is flipping over like it's in a fucking gymnastics tournament.

No. No. No. No. This can't be happening. This can't be fucking happening!

"Megan, are you alright?" I hear Helen say, and the machine I'm connected to is starting to beep faster, probably because my heart's about to explode in my fucking chest.

This bitch wasn't on birth control?

Shit. Shit. Shit!

"Dr. Hammond would you please excuse us?" I hear Dr. Lyce say. They exchange some other words but I don't hear them because my world is falling apart right here in this froufrou hospital room.

"Alana, I need you to calm down," Helen says, her voice stern and authoritative.

"How the fuck am I supposed to calm down? She's pregnant! I-I'm pregnant!" I'm trembling now, and I'm going to throw up. She's got Kam's baby inside of me! Ewww. Oh God!

Helen must read my face because she's grabbing some sort of bucket and handing it to me. I grab it just in time and vomit into it. *Get it together, get it together.*

A minute later she's handing me Kleenex and I haven't even realized there are tears pouring from my eyes. What do I do? What the fuck do I do?

"I can't. I just can't!" I tell her, and I feel sleep slip over me.

MEGAN

My body hurts. My thighs, my legs and arms. I open my eyes, almost afraid to see where I am. When I do I see that I'm in a hospital...at least I think I am, but it's not a normal one. This looks like a room decorated by a crew from some HGTV show.

"Megan?" I turn to see Dr. Lyce sitting beside me.

"What happened, what am I doing here?" I ask before she hands me a cup of water. I take it, relieved, because my throat feels scratchy and raw. Even after I swallow a few sips it stings going down.

"You're at Rush University in the psychiatric ward," she explains gently. My eyes widen and my heart starts to speed up.

"I-I don't understand."

"You were in an accident Megan. You were hit by a car, but from witnesses on the scene it appeared as if you ran out into the street intentionally."

I frown at her. "No. No, I wouldn't do that." I close my eyes and fight through my foggy thoughts.

"What is the last thing you remember?" she asks. I think hard, fighting through my memories.

"Uhm...I remember I was...with Ian. Ian and I had a fight..." I trail off, remembering it wasn't a fight. It was intense, and terrifying. He kissed me. I *let* him kiss me. I remember his hands all over me and how it felt.

I feel my face flush.

"And then...I was just trying to get away and I heard her. Alana, in my head. She was screaming, her voice piercing. And then the car...I didn't see it coming."

She nods.

"How long have I been out?" I ask, afraid to hear the answer.

"A little less than twenty-four hours. Once the doctors knew that you didn't have any internal trauma or bleeding in the brain, we had you moved here. Aside from the soreness you're most likely feeling, you're doing pretty well considering," she says with a smile. I try to match hers but it's fake. Not because of the pain I'm in but because of everything that happened before it. I remember the ring I found, how things happened with Ian, and Alana practically attacking me,

getting us both killed and decimating any hope I had of us ever being on the same page. The soreness I have doesn't compare to everything that I'll have to face once I'm out of here.

"How long do I have to stay here?" I ask hesitantly.

"Just forty-eight more hours as long as...if there's no signs showing that you are a threat to yourself or anyone else. At that point you can be released into the custody of a relative," she explains gently, and I nod. I let out a deep breath and a tear escapes my eye.

"The only family I have is Cal, and with Lauren being so close to delivering I can't ask him to..." I run my hands over my face.

"Well, that's not entirely accurate," she says, almost hesitantly. I look at her curiously.

"Your other brother, Dexter Crestfield, who is also my husband..." She says this in the span of a breath.

"What?" I ask. She smiles tightly and looks away from me briefly.

"I don't understand, why wouldn't you tell me that? Why would you hide that from me?" I ask, puzzled. I have another brother, and she's his wife?

"It wasn't that I hid it from you Megan. Cal told you that I was his sister-in-law, remember?" she reminds me and I squint and rub my temples. I do remember that, I guess I just didn't put it together that his brother was mine.

"You're more than welcome to come with us. You can be released to my care if you'd like. I actually think it will be the best thing, but it's up to you. You'll have the support from me no matter what you decide."

"I'd rather not be released to anyone," I say quietly. But it won't kill me to be with them for a few days I suppose.

"They're both here. Cal and Dexter. We all care about you greatly. You're not on your own anymore," she tells me with a warm smile.

"And there is something else."

I look at her cautiously.

"Were...were you aware that you're pregnant?"

I laugh at her, confused. What is she talking about?

"I'm not pregnant."

"The hospital ran some routine tests and a pregnancy test was one of them. It was positive."

Pregnant? I'm pregnant!

"Are you sure?" I ask her hesitantly. She nods and I feel a smile spreading across my face. A smile I can't hide. One that makes tears fall from my eyes.

"I-I didn't think it was possible. After being on that medication for so long. I thought I might be infertile..." I can't believe this! I'm pregnant!

"You're happy," she says, a smile spreading across her own face and enthusiasm peeking through her voice as she takes in my reaction.

"Yeah."

"This makes everything easier!"

I'm having a baby. Something I wanted, of course, but didn't expect so soon—and didn't think would ever happen after finding out the truth about my condition. Before this moment everything was so complicated, so scary. I think of Ian—how him holding me and kissing me was making me feel things I didn't think were there for him—and it was terrifying at the time. Before this moment I had to figure out if it was my feelings for him or Alana's coursing through. I didn't know how I would sort through it and I really would have had to decide if marrying Kam was the right decision, but this changes everything.

I'm having Kam's baby. This is the sign that I need.

I know things are going to be difficult still because Alana exists and I have my condition but, this baby...he or she is my answer to everything.

"I'm so glad that you're excited and happy about this Megan, but this isn't going to be simple or make things easier. If anything, this could make things a lot more difficult for the two of you."

It's not going to make things harder. This is going to be what saves us, what saves me.

"I don't understand what you mean. Kam is going to be ecstatic," I tell her, holding on to my enthusiasm, the joy coursing through me. This will solidify everything.

"I-I don't mean you and Kam, Megan. I mean you and Alana."

"Alana's not here. I am. I'm the one having the baby. I'm the one who conceived it," I tell her, not allowing pessimism to affect me one bit.

"Megan...Alana was just here," she says softly.

"What?"

"Yes. Just now, less than five minutes ago," she says carefully. My heart drops.

"You spoke to her?" I ask, my elation beginning to dwindle by the second.

"Yes, and her reaction was the opposite of yours."

I look down at my stomach and touch it softly. Knowing there's something inside of it made out of love, a part of me and the man I love most in the world, makes me feel a sudden urge of protectiveness pour over me.

"It doesn't matter what she wants. She can't...I won't let her hurt it," I say, feeling myself starting to panic.

"I didn't say she wanted to hurt it Megan."

"She doesn't want it because it's *mine*, it's something *I* did, that was created out of love. She didn't have anything to do with it. She hates me! Why does she hate me?" I'm crying now, feeling hopeless and desperate. What if she took over and tried to get rid of it?

"Everything is going to be okay." She sounds confident but how could she possibly know that? How does she know it's all going to be fine?

"I have to talk to Kam. I need to talk to him," I say, frantically looking around for my phone. I need Kam more than ever now. I have to tell him everything. Kam will support me. He will help me protect our baby.

"Megan, please calm down."

"I'm trying, I really am. But it's all so much, and the moment I get even the slightest bit of hope there's something else to take it away. It's *her*, actually. Always in the background waiting to sabotage me, to destroy what makes me happy."

"Remember, stress is a trigger. Please try to calm down," Dr. Lyce implores, and I nod and do the breathing exercises she taught me. I have to be in control, more so than ever. Alana can't come back now. She's unpredictable, selfish, and cruel. And I don't want her having anything to do with this baby.

"Dr. Lyce, I know you've always said that I can't get rid of her. That she's a part of me, but—especially now—I'm willing to do whatever I can to keep her away."

Dr. Lyce sighs. "We don't have to think about any of that now. We'll take everything in steps," she says, giving me an encouraging

smile. Her phone rings and she asks me to excuse her for a moment. I nod and start biting my nail.

I'm pregnant. I'm going to be a mom, responsible for another person. I have to be. I can't do this with Alana anymore. We can't have separate lives, we have to have one agenda. I think of how Dr. Lyce described her reaction to the news. We're different but there has to be some similarities. We can't be so different that she wouldn't want this little seed inside of us, even if it's not exactly from the person she wants it to be from. It's still part of her.

"Megan, Ian is here and would like to see you." Her words tear me out of my thoughts.

"Would you like that?" she asks, and my heart begins to hammer in my chest. I can't see Ian right now, not after what just happened. Not knowing what I know. I'm pregnant with Kam's child...whatever could have possibly been between us is gone. There isn't anything for him with me or Alana now. It'd be cruel to give him false hope. Kam's baby is growing inside of me now. I have to put our family first.

"No. I don't want to. If you can let him know that I'm alright but no, not now," I tell her, even though guilt has climbed on my shoulders and settled there. She nods and I hear her tell whoever she's talking to that I'm not up for company at the moment. When she hangs up our eyes meet but she doesn't say anything. I guess she's waiting for me to say something but I don't have anything to say right now. I can't think about any of it at this moment. Like she said, baby steps. As guilty as I feel about not seeing Ian right now I know I can't worry about him, how he feels, or anyone else.

My main goal is to take care of my baby.

Chapter 6

IAN

I'M AN ASSHOLE.

I know that, and I don't know how any girl in her right mind could ever be genuinely interested in me besides wanting to get fucked right, other than Alana. I glance over at Hillary, whose eyes are glued to her phone. She hasn't said anything in the ten minutes since I talked to Lauren. We've been waiting four hours but she's still here. Why? I don't have a clue because I sure as hell haven't been the best company. She's not a friend, but a coworker—one who I know likes me in a way that makes me uncomfortable because I can't exactly like her back, or give her the good fuck she might just be waiting on.

Instead I'm a wreck. An overemotional, easily annoyed wreck. It's my fault Megan's here. I was so busy thinking about myself, trying to convince her that I could be the one she wants, that I didn't think about what it'd do to her. I know Megan isn't as emotional as Alana but she suffers from a mental disorder and I pushed her, probably too far and too fast. But she pushed me too, almost right over the edge.

How could she ask me to stay away from Alana? How did she think she could tell me that Alana possibly came back and let me make love to her, tell me to drop it, to walk away from all of it so she can be happy with her stupid fucking *boyfriend*? That I should walk

away from *my* marriage so she can play house...except she won't be playing, she wants to marry someone else.

Marry!

I felt like it was my last chance, the clock ticking down to an explosion, and it'd be me wrecked afterward. I knew she'd feel it, that she'd give in. Hell, I didn't know, but I hoped. I put all my hope into that kiss, my pain, my need. I wanted her to feel it all, for someone else to help carry it. For her to see that I needed her to hold it with me, to let me hold what she had. That we could do it, that I could love *all* of her, not just one half. That *I* could be the one to keep her together. I've never met Kam but from what Blue describes him as—rich, pampered, spoiled—he's not the kind of guy that will stick this out with Megan. He sure as hell couldn't handle Alana, and I can even see her putting up with a dude like that for a second...but I guess she did, or she is, because it's Megan's who's in control. It's Megan that's making the decisions, and Alana's just on cruise control...or is it that she's okay with everything going on?

Thinking of Alana pisses me off. Why the hell didn't she tell me what was going on? Why didn't she give me the chance to be there for her, to support her? We could have worked. I'd never left or abandoned her and now, it's all gone to shit. Megan is in love with someone else and I'm here in a hospital waiting room just hanging around for my turn to get a glimpse of her, to know she's okay, to apologize. Not that I'll know what to apologize for. For kissing her? Finally telling her the truth and not pretending?

"Look." It's Hillary nudging me out of my thoughts, and I glance over to see Cal striding in beside a shorter guy in a suit like the guys in Wall Street movies wear. I immediately stand and Hillary and I go over to them.

"What the fuck Cal!" I yell at him, unable to control my rage. He knew I've been here this whole damned time.

"Ian," Hillary says in a low warning tone.

"Look, calm down," Cal says dismissively, like he always fucking is. I really want to punch him in the face right now but I remember he's the one that's taking me to see Megan.

"You want me to calm down? Tell me you'd be calm if it was *your* wife up there after just getting hit over by a damn car!" I roar at him, and see the slightest break in his expression.

"I'm Dexter Crestfield Jr., Alana's older brother," he says smoothly, as if me and his brother aren't about to come to blows in the middle of the hospital ward.

"Are you as much of an asshole as he is?" I ask, gesturing towards Cal. Hillary nudges me, indicating for me to rein it in, but this guy doesn't seem affected by what I'm saying. If anything, he seems amused. This family is so fucking weird.

"Not as much of one, no," he chuckles. Cal rolls his eyes.

"We came to tell you that Alana is doing well, perfectly fine considering the accident she was just in," Dexter explains. It's jarring but welcomed that he's calling her Alana instead of Megan, but maybe that's just something that they do.

"What the hell happened?" Cal asks, his eyes narrowing in on me, and I give him a *what the fuck?* look.

"I'm not about to be interrogated by you of all fucking people. I want to see Alana."

"Well you just missed her. Megan's back and she doesn't want to see you," Cal announces with the least unsympathetic shrug he can muster.

"Wow Cal, can you be any more of a dick right now?" Hillary interjects, but his words have knocked me down. Alana was here?

"What do you mean she was here? Just now? You fucking asshole!" I shout, pushing him in the chest. He pushes into mine and before a punch can be thrown Dexter and a security guard get between us.

"This is why you can't see her. What the fuck is wrong with you?" Cal laughs tauntingly as we're taken apart. Before I can even respond, security has pulled me outside of the hospital.

"I just want to see my wife!" I say, trying to control my anger with everything in me.

"Sir, just go take a walk. These guys aren't anyone you want to get a charge against," a tall frumpy one says.

"Fuck them!" I shout. Hillary's come out now.

"Ian let's go *now*," she demands, red-faced and glaring at me.

"I'm not going anywhere until I see her!"

"Look, you're not going to be able to see her today, especially after what's just happened. Your best bet is to go talk to Lauren okay?" she tells me sternly.

"Fuck!" I shout.

"Are you going to be okay sir?" the guard asks me. I flip him off.

"He'll be fine. Thank you," Hillary tells him.

"What is wrong with that asshole?!" I shout.

"I think the fact that you're both assholes is the problem," she mutters.

I look at her, confused. "All I want is to see her! That's all I've asked for—a husband wanting to see his wife. How the fuck is that unreasonable? What about that makes me an asshole?" I laugh bitterly as I head down the sidewalk, and hear her coming up behind me.

"Nothing, but you shouldn't have pushed him like that. I don't know why he's such a jerk to you other than he sees himself in you," she reasons.

I scowl at her. "That's the insult of the fucking century."

"I just think if you maybe give him some time—"

I cut her off with a cold glare.

"Look," she continues, "he's not my favorite person by far, trust me. I told Lauren to drop his ass years ago but now they're married so she's knocked up and stuck with him," she explains halfheartedly. I don't say anything as we make the trek to the hospital parking lot.

"But he loves Lauren and I'm guessing he loves his sister the same way. And if he does, he'll be the best brother you could pick."

"The guy's not only an asshole, but a liar. There's no way she would have said she didn't want to see me, even after everything happened!"

"No way possible?" she asks skeptically. I stop in my tracks, turning to face her.

"I saw her run into that street, Ian. She was really upset."

Guilt shifts all over me again.

"But Megan's not like that, she would have saw me at least, and Alana sure as hell would have wanted to see me!"

"Like I said, we just need to go and talk to Lauren..."

"I'm not going to that jerk-off's house. I'll end up in jail if I see him again," I laugh bitterly.

"Come to my house then. I'll go pick Lauren up and you guys can talk."

"I don't want to talk to anyone right now if it's not her. I'll figure things out on my own. Actually, I'm just gonna grab a cab. Hillary, thanks for being here but I need time to think," I tell her.

She runs a hand through her hair and looks away from me.

"I'll call you," I say, then make a beeline across the street.

I pull out my phone and call Blue but he doesn't pick up. I didn't call him after everything happened, but now I realize *he* should have been the first for me to call, not Cal. She would have seen Blue even if she wasn't sure about talking to me, and Blue would have made sure that she'd see me. He could have explained...there's nothing to explain, but I could have apologized.

I try not to think of the fact that Alana was back. I don't know for how long, but she came back and I didn't even get to speak to her.

I'm so fucking pissed at her. Why'd she wait until I wasn't there? Why'd she'd talk to that dickhead brother of hers instead of me? She should have been screaming her head off, demanding to see me, her fucking husband...but then what if she's upset? Would she be upset about seeing Hillary with me? She shouldn't be.

She left me! She told me to divorce her, to move on. Even if something was happening between me and Hillary she would have said something to me, right? Megan said that she might have come back that night to see me, so she can't be mad at me. She still has to love me. I let out a deep breath and instead of hopping in an Uber I make my way to a bar I see sitting on the corner. I head into it and make a place for myself. I'm probably going to be here a while.

KAM

I meet Blue at a restaurant a few blocks from Megan's. He let me choose it, and

I'm sort of regretting my choice. It's brightly lit and crowded; there's way too much going on but on the face of things none of that really matters.

I need his help.

I haven't been able to think of anything else since the phone call from my dad. I

finish my second Sprite and the waitress smiles at me. It's flirty and warm and she's cute, but there's only one woman on my mind right now. I force an unenthusiastic smile and let out a sigh of relief upon seeing Blue headed towards me.

"Hey, what's up man?" he says, sliding into the booth beside me. He looks different, like

he's been up all night. The carefree funny guy I knew when he dated Katy transformed into this one, who seems stressed. He has bags around his eyes and his smile seems forced. I think to ask if he's okay but my own problems are too busy fighting their way up my throat.

I've been trying to think about how much to share with Blue because he and Megan have gotten pretty close, much to my disdain, but I'd rather have someone I know in her life that's helping her along than no one. At first I thought he might have been into Megan, but in all the time Megan and I have spent together she's only talked about how good of a friend he is to her. She doesn't avoid him coming up in conversation, or is tense about what they are. I trust Megan and sort of trust Blue. But Megan is beautiful, sweet, and kind. It's hard to not find that attractive even when you shouldn't.

"I need some information," I tell him. He looks at me curiously.

"You've got the right guy for that. What do you need?" he asks, and for a split

second I rethink telling him what I'm about to. What if he tells Megan what I know, or what if he won't help me? I feel like this might bite me in the ass.

"First, I want to hire you. Do you have a confidentiality clause or something?" I

ask him seriously. The tension in his face eases and he laughs, turning back to the Blue I used to hang out with.

"I'm not a lawyer or a priest, but I'm known for my discretion. You just got to let me know what I'm being discreet about," he says easily. I bite my lip and take in a deep breath.

"I know you and Megan have gotten close these past few months," I say, trying not to glower.

"Yeah..." He trails off, eyeing me suspiciously.

"She says you're just friends, right?" I have to ask it, face-to-face, man-to-man. I have faith in Megan but she's so caring and trusting. She may not see what's right in front of her.

"Yeah Kam. Strictly friends, very platonic. I swear I've never touched her, or will. She's head over heels for you," he says, exasperated.

"Good to know," I say, my shoulders relaxing. I let out a cleansing breath.

"Is that what you called me here for?" he asks skeptically.

"No. I just thought since you were here, I'd ask," I tell him honestly, and he nods as if he understands.

"How's Katy?" he asks. I tell him she's doing good but misses him. He doesn't respond to that part, not that I blame him.

"Just to reiterate, what we discuss stays between us right?" I ask. He looks at me almost hesitantly.

"Between us," he reassures me with a nod.

"Okay." I let out another breath.

"You know about Megan's condition," I start. He nods, taking the glass of water in front of him and sipping it through the straw.

"My dad's been looking into Alana," I tell him, and he sets the drink down and gives me his full attention.

"Long story short, he found out she was married." His eyes go wide.

"Yeah, and I know the guy's name. Ian Hudson. I need you to find out what you can about him," I say, laying it all out on the table. I see Blue swallow a lump in his throat and he runs a hand through his hair.

"You haven't talked to Megan about this?" he asks, almost like he's holding his breath.

"No. I don't know if Megan even knows. I don't want to add any more stress to her situation. I just want to know who this guy is, find out what I can about Alana, and make sure he's moved on so we don't have any issues in the future." Blue's expression is blank and he doesn't say anything. I can hear how I'm coming off to him, like some weird dude stalking his ex's past, but he has to know it isn't like that.

"I'm proposing to Megan. I already have the ring. I'm not just some jealous boyfriend prying into her life. I'm hoping to get to be her fiancé, her husband. I just want to make sure all roads are clear for us to build a life together."

"This is so fucked up," Blue growls, covering his face with his hands. My face flushes red.

Is this fucked up? Should I be snooping around what is clearly not her best self? Maybe there's something wrong with me.

"I love her, Blue. It might seem messed up..." He shakes his head and glares at me.

"Not you, man. Me, fucking Megan, Alana. We are..." My blood runs cold and my teeth start to clench, wondering what the hell he's about to tell me. Has he been lying? Is he fucking around with Megan...or even Alana?

"You and Megan?" I say, my voice on the edge of furious. Blue must see how close I am to exploding, but my voice is calm I make sure it stays that way.

"No. Not how you think," he tries to explain quickly, and I feel my fists curling up.

"There isn't a me and Megan, but I know who Ian is and Megan does too," he admits with a sigh. He signals over a waiter.

"Can we get two shots of tequila please?"

"Megan knows? What do you mean Megan knows!"

"I told her to tell you, but fuck...I couldn't make her, and hell I've been lying more than she has, to everybody." His voice is low and sullen. I feel like I'm in the twilight zone and am very confused about what the hell is going on.

"Blue what do you mean?" I ask him tightly, and my phone rings. It's from a number I don't recognize, a Chicago one, but I hit *ignore*.

"What aren't you and Megan telling me?"

"Megan knows about Ian and Alana, and so do I. Ian's my cousin. I'm sorry. It was before you..." he starts to explain and my phone rings again from the same number. I'm so angry and confused that I can't even think straight. Megan's been lying to me? This whole time? Why would she lie to me? I've accepted everything she's told me. I glare at Blue, who's not even looking at me, and before I can start my interrogation the number calls me again. I finally pick up. When I hear it's Megan I feel defenses go up that I've never had with her, and I'm on alert.

"Babe, where are you?" she asks, her voice sounding slightly weak, like she's sick.

"I'm with Blue," I say coldly. From her pause it clearly throws her off guard.

"That's good, great actually. I don't want you to be upset but I was in accident. I'm at Rush University—" she says, and all the anger and resentment that started to course through my veins fades.

"You were in an accident?!" I interrupt, standing from the booth. Blue looks on worriedly.

"I was hit by a car, but I'm okay." She sounds way too cheerful for someone who has been in an accident and could have been killed, but I'm already heading out the door. Blue's taken my cue and is already behind me.

"I'm on my way," I tell her before hanging up.

"What's going on?" he asks, and I quickly tell him what Megan told me. He looks just as upset as I am.

"I'll drive," he says as we head to his black Challenger.

We're both quiet on the ride over to the hospital, ignoring the humungous elephant in the room. I want to ask him what the hell he meant about Megan knowing about Ian and him lying to everyone, but I try to push all of that from my head because Megan needs me. Knowing she was in an accident while I was snooping through her past and trying to get one of her friends to dig up dirt on her, while she was hurt and in the hospital, makes me feel sick.

None of it matters anyway because I love her. Regardless of her past, regardless of this Ian guy. The fact is Megan loves me and I'm who she calls when she's in need. We'll work out everything else later. Her and I, we'll push through all of this crap together.

Blue parks the car while I go to check in. I let the clerk know that she'll have a friend coming up in a little while as well. I head straight

up, my nerves already in my stomach, and they multiply when I see we're in the psychiatric ward of the hospital. I don't know why she's in this section if she was hit by a car, but it's a reminder that my perfect girl isn't exactly perfect and that she suffers from something real.

I check in at another desk, showing my ID and listening to the rules which play through my mind like background music. I'm told I can't take my cell phone in and am given a quick check for unsafe items. Once it's over I'm led down to her room by a nurse who makes small talk since Megan's room is all the way at the end of the unit. I wait for the nurse to scan a key to get in. My heart stammers.

It's another reminder that not only is she in the hospital because she was hurt, but she's here to be kept safe...from herself.

"Your guest is here Megan," the nurse announces. When I see Megan sitting up in bed—her face just a little swollen, her body connected to a machine and IVs—I have to stop myself from running to her and taking her in my arms.

"Let me know if you all need anything," the nurse says before leaving us alone. Megan beams at me.

"I'm such a klutz huh?" she jokes. I rush over to her but carefully embrace her to make sure I don't hurt her in any way.

"What the hell happened babe?" I ask, the weight of concern and worry surrounding my tone.

"I was walking across the street. I wasn't paying any attention and a car came out of nowhere," she explains, squeezing my hand in hers. Her tone is light, almost matter-of-fact. I don't understand how she's so calm about this.

"Did they arrest the driver?"

She shakes her head. "It was my fault Kam. I was running and didn't see. It was just really stupid. It wasn't the driver's fault," she explains, sounding embarrassed. I let out a deep sigh, take her in my arms again, and kiss her forehead.

"You could have been killed," I whisper, holding her close.

"I'm fine, I promise. All of this is just for caution. I don't have any internal injuries, not even a broken bone. Just some bruising," she tells me, her eyes light and full of joy, and it makes me curious.

"You're awfully happy for someone who was just slammed to concrete," I say, but my own mood is lifting seeing how good hers is. Though her being hit by a car doesn't explain why she's in a psych ward.

"Why do they have you *here* Megs?" I ask cautiously, briefly glancing around the room. As I do I notice this isn't a standard patient's room, it's more like a hotel suite.

"Some of the witnesses seem to have thought that I purposely ran in front of the car and with my psychiatric history, it was standard," she explains, her face reddening a bit. I frown, not wanting her to be embarrassed about it.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, okay?" I assure her, and she nods with a half-smile.

"I just feel like such an idiot. Who runs into the street without looking?" she squeaks, trying to laugh it off, but I can see her nervousness and a sliver of fear.

"Is that all that happened?" I ask her. Her eyes flit to mine and the fear I see almost multiplies.

"Sweetheart you can tell me anything, you know that," I tell her, squeezing her hands again...my heart is slamming against my chest. Did she run in front of the car on purpose? I kick the thought out of my head. Megan may battle mental issues but she's not suicidal. She looks up into my eyes, determined, and I can tell she's struggling to tell me something so I try to smile at her encouragingly.

"I'd just had an argument with someone from my past," she says quietly. I feel my brow arch up to my forehead, her past instantly reminding me of the conversation that was interrupted with Blue. I nod for her to go on but then a voice comes over the intercom.

"Megan you have another guest, a Joshua Stokes." Megan's face lights up in surprise, but then she frowns.

"Blue's here?" she asks quietly, and I'm not sure if she's happy he's here or annoyed.

"We were together," I admit.

She looks at me curiously. "Well that was certainly convenient, but why?" she asks, surprised.

"Would you like to see him?" the voice on the intercom interjects before I answer. Megan pauses, peering at me before giving the nurse the okay for him to come up. I wish she wouldn't have. I suddenly wish I wasn't with him and it was just me here because I have a feeling Megan was about to tell me something that she probably won't since Blue's about to be the third wheel.

"Why were you together?" she asks again. I think of what to say to her. I can't tell her exactly why I was with him, but will he tell

her?

"I wanted him to do a job for me," I admit, leaving out the specifics.

"A job?" she asks. I don't know if I'm being paranoid, but she sounds suspicious.

"Yeah, look into a person my dad told me about..." I trail off. It's the truth, just not all of it.

Not a lie though.

"Oh," she says softly. I can tell she wants to question me further about it but I give her a soft kiss instead.

"I'm so glad you're okay," I tell her with her face in both my hands. She smiles at me, the suspicion I saw earlier gone in an instant.

"I'm glad you're here."

"You're a popular lady," the older nurse jokes and winks when she comes in with Blue, looking between me and him.

"You look like shit," Blue jokes. Megan's face breaks into a grin before he comes over and gives her a brotherly hug.

"I feel like it a little bit," she jokes back. Him and I exchange glances and I try to silently tell him that *now* isn't the time to address what we were talking about if he's thinking of it. He sits on the sofa a few inches from Megan's bed.

"Thank you for coming Blue," she tells him sincerely.

"I was in town anyway," he says with a shrug.

"I heard. Kam was telling me about the job he was hiring you for," she says easily, and me and Blue lock eyes. Without words, I can tell he wants to know what all I said, and I'm trying to communicate that I didn't say anything, and for him to keep quiet.

"Okay guys, what's going on?" Megan asks, her voice tighter than normal. Blue glues his eyes to his lap and she glares at me. I let out a sigh.

"I think we should talk about it later Megan," I tell her.

"Why later? Why not now?" she asks tensely.

"Because look at where we are," I quip back, rubbing the middle of my forehead.

"I'm fine! I'll be going home in two days. I told you all of this is just a precaution okay? Kam, please don't patronize me," she says beseechingly.

"He's right, it'd probably be better to talk about once you're out of here," Blue adds, his voice low and constrained. Now she's looking between us wildly.

"What!?" she almost screeches, her voice high and tense.

"Kam wanted me to look up Ian, Meg," Blue finally blurts out. I scowl at him. Megan looks like a deer in headlights. I hear her let out the smallest breath, her face starting to redden.

"How do you know about Ian?" she says quietly, but she's still looking at Blue. The hesitation I had is starting to transform into annoyance, especially replaying what Blue said to me in the diner.

"My dad called me today and said that there's a record for a marriage between this Ian guy and Alana, and I wanted to find out more about him," I tell her, emboldened by the fact that she hasn't denied knowing who Ian is. She knows him and hasn't said a word to me about it.

The tension in the room has gone up several notches, especially since I see her and Blue having a silent conversation that they haven't brought me in on.

"You knew about him," I ask, but it's more of a statement. She's taken her lip in between her teeth, and I feel anger starting to come from the pit of my stomach and work its way up to my chest. But I let out a small breath, remembering what her therapist said about causing her stress, and being patient and giving her time to come to terms with things, yet it's one of the hardest things I've ever done to keep my mouth shut and not start yelling my head off.

"Blue can you excuse us?" Megan asks quietly. I glance over at him, almost wanting to tell him to not go anywhere. It seems like they've both been keeping secrets and hiding shit from me, and I want it all laid out right here, right now.

"Are you sure?" he asks. Now I'm upset.

"Yes she's sure. Goodbye Blue!" I say, my voice loud and stern.

Now I want him gone. I want whatever little secret society talks they've had to be done with. I feel jealousy surging through me because Blue knew about Ian. He probably knows a hell of a lot more about this whole situation than I do. Why wouldn't she tell me? Why can't she trust me? Blue looks at me, a mixture of guilt and defiance on his face. I thread my fingers together to keep from grabbing him and once the door shuts I glare at her. I see tears behind my eyes, I

feel my throat start to constrict. I'm afraid of what she's about to say, but then she doesn't say anything.

"It's true?" I ask her, and she nods as a tear slips from her eye.

There it is. My worst fear come true. There was someone else. Someone else that loved her, that had her body. I can't even imagine that they had her heart.

"Why didn't you tell me?" My voice is cold; my attempt to add warmth to it failed completely.

"Because...I was afraid. Afraid to lose you, afraid you'd think I was a liar, that you couldn't move past it." Multiple tears are coming from her eyes now, and I feel wetness in my own but I won't let any fall.

"When did you find out?" I ask her, trying to still my voice and not let it come off too loud or harsh. I want to keep her calm and talking.

"The first day I arrived in Chicago," she mutters. I'm biting my lip now. That was almost three months ago!

"I didn't know if it was true at first. It was before I even knew about my condition, before I came to terms with Alana. I didn't know if it was real or not Kam, you have to believe me," she says, her tone pleading.

"But that was over three months ago Megan."

"I know. It was why I didn't want you to see me. Because I felt so guilty and confused."

I stand up, grab a box of Kleenex from the table, and hand it to her. She takes a few gratefully and blows her nose, then wipes her eyes. I stand and cross my arms, staring at the floor.

"What made you change your mind?" I ask, keeping my voice even, wanting her to say something that will melt the ice I feel spreading across my heart. Wanting her to silence my father's voice in my head, the doubts creeping in, the suspicion coursing through my veins.

"It was after I started treatment with Dr. Lyce. I was able to understand that it wasn't me, that it was her, and that we're not the same. That with treatment and therapy that I could have a good life, that I could build a life with someone I love...and you're the only person I've ever loved Kam. I was going to tell you. I wanted to do it with Dr. Lyce, so she could help you understand, help me understand." Her voice is so broken and her expression so pained I don't

worry about the coldness I previously felt. My heart is melting now that she looks devastated. I knew that Megan loved me but seeing her now at the thought of losing me makes me not question it, regardless of what's happened. None of it matters, nothing is more important than us being together, making it through this. I pull her into my arms and kiss her tears away.

"I'm so sorry I didn't tell you," she chokes out.

I tell her it's okay, to calm down and not get too worked up, that I'm here and not going anywhere. I tell her that we'll sit down with Helen how she wanted, that we'll push past this and make it through, that everything will be okay. I comfort her by stroking her back and kissing her cheeks and lips, and before long the nurse from earlier is back explaining visiting hours are over. I tell Megan I love her and to get some rest, and that I'll be back the next morning as soon as I'm allowed.

When I leave her room I see Blue in the waiting area. I walk up to him and he stands. I can tell he's trying to read my face and preparing for whatever I bring his way. I stuff my hands in my pockets as I walk over to him.

"You said this Ian guy was your cousin?" I ask him tightly. He nods, our eyes leveled on each other.

"So you bring her to Chicago to meet your cousin without having a clue she was married to him?" I ask, rubbing my chin. He looks away from me.

"It wasn't like that," he mutters, but I know he's full of shit.

"Tell me what it's like then," I demand.

"It's a conversation we all need to have," he says and I laugh mirthlessly. There isn't going to be any more conversations with all of us.

"Look, I appreciate you being there for Megan," I tell him sincerely, and he nods slightly.

"But something about this doesn't sit right with me. Just so you know, I'm going to be the one here for Megan now. For the shitty parts, the good parts...whatever she's about to face, we're going to do it together. Her and I, we're an *us* and *you* aren't a part of it. I can't make her not be your friend but as a man, I need you to stay out of things you shouldn't be involved in." I see his face harden but what the hell can he say?

He's her friend, that's it.

He may not want to be with Katy but he needs to find somebody else to save because Megan doesn't need him. He's not her white knight—I am. He glares at me and for a moment I think he wants to punch me but whatever it is that I see him fighting with he swallows down.

"I got it," he says, throwing his hands up in a truce.

"I'll make my own way back," I tell him before walking away. Blue and I were always cool before this happened. I thought he was good for my sister, a decent guy. Now I don't know what to think. I do know his loyalty doesn't lie with me and that's fine but I won't stand for him to do anything that interferes with me and Megan's relationship. He's not going to be a gatekeeper anymore, we don't need that.

It's us—me and her—against the world.

Lauren

WHEN MEGAN SHOWED up at the doorstep of the gallery I almost swallowed my heart in my throat. I was beyond shocked when she said Cal was her brother but right hand to God I was just relieved she wasn't a girlfriend or long lost fiancé. After my adrenaline and relief wore off I realized it was still a world-quaking revelation. That the beautiful girl who stood in front of me was my husband's sister and that her entering our atmosphere could change everything. For a split second the selfish part of me, I'm embarrassed to say, wanted to wish her away because she would be a new factor, another variable to the fragile balance we finally had come to. Nothing about Cal has ever been easy, simple, or straightforward. If she was telling the truth it could change everything. Regardless of how Cal reacted to her initially, one thing I know is how important family is to him, and how protective he can be. Then I realized that I was so wrong to even think that. I realized it's true that she is a part of a family tree he never had a glimpse of.

Megan was lost and searching for a connection, a piece of herself. I can understand that. Growing up without my parents was extremely difficult. I didn't have a mom who could tell me about the boys who broke her heart and made her smile, and not having a dad to tell me I was kind and beautiful and that Prince Charming would come along one day. But I was blessed to have my aunt Raven. She was the best of both worlds. Even though my parents weren't around, I was still connected to them. I had pictures and cousins and an aunt who kept their memory alive. Neither Megan or Cal had

what I had—a connection that tethered them to the people who brought them into this world—but even Cal had Mr. and Ms. Scott, and it broke my heart when I found out Megan had no one.

It was her alone against the world. No one to lean on, no one to protect her. It would have made me sad if I wasn't super hormonal and pregnant, but being so it makes me damn near cry to think of it. So after badgering Cal to find out if it was true, and not letting up until he reached out to her, I was relieved once it was a fact.

They were related; my husband had a sister, another woman who I hoped he could one day love and she could love in return. What I didn't imagine—what I never guessed would *ever* happen in a million years—is that she'd have the same condition that my husband, the love of my life, lives with every day. When I found that out my heart shattered for her and when it came out that Ian was in love with her—well, the other version of herself—my heart broke even more for him.

I first met Ian almost three years ago. It was a week before my art gallery was due to open. I had been more than familiar with his work. I was in awe of his photographs and knew I'd do whatever it took to have his work featured. His pictures spoke to me in a way that no other artist's work did. Even though the pictures weren't of sad things, they were gorgeous black and white portraits. Some of them landscapes, others of people, or objects. But there was an underlying sadness that was so deep, a pain that was almost tangible behind the lenses, that poured out into the work.

