



**TWISTED**  
*Creek*

KC KEAN

# TWISTED CREEK

THE ALLSTARS SERIES #3

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KC KEAN

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*To My Aceholes,  
For sticking around and encouraging  
me to pursue my dream.  
This one's for you!*

This town is toxic. It's tainted, it's twisted, and I want no part of it.

EDEN GRADY





# PROLOGUE

---

Lost.

ONE



## TOBIAS

---

*The sound of the lock turning in the door echoes around me, forcing my eyes to blink open, but my reaction time still isn't good enough, because I'm being pulled by the back of my shirt before I can see anything. The lights are still out, so it must be early morning. What the hell?*

*"Wake up, you little shit," the guard rumbles, planting my feet on the floor beside my bed as I stare up at the full-grown man, his hand still gripping my t-shirt at my throat. Fucking juvie, and these fucking guards. All of them are my father's minions. Although, I'm not too familiar with this guy.*

*"What's going on?" I hear Xavier growl, and when I look in the direction of his bed, I find him being held just like me as someone flicks on the lights, blinding me for a second. A quick glance to my right shows Hunter is also in the same position.*

*Dammit.*

*"You're wanted out in the yard," Bernie, the guard holding me, states, and I'm finally alert enough to try and shove at his chest, but he just grins down at me. "Cuff them, we need to go."*

*I struggle against the other guards that surround me, but my fourteen-year-old self isn't strong enough to hold my*

*ground as I'm forced to turn around. I feel the bite of the metal around my wrists as they wrestle against me, pinning me to the cell wall.*

*As they start to drag us from our tiny corner room, the cream walls marked with scuffs and stains, I catch a glimpse of Hunter and Xavier being pulled along behind me. We may be in here because Ilana deemed it so, but my father, Grant Holmes, the warden, always takes great pleasure in making sure someone beats the shit out of us. I don't think I'll ever understand why, and at this point, I don't care enough to try and figure it out.*

*Silence fills the halls as the three of us fall into line, letting the guards lead us to our fate once again. Shaking my head, I try to speed up my waking process because I have a feeling what awaits us in the yard is another beating. Hopefully it's the last one before we can get the hell out of here again. My dad fucked us over when we arrived, and it seems he's waited for most of the bruises to heal, so it wouldn't surprise me if he was ready to mark us with new ones.*

*Adrenaline pumps through my veins as they unlock the door to the yard when I hear Xavier grumble, "Keep your guard up. These fuckers forgot who they're messing with." Thankfully, none of the guards seem to pay him any attention and don't hear what he has to say.*

*Ever the optimist in any situation, Xavier's right. We can feel the axis slowly changing in our favor, especially since we arrived, but most definitely since we were last here. People are learning our worth, or more importantly, the inmates are.*

*The night sky greets us as we step outside, the spotlights surrounding the adult yard the only thing lighting the area, and as expected, a handful of men wait in the middle. Letting*

*the guards drag us down the steps and across the dirt path, we come to a stop right in front of the five prisoners standing around a table.*

*“Make it hurt, boys. You’ve got ten minutes,” Bernie says with a grin, pushing me forward, and I almost stumble over my own feet. No other guard says a word. Sometimes it’s because they actually have a conscience, but it still doesn’t stop them from following the warden’s orders.*

*No one responds to him as the guards retreat, leaving Xavier, Hunter, and me here with our hands still cuffed, facing men easily in their twenties, if not thirties, whom I have no recollection of. Excellent.*

*I don’t turn around to watch the heavy metal door slam shut, it won’t change the inevitable. Xavier moves to stand to my left, while Hunter steps up to my right, staring down at the men. We wait for their first move as they look us over.*

*The silence grows, and I ball my hands into fists as I try to prepare for what’s to come. After what feels like an eternity, all five of them relax their shoulders and drop back onto the wooden bench behind them. I refuse to let my guard down just yet though. Our standing has grown in the juvenile facility, not where the adults roam.*

*“So which one of you guys is Tobias Holmes?” the guy sitting on top of the table asks. I notice a scar running down his face, starting at his brow and reaching all the way to his neck. The jaggedness of the healed wound holds my attention, but I clear my throat, refusing to hide.*

*“Me,” I answer, and a wide grin stretches across his face, making me stand taller.*

*“So, who are Xavier and Hunter?” he continues, glancing between my friends who continue to look him dead in the eye as I follow his gaze.*

*“Does it fucking matter?” Xavier bites out, and the guy’s grin widens.*

*“That would make you Xavier then,” he says, pointing directly at Xavier before swinging his finger to Hunter. “And you must be Hunter. Do any of you know who I am?”*

*I’d be lying if I said I did, but I simply shrug while Xavier continues to talk a big game.*

*“Are we supposed to?” he counters, and the guy claps his hands, seemingly at Xavier’s retort.*

*“Well, I’m Marco. In for life, baby, but you know who else is here? Hmm? My baby brother. You know what his name is?” Is he even going to give us a chance to answer his questions, or is he just going to continue throwing them at us? “Dalton Boone.” Propping his hands on his hips, he watches as realization washes over our faces.*

*Well, I remember that name, he’s in the juvie section with us. He was dealing with a lot of shit, being pushed around in the yard, and we intervened. I’m not even sure why we did, but people fucking listened as we demanded everyone follow our fucking rules, and for the most part, it seemed to work.*

*We had to get our hands dirty, gaining a few extra bruises from brawling, before we were thrown into solitary confinement, but Dalton was desperate to do anything to please us, as were ninety percent of everyone else in juvie. This had me hopeful for a stronger alliance when we were in here again, because God fucking knows it won’t be the last time.*

*“He says you guys had his back and are restructuring how shit goes down over in juvie. That true?” he asks. His four friends continue to silently observe us like good little soldiers as they wait for us to answer.*

*“We may have made some changes,” Hunter finally responds, but Marco shakes his head.*

*“I want to hear from the warden’s boy,” he demands, his gaze fixed on mine, and I have to refrain from rolling my eyes. He must be able to see I don’t get along with my father, so I don’t understand why it matters. Unless he’s testing me.*

*“We’re a unit. It doesn’t matter who it comes from. The statement will be true for all of us.”*

*Mulling over my words, he glances at the three of us, rubbing his lips together as he searches our eyes. I don’t know what he expects to find, but he eventually shrugs, and I have to hold back a frown.*

*“No one will jump you again. That’s my thanks for protecting my brother so I don’t owe you one at your convenience,” Marco says, leaving no room for argument as he nods at us and stands from the bench, his goons following as he heads toward the door at the other end of the yard.*

*I watch as the door swings open, a guard letting them in, and I don’t miss the handshake between them before the door closes.*

*“What the fuck just happened?” Hunter asks, his brows knitted together as his gaze flicks between the door Marco and his group left through and us, but I’m just as shocked as he is.*

*“That was us solidifying our ownership of this fucking place,” Xavier grumbles, and a little of the tension inside me subsides.*



*He's fucking right.*

*Because no one has laid a finger on us since.*



The memories of this place have haunted me in sequence, as they always do, starting from my earliest memory and flowing all the way until my most recent, so I always get a fresh sense of calm when my mind catches up to the fact I no longer have to fear people like I used to. The threat of someone coming to wake us in the middle of the night doesn't haunt me anymore. Fuck, even the guards are now on our payroll. If anything, we're safer from Ilana in here anyway.

But Eden isn't.

That's what continuously plays in my mind—her safety. Hunter was able to confirm that she was with Bethany and Ryan, using one of the prison guards to drive by their place on the first night to take a photo of Eden's G-Wagon parked outside.

Xavier is adamant she should run, however, and honestly, a part of me feels the same. Hunter says Ryan knows what he's doing, and I believe him. Man, I've even seen it myself, but I'd much rather have him handle the situation with Eden as far away from Knight's Creek as possible. She'd be safer.

I can't get over the confusion in her eyes as she watched us drive away, and it pains me, but every time she's requested visitation, we've declined. She shouldn't see us like this, in prison, in these vibrant orange jumpsuits, and it'll only put her on my father's radar as well as allow Ilana to keep tabs on her. It hurts my fucking soul, but we're not doing it for us, we're

doing it for *her*. I just hope she eventually sees that and doesn't hate us too much.

“Yo, Allstars, you got a minute?” Dalton asks as he approaches our table. We're sitting dead center in the yard, the heat of the sun pounding on the backs of our necks as we watch everyone around us. The adult side of the prison is nowhere near as scary as it once was when I was younger.

“What's up?” Xavier asks as I watch a few of the guys shooting hoops to our right, but the sigh on Dalton's lips has me turning my head to give him my attention, and I catch sight of Hunter doing the same.

“There are some new guys, rolled in late last night from out of town. They're trying to lay down their own rules, but Marco has a feeling daddy dearest has definitely been encouraging them,” he murmurs, and I bite back a groan of frustration.

Of course he has. Any chance he gets when fresh meat walks in here, he tries to pit them against us, knowing no one else inside will fight in his corner, but what my dad refuses to acknowledge is that everyone here practically serves us. It's arrogant, but it's fucking true, so there would be a lot of muscle to get through before landing on us, if that's how we wanted to play it, but it never is. We never shy away from confrontation.

“Lead the way,” Hunter mutters, rising from his seat as Xavier and I follow.

Moving in sync, Xavier and I hold back slightly as we walk side by side flanking Hunter. It's never orchestrated, it's just how we operate. We always ensure a different one of us is leading the way so the regular inmates don't get any ideas and think there's a weak one amongst us.

The prisoners tend to stick to groups. The agreement is we set the rules when we're in here, but that doesn't stop issues from arising when we leave, and we respect that. Marco really is a lifer, along with Dalton, who was tried as an adult as soon as he hit eighteen and given the same sentence—murder. They murdered their parents, and with parents like ours, I fucking get it.

As we walk through the tables, everyone avoids eye contact with us, as usual. The layout of the yard is quite simple. You have the benches laid out in lines to the far right, the basketball court to the left with the gym equipment spread out to the top corner, and a strip of yellow, dried grass that finishes off the square space. There are usually guards at every corner, even more so when we aren't here, but there are probably eight guards stationed around the yard tonight.

I spy Marco sitting in his usual spot over by the gym equipment with four guys hovering nearby. They must be the new inmates, and I can hear the shit they're saying from here.

“No one's going to fucking tell us what to do. I don't give a shit. These players are going to operate by our rules or not at all, you feel me, brother?” the closest guy says, his voice filled with venom as he spits the words out, his body trembling. As we get closer, I instantly notice his pupils are blown, and then it all makes sense. He's on crack. Never the pure stuff, no, my father prefers to get them all pumped up with the low quality stuff so he can get them all riled up and accelerate their rage.

“How long has he been going off like this?” I ask Marco as I come to stand beside him, and he rolls his eyes at the shit show he knows is coming.