It was a feeling that I recognized immediately and though the work was impeccable it was the emotion that drew me to them that made them stand out. I thought it was just me at the center of an emotional hurricane that made me imagine something that wasn't there. Maybe I was projecting. But after finding out that Ian had gone through—and would go through—everything I had, I knew what I saw wasn't imagined. It was a painful, emotional turmoil so deep that it's indescribable to someone who hasn't gone through it. That's what was in his work, what spoke to me so deeply.

It's why when Hillary called me and told me what a fucking jerk Cal was still being to Ian that I had to run a warm bath and drink a glass of grape juice, wishing it was wine, to try to calm my nerves. I know they technically got into a fight when they first met but Cal understood why that happened, and it was over two years ago. I

thought he'd be over it by now, but maybe that resentment is still in play. It's the only reason that I can think of as to why he's so mean to him.

When I see him crack the door open, wearing a grin as his eyes slide down my body, I scowl at him and sit up in the water.

"How's my girls?" he asks, ignoring my scowl. I turn and my body is so big now it almost splashes water as I move to face him.

"What happened at the hospital?" I glare at him and he sighs dismissively, coming behind me to rub my shoulders, but I shrug away from him demanding he give me an answer.

"Hillary can't keep her fucking mouth shut I see," he grumbles.

"What is your problem Cal? I don't understand. Why are you so shitty to him?" I hiss, tired of holding it in. I've tried to look past it, but knowing that he let Ian sit in fear for hours and not let him see his wife is beyond me.

"Ian doesn't have anything to do with us. I don't want you getting stressed out over shit that you shouldn't be worried about," he says firmly. I splash water in his face and he laughs at me, which makes me even angrier.

"How could you do that to him? You can be an ass sometimes but that was really fucking cruel." To my absolute horror I'm crying now. His condescending grin melts away and he sighs, pulling me back to him. I don't bother to push him away this time because I'm an emotional mess and want his arms around me. I just don't want him to be a jerk.

"Babe, don't cry. He's okay, he knows she's okay, and I can't make her see him if she doesn't want to," he says, and I wipe my tears away.

"Why doesn't she want to?" I ask, confused.

"That's not my business babe. It's neither one of ours," he says, quietly rubbing my shoulders. I look over my shoulder and pin him down with a stare.

"You really don't know?" I ask, and he gazes at me blankly.

"I really don't know. I swear," he says with an innocent grin. I roll my eyes at him but allow my body to relax into his hands.

"I'm really not gonna like the guy if you start making me fucking jealous," he says huskily with a playful look, but gives me a possessive squeeze. I can't help but smile.

"He reminds me of *me*, Cal..." I say, quietly going back in time to the days when I was the woman abandoned, the one who was in love with a man who had someone else, when he loved her and I was merely an inconvenience, a memory locked away inside a mind fragmented and refusing to meld together. I want to add that Ian reminds me of Cal, the two men I've met that Megan's shared with us. Ian and Cal remind me so much of each other, I would have thought Kam would be the one he'd clashed with, that he would have made fun of, that he would have been annoyed with. Yet it's Ian.

He's quiet, and I expect a smart-ass retort, but I only hear a soft breath pushed from his mouth.

"It's not the same thing," he says, his voice quiet but firm.

"How isn't it?" I challenge him.

"We were different. We were married."

"They're married!" I tell him.

"You had Caylen," he counters.

"I would have loved you the same without her. I hurt the same before I knew she existed." I turn towards him, my body making waves in the tub. He takes my hand and helps me push my body up so I'm resting on my knees. I take his face in mine and rest my forehead on his.

"He's hurting Cal, like I was hurting," I tell him. His hands rest on my stomach and I feel one of the babies kick it, and the smile he reveals makes my heart melt. One I didn't get to see while I was pregnant with our daughter Caylen. I remember how badly I wanted this, him holding me and feeling love in his touch, his prideful smile while touching a part of himself growing within me. I put my hand over his, and he leans back and kisses me softly on the lips.

"I can't make her do what she doesn't want, but I'll be better," he promises me.

"That's all I'm asking."

IAN

I don't remember how I got home. I sure as hell don't remember calling Blue, but somehow it must have all happened because he's on the couch opposite me. The room smells like stale whiskey and nightmares. My head is killing me. I push off the couch and shuffle over to the fridge, pulling out a gallon of water and downing about half of it before I move it from my lips, finishing off half the gallon. I search through my thoughts while remembering yesterday, looking at the table that I had pushed Megan up against. How she was on the verge of giving in, how she let my tongue into her mouth, how her hands roved up my body. The kiss she said would show me that she couldn't love me back, not the way she loves him...yet it only did the opposite. It showed me she could if she just gave in.

It was supposed to sever the tie between us. In her mind it would be goodbye, but I knew it wasn't goodbye. It was an introduction to what we had, what I knew was there, what she's tried to push to the back of her mind and forget. It was almost unfair; the rules were in my favor because regardless of how much she denied I was in her heart, I sure as hell knew her body—what it liked, what made it melt, every spot that would drive her crazy. I could convince her body even if I had to work more for her heart.

"I thought you'd be sleeping for days." Blue's up on the couch, yawning now. I

walk over and hand him the water jug. He takes it and finishes it off but frowns, pushing it back to me.

"Your breath tastes like shit man," he says.

"Makes sense. I feel like shit," I reply, sinking down into the couch.

"You were so fucking wasted by the time I got to you."

I recall starting off with a double shot of whiskey and then another...and that's about as much as I remember.

"Thanks for coming," I mutter.

"You were messed up about Megan?" he asks cautiously.

"You heard?"

Of course he heard, they're practically best friends now, I think, annoyed.

"I saw her," he says, and it makes me sit straight up.

"Right before I came to get you."

I try to swallow my envy down.

"I can't believe she got hit by a fucking car man," he says, shaking his head.

"Did she tell you what happened?" I ask, already knowing she has.

"We didn't get to really talk. I got there right before visiting hours."

"I saw it happen. She was here," I tell him, trying to unload some of the guilt I've been carrying on my back, making some room for despair and anger. He glares at me.

"What?!"

"It was kind of my fault," I admit. He looks at me in disbelief and I just lay it all out for him. How she came here and told me about Alana coming back, and if she did again to refuse her. How she was getting married. And even how we almost had sex right in the kitchen, and then she ran out of here and directly in front of a car. Blue looks at me as if trying to wrap his mind around what he's just heard. His expression goes from shocked to amused to disbelieving throughout the span of the story. He shakes his head slightly.

"She wanted me to tell you." He's jiggling his foot, and fidgeting.

I look at him, confused.

"She wanted me to tell you that if Alana resurfaced that you tell her you didn't want to be with her anymore and you'd moved on," he continues. "I knew how you'd react if I told you but I should have just done it." He groans, rubbing his face.

"If you'd told me that shit *you'd* have ended up in the hospital, and not because of a car," I tell him, trying to ease his guilt.

"This is so fucking messed up," he whines. It looks like my attempt to ease his guilt didn't do shit.

"So Cal said Alana came back?" he asks tensely.

"Yeah. But he's a jerk-off so he could have been lying." I look at Blue and notice how stressed my little cousin looks. I feel bad that he's been dragged into all of this.

"I don't blame her for being upset with me. It's sort of my fault. I pushed her to...I just didn't want to lose her," I say quietly.

"Which one?" he asks, and I frown.

"It doesn't matter to me, they're one and the same," I tell him. He looks away from me and focuses his eyes on something across the room.

"What do you think Alana would feel about that?" he asks. I think this is the first time he's even talked about Alana as a person separate from Megan.

"What do you mean?"

"I just mean, you know her really well. Do you think she'd want you to be with Megan?"

"What the fuck are you talking about? She's Megan. Megan is Alana," I tell him, feeling myself become defensive. I think of my girl, the one who's all fire, sass, and takes no bullshit. Who was possessive and liked me the same way.

Shit...would she?

"It was a stupid question. You're right," he says, exasperated. He stands and heads to the bathroom, leaving me with my thoughts... which are now full of Alana, *not* Megan. I look to the kitchen where I had her. The table I had Alana on, that I almost had Megan on. The apartment is full of memories of me and her—me and Alana—but our last memory is me alone with just a letter, saying to forget about her. To move on and be happy.

She wanted me to hate her. She had to, because if I hated her I couldn't love her. But she was wrong. I could do both simultaneously, almost effortlessly. When I first found out about DID I tried to think of them as two different people, two different women sharing the same body. As much as I try to wrap my head around that, it's almost impossible. I see the woman I love, and there's two different versions of her. I've thought of it as convincing her other side that I can love her and that she can love me, but for the first time I realize I've never stopped to think about how Alana feels about it, if she's there somewhere behind Megan's thoughts. Her memories I haven't thought about. How Alana would take this.

Blue is out of the bathroom.

"Let's go and get something to eat man. We need air and water that doesn't have backwash from last night's whiskey in it," he says, and I nod.

I stand up and head to the shower, get dressed, but I'm just going through the motions. With my thoughts on the conundrum he's dropped in my lap, I'm even quiet on the drive to the restaurant. It's a Greek place that gives you so much food three people could share it. The food is good and just what I need to suck up the remaining alcohol inside of me. Blue gets a Gyro platter and I get Bakaliaros.

Blue's attention before the food comes is on his phone, and I start to wonder if he's texting Megan.

Are they talking about me? I realize I'm being paranoid, and the blood coursing through me is still tinged with whiskey. I'm in a bad fucking mood even after the shower, and the fresh air Blue said would make me feel better. I keep hearing Megan's words that she's going to marry this douchebag, that she's going to be with him. I think of Alana saying she'd be my wife, making vows she knew she couldn't or wouldn't keep, and I'm getting so fucking pissed. I signal the waitress over and ask her for a shot of tequila. Blue glares at me.

"Don't you think you had enough to drink yesterday?" he asks. I give him the finger. He sets his phone down and gives me his full attention.

"You're not going to do this are you?" he asks, his voice dripping with disdain.

"Do what?" I scoff.

"Turn into an angry bitter drunk, like our uncles, like..." He trails off and I realize he's talking about his dad.

"You're being a little dramatic aren't you Joshie?" I say, teasing him and trying to kill the sad tension that cropped up at my last statement. Josh's dad was messed up all while we were kids. I heard he finally pulled himself together a few years ago but I haven't seen him and I didn't bother to ask Blue about it in case it wasn't true.

"Nobody starts out as a drunk. I know you're dealing with a lot of shit man, but you can't let this be your answer," he urges. I can see the worry behind his eyes.

"Besides, I wanted to talk to you about some stuff and I need you to be sober, okay?" I wave over the waitress again, who's eyeing our table with a flirtatious smile, and I'm not sure if it's for me or for Blue.

"What's up fellas?" she asks. Her eyes linger on Blue and that makes me grin.

"You can cancel the tequila."

"Sure thing. Anything else I can get you while you wait?" she says, her brown eyes darting to Blue. He's either uninterested or too stupid to notice.

"Two Ginger Ales," he tells her. She nods since Blue hasn't given her the slightest glance before leaving our table.

"She's cute, and she likes you. God knows why," I joke, and he shrugs.

"I think you have enough women problems for both of us," he quips back. I can't argue with that.

Our food arrives and we tear through it like we haven't eaten in days. Once my plate is three quarters of the way finished I push it away. I grab my bottle of Ginger Ale, down most of it, and cross my arms across my chest.

"Okay. Shoot," I tell him.

He looks at me as if he's trying to figure out what I'm talking about, but he knows.

Blue was my best friend before I realized we were related by blood. Our mothers were close and for most of my life I considered him more like a brother than a cousin or friend. We had our first fight together, had our first kiss with two sisters we double dated with, stole candy out of stores together. I was the first person Blue told that his dad was hitting his mom after he got drunk. We've always been closer than close, until we had a falling out. One of Blue's fucktard friends brought him in on a robbery job that he was supposed to drive for, and Blue hid some of the shit at my house.

Blue was young and stupid and I was slightly older and a little less stupid, but smart enough to know that what he did could have landed us both in prison. We fought, verbally and physically, and I told him he was dead to me. It was nasty, ugly, and we distanced ourselves from each other for way too long. It wasn't until my mom told him about Alana leaving me and how messed up I was that we reconnected. That being said though, I know Blue and I've been so distracted with my own shit that I haven't seen that my cousin has been carrying a heavy load of shit himself. Megan told me about what a slut his girlfriend turned out to be, and I guess I was so busy being heartbroken myself I haven't realized that maybe Blue is too.

"Is this about the Katie girl?" I ask him. He looks at me, almost surprised, and immediately frowns.

"I think seeing how much you love Alana made me realize that what me and Katie had wasn't even close, but it's better to find out now than later right?" he says. I nod, but the way I'm feeling now, I almost want to tell him he doesn't want the kind of love me and Alana had. That the loss of it isn't worth it. But that'd be a lie. I'd live

through this the rest of my life if I could get a do-over with her again.

"What's your plan from here?" he asks me. I feel annoyance and irritation crawl up my neck.

"If I knew that I wouldn't have asked for tequila," I utter, trying to laugh it off.

"What...what if she marries Kam?" My blood goes cold at the thought. It's something I've been trying my hardest not to think about. I try not to think that she's with another man every single day, that someone else makes her happy every single day. And here he is putting the shit right in my face...but he's right. So I'll tell him the truth.

"I don't have a fucking clue."

He starts playing with that stupid lip ring. "But she told you she's going to say yes?" he reiterates.

"I know what she told me but I also know what I felt!" My voice is loud but it's after the lunch rush, and it's Tuesday, so it's mainly only the staff around.

"You know what Blue? I don't know why I even keep talking to you about this. You've made it clear you're on her side, not your fucking cousin's, so why don't we drop it completely," I tell him angrily. His face is full of indignation now, but there's something else behind it. I'm surprised when he doesn't tell me to calm down or pull it together or that I'm overreacting. Instead he lets out a long sigh, drops his face in his hands, and stares at the table.

"When I said I was on her side...I didn't mean Megan," he sputters out. What the hell is he talking about? Who the fuck's side is he on, Hillary Clinton's?

He must read the confusion in my face.

"I meant Alana."

I don't get what he's talking about. Alana? He doesn't even know Alana. He's never met her. Why would he be on her side?

"What are you talking about?" I'm trying to contain the anxiousness that's climbing in me, to push away the tension that's building around my temples. He looks around briefly as if he's about to tell me a secret or something. I clasp my hands together in an attempt to be patient.

"I did know Alana," he says, his voice wobbly.

I laugh. "Good one Blue. You got me, I almost believed you." I shake my head and chuckle.

"I'm not joking. I met her through a guy I did work with. She set the marks up, we did a job together, and we hit it off," he starts to explain. I can't swallow. I can't move. I can't breathe. If he says what the hell I think he's about to say, I'm going to be arrested for assault.

"It's not what you think. When I say 'hit it off,' I mean we understood each other, both coming from crap families doing what we had to so we could get by. She became my friend. I didn't know about you until I took her to my dad's sobriety barbeque and she saw a picture of us together." I sit back in my chair feeling my blood pressure starting to rise, but wanting to remain calm. To not reach over and grab him by the neck until I hear how he's going to end his fucked up confession.

"I didn't know about her condition until after that. She told me I couldn't tell you, and you wouldn't have believed me anyway. We hadn't even spoken in years. But when she knew she was...leaving, that Megan was coming back, she made me promise to make up with you. She loved you, and she made me promise to never say anything. But this is..." He's talking a mile a minute and sounds desperate, almost like he's pleading with me, like a kid trying to explain to his mother why he flushed the goldfish down the toilet. Instead, he's just been treating my life like a fucking frisbee.

"It's fucked up and shitty as hell!" I growl, unable to contain my composure anymore.

"I know man. I'm sorry. I was just...shit, I don't know. I was trying to do what she said!" he yells back. I take several deep breaths, trying to calm down and make everything make sense.

"You knew all along, the whole fucking time!"

"I was trying to fix things. I just thought once she saw you, that... she'd remember. When Katie told me Kam was going to propose I thought this was the best way to fix things," he pleads. "I'm sorry bro. I fucked up. It's all fucked up!"

"Wait, so Megan doesn't know you know about Alana?" I ask, and he looks away from me guiltily. I laugh because it's the only way I can stop myself from breaking Blue's jaw. He and Alana were friends the entire time I was with her. While I was blubbering on about how great she was, how much I loved her, telling him that I knew Megan was her, he pretended that he had no fucking clue!

"You let me go crazy. You let *Megan* go crazy! You could have fixed all of this!" I shout, pushing myself from the table.

"No. It doesn't work like that! I couldn't just tell Megan. She wouldn't have believed me and she'd never have come to see you. I thought I was doing the right thing."

"You should have told me, Blue!" Now the restaurant is completely quiet except for us.

"Stay the fuck away from me bro!" I tell him, storming towards the door. I hear him follow behind me, and I turn and give him a death stare that warns him I'm two seconds away from kicking his ass. I don't know what to think, how to feel...everything seems wrong. Left is right, up is down. If my closest cousin—who I thought was my best friend—lied and kept secrets from me, then I don't know who I can trust.

Megan

IT'S DIFFERENT NOW, like a weight has been lifted since I've told Kam about Ian. Well I haven't exactly told him *everything* but he knows he exists and it's the best feeling I've had in a long while. I thought after I told him that things would change, that he'd look at me differently, that it'd be too much. But it didn't change anything. He still looks like I'm the best part of his life, and he's let me know he's going to be here every step of the way. He told me that he's gotten approved to transfer his program, and we agreed that he'll move in with me. He's a little uncomfortable staying in the apartment Cal owns so we'll start to look at places next month. We'll need a bigger place anyway, but Kam doesn't know why because I haven't told him yet.

I know it's keeping a secret but this is different. I don't want to tell him he's going to be a dad while we're sitting inside a psychiatric ward, even one as nice as this. I want it to be romantic. I want to let him know how much I love him and that I will do everything it takes to make sure this baby is brought into a safe, warm, and loving family. That *we* made this baby. It's ours and I'm going to do everything to make sure its life is amazing. Whatever I have to go up against I will.

It's funny that Alana's supposed to be the strong one, the one who handles pressure well, who saved me. Actually, she didn't save me. She can't because she's fragmented and mentally stunted, not to mention emotionally broken.

This baby is what's going to save me.

He or she will be a person I can love and who will love me unconditionally. I haven't been hearing Alana at all either, and that's only strengthened my faith that she wants absolutely nothing to do with this. Besides, she couldn't be a mom. She only cares about herself and Ian...and not even really Ian because she abandoned him. I've been trying not to think of Ian. I can't now; there's someone more important that I have to think about what's best for. I know that Ian loves Alana, but she could never make him happy since he'll never have her completely—because my heart will always belong to Kam.

Kam is comfort, Kam is reliable, Kam comes from a great family. He's loved me at my worst and will accept me as I am. He won't ever wish I was someone else. Yes, Ian and I have a connection, I can't deny that, one that I've known existed since I first saw him. But when we kissed it was scary how strong it was. It wasn't *ours*. His feelings weren't for *me*. The intensity between us wasn't based on *our* history.

While I was out from the accident memories began to flood in of the two of them. Her feelings for him almost suffocated me, and I know now that she was angry. She doesn't want me to have Ian and I really believe once she knows that Ian isn't what I want, that I will leave what they had unaffected, she won't bother me anymore. It's just as well because what I felt that day with him when we first met wasn't *my* feelings. They were hers.

Ian said that he could love both of us, but what he doesn't understand is Alana is the worst part of me. She's reckless and proved that by almost getting us killed. She's ridiculously impulsive and makes dumb decisions, but he loved her regardless, and that sort of love doesn't go away. He'd always want her back, he'd always be looking for her, maybe even wishing for her. I have grown to care about Ian. He's a really good guy and he deserves someone better than Alana, and this baby is the answer. Without it I don't think he'd ever let her go, but once he knows that there's another life involved, that he isn't the father...he'll have to let her go.

Without Ian Alana has no reason to exist now. I don't need her protection, or for her to help me function. I know Helen says there's no way to really get rid of an alter and that integration is what the goal is, but I've been researching as well and I've found that people with multiple alters have found that most of them usually go away,

or come so infrequently it's like they're gone permanently. If it's true for people who have ten and twenty alters then why can't it be true for someone with one? Plus, my circumstances are different from theirs.

I don't know exactly why Alana came about and to be honest I don't really care. I have a theory that growing up in foster care was not easy and there were difficult times that I may have created her for, but that's over. I'm about to have a good life. I'm safe now and I don't need her warped attempts to try to protect me anymore.

I look towards the large floor-to-ceiling window. The sun is pouring in; it's a beautifully perfect day. I feel invigorated and emboldened by it, like the weather is a sign from the universe telling me that everything is going to be okay, that it will all work out.

Kam comes through the door carrying a large bouquet of yellow roses and it makes the biggest smile come across my face. His eyes light up at me as he crosses the room and hands them to me.

"They're beautiful Kam," I tell him, taking in the scent. I move them out of the way, relishing the soft kiss we share. It takes everything in me not to tell him right now that he's going to be a father, that I'm carrying a part of him inside of me.

"What's on the agenda for today?" he asks me. I giggle.

"Well I don't seem to be going anywhere," I tell him jokingly.

"Is Dr. Lyce coming today?" he asks, and I shake my head.

"No, she had something come up last minute with another one of her patients, but she promises once I'm released that we'll have treatment daily." He nods and squeezes my hand before kissing it.

"Are you really comfortable with her sweetheart?" he asks while his gorgeous eyes hold mine captive.

"Yeah, I think so," I say quietly. His brows knit together and a glimpse of skepticism passes across his expression, but it's gone as quickly as it was there.

"Have you talked to Blue?" he asks curiously, and I shake my head.

"No, he hasn't called me either, which is kind of strange." Ever since I've come to Chicago Blue and I usually talk every day, so this is definitely not normal for us to go this long without talking.

"Did you see him when you left the other day?" I ask him curiously. He gives a half nod as he uses the remote to change the channel on the TV.

"Did he say anything to you?" I ask, noticing how he seems to be more engaged at what's happening on the television than what I'm saying to him. I'm not entirely surprised. When Kam found out that Blue was with me when I first came to Chicago and Blue didn't tell him where I was, things changed between them, and I hate that it's my fault. Before all of this they had such an easy friendship. Yes, it was because Blue and Katie were dating, and that ended terribly wrong as well, but I still think if all of this hadn't happened they'd be on good terms with one another. I know he doesn't exactly like the relationship between me and Blue but he trusts me. It makes me guilty to think about it and I know I have to tell him that Ian is Blue's cousin sooner rather than later. I just want it all to happen at the right time. I don't want to mess things up more than I already have. Thinking about it makes me wonder if it will even matter. Once I tell Kam about the baby I don't know how long our friendship will be able to sustain with Kam not exactly being thrilled for it. I'm sure after Ian knows about the baby he'll need Blue's support a lot more than I will.

I ignore the sting of guilt that shoots through me.

"No, we didn't say much to each other. I was kind of tired and just wanted to get home after I knew you were okay," he says, finally settling on a baseball game.

"I just wanted to say I appreciate you being so understanding about everything. I know it's a lot," I start, and he's at my side in a second.

"Megan, I love you. I told you there's nothing that would stop that from happening. I'm here to support you and do whatever I can to make life better for you, for us. I just..." He trails off, his soft expression becoming more determined.

"I just need you to be honest with me, to trust me to be that person who you can share everything with." His tone is almost pleading and I feel guilt gnawing at me. I know I haven't been entirely honest with Kam but it's to avoid hurting him. I don't want to make things worse. I do want him to know the whole truth, I just feel it would be a lot better telling him the truth with Dr. Lyce. But in this moment with his feelings on his shoulders, begging me to be honest with him, to let him in I have to tell him something. So I let out a quiet breath and build up my resolve.

"Ian...Ian is Blue's cousin," I tell him, and I watch his eyes widen in surprise. Then his face morphs into anger.

"What?!" he says, his voice raised and his anger visible.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you..." I feel so guilty. His lips are pressed together into a hard line and he's walked away from my bed. I can tell he's mad, *seething*, and it's strange that I haven't seen Kam angry a lot. There's been occasions where he's been annoyed, irritated, and frustrated, but never flat out angry. It makes my stomach twist because I'm hoping that it's towards me and not misdirected. He turns back to face me, rage contorting his beautiful face.

"He lied to me. That son of a bitch!" he yells. I'm taken aback, my thoughts racing a mile a minute trying to think of how to fix this.

"It was only because I asked him to. Please don't blame Blue for this," I beg him.

"How can I not? Everyone's been hiding so much crap from me!" he yells.

"I have been hiding it from you, not Blue. It's me who owed you the truth, not him."

"I'm sorry Megan but you can't fix this. You're telling me your ex-husband *happens* to be Blue's cousin and he had no idea this entire time!" he spouts, his eyes squinting as if he's trying to see if I'm still lying or just an idiot.

"Blue didn't know until I met him, Kam, and even with him being his cousin he's been nothing but unbiased and supportive of what *I* want. To be completely honest he's been more on my side than Ian's," I try to explain, but Kam is furious.

"That's bullshit Megan. There's no way he didn't know. And he just so happened to take you to his cousin's house?!"

"I know what it seems like," I plead to him, seeing his anger start to subside a tiny bit, but his indignation has only grown. He stalks towards me and if it was any other man I'd be afraid, but with Kam I've never felt safer.

"Megan. Listen to me." My hands are in his now.

"Think about what you're saying. Blue, who finds things out about people for a living as easy as it is to breathe, found out all of this stuff about you, your family...but didn't find anything about Ian, or Alana for that matter. It just doesn't make sense."

"I know what it seems like but..." I trail off. It is a coincidence, a big one, and nothing I haven't thought about more than once. I was

sure it was all a trick when it first happened but there's no way. If Blue knew that'd mean Ian would have known also. Nobody can fake the pain, the anguish, and restraint that Ian has shown. I can't say that to Kam though.

"He didn't know, Kam. Trust me please. I know our relationship has been difficult for you to handle but he's my friend—one of my only friends—and I don't want it to get in between us," I plead.

"I don't want that either," he says as I rest my head on his shoulder.

"Then don't let it. I promise from this day on I'll tell you everything. You'll be my confidant. It'll be us against the world," I tell him, and I mean it—for him, for us, and the family we're about to have.

"Okay," he says, but I can hear the skepticism, the frustration underneath his tone, and I know that Blue and I need to talk. Kam would never lay a finger on me but if he thought he was protecting me or defending me then things would be a lot different.

"So, what is he like?" he asks. I should have known the question was coming. I just don't know how many questions there are going to be. This is a man that wasn't supposed to exist, questions that Kam was not supposed to ever have had to ask. Kam was supposed to be my first, my only, and it feels like everything has changed. Theoretically, everything is as it was, but in the real world everything has changed.

"He's...he's different. Not someone I'd date," I tell him, shifting my weight in bed. My body is a little less sore today, and if I was able to take more pain meds I'm sure I'd be in hardly any pain, though for the little one inside of me I'll endure whatever pain I have to.

Kam lets out a heavy sigh, one that has to carry so much—his anger, pain, sadness—but he hides all of it behind that sigh.

"What was it like when you saw him? You didn't recognize anything about him at all?" he asks, and I know what his real question is. The question is did *I* feel anything? Perhaps the more important question that he's too considerate to ask is if I feel anything now.

"It wasn't me that Ian married. It was Alana, Kam. Their connection and history has nothing to do with me. He's been kind and understanding considering the situation he's been placed in, and for

that I'm grateful. But that's all," I tell him preemptively, hoping that settles any worries or fears he has within him.

"So he's okay with just letting you go...*her* go?" he says, correcting himself at the last moment.

We're supposed to be telling the truth, no more lies. I gather up my courage to tell him the truth, especially at the insistent look on his face.

"I wouldn't say that, but it's not up to him," I say as confidently as I can.

"What if she comes back?" he asks bluntly. This I don't have an answer for.

"I don't think that she is, not any time soon at least, and that's what therapy is for anyway." I rest my head on his shoulder. He begins to rub my back, but his touch seems almost distant.

"Well there's really no reason for you to have to deal with him is there? My dad said their marriage license was under Alana's alias so...there really isn't any loose ends to tie up right?" he says, looking up at me beneath his lashes. He's right, there really isn't anything else...once I tell him that there's something more important than the way he feels, I feel, or Alana for that matter.

"I just wanted him to understand that she's not real so that he could move on, have a life with someone who isn't sharing it, stealing it from someone else," I tell him, determined. He shakes his head ever so slightly.

"You're a good person and I understand that you want to fix this thing for everyone but you can't. If I was him the last thing I'd want is you trying to fix it. He needs space, for you to tell him without a doubt that what happened is over...maybe it should be me, actually."

My heart begins to thud against my chest.

That could never happen.

I never ever would want them to meet. The two worlds collided, two men who are stubborn and think their ridiculous, possessive behavior would be justified by love.

"No. That won't go well Kam. I'll take care of it," I promise him.

"But you haven't," he corrects me. I push out a breath and glue my attention to the TV.

"Is there a reason you haven't Megan?" he pushes further. I know he's not going to drop the subject, and he's entirely within his rights

not to.

"How involved have you gotten with this guy?" Concern is climbing through his tone.

"I'm not involved with Ian, I just know things would be easier if he was on the same page with me."

"Babe there's a possibility that could never happen!" he says sternly, and I'm starting to feel stressed. The enormity of everything is starting to suffocate the optimism I began to have that this can all be worked out, cleaned up neatly. I remind myself that Kam doesn't know about the baby and he won't understand until I tell him, but I won't do it here. I won't have our moment ruined by all of this.

"It will, I promise. Things have changed since the accident. I can feel it." I'm hoping he's reading my mood to drop it.

"I'm going to let you get some rest and get everything ready for you to come home," he tells me with a smile, but it's forced. He gives me a gentle kiss on the lips and we let it linger. I want our kiss, our touch, to remind him that everything will be okay regardless of how it looks.

"I love you," I tell him.

"I love you too sweetheart," he says, this time with a real smile, before heading out of the room.



ITS ONLY ABOUT a half hour after Kam leaves when I'm told I have another visitor, and Cal walks through the door. My brother and I have come a long way since the day I showed up at Lauren's gallery.

"Hi," I say brightly, feeling really happy he's here. To see someone who I haven't been hiding things from, who I don't have to fix things with. In a way he understands my predicament, maybe even better than myself since he's come to terms with it way before I have.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, taking a seat on the same sofa Kam had sat on earlier.

"I'm a little sore. But you know, thinking of how things could have turned out, I definitely can't complain. Although I'm really ready to get out of here." I say the last part with a laugh and he nods and cracks a smile I don't see very often.

"That's good, but how is everything else?" I feel anxiety start to creep out of my stomach again, but I remind myself what I tell him doesn't fundamentally change *his* life. Then I wonder for a second if Dr. Lyce told him about my pregnancy. It'd be completely inappropriate since she is my doctor, and there is the assumption of doctor-patient privilege. But she's his sister-in-law—one I'm assuming he's close with seeing as he trusts her with his brain and mine.

"What do you mean?" I ask him curiously. I don't mind him knowing but I feel like it wouldn't be fair for so many other people to know before Kam knows.

"I met Alana," he says easily, as if it didn't faze him at all.

I blink at him, unsure if I should apologize or cry. All I feel right now is embarrassed. I have no idea what she said to him, how she behaved. I peer up at him looking for clues to how the meeting went, but Cal is always so cool and almost unreadable that it's useless.

"Should I apologize?" I ask meekly.

He grins. "No, I think we have an understanding of one another," he tells me, getting more comfortable in his chair. I can't help but feel a sting of resentment. They have an understanding of one another? She wasn't even around that long from what Dr. Lyce told me. I still don't think him and I have an understanding of one another.

"She's the reason the accident happened. I was in the middle of the street and I could hear her. More so than I ever had before. It was almost piercing shrieks. She could have killed us," I say, recognizing the bitterness in my tone.

"But you're here," he says, his voice even. I feel myself frowning. Is he on her side? How could he dismiss that she literally attacked me in the street?

"No thanks to her," I say, slightly defensive.

"I mean *you're* here, not her. What happened?" he asks bluntly. I'm at a loss for words for a second. I'm slightly relieved that Dr. Lyce didn't tell him about my news, but I don't know what to tell him that would make sense.

"I'm the one who should be here, she's the one who should just go away."

His expression is impassive when he hears this and I wonder what he's thinking.

"How did you deal with this when you first realized you were sharing your body with someone, that another person was interrupt-

ing your life and causing chaos beyond measure? How do you just get past it?" I ask, hoping for some real words of wisdom, some instructions that I can implement to get through this. I hope with everything in me she's gone. How I've tried to convince myself I don't hear her anymore. But I need a failsafe plan now more than ever, especially with another layer added on to this.

"I was the one causing chaos, Megan."

"What do you mean?"

"I was the one who picked up the pieces of Chris's breakdown. I guess you could say most people would consider me the alter," he explains, with an added shrug. My heart begins to pound.

"Wait, what?" I ask, my eyes narrowing in on him, hoping this is some sort of joke.

"I didn't say I was, I'm just explaining why I have an understanding as to what Alana is dealing with."

"But I don't get it. You have the life—the kids and family and wife—so how could you be..." The realization slams down on me like a house of bricks.

"It's not just me anymore. It can't be and it will probably never be," he says, looking me directly in my eyes

"So...Christopher is who's real?" He looks mildly irritated and I feel on the verge of a panic attack, my throat starting to constrict. I've never met Chris and that's terrifying because it means that Cal—who is telling me he's an alter—is the equivalent of Alana, who is in control most times.

Purple.

White.

Beige.

Green.

"All integration is compromising. Coming to an agreement, accepting all the parts of yourself I guess. Helen can explain it a hell of a lot better than I can, but since I live it and it seems that you both are so fucking far on the spectrum that you almost got yourself killed, that I'd give you the real deal about this. I don't know what your plan is or if you think you can keep her away or figure out how to stop her from taking over, but it's not going to work. She's in there and the best thing you can do is try to connect with her so when she does resurface, she doesn't blow your fucking life up."

He says all of this so casually, like I'm supposed to take it all in and accept it. I don't know how he's dealt with things but he's never dealt with someone like her. I'm sure Chris was much easier to deal with, to compromise with.

"You don't understand. She's not wanting to compromise. She hates me! She doesn't want the life I want. She's the total opposite of me, and she won't even talk to me!"

"She may hate you but without you she can't have a life either, and it seems like you've coexisted for over twenty-something years together. Then something changed. What pissed her off so much?" he asks directly. I remember the words she shouted at me, that Ian was hers, that she wouldn't let me have him.

"I...I think it was me being with Ian," I tell him quietly. He looks at me and lets out a deep sigh. I see the slightest shake of his head.

"I don't even want to be with Ian. I'm going to be with Kam. I think she'd leave me alone if I just let Ian go, which I am," I say optimistically. I can tell he's not sold on my theory but he doesn't voice his skepticism, even though it's pretty obvious.

"Also, I'm pretty sure Alana doesn't want anything to do with being a mother." I say this quietly and he looks at me puzzled at first, then his eyes widen.

"Are you saying you're..." He trails off.

"Yes. I'm pregnant. That's why Alana let me come back."

For the first time my cool and collected brother looks genuinely shocked. And then I see it. He looks a little scared; it's nice to see him not be so blasé about things.

"Does Helen know about this?" he asks. His voice is calm but I can hear the anxiety underneath it. I nod. He lets out a deep breath and runs his hand through his thick hair. The fact that what I've just said has frazzled him is making me nervous.

"That's why I think she's going to stay away...for good. I know that didn't happen in your case but even though our situation is similar, it's not the same."

"You're a grown woman and I can't tell you what to do. I can just say, if you're going to have a baby it's more important than ever that you come to some type of understanding with Alana." He sounds more serious than I've ever heard him before.

"But..." I start and he leans forward now, his hands clasped together as if to brace himself.

"Listen to me. I know you think you have it all worked out. And who knows, maybe you fucking do. But if you're *wrong*, this can end up being a catastrophe." He locks eyes with me, and in this small moment I don't like him. I hate him for trying to burst my bubble, rain on my parade. Maybe he's even jealous that I have a way to fix my life, that it doesn't have to be as screwed up as his. Then I remember he's not who I should be talking to anyway, he's the alter. Maybe he's on Alana's side.

"I appreciate your concern, and I'm going to take it into consideration. I promise," I tell him, but from my tone he knows this conversation is over. I want him out of my space. I hate the rush of uncertainty he's caused to pass through me. He glares at me and I can tell he's pissed but he seems to be having an internal conversation with himself on how far to push. He gets up and heads to the door, but before leaving turns around.

"It's not just about you anymore. There's another life, separate from yours, that's innocent that you need to think about," he says, an edge to his voice.

"I'd really appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone about this. It's still early and no one else knows, not even Kam, so please..." I say, ignoring his previous statement.

"Yup," he says, his voice clipped, before leaving the room.

IAN

Family is fucked up. No one cares about you. They say they do but they don't. Family just fucks you over like strangers do. They lie, and cheat you, and at the end of the day apologize like it's supposed to mean something—but it doesn't mean shit. Blue lied to me, Alana lied to me. They're liars and not to be trusted.