“A solid twenty minutes, but I was hoping he would calm down. I can handle it if you'd like, I wasn't sure,” he responds,

looking at us for approval, which always makes me smile on the inside. My, how the tables have turned.

Without pause, Xavier walks around the benches and comes to a stop in front of the group of new guys who glare at him. The whole yard is likely watching it unfold, but I don't glance around to confirm it.

"The fuck do you want?" the dickhead sneers, pulling a cigarette from his pocket and making a show of lighting it. "Why don't you run along and find me the fuckers who think they run this place? I want to have a word with them," he grinds out, and I have to hold back my grin as Hunter and I step forward, coming to stop side by side with Xavier, standing confidently as a unit.

"That would be us, asshole," I tell him, and the four of them scoff. I almost feel insulted, but honestly, it always gives me an extra level of satisfaction when it does finally dawn on them.

"Nah, it's usually one of the lifers, not some fucking babies. Chop-chop," he scoffs, and we just continue to stare at him. I can feel everyone in the yard stop what they're doing to take us in, knowing this is going to go south pretty quick, and the longer we stand expectantly in silence, the quicker the realization washes over their faces.

"So are you ready to talk business, or are we going to cut straight to fighting?" Hunter asks, rolling his shoulders back, and the four men line up before him.

"Fuck you," one of the other guys sneers as the big talker flicks his cigarette in our direction, and I watch as it lands at my feet.

Ready to lay down, Xavier growls, “You’re going to regret opening your mouth, new boy.”

I shake my hands out, but before I can take a step forward, Marco stands in front of us.

“You can make your stand, Allstars, but keep those hands clean for the game. You know we all love putting our money on you winning. It’s the only bit of fun we get in here. Besides, we do all the dirty work so you don’t have to.”

With that, inmates from around the yard rush over, joining Marco and his gang to teach these motherfuckers a lesson as we turn our backs and walk away. At least it’s stopped the inmates from fighting amongst themselves for an afternoon, and nothing really shows power around here like keeping your hands clean.

Glancing up at the window, I’m not surprised to see my father standing there with his hands in his pockets, the mustard stain on his shirt visible from here as he glares down at us. Offering him a smirk, I flip him off as we head back to our table.

With that taken care of, the three of us fall into silence, considering what the fuck we’re supposed to do about Eden.

TWO



## EDEN

---

I brush my teeth again, but I can still taste the acid in the back of my throat. Morning sickness is completely destroying me. I've been sick multiple times every day for almost a week. What a load of shit.

Drying my hands on the towel hanging near the vanity, I look at myself in the mirror. The dark bags under my eyes and my hooded lids show how worn out I am. Between the sudden onslaught of pregnancy symptoms, the constant refusals to see Xavier, Hunter, and Tobias, mixed in with the threats and Ilana, I'm at a complete loss.

I undo my hair tie and run my fingers through the ends before piling it all back on top in a messy bun. Makeup free, wearing an oversized t-shirt and a pair of loose shorts, I head downstairs with my phone in hand, where I know Bethany will be waiting.

I've been cooped up here for five days, ever since the Allstars left in the back of the cop cars, the threat against me still hanging in the air as I flounder with the news that I'm pregnant. I'd kind of hoped the pregnancy test had been a false positive, but the constant sickness, sore boobs, and my complete lack of a period only confirm it.

The floorboards creak as I reach the bottom of the stairs, and I'm walking toward the kitchen when I hear Bethany call out my name.

"Eden, do you want to eat?"

The thought of food has my tummy churning again as I step into the kitchen to find her over the stove, dressed for the day, with Ryan and Cody at the breakfast bar. It's a little after eight in the morning, and the sun is already too bright for my tired eyes.

"I can't bear the thought of eating anything normal right now," I admit, dropping into the seat opposite Ryan as Cody sits between us in his highchair. I place my phone on the table beside me and lean my elbows on the surface as I get comfortable.

"De-de. De-de. Hi, De-de," Cody garbles, melting my heart, and tears prick the back of my eyes as my emotions get the better of me.

"Hey, little man. Are you ready for your breakfast?" I ask, loving how he nods eagerly in response. I stroke his cheek, his skin soft under my touch as he smiles. He looks too fucking adorable in his navy polo shirt and denim shorts.

"Morning, Eden," Ryan greets, waiting until I've had my morning dose of Cody before speaking, and I offer him a soft smile.

"Morning," I reply as I fold my arms over my chest.

"Eden, I can make you some dry toast, that might help settle your stomach, or maybe just some more ginger cookies if that would make you feel better?" Bethany offers as she walks toward us, placing Cody's plate down in front of him and stroking my back sympathetically.



“Whatever you recommend, I’m willing to try. Just no eggs, the thought of the smell alone has me ready to gag,” I murmur, and she squeezes my shoulder, moving over to the cupboards as she searches for an answer to all of my food prayers.

My gaze falls back to Cody as he eats his pancakes, and I find myself repeating the same thoughts that have been playing on repeat in my head all week.

There is a baby growing inside me.

A. Baby.

I don’t know how to deal with this. I don’t know how to process the fact that I’m going to be a parent, a mother, or that I could make it all go away in an instant. Since I grew up with just my mom and dad, the talk of abortion has never been a thing. The option is there for me to consider, but deep down in my soul, I know it’s not the right decision for me.

Something about this little human growing in my tummy has me determined to fight back, survive, and live happily ever after—even if it is just me and the baby. I feel the burning in my soul to do better for them than my parents did for me. Maybe I’m just feeling bitter right now, but it’s hard to remember my life before Knight’s Creek, since this town has consumed me from the moment I arrived.

I want to be a Bethany; I want to be fierce, unstoppable, and protective. But most of all, it’s made me realize how much I want to live. Live for the baby, and live for me.

Bethany sets a plate and a glass of water in front of me, breaking my train of thought, and I murmur my thanks as I stare down at the slice of dry toast and a handful of ginger cookies.

Lifting a cookie to my lips, I tentatively take a bite, grateful my mouth doesn't start watering for all the wrong reasons as Bethany sits beside Ryan. We all eat in silence, except for Cody who spends the whole time shouting, "Daddy!" much to Ryan's delight as he repeatedly plays peek-a-boo to make him smile.

When I've managed as much as I can stomach, which is barely more than two cookies, I push my plate away, taking a sip of water before clearing my throat.

"Any luck with the prison?" I ask, my hope instantly rising even though I know it shouldn't, and the look on Ryan's face is all I need.

"Sorry, Eden," he murmurs sympathetically, and I shrug, trying to act nonchalant, but it continues to cut me to the core.

"Do you think it's them doing it or the warden?" I question, running my fingers up the side of my glass to keep my hands busy, and Bethany sighs.

"It's hard to guess, if I'm honest. I know they have a lot of pull in there, much to the warden's distaste, but it *could* also be Grant or Ilana refusing them access to anyone on the outside," she adds, and I frown. Why does it have to be so goddamn difficult?

"Would Tobias's father do that to hurt him and the guys as a form of emotional torture? Or would he do it because Ilana told him to?" I ask, trying to understand the rules and logic surrounding this situation, but apparently in this town, none of that fucking matters anyway.

Realistically, it doesn't surprise me, I'm just worried about what else he's up to in the Holmes Correctional Facility. The idea of him putting them through their paces again and again

like he's done before doesn't sit right with me. Admittedly, a part of my soul feels like this is all my fault for pushing Xavier to meet Ilana. I just don't know how true that is, though, since I've had no contact with them.

"The question is, what wouldn't he do?" Bethany counters with a sigh, and I rub my temples, feeling a headache coming on.

"There has to be a way to bypass all this shit. None of it makes sense. They shouldn't even be in there and we all know it. It's Ilana and the rest of the remaining founding families that continue to screw them over," I grumble, trying really hard not to swear in front of Cody as Ryan hums in agreement.

"They definitely toe the line at the correctional facility, but no matter how much pull I have, none of it extends to decisions made by the founding families of this town. It's like a secret society or something," Ryan explains, rubbing the back of his neck as he meets my gaze, and I feel even more at a loss than I did before.

This fucking toxic town is all twisted to meet their needs, and I fucking hate it. I'm not safe unless I'm in this house, and I *still* can't sleep from the fear that I'm putting Cody in danger. Even though Bethany and Ryan are adamant no one could breach the property, it still weighs heavily on my mind.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do. A part of me feels like it's the Allstars pushing me away since Xavier's last words to me were to run. They haven't called or anything, but then that makes me scared to know what the warden is actually doing." The whole situation is an emotional fucking mess.

"We'll figure it out, Eden. You're not in this alone. The last time this happened, it was almost a week of 'delays' before they got to see an attorney," Bethany assures me with a

soft smile that doesn't quite meet her eyes, and I try to feel her hope, but it keeps being shattered. Anything I've hoped for since my father passed has diminished.

My mom hasn't answered a single call or text. Archie and Charlie are desperate to see me, but I don't want to drag them further into this and make them targets. The Allstars are completely off-grid, so none of them actually know about my current situation. Lou-Lou has been calling, but she doesn't need to know about any of this, she has her own shit to deal with, and this is *my* mess.

That leaves me with the three people in this room, one of which is a toddler, while the other two are willing to risk everything to keep me safe.

I wish my dad was still here. I haven't seen or heard a peep out of Richard, which is fucking soul destroying in itself, especially when he was the one to hand me a picture of us all together when Archie and I were born. Anyone remotely in a position to be a parental figure is either dead or nowhere to be found.

Perfect. Really fucking perfect.

My phone vibrates on the table beside me, jolting me from my internal debate, but as I look down at the screen, my heart stops. *Not again.* I can't keep the tremble from my fingers as I look down at the message flashing across the screen. The word "Unknown" continues to ruin my life.

**Unknown: How long do you think you can continue to hide, little Eden? Your time is up. We're going to bury you alive with your baby still inside you.**

How... How do they even know? What the actual fuck?

Bethany pulls the phone from my hands, but I remain frozen in place. My palms are sweaty, and my leg is bouncing as the words play on repeat in my mind. They know. Ilana knows. What the fuck am I supposed to do with this? I just don't understand what I fucking did wrong, apart from breathing apparently. What more do these people want from me?

*My life?*

*My baby?*

Oh, fuck no. They can do whatever they fucking please to me, but they're only solidifying my love for my unborn child. I will do anything and everything to keep my baby safe. *Anything.*

"Eden? Eden," Ryan calls, and I blink my eyes open as my eyebrows knit together as I try to figure out when I even closed them to begin with.

"I-I..."

"It's okay, Eden. We're going to figure this out. We are here for you every step of the way, but I refuse to smother you. You've handled yourself so far. Whatever direction you want to go in, that's what we do," Ryan states, determination firing in his blue eyes as I glance to my right, finding Bethany soothing a crying Cody. He must be able to sense something is wrong.

What *do* I want to do? It's not about what's best for me anymore, but what's best for my baby. That's all I can think of.