I stare at the picture of Alana's face, one I haven't looked at in so long. I should have known she'd destroy my life, with those big soulful eyes, her angelic voice, her warnings that she was fucking nuts. But nope, I didn't listen. And here I am. I take the portrait and run my finger across her face before throwing it across the room and watching it shatter. I'm a crying mess, a complete little bitch. I take another swig from the bottle of Jameson I picked up on my way home from finding out my cousin—and best friend—is the worst kind of traitor, maybe even a psychopath, because how the hell could he pretend and lie how he did? I shuffle over to the broken portrait, getting on my knees so I can try to piece it back together.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me the truth!" I shout to no one. She could have just told me the truth. I would have loved her, accepted her. We would have figured it out. She trusted Blue with the truth but not me, her damn husband. I'm proud of myself. I've come a long way on this little fucked up journey I've been on. Since Megan showed up and Blue lied to my fucking face about knowing my wife. He let me cry like a little girl, walk around like a confused lunatic thinking I was going insane, when he knew all along. But I didn't slam his head into a wall or choke him out. No battery or assault. I'm not in jail so it's progress right?

I look at the bottle of whiskey in my lap. It's half empty...or is it half full? This is the truth: whiskey doesn't lie to you. It doesn't break your heart or fuck you over. It heals you, makes you feel better about the shitty life that's become yours. It's consistent and honest, which is exactly what I need. Just me and Jameson against the fucking world.

Boom Boom Boom. Fuck, my head. The booms don't stop. I force my eyes open and hear the noise repeated. I don't have any idea what time it is. I attempt to push myself off the couch. My stomach

wavers like it's on a fucking ocean. My head feels like it's in a vice-grip. The noise doesn't stop. And that's when I hear him.

"Ian. I'm not going anywhere until you open the door!" he shouts. I laugh because it has to be a joke. I know Blue—my cousin, who just sent cracks down my already broken life—isn't at my door pounding on it like he's a police officer demanding to be let in. Adrenaline soothes my pulsing headache enough to bring me to the door; I swing it open, then grab him by the throat before he can say anything. I attempt to slam him to the floor but the whiskey has my coordination off and I end up tripping over myself. He stops me from falling hard on my ass, but I still fall.

"Your stupid ass still went and got whiskey?!" he says, sounding disappointed. If I could just get him to stop swaying I'd kick him in the nuts. Yeah, it's a low blow, but I'm at a disadvantage. He pulls me by the shoulder and starts to help me up.

"Let me go!" I say, trying to push him away. I wobble and stumble as I do.

Shit, I am fucked up. I manage to make it to the couch, and before long he's in front of me with a cup of coffee, forcing it in my face.

"I know you're fucking mad. You deserve to be. But you won't be able to punch me until you sober up, okay?" he says, forcing it in my hand. I take it, too exhausted to protest, and force the hot liquid down. It makes me want to throw up but it stays down.

"Get out," I growl at him, but it sounds weak and pathetic.

"I'm not leaving bro. Not until I know you're okay."

"Don't fucking call me bro. You're not my brother, you're not my friend, and you sure as hell can't be fucking family," I tell him tightly.

"I fucked up man I know, I know I fucked up!" Now he's shouting.

"Sorry man," he says, obviously seeing me flinch.

"It all happened so fast. I tried to think of how to fix it, how to make it better, and I couldn't figure it out." He's sitting on the chair in front of me. I'm cursing myself for drinking so much because this is the part where I want to beat his ass, but I can't muster up the energy. I'm pretty sure I'd lack the coordination anyway.

"Fast? It happened fast...you said you and Alana were friends so you fucking knew what she had. You knew about Megan before she left me. Before you came and said you wanted to put the past shit

behind us. You knew then. It's been over a fucking year since that. What dimension are you fucking living in for you to try to say it happened fucking FAST!" He only looks away from me guiltily.

"Aly was my friend Ian. She was my friend when you and I weren't even talking. She was my best friend before I had a clue that you were the dude she was head over heels for." My stomach clenches at hearing him call her *Aly*. He has a nickname for her, my wife, the woman he's been pretending not to fucking know.

"You've got to understand—"

"I don't have to understand a fucking thing asshole!" I growl and he lets out a frustrated groan.

"Then just fucking listen for a minute, and by the time I'm done maybe you'll be sober enough to fucking hit me okay?" he fires back, and that's the only thing that shuts me up. I down the rest of the coffee and summon all my willpower to get myself together so I can do just that—punch his fucking face in.

"When Alana told me about her condition, about Megan, I told her to tell you. I told her it wouldn't have mattered to you. That I knew you and if you'd married her nothing would have been big enough to keep you guys apart. That you're the most loyal, protective guy I know." I sneer at him, hoping my look says he's a fuckin traitorous bastard.

"She told me she was going to tell you! Before you guys were supposed to go road tripping. She said that she'd tell you..." He's up now pacing the room, and I have to stare at my lap because he's making me dizzy.

"She was going to try to get help, from her brother..."

"She knew about Cal? *He* fucking knew about Alana!" I say, sitting up on the couch, rage bubbling inside of me. That piece of shit knew all along...

"No. Not him. Dexter Crestfield," he says. I try to swallow my contempt.

"He had found out about her and wanted to help her, said her brother suffered from a form of the disorder and he could help," he continues to explain, and I'm wondering how the fuck it ended up going so wrong. If he told her to tell me and she had this rich fucking brother to help her, why the fuck did she leave? Why the hell am I sitting here brokenhearted and shitfaced? He must sense my patience running out because I want him to get to the fucking point—

why I should forgive him, how he thought he was looking out for me, why he sided with Alana when she was being irrational and stupid as fuck!

"She changed her mind when you said that you wanted to have a kid," he says quietly, and I almost stop breathing. I think back to the last night I was with her, how I got caught up in the moment and we were going at it...it was intense and I was so fucking happy and I asked her to have my baby. I remember the look on her face, like I had just told her I went bankrupt and lost all our shit. A cross between her being terrified and disgusted. I cover my face with my hands.

"I didn't mean right fucking then!" I shout out loud.

"Ian, she didn't think it could ever happen. She was scared and thought she was cheating you out of what you wanted." His voice is quieter now, like he's walking on eggshells.

"She told me she was going to tell you before that happened, but I don't think she really was. I think she was going to keep trying to hide it from you...she convinced herself that she could make it work but, when you brought up kids, her having a baby, she couldn't exactly hide *that* from Megan, from you. She made a bad decision, one I wish I could have talked her out of, but she really was trying to not hurt you. She thought letting you go was the best thing."

I hate the fact that tears are coming from my eyes now but I can't stop them. Before long I'm crying so hard my body is rocking. I feel Blue sit beside me; he brings a hand to my shoulder.

"I'm sorry br—Ian. I should have just said something, but she was so fucking stubborn she convinced me it was the best thing and I couldn't change her mind! I didn't know what it was like to have her disorder, and a small part of me didn't really believe her, that she was going to stay gone, that there really was another part of her... but then I saw, and it was surreal and insane and mind boggling because Megan was so different from her. I really didn't know what to do. I became friends with Megan but she was already really into Kam, and he was Katy's brother. I thought I was in love with Katy. Everything just snowballed so I kept waiting and hoping for Aly to come back, to talk some sense into her, but she never did."

I finally still myself.

"Keep going," I tell him. He lets out a breath.

"So I finally thought that if I could get Megan to see you, if I could get her to remember you, give her some information about her past, that Aly would come back. She'd connect the dots and we'd figure it all out. But she didn't and I realized I'd fucked up everything. I was lying to you, to Megan, to Katie and Kam...it was just shit! It's all shit."

I glance at him and see that he has tears in his eyes, and I wonder when we become such little bitches?

Alana did this and it makes me sort of laugh.

"What?" he asks.

"If anyone could make a grown man feel like a bitch, it'd be my girl," I tell him. He nods, a ghost of a grin on his face.

"I really fucked up and I know there's nothing that I could ever say to fix this, to make you trust me again. But I swear I'd never lie or keep anything from you about this ever again, I swear to God. Just let me help try to figure this out, to make all of this right," he pleads. I don't answer. I don't know what he could do to make this right, to fix it. This mess seems beyond repairing.

"Why'd you tell me now?" I ask him curiously. "Was the guilt just too much?" I ask him. He wipes his eye and shakes his head.

"No, Kam met with me. He found out about you," he says quickly.

"Megan didn't tell him about me?" I ask, almost feeling betrayed. Was I so insignificant that she didn't bother to mention me to the supposed love of her life?

"Kam's family is...they're like this rich political aspiring powerhouse. They're cool people but I think she thought it may have been too much for him to handle. Katie told me that Kam said he was Megan's first love..."

My stomach flips over and the coffee and last night's whiskey comes out my throat and all over the floor. Our conversation is on pause while we both go and get buckets of water and soap to clean it all up. It's almost a welcome interruption to the intensity that was filling the room. Once the last part is cleaned up, I speak first.

"What'd he want to know? Did you tell him her ex-husband is crazy as fuck and won't ever give up on her?" I say pointedly, and Blue covers up a snicker.

"I didn't, but I made Megan tell him about you."

"What did she say?" I ask, trying not to sound desperate.

"I don't know exactly what she told him but he knows you exist. To what extent, that I don't know." I clench the mop in my hand tighter before carrying it off to my small storage closet. Blue does the same with the bucket.

"How do you think it went?" I ask, hoping against hope that maybe him knowing the truth would be too much. I mean, this shit is a lot to handle and I know a lot of guys who wouldn't be able to. It's selfish but I don't give a fuck. If Megan didn't have this Kam guy it'd make it a lot easier to convince her that I can love both her and Alana, that they're one—or should be—and whoever is with her should understand that.

Blue nods his head solemnly.

"I don't think he's going anywhere bro. He's head over heels for her."

I feel my jaw tighten and let out a deep breath. He hasn't really had to deal with the shit parts of this. I know for a fact he hasn't met Alana. Megan hasn't run away screaming from him. She's told him the truth, she hasn't given up on them. I fight the thought that maybe their love is stronger since Alana gave up on us, but I don't know if she did. She thought she was doing what was right. That's selfless, even though she was wrong.

"But Alana came back, you said." Blue interrupts my thoughts and I nod.

"A second time," he reiterates. "That means she's fighting right? She's not content with just riding it out in the background anymore. If she's fighting for you, we have to fight for her," he says, and I frown.

"How? How am I supposed to fight for her? Megan doesn't want me anywhere near her," I tell him, feeling defeated, dehydrated, and exhausted with everything that's been laid out on the table.

"That's the point. She must not want to see you because Aly's trying to get back to you. If Megan ran away from you after everything happened like you said, then Megan's scared of her coming back obviously," Blue says, trying to muster some enthusiasm in his voice.

"Just don't give up hope man." Blue pats my shoulder. "Kam's a good guy but I don't see him being able to deal with Aly. You could love them both."

I push a hand through my hair and look at the shattered picture of Alana that's behind the TV. I walk over to it and see her face staring back at me full of life, promise, secrets. I can't give up on her, even if I'm tired and emotionally exhausted. I can't walk away from her, pretend that she never existed, let Megan lead the life she wants without trying again. I'd be lying to myself if I did, so this pity party needs to come to a close. I just need something—a sign—to keep fighting, to not give up...*something*. I look at Blue, who's face has gone blank.

"Megan just texted me. She wants to meet with both of us." His tone is reticent, but what he said is exactly what I needed to hear.

Chapter 9

Ian

MY STOMACH HAS BEEN WOBBLY all day, my thoughts all a cloud of her. Megan/Alana, the women who both flipped my life upside down. It's been a day since that text came through. My sign, I've come to think of it as, said Megan wanted to meet with us the next day. Thankfully it gave me time to sober up, get the stench of alcohol out of my skin, and to flush out my brain and try to think clearly. I keep running through my thoughts of what to say to her, how to explain that we have to figure things out, that if Alana...no, not if. Alana *is* her, and she's still in there somewhere. We have to come to a conclusion that will make both of them content even if that's her taking space from both me and this Kam guy. I can't tell her who to date or see romantically but that she sure as hell shouldn't commit to marrying this guy.

I'm trying to figure out how to do this without overwhelming her or scaring her off. I don't want a repeat of the outcome that landed her in the hospital, but Blue will be there to be our buffer. He's nervous as hell too, and has decided to be honest with her about meeting Alana first. I'm sure it's going to suck for him to come clean. Blue has been someone she trusted and he lied to her for Alana and for me. Even though Megan is a lot more in control of her emotions, be-

ing the more rational of the two, she's going to be pissed off. I just hope she believes I wasn't in on it, that this wasn't a trick.

I really wish Blue would just wait until things are steadier, more concrete and not as messy, but then that'd make me a hypocrite. I'd be asking him to do what he did for Alana, to me, and I can't ask him that. I hope Megan will know that I can't pretend to be shocked to see her, that I could barely pretend to only want her friendship, to not want Alana back—*her* back.

The address she texted us to meet her at is somewhere we haven't been before. It's on the same block as Megan's apartment but it's different. We find a park about a block and a half away and walk towards it. I want to pull Blue along faster; he's walking like a man in a funeral procession. I know this conversation isn't going to go as well for him as I hope it will for me. I don't even expect for anything to be solved, really. I just want it to be a step in the right direction. A beginning, a bridge between the two of us—because the last time I saw her, the bridge we had broke.

"You're going to be cool right?" he asks.

"Yeah, I'm cool. I don't want a repeat of last time," I tell him honestly, and he nods. As we get closer to the apartment, my stomach drops. Cal and Dexter are standing outside on the porch. What the hell are they doing here? Blue and I exchange a glance.

"Stay chill," he tells me, his voice steady. I grit my teeth but don't say anything. Cal sees us first, but the other one, Dexter, comes down and greets us. I feel my blood pressure rise. What if Megan's not here? What if it was some kind of twisted play for them to tell us to stay away from her? I try to remain calm but adrenaline is already pushing through my veins.

"We come in peace," Dexter announces with his hands up in a truce, a self-satisfied smile on his face. Blue and I stop before going up. Cal and I both stare each other down.

"Is Megan here?" I ask tightly.

"She is. We're just here for support," Dexter explains calmly. Blue and I exchange a look. Support for what? We knew Megan and Alana before these guys even knew she existed.

I glance up at Cal, ready for some shitty comment to be thrown at me.

"It's what he said," Cal mutters, without his usual condescending tone. I glance at Blue who looks as skeptical as I am. Neither one

of us are used to this, these big brothers and supposed gatekeepers. I'm not used to Alana having anyone but me. But hell, I don't give a shit if they're here. It's not going to stop me from saying anything I planned on, and I guess I can understand them wanting to be here for her after what happened last time.

Cool.

I don't want any problems today. Shit shouldn't be so fucking complicated all the time.

"Good," I say, making my way up the stairs with Blue behind me. The apartment is big but there's not much furniture in it, and I realize it's probably a model unit they own and rent out. As we go further in we notice Dexter and Cal both remain outside, which is a little more comforting. And then I see her. She's not facing us, but sitting at a round table in a dining room, her long dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. She turns to greet us, and I wait for my heart to lift, but her expression is reserved. There's no light in her eyes but she gives us a small smile, even if it looks forced, as she stands.

"Thanks for coming," she says. Blue approaches her for a hug and I'm jealous that she gives him a warm embrace. Her and I only exchange awkward forced grins, and my nerves ramp up again. This is going to be a hell of a lot harder than I thought.

"Have a seat," she says, gesturing to the chairs at the round table, and we both do. We're quiet like we're parents at a parent-teacher conference with our kid, who was caught screwing off.

"I'm so glad you're okay," I tell her. The words come out heightened and sound desperate even to myself. She looks away from me as soon as I finish, but I notice her skin is flushed.

"It happened but we're past it. I'm completely fine," she says, her tone becoming a smidge more friendly.

I nod. She looks good, just some red swelling around her chin. There's a bandage on her hand, but she looks so much fucking better than I thought she would after seeing her on the ground like that.

"You've got some expensive bodyguards out there," Blue jokes. This time her smile is genuine, and I'm jealous. I can't help but be a tiny bit happy that she's about to become as upset with him as I was as the course of this conversation goes on, but then I check myself, realizing that's the last thing I should want. Blue is my go-to when her and I can't communicate. If she is upset with him I won't have

any way to reach her, and I suddenly want to tell Blue not to say anything.

I fold my arms across my chest to keep from touching her, reaching out to her, remembering *her*—Megan's—lips on mine. *Her* body against mine. How *she* gave in. I want to bring it up to make her admit it happened but I know that's not the smart thing to do. Though from the way her eyes are avoiding mine, and her skin reddening, I think she already remembers.

"Are you moving here?" Blue asks. I want to tell him to stop with the small talk. I can barely sit still and just want to get to the point, to push pass the awkwardness and pleasantries and get right down to it.

"No, it's one of Cal's buildings. He says it's *one* of his Airbnb properties. Crazy right?" she says brightly, soaking in the easiness of the question.

"Why didn't you want to see me Megan, when you were in the hospital?" I cut in. The brightness in her eyes dulls as soon as they land on me and I'd be lying if I didn't say it isn't a punch in the stomach.

She lets out a small breath but it's long. She starts to stroke her hand with her thumb—something I've never seen Alana do—so I guess this is a Megan thing.

"And why are your brothers here? Are you scared of me now?" I continue. Blue nudges me to I guess chill, but this is starting to feel weird. Us meeting at the place she doesn't live in, with her brothers standing outside as if she needs protection from us...who am I kidding—not us, *me*.

"They're here because of what happened last time Ian. I'm okay but I could have been killed." Her voice is slightly raised and it stings me. She's right, she could have died, and it causes my adrenaline to be replaced with guilt.

"Alana attacked me," she forces out. I look at her, confused.

"What do you mean?" Blue asks before I can.

"After what happened," she says, almost cringing. Her eyes land on mine briefly and my heart dips a little.

"Alana was angry and she started shouting these piercing profanities at me. I was so caught off guard that before I knew it I was in the middle of the street, and the car was right there."

Shit!

This is my fault. I feel a truckload of guilt pour down on me thinking of what Blue said, how maybe Alana didn't want Megan and I together, and this basically solidifies that. I'm furious at Alana because she could have gotten them killed, and at the same time my heart rate speeds up because she's still in there, she still cares. I scold myself for being a selfish idiot.

"I'm sorry Megan," I tell her sincerely. "About what happened..."

"What happened was inevitable." Her words shock the hell out of me, but her tone is really fucking dismissive. I'm confused, and glance over at Blue, who seems to be as well.

"I think it was good that it happened. We both were able to see that regardless of what you thought *we* had, you and I, it wasn't between *us*. It was between you and Alana," she says confidently, but I feel my expression break.

"You're Alana." I'm tired of the bullshit, pussyfooting around, separating them. I can do that but she shouldn't.

She glares at me, like I've thrown water in her face.

"No. No, I'm not, and that's what you keep failing to understand," she says, her voice raised.

"Isn't the whole point of DID to get you both to come together? Because it's *you*, and you're both the same." My voice is raising now, and I feel Blue's hand on my shoulder.

"No Ian, Alana is impulsive, reckless, and selfish. Her almost getting us killed showed us that!" she counters, and before I can reply she's starting again.

"Besides, obviously Alana wouldn't be content with the idea that you want to keep forcing. She doesn't want it! She doesn't want us together, you and I. Besides, I'm in love with someone else!"

Her statement is a punch in the gut, then her expression softens.

"I'm sorry," she adds quietly. "I wish it wasn't that way, that things were different, that Alana didn't hurt you, that you weren't involved in this. But we—you and I—have to be adults. Mature, reasonable adults, and put an end to this."

I'm glaring at her now.

"Megan, I know the accident scared you, and Kam has plans for you, but with everything going on do you think that you should even be with anyone right now? Maybe you just need time to heal and figure things out. Shouldn't you just take things slow until that

happens?" Blue says, keeping his tone easy and thoughtful. He's doing a hell of a lot better than I am. I'm ready to argue, to tell her she's wrong, that *we* can figure it out!

Her gaze leaves us and she focuses on her hands. The room is silent. I can see her thinking, urging herself to say something. I have things to say too but I want to hear her response, without starting another verbal battle.

"I'm pregnant."

The words hang in the air and I look at Blue, then back at her.

She's pregnant?

I start to feel nervousness and elation course through me. It's words I've wanted to hear Alana say since she left, and it's happened. It's real! The anger, coldness, and frustration pours off me and I can't fight the smile spreading across my face. I look at Blue, my eyes wide with excitement.

This solves everything! But Blue's face is blank; he looks like the air's been knocked out of him. When his eyes meet mine he doesn't look relieved or excited, there's just pity in them. I turn back to Megan, whose eyes hold the same thing Blue's does, and it hits me.

"I'm pregnant by Kam, Ian."

I run the words she's said back again. I'm pregnant, makes sense. But by Kam? That's when it feels like the room has started to close in. How the hell could I forget about her fucking perfect golden boy, the one who's been staying with her, fucking her, claiming her? I'm an idiot. A fucking idiot!

My heart is pounding so loud it's like drums going off in my ears. What the fuck did she just say? My breathing is shaky and I look at her, at the face of the woman who made me the happiest man in the world, who just crushed my heart...the heart that was already in pieces. I feel myself trembling but I'm not because I'm looking at my chest and see I'm not shaking. I fight images of her with a man I've never seen before, him making love to her, him rubbing her belly, him holding a baby that was supposed to be mine.

"I told you before that he's going to ask me to marry him, especially now. I'm going to say yes." I hear her but I don't, because what she's saying can't be real. This can't be fucking happening. But it all makes sense now. Why we're meeting her at a place she doesn't live, why her brothers are outside. She knows that what she just said is going to destroy me and she's sitting there, her eyes downcast like

I'm a fucking stranger, like what she's said isn't a bomb that's going to obliterate my life.

"So you see, there can't be a you and me...or Alana. *I'm* having this baby, and I'm going to have a life, and where Alana fits into it I don't know yet, but there's not room for anyone else. I'm so sorry." Her voice is sorrowful but strong, determined. I can't see if there's tears in her eyes because mine are blurring my vision too much. I hear her chair move back and her footsteps leave the room. I feel Blue's hand on my shoulder.

"Ian..." he says so quietly but I can't look at him. I can't let him see the hurt, disappointment, what's broke inside of me. He'll see it but I don't want anyone to see it now. I want to hold on to it, because even though it hurts it connects me to her, to us, and that's all I have left. What I thought would be a new beginning is the end, and the hope I had inside of me is dead.

"We should get out of here," Blue says. I hear him standing, but I don't respond. My gaze is still on my lap.

"I'm going to go get the car so you can come straight out when I pull around okay?" I nod the slightest bit and he heads out. When he's gone I force my head up and push myself out of my seat. I look around the apartment but I already know she's gone. I can feel it. When I make it to the entrance I see it's just Cal standing by the door. I swear if he says the wrong thing I'm going to break his face, I don't give a shit about jail. Nothing matters now. But he only opens the door for me to leave.

"I-I'm sorry Ian," is all I hear before the door closes behind me. The fact that he truly sounds sorry makes me want to die.

Blue has pulled up in front of the apartment building. I make my way down the stairs and pour myself into the seat of his car. We don't say anything on the short ride home. Thankfully he doesn't try to talk to me, and I welcome the silence once we're in the apartment. I sit on the couch and he turns on a basketball game and we watch it in silence. He hands me the bottle of whiskey but I just nudge it away. I don't need to feel numb. I don't feel anything, and I doubt I ever will again. I'm dead.

Megan

I knew it would be difficult to tell Ian that it was over, but it was still something I looked forward to. I just wanted to get the weight off of me, to not have my chest tight with anxiety, to not have to keep carrying the burden of a man clinging to a ghost inside of my head. I wanted—*needed*—a clean start with Kam before telling him about the baby, and I couldn't do that until I made it clear to Ian to not let Alana keep his heart captive anymore. I won't have him held hostage to some vision of a future that will never happen, that can't happen. I wanted to do it on my own but I wasn't sure how Ian would react; if he'd be angry, combative, if he wouldn't accept things and continue to try to convince me that we could work. Now more than ever I have to be careful because I'm not just thinking for me anymore.

So I had him bring Blue and I asked Dexter and Cal if they were free to be with me when I talked to him. I would have just asked Cal but I didn't know if it would take them both since Blue would be with Ian. I didn't expect things to come to blows but I didn't know what would be needed, what I'd need, and they both said yes. I felt good about it the entire day, reminding myself that it was the right thing to do. I realized that it would hurt him, that he would be angry or sad, but that it'd be for his own good. It would be good for all of us. I built up my courage, pulling it from deep down within me. I didn't think I had it and can only contribute what I found to the baby.

I was confident and content that I was doing the right thing even on the ride over. Cal picked me up and Dexter was there waiting for us. Cal was quiet in the car. I felt bad about how short I was with him at the hospital the other day. I'm learning that I don't think my brother's feelings are easily hurt because even though we didn't talk much about anything, other than small talk about Lauren and her pregnancy progressing, he didn't bring up mine. He offered steadiness, a cool calm that I really needed. Neither asked questions about why I needed them there but I think they knew. Maybe it's a sibling connection or just them being there for their little sister. I'm not sure what it was but I appreciated it. Everything felt right, that I was on

the precipice of doing something positive. I was at peace right until Ian sat down in front of me.

Seeing Ian in person is indescribable. It's easy to downplay what is between us when reminiscing about it, reflecting on it. But when he's in the room, when his eyes lock on mine, it's an unbreakable connection. However, I reminded myself that now there was something in between that, growing inside of me, and that it would make my connection with Kam just as strong. What we have is already beyond solid but our baby has made it indestructible.

Sitting across from Blue, my best friend, and Ian—the man a part of myself loves more than anyone—and knowing what I was about to do broke my heart. It took everything in me to not tremble, to try to remain calm, levelheaded, and reasonable. I was pushed on by the fact that even with him there, with me about to tell him what would end them...*us*, Alana had not said a word. No whispers or roars. She was quiet, which let me know it was the right thing to do, that my theory could be right in that the baby has scared her away and given me a strength that's made her unneeded.

I realized the moment Ian spoke that I was going to have to be quick because I could feel my emotions threatening to pour out and over, my stress about the situation coming to the surface. I've only ever equated that with Alana, but what I didn't expect when I spoke the words that would end it all was that they would cause his brilliant eyes to light up. The weight of the world seemed to fall from his shoulders and he looked like the happiest man alive.

For a second it was contagious; if I hadn't come to my senses I would have acted on the urge to stand up and hug him. With horror, I grasped the enormity of his reaction. He wasn't understanding. He'd misconstrued what I said and that hit me in the face like a ton of bricks. I realized the fallout would be so much worse than I thought. When I told him my baby is Kam's I could see the light leave his eyes. I witnessed right in front of me something in him break. I steeled myself for anger, for arguing, for shouting, but none of it came. Instead, I watched the joy that exploded inside him become extinguished like a butterfly someone stepped on. As I watched him I had to fight against the impulse to comfort him, to tell him everything would work out and that he'd be okay, that he'd find someone to make him happy. For a moment I felt something, *her* maybe, begin to stir within me, but I fought it by keeping images of

my baby, labor, being a mother, and holding my newborn in my arms in the forefront of my mind. And I won.

For the moment, at least. I wasn't able to tell him that he would be fine, better without me. I only trusted myself enough to tell him I was sorry, then leave. I was being suffocated by guilt. I ran away so fast I almost knocked Dexter over. I told him through struggling breath I needed to get home, to leave, and without question Cal told him he'd handle things. I tried not to think of what that meant and allowed Dexter to whisk me down the stairs, his driver in front of the building before my foot hit the sidewalk.

We didn't go back to my house. I was a little paranoid that he'd go there and wait for me, but I know that was silly because I saw the fight he had go up in smoke before I left. We went to Dexter's and Helen was waiting on me in her office, with warm chamomile tea. Before I took it in my hands I texted Kam to make sure he wasn't at the apartment just in case Ian went there. Once he confirmed he wasn't I let out a deep breath and to my embarrassment broke down in front of Dr. Lyce, body-shaking sobs rocking me. Before I knew it I could feel Dr. Lyce's arms around me and I took comfort in them. After I finally caught my breath she asked if I was ready to talk, and I am now.

I have to talk and get it out of me, the confession of a heartbreaking sinner. We move in front of the large fireplace where two luxurious arm chairs are. It is warm and cozy and almost melts away my stress. She pours me another cup of tea, since the one I had went cold after my breakdown, and I take a small sip, wiping my last tear away.

"What happened Megan?" she asks, her voice soft and neutral. So I tell her—about my theory of Alana being terrified of motherhood, how I told Kam about Ian, and that I let Ian know I was pregnant. I don't tell her about the ring or me telling Ian I'm marrying Kam because Dr. Lyce has made her thoughts clear on big life changes triggering Alana. I'd rather do it with support, with Kam by my side.

"How do you feel now that everything has been laid out in the open?" she asks. I stop and think of how I feel now, and there's so many emotions going on inside of me I take probably a full minute before I respond.

"I feel like it needed to be done. I'm happy because there's nothing else standing in the way of Kam and me. I feel like I'm at the start of something wonderful but, knowing what Ian is going through..." I trail off, tears beginning to choke my throat again.

"The feeling is devastating," I tell her, letting the tears fall from my eyes and promptly wiping them with a Kleenex.

"And why do you feel devastated Megan?" she asks.

I'm confused. "I thought it was obvious. He's devastated."

"But why are *you* devastated?" she asks again, and I think about it.

"Ian is a great guy. I hate that he's hurting."

"Yes, I understand that, but devastated is a strong word, though your reaction is clear that it's the correct one," she says. I look at her, wondering what she's getting at.

"Empathy is a wonderful trait to have, but to feel devastated because of someone else's pain indicates something a little more, don't you think?"

"I think I feel guilty," I say, attempting to swallow back the tears coming again.

"And what is it you feel guilty about?" she asks repetitiously. I start to say because I'm breaking his heart but then I realize that *me* feeling guilty about that shouldn't equate to devastation. When I told him that I was going to be with Kam and I loved him, that technically was breaking his heart, but I didn't feel like this.

"What do you think?" I ask her, not in a condescending tone, but really wanting to know her answer. She smiles at me, and I know I'm not going to get one.

"Is it possible that your feelings have grown towards him?"

"I think maybe I'm hormonal." I laugh, wanting to change the subject.

"Maybe?" She offers a small smile.

"I think I will feel better once I tell Kam about the baby. I'm feeling better already." It's part truth and part lie but from her expression it looks like Dr. Lyce knows this.

"If circumstances were different, if you didn't know you were pregnant, would you have still had the same conversation with Ian today? Excluding the obvious, of course."

"My choice of being with Kam has nothing to do with the baby. It would have been the same even if I wasn't pregnant. I'm in love

with him," I tell her, feeling offended.

"And Alana, how does she feel about Kam?" I look at her, perplexed.

"I don't know and I don't care. It doesn't matter. She's gone and I hope she stays gone." Dr. Lyce lets out a breath that's almost undetectable, and it makes me uncomfortable that she won't consider my theory that Alana is gone, if not indefinitely, but that she'll stay gone during my pregnancy at least.

"Megan, it does matter, and it will, and I can't express how important it is to try and connect with her now more than ever."

"I think the most important thing now is to focus on my child being born into a safe, healthy, loving environment," I counter.

"Of course. But to maintain that we need to make sure your mental health is a top priority," she says, with a warm smile on her face. Her words are like ice to my veins.

"You're the one who told me to ask Ian to deny Alana if she comes back," I remind her tightly, feeling my defenses rise.

"Yes. However, circumstances have changed."

"What did you think would happen if I asked him that? In fact, the whole reason I was in the accident was because I asked him to do *that* and it caused my accident. Alana was furious," I say, realization dawning on me. "Now that I think about it, following your advice has made things worse." Her face is blank, not revealing any response to what I just said. She doesn't look offended or even apprehensive.

"And when you say worse, are you referring to Alana coming about?"

I don't answer at first, just stare at the embers in her fireplace.

"You said she reacted really badly to the baby. I don't want to risk her taking over and doing something stupid, irreparable."

"Like..." she asks. I roll my eyes, annoyed.

"I don't know, but if she doesn't want this baby..." I can't even continue without my voice breaking.

"Alana didn't say that, Megan," Helen says, her voice even.

"But she freaked out right?"

"It was an overwhelming situation for her I believe, like it would be for most women who didn't plan on pregnancy," she admits.

"I'm so afraid of her ruining everything—my life, my relationship, and now what's going to be my family."

“Are you willing to undergo hypnosis in hopes that I can speak with her again?” she asks, and I glare at her. Is she for real?

“I don’t want her to come out now! There’s too much at stake. I’d rather continue working on the coping strategies to prevent her from coming back.”

“But the end goal, Megan, would be...”

“I don’t care what the end goal is right now. I’m concerned about the next nine or however many months,” I say firmly.

“Megan I promise you that I will do whatever I can to make sure you have a happy and healthy pregnancy so that your little one will arrive safe.”

I smile. That’s all I want. It’s what’s most important right now, more than anything. I rub my belly and imagine the little bean inside.

TODAY MEGAN COMES HOME. Well, not home because this apartment won't be our home. It's the building her younger brother owns, but I don't like her feeling beholden to anyone and she doesn't have to. Alana may not have had anyone in her corner that really supported her but I'm here for Megan, and once she becomes my wife my family will be here for her too. Still, I've cleaned the apartment, stocked it with groceries, and even bought her favorite candles she likes. I want her to be as comfortable as possible, and for her mental stress to be as minimal as I can make it. When we talked about everything, it took all I had to not be visibly upset or angry when I found out she knew about Ian and didn't tell me, and that she's had all these secrets with Blue. But she's promised me all of that is over. It's me and her now against the world.

My phone rings and I glance at it thinking it's Megan ready for me to pick her up, but instead it's my father. He's called daily wanting to talk about Megan but I'm not up to speaking with him yet. I want to be in a more solid place with Megan before I do. Once she's home and things feel right, and she lets me know that she's cut off contact with this Ian guy, then I'll talk to my dad. She's doing that today, it's why I've been keeping myself as busy as I can trying to keep my mind off of her dealing with everything alone.

I wanted to do it with her, but she said it's something she had to do without me, that she didn't want to rub *us* in the guy's face and prevent things from escalating. I don't know anything about this guy and that's another thing I haven't been able to stop thinking about—

who he is, what real history him and this Alana had. It shouldn't matter because I know what they had doesn't compare to what Megan and I have, but I'm only human.

It's probably better that I don't know more about the guy. I've tried to convince myself he's unimportant, that he's a part of a past that isn't even hers, a life she doesn't even want. Megan's nice and is always taking into consideration this dude's feelings because she's always thinking of others before herself. She's too kind and sweet sometimes, and that's where I'll come in once she says yes to me. I won't let anyone boss her around or treat her any less than she deserves.

I grab my phone and text my dad that I'll call him next week, and that I'm fine and everything's okay. When Megan calls me to pick her up it's from an address I'm not familiar with. I've been to her brother Cal's new home in the suburbs. It is beautiful and large, not much different than my relatives and more established friends, but this is a mansion. I wait at the gate to be buzzed in and when I pull up I'm greeted by a valet to take my car. I give the keys and look around, impressed at the magnificence of it all. Megan's come a long way from when I picked her up on the desolate street in the crummy area and small apartment for our first date. I'm greeted by a butler who welcomes me to the "Crestfield Residence." That name sets off alarm bells.

I know that name.

A few moments later Megan, Dr. Lyce, and a shorter man with light brown hair—who may be a little older than me given the distinguished way he's dressed—appears. Megan's face lights up when she sees me and I can't help but wrap her in my arms before I say anything else to Dr. Lyce or the other man she's with.

"It's good to see you Kam."

We exchange a handshake. "Good to see you as well."

Megan smiles and introduces the man. "This is Dexter Jr., my brother and Dr. Lyce's husband."

"Nice to meet you. I've heard very good things about you," Dexter says. His handshake is firm. I wish I could say the same about him, but I don't remember Megan saying anything about him specifically, or Cal for that matter.

"Would you like to have a quick drink with me before you leave?" he asks.

It's the last thing I want to do. I want to get Megan home, feel her sleeping next to me, but since this is my first time meeting him it'd be rude to decline.

"Sure," I say, covering my disappointment up with enthusiasm.

"Great. I won't keep you long," he explains, with a knowing smile. Megan throws me an encouraging yet apologetic glance. He gestures for me to follow him and before long we're in a large rustic room, the walls covered with bookcases, a fireplace in front of two large leather armchairs which he gestures for me to sit at.

"What's your preference, Cognac, Scotch?" he asks, already filling his glass.

"Just water's fine for me, we have a long drive back," I tell him. They're almost forty minutes out from Megan's apartment. He smiles approvingly.

"Good man."

He sits in the chair across from me.

"So, your family is in politics correct?" he asks. I nod, wondering if Megan told him or if his wife did. One thing that makes me uncomfortable is her seeing Dr. Lyce. The relationship seems too muddled. I'm sure she's a professional, and by doing my own research I learned she is one of the most acclaimed in her field, but it still seems like a conflict of interest.

"Yes. My dad has some political aspirations and passed them on to me," I admit.

"A little bird told me that he has a very good chance of being the republican nominee for the house," he says, and I nod graciously.

"My father's a great man," I tell him.

"Another little birdy told me you may have some political aspirations yourself," he adds deliberately. I let out a laugh.

"One day. When the time is right." Dexter smiles and takes a sip from his glass.

"I'm still getting to know Megan," he starts, and I still myself in my seat. I know men like Dexter, I went to school with them growing up—wealthy, smart, and believing they know everything, that their opinions and actions shape their world and everyone else's. And usually they end up being right. I think for a moment that my parents and Megan's family would blend well with each other, that they would be impressed. My uncle George would be pissing himself to get on her good side again. I'm not entirely sure what the

Crestfields are into but it's obvious they are a juggernaut of wealth and power. I make a note to ask my father about them and feel guilty for not having returned his phone call.

"I have had the pleasure of meeting Alana. Have you?" he asks, his eyes narrowed on me. I shift a bit.

"I haven't," I tell him, trying to keep my tone even. Dexter nods and I hear him push out a small breath.

"I know the political landscape has changed those qualified to run and with what sort of baggage," he says lightly. I'm assuming he's referencing our current POTUS. I nod and a mirthless laugh escapes my mouth.

"However, I do worry if Megan's disorder is something that would hinder someone with those kinds of aspirations. Is it something your family has discussed with you?"

"I know what you're hinting at, however, that isn't going to be an issue with me. I love Megan and I intend for her to be my wife soon. My family also loves Megan. We plan on providing her all of the love and support that she needs," I tell him confidently.

"That doesn't necessarily answer my question." He laughs lightly.

"My family wants me to be happy. Megan is what makes me happy. There is nothing that would make me reconsider my love or relationship with her."

"I've had some experience with this disorder. My younger brother unfortunately has been battling with it his entire life." I can't help but flinch when he calls Megan's condition a "disorder."

"It is something that can cause even the most patient of people frustration. The weight of supporting someone going through this when there isn't really a cure can be daunting—"

"I know what I'm dealing with. Your wife has done a very good job explaining it all," I tell him firmly.

"Do you?" he asks smugly.

"Yes," I spout back. He sets his glass down.

"You haven't met Alana though have you?" he counters, and I feel my face flush.

"No," I admit.

"They're very different. Like night and day actually. How will you deal with being with a woman so different than the one you love? One who most likely will be extremely resentful of you?"

His tone and his glare is irritating. I didn't know I was about to be given the third degree when all I want is to take my girlfriend home, to get away from all of the worst case scenarios and the drama.

"I'm going to do whatever it takes so that Megan can be her best self, and if it means coming to some type of compromise with... *Alana*, then so be it."

"What if there is no compromise? What if she hates you? What if she's still in love with someone else?" he asks pointedly. My jaw twitches. I try to hide my frustration and remain calm.

"Ian is no longer a problem," I reply, with a hint of smugness. His expression doesn't change, but I feel good that I know about Ian, that it's not something that can be held over my head any longer.

"Look. I know that you're Megan's family and you want what's best for her, as do I, but if you're worried about me not supporting her or being committed to her, that's not the case," I explain to him, but his expression doesn't reveal what he thinks of what I've just said.

"I'm not one of those people who think marriage is something you try on and slip off if it gets hard. I believe in the vows that I'd make to her, for better or for worse," I tell him; he only slightly nods.

"Well. I guess there's not much else for us to talk about. I know this has been a difficult couple of days, and I'm sure you're anxious to get Megan home," he says, and I nod. We both stand. I don't think we've come to an agreement or understanding, but there's a mutual respect.

Once we're in the car Megan gives me a hug that says everything I'm feeling right now. Relief, appreciation, joy to be back by ourselves. I pull back and give her a kiss on her soft lips.

"How was your conversation with Dexter?" she asks cautiously.

"It was fine. I'm used to dealing with men like him," I tell her easily as we pull off.

"I know," she says, sounding relieved and almost proud. "It's weird though, to have these family relationships, everyone having these strong feelings about my wellbeing when I barely know them," she says, letting out a nervous laugh. I let out a sigh of relief, glad we're on the same page.

I'm so glad Megan has a family now, and the fact that she has one that is more than able to provide her the love and support she de-

serves. But I have to admit it's been jarring. I don't exactly agree with her view of it but I squeeze her hand in support. Even though she's expressing the awkwardness of it, I know she relishes that she has something that's been missing from her life for so long, and I am happy for her.

"How did your session go with Helen?" I ask. She says it went fine but doesn't give me any other details, and I assume it's because she's tired and wants to get to bed just like I do so I don't press her on it.

"I just want to thank you for being so great about all of this Kam. I know none of this is easy...and it may get harder," she says reluctantly.

"It's going to be fine sweetheart. Now that everything's out in the open, we're going to get through this. We're not just going to get through this—we're going to come out on top," I assure her. A stunning smile spreads across her face. It makes me feel good that she believes what I say, that she trusts me now that there's nothing else in between us. When we finally make it back to her apartment she's asleep. I carefully take her in my arms and help her into the house. She's in fantastic shape for just having been in a car accident but some of her skin is still swollen and red. I help her take off her clothes and she chooses one of my night shirts to sleep in, which warms my heart. She eases into bed and I change into some pajamas and slide in next to her. She immediately presses her body towards me and rests her hand on my chest.

"I love you so much Kam," she whispers quietly. I hold her against me and kiss her lips again, letting her know without words that I love her more than anything. I fight the urge to ask her to marry me right here and now. When I propose I want it to be special, romantic, something grand almost. She pulls back from me so we're face-to-face, takes my hand, and puts it underneath her shirt to rest on her stomach. I remind myself that she's probably too sore to have sex and try to think of every unsexy thought I can to fight off a hard-on. I start to trail my hand down her stomach, wanting to land between her thighs. To hear her moans and whimpers, to feel how wet she is and not be able to touch her will be torture, but it's too tempting...until she stops my hand and holds it at her belly button. I look at her curiously. Her eyes widen a bit and a soft smile spreads across her face.

"Kam. I'm pregnant."

I swallow hard, unsure if I'm dreaming, if what she just said I really heard or if it's some beautiful audio hallucination.

"You're pregnant?" I ask her before hesitantly allowing myself to really take in her words. Her smile lessens but she nods. Maybe my blank response has tensed her, but when she says yes again I shoot up in bed, unable to contain my elation.

"You're pregnant!" I say again, my face hurting from my smile. Now she's smiling just as hard, tears in her eyes.

"Yes!" she laughs, and I take her in my arms in disbelief.

"Are you sure?" I'm afraid to let my hope skyrocket.

"Yes. I'm sure. They told me at the hospital," she reveals, a tear falling down her cheek.

"Are you happy? I know things are so crazy right now and..." she starts. I cup her face in my hands and give her a long, firm kiss on the lips so there's no doubting my response.

"Does that answer your question?" She laughs and it's beautiful, but full of tears. I pull her towards me again and then pull away, lifting her shirt and looking down at her flat belly. I touch it again.

"My baby's in there?" I ask, in awe. She nods and places her hand over mine.

"Our baby," she says, with a smile I'll never get tired of.

"How far along are you? Are you feeling okay? Are you hungry? Do you need something to eat?!" I sound frantic.

"No I'm fine," she tells me, laughing. And then it hits me. She was in an accident and could have lost our baby.

"It's a miracle," I say.

"I don't know how far along I am but I have an appointment this Thursday with an OB. Do you think you're able to come?"

I scoff at her. "I wouldn't miss it for the world! Are you crazy?!" I laugh, my entire body buzzing. Then I notice her smile disappears and I realize what an idiotic thing it was that I just said.

"I didn't mean to..." I tell her quickly, not wanting anything to ruin this moment, our moment.

"No...it's okay. It's just. It's a reminder that..." She trails off, looking down at her stomach. Her stomach doesn't show the hint of anything being inside of it but we've been having sex like crazy so she could be anywhere from four weeks to twelve for all I know.

"Don't even think about any of that now. You don't worry about anything except taking care of our baby." I squeeze her hands and she nods, but her eyes look worried.

"I promise you that our baby will be born safe. I won't let anyone or anything get in the way of that. We're in this together now. Remember, you're not alone," I tell her, meaning it with every fiber in my body. I see a little relief spread across her face, and I need her to be completely relieved to know that everything is going to work out.

"I don't know how far along I am. My period has been sort of irregular the past few months, I think due to the stress of everything, so I don't have a clue how old this little guy is," she says, changing the subject.

"Little guy?" I ask her, amused, and she flushes.

"I just got a feeling sort of," she says coyly. I am so in love with this woman. I hop out of bed and go the closet.

"Babe, what are you doing?" she asks. I pull out the velvet box and hurry back to the bed and open it as if I'll wake up and it'll all be a dream if I don't show her right now.

"Marry me," I ask her, opening the box to show her the ring I bought months ago, the one I've wanted to give her for so long even though I knew it was too soon. I wanted to wait until it felt like the right time, but now I'm glad I didn't because I know now is the absolute perfect moment. She lets out a small sigh and tears come to her eyes, a perfect reserved smile on her face.

"I love you more than anything. I knew from the first time I saw you, you'd be important to me, and I've known for a while. I want you to be my wife, and this just makes everything perfect. Make me the happiest man in the world?" I ask her. Through her tears, the sincerest beautiful smile spreads across her face.

"Yes. Yes, Kam. It'd be an honor."

IAN

When Alana first left, when I woke up and found out she was gone, it was a nightmare. I remember being angry more than anything. I didn't really think she was gone for good. I couldn't believe that, I guess. I think it was my mind's way of trying to protect me, knowing at that moment—only a few days before we were supposed to go on our honeymoon road trip—that I didn't have a wife anymore. I wasn't just losing a wife, but a best friend, a soul mate. I couldn't handle that feeling so I decided to stay angry, then I transitioned from angry to bitter. I stayed bitter for a while then bounced back to anger. I tried to convince myself it was all a joke. That it wasn't really happening, not long term. Maybe she was scared. Neither one of us had ever been commitment type of people.

She'd quit her job, and said "I do," but maybe it was a lot for her to process. I didn't take in what she meant in the letter. I didn't try to understand it because the letter made no fucking sense to me then. I didn't know what the hell she was talking about. I had convinced myself that maybe it was some sort of test. Alana liked to play mind games and shit, maybe she wanted to make sure I'd go and do the apprenticeship and be focused on it even in the midst of her blowing my life up. I had told myself that I'd go and do it and once I was finished she'd show up at the end, we'd fight and fuck, and be just how we were. It's what pushed me through it, thinking she'd be the prize I won after doing it.

It wouldn't be completely out of the ordinary; she was my controlling little psycho. That's what I told myself, how I convinced myself to get through those first shitty weeks. It was crazy because I was angry, not allowing myself to feel hurt, but at the same time I was inspired. The apprenticeship was just what I needed. It made me even madder that she pushed me to do it, that she knew it'd ease things, and I hated her for it. I began getting paranoid that she knew she was going to do it all along—leave me—and that she was like some fucked up Marry Poppins coming into my life to give me meaning, making me want a future I never thought about. Marriage, kids, a house in the burbs didn't seem suffocating like how it was be-

fore I met her. But then she left and all the color and magic she brought into my life was gone.

When I got back home I lost my job because I couldn't bring myself to go to work, and I used up all the time I had for the apprenticeship. I'm sure I could have taken a leave or something if I explained to the boss what had happened, but I was too fucking embarrassed. Thankfully I had a good chunk of savings set aside or I might have ended up homeless, and to be honest I probably wouldn't have given a shit.

Then about four months later a picture I took during my apprenticeship went viral. Jacob, the guy who mentored me that I met through Simon, had to call and tell me because I hadn't looked at my Instagram account since I left. Most of my activities consisted of sleeping and walking the streets at night. I can't even say how many hours I walked. Every night, as soon as the moon came out, I walked and begged for some asshole to start shit with me so I can take my anger out on him. One time I walked at least twenty miles before heading back home, just to sleep and repeat. After going viral, paid gigs replaced the sleeping and walking. Instead of going to bars just waiting for some unlucky prick to pick a fight so I could smash his face in, I joined a boxing gym. By this time Blue had apologized to me and made amends so he'd go with me sometimes, but most of the time I went alone. I was too afraid I'd kill someone if I got in the ring so I mostly took my anger out on old punching bags.

It took over a year for me to come to terms with Alana being gone, that I'd never see her again, that I maybe never had her to begin with. And then Megan showed up. I took it as a sign even though I wasn't a hundred percent sure that she was Alana, thinking it could be her sister or some doppelganger relative. But even if it wasn't her I thought the universe was telling me to find her, linking her to me in some sort of way, bringing soul mates together. I held on to that even when I found out about the disorder, even knowing that Alana lied to me and chose not to trust me with the truth, even after I realized that she—or Megan—loved another dude, and when she dropped the bomb that she was going to marry him. Through all of that shit I had hope that everything would work out. I could get past all of it and fight, or even wait for her. There was nothing that anyone could say—not Blue, not Lauren or Cal, or even fucking Megan—that was going to make me give up.

That's what I thought until she told me she's having a baby and it isn't mine. Everything that happened before that, between all three of us, hadn't broken me until she said those words. The sickest thing is that when she told me she was pregnant, it didn't cross my fucking mind that it wasn't mine. Isn't that sick? For a split second I was the happiest man on the whole fucking planet, because for a moment I forgot she was Megan. I forgot that I was sitting in a fucking decoy house guarded by her asshole brothers, sitting across from a girl who had been practically living with and fucking another man.

Now I'm not angry or sad. I'm past all that.

I feel numb.

I don't feel alive.

I don't feel here.

I've wished what has happened was a nightmare, that it's not real. I wish Megan didn't show up on my doorstep because I would have been able to survive then, I would have been able to move on... maybe not be happy, but I feel I wouldn't be this, like a zombie.

I hear a knock on my door and I don't answer. I don't even know what day it is, and the crazy thing is I'm sober. I can't bring myself to drink because I know it won't fix anything. It won't make me feel better even for a microsecond. I'll still be like I am: lost, confused, in disbelief.

Blue left saying he'd be back later this afternoon but I don't care either way. Whether he is or not doesn't make a difference. If I'm here or at a bar or a restaurant, inside or out, none of it matters because at this point life isn't important. It's just something to get through. A minute, an hour, a day, and whatever comes next. The knocking continues and I turn the TV up to drown it out until I hear a familiar voice. It's feminine and sounds urgent. It's not *the* voice, the one that would probably save me or kill me.

"I think you have the wrong place," I say through the door.

"Ian, it's me. Lauren."

What the hell is she doing here? Fuck, I can't leave a pregnant lady outside.

"Hi," she says, reserved.

"What are you doing here?" She's huge, bigger than the last time I saw her. When I realize she's climbed a flight of steps to reach my door I feel a flicker of guilt.

"Do you need some water or something?" I ask, opening the door for her to come in.

"That'd be nice," she says, wobbling past me. I close the door behind her and head to the fridge to get a bottle of water out. There's only one left and seeing the fridge I realize I only have a half a pack of roasted chicken meat and a bottle of whiskey. I take the bottle of water and hand it to her, watching her take in the apartment. At least it's clean-ish.

"Thank you," she says, and she edges herself back to sit on the couch. I offer her my arm so she doesn't bounce.

"Does Cal know you're here?" I ask dryly, folding my arms. I have a feeling if he knew she was he'd come and try to kick my ass. Hell, right now I just might let him.

"No," she answers quickly, a look of guilt passing through her expression.

"I wanted to see how you were doing. You weren't answering my or Hillary's calls," she says apprehensively. My eyes drift down to her belly and I feel a wave a sadness threatening to take over me, but I shake it. The numbness is what I want to keep.

"I wanted to be left alone," I say matter-of-factly. She nods.

"I heard about what happened," she mutters. I don't flinch. I don't even know if I blink.

"I don't need you to come here and feel sorry for me. I'll have everything ready for the showcase in time. I promise," I tell her, and she frowns slightly.

"I'm not worried about the showcase. That can be postponed...I-I'm worried about you," she says hesitantly. I arch a brow at her. Lauren and I have been cordial. She's been nice to me and *almost* gets it. She's walked down a similar road that I can't get off of even though the person who put me on it hitched a ride out of town. But we're not friends, not the kind of close for her to come here alone, find parking or get dropped off while super pregnant with twins, and climb a flight of stairs.

"You don't need to worry about me. I'm okay, and you need to focus on the..." I can't even say the word *babies*. I just nod to her stomach, which she instinctively places a hand on. She can't hide her smile but sweeps it away quickly, turning her attention back to me. She sucks in a deep breath and lets it out, her eyes avoiding mine now.

"Cal left me when we were married. We hadn't even made it to our third anniversary," she says quietly. I swallow a lump in my throat I didn't know was there.

Lauren had hinted that she has been through a lot with Cal, but she never said to what extent, just that she understood what I was going through. But I can't imagine she understands what I've been going through. She's married and even though her husband's a jerk, she seems happy. She has a family with Cal and a successful business. Yeah, he's a prick, but at dinner the way he looked at her, the conversations they had where they didn't even have to speak...I'd give anything for me and Alana to have that. I judged her happy ending and thought she was full of shit about understanding where I was when mine was nowhere in sight. But seeing her here, without the house, the husband, and the kids, I see something that maybe she's hidden or tried to forget about, the pain and hurt she's had, and it makes me sit down to listen.

"It was right before I found out I was pregnant with Caylen," she says, letting out a sigh and drinking some of her water.

"How long was he gone?" I ask, clearing my throat.

"Almost two years," she says tightly. My stomach flips.

Shit.

She bites her lower lip, her eyes downcast, like the memory still knocks the shit out of her. I feel even more shitty for judging her now.

"When he left me..." I notice her eyes glistening and I'm horrified, feeling my throat start to tighten up. I remind myself that I'm numb. That I don't feel shit anymore, but the way my heart is pounding now it's beginning to contradict that belief.

"If I didn't have Caylen I'm not sure how I would have gotten over it. I used her to push me to get past the pain, to not let it destroy me," she continues, wiping a tear that hasn't fallen from her eye.

"Then...I found him. But it wasn't him, it was *Chris*. And he wasn't alone. He was engaged, apparently in love, and had no clue who I or Cal was," she says, laughing though mirthless.

"Losing him the first time was the hardest thing I ever experienced. However, when I found out about Chris—his disorder, him being engaged...that almost broke me." Her gaze is distant as if she's reliving the entire thing. She breaks away and strokes her belly, peering over at me.

"So, trust me. If anyone in the world knows what you're going through right now, it's me. I know it's the worst feeling in the entire world. It's a mourning almost for someone who isn't dead, which makes it worse because it's nearly impossible to let them go." I nod, feeling overwhelmed with relief that someone gets it, because what she's just said is exactly how I feel.

There's a stretch of silence and I feel emotion well up in me. I try to force it back down but a tear still finds a way to my eye.

"I-I don't know where to go from here. I'm lost," I tell her honestly, rubbing the back of my neck until it's sore.

"Before I felt like there was still a chance, that I could fight for her, but now...now there's nothing I can do. She's having this guy's kid. How do I compete with that? I shouldn't even want to compete with that but after everything, what makes me the angriest is that I still want her. It's fucking disgusting and I hate myself for it." The words are spilling out now.

"I can't see past any of this. Knowing she's up the fucking street might as well be less than a few miles away, and I can't get to her. For Megan to sit in front of me and break my heart like that...and I can't blame *her*, I can't hate *her*, because she didn't make those promises. But Alana's not here!" I'm yelling now and tears are coming out of my eyes but Lauren doesn't look uncomfortable or intimidated by it.

"You can! You have every right to feel how you feel. You have to allow yourself to feel. It doesn't matter if you're angry at Megan *or* Alana; let it out." Now she's at my side and her arms are soon wrapped around me. I start crying like a fucking baby.

"You're going to get past this," she says, coddling me like I'm a child.

"Why didn't she choose me?" My voice cracks. My shoulder is wet with Lauren's tears. I try to pull myself together but she doesn't rush me, she just lets me get it all out. I'm not sure how long we've been like this but she holds me until I'm all dried out, and when we release our embrace I see her face is red, blotchy, and tear-stained.

"This is fucked up. I shouldn't have you like this," I tell her, pushing out a much needed breath.

"It's okay," she says with a warm smile, wiping her own eyes. "I needed this too." She pats my hand.

“Ugh I’ve got you all wet.” She wipes the remaining tears from her eyes with her sleeve.

“I think I have some Kleenex in my room,” I tell her, getting up to go get some. I scan the room for the box.

“Uhm Ian?” I hear her call. I grab them and head back out to her.

“You’re going to need more than Kleenex. My water just broke.”

Megan

I'VE NEVER SEEN a man happier than Kam when I told him about our baby.

Our son.

I just have this feeling that it's a boy. He was ecstatic, beaming happier than I ever imagined him being. I knew he would be ecstatic. From the first day I met Kam I knew he was a family man, and after a few dates he always talked to me about wanting kids. Two boys and a girl, and if he could choose the boys would be first so they could protect their sister. I had started birth control once Kam and I moved in with each other because I knew slip-ups would happen but once I discovered everything about Ian and Alana, using it was the furthest thing from my mind. A small part of me didn't think I'd be able to have kids. I don't know why but I thought it would be difficult with how everything else has been in my life, that it would take more than a few months. But obviously that wasn't the case, and now I'm here. Something that would have terrified me before is what's saving me, tying me to a man who I'll spend the rest of my life with.

Today is the first day we're seeing Dr. Lyce as a couple since the accident, and I'm nervous. Dr. Lyce had sort of advised us against making big decisions like these or doing things that would be stressful or jarring, but being engaged is the best thing that's ever happened to me. Besides, I'm already pregnant. Naturally, this is what comes next. It's the one thing that's made me feel safe after every-

thing that's happened. This decision is one that I've got to make on my own—what's best for me and my growing family.

Kam and I are sitting in her office already since her assistant let us in. Kam smiles at me encouragingly before kissing my hand and I give him a bright smile back, not being able to help beaming at the site of my ring. It's a gorgeous princess cut, huge but not gaudy, and my favorite color pink. It's the most perfect ring I've ever seen; he couldn't have done a better job choosing something that I'd wanted.

I am going to be Ms. Kam Davidson, little ole me, imperfectly flawed but loved more than anything by this perfect man, and about to have his child.

"How is Bryan?" he asks with a playful smile. I chuckle.

"Bryan?" I say teasingly, raising my brow.

"Or Clint...I like Clint," he says, grinning. I can't help but lean over and kiss him.

"Good morning you two," Dr. Lyce announces happily as she comes in and takes her seat. Kam and I say good morning in unison.

"You both look well."

"We are well. More well than we could ever be," Kam pronounces happily. As she sits, he presents my hand to her, showing off my engagement ring. I flush though can't help but fight my smile as well. I notice her smile becomes a little more reserved, tighter, and slight lines in her forehead appear. I squeeze Kam's hand for support which he does back. He sits up straighter in his chair and a determined look settles on his face. I'm glad that my first session with her since everything has happened includes him.

"I know that you said you didn't recommend big life changes, that stress could make bad things happen..." he begins.

"When you say 'bad things' Kam, what do you mean?" she asks quizzically.

"That it could trigger a change, for Alana to make an appearance I guess," he says cautiously. She lets out a small sigh and nod.

"We did certainly discuss that." Her tone is coming off a tad condescending, and I find myself frowning. Kam and I exchange a glance.

"But circumstances have changed. We're about to have a family," I remind her with a smile, absentmindedly touching my belly.

She nods. "Yes, congratulations to you both," she says, but her tone is still reserved.

"I couldn't be happier than where I am right now Dr. Lyce," I add, and Kam beams at me.

"Well. You two have made your decision." She folds her hands together and looks at both of us.

"I want you both to know I'm not here to be a parent or dictate the decisions that you make. I'm only here to guide you down what I believe is the easiest path and make things as normal for you as possible. To help you cope with what may not be. I can only make suggestions; I'm not here to judge you if you don't take them." She looks more compassionate and it alleviates some of the tension in the room. I feel myself relax and notice that Kam does as well.

"That being said, this is where we are, and we will go from here," she says with a smile. We both nod.

"So, let's begin by something you said earlier Kam." She turns her gaze towards him.

"You referred to Alana coming as 'something bad happening'," she paraphrases. I fight the urge to roll my eyes. Alana returning *is* something bad happening.

"I just meant...now, *especially* with Megan being pregnant, is a much bigger cause for concern. Alana, from what I know of her, isn't someone I'd want to trust with the well-being of my child," he says firmly. I smile in complete agreement.

"But that is a possibility," Dr. Lyce says, and I see Kam immediately tense up.

"I just think that it's a good sign that she hasn't come back. Like you said—with all of these big changes happening, she should have made an appearance if she was going to, right?" I interject.

"I think it is important that you both—more so than ever now—begin to really attempt to rethink how it is that you see Alana, to be reminded that Megan and Alana are one and the same." I fight the feeling of disappointment rising inside of me. I thought under the circumstances she wouldn't still be pushing this.

"I understand why it's a difficult concept to grasp, and why I wanted Megan to really master it before decisions like this were made—"

"Well we're beyond that now Dr. Lyce," Kam interrupts. "What do we do to stop her from doing something stupid?" He's pretty blunt but I would have put it a different way. He's right though, voicing a real concern that both of us have. Hearing Kam say it

aloud...I can't help but feel guilty that it's me with this problem that could potentially affect his baby.

"There is nothing that I can recommend for keeping Alana away, as you both know..." she begins.

"There has to be something, especially now that the situation is almost a matter of life and death," he adds urgently.

"Keeping Megan as stress-free as possible is one measure, attempting to communicate and compromise with Alana..."

"Compromise?" Kam asks, his voice slightly raised.

"Yes, these were all things that we were supposed to approach gradually. But seeing as things are drastically different, we will have to be more expedient," Dr. Lyce says sternly. Kam and I glance at each other, and I can see annoyance and frustration behind his beautiful eyes. I've never really seen this side of Kam before, one so protective and direct. I have to admit it's a little bit of a turn on.

"What do you mean by compromise Dr. Lyce?" I ask, trying to ease the tension in the room.

"First we need to work very hard to establish communication with Alana. In addition to that we need daily therapy to talk through whatever could be mental triggers. If we can establish a line of a communication between you two, we can see where Alana's state of mind is..."

"But what if she's gone like Megan thinks? Why would we attempt to bring her back?" Kam asks, his tone still stern.

"It's not about bringing Alana back. She's in there. It isn't a question of *if* she will come back, it's *when*. And the purpose of therapy is to make the transitions not so jarring, that if there are shared established goals that she wouldn't be disruptive if she's included," Dr. Lyce explains firmly. Kam lets out a sigh of frustration and I let out one just a bit softer. He immediately looks toward me, taking my hand in his again.

"It's going to be fine Megan. I don't want you worrying at all, okay?" he says reassuringly.

"It is important, especially with the situation at hand, to know Alana's feelings about things, to allow her to express them in a way that isn't toxic," Dr. Lyce says, her tone and expression softening. Kam's face is hard though.

"Does it matter how Alana feels? She's not going to get a say," Kam says stubbornly.

"We want her to be at peace with this. It is her body and the hormonal fluctuations that Megan is about to undergo, they both will. It would be best if everyone is on the same page. This is new territory for me," Dr. Lyce explains, and my heart speeds up.

Kam seems frustrated. "So, you don't have any experience with this? With someone having DID and being pregnant?" It's a question but comes out as a dig.

"Remember Kam, this is a rare disorder," I remind him gently.

"No, I don't have experience with these particular circumstances. However, I assure you that with my professional experience I am the best equipped to make this process as easy as possible for the both of you. I'm on your side," she assures us, but seeing Kam's expression I'm not sure if he believes it. He sits back heavily in his seat and begins stroking his chin.

"So, you're suggesting that I undergo hypnosis again?" I ask quietly.

"Yes," she says. In my peripheral vision I see Kam shake his head.

"I don't think that's best right now. What if she does come out, and Megan is stuck or something?" He's voicing my fear, because this isn't the time for that. He looks towards me, waiting for me to confirm.

"I agree with Kam, Dr. Lyce. I just don't want to risk it," I say, avoiding her gaze. She shifts slightly in her seat.

"We're not saying *ever*. Of course it's something that would need to be done, but just not now when things are so fragile," I say, touching my stomach.

"I agree," Kam confirms with a nod. If Dr. Lyce is annoyed or offended by us not taking her advice she doesn't show it.

"We can certainly approach it at a later date," she responds easily. Kam and I exchange relieved glances.

"I'm assuming with what's happened, Kam, will you be relocating here permanently?" she asks.

"That was the plan," he answers with a smile, seemingly feeling better about things now that hypnosis is off the table.

"Well I think that we should definitely have twice a week sessions with you both. Megan, we've already discussed daily sessions and Kam, I'd recommend that you see me as well, an individual session once a week," she says.

"I'll see what I can do," Kam says noncommittally.

The rest of the session we discuss how we both are feeling, both of us ecstatic obviously. We let her know that my first appointment is tomorrow, and that Kam and I will be having dinner with his parents tonight.

"Your parents, are they aware of Megan's condition?" she asks, wearing her unreadable smile.

"Yes. They know and are supportive," he says, flashing me his Prince Charming smile.

"And this would be the first time that you're seeing them since them finding out about your condition, is that correct Megan?" she asks. I nod and swallow the anxiety that's starting to grip my throat.

"How do you feel about that?" she asks.

"I'm excited, but I'm a little nervous," I admit with a smile and a shrug.

"There's nothing to be nervous about sweetheart. You know my parents love you and now that we're having their first grandchild, you're going to be their favorite person in the world," Kam explains excitedly. Dr. Lyce makes a note on her electronic pad. Kam notices too. You notice everything when you feel like someone is judging you, even though she claims that isn't what she does.

"I would just make sure it's a safe environment for her when you disclose things. Do you not think it would be better for you to tell them first, Kam, without Megan?" she suggests, and he frowns.

"They're going to be thrilled, and my parents aren't monsters. Of course the environment will be safe," he says, slightly offended.

"I only mean that, as we discussed, stressors are to be avoided. You may not feel anxious or overwhelmed but Megan's thoughts and feelings can differ from yours," Dr. Lyce says and I glue my eyes to my lap. The truth is I am extremely nervous about seeing Kam's parents again.

"Is that how you feel Megan?" he asks, turning towards me. I glance at Dr. Lyce, who gives me an encouraging smile.

"Your parents have always been kind to me, and I've never felt anything other than completely welcomed," I start off. He gives me a soft smile, then I move my gaze to my lap.

"But after everything that's happened I can't help but think that their opinion has had to have changed, especially since your dad found out about Ian," I explain gently; his brows draw together.

"And it's okay if they have opinions. I don't blame them. Especially with DID not being commonplace. I can understand it being hard for them to grasp and come to terms with," I say softly.

"Megan, I wouldn't put you in any situation that would make you feel uncomfortable. I wanted to surprise them and have you with me but if you'd prefer that I tell them beforehand I can absolutely do that," he says, placing his hand on my thigh. I lean forward and we share a soft kiss.

"Excellent," Dr. Lyce says happily. "Now, you said that your father found out information on Ian Hudson?" she asks, turning towards Kam. Just hearing Ian's name makes my heart clinch, and the possibility of where this conversation could go makes me start to recite colors in my mind.

"Yes. My dad...he just wanted to protect me. Before he knew about her disorder he started to look into Megan's background and it came up just a few days ago," Kam explains.

"And you both have discussed Ian and feel comfortable with his role in this?" she asks, looking between the two of us.

"He doesn't have a role anymore," Kam announces. Dr. Lyce glances at me.

"I've explained to Kam that Ian knows that I'm getting married and having our child. I think he understands that..." I'm speaking slowly and trying to choose my words carefully. I feel Kam's eyes on me.

"You *think* he understands?"

"He understands...that the life he thought he'd have isn't one he's able to," I say, feeling comfortable with my words.

"What sort of life did he think he was going to have with *you*?" I hear the drop in Kam's tone and I glare at him. I thought we were over this topic, that we didn't have to go into this, that it could be glossed over. But I'm starting to get the distinct feeling that we're not going to be able to.

"Not with me. With Alana," I correct quickly.

"Did he have an understanding that you both aren't the same?" Kam asks, his eyes glued to mine.

"Yes, but none of that matters now anyway," I say urgently.

"But it did matter before?" he continues, and I take a deep breath.

"Yes, it mattered before because he was still in love with her," I mutter, looking away from him.

"And now he's just given up?" Kam asks, his tone tense, and I shoot a glare at him.

"Kam *we* discussed this," I remind him.

"We didn't really. I just didn't want to make you upset," he admits. I frown. *Now it's okay to make me upset?*

"But since Dr. Lyce has brought it up and we're here in a safe environment..." he says, and at this moment I hate Dr. Lyce.

"Go ahead Megan. When you're ready," she urges. I take a deep breath and turn towards Kam; his expression is blank. I know he's trying to keep it that way, wanting to hide how he really feels.

"I was in communication with Ian because I wanted to know more about this person who was living a life as me, who I'm sharing a body with. They were married, as you know, so of course his feelings resurfaced when he saw me. When he found out about my condition it was something he had to come to terms with. I thought we could maybe build a friendship, and I realized that it was too complicated, especially now that I'm pregnant and marrying you. It's over. That's all there is and all that I want to say about it."

Kam nods slowly.

"Are you satisfied with that answer Kameron?"

Why won't she just drop it?!

"Yes." I reach for his hand and hold it but it takes a second for him to hold mine back.

"It's going to be very important that you both engage in open and honest communication with each other. Not only will it be beneficial during your engagement period, but to have a healthy marriage it's especially important that no underlying tension or resentment builds so that no blow-ups can cause triggers that could lead to detrimental consequences," she explains, and both Kam and I nod.

"So you're saying you think it would be better to talk about things that are stressful here, with you?" I ask.

"Yes, it's what I would recommend specifically until after the baby is born." Kam and I hold hands. He smiles but it takes a minute for it to reach his eyes.

IAN

"You're okay? You're not going to push the babies out right?" I ask Lauren frantically, as I help her buckle into the car.

"No. I'm fine for now. We just need to get to the hospital," she says calmly, giving me a reassuring smile even though it's obvious she's in pain. Shit. Shit. Shit! Please don't let her deliver in the car. The hospital she goes to is only fifteen minutes away but it's rush hour and will probably take us like thirty.

"You want me to call Cal?" I ask after I've stopped at a red light. I really want to speed through it.

"No. No, I'm about to call him," she says, her breathing a little strained, but she's pulling out her cell phone now.

"Hi, um yeah, I was running an errand and my water broke," she explains, glancing over at me.

Of course she wouldn't tell Cal she was at my house trying to put me back together when she went into labor. He'd definitely want to kill me, and I'd probably deserve it.

"I'm fine babe, I'm on my way there. I actually bumped into Ian and he's taking me there now," she explains.

"Cal, it wouldn't have made sense to call an ambulance. I'm fine! Just get to the fucking hospital and call Raven!" Over the span of a sentence her voice goes from sweet and calm to sounding like something out of the exorcist. I hope to God she's not lying about pushing, or whatever it is she has to do.

"Um...you want me to turn on the radio?" I ask. She nods.

"You want to pick the station?"

"Any's fine Ian," she says tightly through a laugh.

"Shit you don't care, you're about to go into labor, or are already in it." I laugh too and I'm not sure why I'm laughing. I turn the radio on and Migos starts to blast. I get ready to switch stations but she swats my hand away.

"I like this song," she says through a long breath. She starts to sing the lyrics and I join in with her.

We get to the hospital, and thankfully she doesn't deliver in my car! I go in and grab her a wheelchair, and in less than a few minutes she's being taken back.

"Thank you so much Ian," she tells me with a relieved smile.

"Would you like to come back with her?" the nurse asks me.

"Oh no, I'm not her husband," I tell her quickly.

"You want to come until Cal arrives?" she asks, and I notice how tight her voice is.

"You can't say no to a pregnant woman," the nurse tells me with a smile, gesturing for me to follow her. I pray like hell for Cal to get here asap.

Thankfully Lauren's whisked away as they get the room ready for her so I'm able to sit in the hall while they do. I glance at my watch after about ten minutes has passed, and Cal still hasn't arrived. The only experience I have with labor is watching *Look Who's Talking*. I'm not the person to be in that room if Cal is delayed or stuff happens before he gets here. I pull out my phone and dial the number that's been calling me every day since Megan was in the hospital—Hillary.

"Ian?!" I've never heard someone sound so excited to hear from me that I've been a complete dick to.

"Yeah. How are you?" I say apologetically.

"I'm good. I've been thinking about you. How are you doing? Have you talked to Megan?" she asks. I'm surprised that Lauren hasn't filled her in on what's happened, but it makes me respect Lauren more.

"No, but I'm actually calling because Lauren's gone into labor and I'm sure Cal's on his way. I just...if he's not here in time I'm wondering if you can come..."

"Oh my God! I'm on my way!" she says excitedly.

About fifteen minutes after I get off the phone with Hillary I see Cal jogging towards me with three bags, looking more frazzled than I've ever seen him.

"Hey. She's gone back?" he asks, his tone lighter than I'm used to hearing it.

"Yeah. They said they'd come get me—uh, you—when she was ready." He nods and lets out a few breaths.

"You need help with that?" I ask. He has a huge duffle bag slung across his shoulder and two diaper bags on each shoulder.

"No, I've got it," he says with a laugh.

"I had to drop Caylen off at her friend's house and get the bags. It's been a crazy day," he explains lightly, but his eyes are full of

excitement.

"Thank you for being there. For bringing her." His face and tone are becoming more somber. "I really appreciate it," he adds. I realize that it might be his way of apologizing or offering a truce about everything that's happened.

"It wasn't a problem. Lauren's great, she's been really kind to me," I tell him, and he nods.

"I called Hillary. I didn't know if you'd be here in time," I tell him.

"One less person I have to call!" he laughs.

"Mr. Scott, you can go in now," a nurse different from earlier tells us.

"Wish me luck!" he says with a laugh before rushing in. I let out a relieved breath and turn to head to the elevator when I see Hillary. Her face lights up when she sees me as she rushes over. I'm a little taken aback by her once we're face-to-face. I've never seen her, how she looks now. Her face is free of makeup and her hair is in one of those pony tail things on top of her head. She's always been beautiful but standing here now her natural beauty is shining through.

"Hey!" she squeals before pulling me into a hug. I have to admit it feels good.

"Is Cal here yet?" she asks as our embrace breaks.

"Yeah he just went a minute ago."