"Ryan, I just... I want to keep my baby safe more than anything in the world. I don't see how I can do that in this town, I really don't, not anymore. I can't live in this house forever, hiding from them when they could be lurking outside

of the gates,” I mutter, my heart pounding in my chest as I scrub my hands over my face, trying to wipe the stress away.

“Whatever you need, Eden,” Bethany murmurs, repeating Ryan’s words, and a sense of calm washes over me knowing that they have my back no matter what I decide. Glancing at Cody, I watch him hum to himself as he eats. My shoulders relax now that he’s stopped crying, and his innocence shows me the bigger picture.

“I think I should do what Xavier said—run. This town is toxic. It’s tainted, it’s twisted, and I want no part of it,” I tell them as Cody reaches his hands out in my direction, and I instantly gather him in my arms.

The feel of his arms wrapping around my neck offers me a sense of peace as I hold him close. Everything we do is for them, for our children, and I know that now. Is that what my parents thought when they ran when I was a baby? Fuck. I don’t have time to process that right now, I need to focus on the here and now.

“We’ll help you every step of the way,” Ryan insists, his palms flat on the table as he looks me in the eye, and Bethany nods eagerly in agreement too.

“But I feel like I have to figure out a way to see Hunter, Tobias, and Xavier before I leave so I can explain the situation,” I respond, looking down at my flat stomach, and when I glance up, they’re both still nodding as Cody plays with my hair.

“I have an idea, but I don’t know how you’ll feel about it,” Ryan admits, eyeing me, and I bite my lip nervously.

“Tell me.”

THREE



# EDEN

---

Relaxing in the shade, I flip through the playlist I just stumbled across on my laptop. It makes me desperate to go jogging, but the thought of moving too quickly has me on the verge of being sick. Add that to the fact I've had a pounding headache since this morning, and I'm barely awake. My body is in need of a nap.

Ryan said he had a plan, but that was a few hours ago, and I've been lounging around ever since. I managed to watch a movie and a couple of episodes of *The Gilmore Girls* with Bethany, who is adamant it's the best series in existence, but I refuse to confirm or deny.

She's been amazing at keeping me distracted, but I hate that I'm pulling her from her day-to-day life. I'm nervous to run again, even if it will be with Ryan's help, but I'll figure it out. I always do. I tried calling the prison again when no one was around, but I instantly got rejected the second I said my name and who I wanted to see. It's infuriating.

I don't even have my phone, since Ryan took it to run more security checks, but it's likely to come back with nothing, just as it does every other time. It never leads anywhere, and I think that pisses me off the most. Ilana is



always hiding behind other people, and I don't know who the fuck *they* are.

“Eden, Ryan said he will be with you in two minutes,” Bethany calls out from the kitchen, and I look in her direction, nodding my acknowledgement before shutting down my laptop, done with my assignments for the day.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I walk around the free-form pool and head into the house. I've taken a few aspirin, but the sun isn't helping with my headache either, so we can have this conversation inside.

I head over to the breakfast bar and find a large pitcher of water with four glasses on the counter. Who is the fourth glass for? Cody is taking a nap, and there isn't anyone else here.

The sound of the front door shutting catches my attention as I hear two sets of footsteps heading our way. Ryan steps into the kitchen first, and my jaw drops when I see Archie behind him, relief washing over his features as his eyes fix on mine. His messy blond hair is pinned back off his face with a backward cap as sweat drips down his brow.

He looks like he just came from football practice, but my focus is on the guilty expression on Ryan's face.

Before I can ask what the fuck is going on, Archie rushes toward me, his arms wrapping around my waist as he lifts me off the ground and spins me in a circle. I think I'm going to puke.

“Oh God, thank God you're okay,” he whispers in my ear, and I roll my eyes.

“Archie, I've spoken to you every day,” I mumble in response, making him squeeze me tighter. “Please put me down,” I insist, covering my mouth with my hand as he does.

He takes a step back as he looks me over in confusion. “What’s wrong? Are you sick?” he asks, and I instantly freeze, remembering he doesn’t know.

Fuck.

What do I do here?

Staring up at him, I watch his brows knit together as he waits for an answer, and nausea continues to build inside me. It’s either from the pregnancy or fear of telling him about the pregnancy, I can’t decide.

He’s a part of this town, once a part of the secrets, but he’s my brother, my blood, and that has to mean something, right? And if I’m honest, I want him to understand why I’m running, why I want to put all of this behind me and move on. Do I trust him now? I believe him when he says he looks out for me.

“Eden?” he prompts, waiting for an answer, and I swallow past the lump in my throat before taking a seat at the breakfast bar.

I look over at Bethany and Ryan, and she squeezes his arm as Ryan stares between Archie and me. “Let’s give them a minute, Ry,” she murmurs, but he keeps his gaze focused on mine until I nod in agreement, and I have to admit, I love how it feels to be under their wings of protection.

Even after I’ve watched them take a seat on the patio set outside, I still can’t meet Archie’s gaze, my body paralyzed by the fear of his reaction.

“Eden, what aren’t you telling me?” Archie questions, taking a seat across from me, and my mouth goes dry as my fingernails dig into my palms.

Slowly turning to face him, I notice he already looks a little pale over what I'm about to say, and I can't decide which one of us is worse. The only time I've uttered these words was when I said them to the back of the cop cars driving off into the distance, no one actually around to hear them. Bethany saw the test with me, and she told Ryan.

I need to bite the bullet and just do it.

"Archie, I..." I trail off, my confidence slipping, and he leans across the table, wrapping his hands around my clenched fists as he stares me in the eye, somehow filling me with confidence.

"Eden, whatever it is, I'm here for you. No matter—"

"I'm pregnant," I blurt, sinking my teeth into my bottom lip as my eyelids slam shut.

I freeze in place, my entire body turning to ice as I wait for his rejection. His hands remain firm around mine, however, forcing me to slowly open my eyes and frown at him. Shock is clear on his face, but there is a soft curve to his lips and a glint of mischief in his eyes.

"Don't ever scare me like that again. I thought something was wrong," he says with a roll of his eyes, which does nothing to ease the frown taking over my face.

"But I said—"

"Are you keeping the baby?"

"Yes," I answer without pause, and the smile on his face grows.

"Then don't sit there and worry about what other people's reactions are going to be. What happened to my badass sister who gives no fucks and pleases herself, hmm?" I lean back on

my stool, slipping my hands from his, my eyes wide and my mouth slightly open as I scramble to answer him, but he's right.

I'm me. Motherfucking Eden Grady. I've never cared what people thought, and I'm not about to start now.

"You're right. I just... that was the first time I've *actually* said those words to someone," I confess, and he offers me a soft smile in support as he leans back on his stool.

"That's okay, but now that you've said it the first time, you don't get to act all nervous and unsure again, agreed?" he confirms, and I nod with a roll of my eyes. Douchebag. "So I'm going to be an uncle, huh?" he mutters, and the joy in his blue eyes has me close to tears. It's on the tip of my tongue to finally ask him why he thinks I'm the one repeatedly being targeted and not him, but there are more pressing matters right now.

"Yeah, but the threatening messages and the constant danger I seem to face are only intensifying," I murmur, clasping my hands together on the table, and his features darken, knowing I'm right.

Glancing outside, I see both Bethany and Ryan looking at us expectantly, and I offer them a slight wave, which has them jumping to their feet and speed walking toward us in a matter of seconds. They slow their pace as they near us, and Archie throws me a knowing smile. They're so damn protective and he knows it, and it feels strange.

"What part are we up to?" Ryan asks, glancing between us as he drops into the seat beside Archie. Bethany sits next to me, and their relief is obvious on both of their faces.

“We’re at the part where my beautiful sister is carrying my niece or nephew while being in danger,” Archie states matter-of-factly, looking between the three of us, and I smile. The way he seems to relax the situation reminds me of Tobias, and it makes my heart hurt. I press my hand against my chest, trying to ease the strain.

If they were all here now, Xavier would growl out orders, Hunter would be protecting me with bubble wrap, and Tobias would drop all the dad jokes. Well, that’s if they understood the situation and didn’t hate me, and realistically, that’s not really likely. They’re probably going to hate me.

I’m not aware of any eighteen-year-old guy who would be happily pursuing a white picket fence and a family of three, definitely not over the college life filled with frat parties and endless sex. Were we already more? The Allstars and me? I don’t know, but I can’t bring myself to consider it. My emotions are already tied in knots with the baby and imminent danger threatening to take it all away.

Sighing, I find all three of them watching me, waiting for me to carry the conversation along, and I smile apologetically as I brush a loose tendril of hair behind my ear.

“It’s not just about me anymore, Archie. It’s about the baby, and even though they may only be the size of a pea, it’s my duty to protect them no matter what,” I start, and he nods with complete understanding.

“One hundred percent, Eden.”

“I need to run, and I need to hide. Knight’s Creek isn’t safe for us, and the longer I stay within town limits, the more I’m putting others in danger.” All three of them start to interrupt me, but I raise my hand, waving them off. “I know what you’re all going to say, but I can’t add that to my conscience,

okay? Ryan has agreed to help me, but I want to see the Allstars before I leave, it's the right thing to do. One of them is..." Fuck. Clearing my throat, I rub my hands down my thighs as I look everywhere but at them. "They have a right to know, and my baby has the right to know that I didn't keep them a dirty little secret."

The pride in Bethany's brown eyes catches me by surprise as Archie taps his fingers on the table.

"Which I can only assume leads to Ryan coming to me for help?" Archie muses, glancing at Ryan who is nervously rubbing the back of his neck, and that has me on edge.

"So we think that either the guys are denying her visitation requests or the warden, Tobias's father, is the one preventing her from seeing them," Ryan starts, searching Archie's eyes to make sure he's following. "Either way, it's not possible to get around whatever they're doing."

His words make my body sag in defeat. I'm confused as to why we're even having this conversation when he's simply repeating what we already know, even if it is for Archie's benefit.

"I don't see where I come into all of this," Archie responds honestly, and I'm glad I'm not the only one who's lost.

"We can't get around the situation for Xavier, Hunter, and Tobias. They also refused Archie's request for a visit, and I don't really know anyone else in there. I don't want to threaten Eden's safety, but if we could get someone on the inside, it would work so we can control who she goes in to see."

His words hang in the air as I repeat them on a loop in my head. *Control who she goes in to see.*

“No, absolutely fucking not,” I bite out, my hands balling into fists as I shut Ryan down straightaway, which only makes Archie sit taller in his seat. Bethany remains silent, nibbling on her bottom lip.

“You mean you want me to go to prison,” Archie mutters, his eyes unfocusing as he digests what Ryan is saying, who offers a sharp nod in response.

“I said no,” I repeat, glancing between the pair of them as they ignore me.

“I’m in,” Archie states, and I slam my fist down on the table.