"Oh thank God! Lauren would kill him if he wasn't here." She snickers. "I'm so excited. It feels like Lauren's been pregnant forever," she adds, pushing her hands in her back pockets.

"I'm so glad you were around," she says, giving me a friendly grip on the shoulder. I start to tell her that she was at my apartment to check on me when she went into labor but I kind of get the feeling that Hillary may already know, or Lauren will tell her if she wants to.

"I'm just glad she made it here in time. I would have shit myself if she went into labor in my car!" I admit with a chuckle. Hillary cheeses at me.

"Look, I wanted to apologize about how I was the last time I saw you," I tell her, pushing my hand through my hair.

"I get it Ian," she says with a half shrug.

"How are *you* doing?" she asks, her eyes searching mine, her tone a bit more somber. I don't know if she's found out about the other

anvil that just dropped or just how shitty everything was the day of Megan's accident. I feel my brows clash.

"I'm...I'm doing." She gives me a disbelieving look.

"Well, it looks like she has the calvary here so I'll head out," I tell her, starting to take a step backwards. Her face immediately falls.

"Do you have somewhere you've got to be?" she asks. I can't even think clear enough to come up with a lie.

"Why don't you stay? Babies make everything better right?" And now I realize she doesn't know about what's happened with Megan. When I don't say anything she gives me a light nudge.

"It could be awhile...right?" I can't think of an excuse fast enough.

She grins with an arched brow. "Well that just might give us a chance to grab an early dinner." She doesn't ask. Hillary hasn't really asked to do anything since we've met, she sort of has always told me what to do. She's always reminded me of...

"What else do you have to do Ian?" she asks knowingly.

Before Hillary disappears inside of Lauren's room she makes me promise to not disappear and if I do she'll come to my house and act psychotic, so I reluctantly promise her that I won't.

In about ten minutes she's back out, a wide contagious grin on her face.

"So her water's broken but she's only about three centimeters so it'll be awhile before the babies make an appearance. Which is great because the grandparents and her aunt are about five hours away."

"Are you ready or are you going to sit there like a statue?" she asks teasingly, motioning for me to follow her.

We end up eating at TGI Fridays. Hillary says it's the five star of the mediocre restaurants, classier than its cousins Applebee's and Chili's. I can't remember the last time I've been to a place like this. The waitress comes a few minutes after we sit down and Hillary orders some sort of loaded salad. I attempt to order just a drink but Hillary threatens to throw a bitch fit so I settle on a burger, which makes her happy.

"So...are you ready for the showcase?"

Shit. I forgot all about the showcase...when the hell is it? She frowns at me.

"It's next Friday," she reminds me. I haven't been keeping track obviously. Everything has just been blurring together.

"And I noticed you haven't been posting on Insta...you can't let it dry up too long. In this day and age people will forget about you," she says, her bright blue eyes narrowing in on me accusingly.

"I've had a lot going on," I say, trying to cover up my annoyance. I notice her face softens.

"I know," she admits, her gaze leaving me and landing on the table.

But she doesn't know. Not everything, and I appreciate Lauren even more for not spilling to her.

"Um. Megan told me that...she's pregnant and getting married," I say, throwing the words out. It's the first time I've said them out loud and it doesn't seem real. I don't look at her but I hear her draw a breath in.

"Ian I...I'm so sorry," she says quietly. I force a shrug.

"It doesn't matter. There's nothing I can do about it. I just...I give up. She's having a kid and I can't beat that. Me and Alana can't beat that. Alana left because she didn't want to have my kid. Megan loves this guy enough to have *his*, for it to link them and destroy *us*."

Hillary's quiet, and she's not usually a quiet person. She says whatever's on her mind. But I appreciate her caring enough to be speculative.

"Ian, you're such a good guy. No, not just a good guy. You are an amazing person," she starts with a sigh. "This is so fucked up that you're in this situation and I wish I could make it better for you, like wave a wand and you just forget about it!" she says with a dry laugh. I'm surprised it makes me chuckle.

"I know, it's been kind of weirdish between us..." she says, her boisterousness settling a bit. "It's totally my fault. I knew everything...well, not *everything*, but I knew you weren't in a place to date or...have sex," she says with a smile, and I find I crack one myself.

"I kind of pushed the line. Ask Lauren. I'm a definitely a pusher." She tosses a piece of stray hair her out of her face. "It's only because you're totally fucking hot. I couldn't help myself. But right now, I realize you don't need any of that extra stuff. You need a friend and if you let me...I'd like to be that for you," she says softly.

"I can definitely use a friend," I tell her. For the first time today, I'm wearing a genuine smile.

Kam

MY STOMACH FEELS like it's on one of those crappy booze cruise boats I went on during spring break. I miss my parents, but I can't say I'm not nervous about seeing them. I only talked to my mom briefly, letting her know Megan and I would be coming to dinner tomorrow night. She is thrilled, but I could hear the worried tone in her voice. She's not exactly happy that I'm transferring programs and am spending so much of my time in Chicago with Megan, but my parents have never been controlling or overbearing. They're just worried, and rightfully so, but there's nothing for them to be worried about. I know once I tell them about Megan being pregnant, everything's going to be all right. They're going to be ecstatic. But today I'm not telling them about the pregnancy. That's still something I want to do with Megan, but I will bring them up to date on everything and let them know I've proposed, and she's accepted. After I park the car and head in, I'm quickly greeted by them both. Ellie must be out for the day.

"Kameron!" my mom says as if I've made it back from the front lines. She quickly rushes over and pulls me into a hug and kisses my cheek.

"I've missed you so much, Son," she says in my ear before pulling back. My dad is behind her, wearing his own relieved smile before hugging me as well.

"It's good to have you back, Kameron."

"You guys have never lost me," I remind them. My mom gives me a sad smile.

"Katy should be here any minute. You know how late she always is."

We move to the sitting room, and my dad pours himself a glass of scotch while my mom does some last-minute touches in the kitchen.

"I'm glad you came today. I knew you were bringing Megan to dinner tomorrow, but I think it's good that we talked first." My dad starts handing me a glass as well.

"How has everything been going? I know you were upset about the news I had last time," he begins cautiously.

"Things have been great. Megan was in a car accident—"

"Oh my God, is she okay?" he asks, genuinely concerned.

"Yes, she's fine. Just a little swelling and some bruises, but thankfully nothing too bad," I tell him, and he nods thankfully.

"I'm actually glad it happened. Not *glad*, but it made me realize that regardless of everything that's happened, I can't lose, Dad. I love her too much. Did you tell Mom about...the Ian guy?" I ask hesitantly.

"I didn't want to worry her before talking to you and figuring out exactly what's been going on," he explains, and I let out a relieved breath.

"Good."

"Have you talked to her about it?" he asks, sitting down in his big leather chair by the fireplace.

"I have. It turns out Megan was aware of him and had met him," I tell him, feeling almost embarrassed. My dad's brow shoots up.

"But things have been ended with him," I tell my dad. He looks at me expectantly, waiting for me to expound, but there isn't really anything left for me to say because beyond that I still don't know exactly how things panned out. I haven't told my dad that I'm marrying Megan yet, and I don't want to tell him that she's pregnant until Katy and my mom are around.

"Have you spoken to this young man?" he asks, and I feel my skin flush.

"No. It wasn't for me to handle, Dad. It was something Megan had to do on her own."

"But Kameron—"

"She wanted to do it on her own, and I love Megan and trust her. She says the situation is handled, so I'm going to believe that until

there is a reason for me not to." I say, making my voice firm so that I can let him know that this conversation is final. He looks at me for a moment, scrutinizing me like he did when I was a kid and I was lying about hiding candy in my room, but thankfully Katy sweeps into the room.

"Long time no see, stranger," she says happily.

"It hasn't been that long." I correct her playfully. She heads over, giving me a bear hug after kissing my dad on the cheek.

"I've missed you, big brother," she says, and it's only been a few weeks since I've seen her, but usually we don't go longer than a few days without seeing each other and a few hours without talking. It's been a little over four days since our last conversation happened right before Megan's accident.

"You did something to your hair?" I ask her, thinking she looks a little different. I'm not sure what it is.

"I cut my hair, just about four inches. You like it?" she asks, doing a spin.

"It suits you." My dad nods in agreement, and she gives him a playful frown. My dad doesn't notice much of anything when it comes to that sort of thing. She'd have to dye her hair pink for him to notice a difference.

We all make our way to the kitchen where my mom's made one of her best dishes: spare ribs, au gratin potatoes, and asparagus. My dad opens the wine and pours my mother some before Katy's. I'm set on finishing the glass of Cognac he poured earlier.

"I'm so glad to have everyone here," my mom says, beaming.

"I know! It feels like forever since we all have been together," Katy adds.

"How are things in Chicago, big brother?" she asks before taking a sip from her glass.

"Things have been good. Really good. I told dad that Megan was in a car accident, but she's completely fine," I tell her and my mom, seeing their shocked faces.

"Thank God. How did I happen?" Mom asks, a hand placed on her chest.

"You know traffic there is insane, and she didn't see a car coming towards her when she was crossing the street," I explain.

Katy's eyes go wide. "What?! She was hit by a car? Then that wasn't an accident!" Katy exclaims.

I roll my eyes. "Regardless, she's okay."

"Besides that, how *is* she?" my mother interjects, and all of their eyes land on me. My family has been supportive since I told them about the disorder, but it's still not a topic that is entirely easy to talk about. Not that I blame them. It's not entirely for me to talk about, without Megan or Dr. Lyce, but I know today I'm going to have to be more open with them knowing that they will definitely want to delve deeper after what I'm going to tell them.

"Megan is good. We've been going to therapy consistently. She has a great apartment and a job, though she's taken a short leave since the accident." They all smile at me, but they seem practiced and forced, and it makes me so glad that I listened to Dr. Lyce's advice and am breaking the ice without Megan here first.

"You said her brother has been helping her a lot?" Dad asks, and I nod.

"Yeah, Cal is great. It's obvious he loves her, and it helps that she has an added support system. I met her other brother, Dexter Crestfield, after the accident. The name sounds familiar...have we met them before?" I ask my parents, and Dad's face goes blank before smiling.

"Dexter Crestfield Jr.?" he asks, and I nod. "He's Megan's brother?"

"Yes, and he's obviously wealthy," I add. Mom and Dad burst out into a laugh.

"He would be. His father is one of the most successful industrialists in the Midwest," Dad explains, looking at me quizzically.

"Well, that was before he was sentenced to prison—a slap on the wrist for what he was charged for..." Dad continues.

"I don't understand, Kameron. You said that Megan was raised in foster care and came from meager means..." Mom asks, a little confused.

"She was. From my understanding, they don't have the same mother."

"Oh." Dad nods in understanding.

"Your uncle Richard would be on his knees apologizing to her if he knew she was a Crestfield." Dad chuckles, and Mom shoots him a disdainful look.

"I'm just saying, honey," he says innocently.

"Wow, Kameron. That sort of changes things," Dad says with a sigh, and I look at him surprised. In my eyes, my dad has never been impressed by wealth or money. He taught me to treat everyone the same, whether they were a CEO or a janitor. I didn't think it would make a difference if he knew Megan's family background is different from what we may have expected.

"What would it change? She's still the same person, so why would it change things?" I ask, almost accusingly.

"Calm down, Kam. I think it just makes a difference because if Megan has support from a family like that, it makes her condition less intimidating. They obviously can afford the best care for her than what a state plan would provide," Katy says, coming to my dad's rescue.

"Yes, that's exactly what I meant. There's a big difference battling mental health conditions when you're financially destitute than when you have money. I'm sure Megan hasn't been able to work and will have some problems completing school while dealing with this. It just means she has much better odds of beating this," he explains simply. I let my defenses down a bit.

"Yes, honey, we all adored Megan, but after finding this out, it is quite a lot of baggage to deal with, even with having such an influential family's support," Mom tells me gently. But I pick out that she used past tense.

"I don't think of it as baggage Mother. No person is perfect," I tell her firmly.

"Of course, but there is a big difference being with someone who might not be a great cook or snores and having a lifelong mental impairment," Katy interjects. I frown at her.

"Like being unfaithful?" I immediately regret saying it the moment the words leave my mouth.

"Kameron," Dad says sternly. Katy's face flushes bright red, and she tears her eyes from mine.

"I'm sorry, Katy," I say immediately, but she still doesn't look at me.

"I just felt ganged up on," I tell them all, hanging my head in shame.

"We're not ganging up on you, Kam. We're just honestly addressing our concerns. You've practically begun to rearrange your life over Megan. It concerns us. She's not your wife, she's your girl-

friend, and we don't want you to regret the choices you're making over someone who may not be a permanent fixture in your life," Mom says, her tone pleading.

"We just want what's best for you," Katy mutters, peering over at me. I take a deep breath, trying to let go of the anger and frustration that's started to build inside of me. I wonder how much they've all talked about this? Still, I remind myself that if I was Katy and it was Blue or someone she was with dealing with what Megan was, I'd probably be just as vocal and protective—if not more—of her.

"I know you guys want what's best for me," I say, my tone free of anger and frustration.

"But you have to trust that I know what's best for me. What I want in my life, *who* I want in my life," I explain. They're all quiet, and I realize it's a good of a time as any to let them know that Megan isn't just a girlfriend I'm doing this for.

"I've asked Megan to be my wife, and she said yes," I say quietly. I hear my mother inhale the tiniest breath. Dad's face is blank, and Katy's eyes are as wide as an owl's. They all exchange glances with each other.

"I don't expect you to be happy about it. From this conversation, I'm sure you're not. All I ask is that you don't try to discourage me. My mind is made up. She's going to be my wife, and I ask that you not only respect her but be kind, supportive, and welcome her into our family," I say firmly, making eye contact with each of them. There isn't really any other discussion to be had; being with Megan isn't up for debate. I've done everything my parents asked me of. I did well in school. I'm about to receive my masters. I joined sports. I was social. I never brought home any problems. I've been the child they wanted, and I'd like to think I'm the man they expected me to be, and the man they raised wouldn't abandon the woman he loves for an easier, better deal. I look to my father, knowing that Katy and my mom will take his lead. He lowers his head a bit and lets out a sigh before meeting my eyes.

"Well, Kameron, if you're choosing to be with Megan and love and support her, we will all do the same," he says. I look at them all nodding in agreement, and after a few moments, smiles come to their faces even if they're forced. Soon Mom and Katy come and hug me, and I apologize to Katy again for what I said. Before I leave,

Mom has mustered up some enthusiasm and even talks about wedding plans.



WHEN I MAKE it back to Megan's apartment, she's on the couch listening to an audiobook with one of my t-shirts on. She stands, scrutinizing me with a hopeful gaze as I come through the door. I greet her with a wide smile.

"It went well?" she asks cautiously with a reserved smile.

"Better than well. They can't wait to see you." I take her in my arms and pull her onto my lap. She looks at me, skeptically.

"Really?" she asks, almost in disbelief.

"Really, I can't wait to tell them about the baby," I tell her, rubbing her belly. When our eyes lock, I see they are glistening.

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?" I ask, wiping her tears away.

"I'm just...I never thought I'd get my happily ever after, and here I am, right in the middle of it," she says before sobbing. I can't help but chuckle and kiss her tears away.

"It's just the beginning, I promise."

IAN

Lauren's had the babies.

Two, I'm told. Healthy, sickeningly gorgeous little girls. That's according to Hillary. Lauren is doing fine, just tired. And Hillary has sent me a picture that's pinged on my phone that I haven't been able to stop smiling at. It's crazy how people I didn't know this time last year can make the problems I have with the person who my world has revolved around for the past few years not seem like doomsday. They're sort of a reminder that life continues, goes on, things die, but things are born again as well.

It still hurts. It still hurts so fucking bad to think that my wife, Alana—or Megan—is beginning something new with someone else. What could have been a start, a saving grace for us, wasn't. It's like knives carving into my heart, realizing this will be Alana in a while. Her stomach is growing with a piece of someone else inside of her, that she's going to be a mother, that she'll have someone that she'll love more than me that has nothing to do with me. Megan will, but it doesn't matter because they're the same regardless of what Megan's been peddling or what Alana wants.

Seeing those two little babies that could have possibly made their appearance in my car gave me a glimmer of hope that one day it won't hurt so fucking much. Hell, maybe one day I can love again, let myself be loved again. That I can be saved. Even if the thought makes me feel like a traitor, like I'm betraying Alana. But now it's not about betraying Alana. It's about being a better man than I was. I can't break up a family that has a chance at working. I've never met the guy, but Megan loves him. She's having a baby with him and is going to marry him. She's made her choice, and I can either decide to wither away and die or try to piece my life together again.

I hear a knock at the door, and I know this time it's Blue who texted me he is on his way up. He's here so much I'm thinking of giving him a key. I open the door, and he looks at me, surprised, and grins.

"What are you smiling for?" I ask him dryly, moving aside to let him in.

"Well, you're up, sober, and haven't punched me in the face, so I'd say it's a good day," he says, patting me on the back.

"I wouldn't go that far," I say, closing the door. I grab my laptop to look at the pictures I've taken for the gallery showcase. I feel him watching me over my shoulder.

"Damn, those are good, Ian."

I almost forgot that Blue's never really seen my work, aside from a picture here and there.

"I think I need to take some more shots today. You want to come?" I ask, gesturing for him to grab my bag. He lets out a surprised laugh.

"You want to go outside...and work?" he asks again

I swallow my annoyance. "Well, the rent has to be paid, and I make that from working," I say, downplaying that this is a major step for me.

"What the hell happened while I was gone?" he says excitedly. I let out a breath and shrug. I might as well tell him to get it over with and avoid any group hug kumbaya shit he's going to start.

"Lauren, Cal's wife, was here. We talked. It was nice to talk to someone who understands what's been going on." I clear my throat, and Blue waits for me to continue.

"Then her water broke and I had to take her to the hospital and I just...I guess I realized life goes on if you want it to."

Blue looks at me almost flabbergasted. "That's what I've been trying to get through your head since I've been back!" he exclaims. I give him the finger and hear another knock at the door.

"You expecting company?" he asks, looking at me curiously.

"Yeah, Hillary's coming with me to get some shots. We're behind." Blue opens it, and Hillary's there with a big smile, her long blonde hair falling around her shoulders. She's dressed in a light blue t-shirt and tight jeans.

"Hey," she says, and I see Blue gawking at her. I forgot how much he has a thing for blondes.

"I'm Hillary. And you are?" she asks, gliding right past him into the apartment. I'm about to go offer to pick his jaw up off the floor if it stays open any longer.

"This is Josh, my cousin. You can call him Blue if you want. He's going to tag along if that's cool with you," I tell her.

"Extra hands definitely will help." She giggles.

"I'm Blue," he says as if he just snapped out of a trance. I know that look from him. He's either in love or going to try to hump her.

"I'm Hillary," she says, amused, extending her hand out to him. He takes it wearing a big goofy smile.

"Your cousin's a lot more friendly than you, huh Ian?" she says, wearing a pageant girl smile.

"Yeah, he's mean as fuck sometimes, isn't he?" Blue jokes.

"Let's get out while we have good light," I tell them, both grabbing my stuff and heading out the door.

Scouting locations has always been one of my favorite parts of being a photographer, but it's hard to keep my mind focused on it today. It doesn't help that Blue is acting like a fucking idiot, panting after Hillary, like a bitch in heat. She's hot, yeah, and definitely his type, but it doesn't excuse how stupid he looks when he can't keep his eyes off of her, keeps asking her stupid questions, anything to get her to talk to him. He's a good-looking guy and can get pretty much any chick he wants, but Heaven help us when he sets his sights on someone like he apparently has with Hillary.

Was this how I looked to everyone with Alana? I was nuts over her, behaving in ways I never have with any girl. I was completely enamored, head over heels in love, and I never would have put up with the kind of attitude she gave me or the games she played with anyone else. I would've fucked them and then kicked them to the curb. I never had the patience for that shit. But with Alana, it didn't matter. She was my girl, my match, the only one who could take my shit and give it right back, and I didn't care.

But it's over now, I remind myself. I try to put her out of my head as we check out a few different locations—an empty street with mostly boarded-up houses, an area of the city being renovated that's full of modern-style apartment buildings and one massive, historic Catholic church that makes for a cool juxtaposition, a gorgeous park with the skyline in the background. It's hard not to think of her, though, because I wouldn't even be doing this if it weren't for her. She got me started. She encouraged me, and badgered the hell out of me until I agreed to try.

Finally, sick of being distracted every few minutes by Blue chattering away with Hillary, I ask them to go pick me up some lunch while I sit and think about what I want to do. If I didn't think Hillary liked him back, I would've sent Blue alone, but I'm picking up some

vibes that tell me she might not totally be against the idea of hooking up with him, she's just not as obvious about it as he is. For one thing, she hasn't paid nearly as much attention to me as she has recently, which is a relief, and I catch her doing some of those things girls do when they're into someone—playing with her hair while she looks at him, biting her lower lip. So I ask them both to go so that I can get some time alone to think and work, and when they both agree, I let out a sigh of relief once they get into their Uber.



Not fifteen minutes later, Blue calls me, probably asking me a question about my food order or where I want them to meet me, but I just send it to voicemail. I don't want to talk right now, and I figure if I give them some time to be alone together, they'll probably hit it off, which would be good for both of them.

It finally clicks with me where I want to go, and without a second thought, I head out to the beach where I took Alana on our first date. It seems like a good place to sit with my thoughts for a little while, to try to make sense of all of this that's happened. Because God knows it doesn't make sense right now, not really.

All it takes is a few minutes of sitting on the sand and listening to the water for the memories to come flooding back—all of them, in a dizzying rush that leaves my chest aching and me short of breath. Alana getting into the car after I convinced her to come out on the date with me, me taking photos of her right here, the candid ones that I loved of her free and laughing and completely herself—or as much herself as she could ever be when she was sharing her body with another person. The posed ones I took of her were beautiful, sexy, but I never loved anything so much as capturing her in those moments when she didn't entirely realize it.

I remember the feeling of her body underneath me, the aching desire of wanting her more than anything in the world in that moment, more than I'd ever wanted any other woman. The taste of her mouth, the feeling of her slick and hot on my fingers, that rush of adrenaline that comes the moment when you know a girl is going to let you fuck her—or at least I had thought I was going to get to that afternoon, before she flipped out on me.

That memory makes me laugh, but only for a second, because the rest of them are right behind it—the memory of her in bed with me for the first time, the way we fought before we wound up fucking, like so many other times, and other memories too. The good is mixed in with the painful, tangled up in a way that I don't think I'll ever be able to extricate them, because the memory of her gorgeous eyes looking up into mine as we said our wedding vows is a reminder that she'll never be my wife again. The memory of our honeymoon is just a reminder of all the adventures I wanted to have with her that will never happen, the road trip we'd planned that will never exist. Remembering her spread out underneath me on the kitchen table, begging for more as I made her come, well...that just reminds me that that's the moment I lost her, that my stupid mouth ran away with me and scared her shitless.

And now she's gone. I know Megan will do everything she can to keep Alana at bay, and why wouldn't she? She has everything now—her Prince Charming, his rich family, their baby. Alana is gone, as good as dead to me. And it's time for me to let her go.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, the wind taking the words from my mouth and throwing them out towards the water, where no one can hear. "I'm sorry for fucking up and scaring you away. I wish we could have had the life together that we planned. I wish we could have had every fucking thing in the world. God knows I wanted to give it all to you. But that's done now. So I'm going to do what you asked, and let you go. I'm going to get the fuck over it and stay away so that maybe at least some part of you gets to have a good life. So you're not torn in two forever."

I reach for my camera then, taking a series of pictures—of the sand where the water is lapping at it, the space where Alana once stood, where she no longer is. I stand up and get a wide shot of the beach, marking in my memory where we kissed, where we swam together, where I nearly made love to her for the first time, where she ran away. I take shot after shot, seeing the empty spaces, and reminding myself with them that she's gone.

Forever.

As I pack up my equipment into my bag and start to walk up the beach, I see a girl at the top of the hill, a camera pressed to her face as she takes a series of shots. When she lowers it, she catches my eye, and I notice that she's pretty—not gorgeous like Alana, but pretty in

a cute way. Short, with light brown hair tied up in a ponytail, freckles, and blue eyes. She smiles at me, shading her eyes with her hand, and then catches sight of my camera bag.

"Oh, so you're a photographer too," she says brightly. "What kind of camera do you shoot with?"

"A Nikon DSLR," I tell her, shouldering the bag.

"What kind of photography do you like to do?"

I shrug. "Landscapes. Candid. Whatever strikes my fancy at the moment." I keep the answers short and to the point, hoping to deter her, but it's clear that she's the sort of extroverted, bubbly personality that can make a friend anywhere.

"Oh, that's so cool! I do landscapes too. I like taking candid shots, but they're just not how I want them to be yet. It's like I just miss that moment every time that would be the perfect shot. So I guess I need to get my timing down. But I'm getting better at lighting." She grins widely at me, and her ponytail bounces as she lowers her camera to let it hang around her neck. "I'm Kylie," she says, holding out her hand.

"Ian," I say, taking her hand and shaking it. I can't help it; I'm slightly intrigued. It's been a while since I've been around this sort of vibrant energy.

"Would you want to go shoot together sometime?" She laughs a little self-consciously. "All my friends are academic nerds. They're not really into this sort of thing, and I think they see it as a waste of time. Like I'm not applying myself to something serious. I don't really have any artistic friends." She hesitates, taking a look at my face. "Oh, I'm sorry. I sound like I'm trying to pick you up, don't I? I'm really not. I promise. I just went through a bad breakup, actually, and —"

"It's okay," I interrupt her with a laugh. "I get it. Maybe we can sometime." I fish into my pocket and hand her a business card. "Right now, I'm meeting some friends. It was nice to meet you, Kylie."

"You too!" she calls after me as I walk up to the parking lot. To my surprise, Hillary and Blue are waiting there by my car with a takeout bag of food. I frown at Blue as I put my things in the trunk.

"How'd you find me?" I ask him shortly, and he shrugs.

"An old friend told me about this place. I figured it might be where you were at."

I know from that much that it was Alana who told him, but it's clear that Blue doesn't want to talk about her and to be honest, I don't either.

The ride back to my apartment is quiet. Blue drives so I can eat the burger and fries they picked up for me, and Hillary stays silent in the backseat. I feel lighter than I have in days, as if the time on the beach helped relieve me of some of the pain and heartache that I've been carrying with me.

When we get back, Blue and Hillary suggest that we go out for drinks, and I turn them down with a tired smile. "I think I'm going to make it an early night, actually," I tell them, and they both look disappointed. "You guys should go, though," I say encouragingly, and I see Blue's face brighten.

Hillary gives me a quick hug and heads outside, but Blue hangs back for a second, looking as if he wants to ask me something.

"Spit it out, Blue," I tell him with a smirk.

"I just, uh..." He runs a hand through his hair and looks at me. "Goddamn man, she's so fucking beautiful. And funny, too! And smart...I think she likes me on top of all of that. But I wanted to make sure it was cool if I asked her out. I know you've known her longer and maybe had some ideas. I don't want to step on your toes or anything."

I laugh. "No man, it's fine. If anything, I encourage it. Hillary's cool."

Blue visibly relaxes. "Thanks, man. I'll let you know how it goes." He winks at me and turns to leave, and then hesitates, glancing back. "I think you're going to be okay, Ian. I think everything's going to be alright."

I give him a small grin. "Yeah, man. I think so too."

Megan

I'M SO nervous I'm almost trembling as we get out of the car to go into the doctor's office for my first appointment. It's a mixture of nerves and excitement, and I can tell Kam is feeling the same way. His takes the form of fussing over me...opening my door, holding the door of the clinic for me, his hand on the small of my back as if I'm already heavily pregnant and need to be steadied instead of only a few weeks along and feeling mostly the same as I ever have—except for the morning sickness that seems to have cropped up recently.

This doctor's office is nothing like any clinic I would have expected to go to. It's a women's health clinic. My appointment was set up by Helen and Dexter. It's sleek and beautiful. Everything is modern, the carpet plush, and the chairs comfortable. It's clear they spared no expense. Instead of an office water cooler, there's a mahogany bar with options like iced or hot green tea, hot chocolate, or exotic coffees straight from a smooth black Keurig machine or a Nespresso. The waiting room is full of obviously upper-class couples—women dressed in business attire or designer maternity clothes, their husbands usually older and equally well-dressed. I can tell that Kam is impressed as I get my paperwork from the receptionist and sit down to fill it out as much as I'm able, given how little I know about my family history.

The receptionist doesn't look harried or overworked. She greets me warmly and takes down my information before handing me the opaque black clipboard with the neatly printed forms, and when I

tell her that I'm not sure how much information I have, she kindly tells me not to worry about it and to just do the best I can.

I've come a hell of a long way, I think, as I sit down in one of the soft upholstered seats. Kam is attentively at my elbow as I start to make my way down the page. I've come a long way from my time in foster care and my crappy little apartment in Indiana, and it's hard to believe that I won't ever be back somewhere like that. My future is secure with Kam, as well as everything that comes with it. I never imagined having this kind of life, and I would love Kam no matter what, but there's a sense of safety that comes with it that I wonder if I'll ever get used to or fully be able to embrace.

The nurse is a pretty dark-haired woman who looks like she's in her mid-thirties, dressed in crisp pink scrubs. I hand her the clipboard and explain the omissions, and she smiles sweetly at me. "Don't worry," she tells me. "Most of that isn't all that necessary for this sort of appointment anyway. We're just going to do the boring stuff now. Take your temperature and height and weight and all of that, and then you'll wait for the doctor to come back. How are you feeling?"

"A little nauseous," I tell her honestly. "But otherwise, alright."

"Some tea might help," she says, and Kam jumps up immediately. "I'll go get it," he volunteers. The nurse watches him go with an amused look on her face.

"First time?" she asks. "I'd assume so, but you never know."

"Yes, this is our first baby," I say. A small shiver of happiness washes over me when I say the words, and I'm experiencing all kinds of different emotions. "Our baby," "first baby," all of those things speak to a lifetime of happiness with Kam, of family and more children after this, and all of the things I never dared to hope that I'd get to have.

"Well, you've got a good one there," the nurse says as she jots down my vitals. "Alright, just change into this gown, and the doctor will be in as soon as she can."

Kam brings me a cup of hot green tea and I sip it as I sit on the table, patiently waiting for the doctor. I'm almost finished with it when she knocks and comes in, a warm smile on her face. She looks a little older than the nurse, with dark brown hair pinned back and a motherly air about her, and I immediately feel at ease. In fact, I've felt that way the entire time I've been here. I'm suddenly over-

whelmingly grateful for Cal, Dexter, and Helen, and the ability to be here instead of crammed into a public clinic full of screaming children and harried mothers and overworked staff.

The doctor greets us both, shaking my hand and Kam's, and asks what we do. She congratulates Kam on his transfer to the new school. "Congratulations to you both," she says as she takes a seat. "It sounds like you're both in a wonderful place in your lives for this. And congratulations on the engagement," she says, winking at me as she notices the ring on my finger.

This could have gone very differently, I think, as the doctor explains what procedures she'll be doing in detail, making sure to pause to see if Kam or I have any questions. I know if I'd had to use my state insurance, it would have been nothing like this. I can't help but feel as if I've hit some kind of lottery.

"Now, I'd like to do this part of the exam alone with Megan," the doctor says. "It can be a bit intrusive, and most ladies would prefer to have some privacy. I'll let you know when you can come back in."

Kam obligingly steps out while the doctor does the first part of the exam, asking me a few questions about my periods and my sexual history. I flinch a little at the last question, wondering if I should mention the episode with Alana and Ian, but I don't. *It doesn't matter*, I remind myself. *All that's over now. You only have the future to look forward to. Ian has accepted it. He's gone. And Alana will stay away too.* The doctor doesn't mention my disorder, and I hope that's a good sign, that that means it doesn't matter. That I'll be fine as long as I avoid undue stress, which pregnant women are supposed to do anyway.

The doctor steps out after that and tells Kam that he can come back in, and once he's seated, she looks at us both. "So we'll be able to do an ultrasound today," she says, and Kam and I both look at each other in shock. I hadn't expected that. My limited knowledge of how these things go is that an ultrasound is a separate appointment, but the doctor explains that the clinic has its own team and equipment for it, so scheduling it out for a different day isn't necessary.

"Oh, wow," I whisper to Kam as we wait for the doctor to go and get the ultrasound tech. "I can't believe we're going to get to see our baby today!"

"I know," he says, squeezing my hand. "I'm so excited. We won't know if it's a boy or a girl, though, right?"

"No, I think that's later," I tell him. "But still, we'll get a picture and everything." I smile at him, and I see every bit of my happiness reflected in his eyes. It warms me down to my toes. I can't believe how happy I am, how perfect all of this is. How *right* it all feels.

The tech sets up her equipment and introduces herself, asking Kam where he went to school before this when he mentions his transfer. She perks up immediately when he mentions Purdue. "Oh, I went there too for my classes!" she exclaims. "It really is a great school, isn't it?"

"It is," Kam agrees. "It was hard to leave, to be honest. But Megan's family is here, and so we wanted her to be close, and I wanted to be close to her. It was an easy decision." The way he explains it rolls off of his tongue so smoothly, without any of the extra baggage or drama that came with it, and it's easy to believe that it was that simple, that we're a normal couple who picked Chicago because my normal family lives here and we're having a baby. That none of that other stuff matters at all.

I gasp aloud when the screen crackles to life, and the tech points out our baby. "It's very small," she says, and it's true. I would never have known what to look for if she hadn't pointed it out. But it's there, a small blip on the screen. *Our* blip. Kam's fingers thread through mine as I squeeze his hand. I can feel tears coming to my eyes as I look at it, and I try to remember every bit of this moment, the first time that Kam and I see our baby. It's as magical as I hoped, and I hear Kam sniff a little too, almost as if he's teared up at the sight, although I can't bring myself to look away to see if that's true.

"So you're eleven weeks along," the tech says, and I smile happily at her, thinking that means I'm almost through that treacherous first three months already, and if the articles I've been reading are true, my morning sickness should start getting easier too.

"Wow, that means it must have happened that first night I came back," Kam says, chuckling as he looks at me. "I couldn't wait to be inside of you. I guess my guys didn't want to leave," he whispers in my ear and winks at me. I flush red and give him a playful nudge, but then my blood runs cold when I realize what he just said.

That was the night that Alana came back.

The night that I blacked out, that Ian swears he and Alana slept together.

No!

I can't get off the table fast enough. I throw the napkins that the tech gave me to wipe off my stomach in the trash and pull my shirt down, scrambling off as Kam looks at me in surprise.

"I have to pee, really bad," I say quickly as an excuse, hurrying out towards the bathroom as I try to get my emotions under control. But as I shut the door behind me, the shock is overwhelming. Fear rises up in my throat and chokes me as I take in the ramifications of this news.

If I'm eleven weeks along, and it happened that night, it might not be Kam's baby. And if it's not Kam's baby...

I fall to my knees just in time, grabbing my hair as I throw up violently. All of the tea and everything I've eaten that morning comes up in a rush as I puke for what seems like forever, tears running down my face.

When I can't vomit anymore, I stand up shakily and run a paper towel under the faucet, wiping off my face and dabbing under my eyes as I look at my pale expression in the mirror. In a matter of minutes, everything has gone from a perfect dream to the possibility of a waking nightmare.

Kam is waiting for me when I step out, his face a mask of concern. "Megan, are you okay?" he asks, reaching for me, and I let him because I know if I pull away, he'll know something is up.

"It was just nerves," I tell him quickly. "And the baby making me feel sick. I threw up, and I feel better now."

The tech looks completely unfazed. I'm sure she's had dozens of women have to run out to puke during appointments. She sets up a date for our next scan with us, and I put on my most cheerful face, pretending to be as excited and happy as I was before as she gives us our picture and walks us out to the receptionist's desk to schedule our next appointment. Kam stays by my side the entire time, his hand on my back or arm as if he can't bear to not be touching me.

It'll be alright, I try to tell myself over and over again.

But the minute we're driving home, I pull out my phone and text Helen.

It's important. I have to see you as soon as I can. An emergency.

IF IT'S NOT Kam's baby it's not your baby!

If it's not Kam's baby it's not your fucking baby, bitch!

I can't stop hearing that in my head, on repeat like a refrain, a broken record that I can't turn off. It keeps going for the entire ride home, and I can't tell if it's my voice in my head or Alana's shouting at me, if it's me that feels that way or her. I try to keep my face blank, to not let on how noisy it is in my head right now, how completely upside down I feel, but when Kam asks me what's wrong I know I haven't done as good of a job hiding it as I thought I was.

All it takes is one look at his face, lined with concern, and the sound of his anxious voice to tell me that he's picked up on my inner turmoil. It should make me feel good that he knows me so well. After all, isn't that what every girl wants, a man who's that attuned to her emotions and moods and cares that much?

It just so happens that what I'm worried about could blow up our entire life, our peaceful little idyllic bubble that we've been in ever since I found out I was pregnant.

"Nothing's wrong," I tell him carefully, trying to keep my voice even and calm. "I've just gotten really tired all of a sudden. It's nothing."

He looks at me curiously, and I can tell that he's not buying my excuse. "If something was wrong, you'd tell me, right?" he asks quietly. "I mean, after we had that talk, we agreed we were partners. You promised that you'd let me in and be honest no matter what."

Tears spring to my eyes, guilt flooding me. I feel worse than ever, like I'm betraying Kam by not being honest with him. But I know I need to talk to Helen. I need someone to tell me what the right thing to do is.

There's dead silence in the car as we pull up to the apartment, the tension in the air thick and heavy, and as he parks, Kam looks over at me, his expression pleading.