“Don’t ignore me, I’m sitting right here,” I growl, my eyes fucking welling with stupid tears again.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe, Eden. I’ve already promised you that. If that means entering the prison as an inmate so you can get whatever you need—closure, promises, whatever—then I’ll do it, especially if it means putting you one step closer to getting out of this fucking place,” Archie states, his tone final as he leaves no room for argument, and I’m stumped.

“I don’t know how I feel about this,” I whisper, and Bethany leans forward and squeezes my hand as both Ryan and Archie rise from their chairs.

“We’ll have it all set up by morning. We get you both in and out as fast as we can, then you run, Eden,” Ryan informs me.

That’s right. I run.

FOUR





## XAVIER

---

I'm sick of this fucking place. We may get privileges in here, like relaxed rules, access to a cell phone, and privacy, but the food still tastes the same, and the fucking people I have to see on a daily basis are irritating the hell out of me. The guards and Tobias's father remind me every minute of every day how much I hate my mother.

Casting my eyes around the cafeteria, I take in the yellow stained walls that act as a cage, trapping us in. I have to look down at my tray to contain the anger rising within me because of this situation, but the sight of the shitty oatmeal in front of me does nothing to ease the tension.

"Are we any fucking closer to leaving yet?" Hunter asks, swiping a hand down his face, and I sigh.

"We're never going to move in the right direction until they actually let us see a lawyer and understand why the fuck we're in here," I grumble, hating the damn politics of this place. There is always some kind of "delay" when it comes to moving our charges along. I know it's about Graham fucking Brummer, but that's all a load of shit. I want to know why my mother feels like she will benefit from this.

“If my father continues to keep blocking it, we’ll be here forever. I don’t understand why we can’t reach out to Ryan,” Tobias says, and my hands fist at my sides as I try to deal with the fact that we have no control outside of these fences right now.

“You know I can’t do that, not when he’s been trying to get to us on behalf of Eden. If we go to him for help, we’ll have to allow Eden to come *here*. We all want her to run, that needs to be the focus,” Hunter reasons, making Tobias pout as my attention is drawn to the table across the hall where a group of guys are laughing and joking around. It’s not too busy in here this morning, thankfully, but it’s still too fucking early for their shit. The sound of scraping chairs and the clatter of knives and forks is already giving me a fucking headache.

“But I miss her so much.”

“We all do, but quit acting like a fucking baby, Tobias,” I bite out, annoyed with the entire fucked up situation. We shouldn’t have expected anything else, but he’s not wrong. The pain in my chest at the mere mention of her name is agonizing enough, but the images that filter through my mind every night before I fall asleep, of her, Nafas, has me ready to explode with fucking heartache.

I want nothing more than to be by her side, but behind these bars, the farther apart we are, the safer she is.

The sound of the security system unlocking to the far left cuts through the air, distracting me from my thoughts.

“New inmate!” a guard calls out loud and clear.

I fucking hate it when they do that, it’s a sign that the warden hasn’t been able to control him and pit him against us, but it’s also signaling that fresh meat is now on everyone’s

turf. Tobias's father prefers to make the announcement himself or he gets his deputy to do it if he isn't available, and it's fucking boring.

A guard steps in first, and it confuses me because it's one of the guys who follows our rules. It's always the warden's men who call out like that. But the second the new guy steps out from behind him, all the blood drains from my face.

Fuck.

Wearing white laceless pumps with the standard orange jumpsuit, he could be anyone, literally anyone, but he's not.

What the hell is Archie fucking Fremont doing here?

And why the fuck does he have fresh bruises all over his face?

The three of us gape in shock as the guard uncuffs Archie. Everyone around the cafeteria is watching him too.

"If we don't protect him, Eden will never forgive us," Tobias murmurs, and I don't utter a word. We protect no one but ourselves here. Things have changed from the juvie days since Dalton's brother has his back now. We don't protect anyone in here, and that's a known fact.

"We need to decide right now, Xavier," Hunter insists, my heart pounding in my chest at being caught off guard like this. I swipe my hand down my face before nodding.

Quick to respond, Tobias is up on his feet, walking around the tables as everyone tracks his movements, and when he nears Archie, he makes sure to talk nice and loud.

"Archie, man. What the fuck have you been doing? Come sit." They do a semi-man hug, patting each other on the back and making sure everyone knows they're friendly, and

whatever Tobias whispers in Archie's ear has him visibly gulping.

Wordlessly, they make their way back to the table, and I sit taller as they approach, moving over a little so Archie can take the spot beside me, leaving Tobias to retake his position beside Hunter. The room seems to remain quiet for an eternity as everyone tries to gauge what's going on, but the three of us go back to our disgusting food as Archie leans on the table with his arms crossed and cringes at the slop, waiting for one of us to speak.

We don't say a word until the noise around the cafeteria picks up, everyone going back to their own business for now, and when I'm sure no one is looking, I glare at the motherfucker beside me.

"What the fuck has been going on since we were arrested, Archie?" I growl. I have no knowledge of the circumstances, and it's likely not his fault that he's in here, but I'm at a complete loss.

Is Ilana behind this?

Is this another way for her to get to Eden?

Does she have Eden?

Fuck, I need him to answer already so I can calm the questions running through my head.

"I don't even know, man. I was picked up late last night from my house, something to do with the assault of Graham Brummer, which is total bullshit, and then I was moved here from the sheriff's office. The trip here was a little more violent than I expected," he says, pointing to the fresh blues and purples marring his face.

“Is this Ilana’s work?” Hunter asks, thinking along the same lines as me, and I sigh. Fuck. I truly hate my mother. Archie looks around at the three of us with questions in his eyes, but he tamps them down as he leans farther forward.

“I don’t know. I just know that me being in here leaves Eden even more vulnerable, so I need to figure this shit out and leave as soon as possible,” he states, and I couldn’t agree more. We don’t have time to leave her so exposed like this, not when my mother is involved. Ryan doesn’t really know who he’s up against.

“So she hasn’t run?” Hunter asks, and Archie shakes his head.

“She’s planning to, but then I got dragged here, so I don’t know what she’ll try now. My biggest concern is the threatening messages,” Archie tells us, and I glance around the room, ensuring no one is fucking listening right now, but everyone has gone back to their own conversations. I turn to Archie, staring him down until he continues. “She received one the day we went to the away game and another yesterday, and I was picked up hours later.”

Fuck.

“This is all going to shit,” Tobias growls, and I roll my eyes.

“No fucking shit, Sherlock,” I snap.

“Any idea how long they’re going to continue to hold you guys in here?” Archie asks, ignoring my outburst, and I shrug.

“My dad is being a dick, nothing new there, but the sooner we can squash what they’re up to, the better. They’re just delaying us being able to see our attorney, which never helps,” Tobias answers, and Archie nods.

“Fingers crossed. Eden has been staying with Bethany and Ryan, and he promised he would get in here to help me. I’m hoping Ryan will be able to get us visitation rights by the end of the day,” Archie says, leaning back in his chair as he rubs the nape of his neck.

My gaze flicks to Hunter’s. This could be our chance to see Ryan. I see the same thought in his eyes as they widen, and when I glance at Tobias, his reaction mirrors ours. We don’t need them to know we have been pushing her away. We know how to have an easier life in prison, but either our parents drop their bullshit or Ryan helps us so we can get out quicker. Ryan is always the safer bet, even if my blood boils at the fact they haven’t helped her run.

“We’ll come with you when he gets here. You’re more likely to be let out earlier than us, and we need Eden as far away from this place as possible,” I murmur, and he nods in agreement, a relieved smile crossing his lips.

“Thanks, guys.”

None of this is ideal. I don’t *want* to push Eden away. I don’t *want* to have to use Archie to get to Ryan. But the fact of the matter is, my mother wanted me to play with Eden as a toy, and I finally stood my ground and refused, and look where that got us. I meant it when I told Eden I loved her, even if she doesn’t believe me. I love her enough to let her go, to keep her safe, and then I can pray to God that in the future, I can find her and make her forgive me.

Just when she’s fucking safe.



It takes six hours for someone to step out into the yard and call Archie's name, and the second they do, we are up and on our feet. He's been quiet the whole time, staring down at his feet as he waits patiently, and we aren't big on sharing our feelings, so I haven't tried to delve into what he's going through.

"Archie Freemont, you have a visitor in room six. We're going to have to cuff you," the guard announces, and Archie holds his hands out willingly, but I knock them back down to his sides.

"Trevor, put the fucking handcuffs away, he's with us," I grumble, pointing in the direction of the door he just came from, signaling for him to lead the way. He offers me a quick nod before turning on his heel and doing exactly what I told him to do.

I let Archie walk in front, and Tobias pats him on the shoulder as he passes. Archie doesn't look back once as he follows Trevor to the door. I feel everyone's eyes on us as we move, and it irritates me, making me feel itchy.

The noise from the other new inmates has quieted down since Marco and his muscle put them in their place. Seeing the beaten and bruised group made me grin the day after our confrontation. Now, they're too busy withdrawing from the drugs they accepted from Tobias's dad and are the least of our concern. But everyone will be curious why we've suddenly accepted someone into our tight group. Of course it's Archie Freemont who has to ruin the dynamic.

I hold the door open for Hunter and Tobias, and then I follow them down the hallway. We pass through two sets of security doors with Trevor and another guard before we finally reach room six. Hopefully Tobias's dad doesn't realize the

connection between Archie and us. He rarely reads the charge forms anyway.

Archie swipes a hand down his face before stepping into the room, and Trevor frowns at us as if only just realizing we've come to go in with him. He begins to stutter, but I raise my eyebrow, and like the weak fuck he is, he simmers down. Whatever he was about to say disappears from the tip of his tongue as he gestures for us to enter the room.

The space is something out of a fucking Hollywood movie. A large pane of glass splits the room with a table on either side for both the inmates and their visitors, and there are eight chairs in total. There's no need for telephones, however, since they have strategically placed microphones to allow you to hear them on the other side of the glass.

As I move into the visitation room, I'm instantly frozen in place. Archie isn't here. There are two sets of doors on either side of the glass, which would explain why he's not here, but why the fuck would he step in then straight out to the other side? It makes no sense.

When I look through the glass, I feel my heart fall to my feet as I come face-to-face with the blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty of my dreams. *Nafas*. Instead of showing her all of that, I growl, angry that she doesn't seem to want to fucking listen to me, to *us*.

"What's the holdup?" Tobias asks, nudging my back, and I can't even bring myself to respond as I slowly move out of the way so he can enter the room too, Hunter hot on his heels. Curse words spill from both of their mouths as they see her looking all beautiful in her seat.

Not a dash of makeup is on her face, so her natural beauty shines through just like it did the very first day I saw her. With



her classic messy bun piled on top of her head and her crystal blue eyes shimmering with emotion, I can't help but fall into the seat across from her. Her lips are pulled into a tight line, her eyes strained, and her forehead is creased with frown lines.

I feel Tobias and Hunter sit down on either side of me and watch as she leans forward to turn her microphone on, but I'm not ready for that yet. Glancing to my right, I see the war in Hunter's eyes too, and when I look Tobias's way, I notice he can't pull his eyes from our girl. I hate that she's seeing us like this. Orange isn't my fucking color, a damn jumpsuit isn't my go-to either, but it almost feels like embarrassment is creeping up my neck.

"Before I press this button, I need to confirm how we're handling this situation," I murmur, keeping my voice low, like she might hear me.

"She looks so beautiful," Tobias whispers, my gut clenching at the absolute truth in his words.

"But how pretty she is doesn't replace the fact that we can't protect her in here. Do you want her waiting around, exposed and without protection, or do you want her as far away from Knight's Creek as possible?"

It takes a moment before either of them responds. It guts me, and I know it will gut them too, but it isn't about any of our feelings, including Eden's, it's about her safety.

I hear the door click shut to my right. It's just the four of us, and it dawns on me that these fuckers put Archie in here to use him against us. That's why he isn't here, and it's totally the kind of shit Ryan would fucking come up with. I've played the manipulation game too many times.

Love her or not, *that* angers me. Fueled by the knowledge, I press the microphone button, my gaze zeroing in on hers.

“What are you here for?” I demand, blunt as ever, making her glare at me as she folds her arms across her chest.

“I’m questioning myself too, so don’t worry about why I’m here,” she mutters in response, before leaning forward to place her forearms on the table, looking between us.

If that glass wasn’t there, I would be able to hold her, touch her, kiss her. Fuck. I’m getting off track.

“I don’t think there’s any reason for you to be here, Eden,” Tobias says, and I slam my mouth shut, happy for someone else to do the fucking talking right now.

She rolls her eyes at him, clearly not impressed with us. “There is, actually. Since I can only assume it’s you who has been stopping me from coming, I don’t have too much to say, so I won’t keep you long.”

“Maybe you should spit it out then, we have things to do,” Hunter growls, fisting his hands on his lap where she can’t see, and her eyes widen in surprise at the fact it’s not just me being a dick right now.

“I... You know what? Forget it. I came here to see you, to understand what the fuck happened because I *know* this is all my fault. I know it, and I want to make it right, make it better. But if we’re back to you all pushing me away, I couldn’t really give a shit if you stay in here or not,” she states, dropping her head into her hands as she presses her fingers against her temples, trying to ease the pain in her head caused by stress.

“There is no making this better,” I tell her, leaning casually back in my seat like my own words aren’t tearing me up inside, and her teeth sink into her bottom lip with anger.

“We’re all completely fucked. So go, run, do whatever the fuck you want, but you aren’t wanted or needed here. Do you understand?”

I can see the tears desperate to escape her eyes as she shakes with anger, looking up at me through wet lashes.

I clench my jaw, and my heart cracks a little at the pain in her eyes. I feel a slight tremble run through me as I push her further away, knowing there may be no forgiveness left in her heart after this, but I have to tell myself it’s for the best. We are hurting her and destroying my brothers and me in the process to save her life. It’s always about her, and it’ll always be about her.

I take a deep breath and harden my expression. “I asked you a question, Eden. Do you understand that you are not wanted or needed here? We don’t *want* you, and we sure as hell don’t *need* you.”

With a heavy sigh, she drops her hands from her face and places her palms flat on the table as she pushes up to her feet, glaring at the three of us with pain in her eyes.

“I wish I could hurt you the way you’ve hurt me, but even then, I know I wouldn’t,” she says, barely more than a whisper, her voice thick with emotion, and Hunter grunts beside me.

Filled with anger, rage, and defeat, she looks each of us in the eye before turning for the door, her body trembling with every step she takes. The farther away she gets, the more of my heart she takes, and I have to repeat what this is all for over and over again in my mind.

With her hand raised to knock on the door, signaling she’s ready to leave, she pauses and looks at us over her shoulder.

“You should go,” Tobias mumbles, and she nods.

“I am, and I won’t look back,” she replies with determination in her tone, and I instantly want to get it out of her, almost needing her to beg, to plead, to stay. She knocks on the door, and it flies open moments later, but her gaze doesn’t move from ours. “But I didn’t come here for me or for you guys,” she continues, pressing her hand to her stomach, and she almost looks like she’s going to be sick. My eyes follow the movement.

“Then why did you come?” Hunter asks, nonchalantly propping his arm up on the back of his chair.

“I came to see you, so in years to come, I can tell my baby I told their father they existed.”

With that, she rushes through the door, the heavy security lock falling into place behind her as the three of us remain frozen in place.

What the fuck just happened?

What the fuck did we just do?

“Eden!” I yell, slamming my hand down on the table, but she does as she promised and doesn’t look back. “Eden!”

FIVE



## EDEN

---

Stepping out of the shower, I take a deep breath as I swipe my wet hair back off my face. The bathroom mirror is fogged up from the steam that fills the whole room, which I'm thankful for so I don't have to take a look at my puffy eyes. I feel physically worn down, I don't need to see how bad I look as well.

After going to see the Allstars yesterday, I came home and cried nonstop for the rest of the night. Sitting beside Bethany with a huge tub of Ben & Jerry's between us, I lost myself in *Aquaman*.

It's these damn pregnancy hormones, at least that's what I'm blaming my reaction on, but I could see the emotions in their eyes. Their ridiculous idea of protecting me is to push me away. To do what? Make me run? I was already doing that anyway. I was already following their word against my better judgment, but as hotheaded as ever, they just do things their own way without seeing the bigger picture.

Applying my face cream, I can't stop my brain from going into overload again. Screw them. Screw them for not even giving me a chance to talk, for not letting me in to see them earlier. No, I had Ryan and Archie to thank for the chance to speak to them yesterday, and it was all for nothing. Well, I did

tell them exactly what I went there for, so why does my heart feel broken? I don't love them anyway, right?

Thankfully, Ryan was somehow able to set it up so Archie could walk straight back out of prison after he lured the Allstars to the visitation room. He literally had him picked up by the sheriff, and with a little payment and the sheriff wanting to scare Archie, he arrested him, agreeing to cart him off to jail for six hours. He would have happily stayed longer, but Ryan had to draw the line, and luckily the assault charge won't go on Archie's record, which was my main concern.

I can't think about that right now. The Allstars haven't stopped trying to call Ryan since I left, but he listened to me when I said I wanted space and hasn't answered their calls at all. Hearing from them isn't going to help get me out of town, it's only going to make me curl up into a ball and hide from the world, and that just isn't going to fix the situation. Neither is running. Realistically, I know I'll have to come back eventually—I refuse to spend the rest of my life running—but for now, I need to do what is safe for me and my baby.

Slipping into a knee-length, sleeveless black dress, I stare at my belly, which looks exactly the same. I think that's what confuses me the most. There is supposed to be something growing inside of me, but you wouldn't know I'm pregnant by looking at me. Running the towel through my hair, I dry the ends and quickly braid it down my back.

When I step into my room, I slip into my Converse and take a seat on my bed beside my open suitcase to tie the laces. I glance out of the window, which has a perfect view of the pool outside. I love watching the sun glisten off the water, but without waves like the ocean, it doesn't settle my soul like I want it to. I can't smell the sea air or feel the sand between my

toes either. Instead, the scent of chlorine leaves me queasy, and the hard, hot concrete around the pool hurts my feet.

Making sure there is nothing else to put into the small suitcase, I zip it up, a little sad that I'm still going to have to leave the majority of my things at the Freemont house. It makes sense, since we don't want to make it more obvious that I'm running, but it makes me sad all the same. At least I already had my dad's favorite jersey here and all of my usual essentials. I just wish I could grab the photos of my dad and me.

A knock sounds on the door just as I lower the luggage to the floor. I roll it behind me as I turn the door handle, finding Bethany standing on the other side.

"Hey, are you ready? Ryan is finally going to go through the whole plan with us," she says, reaching out to rub her hand down my arm, and I nod.

"Yeah, I'm good to go," I respond, stepping into the hallway with the suitcase, but she takes it from me.

"Pregnant ladies do not carry their own luggage," she states, giving me a pointed look, and I roll my eyes. If this was anyone else right now, I would be explaining how independent I am, but I can't argue with Bethany, I just can't. Not after everything she and Ryan have done for me. Her word is gold, and I'm going to live by that mantra forever.

"Lead the way then, oh wise one," I tease with a smile, dramatically sweeping my arm out in front of us, and she gives me the stink eye before heading for the stairs.

As we come to the bottom step, I frown when I hear people talking—more importantly, a girl talking, and I instantly recognize her voice.



Walking into the kitchen, which is somehow the hub of this house, I freeze in place as I find Lou-Lou sitting at the breakfast bar across from Ryan, her expression transforming from anger to happiness when she sees me enter.

“Lou-Lou, what on earth are you doing here?” I ask, moving toward her before I even realize it. She stands from her stool and throws her arms around me. Squeezing her tight, I try to understand what the fuck she’s doing here.

I release my hold on her and step back, glancing between her and Ryan expectantly, and it’s Lou-Lou who caves first.

“He told me about the special cargo you have going on,” she says with a wink, nodding at my stomach to make sure I catch her meaning, and I shake my head. Why would he do that? I’m not mad, I just don’t understand. I trust him, I trust both of them, but what made him go to her?

I glare at Ryan, and he clears his throat, rubbing the back of his neck with a guilty look on his face before bracing his arms on the table with a sigh. I glance at Bethany, but she just offers me a supportive smile.

“Lou-Lou was right, her brother does know me. The why or the how doesn’t matter, but I trust Lou-Lou will protect you,” he tells me, and I frown.

“I still don’t understand,” I murmur, and Lou-Lou smiles at me. Do I even want to know what Lou-Lou is involved with? It never seemed like her brother pulled her in close with his friends back at White River.

“My brother’s gang is a little bigger than the boys that fit in our backyard,” Lou-Lou admits, tucking her hands into her big hoodie pocket, giving me an almost embarrassed shrug as she takes her seat at the table again. We never spoke to her

brother, but he always used to be at the parties, drinking with his friends and dabbling with drugs.

“I feel like I’m missing something,” I say, finally sitting down beside her as Bethany takes the spot next to Ryan, squeezing his shoulder as she does. I miss Cody’s presence. It made sense to put him in daycare as normal, but I wish I could catch an extra hug before I leave.

“You are, but trust me, you’re not missing out. You have enough drama going on right now, so let’s not add to it, okay?” she pleads, and the desperation in her eyes is enough for me to nod in agreement.

“So when you say you trust Lou-Lou to protect me, does that mean she’s coming with me?” I ask, and they all nod in sync. A sense of calmness washes over me as I realize I won’t be traveling alone.

“I’m sorry I’ve pulled you from White River, but I can’t say I’m not happy you’re here. Thank you.” It blows my mind that I once thought of her as a simple friend in passing, but the lengths she goes to for me simply proves me wrong.

“I could do with a break myself, Eden, so don’t worry about it,” she answers, rubbing my back supportively, and I smile.