"Please, Megan, just tell me what's the matter. I *know* you. I know something's wrong. Just talk to me, please, like we agreed."

"I want to talk to Helen," I say, looking down at my hands in my lap. I feel like I sound like a petulant child, but I'm afraid of what will happen if I blurt it out here, now. I have some small hope that Helen will tell me this is ridiculous, that of course it's not Ian's baby, that one night when Kam and I have had sex dozens of times doesn't mean anything. "I'm hearing Alana's voice again," I tell him, trying

to think of anything to placate him until I can talk to Helen. It's partly true; I don't know if the thoughts in my head are mine or hers.

If it's not Kam's baby it's not your baby!

"I'm going to tell you," I whisper, looking up at him. "Just as soon as I get some control of things."

My phone rings and I pick it up the second that I see that it's Helen, glancing apologetically at Kam, who looks more tense and worried than ever.

"I'm ten minutes away from the apartment," Helen tells me. "Just go inside and try to stay calm until I get there, okay?"

"Okay," I say softly, trying to remember to breathe the way she taught me as I hang up the phone and grab my purse, following Kam up the stairs. He's so tense he's almost shaking, looking more frazzled than I've ever seen him. He's been so good at always being comforting, always being there for me, but I can see the cracks starting to show, and I know it's my fault. I'm too much. This is too hard. And if Alana comes back...

Kam looks up at me worriedly, sitting down on the couch. As I join him, he reaches for my hand with both of his, looking down at it as he caresses the back with his thumb. It's almost as if he needs comforting as much as I do, and I'm overcome with the sudden urge to cling to him, to try and pretend that this doesn't matter, that it can all go away if we just have each other.

But then Kam clears his throat, breaking the tense silence, and the next words that he says destroy any illusion I might have had.

"What do you think would happen if Alana came back?" he asks cautiously, and tears fill my eyes, the lump in my throat suddenly almost choking me. I don't know what to say. I can't think. It's the worst possible outcome, and until an hour ago, I believed that it wasn't possible, that we were past that. That Kam and our baby were my protection against that...but now it's all changed.

"Do you think she'd hurt the baby?" Kam asks, and I feel the question like a stab in the heart. At the same time, I love him more than ever for being so worried about our child. *Our child.*

If it's not Kam's baby, it's not your baby!

"I don't know," I say softly, chewing on my lip. "I don't know very much about her. She's just a voice in my head sometimes. When she's present, I'm not here, and vice versa."

I feel like I know less than ever. Everything has changed in an instant. Before this, I was sure that Alana would never have wanted a baby, and most certainly not Kam's baby, but now there's a possibility that it isn't his. If it's Ian's...that might...no, it *will* change everything. That's something Alana would fight for, even if she'd never planned on being a mother. She doesn't want me to have Ian, and she won't want me to have his baby, either.

I fight back tears as the visions I had of Kam and me—happy and thriving and stable, together in our little home raising our baby together, our life untainted by Alana and her past and her marriage to Ian—start to disappear, going down the drain in a matter of seconds. I don't know if Kam will understand this, how he could *possibly* understand this. And even if he could accept that I had no control over what Alana did, that doesn't mean he'll want to raise another man's child. He's been beyond wonderful, everything that I could have hoped for in a partner and more. But everyone has their limits. And this very well could be his.

And Ian. *Ian*. My stomach flips as I think about him, about what his reaction to this would be. If he knows, if he finds out, he'll never stop fighting for Alana. Whatever understanding we came to before would be over. He'd always be there, wanting his wife, his child, his family—the one that *he* thinks is real and belongs to him. I'll always be torn in two...unless Alana just takes over.

Like Cal did? Fear washes over me, turning my blood cold.

I remember Ian's face in that small moment when he thought that the baby was his before he realized what I was telling him, how happy he was for that split second. There had been a second of unbridled joy on his face and I crushed it, any hope he might have had... and now mine is beginning to crumble. And I don't know what to do.

"Megan?" Kam says my name, his voice slightly more urgent, and I realize I never answered his question, too lost in my own chaotic thoughts. "Would Alana hurt our baby?"

"I don't know," I whisper helplessly, looking down at my hands.

He's quiet for a moment. When I glance over at him, I see a determined expression forming on his face. "We need to make a plan in case Alana comes back," he says firmly. "In order to protect our baby, our life. We have to have that."

Before I can think of a response or say anything, there's a knock at the door, and then Helen walks in, looking as calm and poised as ever. "Hello Megan, Kam," she says with a smile, faltering just a little as she picks up on the thick tension in the room. Before she can say another word or I can respond, Kam blurts out: "What do we do to stop Alana from coming back?"

Helen pauses for a split second, caught off guard, but collects herself almost immediately. She takes a seat across from us, smoothing her skirt over her knees as she looks between the two of us. "What happened?" she asks calmly, her voice taking on that tone that I recognize as her "management" tone, the one she uses to try to diffuse a tense situation.

"She's hearing her again," Kam says sharply, before I can get a word out. I look down, my heart hammering in my chest. I can tell how much this is getting to Kam, how he's on the verge of losing his calm completely. I feel terrible that I've brought us to this point, that it's me that's turned our life so completely upside down.

"Kam, I need you to stay calm," Helen says smoothly. "As I've said before, stress and tension won't help Megan in these situations. She's still with us, and everything is going to be fine." She pauses for a second before continuing, giving Kam a moment. "I'd like to speak to Megan alone, briefly."

Kam hesitates, clearly gearing up to argue, but I quickly put my hand over his and give him my most reassuring look. "Please Kam, I'd like to talk to Helen alone too. Can you just give us fifteen minutes?"

His expression is plainly irritated, but he stands up, bending to give me a kiss on the cheek. "Alright," he says blandly, burying his emotions. "I'm going to go to the store then. Do you want anything?"

"Barbecue chips?" I ask, giving him a small smile, and his lips twitch at that, some of the tension leaving him at the ordinary request.

"Coming right up," he tells me, giving me another quick peck on the cheek before glancing at Helen and then leaving.

When the door closes behind him, Helen comes to sit next to me on the couch, turning to face me. I take a deep breath. Helen gently reaches for my hand. "Tell me what's happened," she says soothingly, and I feel something break loose inside of me.

"I found out how many weeks along I am," I tell her, miserable. I don't want to say the rest out loud. Once I speak the words, there's no taking them back, but I know I can't get through this alone. I need help, I need guidance, and Helen is the only one who truly can advise me, who has the experience and knowledge to do so. Cal has lived it, but how can I trust him completely when he's the alter? He won out over Chris the way Alana might win out over me if she knows the truth. Helen is the professional. I have to trust her.

"Based on that time frame, there's...there's a strong possibility that Ian might be the father," I say softly, my words tense and formal.

Helen is quiet for a moment, her face carefully blank. "How does that make you feel?" she asks finally, her voice neutral.

I feel a spark of anger. I jerk my hand free, my voice rising slightly as the words spill out of me. "How do you think that makes me feel?" I ask indignantly. "I'm fucking terrified! If Ian is the father, then Alana will come back, and I keep hearing all of these thoughts...I can't say for sure that it's Alana in my head and not just me, but I haven't been able to think clearly since the appointment this morning. Everything is a fog, and I just keep hearing it over and over—" Tears fill my eyes and spill down my face, my voice cracking and breaking as I start to cry in earnest. "What's worse is if it's Ian's baby, then it's Alana's. Technically, it's not my baby, and...and..."

Helen takes my hand back as my words dissolve into sobs, my shoulders shaking as I lose the ability to speak, and she gives me a moment to cry before handing me a tissue and looking at me intently. "Megan, this is why it's so important for you to see yourself as one person. Of *course* it's your baby. You're the mother, you're the one who will be carrying this child. You can't think like that. This is your body. But this is why I have encouraged you to integrate Alana rather than fight her."

So she can be the driving force like Cal is? Helen's voice is soothing, her words logical, but it's a small comfort. The thought that I can be in control, that Alana won't come back, that my baby and my relationship will hold her at bay, has been what's gotten me through this so far. Anything else is terrifying, unthinkable right now. "I don't know what to do," I whisper. "I promised I'd tell Kam everything, but how do I tell him this?"

"This can be a very sensitive issue—" Helen begins carefully, and I jump at the insinuation I hear in her words.

"So, you don't think I should tell Kam?" I ask eagerly, hoping for just that: permission to put this off, to keep my world as safe as possible for a little longer.

"I don't condone lying," Helen says firmly, not giving me the out that I hoped for. "But whatever you decide, Megan, we need to have an earnest and serious conversation about you accepting Alana." She pauses and takes a deep breath, making sure she has my full attention. "Furthermore, you need to tell Ian about this development, in case Alana does make a reappearance."

I look at her in horror, speechless, but she's unfazed. "I suggest hypnosis, as I have before, so that we can reach Alana preemptively." I stare at her but she's still talking, and her next words make my blood run cold.

"Before things spin out of control."

I start trembling when I hear her say that. I can't help it. I'm terrified at the prospect of letting Alana in again, of losing control, of losing everything.

If it's not Kam's baby, it's not your baby. That's what you said, right?

The voice comes screeching through my head again, ripping into my thoughts, and I shudder, covering my face with my hands to try and block it out.

"Megan, if you know then Alana knows," Helen says calmly, almost soothingly, trying to break through the fog that surrounds me. "There isn't any way to hide things from her. She's a part of *you*. You're a part of each other." She pauses for a moment, and when I drop my hands and look at her, she continues in that same cool, even voice that she always uses, as if my world isn't crumbling around me. "You need to introduce Alana to Kam," she says gently. "You need to begin building a bridge because there isn't any magical way to keep Alana from coming back. And I don't want to be harsh or scare you, Megan, but continuing to pretend like there is, that's both ignorant and dangerous."

I flinch as if she's struck me, but she continues speaking. "We don't have the luxury of easing into this anymore, Megan," she says, her voice firm now. "We need to begin working on this *now*."

"I'm afraid," I whisper, my hands shaking as I knot them together in my lap. "I'm afraid that Alana is stronger than I am."

Helen lets out a slow breath, and I can tell that despite her professional calm, she's beginning to feel frustrated. *And if she's frustrated with me, how does Kam probably feel?* I look into Helen's calm eyes. "Megan," she tries again, gently but firmly, "you *are* Alana."

"No," I say frantically, trying to get her to understand. "You don't get it. Cal is the alter! He's the one who is mainly around, the only one I've ever met, the one with the wife and the children and the family! What if Alana takes over like that, what if she ruins my life? Kam isn't in love with Alana, she's nothing like what he wants, and if she takes over, she'll destroy everything. She's not going to be reasonable. She'll do everything she can to keep me away." I'm shaking and crying again, overcome with fear and panic.

"All of this can be worked out," Helen says.

"You can't promise me that it will work out!"

"What I *can* promise you is that I'll do everything possible to make sure that it does."

I sink back into the couch. "Fine," I whisper, feeling defeated. "I'll do the hypnosis, and I'll tell Kam about Ian and Alana. *But,*" I say sharply, sitting back up as an idea comes into my head, "not until after I have dinner with Kam's parents."

"I don't think that's a good idea, Megan," Helen cautions me. "Being in stressful situations, as we've discussed before, is a terrible idea for you."

"It'll remind me of what *I'm* fighting for," I insist. "Kam, and our baby, and our family. That'll be what's in my head before I go under. And if things go wrong..." My chin quivers, and I bite my lip hard. "I want to remember what it all could have been like if...if it had gone right."

"You're only fighting against yourself," Helen says, shaking her head. "You and Alana are one and the same. This internal battle is what's making this harder for you."

"I can't go the entire pregnancy without knowing who my child's father is," I tell her, trying to pull my emotions back under control. "If I knew for sure it was Kam's, we wouldn't have to do any of this," I say eagerly. "Isn't there some kind of paternity test that we can do while I'm still pregnant?"

Helen hesitates. "That's not my area of expertise," she says carefully. "But I believe there is a non-invasive test that would be able to

tell you if Kameron is indeed the father. If it will put you at ease," she adds with a little sigh, "then I'll schedule you for one."

"I can't do the test with Kam!" I say, alarmed. "I know, regardless of what it says, that it'll hurt him too much, to know that I needed to find out for sure...we'd never be the same after that."

"It's impossible to do it without the father, Megan," Helen says patiently.

I don't need the actual father. I just need to rule out one of them.

Ian.

I feel awful for thinking it, but if Ian is the one who does the test, Kam won't ever have to be hurt. Ian is going to be hurt either way, whether it's Kam's baby or not.

Ian is stronger. And I'm not prepared to sacrifice what precious little I have in order to protect Ian's feelings.

You evil fucking bitch!

The thought slices through me like a knife, sending a chill down my spine so sharply that it feels as if the room has dropped by ten degrees.

"Do you really think that's best?" Helen asks. "Kameron has asked you for honesty."

"I won't hurt Kam again if I don't have to," I say firmly, gathering all my nerve despite how shaken I am from the sudden, sharp intrusion of Alana into my thoughts. And I know it was her.

"If you schedule the test," I say, squaring my shoulders and sitting up straighter, determined, "I'll make sure Ian is there to take it. And if...if it is Ian's, then I'll do everything you ask regarding Alana. I'll do the hypnosis and I'll tell Kam about it with you here, but..." I take a deep, shaky breath. "If it's Kam's then we can go more slowly. I know Alana will stay away then, I can *feel* it." I can hear the desperation edging into my tone, but I ignore it.

"Megan, I still want to caution you..."

"I have to try to make things right for Kam and for me," I say, swallowing hard. "I have to know for sure before I risk everything."

Helen lets out another sigh, and I can hear the disappointment coloring it, but she stands up. "Just let me make a call," she says, and steps into the bedroom.

This could *destroy* Ian.

Don't drag him into this. We've hurt him enough! What the fuck is wrong with you!

When Helen comes back out, her face is carefully neutral. "The test is scheduled," she says. "They can get you in the day after tomorrow. But I want you to be aware that the results can take a week. So keep that in mind."

And just like that, I have a new thread of hope to cling to. All I have to do is get Ian on board, and I know deep down that this is a fragile line that I'm walking, that it could go very badly if I'm not careful. But it's my only chance at happiness, my only shot at salvaging what I have. The thought of Kam's face if I'm forced to admit to him that I left him to have sex with Ian, whether or not Alana was the one in control, is enough to set me firmly on my course. Even if the baby is his in the end, I know he'll never be able to get the image of me in bed with Ian the same night that Kam came to Chicago to be with me, too passionate and out of control to use protection, out of his head. It will tarnish our relationship no matter what.

"I think that I should go with you when you go to explain this to Ian," Helen suggests, and I'm quick to agree.

"I think that's a good idea," I tell her, relieved to not have to go alone, and Helen looks equally relieved that I've listened to at least one piece of her advice today.

There's a knock on the door and soon Kam comes in, a plastic bag from the convenience store in hand. Helen stands to leave, and just that small shred of hope is enough to calm me so that I can act naturally again, giving Kam a genuine smile as he sets the bag on the counter and looks at us both.

"Thanks for coming," I tell Helen. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Of course," Helen says, her voice back to giving away nothing. "I'll see you tomorrow, Megan."

"How are you?" Kam asks once Helen is gone. "You look better."

"I'm much better," I tell him, crossing the room to wrap my arms around his waist. "I was just overwhelmed at the appointment, that's all."

"Are you unhappy?" Kam asks. I hate that I've made him think it's him. It's never been him. It's me, it's her. I look up at him, his forehead creasing, and I shake my head quickly.

"No, of course I'm happy!" I reassure him. "It was just scary for a minute, that's all. It's all new, and I just was scared. It's better now."

"What about Alana?" he asks cautiously. "What about you hearing her, and what happens if she comes back?"

"Helen said it's nothing to worry about," I assure him breezily. Before he can respond, I go up on my tiptoes, kissing him as I thread my fingers through his hair, and I feel Kam give in for a second, returning the kiss before pulling back and looking at me with concern still in his eyes.

"I'm really excited about dinner with your parents," I tell him, trying to change the subject, but it's clear that he isn't going to let me off so easily.

"Are you really okay?" he asks hesitantly. "If you're not, we can reschedule..."

"I definitely don't want to do that," I tell him firmly. "I'm really okay, I promise. Come on, I want to go get a nice dessert to take with us for dinner tonight. I'm sure your mom will appreciate that."

Kam smiles at me, reaching for his keys, but it doesn't quite meet his eyes. I'm not at all sure that he's buying what I'm selling, but I make up my mind to keep going anyway because I don't see any other path. Not one that doesn't end in heartache for us both.

And for now, at least, he's playing along.

Kam

SOMETHING ISN'T RIGHT.

I'm not entirely sure what it is or what's going on, but I'm not stupid.

At the appointment, everything was fine—better than fine, even. I could never have expected how I would feel hearing my child's heartbeat for the first time, but it's changed everything. I've always wanted to protect Megan, to keep her safe and give her the life that she never thought she'd have, but it's not just about that anymore. Now it's about protecting the child that she's carrying too, *our* child, my child. This is our family, our future, and I'm not about to let anyone get in the way of that. Not even the other half of the woman I love.

When Megan said she'd started hearing Alana's voice again, it frightened me more than I can remember ever having been before. I've never met or even seen Alana, she's just a name and a file to me, a list of petty crimes and a personality that I'd avoid if I ever came across it. I've tried to prepare myself for the possibility of seeing her, but how do you prepare for seeing someone else's attitude and personality reflected in the face of the woman you love?

The answer is you don't...there's no way to prepare for something like that. And the moment that I found out Megan and I were having a baby, all of my feelings about it changed. At one point, I'd simply hoped for the best with Alana, to be able to coexist with her if she appeared and placate her enough that she'd give me back Megan

sooner rather than later. I never expected to love or want her or even like her, but I considered her a necessary evil.

Now I want to keep her away through any means possible, whatever it takes. She's an unknown, possibly a threat to the baby, and I don't know how I'm going to fix the situation, but I'm determined to do whatever I have to in order to protect my family—the love of my life, my baby, my seed growing inside of her.

I considered canceling the dinner with my parents tonight. In fact, I thought it would probably be for the best, but Megan won't hear of it. She's bubbling with excitement now, at least some of which I can tell is forced, but she insists that she's excited and wants to go. I can't deny that her attitude changed after she talked with Helen. She's back to her usual cheerful, pleasant self, and I want to believe that it's real, that she just needed reassurance from a professional and now all is well.

So I play along, hoping that my misgivings are just my own anxieties coming to the forefront and don't mean anything. As we drive to my parents' house, I try to distract Megan from thoughts of Alana, encouraging her to talk about the baby instead. "What about names?" I ask her, glancing over. "We should come up with one for a boy and one for a girl, just in case."

She smiles at me, reaching over to thread her fingers through mine, holding my hand. "What are yours?" she asks curiously. "I'm still thinking about mine."

"Maybe Kevin for a boy?" I suggest. "Or Melody for a girl? You know, using our first initials."

Megan laughs, but I hear a small tremor of nervousness in it, and I know she's thinking of Alana. "I like Alison," she says, her voice quiet, and to my relief, the turn to my parents' house is coming up before the conversation can go any further.



MY PARENTS ARE THRILLED to see us. My mother gives me a huge hug, and my father claps me on the shoulder. Katy's hanging in the background but looks equally happy that I'm there.

"Megan!" my mother exclaims as she walks up behind me, giving her a hug to match the one that she gave me, and my father

greeted her happily as well. It's clear that they're welcoming her with open arms and hiding any displeasure they might have over us getting married, which takes away some of the tension I've been feeling. I asked them to give Megan a chance and respect my decision, and it's clear that they're doing that. I'm grateful all over again for the family that I have.

It's the kind of family I plan to have with Megan. And I don't intend to let anyone get in the way of that.

The house manager and cook have collaborated to make an extravagant dinner for the family, with squash soup and salad to start, and a lamb roast with mint jelly, roasted vegetables on the side, and mashed potatoes with goat cheese and garlic. When we sit down to dinner, my father is immediately attentive to Megan, asking her how she is and how she's feeling.

"I'm well," she says carefully, and I can tell that she's trying to be poised, to fit in with my family. I want her to be comfortable with them, but I know that she hasn't seen them since everything came to light, since the outburst at the charity gala, and it will take time. "I just..." She starts and takes in a small breath.

"I wanted to say, I'm sorry about everything that happened," she says quietly to him. "I love Kam so much. I would never do anything to hurt him. I really appreciate you accepting me into your family again, and I hope I can eventually be the woman that your son deserves."

If there were any reservations, I can see them swept away by Megan's small speech and heartfelt apology. "You're more than welcome in our family," Dad says firmly, and Mom nods her assent. Even though I can still see some coldness in Katy, she agrees as well, her smile telling me that she's on her way to forgiving Megan as well.

"I'm so glad you're a part of the family," Mom says warmly. When Megan looks over at me with a hesitant but happy smile, I feel as if it's the right time to let everyone know, at this moment, when we're all together and warm and full of joy.

"I think I should let you all know...*we* want to let you all know," I begin, reaching for Megan's hand and looking around the table, "that we have some good news to share." I feel Megan's hand tighten around mine, but I don't look over at her. I'm too caught up in the

moment to wonder if it's anything but shared excitement. "Megan is pregnant. We're having a baby!"

There's a brief, shocked silence, and then my mother gasps aloud, her hand covering her mouth as her eyes shine with happiness, and even Katy grins.

"We've got to plan a shower! Of course, we'll have it here, we'll throw you a huge party, and are you doing a gender reveal? How far along are you?" My mother shakes her head with excitement, laying down her napkin and waving to Megan and Katy to get up. "Come on girls, let's leave the boys alone, and we'll go talk. I want to hear everything!"

Katy looks amused at our mother's reaction, but she goes along, following Megan and my mother out and leaving me sitting at the table with my father. "Congratulations, Son," Dad says, standing as well and giving me a firm handshake. "Come on, have a cigar with me."

We go into the study and he closes the door behind him, pouring a splash of scotch into two glasses and handing me one, along with a cigar. He settles into his chair and looks sternly at me as I sit down across from him, cutting and lighting my own cigar when he's finished with his.

"Megan being pregnant changes everything," he says firmly, and I nod.

"I agree," I tell him. "It's only solidified my determination to be with her and keep my family safe." I lean forward, looking at him intently. "I need to make sure that Megan and my baby are protected."

"Of course. That's your job," Dad agrees, and I sit back.

"So, on account of that," I say, narrowing my eyes, "I need everything that you can find out about Alana, and everything you can dig up on Ian Hudson."

My father takes a deep drag of his cigar, considering the whiskey in his glass for a moment. "You'll have everything that there is out there on both of them by tomorrow night." He looks up then, meeting my eyes. "You have my word."

Megan

Relief washes over me as I sit down in the family room with Carolyn and Katy. My heart was racing from the minute we pulled into the driveway, but after I got up the nerve to speak up and apologize, I felt better, and I could feel the change in Kam's parents, how much they relaxed after I said my piece. Things feel like they were before everything happened, like Kam's family is accepting of me, happy to have me here, and even though I didn't expect Kam to announce my pregnancy, I'm glad that I didn't see despair or disappointment in anyone's face.

Carolyn has dragged out a picture book full of Kam and Katy's baby pictures, and she starts flipping through it, showing them to me as I look over her shoulder. Katy looks mildly disinterested by the whole thing, but I think it's adorable. I feel whatever tension might be left between Carolyn and I dissolve as she points out picture after picture, and I laugh along with her. "How was your first appointment?" Carolyn asks, looking over at me, and I smile.

"It was great," I tell her. "We got to see the ultrasound and everything. My brother has gotten me into a very nice clinic with a really good doctor."

Carolyn beams at me. "A good doctor makes all the difference," she tells me, clearly overjoyed that things are going well, but when I glance over at Katy, her face is expressionless and cold, almost sullen. I can't blame her exactly, but I wish I knew why she's still so upset with me—whether it's because of what happened with Blue or

because of everything with Kam, when I blacked out and what's happened since then.

"So, how is your *condition* going to affect the pregnancy?" Katy blurts out, and the room goes entirely still for a moment. I'm frozen in place for a second, speechless, and Carolyn looks horrified that her daughter asked the question at all.

"That's not an appropriate question right now, Katy," she scolds.

I know it's the question on the tip of everyone's tongues, though, and that regardless of her manners, Carolyn must be wondering it too. Kam's dad and anyone else aware of the situation would wonder the same thing.

"I have a great specialist," I say quietly, looking at Katy. "She's taking good care of me, and she's going to monitor me throughout the pregnancy to make sure that everything goes well."

"That's wonderful to hear," Carolyn says. I can hear the relief in her voice, but I can tell Katy isn't going to be so easily dissuaded.

"Has this specialist ever treated someone with your condition before who was also pregnant?" she challenges, and I flush, realizing that Katy isn't going to let up about this at all, regardless of how much anyone could tell that Carolyn wants her to, so we can go back to the fun and exciting part of the baby conversation. It's clear that while my apology and declaration of love for Kam might have softened his parents, it hasn't thawed Katy at all. I wonder if she'd be brave enough to ask these same questions with Kam in the room, or if she's taking the opportunity while she's got me away from him.

"Megan, you don't have to answer anything you're uncomfortable with," Carolyn says gently, but I can see the curious glint in her eye. Of course she's curious. I have a rare mental disorder, and I'm marrying her son and carrying her grandchild.

I take in a small breath, looking between the two of them. "As you know," I say softly, "my condition is extremely rare. My doctor is one of the best in her field, and she doesn't have any concerns about it negatively affecting the pregnancy." *It's mostly true, I console myself. I'm not really lying to them. My disorder won't actually affect the health of my pregnancy at all, it's my own mental health that Alana poses a threat to, but could, in turn, affect the baby.*

To my surprise, Carolyn reaches over and puts her hand comfortingly over mine. "We'll be here for you to provide whatever you need," she says reassuringly. "You're family now."

Katy says nothing, but her face is completely unreadable.

Kam and his father walk in then, bringing the conversation to a screeching halt. Kam sits down next to me as Robert joins his wife. Kam kisses me lightly on the forehead, smiling at me. "What did I miss?" he asks teasingly. I can't help but smile back.

"Baby pictures," I tell him, and I glance over at Katy as I say it, who meets my eyes but says nothing.

"So, how are you fitting in with the Crestfields?" Robert asks me, ignoring the warning look that Kam shoots him. I don't mind, though—anything is better than talking about my condition and how it might affect the baby.

"I'm very grateful to have found my family," I say simply, and he grins.

"A very upstanding family," he adds, and I flush pink, not quite knowing what to say to that.

"So what are the wedding plans now that you're pregnant?" Carolyn cuts in.

I glance over at Kam. "I'd like to be married before the baby is born," I say softly, and he nods his agreement.

"Something small," Kam says. "No frills, really. But don't worry Mom, after the baby is born we want a traditional wedding, one that you can go wild and indulge yourself with."

Carolyn beams at him, but Katy stands up and excuses herself abruptly, and I can feel tension fill the room as she sweeps out of it without another word.

Kam stands up as if to go after her, but I grab his hand. "I'll go talk to her," I say, and for a second he looks as if he's going to protest, but I squeeze his hand a little more tightly, giving him a reassuring smile. "It's fine," I tell him, and he relaxes a fraction, sitting back down.

I find Katy out in the gazebo in the backyard, sitting down with a glass of wine in her hand. I approach her hesitantly, sitting down next to her, but she doesn't say anything as I sit, just looks away.

"I understand why you're probably upset with me," I say quietly. "I don't know what you think might have happened between me and Blue, but I promise we're just friends. It's nothing like that."

Katy scoffs, shaking her head as she finally looks over at me. "I'm not upset with you about *Blue*," she says dryly, but her tone softens a little as she continues. "I know what happened between him, and I

was at fault. I know Blue wouldn't have cheated on me." She takes a sip of her wine. "I'm worried about my brother, Megan. I love him, not just as a brother but as my best friend, and I'm terrified that all of this could go wrong for him. I know what it's like to have a broken heart, and I don't want my brother hurt." She looks at me sharply, her expression almost angry. "Kam was *devastated* when you left, Megan. And it sounds to me like, with this condition that you have, there's not a damn thing you can do to keep that from happening to him again. And now you're getting married and having a baby?" She shakes her head in disgust. "This doesn't make me less worried, it makes me a hell of a lot *more* afraid for him."

She turns to face me fully then, the glass of wine in her hand forgotten. "What happens if your alter ego comes back, Megan?" she demands. "Huh? What happens then? What's to stop her from running off with my brother's child, and doing whatever damn thing she wants and not you or me or Kameron or either of our families can do anything about it?"

I'm completely speechless, staring at her with my face gone white and my blood running cold. She's right, I know she's right, but what am I supposed to do about that?

"That's why I'm not thrilled," Katy says flatly. "I'm going to do my best not to make things harder for either of you, or any of us. But," she continues, glaring at me, "I think if you really loved my brother the way you say you do, you would have let him go before all of this happened." As the last words come out of her mouth, she stands up, giving me one final, angry look before stalking away, leaving me sitting there completely stunned.

Tears flood my eyes, but not before I hear Alana's voice slice through my head. *She's right, you know. You're a bitch, a selfish fucking bitch, and you always were!*

And then I see Kam coming down the back steps. I sit up straight, wiping the tears out of my eyes just in time, and pasting a smile on my face as he walks into the gazebo. "What were you and Katy talking about?" he asks curiously. I just shrug, standing up to meet him.

"We were just talking about Blue," I tell him, and he frowns a little, but leans down to give me a quick kiss. "Are you ready to go?" he asks, and I nod.

"Yeah, let's go home," I tell him softly, and he smiles.

I have to make this work, I think, determination rising up in me as I get into the car and reach for my phone. *I can't hurt Kam again. I have to make this work for both of us.* Before I can change my mind, I text Helen and tell her that I don't need the paternity test. I've made up my mind, Kam is going to be the father of my child. Blood or not, like my husband, he would be anyway, and that's what I want. I want to marry him. I want a family with him. I want the life that we planned together.

Nothing else—and no one else—matters.

I SHAKE my head as I walk down the steps of my apartment and wave to Hillary, who is sitting in her car waiting for me. She greets me excitedly like always, and I can't help but chuckle—I've somehow been roped into going to dinner at Lauren and Cal's house in the suburbs. Lauren did the inviting, but Hillary did the convincing, talking me into dinner and coming over to see the babies that everyone now likes to joke that I "almost delivered."

I tried to turn them down, of course. I'm not really in much of a mood to socialize, but Lauren wouldn't hear of it. And since I don't have much of a life these days, I don't have any excuse for something better to do.

While we drive, I glance over at Hillary, grinning playfully at her. "So...how was your night?" I ask, and she blushes a furious shade of red, which tells me all I need to know, really. She smiles back, clearly on cloud nine. "Your cousin is pretty awesome," she says, still blushing.

"I'm glad to hear that," I tell her, and I mean it. Blue's been pretty tight-lipped about the whole thing, despite his obvious crush on Hillary the other day. I think he's trying to avoid rubbing his romantic success in my face by accident. But I'm happy for both of them. Just because my love life crashed and burned doesn't mean that I want everyone's to.

"It's not weird or anything, right? That I'm dating your cousin?" She bites her lip and looks over at me with some worry on her face, and I can't help but laugh.

"No, not at all," I assure her, and she lets out a relieved breath.

"I'm glad you're coming tonight," she tells me. "Lauren didn't know at first if you'd want to be reminded of babies"—she says this bluntly, in the way that I've gotten used to Hillary talking about things—"but I convinced her that babies remind people of fresh starts, and if anyone can use one of those, it's you," she declares.

Flashes of Megan pregnant invade my thoughts—Megan rubbing her stomach, talking quietly to it, Megan lying in a bath with bubbles heaped around her belly, Megan holding a baby in her arms—but I push them away quickly, not wanting the stubborn ache in my chest that comes with thinking about Megan.

I haven't been to Lauren and Cal's home out here before, and it's huge, as to be expected, but more homey and warm than I would have pegged any residence that Cal lived in to be. Despite its size and modern architecture, it's full of plush carpet, soft textiles, and a warm color palette that makes me feel instantly comfortable and at home. Entirely Lauren's influence, I'm sure.

The second we're in the door two little girls come running up to us, one about six or seven with dark brown hair and the brightest smile I've ever seen and the other older, maybe ten or eleven with blonde hair and bright blue eyes that immediately rushes to Hillary and gives her a huge hug.

"This is Caylen," Hillary says, indicating the dark-haired girl, "and Willa." It's clear that Caylen is Cal and Lauren's older daughter; the mixture of their features is obvious. As I glance curiously at the other girl, Hillary adds, "Willa is their niece."

"Who are *you*?" both girls demand in unison, and I can't help but smile at them. "I'm your aunt Hillary and Lauren's friend," I explain.

"Do you want to be our prince?" Caylen asks.

Willa adds, "We need one for our game."

"Mm, I don't think I'm much of the prince type," I tell them. "More of a knight, I think."

"You're handsome like a prince," Willa says shyly, and I burst into laughter at the dry look Hillary gives me.

A pretty older woman hurries into the room, breathless, her red hair piled up on top of her head. "I'm sorry for them bombarding you," she says, and I smile. "Not at all," I tell her, as Hillary introduces her as Cal's mother, Gwen.

"This is Ian," Hillary explains. "He's Lauren's friend and one of the artists at the gallery."

"It's nice to meet you," Gwen says. "Come on girls, let's go back in the other room and pick up our toys. You'll find Lauren in the family room," she tells us, before shooing both of the little girls back out of the room to their dismay.

It's impossible not to feel the joy and warmth of the house. A family lives here, a *real* family, with kids and in-laws and bustling, happy energy. It leaves me with a vague sort of pain in my chest as we walk into the room and see Lauren stretched out on the large sectional in front of the television, one tiny baby tucked into her arm and the other in the bassinet, sleeping.

Hillary squeals immediately, hurrying towards her. "Give me my goddaughter!" she exclaims, and Lauren grins, handing the baby over happily and then turning that same smile on me as she sees me.

She gets up off of the couch slowly, walking over to me and giving me a warm hug. "Thanks for coming," she tells me sincerely.

"Thanks for having me." I glance over her shoulder at the two babies, the one now being cuddled by Hillary and the other still miraculously sleeping. "What'd you wind up naming them?"

"The one sleeping is London," she says, "and the one Hillary has is Paris." She glances over at Hillary. "Can you keep an eye on them for a minute? I want to show Ian the house."

"Of course! Go on," Hillary says, waving a hand and shooing us away.

"Should you be walking around?" I ask with concern, and Lauren just laughs. "I'm fine," she assures me. "How are *you* doing?"

"Better than expected," I tell her honestly, and I smile at her. "You had a lot to do with it, to tell you the truth. Seeing you with the babies kind of reminded me that life doesn't stop...it has to go on, regardless of whatever's happening at the moment."

"Well, I hope you've started to see me as a friend," she says firmly. "Someone who can be there for you."

"I definitely do."

Lauren takes me on a tour of the house, slowly, ending up finally in the kitchen where Cal is. He greets me more warmly than I expected—I wasn't sure how he'd feel about Lauren and I having a closer friendship, but if he's upset, he isn't showing it, outwardly at least. It's clear that he's happy, over the fucking moon about the ba-

bies. His joy is tangible and almost infectious. Lauren walks over and hugs him, giving him a soft, tender kiss, and I'm reminded of everything I wanted with Alana, everything that I hoped to have. It's gone now, but I remind myself that I can still have it one day, even if it's not with the woman I want more than anything in the world.

I enjoy myself more than I thought I would. The dinner is delicious, and as we all sit down around the table the girls remind me of my earlier "promise" to be their knight in shining armor, which results in Cal and I getting roped into playing a game of princesses and castles with them after dinner in the living room, while Lauren and Hillary and Gwen look on. They cheer us on teasingly from the sidelines as we "rescue" the princess from the "dragon" that's living in the castle they've built out of blankets and brooms and boxes, and although I would have scoffed at the idea not long ago, I actually have fun. With Cal, no less.

I'm getting ready to meet Hillary at the door to leave when Cal suddenly appears, pulling me out the front door and onto the porch. "Have you talked to my sister?" he asks, his eyes narrowing. "Since Megan told you, I mean."

"No," I say flatly. "I haven't." I take in a deep breath, reminding myself that life is different now, that it doesn't have to be hurt, pain, doom, and gloom. That it's going to be better. There's a possibility of it, at least. "I'm not going to make trouble for her anymore. I'm trying to make peace with what she wants, and that's all."

"What Megan wants." Cal looks thoughtful. "What about Alana?"

I look at him with confusion, my old irritation with him rising to the surface. He's given me shit for as long as I've known him, and it's been plain from the start that he didn't think I was good enough for his sister. Now he's going to switch sides and start hinting that I shouldn't just walk away?

What the fuck, man?

"Your sister is engaged to and pregnant by another man," I say sharply, keeping my voice low. "So it doesn't really matter what Alana wants."

Cal narrows his eyes at that, chuckling. "Is she?" is all he says, his tone sarcastic. I feel my temper rising dangerously. I'm more confused than ever.

"What are you two gossiping about?" Lauren asks playfully as she and Hillary walk out. Cal puts an arm around her waist, pulling her in and silencing any further inquiry with a kiss. I take that opportunity to slip away with Hillary, suddenly fucking ecstatic to be away from Cal. At least it's a more familiar reaction to him. Knew it couldn't last for long.

"What was that about?" Hillary asks curiously as we get into the car.

"No fucking clue," I say shortly, shrugging. But I can't get the question out of my head.

Is she? The thought won't let up and haunts me all night and stays with me to the next morning. I can't stop thinking about Cal laughing in my face and asking *Is she?* There's something about the way he said it, his tone, his attitude, and I can't stop turning it over and over in my head. What the fuck was that supposed to mean?

Was it just Cal fucking with me, the way he's shown many times over that he enjoys tremendously? Does he mean *is she* really marrying this Kam dude, or *is she* really pregnant? Does he think she's lying about it?

Why would Megan lie about something like that? She was so happy but more protective and fiercer than I've ever seen her, like a mother bear protecting her cub. I don't think she's lying. But I don't know what Cal's fucking deal is.

I show up at Blue's door first thing in the morning, pounding on it, and he opens it looking more than shocked and confused. "Hey, what are you doing here?" he asks like he just woke up.

"I need to talk to you right now," I tell him, pushing my way past him and inviting myself in.

I'm not exactly surprised to see Hillary in a t-shirt on the couch, holding a bowl of cereal, and we regard each other awkwardly from across the room for a moment. I'm not about to be distracted by it. I have more important things to worry about and discuss with Blue right now.

"I'm...just going to go shower," Hillary says, getting up from the couch and disappearing into the kitchen.

"What's going on, man?" Blue asks, sitting down onto the couch. I glare at him.

"Cal is fucking with my head, that's what," I snap. "I had dinner at his place last night. Lauren invited me, and just before I left, he decided to ask me if I'd talked to Megan. And then when I said no, he had the fucking gall to insinuate that I shouldn't just be walking away, asking me if I'd considered what *Alana* might want, not Megan."

"You said he's an asshole, right?" Blue asks logically. "Maybe he was rubbing it in a little."

"I said it didn't matter what Alana wants, because Megan is marrying Kam and pregnant with his kid, and Cal just laughed in my fucking face and said 'Is she?' in this sarcastic fucking tone of voice." I'm red-faced by the end, but Blue doesn't look all that surprised.

Blue shrugs. "Yeah, that's weird man. But you said how Cal is. He's probably just fucking with you."

"I thought of that, but what reason does he have to do that?"

"He's an asshole, man. You know it. We all know it. Maybe he's all twisted up in the head and gets off on fucking up other people's lives since he's settled down and can't fuck up his own anymore." Blue is looking directly at me, and I can see the disappointment in his eyes. "You're going back down the rabbit hole, dude," he says quietly, and I know he's right.

"Could you just go talk to Megan?" I ask, my voice quieter now. "Just so you can see if you think anything is off."

"I haven't told her I lied to her about Alana," Blue cautions.

I nod. "I know. Just...I need you to do this. Please."

Blue lets out a sigh. "Alright," he relents. "I'll do it. But," he says sharply, "I want you to promise that if things are how Megan says they are, you're gonna be done with Alana. For *good*. You'll try to move on?"

I take a deep breath. I *was* trying. I was trying my fucking hardest to let her go, to move on, to envision a different future for myself, and all it took was two words to pull me back, to remind me of how badly I wanted everything with her. When Megan told me she was getting married, that was a knife through my heart. But her being pregnant decimated me. It's what made me try to let Alana go. But if there isn't a baby, that changes everything.

"Alright," I agree.

Megan

Helen will be here any minute, and I feel like I'm going to throw up.

I've been dreading the appointment today, not sure what she's going to say after the text that I sent her. Will she be upset? Disappointed? I don't think it's going to be good, whatever it is. I know that she doesn't think I'm handling this well, but I have to protect myself. I have to protect my baby.

I'm glad that at least this appointment is just the two of us. We have a lot to work out, Helen and I, about how to move forward before Kam joins in on the appointment again. I fidget in place as I wait, drumming my fingers on the couch, tapping my foot, feeling like a prisoner waiting for their execution as I listen for Helen's footsteps, the sound of the door opening.

It doesn't matter if she disagrees, I tell myself firmly. My mind is made up. I'm not going to let anyone else run my life anymore. I'm going to be the one in control, the one who decides what happens. I'm not going to be passive any longer.

When Helen comes in, whatever feelings she might privately have are hidden, as always. Her face is clear and pleasant, and she greets me warmly before she sits down—no judgment, contempt, or annoyance in her expression. It drives me crazy sometimes, even though I know it's her job to stay calm, to remain mostly neutral. Just for once, I'd love to see her actually show how she really feels.

"How are you doing?" she asks gently.

"I'm good," I tell her, shrugging. "I had a hard time sleeping. But otherwise, I'm fine."

"How was dinner with Kam's family?"

"It started out good," I say hesitantly. "I apologized for what happened when I blacked out and told them how much I love Kam, and Kam told them about the pregnancy." I see Helen's eyes widen with surprise at that, but she says nothing as I continue. "Kam's mom dragged me off to look at baby pictures, and she was thrilled... but his sister was upset." I bite my lip, trying to stay calm as I remember the conversation. "She said that she's afraid I'll hurt Kam again, that Alana will reappear and run off with the baby, that I'm not in control of what happens. She said if...if I really loved Kam, I would have left him." I can't stop the tears welling up in my eyes now. Just the idea of losing Kam makes my heart ache. "So that's why I canceled the appointment," I say, looking up at her defiantly. "I'm choosing my future. And that future is with Kam."

Helen is quiet for a moment. And then, calmly, "Do you think that future is fair to either Alana or Ian?"

"I'm making the best choice for my baby," I say firmly.

Helen lets out a small sigh. "Megan, the best choice for the baby is for *you* to feel better, to be whole—and that means including Alana."

I take a deep, shaky breath, trying to keep my emotions under control. "I disagree," I say flatly, and leave it at that.

"Megan, you haven't even made an effort to include Alana, or work out a compromise," Helen reminds me gently. "You don't know yet what the possibilities are."

"There isn't anything to compromise over!" I blurt out, more sharply than I meant to, but I can feel myself getting angry—I'm so *tired* of this, so sick of this back and forth, this insistence that I share my body with someone else. I feel like a child, pulled this way and that, no one trusting me to know what is best for myself. "My whole life has been a series of compromises with Alana in control, and I'm tired of it," I say flatly. "I'm not going to let the threat of Alana control me anymore."

Helen gives me a minute to finish, sitting quietly as I talk. When there's been silence for a few moments, she looks at me. "Megan, there's someone I'd like to introduce you to if that's okay with you."

I immediately feel my whole body tense, on alert for whatever is about to happen. "Do I have a choice?" I ask tightly.

Helen smiles at me. "You always have a choice," she says gently.

"Fine...sure."

Helen picks up the phone to speak to her assistant. "You can send in Mr. Scott," she says pleasantly, and then hangs up the phone, watching my face as I look at her curiously.

A moment later, Cal walks in, and I look at him and then back at Helen, completely confused. "I don't understand," I say, my stomach full of anxious nerves all over again, but Cal just smiles and sits down beside me. I don't return the smile. Our last conversation is still fresh, and I'm more irritated than anything that he's intruding on my appointment.

"I'd like you to meet Christopher," Helen says.

I stare at her, completely floored. "What?" I manage, almost speechless, but Helen gives me a reassuring smile.

"I wanted Chris to come today because I think it might help you to understand better why integration is so important if you speak with someone who has gone through the same thing."

Cal—Chris?—sits there quietly, and it gives me the opportunity to really look at him for the first time since he walked in. I can see a few small differences from the man that I know—he seems more relaxed, and his clothes are different from what I'm used to. Cal is polished, a man with money who likes to show it, and now he's wearing faded blue jeans and a soft t-shirt that looks like it's been through plenty of washes, with a denim shirt thrown over that. His hair is messier, not as groomed like Cal's is. And when I look closer, I see that the most obvious thing is that his eyes aren't Cal's pale grey, but a soft shade of green instead.

Chris clears his throat. "It's nice to meet you, Megan. Officially." He gives me another of those smiles, and I can see some of Cal's charm in it, but it's easy, more open than I've seen.

I glance back at Helen. *This has to be some kind of joke, a trick or manipulation*, I think. But deep down, I know that it isn't. This is real, and I don't know how to deal with it, how to reconcile this all in my head.

I have a plan! I want to scream, but no one seems to think my plan is the right way to handle this.

"I know this can be strange and overwhelming," Chris says gently, and my head snaps back around to look at him. "But I understand the place you're in right now. I've been there."

I try to pull myself together, to get some order to my racing thoughts. "Helen, can you leave the room, please?" I ask, still looking at Cal/Chris.

"Megan, I don't think..."

"Please," I say tightly.

"Alright," Helen relents, standing up. "Take all the time you need."

Once she's gone, I feel a little better, less like I'm being ganged up on, but I still feel awkward as I look at the man across from me...this man who is my brother Cal, but also somehow not. He's different, like me.

"I know you must have a ton of questions," Chris says, his face and voice clearly saying that I should ask them. It's the clearest sign yet that he's not Cal, who would never be so forthcoming. "I know —"

I interrupt him, my heart racing, as I ask him the question that's been on my mind nonstop since the hospital. "If Cal is the alter, then why is he the one who is around most of the time?"

Chris smiles calmly at me. "I'm around just as much as Cal is," he assures me. "That's the thing, Megan—integration is about compromising, not about one person winning." His eyes flick down to my stomach and back up, and his voice is gentle as he continues. "From what I understand, you and Alana now have someone to compromise for."

Tears spring to my eyes at that, as the old familiar fear that I have whenever I think of Alana starts to flood through me. "You don't know what she's like," I say helplessly. "She almost got me *killed*. I don't trust her! I don't trust her with my pregnancy or with my baby, and she's definitely never going to let me be happy with Kam." Tears drip down my cheeks as I look at him. "You don't understand."

"Trust me, I do," Chris insists. "Megan, Cal was just as difficult as it sounds like Alana is. We had two separate lives for a long time. I didn't know who Lauren was until she showed up on my doorstep with a daughter she claimed was mine, while I was engaged to another woman that I was in love with."

I feel my blood run cold. *Chris was engaged? But he's with Lauren now. And Lauren was Cal's. So that means...* The parallels are too much to ignore. The idea of losing Kam fills me with fear, and I want to

cover my ears, to tell him to stop, to shut up. But I don't. I let him speak because another small part of me knows that what he's saying is important, that it's something I need to know.

"But the woman I was with wasn't the one for me," Chris continues. "And I fell in love with Lauren, too. Lauren was our bridge, our reason for compromise, along with our daughter."

"Caylen," I whisper.

He nods. "This baby can be your bridge with Alana, Megan. It's not easy. I'm not going to lie to you. I felt so out of control, so lost for a long time. It was hard for me to come to terms with what I had, who I was. I used to look at Cal as the enemy too, the one who was threatening my life, but that was never really the case. I understand that now. All of that—it's all *me*. Chris, Cal, Collin—those are all different facets of myself, parts making up a whole." He pauses, looking at me intensely. "Megan, the only way for you to have any hope of a life that isn't fragmented, that isn't chaotic and broken up into pieces, is for you to come to terms with the other part of yourself."

"Who is Collin?" I ask curiously. I've never heard him mentioned.

"That's a story for another time," he says with a light sigh, and my stomach drops as I think of the implications. Three. Chris, Cal... now Collin? He has a third person, another alter. What if I developed another one, too? Alana is hard enough; the idea is terrifying. Or what if I have another already, and I don't even know it?

It's too much. It's too overwhelming, and I cover my face with my hands for a moment, trying to get myself back under control, composed again. "I'm getting married," I say finally when I drop my hands back into my lap. "And I don't know if my fiancé could really accept Alana. She's not...she's so different from me. I don't think he could love her. And to be honest..." My mouth twists as I think about it. "From what I know of Alana, I don't know how I could not be jealous. She's like...she's this wild girl. She worked in a strip club, for God's sake!" I try to lower my voice, slightly shocked at my own outburst, but Chris doesn't look perturbed. "It almost feels like he would be cheating on me if he did want her. Because she's this wild, crazy, sexy alter ego, and I'm just a normal, Midwestern girl."

"Maybe it's because you haven't accepted Alana," Chris says gently. "She's a part of you, Megan. You have those things in you,

even if they're not conscious. You can bring the two parts of you together if you're willing."

"Alana is in love with someone else," I say flatly. "Do you know about Ian?"

He nods.

"I don't know if she'll give him up," I tell him helplessly. "How can we build a life together when what we want is so different? She married someone else. She and Ian didn't divorce. She might fight for him because Kam isn't what she wants any more than Alana is what he wants."

"You have to talk to Alana," he insists gently. "I know this sucks. I really, really do. But trying to banish her won't work. She'll fight her way back to the surface eventually. Neither one of you can beat the other, and considering that you're pregnant—you have to make things right with Alana." He smiles at me, trying to reassure me. "It's the only hope you have at providing a good life for my little niece or nephew."

He's right. I know he's right, but there are so many what-if scenarios. What if it goes wrong? What if Alana doesn't want the baby at all? What if she does? What if she fights and won't compromise?

"I'm scared," I whisper, meeting his eyes. Green eyes, not grey. Not Cal's eyes, Chris's.

He reaches out cautiously to hug me, and after a moment's hesitation, I let him. He wraps his arms around me, and the hug is soothing. For a moment, I feel protected and safe, like my big brother has come to help me.

"I like you a lot better than Cal," I tell him, laughing through my tears as I sniff them back.

He laughs too, pulling away from me as he looks down at my face. "I am Cal," he says gently. "We're one and the same, regardless of what you call me."

"I think I'll call you Chris," I tell him through a sniff. He chuckles.

"Okay," he says.

And I try to believe everything will be okay.

Kam

I THOUGHT FINDING out everything there was to know about Ian and Alana would make me feel better once it was all laid out in front of me, but now that I'm here, it doesn't. I'm sitting at the dining room table with my father, pictures everywhere, staring at all of them. There are pictures of Ian, pictures of Alana, pictures of Alana and Ian together. The pictures of Ian are one thing—it's confusing to see him, this rangy, roguish-looking blond with an arrogant grin and a cocky look that I want to punch directly off of his fucking smirking face—no, it doesn't just make me jealous. It makes me fucking *furious*. Because this man had his hands on my fiancée, his mouth on her, his dick inside of her. I was supposed to be the first, the only. It *meant* something to me, to Megan, that I was the first, that she was innocent and sweet and trusting the first time, and that no one else had ever touched her. But all it took was this guy showing up, and now I know all of that was just an illusion. It wasn't Megan's fault, sure, but it still fucking hurts like a punch to the gut.

And then there's the pictures of Alana. Pictures pulled from his Instagram of her standing on a beach, windblown and careless, snapped in a moment of reckless joy. Her on a balcony I don't recognize, staring off into the city. Her balcony? His? The home they shared? The thought rips through me, the idea of them sharing a home, a bed, a life.

A picture of them on their wedding day, Alana in a casual wedding dress in a Vegas chapel. It wasn't a drunk spur-of-the-moment thing, that's for sure. She's glowing. It's clear that she meant to be

there, that she's happy, and so are they. More pictures from his social media, pictures of them on their honeymoon, in Mexico. It's like looking at Megan's twin—if I didn't know they were the same person, that's exactly who I'd think she was, because the expression on this girl's face, the sarcastic glint in her eye, that's not my Megan. The way she dresses, her demeanor—it's all different.

But I know they're the same. That's Megan in the pictures as sure as it's Alana, and as I stare at the mess of them scattered across the table with my father, I want to flip it over, hurl them all into the wall. I've never felt so unhinged in my life. I've always prided myself as calm, reasonable, understanding. But this is testing it.

There are other things too. Drivers' licenses, school IDs, every document that my father could find. Before I saw all of this, Ian Hudson wasn't real to me, just some shadowy figure that threatened my future with Megan, something amorphous and insubstantial. And Alana—well, she was a problem, not a person. Something to be figured out, medicated, tolerated. But looking at all of this, I know now she isn't something I can ignore, she isn't someone that I can pretend doesn't exist. She's real, and she had a life. A whole life that Megan was never aware of.

"Have you met this 'Alana' person?" Dad asks, picking up one of the photos and looking at it more closely.

"I haven't," I say grimly.

"Do you think Megan was able to end things with Ian?" He picks up one of Ian's photos, and I grit my teeth, not wanting to see Ian's damned face again, to think of Megan in bed with him.

"I don't know." I look away, but that just puts the photos of Alana in my field of view.

"You need to speak with Ian and get confirmation of that yourself," Dad says resolutely, setting the photos down. "Worst-case scenario, you can say that you'll make it worth his while to disappear. This guy seems young. With the right financial offer, he could start fresh, have a whole different life than what he might have thought he could aspire to."

I snort, shaking my head as I try not to laugh bitterly. "I don't think that's a good idea," I say shortly. "I can only imagine what I'd do if someone offered me a deal like that to stay away from Megan. And this Ian doesn't look like he comes from the same kind of background that I do. I think he'd do worse."

"He may not feel the same way about Alana as you do about Megan," Dad says calmly. "And Megan is pregnant with your child. Not many men want to raise someone else's kid." He clears his throat, looking back at the mess of photos. "I'm not trying to offend you, but can you handle being with *this* woman?" He gestures towards one of the photos of Alana at the club, dressed in white lingerie that makes her skin look unearthly pale, and her black hair stand out more than ever. She's gorgeous—all legs and pushed-up breasts, a waist that I remember what it's like to hold onto, red lips, and smoky eyes.

It makes me angry because this isn't my Megan. This is the kind of woman I would have lusted over with my friends at some high-end strip club. The kind of woman that my father's politician buddies pay for a blowjob in the champagne room. The kind of woman that gives you a hard-on that just won't quit. But not the kind of woman you marry. Not the woman you take home or fall in love with or have a family with. This isn't Megan—because she *is* all of those things. She's soft and sweet and innocent, and she's the mother of my child. She's not this...*this fucking whore*.

I don't want to be with the woman in the photos. I don't want to feel anything for her, not lust and sure as hell not love. But I don't want to lose Megan. I can't lose her. "I could tolerate Alana, if it came down to it," I say carefully, pushing the photo away. "But hopefully it won't. Megan's doctor is the best there is. She'll solve it."

"Do you want me to go with you?" Dad offers. "To talk to Ian. I make deals for a living. Maybe I can encourage him to take the offer."

"Thanks, but no," I tell him.

I look at the pictures again, a long hard look, burning them into my mind and holding on to the anger that they cause because I might need it to get through this.

"This is something I have to do alone."

Megan

As irritated with her as I was at the time, I have to admit that Helen was right to bring Chris into our appointment. After our conversation, I understand that integration is the only answer, that compromising with Alana is the only thing I can do to prevent my life from being fractured and provide a good, functional life for myself and the baby. I'm going to talk to Kam about Alana tonight, no matter how hard it is. I've agreed to undergo hypnosis at the next appointment to try and talk with Alana and communicate with her. I'll do whatever it takes. I'm terrified, but I know that I have to be strong and do it...it's not just about me anymore.

My train of thought is interrupted by a knock at the door, and I jump a little, getting up quickly and going to answer it. I have no idea who it could be. Kam has a key now, but when I open it and see that it's Blue, I'm thrilled. I give him a huge hug, relieved to see someone that I'm actually happy to talk to.

"Come in!" I tell him, waving him inside. As he walks in, I go to get him something to drink. "I didn't know if you'd want to talk to me again after that meeting," I say, smiling sadly at him. "I'm really glad that you do."

"I'm Ian's family, but I'm your friend," Blue reminds me, sitting down at the breakfast bar. "Thanks," he says, taking the glass of water I hand him. "How are you doing?"

"I'm doing pretty well," I tell him. "A little nauseated and nervous about the baby, and lots of doctor's appointments, but good, considering."

"Is Kam home?"

"No, he's in Indiana with his family. He said he had some things he needed to take care of." I can see him visibly relax, and I wonder why he's nervous to see Kam.

"Kam must be pretty excited about the baby," he says, his tone dry before taking a sip of water.

I force a smile back onto my face, nodding. "He is," I say, a little more hesitant now. I've never lied to Blue before, and I'd like to keep it that way, but if he starts asking too many questions about the baby, then I might have to. I want to ask him about Ian but I don't want to open that door, and the reality is I'm afraid of what I might hear—and I feel guilty for wanting to know at all.

"You look good," I say, quickly changing the subject. "Happy."

"I am," Blue flushes slightly. "Actually, I've sort of started dating someone."

I look at him, surprised and caught off guard, but happy for him. I wanted him to get past Katy's cheating, to find someone who would really be good for him. "What's she like?" I ask curiously.

"She's beautiful and smart and funny, and the sex is amazing," Blue blurts out.

I roll my eyes at the last part, but I can't help being happy for him. "What's her name?" I ask.

"Hillary," he says, and I look at him curiously. "Is that the girl that Ian works with?"

"Yeah." He can't stop smiling; the grin on his face is stretched from ear to ear.

I immediately feel elated.

I remember Hillary from the day that I was in the accident, and I have to fight back the memory of what happened that day between Ian and me. I thought I had picked up on some chemistry or attraction between Ian and Hillary that day, and even as I scold myself for feeling happy that it didn't grow into anything more, I can't help the smile that spreads across my face. I know that I was jealous, that from the moment I walked into his house, I hated the idea of a beautiful girl being there. Selfishly, I'm happy that Ian isn't with anyone. It's conflicting and painful. I hate myself for feeling this way. The emotions tangle together inside of my stomach until I feel nauseous and almost like I might throw up. I shouldn't be happy, I shouldn't want him to be alone, but I do. I'm *glad* he's not dating anyone, and I

hope that he's not sleeping with anyone. The guilt makes me sick, but I remind myself it isn't *me* that feels this way. It's Alana.

"What's wrong?" Blue asks, his voice alarmed, and I shake my head quickly.

"Just some morning sickness," I lie, sitting on one of the barstools. "Or all-day sickness, as I like to call it," I try to joke, but it comes out weakly.

"Should I get you something?" Blue asks nervously, and I stifle a laugh. He's just like Kam, nervous and anxious to help as if I'm going to explode or break or something.

"There's 7-Up in the fridge," I tell him, leaning my head against my hand, and he jumps up to get it.

Once he hands it to me, he sits down again, shaking his head. "I can't believe you're pregnant," he says, his eyes landing on my stomach bug-eyed. This time I do laugh.

"I can't believe I'm pregnant, either." I take a sip of the soda, and then I notice something off in Blue's expression, like he's on edge. "What's wrong?" I ask. "I promise I'm okay."

Blue hesitates and then blurts it out. "Is there a reason why anyone would think you're lying about being pregnant?"

I laugh at first, thinking that he's joking, but a second look at his face tells me that he's dead serious. "Of course I wouldn't lie about it," I say, horrified and slightly offended. "Why would you even think that?"

He hesitates again, looking upset that the conversation is even happening, but he pushes on anyway. "To get rid of Ian," he says finally. "That's the one thing that would make him let Alana go, you being pregnant with someone else's kid."

I stare at him in disbelief. "I'd never do that," I tell him firmly. "God, I didn't even *think* of doing that!" I know even as the words come out of my mouth that I'm being a hypocrite because I'm not telling him the whole truth—the possibility of it being Ian's. The one thing that would make him fight for Alana more than anything else rather than give her up. *You're doing it for his own good*, I remind myself sternly. I'm almost completely sure it *isn't* his baby, and to make him hold on to hope for months would be cruel, especially when it turns out to be Kam's baby. And besides, I've already decided I'm marrying Kam, that we'll raise the baby together, so why make this even harder than it has to be?

"Ian is starting to not believe you," Blue says quietly. I get up, my expression full of irritation. I go to the bedroom and get the ultrasound picture, walking back out and waving it in front of Blue's face.

"I'm not lying about being pregnant," I tell him. "Here's the proof. Kam and I are planning to go to the courthouse and get married before the baby is born, too. I want to be married before we start *our* family."

Blue takes the ultrasound and looks at it, and I see his expression turn sad. I know he's thinking of Ian, and that he believes me now, that the baby is real and there's nothing left for his cousin to hold on to. "Can I take a picture of it?" he asks quietly. "To show Ian?"

"Yeah," I tell him, slightly calmer now that he seems to believe me. He snaps a photo and hands me the ultrasound picture back. "You know," he says, almost conversationally, "your brother Cal is a real fucking prick."

My heart pounds in my chest, so hard that it almost hurts. "Why would you say that?" I ask, the words coming out choked.

Blue sighs. "He put the idea in Ian's head that you were lying about being pregnant."

What?!

Fury like I can't remember ever feeling slices through me, and for a moment, I see red. I've never been as angry at anyone as I am at Cal right now. And confused, too—I don't know why he would do that, what reason he would have. Why would he cause more confusion and trouble for me, knowing what this is like, how hard it is for me already? *As soon as Blue leaves, I'm going to call him and give him a piece of my mind*, I think furiously. But then I think of Chris, and how different he was.

Chris said they were the same, but I feel confused by it all over again—things aren't adding up. The man I met today at my appointment wouldn't do this to me. He was kind and caring and protective, the kind of brother I always wished that I had. But Cal probably would. Cal's as reckless and selfish as Alana, screwing up people's lives for their own amusement.

"Why would Cal call Ian?" I ask, trying to keep my voice even.

"He didn't," Blue tells me. "Ian was at his house for dinner. I guess Cal's wife and Ian are sort of friends."

That's it. A new possibility occurs to me—that Lauren pressured Cal or Chris to do this, to plant that seed of doubt in Ian's mind. I

wonder how much she knows, if Helen has told her anything, if she's mentioned the possibility of Ian being the father. I feel sick, overwhelmed, but I remind myself that I can only deal with one problem at a time. I have to keep my emotions in check, keep myself from being too stressed, or Alana could come back. And that's the last thing I need right now.

"After all of this, is there a way we can still be friends?" I ask Blue quietly. "Or is it all too much?"

"I really would like to try," Blue says, and I can hear the sincerity in his voice. I need a friend, I know I do. "What's wrong?" he asks gently, seeing the expression on my face, and I can't help it...the dam breaks.

I start to pour it all out, one thing after another. Chris coming to the appointment, how I agreed to bring Alana back through hypnosis, how afraid I am. "I'm so afraid of letting her in," I sob. "She's stronger than I am. What if she takes over? I keep hearing from everyone that integration is this one certain thing, but I feel like it's something else altogether. And the baby, I know she doesn't want it..." I'm sobbing in earnest now, all of it flooding out, and Blue looks genuinely alarmed.

"I need to tell you something," he says slowly after I've stopped talking. From the look on his face, I can tell that it's serious.

"I knew Alana," he says quietly. "Alana was my friend. I knew her first. Before you. Alana asked me to watch out for you. She isn't this monster that you think she is."

I'm completely, utterly speechless. So many emotions wash over me—more anger, hurt...and betrayal. Tears come to my eyes as I look at him, thinking that I trusted him. I thought he was my friend, but he was hiding things from me, just like everyone else. "You lied to me," I whisper. "You knew the whole time." And then it hits me—he brought me back to Ian's on purpose. He tricked me! "Kam was right!" I say, my voice steadily rising. "I was so stupid to believe that you didn't know, but now it all makes sense! Did Ian know? Was he in on it too?" I shout, almost shrieking at him.

"He wasn't," Blue insists, his voice adamant. "I swear he wasn't. I was just trying to help, I didn't want anyone to get hurt, and I thought... it was the only way I knew to try and make things right."

"Get out!" I shout at him. "Just get out of my house!"

"I thought I was doing the right thing!" he pleads, his voice rising.

"Leave!"

"She's not evil. She's not a monster like you think. I swear she's not."

I feel like I'm losing my mind. I thought he was my best friend, my only real friend outside of Kam, but the whole thing was a fucking lie—all set up by a woman who everyone wants me to trust, against my own instincts. I lunge at him, hitting his chest, shoving him backward.

"Get out! Get out! Leave, or I'm calling the police!" I shriek at him, hitting his arms. Blue throws up his hands, backing away.

"Okay! Okay, Megan," he says, heading for the door. "I'm sorry. I really am."

I don't even hear him go. I'm completely overwhelmed, lost in the mess of everything, and I crumple onto the floor crying. Nothing makes sense anymore. I'm second-guessing every decision I've made about how to handle Alana and move forward. I know now that she isn't just some irrational wild child. She isn't crazy, she's smart. Smarter than I gave her credit for—methodical—and she's a force to be reckoned with.

It's worse than I'd ever thought it could be.

It takes a little while, but slowly the devastation that I feel turns into simple anger. I'm angry at everyone—Blue, Cal, Helen, and now on top of that, Lauren. No matter how much I wrack my brain, I can't think of any reason for Cal to insinuate that I'm not pregnant, unless Lauren convinced or pressured him to because of her friendship with Ian. It feels like adding insult to injury because Lauren got everything she wanted—she got the guy, the wedding, the house, the beautiful babies. I don't know why she's hell-bent on ruining my small chance at happiness, but I'm sure as hell going to find out.

Once I've calmed myself down enough, I call Helen. She sounds happy to hear from me, asking if anything is wrong, but I tell her no, keeping my voice calm and relaxed. "I just wanted to call Lauren and tell her congratulations about the babies," I say casually. "It's been two weeks. I feel like I should."

"Oh, of course. Hold on, I've got her number here." A second later, Helen comes back on the line and reads off the number for me. I

write it down, thank her, and hang up.

When I call Lauren, she sounds delighted to hear from me, which just makes me seethe all the more. *What a two-faced bitch*, I think, and normally I would assume that thought is from Alana, but I know that one is all me. I'm just about to start to lay into her when she quickly continues, "Can you hold on for a second, Megan? I think my client just got here."

"Are you back to work already?"

She laughs. "Just for today," she says lightly. "I'm just finalizing a few things for Ian's showcase, that's all."

That's all I need to hear. I hang up the phone immediately, grabbing my keys and heading downstairs. I drive to her gallery in a blur, seething the whole time as I park and stride in the front door, hanging on to my anger for all its worth.

"Hi, Megan!" Lauren says, clearly surprised but happy to see me. "It's good to see you." There are a few employees with her that I don't recognize, and I clear my throat, looking at her pointedly.

"Can we talk in private?" I ask, and Lauren nods.

"Sure. You can come back to my office if you want."

"Actually, can we talk outside?"

Lauren looks confused, but shrugs. "Sure," she says again. "I'll be back in just a minute, guys," she tells the others, and follows me out to the parking lot. Once we're outside, she looks at me, concerned. "Is everything okay, Megan?"

I cross my arms over my chest, glaring at her. "Why did you tell Cal to try and ruin my life?" I demand angrily, and a stunned look crosses her face. She looks more confused than ever, but she's not going to fool me. I'm going to find out what the hell is going on.

"Cal made Ian think that I'm lying about my pregnancy," I snap. "Ian had accepted it until Cal got into his head!"

Lauren flinches, looking upset. "I haven't told Cal anything," she says cautiously, her expression anxious and confused. "I wouldn't have asked him to lie about your pregnancy, Megan. I didn't even *know* you were pregnant until Ian told me recently."

A streak of jealousy slices through me, and I know it makes no sense. It's ridiculous, but the idea of Ian confiding in Lauren makes me angry. I don't want him telling her these things, letting her into his life like this. "Why are you still talking to Ian?" I demand. "I'm Cal's sister. Ian has nothing to do with either of you!"

I see the calm, apologetic expression slip as Lauren's lips press together, her irritation showing through. "Ian is my client," she says stiffly. "And besides that, he's my friend. And considering all that's going on, he could really use one right now."

"Well, you can leave me out of whatever friendship you have!" I say coldly, still furious.

I hear the door open and turn to see Cal walking out of the gallery towards us. "What's going on?" he asks sharply as he approaches, and I don't know which one he is today, Cal or Chris, but at the moment, I couldn't care less. The second he's within earshot, I turn on him.

"Why did you tell Ian that I wasn't pregnant?" I ask accusingly, glaring at him. He returns the expression in equal measure, and I can tell then that it's Cal I'm dealing with.

"I didn't tell Ian anything," he says, the coldness in his voice echoing mine. "Ian drew his own conclusions."

"Conclusions from what!" I can hear my voice rising again. "What the hell did you tell him?"

Cal smirks. "What you should have told him," he says, and his eyes meet mine, neither of us looking away.

"What are you talking about?" Lauren asks, her alarmed voice slicing through the tension. "What did you tell Ian, Cal?"

I'm done with this conversation. I'm *so* done. I'm done with all of them, with everyone, with the lying and the tricks and the manipulation. I don't want anything more to do with it.

"I don't want anything to do with either of you anymore," I spit out, looking between the two of them. "You can play games with your own lives, but you can stay the *hell* out of mine from now on." I pause, getting my keys and turning towards my car before looking over my shoulder and throwing one last directive their way.

"And you can tell Dexter and Helen the same thing for me."

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN I was going to get a scolding from my mother when I showed up today. I practically disappeared, and I've been dodging her calls, which I hear about from the second I walk through the door. I can't really blame her though, and I take it in stride, knowing that I deserve it. I cut off everyone for a while there, and I know she's just laying into me because she cares about me.

"You're my son," she finishes, shaking her finger at me. "My family, and no woman on the planet is worth what you've been going through with Alana!"

I haven't told her everything. If I did, she'd be on the warpath. Only that Alana struggles with mental health issues. It would be too much to fill her in on everything that I've dealt with from Alana and my relationship.

"You're handsome and successful," she declares, looking at me across the kitchen table. "You just need to let the idea of her go, and move on."

"Okay, Mom," I say gently, reaching the end of my patience with it. "I didn't come over here to be lectured, you know. I wanted to spend some time with you. I've missed you."

"Fine," she grumbles. "But you need to know I'm upset with that girl. And if I see her again, I'm going to give her a piece of my mind, and you can't stop me!"

I let out a sigh of exasperation, carrying my plate to the sink and leaving my mom, who is still muttering under her breath, to finish making dinner while I go and sit in the living room with my step-

dad, who is busily watching the football game and ignoring all of the drama.

He looks up as soon as I walk in, smirking as I take a seat. "I'm going to hear about that tonight," he says, jerking his head in the direction of the kitchen. "In fact, I *have* heard about it every night since you stopped answering her calls."

"I'm sorry," I say sincerely, but he waves a hand.

"It's alright," he says. "I understand; heartache isn't easy to come back from. Sometimes you just need to sit with yourself for a while, really think things through."

I start to respond, but my phone vibrates, and I pull it out of my pocket. It's a text from Blue, saying that he needs to talk to me, and my heart does a flip in my chest. I text him back quickly, telling him to come meet me at my mother's house.

Blue gets the same treatment the minute he walks in the door just before dinnertime: my mother flying over to give him a warm hug and then scolding him about how long it's been since she's seen or heard from him. Blue takes it all in stride, telling her that he was just busy making money to spoil his favorite aunt, and produces a bouquet of flowers and a bottle of wine. I'm impressed. I have no idea how he managed to dig that up and get here so quickly, but Blue has always been the smoother of the two of us.

Before I can get him away to find out what the hell is going on, my mother shoos us all into the kitchen for dinner. It's my favorite: pulled pork and mashed potatoes and homemade mac and cheese. But I can hardly taste it. I'm so anxious to find out what Blue needed to tell me.

"So who are you seeing these days?" Mom asks him, heaping food on his plate.

Blue grins. "Someone new," he hints. "You'll meet her sooner or later if it sticks. Don't want to scare her away," he says with a wink, and my mother scoffs.

"See, this is what I'm telling Ian. He needs to get with a nice, normal girl. Take a lesson from you."

"Hey, that's enough, just drop it okay?" my stepdad scolds lightly, and my mother rolls her eyes, toning it down just a little but continuing to make small comments here and there. It's enough to make me ready to call it a night by the time we finish eating, my hands full

of leftovers as I give Mom a hug and a kiss, and my stepdad a quick hug, following Blue out to where the cars are parked.

I can't even wait until we get to the car. The minute we're outside, I immediately blurt out: "Okay Blue, spill it."

"Megan wasn't lying," Blue says with a sigh. "She really is pregnant."

"Are you sure?" I ask desperately. I've been holding on to hope that maybe she was making it up, that maybe it's not true, but I know that's not likely—that the reality is that Cal was probably fucking with me and Megan is most likely telling the truth.

Blue lets out another long breath, and when I put the food in my car and turn around to face him, I see him holding out his phone, handing it to me.

There's a photo of an ultrasound, plain as day, and when I look at it, it feels like a kick to the chest, like all the air has been sucked out of me. "Well, that's it then," I murmur, and to my horror, I feel tears come to my eyes.

Blue gives me a one-armed hug, and I can tell that he's upset for me. I try to pull it together, forcing back the tears and swallowing hard as I hand him my phone. *You always knew this was true*, I tell myself. I just decided to doubt it, like a fucking idiot, because that's what you wanted to happen. "It's alright," I tell Blue. "At least I know for sure now."

"You'll be alright, man," Blue says. "I gotta go, but I'll check in on you later, okay?"

I'm walking over to my car as Blue gets in and starts his, and I hear it click, but it doesn't turn over. I pause, giving it a minute, but it's clear as I walk back towards him that it's not starting. "Fuck!" Blue growls as he smacks the steering wheel. "I just knew something was going to go wrong with this soon."

A quick inspection by us both determines that the battery is fine; it's the ignition switch that seems to be broken. "I'll take you home," I tell him. "My parents won't care if you leave it here until we can get the part and get it fixed."

Blue flushes a little. "I was going over to Hillary's," he mumbles, clearly embarrassed.

I just grin at him. "Well, at least one of us is getting laid," I say, forcing myself to sound cheerful. "Come on, I'll take you there then."

Hillary comes out on the porch when she hears us drive up, and walks over to my window as I roll it down. "Thanks for bringing me my man," she says with a grin, that then fades as she takes a closer look at my face. "You look sad," she says with a pout. "Come on in, you need a drink."