“Let’s go through the finer details, shall we? Then we can get you out of here,” Ryan murmurs, and we all look at him expectantly. “Unfortunately, Eden, you’re not going to be able to take the G-Wagon. Last time you tried to go on your own, it didn’t end so well, and they’ll instantly recognize you. I’m going to need you to trust me with it.” His eyes don’t leave mine, and as much as I hate it, I know he’s right. However, considering that he was able to return my G-Wagon in such

amazing condition last time, I don't think I trust anybody with my SUV as much as I do him.

"Okay," I mumble, and he nods, continuing with the rest of the plan. I have left everything in his hands, happy to go forward with his decisions because the last time I tried to get out of town, it all went to shit. I'm just charged up and ready to go.

"Excellent. We're going to have one of my female security officers drive your SUV from here to Archie's, where he'll be waiting to let her in to keep it realistic. At the same time, you guys will take one of our security minivans with one of my men driving until you're far enough away to switch and take over. Is that okay?"

Is that okay? It sounds like we're planning a fucking heist and I'm going to get my own role in the next remake of *The Italian Job*.

"Whatever you think will work," I answer, starting to tap my foot nervously as he sends out a few messages on his phone, telling everyone to get into position.

"Perfect, we're also going to go pick up Cody together like we always do so everything seems normal there as well, but I promise you, I trust these people with my life, Eden, alright?" Ryan says, glancing around at us.

"If you trust them, so do I," I reply honestly, and we all stand, letting Ryan lead us toward the front door. Bethany grabs my suitcase again before I get a chance.

Stepping out into the driveway, I watch as a blonde woman with aviators on and her hair hanging in a ponytail from her baseball cap climbs into the G-Wagon, and all I can do is hope it works. I can't imagine Ilana sitting in an SUV on the side of

the road all day watching my every move, but her security team likely is. Let's hope the tinted windows and the things covering her face do a good enough job.

Bethany places my suitcase in the back of a large minivan to our left beside another bag, which I can only assume is Lou-Lou's. "I'm sorry I'm not coming with you, Eden," Bethany whispers with sadness in her eyes, and I shake my head.

"Bethany, I need you to keep my favorite boy safe. Cody needs you, and I need you, which means you need to stay here," I murmur as I wrap my arms around her shoulders and pull her in close. The damn people in this house are making me fucking soft. I bat my eyelashes quickly, forcing the tears back as I internally panic over when I will see her next.

"Are you ready?" Lou-Lou asks, heading toward the black minivan, and I release my hold on Bethany to follow her. The gates open, and the woman in my G-Wagon takes off down the road, my throat drying as I nervously watch her drive into the distance.

What causes me more concern, though, is the red Jeep heading up the driveway, perfectly timed with the gates being open. I gape as it comes to a stop on my left before Charlie jumps out, swiping her hair back off her face with a big smile.

"Oh good, you haven't left without me. I was worried Archie had told me too late," she chirps, slamming her door shut behind her before heading to the trunk to pull out a suitcase. What the fuck is happening right now?

I glance at the others, but they're all staring at her in surprise as she comes to stand directly in front of us. She looks completely frazzled. Her usually smooth hair is a mess on top of her head as she stuffs her hands in the pockets of her cute, floral summer dress.

“Charlie, what—”

“Do not even with me, okay? Archie told me everything, and there is no way in hell I’m going to let you run off without offering my support.” I continue to gape at her as she gives me a pointed look before glancing at Lou-Lou. “Oh hey, girl, I’m glad you’re here too. We’re obviously going to be the godmothers of this badass baby, so it’s only fitting that we protect them together too,” she declares, wrapping her arms around Lou-Lou like they’re old friends before walking over to me and placing her hand on my stomach. “We’ve got you, little bean,” she whispers, her smile wide as I stand here in shock.

Does everybody fucking know now?

I look at Ryan, wanting him to take the lead on this as well, and he clears his throat. “Charlie, I don’t know if this is a good idea,” he starts, but she’s shaking her head and pulling her suitcase toward the minivan before he can even finish speaking.

“Ryan, I know Krav Maga. If anyone tries coming near my faves, I’m going to lay them out with a quick one-two jab,” she says, swinging her arms around like karate chops sarcastically, before lifting the case into the trunk. “So are you guys coming or what?”

Well then. With her hands on her hips, she looks like she’s been standing there waiting for us for hours, her sass on full display.

“Do your parents know you’re here, Charlie?” Bethany asks, rubbing her forehead, and Charlie dramatically rolls her eyes as she climbs into the backseat where the windows are tinted.

“Of course. They helped me pack. Besides, leaving my car here makes it look like I’ve come over for some girl time, right?” she responds with a shrug, leaving no room for questions. Ryan holds his hands up in defeat.

That’s settled then too.

Lou-Lou climbs into the minivan, moving to the very back to talk with Charlie, and I rub my fingers against my temples as I try to calm the stress building inside me. I don’t know what I’m more worried about, the fear of not making it out of town or actually getting there and feeling no safer.

Just as I lift one foot up into the minivan, Ryan calls my name, making me pause, and then he holds up a small basic phone.

“Don’t forget, use your phone so we can track you all the way to the cabin. We’ve got a blocker encoded on it so no one else should be able to trace it if they try, but then switch to this as soon as you get to the cabin just to be on the safe side,” he instructs, placing the phone in my hand. His level of security blows my mind.

“Thank you, and don’t forget what you promised me, okay?” I repeat again, and he nods, his serious face in full effect as he steps back from the minivan, bowing his head at the driver who is one of his employees.

It feels like I’ve barely gotten comfortable in my seat in front of the other two, who seem happy to give me the space I need right now, before we start moving. Bethany and Ryan wave as we pass the gates and head toward the freeway.

With every mile we cover, my heart beats harder in my chest, the sound of the engine the only thing I can hear, and as we drive straight onto the freeway, I almost cry from the

emotion swelling inside me. No one stopped us, not a single soul.

With one last glance over my shoulder, I spot the Knight's Creek welcome sign, and I pray I never have to see that awful thing ever again.

SIX





# HUNTER

---

*“I came to see you, so in years to come, I can tell my baby I told their father they existed.”*

Eden’s words play on repeat in my head on a never-ending loop. I swipe a hand down my face, unable to calm the stress rising inside of me. I feel the turmoil of regret, anger, and sadness swirling inside of me like a storm.

“I don’t understand why the fuck Ryan isn’t answering,” Xavier growls, slamming a cheap burner phone down onto the mattress in a huff, and I stare at it helplessly. The guards provided it, but the damn thing has been no use at all.

It’s almost six in the evening, and Tobias’s father will likely be around soon. He shows up every night, forcing us into lights out before everyone else. He definitely has no clue how things actually work around here, too oblivious as he sits upon his throne. We follow his fake rules, created just for us, and then we slip back into our normal roles the second he leaves. But his ego gets the better of him, he loves to do anything and everything to make us feel helpless and trapped.

“Maybe it’s because we’re only now just reaching out when they’ve been trying to get ahold of us since we got here,” Tobias mumbles in response from where he sits on his

bed, his arms braced on his bent knees with his head hanging between his legs.

Defeat. Anger. Irritation. Desperation. That's what we're all feeling, and none of us know what to do with those types of emotions.

"Eden meant what she said, didn't she?" I question, looking down at my hands, unable to meet their gazes as I broach the actual subject that has us all worked up for the first time. It feels like an eternity before someone finally responds.

I gaze around the small cell. The bunkbeds and the single roll up bed are to the right. The tiny window does very little to lighten the room. The toilet is by the door, going completely unused because we have much more free rein than this tiny janitor's closet.

"I think the look of determination in her eyes is because she has something worth fighting for. We've all seen her with Cody, man. The first time she met him at the football game, her protective instincts set in, even in the way she held him," Tobias comments, and when I look at him, he's staring at the door, his eyes bleak as he bounces his leg.

"But Eden said she had the implant. I don't understand how it's fucking possible for her to be pregnant when she's on birth control," Xavier bites out, his jaw tense and his hands fisted as he paces the tiny space in front of his bed.

"Even you must have heard birth control can fail," Tobias scoffs as Xavier grabs the phone off the bed and hits redial again, but the call just goes straight to voicemail. Fuck.

"It was real, Xavier. It was true. She's not like the other fucking girls around here. She doesn't see us as a meal ticket out of Knight's Creek or a chance at an easy life. Fuck, she

fought against us at every fucking turn. This isn't just for attention or money. Her words were raw and filled with anger because she could see right through us. She could see us pushing her away at a time when she fucking needs us the most." I clench my hands in my lap, the churning emotions inside my mind getting the better of me as I focus on the orange jumpsuit I'm wearing—a reminder of the circumstances we are currently in.

"She's never going to forgive us for this, never," Tobias mutters, and I refuse to believe his words. There is a way to figure this shit out, there always is, and we won't be beaten by our own stupidity this time, especially when it comes to Eden.

"We don't know that, and we won't get answers until Ryan picks up his motherfucking phone," Xavier growls, but his anger is getting us nowhere.

The sound of the door unlocking has us biting our tongues, and Xavier covers the phone with his pillow before the warden catches sight of it. His attention to detail is fucking shit unless it's in regard to us, which is why I still can't wrap my head around the fact Archie and Eden were able to pull off the bait and switch today. I mean, it definitely makes sense if they had Ryan's help in executing the plan. Fucking asshole.

"Good evening, boys. It's time for lights out, unless you'd like to join us down in the fighting rings tonight?" the warden says, wiping the sweat from his top lip with his hand when none of us answer him. His off-white shirt is tucked into his pants, the stains still noticeable from his fucking dinner.

Our silence makes him chuckle, and I hate the sound just as much now as I did when we were kids. He's a psychotic fucker, that's for sure.

“Have it your way. You’re too unpredictable anyway. I need to make money, not fucking lose it on you little shits doing whatever you please instead of rigging the fights,” he grunts, using the master key on the wall to turn the lights out. The space immediately falls into darkness. Since this room isn’t supposed to actually be an inmate prison cell, he spent far too much money making the modifications he desires. “Sleep with one eye open. I’m going to have you eating dirt before you leave,” he threatens, pleased with himself, before sauntering out of the cell and hollering for someone to lock the door.

I watch Tobias scratch his head, desperately missing his beanie since they confiscated it on arrival.

His shitty attempt at threatening us does no good because we don’t fear him. Not now. He’s too old-school and way out of the loop to know his words mean nothing to us. We aren’t the same scared little kids anymore.

“I fucking hate him,” Tobias grinds out into the darkness, and I know the feeling. I hate him too, but since it’s his actual parent, the level of hatred Tobias has is on another level. My parents were the bottom of the barrel type of people, but now they’re dead and I’m free. Beth refuses to go into full detail on just how diabolical they truly were, but I guess that’s her story to tell.