"No, that's okay," I start to say, but she insists, and Blue joins in, cajoling me to come in. It's easier to give in than to argue with them, so a few seconds later I find myself on Hillary's fucking impractical velvet sofa while she starts to mix us tequila sunrises, which Blue informs me is her specialty.

"What's wrong?" she asks me, glancing over from the brass bar cart where she's working. I shrug it off at first, telling her that everything is fine, I'm just tired, but by the time I've had my second drink I start to let it out.

"I thought maybe Megan was lying about being pregnant, to get rid of me," I say quietly. "Cal hinted at it. But turns out he was just fucking with me, and she really is pregnant with Kam's baby. Blue saw the ultrasound."

"Oh no, I'm so sorry," Hillary says, her voice sad, and I can tell that she really means it. "Can I see?" she asks, and I shrug as Blue pulls out his phone and shows her the photo that he took.

"How far along is she?" Hillary asks.

I shrug again. "She just found out. I guess a few weeks. I don't fucking know."

"A couple of weeks is like six or seven," Hillary says offhandedly. "She's three months, big difference."

Blue peers at the photo. "Yeah, you're right," he says. "It does. Guess it's a big one," he jokes a little drunkenly. They continue to talk, and I wallow in my thoughts, trying to figure out how many glasses of water I need to drink before they'll let me go. Today, finding out I was wrong didn't hurt as much as the first time. I guess my heart is done breaking, but the numbness is there again. I push the empty glass away from me when it slaps me in the fucking face.

Three months.

I start to count backward in my head. I'm trying to keep my composure, but I can feel hope beginning to bubble up in me.

"Blue," I say, trying to sound as casual as possible. "How long ago did Kam move in with Megan? When he came to Chicago?"

Blue looks confused and shrugs. "Hell, I don't really remember."

"I need you to remember. It's important," I say through gritted teeth, leaning forward.

"Now, now, boys," Hillary says jokingly. "There'll be no drunken fighting in my house."

"Think!" I say urgently to Blue, ignoring her.

Blue frowns, concentrating. "Um...shit. Two or three months ago, I guess."

I'm as sober as a nun in church now, the implications of it all rushing in and making me dizzy.

"I don't get it," Blue says, looking at me and then at Hillary and back again. "Why are you thinking about that? You've got to stop thinking about that shit!"

"Think back to the night you were at my house," I say tightly. "When Alana was there, when she came back. It was the whole reason that Megan asked you to tell me to turn Alana down if she came back." I know I'm white as a fucking sheet, and as Blue takes in what I'm saying, realization dawns on his face too, and I see him start to go pale.

I snatch the phone out of his hand. "Unlock it," I demand, and when Blue does, I stare at the ultrasound again, my heart hammering in my chest.

"What the hell is going on?" Hillary asks urgently. "Don't leave me out, I want to know!"

I stare at the picture, and I can't stop the smile that starts to come across my face as I look down at it, at the baby there on the screen. When I answer her, it's in an almost awed whisper, my hand clutching the phone.

"I...I might be the father."



I WAS SUPPOSED to go home.

I promised Blue that I would, that we'd sit down when we were sober and figure out the best way to approach Megan about this possibility, about my *theory* that I might be the father. He calls it a theory, I call it a gut fucking feeling, one that I feel down to my core. Blue had suggested that maybe talking to Lauren first was the best way forward; Hillary agreed to help set that up. I'd left fully intending to

go home and stick to what we'd agreed, but as soon as I got back home, I couldn't just wait and sit fucking still—I had to talk to her.

Everything has changed for me today, the minute I looked at that damned ultrasound. I can't keep my eyes off of it. I've stared at it so much I'm going to dream about it. I'd blocked the idea of "the baby" out of my head when Megan told me about it. At that time, it was just something that destroyed my connection to the woman I love, that broke us apart for good and destroyed any chance I might have had at the life I wanted with Alana.

But now it's restored a sliver of that hope. This baby, this possibility, is now my *only* hope, my only shot at regaining what I've lost, even though I know the odds are against me. It kills me to think of Alana with another man, even as Megan, but I know that it happened. I can't fucking deny it—she's been with Kam, and probably a lot more times than just the one time that I had with her. I have a drunken picture in my head of my sperm drunk off its ass trying to find its way to an egg, but it's a tiny possibility, and I'm not going to let it go.

I can't.

I know it's not a good idea to talk to Megan now. I'm upset, and what I drank earlier is not completely out of my system. But I have to let her know that I know, that I'm not going to give up. I'm not going to pressure her or force her, but I want her to understand that I want to know if it's my child. I'm not just going to go away. She can't erase me out of her life if she's having my baby, and it hurts like a wound in my chest to think that she's disconnected from me so easily, just pushed me out of her life like I was nothing. I thought that we'd had a connection, that my love for Alana made her realize that I could love her, too, but I realize now that Megan doesn't understand that she's Alana, and Alana is her. I can't explain it exactly. It's strange and convoluted and doesn't always make sense, but I know that there isn't one without the other.

And I don't think for one goddamn second that this Prince Charming, this perfect Kam guy, is going to accept both parts of her.

I know better than to drive. So I get an Uber to her apartment building, and I've regained a little bit of my sobriety by the time I get out and start to walk up the sidewalk, enough that I think I can make a reasonable case for my side. I'm trying to think of what I should say and how exactly to say it when I hear someone call my

name from behind—not a female voice, but for sure a man's. I stop dead in my tracks and turn around, seeing someone that I don't recognize—a tall man with short dark hair, traditionally handsome in that clean-cut, rich kid sort of way. Everything about him screams upper-class, and I'm immediately on the defensive. I can see his face in the lamps along the sidewalk. His expression is almost unreadable, but he's staring hard at me, his eyes fixed grimly on my face.

"Yeah, I'm Ian," I say defensively. "What do you want?"

The guy just gives a small nod. "I know. You saved me a trip."

It sounds ominous, and I bristle, not knowing who this guy is or what he wants with me. "And you are?" I challenge, squaring my shoulders as I draw myself up to my full height, ready to take on whatever this guy is going to bring.

"Kameron," the guy says, and I flinch.

So this is Kam, Megan's white knight, her prince who rode to her rescue. The asshole who ruined my life, who has my girl, who is *marrying* my girl. The only person I've ever met who could be the other side of my coin. I match his gaze, each of us staring the other down, and I search his face, looking him over to try and get the measure of him. We couldn't be more different. We're *so* fucking different. We have different hair colors, are dressed differently—this guy screams money and polish while I've always been rougher around the edges. That was why Alana liked me. I was her match, able to challenge her and give her as good as she got. This guy looks like he'd wilt with one word from her. The only thing we have in common is that we're both tall.

"Are you here to talk to Megan?" Kam asks, his voice hard and firm but not as defensive as I'd expected.

"Yeah," I say, my voice clipped.

"Don't you think we should talk first?" He steps closer, more into the light, and I can see from the expression on his face that he's not giving an inch. My blood pressure has shot up, my heartbeat thundering in my ears. I knew about this guy, but he was never real for me, never someone I considered as a real threat until recently. *I* was Alana's husband. I married her. I had her first—body and soul.

We were an "us" long before Megan and this guy ever met.

"Go ahead and talk," I challenge, and Kam glares at me, looking far beyond annoyed.

"What are you doing here?" he bites out, and I just laugh.

"What the fuck do you think I'm doing here?" I ask with a snort.

"Megan ended things with you," Kam reminds me tightly. "So what the hell are you doing back here?"

I fight to keep my composure, to hold my emotions and my anger in check. We're in front of Megan's apartment, on a public street, and I know just how badly this could go. If this asshole says the wrong thing, I'm not going to be able to stop myself. My fist is going to wind up in his face, and he might just get the rough end of everything that I've been bottling up all of this time—all of the anger and frustration and pain that I've been holding inside. And right now, I don't know that he doesn't fucking deserve it.

"Alana's gone," Kam says sharply. "You and Megan have nothing between you."

I chuckle at that, taking a step forward. "I don't know if you realize it, but Megan and Alana are the same person. And if there's any part of Alana still in there, we're not fucking done."

Kam's face goes hard at that, his eyes flinty as he faces me down, but he takes a deep breath. "It probably doesn't matter, but you should know that I didn't know about you or Alana, or any of what you had until recently."

"What we *had*?" My voice is harsh, cutting, slicing through the air between us. "We had a *marriage*. We had a life together. You don't have any idea what we had."

"I have the same with Megan," Kam says coldly. "And Alana is gone."

"She's not gone," I snap, and I see Kam shift his weight, his expression clearly saying that his patience is hanging on by a loose thread.

"We're engaged," he continues in that same icy, no-argument tone. "Megan and I are getting married, and she's pregnant with my baby."

I shake my head, refusing to listen. It's all things I've heard before that I tried to tell myself that kept me from being right where I am in this moment. But now I have reason to think otherwise, and no one, not this arrogant rich dude or anyone else, is going to keep me from my wife and my child if it's the truth.

Kam isn't letting up, though. "Look, maybe you loved her," he says, his tone shifting to placating. "Maybe you still love her, hell, why wouldn't you? She's a one-of-a-kind girl. I get it. But I'm not go-

ing to let you upset Megan or stress her out. I understand you're mad, but I'm not going to let any harm come to her or our baby."

I shake my head again in disbelief. I can't believe that I'm getting a lecture from this spoiled jackass about protecting Megan, about not ruining *their* relationship, after he shattered mine beyond recognition. "Is it?" I snap angrily, immediately hating myself for echoing Cal's same words.

Kam stops short, his expression visibly confused. "Is it what?" he asks, his lecture abruptly cut off.

"Yours," I hiss. "Your kid, your baby. She's three months along, right? Isn't that just before or right around when you came back?" I sneer, feeling momentarily victorious that he might feel even a shred of the doubt or pain that I've lived with for so long.

Kam's face goes blank, unreadable, the righteous indignation in his expression slipping away as he tries to make sense of what I'm saying. And then he flushes red, anger roaring back as he glares at me furiously. "Are you telling me you slept with my fiancée?" he shouts, striding towards me angrily. I square up, preparing myself for the fight that's been a long time coming, pre-ordained since the minute Kam found his way into my girl's bed...and then Megan's voice pierces the air between us, stopping us both in our tracks.

"What are you doing here?" she shrieks, and I look over to see her standing in the doorway, silhouetted from the light behind her. She looks as if she's just seen her worst nightmare, her face pale and stunned, but she's still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. It doesn't matter if she's Megan or Alana, the sex goddess or the Midwestern sweetheart, the woman I married or the woman I only knew as a friend. She's the same woman to me, the love of my life, and I want nothing more than to go to her and take her away, to remind her of everything we had, everything we could have been to each other. All of my emotions collide with each other—anger at what's happened, at her for leaving me, at her for falling in love with another man, the aching, addictive love for her that I can't seem to disengage myself from or stop feeling, and disappointment that I can't go to her, I can't do any of the things I want to, because she looks terrified and disappointed and none of it is directed at Kam, it's all directed at me.

All of the anger in me starts to dissipate, draining away until I just feel like a hollow shell, like I did after Alana left me, and I real-

ized that she wasn't coming back. It's like losing her all over again.

"We need to talk," I tell her, and I can hear the hollow ring to my voice, the pain in it.

"We don't have anything to talk about." Her voice is trembling but icy cold, firm.

"Did you sleep with him, Megan?" Kam's voice cuts through the air, dividing us, pulling her attention back to him. He's shouting, but his voice is weak, and I know that tone, it's the one where the only thing keeping you upright, keeping you going, is rage. But underneath it, weighing it down, is nothing but pain. Despair so suffocating that you feel like you're going to die, that there's no coming back from it.

When I look back at Megan I can see that she's feeling it too, and it makes me feel nauseous, so sick that I want to vomit. This isn't what I meant to do. This isn't what I wanted to make her feel.

Megan opens her mouth as if to speak, but no sound comes out. She just stares at us both, trembling in the doorway.

"You slept with him," Kam says softly, as if confirming something to himself. His voice is weak and low, as if the words hurt when they came out of his mouth. I'd almost feel bad for him, but I've been feeling that pain for a long time now, knowing that Megan—and Alana—has been in another man's bed. Kam's just getting the first taste of it now.

"It wasn't me," she whispers desperately, coming down the steps towards us, heading straight for Kam as if to embrace him. He backs away from her like she's poisonous, his look cold and full of disgust as he puts his hands up to ward her off, and the look on her face is devastating. I start to move towards them. I don't know how the hell he's going to react, but if he makes the wrong move, if he lays one finger on her, I'm going to end him.

"Kam," Megan says, her voice begging, *pleading* for him to listen, and it's breaking my heart to hear it. It makes me want to throw up all over again—she doesn't even see me, she's got nothing for me. I'm somehow invading a private moment between them, and it makes me sick to see it playing out in front of me.

Kam pivots on his heel and starts to stalk away, Megan starting after him, but the moment he shouts back: "Don't fucking follow me!" she freezes in place, watching him as he strides to the parking lot and gets into his car, the tires squealing as he drives away. She's

frozen to the spot, and I'm almost afraid to speak to her. But as angry and hurt as she might be now, I've been living this all this time.

"Is it true?" I whisper from behind her. "Is it true that the baby might be mine?"

Megan whips around at that, an evil glare like I've never seen on her face, not even on Alana's in her angriest moment. She stalks towards me, coming up so close that for a second I think that she's going to either kiss me or slap me, and in the lamplight I can see that there are tears streaming down her pale face.

"I never, *ever* want to see you again," she whispers in the harshest voice I've ever heard, so cold that it turns the blood in my veins to ice. "If you're not gone from here in five minutes," she continues, her eyes fixed on mine, "I'm calling the police."

I don't know who's standing in front of me, Megan or Alana or someone else entirely, but I don't have time to figure it out before she's gone, back up the stairs and into the house.

The sound of the door slamming behind her is the only thing that tells me I'm not in a nightmare.

Kam

I DRIVE until I can't anymore, until I'm shaking so hard with anger and heartache that I have to pull over and stop in the parking lot by the Chicago lakefront. I can't stop thinking about everything that just happened with Ian, how in a matter of minutes my world has started to crumble around me. I've seen him in the flesh now, this other person who is involved in all this. He's more real to me now than he ever was from just the pictures. Some part of me wanted to believe, against all evidence and common sense, that he didn't actually exist. That he was just something made up, some figment of Alana's crazy mind.

But I got what I'd said I wanted. I've gotten the truth—some version of it, at least—and now I know Megan was hiding it from me. It makes sense now why she was so upset after the ultrasound—she slept with Ian just before or right after I came to Chicago, and when the tech told her how far along she was, the time frame must have lined up in her head. She said that it wasn't her—that it was Alana, *of course*—but at this point, I'm having a hard time distinguishing one from the other. And even if it was Alana's personality, Alana's mind driving it to happen, it was still her body, Megan's body that Ian kissed, touched, fucked, all the while I was giving up everything to come here and be with her, to support her.

It doesn't matter. One of them—both of them?—is carrying my child...or Ian's. I don't know Alana, I've never seen her in person or talked to her, so the only one I can direct my pain and anger at is Megan. She might be carrying another man's child while accepting

my proposal, getting engaged to *me*, and she knew. She knew what Alana did. I could see it in her eyes when I accused her, the fear and guilt. She hid it from me like she's hidden so many other things, the marriage to Ian and the life she had with him as Alana, and I have no idea if I can trust her now. I don't even know if I can look at her... but still, she might be carrying my child.

And regardless of how angry I am right now, I still love her. She has my heart, even though it feels right now as if she's squeezing the life out of it. And what makes it worse is I've seen now in vivid color, face to face, that she has this other guy's heart too. I recognized in Ian's eyes the same things that I feel, and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that if there's the slightest chance that the baby is his, he's never going to give up. He's not going to let go. Hell, if he loves Alana as much as he seems to, he might not give up even if the baby isn't his.

I press the heels of my hands against my eyes, trying to think. I'm alone in this. I can't tell my family or seek their help or advice. They've forgiven Megan for what happened before and accepted her back into the fold, but if they know that she lied to me, that the baby she's carrying might not even be mine...they'd never look at her the same way again.

And what if the baby isn't mine? What happens then? What if it is Ian's? Can I go through an entire pregnancy at Megan's side while she carries a baby that belongs to someone else? Can I watch her grow and change, her stomach swelling with a constant reminder that she fucked another man while saying she was in love with me, that it's his seed growing inside of her, that it's his baby that she's going to whisper to and labor for and love? Can I deal with co-parenting with a man that I hate to the marrow of his bones, who shattered my illusions that I was the first man to be with Megan, the only man who'd ever been inside of her, felt her, tasted her, made her moan and cum? Can I spend eighteen years coexisting with a man who's still in love with her, who won't ever stop?

Do I walk away, or do I go back to her? I can see my phone glowing in the dim light, blinking with several missed calls from Megan. Do I leave until I know for sure? Can I walk away from this? Or do I go back to her? I have to make a decision. I have to choose to be all in or not, whether or not it's my child...if I marry her, the baby will be mine legally, my child to raise. I have to decide if the biology mat-

ters, if I can love the baby regardless if it's my blood, if I can look at it and not always see the living proof of the lies that have started to come between us.

I slam my fist against the steering wheel, shouting into the empty car, panting hard as I face the truth—I can't walk away from Megan. It doesn't matter what she's done. If it was her or Alana, it doesn't matter if the baby is mine or not. I love her, and I'll love the baby because of that, not in spite of it, because regardless of who the father is, it's still half her.

The only thing left to concern me is the unknown variable in all of this—Alana. I've seen what she's left in her wake, the path of destruction that she's capable of causing. It doesn't matter that I haven't met her...I know she's real, just as real as Ian, and I see now what pretending that he didn't exist brought about. She can destroy everything if she chooses to, she could break apart what's left of my relationship with Megan.

If I'm going to be with Megan, I have to be sure that Alana can be controlled. I have to find out if Megan can and will contain her...or if Megan is going to allow them—her and Ian—to beat her in the end.

Megan

I'm more distraught than I've ever been, in all of this up to now. I felt sick when I saw what was happening outside, like I was going to throw up as I watched my two worlds colliding, the two men that I've tried so hard to keep apart together at last. I heard them before I ever saw them, and I wanted to believe that it was a bad dream.

I'd fallen asleep after my confrontation with Cal and Lauren, waiting for Kam to get back home, and I wanted to think that it was a nightmare, a product of all the stress and grief I'd endured throughout the day. I wanted so badly for it to not be true, but I knew it was happening before I even opened the door. Everything inside of me felt chaotic, unhinged, all of my emotions crashing together and weighing me down. I wanted to comfort Ian and embrace Kam all at once, to soothe them, fix the pain that they were both clearly in...and at the same time, run away from them, from their anger and hurt and suspicious glares. It was all too much at once, crowding in and overwhelming me, and I'd never felt Alana as clearly as I did in that moment, her presence threatening to overtake me, to break through and come back out. But I could feel that she was still afraid, too, that something was holding her back, and I'd bet anything that it was the baby who did it.

Or maybe it was that she enjoyed seeing Kam hurt, seeing the hatred and disgust in his expression when he realized that I—that *she*—had slept with Ian, and she wanted to let it keep going, to let him keep having to look at me and see me in Ian's bed.

Hurt, the way you hurt Ian, you selfish fucking bitch!

I hear her voice in my head, intruding on my thoughts, and I clap my hands over my face, wanting to curl into a ball and hide, wanting to get up and run away. But I can't run from myself. I don't know what to do now—I was so angry, furious at Alana, but I took it out on Ian, he was there and an easy target. I'll never forget how he looked at me as long as I live, as if he didn't even recognize me, as if in that moment I wasn't Megan or Alana but someone else entirely. I could see everything on his face—anger and pain and disbelief, pain more than anything that I hid the possibility from him, that I pushed him away even though I knew he might have reason to want to stay.

I need something to drink. I've been crying so hard and for so long that I'm dehydrated, and I peel myself off of the floor, getting up to go to the kitchen and get a water bottle. I'm tempted to call Helen, the only person who might be able to give me real advice, but I'm so angry with her. Someone told Cal about the possibility of Ian being the father, that I wasn't a hundred percent sure that it was Kam, and Helen is the only person I can think of who could have done that. Lauren most likely persuaded Cal to either tell Ian outright or hint at it. Blue gave him the proof...there's no one left that I can trust. Everyone that I thought loved me or who I thought was my friend has lied to me or betrayed me. The only person who hasn't is Kam, and after this, he hates me...how could he not? I saw the look on his face when he left.

The door to the apartment opens, and I turn sharply around to see Kam walking in, and I freeze in place, my heart pounding in my chest. He looks as miserable as I feel, but he's still one of the most beautiful men I've ever seen, different in every way from Ian, like night and day. His dark hair is messy, falling over his face, and he's pale, but he looks determined, and I brace myself as he walks into the house. I'm afraid to move, afraid that if I so much as twitch that he'll turn around and leave, that maybe he'll never come back. I try to prepare myself for the possibility that he might anyway, that maybe he just came to get his things or to yell at me again, to tear into me and let me know exactly how badly I've hurt him.

He stops and looks at me, taking me in as if he's seeing me for the first time. I hate it, my skin crawling as his eyes skate over me from forehead to toes and up again, because I don't want him to see me differently, as I am now, someone who hid things from him and lied to him and brought pain and confusion and chaos to his life. He

stares at me hard for several seconds, and then finally I see his shoulders slump, his eyes turning sad, and I think that I can see tears in them. I've never seen Kam cry, and it sends a jolt of pain through me, my chest aching.

He doesn't say anything, only walks away from me and goes into the living room to sit on the couch. I follow him after a moment, sitting across from him and trying to get him to meet my eyes. "I'm glad you came back," I whisper. "I didn't think you would."

There's only silence in the room. "Please say something," I beg, biting my lip hard.

He's quiet for a few more moments before speaking, still not looking at me. "Is it possible that the baby you're carrying is Ian's?" he asks finally, his voice sad and hurt.

I want more than anything to tell him no, of course it's his, how could it be anything else...but I can't bring myself to lie to him, to fudge the truth any more than I already have.

"Yes," I tell him, my voice breaking as I start to cry again, and I see his jaw clench as he nods.

"It only happened once," I tell him in a rush, my words tripping over each other. "I know it's a possibility that it could be Ian's, but I know it's our baby, yours and mine, I can feel it."

"What happens if it's not mine?" he asks, and he raises his head, looking directly at me for the first time since he sat down.

I pause, thinking about that for a long time as the silence hangs heavily between us. "I don't know," I whisper. "I didn't even consider the possibility." I hesitate, the lump in my throat growing, threatening to choke me. "I'm more concerned about Alana than anything else if that's the outcome, what she'll do."

To my surprise, Kam reaches out and takes my hand. It shocks me, I didn't expect tenderness or care from him after what happened, and as he looks into my eyes, he quietly says the words that I wasn't sure I'd ever hear from him again. "I love you," he says firmly. "Nothing you've done could stop me loving you, but I can't live with the threat of you...*Alana*," he corrects himself, "destroying everything that we've worked so hard for, after all we've been through together."

I look at him, confused. "I don't understand," I whisper. "I'll do anything for us to be together, you know that." I start to cry then, the tears spilling down my face in a rush as my shoulders start to shake.

"I think Cal and Lauren are who told Ian about the possibility of it being his baby, that Helen is the one who told Lauren in the first place, and now I've found out that Blue knew Alana all along, that he knew her before me and kept it from me...you were right about him, and you're the only person who hasn't lied to me or tricked me or tried to control me." The words come out between sobs, choked and shaky, and Kam holds my hand throughout all of it, his gaze fixed intensely on me. "If you want me to integrate, I'll try," I say desperately, looking up at him through tears.

He's quiet for a moment, his lips pressed tightly together. "It doesn't matter to me if it's biologically my child or not," he says finally. "It'll be mine no matter what, because you'll be my wife. I want us to be together, Megan, but I can't live on the edge forever wondering about Ian and Alana, what might happen."

I chew on my lower lip hard, still confused by what he's asking. "I don't know what you mean," I say softly. "If I could get rid of her, I would. You know that! But there's no way to do that. Dr. Lyce has told me a million times she won't just go away. I can't cut her out of me..."

Kam interrupts me smoothly, his hand tightening around mine. "I know we can't get rid of Alana," he says. "I just can't live under the threat of her right now."

I look at him numbly, still not understanding.

"I want to leave Chicago, leave Indiana. I want us to go away until you have the baby," he says firmly.

I stare at him, completely floored. I don't care about leaving Chicago, I think, everyone who I have here has lied to or betrayed me. I'm furious with all of them. But I can't believe that Kam would leave his family.

He sees what I'm thinking without me saying a word. "Indiana is too close," he explains. "If Alana comes back, I don't want her to just be able to hop in a car and drive back to Ian within a few hours."

My heart starts to beat faster, pounding in my chest. "How far?" I ask weakly, fear starting to creep in as I look into his determined eyes.

"As far as we can go that won't be a culture shock," he says firmly. "I want to be with you, and to take care of you, Megan. I've got access to money, to my trust—I'll find you a doctor who will be more open to different things, ideas other than integration. But," he says,

taking both of my hands in his now and looking into my eyes, his face serious and deadly calm, “if we do this, you have to be sure that it’s what you want. You’re what I want, Megan. I’ll be the baby’s father regardless of its biology, but you need to be sure. You need to be committed to this, to us.”

The realization of what he’s asking hits me like a truck. Ian’s face flashes into my head, the momentary look of joy when I first mentioned the baby, and he thought that it was his, before he realized what I really meant. The desperation on his face tonight, the anger and pain and love and hurt all mingled together, the fact that he came back for me—not just Alana, *me*.

But it’s Kam sitting next to me right now, Kam, who I’ve wanted to spend the rest of my life with since he captured me with that smile in the college bookstore. The odds are that it’s his baby no matter what. She slept with Ian once. What is the chance that that one night with Ian won out over all the others surrounding it? Kam has been through so much because of me. I’ve stomped all over his heart and rebuilt it only to crush it again. How can I tell him no?

And co-parenting would make Ian miserable. He wouldn’t move on. He’d cling to the idea of Alana no matter how hard I tried to keep her at bay. If the shoe was on the other foot, I think he’d ask the same thing of me that Kam is asking right now. And Alana would do it for Ian without a second thought. She’d never look back or question it. She loved him that much.

“Whatever you want, as long as we’re with each other,” I whisper, looking into his eyes as I try to push back the tidal wave of sadness that washes over me, the tiny sliver of fear at abandoning everything and placing all my hopes and trust in Kam, and above all else, the voice whispering in my head, angry and sinister:

If you do this, you’re going to pay.

You both will. I promise you that!

I ignore that voice, though. She’s not important.

I nod and take Kam’s face in my hands. Tears in my eyes fall, and I smile. “Yes,” I tell him firmly. I remind myself that this isn’t selfish. I’m not just doing this for Kam or me, but for our baby.

I’m doing this for us.

Chapter 19

IAN

"You should have seen her face, man. She fucking hates me!"

I don't know how to feel or what to think. I'm despondent and Blue's face is full of pity for me, fucking empathy that I don't want, but I probably need. He came over first thing this morning, knowing I'd need someone, and God knows I do.

I need *her* but she doesn't want anything to do with me, I know that. "How she looked at me, it was worse than anything I could've imagined."

"It wasn't just her being anger with you," Blue says quietly. "She's pissed at both of us. But she'll come around..." He pauses.

"Kam's family isn't going to accept her not knowing who the father of her baby is. They'll convince Kam that he shouldn't be with her, they're nice people and all but they have an image to uphold. I just can't see Kam going for it, going against his family like that."

"What am I supposed to do now?" I ask him helplessly. "She's pregnant, and it might be my baby. Am I just supposed to stay away from the whole thing, if it could be mine? Am I just supposed to wait for six more months to find out? It's not just about me wanting Alana back anymore, it's about Megan possibly having my baby."

"There's gotta be a way for us to find out." Blue flips open his laptop, and nods. "Yeah, there's tests. Low-risk to the pregnancy, seems like it's pretty simple." He says with a shrug.

"Low risk isn't no risk," I say quietly. "I wouldn't want to risk the baby or take the chance that something might happen."

"Maybe if you talked to a doctor you'd feel better about it. "

"I don't even know if she'd want to do it." I think of her face when she looked at me, how angry she was, how she told me to go away and not to come back.

"She'd want to do whatever she could to make sure Kam knows it's his baby," Blue says bluntly, and it hits me like a punch in the face. Blue winces, immediately realizing what he's said and how it sounds.

"I'm sorry man," he says realizing his error. "I shouldn't have said it like that."

"It's alright." I lean back against the couch, closing my eyes.

The door opens then and I hear Hillary calling out hello as she walks in. "I've got photos for you to choose from," she sings as she walks into the living room, setting a manila envelope down on the coffee table. "Lauren needs you to go through these and finalize what you want out of what she's narrowed down for the showcase."

Blue jerks his head in Hillary's direction, looking at me pointedly as if to tell me to fill her in on what's going on, which I'm not really sure I want to do. But Hillary picks up on the gesture immediately. "What's going on?" she asks suspiciously, looking between the two of us.

I let out a long sigh, and with an irritated glance at Blue, explain to her everything that happened last night. Hillary sits down on the couch as she listens intently, her face expressionless as she takes it all in.

"Well," she says finally when I'm done. "Normally I would be shocked, but at this point nothing with that family surprises me anymore." She sighs. "I'd talk to Lauren about it, I'm sure she can get Cal or Dexter to arrange a sit-down between you and Megan."

I run my hands over my face. It seems like everyone is doing something, capable of making things happen except for me. Hillary puts her hand on my shoulder.

"Not knowing if the baby is yours or not just holds you hostage to her," she points out. "It's better for everyone to know for sure, I think. If it's not yours, then you can really move on. And if it is, then decisions have to be made, depending on what all of you want."

"I don't want to put any more on Lauren's plate," I protest.

"Call Cal, then," Blue interjects. "I think Hillary's right, and I swear I'm not just saying that because she, well...you know," he

says, cutting off whatever he was about to say as Hillary gives him a amused but warning look.

So I call Cal. He picks up, which I'm surprised at.

"Hey, it's me, ugh Ian." I mutter.

"Yeah." He says dryly as if waiting for an explanation as to why I'm calling him. "I wanted to say...Thanks for the heads-up about the baby, man," I say begrudgingly after we exchange greetings. "You didn't have to do that."

"You don't owe me a thanks," Cal tells me gruffly. "If it was me I'd want someone to tell me."

I hesitate. "Look, I know you already have done a lot but would it be possible for you to arrange a meeting for me with Megan? I tried to talk to her, but it went south pretty fast, and didn't really turn out the way I wanted. I need to talk to her on neutral ground, figure this shit out."

"I can try," Cal says slowly. "But I'm not exactly on her list of favorite people right now."

"What happened?" I ask curiously, and Cal just grunts. "Family stuff," he says noncommittally.

That's fucking great. I let out a low sigh.

"I'll see what I can do," Cal says, and abruptly ends the call.

There's nothing else to do but go about my day, so I take Blue and Hillary and go out scouting for the remaining shots that I need for the showcase. It's not long before my phone vibrates with a call from Cal, and I answer quickly. I hadn't expected to hear from him today—I didn't think he'd put me so high on his list of priorities.

My stomach drops when I hear his voice, blunt and directly to the point. "Look Ian, I called Megan. Her phone is disconnected. I went over to the apartment after that and let myself in—I'm there now. Her stuff is gone and she left the keys to the car I got her."

"What the hell does that mean?" I demand.

Blue hears me and walks over, his expression concerned. "What's going on?" he asks.

I cover the phone with my hand. "Cal said Megan's stuff is gone and her phone is disconnected."

"Hang on, I'll try to call her," Blue says. He dials the number quickly, and there's a moment's silence before he looks at me shocked and confirms what Cal just said.

"I called Helen before you," Cal says flatly. "She hasn't heard from Megan either."

The world feels like it's spinning around me, like I'm about to be sick. Worry for Megan floods through me, and I feel stupid, like an idiot for leaving her there alone when Kam was so pissed.

"What if he did something to her?" I demand as I hang up the phone. "What if Kam came back and hurt her, what if something's happened to her?" I can hear my voice rising, almost frantic now.

"Calm down, man," Blue says, shaking his head. "Kam wouldn't do that. I'll call him right now, maybe he knows what's going on."

If Megan is still Megan and she's alright she'll be with him, I think, if not then it's Alana. It's the only other explanation for Megan disappearing, that Alana's come back, and I feel hope starting to flood through me followed by guilt.

"No one answered, but the number is still working," Blue says finally, hanging up the phone. "That's a good sign."

"It's not good enough," I tell him flatly, my jaw clenched, and Blue lets out a long-suffering sigh. "Fine," he says. "I'll call Katy. I sure as hell don't fucking want to," he emphasizes, looking at me pointedly. "But for you, I will."

Hillary gives Blue a small smile and walks off a little ways to give us some privacy, and I'm impressed by how mature she's being about the whole thing. I'm especially glad that she gave Blue some space once Katy answers the phone, Blue has her on speaker and I can hear the glee in her voice from the minute she answers the phone.

"Hi, Katy," Blue says coldly. "I just need to ask you a question, that's all, we don't need to talk long."

I shake my head. *Be nice to her*, I mouth, and he rolls his eyes, but softens his tone a little. "Have you seen Kam?" he asks.

"He came by and got some stuff late last night," Katy says. "Why?"

"Was Megan with him?" Blue asks shortly, ignoring her question.

"Yeah, she was." Katy pauses. "She mentioned you might call or come see me...I was kind of hoping for the latter, honestly."

Blue doesn't say anything in response, and after a minute she continues. "She left a letter for your cousin, Ian. I can open it and send you a picture, if you don't want to come and get it."

"No, we'll come get it," I say quickly. "I want to see it without it being messed with."

"Come on, man," Blue says quietly, but I shake my head. I'm not budging on this one, a photo of a letter isn't good enough for me. I want to hold that fucking thing in my hands before I'll accept whatever is written in it...and I'm pretty sure it's nothing good.

Hillary tags along, refusing to be left behind and out of the loop, but she promises that she'll stay in the car while we talk to Katy—the last thing Blue wants is his ex colliding with his new girl, and Hillary doesn't seem all that eager to meet Katy, either. The ride over is tense, and no matter how many jokes Hillary tries to make, it can't cut through the heavy feeling in the car—Blue because he has to see his cheating ex again, me because I can't stop feeling like there's a huge pit in my stomach. I haven't had good luck with letters, I think grimly, and nothing is pointing to this one being any better than the last time that Alana/Megan left me a letter.

When we walk up to the apartment and knock, we're greeted by Katy with a huge smile on her face, clearly ready for the visit. She's done her makeup, her hair is styled, and she's wearing tight skinny jeans with a blousy top that shows *just* the right amount of cleavage. She's girlfriend-sexy, not slutty-sexy, I think, and that's exactly the message she's probably trying to send to Blue.

But I'm not about to be distracted by any of that. "It's nice to finally meet you," she says, but I just make an agreeable noise, looking at her pointedly.

"Alrighty," she says finally, looking slightly deflated. "I'll get the letter."

I open the letter the second she hands it to me, my heart pounding and palms sweaty as I start to read what Megan has written there.

Ian,

I know this isn't going to be what you want to hear. This isn't just about me anymore, you or Alana. There is someone coming into the world more important than any of us. I have to do what's right for this baby, and make the best choice, so that's what I'm doing. You might think that the baby is yours but it isn't, I know that with everything in me, it's Kam's baby and my plans haven't changed. Kam is going to be my husband and the father of my child.

I wish that things didn't have to be this way, but there isn't any other choice. Please don't fight this. Please do the right thing.

I wish you love and happiness.

--Megan

I crumple the paper up in my fist, balling it up and throwing it against the wall as I fight back tears, my heart aching in my chest. She's gone, she's fucking gone, and there's nothing I can do to bring her back.

"What did it say?" Blue asks quietly, and I round on him, my eyes flashing. "What the fuck do you think it said?"

"Alright, man," Blue says. "I get it." He turns to Katy, his face expressionless. "Do you know where they went? What did Kam say?"

"They wouldn't say where they were going," Katy says quietly. "But he did say they'd be gone for a while."

I can't take it anymore. I storm out of the apartment, wanting to track Kam down and kill him. I'm so furious I'm almost shaking.

Hillary sees me and gets out of the car, walking towards me quickly and trying to put a comforting arm around my shoulders, but I shake it free. I'm not fucking inconsolable, and I'm not sad. I'm angrier than I've ever been in my life. And not just at Kam, the longer I think about it the more angry I am at Megan too, because she didn't have to do this. Why would she fucking do this?!

"This is fucked up, why is she doing this! It's so fucked up! She can't do this!" I slump against the car, hands on my knees as I try to breathe. "I thought I knew her," I mutter. "But I obviously didn't fucking know Megan at all." I look up at Blue as he approaches cautiously, furious tears in my eyes.

"Ian, I can find her," Blue reminds me quietly. "And if somehow I can't figure it out, you know Megan's brothers are going to want to know where she went, and they've got enough money to dig out the Devil himself."

I've never felt this hurt and betrayed. Not even when Alana left me. How the two sides of the same woman could have betrayed me so thoroughly I don't know, how I'm stupid enough to let it keep happening, but this is her choice.

And I've made mine.

If she can be this cold, and not give a fuck about me or how I feel, fuck Megan and fuck Kam. I'm going to get my girl back, if that's how they want to play it, that's what it'll be.

Them against Us.

The final installment of Her, 'Yours' Releases early summer. Sign up for text alerts to be informed by texting portia to 797979 or join my reader group [here](#). Or if email's your thing join my list [here](#). Thank you so much for reading!