Barely two minutes later, the door clicks open again, and a guard we’re familiar with wordlessly turns the lights back on and leaves the door open for us. He doesn’t even meet our gazes to seek approval, and I think he might be my new favorite guard since he did what he was asked without a word of protest.

“Try him again, X,” Tobias says, and I rake my hands through my hair, desperation getting the better of me.

Does Ryan know about Eden? About the... baby? The word feels strange, even in my mind. Do Bethany and Archie know? If this is true, like I know it is, then I pray to God she isn't going through this alone. The worry is tearing apart my insides.

What does it even mean if one of us fathered her child?

What does that mean for the one who is? And more importantly, what does it mean for the other two?

Are any of us even ready for this?

Fuck. I need Ryan to answer his fucking phone so we can at least figure our shit out. We need to get out of this place, and I need to see her, listen to her, and I need it now. We fucked up earlier. I can admit that, but I won't make that same mistake again.

“Why the fuck isn't he answering?” Xavier asks again, pulling me from my thoughts as he looks down at the phone like it has all the answers, but instead, we sit here with nothing.

A knock sounds at the door, and Tobias hollers for them to come in. The corrections officer from moments ago peeks his head around the door with a guilty expression as he clears his throat.

“Hey, you have a visitor in room two. Would you like me to escort you over or would you like me to decline their request?” he inquires, and I'm up out of my seat before he's even finished speaking, with Tobias and Xavier moving toward him too.

“Did you get a name?” Tobias asks, ushering him out of the cell. The three of us are hot on his heels as the guard fumbles with his identification card that doubles as a door scanner. Irritation rises inside me, he needs to hurry the fuck up.

“Uh, no. I was just told to come down here and tell you there is a guy in there wanting to see you. The other guard said you’d lifted the ban on visitors, but I wanted to be sure,” he mutters, leading us through two sets of double doors. None of us respond. I focus on the fact that he said “a guy.” I wish it was Eden, but please let it be Ryan. I won’t be able to protect Archie if he’s back. Little fucker.

The halls are quiet since most prisoners are in their cells now. I didn’t miss the fact he said “room two” as well. They don’t have the glass paneling in there. It’s just a standard room with a table and chairs. That’s the room Eden should have been in so she couldn’t just leave without explaining.

We don’t bother to remain behind him as he unlocks the last security door which leads down another hallway. Instead, we head straight for room two. Xavier reaches the door first, roughly swinging it open, and when I follow him inside, I’m relieved to see Ryan sitting casually at the table.

His hair is a mess, like he hasn’t stopped running his fingers through it for days. *You and me both*. But the bored look on his face pisses me off. With his ankle propped up on his thigh, he gazes leisurely around the room.

“What the fuck, Ryan? We’ve been trying to get ahold of you for fucking hours,” I grind out, folding my arms across my chest as Tobias drops into the seat to my right, glaring at Ryan as Xavier slams the door shut behind us. The corrections officer happily waits outside.

“Yeah, Ryan, what the fuck?” Tobias adds, and I want to put him in a headlock and tell him to shut the fuck up. We’ll get nowhere if we just repeat ourselves when we should be getting answers.

“I saw the calls. I was a little caught up, but I’m here now,” he replies, glancing between the three of us. I have to bite my tongue so I don’t start verbally ripping into him, it’s not going to get me anywhere. I can tell by his body language he’s not too pleased with us either. His foot twitches with annoyance, and his jaw is tight.

I have a lot of memories of this guy, and the expectant look in his eyes tells me we’re going to do all of this his way or no way at all. I fucking hate that I looked up to him as a child, because now he seems to think he can use this shit on me, even at this age. Asshole.

Taking the hint, I drop into the chair directly across from Ryan as Xavier takes the chair on my left. The three of us stare him down, unable to just sit and listen to him without our egos getting in the way.

“So, you called?” Ryan begins, glancing down at his phone, nodding slightly to himself before placing it in his pocket and looking back at me.

“What took so long, Ryan? Seriously,” I ask, making sure to keep the anger from my tone, and he offers me a half-smile, motherfucker.

“I made a promise, I kept it,” he answers with a shrug, and I watch as Tobias balls his hands into fists and Xavier practically growls under his breath.

Swiping a hand down my face, I sigh, already fed up with the short answers that aren’t really answers at all.

“Whatever. Where is Eden?” Xavier cuts in, leaning forward on the table as he changes the subject, waiting expectantly for Ryan to answer, but he barely reacts.

“Gone.”

Wait, what? How can he sit there and say that word so casually?

“What do you mean? She was here yesterday,” Tobias exclaims, and I feel my heart start to pound in my chest with realization. Fear slowly floods through my body at his one single word. I really don’t like the idea of her running alone. Why the fuck did we think that was a good idea? Why did we push for it?

“I believe it was Xavier who told her to run, so she did.” He shrugs again, folding over the sleeve of his pale blue shirt. This is his tell, and now I finally know we have business Ryan in front of us, and not my cool, big brother Ryan.

I glance at Xavier. His eyes are closed as he squeezes the edge of the table, his knuckles white with anger, and when he opens them again, the usual hazel irises are almost black.

“Is what she said true?” I ask, my voice quieter than I actually want it to be, and the one sharp nod Ryan offers in response is all I need. Is that why he’s angry? Because she’s pregnant and we’re locked up in here doing nothing?

Fuck, I don’t know, but my chest hurts and I don’t like it. I’ve worked hard not to feel much of anything since I was a child.

“We need to sort this out, Ryan. You don’t understand, we —”

“Oh, I understand. I understand perfectly well. You see, I’ve been eighteen, one of the guys, even been in my own



form of prison, but I have *never* treated someone the way you guys treat Eden. Now I've had to help her flee, pregnant, because your mother decided she wanted a new toy to play with. Some bullshit vendetta against Eden's family," he says, anger and annoyance thick in his voice. I have no room for argument, none of us do as he rises from his seat, straightening his sleeves.

"Listen, if you can just help us get the fuck out of here, we can go to her and figure this all out," I argue, holding my arms out wide as I plead, the gesture even surprising me.

He shakes his head, forcing a laugh. "I don't think you guys are getting it. That's the promise I made. You see, Eden knew you motherfuckers would come calling for me after she was here, and I promised her I wouldn't come help you until she was safe where no one from this fucking town will ever get to her."

SEVEN



## EDEN

---

I sigh, tapping my fingers on the armrest in the middle row in the minivan. I forgot how exhausting running from a town could be, but it feels even worse when you have to stay in the back of the vehicle, bored out of your mind.

We've been holed up in here for nearly five hours, only having one pit stop when we dropped Ryan's security guard off in Olancha and Lou-Lou got behind the wheel. Charlie's excitement about being allowed to come with Lou-Lou and me had her practically bouncing on her tiptoes. The second we left Bethany and Ryan's, she fucking fell asleep, and we've barely heard a peep out of her since.

When we hit the town of Bishop, Lou-Lou said the GPS showed we weren't far from the cabin. Since I've been counting down the miles, ready to just get there, I suddenly became overwhelmed with nervousness. The positives to being in an unknown location is no one knows who you are—unless it's Knight's Creek of course, where they apparently know fucking everything—but just like the twisted town I ran from, I'm going to be completely unfamiliar with my surroundings. This time it just doesn't seem to scare me as much.

Driving through Sand Canyon, I feel the minivan slow as I stare out at the water, so I look out of the front window, and my jaw drops as I pay attention to where we are. I had no idea what to expect when Lou-Lou mentioned the final destination was Lake Sabrina, but this place is just beautiful.

Framed by mountains, the crystal clear water glistens under the setting sun, the bright tones of dusk settling on the picturesque location. The oranges, pinks, and reds make the mountains look like they've been speckled with emeralds and gold.

“Holy shit,” I whisper in awe, and Lou-Lou chuckles up front.

“Right? This place is fucking gorgeous, Eden,” she responds, wearing a smile on her lips as she comes to a stop outside of a large log cabin.

Ready to get the hell out of this minivan, I nudge Charlie's shoulder, rousing her from sleep.

“Wait, what time is it? Are we there yet?” she rambles, looking around all bleary-eyed as she fixes her glasses, and I shake my head at her in exasperation as I open my door and climb out.

The warm air wraps around me, a huge change from the air-conditioning in the vehicle, but it feels nice as I stretch my muscles and crack my neck from sitting in the same position for so long.

The dirt path Lou-Lou takes is narrow, close to the water's edge and lined with dried, dead bushes on the other side. Kicking the stones beneath my feet, I look out over the lake, completely captivated by it. The calmness I feel by simply standing here fills my soul with peace.

“Hey, you coming, Eden?” Lou-Lou shouts, shaking me from my fixation on the ripples in the water. I look over my shoulder to find her and Charlie standing on the wraparound porch by the front door of the cabin, waiting for me to join them.

“Yeah, sorry,” I murmur, folding my arms over my chest as I walk toward them. The closer I get, the more I see that the lake almost wraps around the two-story cabin, flowing down the right side and around to the other, and there’s a dock out over the lake too.

Lou-Lou holds a set of keys out to me, seeing as Ryan trusted her with everything. I take them, muttering my thanks as I step up to the front door and turn the key in the lock, revealing the inside of our new home for the foreseeable future.

Walking into the open-plan space, I notice a gray corner sofa to my right with a log burner and an old, classic burgundy artisan rug in front of it. It separates the dining table from the lounge area, which leads to the fully equipped kitchen to the far left. Immediately to my left are stairs with a coat closet underneath. The walls are a mixture of open brick and cream plaster. Touches of burnt orange furnishings run throughout the entire space, making the place feel homey and comforting.

Moving farther into the cabin, I place the keys on the side table by the door, dragging my fingers across the wooden surface as I mindlessly continue to take it in.

“I mean, this is perfect for a girls’ weekend,” Charlie remarks with a smile on her face, and I have to refrain from rolling my eyes at her. This is a little more than a girls’ weekend, but I don’t want to burst her bubble with my shit

show of a life right now when I know she's just trying to lighten the mood.

"I'll bring the suitcases in. Charlie, Ryan sent us with loads of groceries too, so you can help get all that while Eden picks out her room," Lou-Lou orders, and I raise my eyebrow at her. She's already turning around and heading toward the minivan before either of us can say a word. Her bossy side is totally new to me, but I like it.

Charlie follows her out of the door, offering me a wink over her shoulder as she goes, so I make my way up the cream carpeted stairs, which turn halfway up. Reaching the top, I'm faced with a long hallway with four wide open doors. The way the rooms are separated gives me a sense of having my own personal space and, more importantly, privacy.

As I walk down the hallway, I notice the first room to the right is a full bathroom, leaving the other three rooms as bedrooms. Choosing the door at the end of the hall, I step inside to find a large, queen-sized, four-poster bed facing a floor-length window which looks out over the lake.

I move straight to the window, and when I look down over the dock, I spy a jacuzzi on the back porch and a boat rocking in the water with a rope keeping it docked to the post by the back steps. I definitely need to get down there and investigate more.

This place is beautiful, secluded, and filled with everything we need. I'm glad we get to live somewhere like this, and not in some dingy motel room with stains all over the floor and walls. It does, however, have me wondering exactly what Ryan does for a living. I know he's in security, but I've never known someone to hold these kinds of connections or power before... with the exception of Ilana. I'm going to have to ask

eventually, curiosity always gets the better of me, but right now, I trust Ryan and Bethany with mine and my baby's lives.

"Eden, your phone is ringing!" Charlie calls from downstairs, and I head back down, my eyes lingering on the bed. I wish I could take a nap, but that will have to wait.

As I reach the bottom of the stairs, Charlie points me in the direction of the dining table.

"The room at the end is mine," I holler. I'm left speechless as I pick up my phone to find my mother's name flashing across the screen.

What the fuck? She's been unreachable every time I've tried to call, but the second I actually manage to get out of that god-awful town, she calls. It can't be a coincidence.

"Hello?" I answer, lifting the phone to my ear, but all I hear is her breathing at first.

"Eden, hey, it's Mom. Are you okay?"

Am I okay? Is she fucking crazy?

"No, I'm not okay. I haven't been okay since Dad died." Anger thrums through my veins as I scramble to find what I actually want to say to her. "I come to see you, for what? I don't know, but then I haven't heard from you until now. What's going on?"

"Uh, nothing, Eden. I just wanted to see how you were doing at the Freemont house," she says, her voice falsely sweet, and it makes me frown.

Raking my fingers through my hair, I glance around to see the girls awkwardly unpacking their stuff, and I mouth my apology as I take my call outside.

I don't answer her as I follow the wraparound porch to the back of the cabin, taking a seat on a wooden bench as I look out over the water. So much has happened since Xavier took me to see her, so fucking much, but my gut tells me to keep my mouth shut for now. Trusting her isn't as easy as it once was, not when we're currently playing the puppets in Ilana's game.

I hear some shuffling in the background as I try to find anything to say to her, and that's when I hear a whisper in the background.

*"We're trying to tracking her signal, just keep her on the phone a little longer, it's not loading for some reason."*

Oh, fuck that, and fuck them.

"How fucking dare you?" I bite out, my cheeks heating as anger rises inside me. "How fucking dare you call to track me? Fuck you, fuck them, fuck you all. My mother would never do this to me, think about that." I hit the red button, wanting to say so much more, but that'll only give them more time to trace me.

Dropping my phone on the table like it's on fire, I bury my head in my hands as I try to process the fact that my mother had me on the phone so someone, likely Reza, could track my location. Does that mean they know where I am now? Betrayal and anger stir inside me.

Standing, I grab my phone and toss it toward the water, but the small splash is nowhere near as significant and monumental as I wanted it to be. At least it's gone, and this time I made sure to back up all my photos of my dad before we left, so it was simply a case of dropping the device and not the memories it captured.



I close my eyes for a moment, letting the light breeze whip around my face, tangling my hair as I try to calm myself. I need to think about me, *us*, not my mother and her warped way of protecting me. Maybe if she knew what, no, *who* I am protecting, she would understand, but her knowing would mean *them* knowing. Hell fucking no to that.

Moving back inside, I hear Lou-Lou and Charlie upstairs arguing over who gets what room out of the remaining two, and I shake my head. I wish that was all I had to worry about, not that they don't have their own circumstances to deal with, I guess. I've just had so much of my own shit going on I haven't even considered what they're going through, and that makes me feel like shit. I need to be a better friend, supporting them like they support me.

Finding my duffel bag on the sofa, I take a seat and rifle through everything to find the burner phone Ryan gave me. I turn it on, seeing a few numbers already programmed in the contacts list, but I head straight for Bethany's.

It feels weird having a phone with physical buttons I actually have to press. No touchscreen and no access to the internet—it's perfect.

It barely rings twice when Bethany's voice filters through the line.

"Eden?" Her tone is full of relief.

"Hey, it's me," I respond, my heart and nerves settling a little at hearing her voice, and she sighs in relief.

"Thank God. Are you guys all okay?" she asks, and I nod like she can fucking see me. I glance at the time, Cody will be asleep now, but I wish I could hear his voice too.

“We’re all okay. We haven’t been here long, but I’ve already received a call from my mom. Before I shut my cell off, I heard someone in the background telling her to keep me on the phone so they could pinpoint my location. I ended the call and threw my phone into the lake in panic even though you put a blocker on it,” I tell her, nibbling on my bottom lip as I wait for her to respond.

“You did the right thing, Eden. Do you think they realized there was a blocker in place?” Ryan inquires. I must be on speakerphone, but I don’t mind, it saves everyone from having to repeat themselves.

“I don’t think so, but they must know I’m not in town anymore. I haven’t heard from my mom since Xavier took me to see her, and now she suddenly calls me out of the blue.” I glance around the kitchen, realizing it’s been a while since I’ve eaten.

“If anyone knows, they haven’t made a public display of it, but we’ll keep our eyes open and ears to the ground. You guys have had a long day, so try to relax tonight, and we’ll call you in the morning, alright?” Ryan says soothingly, my eyes falling closed as I hum in response.

“Thanks, you guys, I really appreciate it,” I murmur, ending the call as I hear them say goodbye.

Dropping the phone beside me on the sofa, I lean my head back against the cushions. I’m exhausted, but we need to eat. I couldn’t really care less, but Bethany’s constant reminder that food is what the baby needs has me reluctantly standing and heading for the kitchen.

Just as I open the fridge, Lou-Lou and Charlie come rushing downstairs, heading straight for me in the kitchen, and I stare at them with wide eyes.

“I’m cooking,” Charlie declares as Lou-Lou gently places her hands on my hips and moves me back to the living room. She won’t see me put up a fight, not at all. Actually, I should probably nap while they’re cooking.

“Thank you,” I say with a smile, and both of them shake their heads like it’s nothing as I lie down on the sofa.

Maybe when I wake up, my life since entering Knight’s Creek will have just been a dream. Well, maybe not the lake, the lake can stay. Just not all of the pain and stress I seem to be dealing with. Hopefully if I stay close to the girls, I might actually feel safe enough to close my eyes.

Otherwise, my brain will run a mile a minute, remembering the harsh words and scathing looks the Allstars gave me.

They can join the new fuck you list.

EIGHT



# TOBIAS

“What the fuck is taking so long?” Xavier growls, pacing back and forth in the visitor room, while I’ve barely wiped the fucking sleep from my eyes.

“You know Ryan is going to be facing hurdles, X, it’s going to take a minute,” Hunter grumbles from his seat beside me, but he’s just as anxious and worked up as Xavier is. I am too. It feels like my insides are clawing at me, desperate to see Eden or at least hear her voice.

Ryan left us last night with the promise of returning to help get us released. It’s a little after seven in the morning, and a guard knocked on our cell door to let us know he was on his way.

My heart still pounds in my chest after I was literally ripped from my dreams, which weren’t my usual prison memories for a change. They were filled with Eden and babies, babies everywhere. I felt like I was swimming in a sea of pink and blue, but what weirds me out the most is that I wasn’t disgusted by the idea or trying to run away. Instead, I was trying to fucking chase Eden down through all the colors, desperate to kiss her.

Clearly hearing her say she's pregnant, and Ryan confirming it, is all that lives in my head right now. Being consumed by her is not a bad thing at all. It actually feels like I had the best night's sleep since I've been in here, but by the looks of the other two, they barely slept at all. Their hair is barely contained, they have dark bags under their eyes, and there's tension etched on their faces.

We're back in room two, the off-white walls covered in stains and scuff marks from people struggling against being arrested. Footprints, handprints, you name it, it's stamped on the damn walls. I'm sure one of the footprints to the left is from several years ago when I put up a fight because they decided to punish me and leave Xavier and Hunter out of it, which is literally the worst kind of punishment for me.

It takes a lot for me to admit it, but these guys are my fucking rocks. I don't know if I would still be breathing without them.

I don't trust others, so when they're not here, I have to try and manage all of our ego shit myself. Thankfully, Marco has his team work as a buffer so everyone leaves me alone.

"Fuck this shit, call him," Xavier growls, slapping his hands down at his sides and hitting his thighs like a toddler who isn't getting what they want. Admittedly, we're all feeling it.

Hunter pulls the small burner phone from his pocket, hitting Ryan's name again, but the second he goes to lift it to his ear, the sound of the security lock opening from the other side of the room has him dropping it to the table.

Ryan walks in wearing his black suit pants and matching shirt, looking way more mafia than I'm used to, with his jaw tight and hands clenched. What has me sitting taller in my seat

is the sight of Archie walking in behind him. There's not a single fucking scratch or bruise on this motherfucker's face. Not. One.

“Where the fuck have you been? And why the fuck is Archie here? And where the fuck have all the bruises gone?” Xavier asks, getting louder with each question, but Ryan just rolls his eyes.

“Good morning to you too,” he responds, taking a seat in the chair across from me as Archie drops down beside him with a slightly embarrassed look on his face. He confidently meets our gazes, but I don't miss the pink tinge to his cheeks.

Hunter shifts forward, bracing his arms on the table as he leans closer to Archie. “Was all the bruise coloring on your face done with makeup?”

Clearing his throat, he rubs the back of his neck as he looks at the three of us. “Yes.”

Well then, these fuckers got us good, but we really don't have time to be dealing with something so inconsequential right now. I'd rather wait until we get out of here to get back at them, preferably while they're taking us to Eden. What I would do exactly, I have yet to decide.

Rising from my seat, I plant my hands on the table as I look into Ryan's eyes. “Are we done here?” I ask, moving the conversation to where it needs to be.

“Yes and no,” he answers, making me frown, but he instantly starts to explain himself before another one of us growls. “My attorney has had the case dropped. Your charges had weight and all that bullshit, but it's done with. The warden is still saying he can't clear you guys for a few more days.”

“Are you fucking joking?” Hunter shouts, slamming his fist down on the table.

Ryan raises his eyebrows at us while Archie sits quietly in his seat. “I know I’m funny, Hunter, but this really isn’t my kind of joke,” Ryan replies blandly as he taps his fingers on the table. “So I just came here first to confirm with Tobias how much we can do to get the warden on board,” he states, bringing his gaze back to mine, and I’m already nodding.

“Whatever the fuck it takes,” I answer without pause. My father is nothing to me, nothing at all, and I’ve seen how Ryan works, or the illusion of it all, I guess. There is something about Ryan that he keeps to himself, none of us really knowing all of him, but he protects Bethany, Hunter, and Cody like they’re his life, which extends to us when we need him.

With a simple nod, Ryan rises from his seat, patting Archie’s shoulder before leaving the room, the door falling closed behind him.

“What the fuck just happened?” Archie asks, but the three of us just glare at him.

“What are you doing here?” Xavier retorts, answering his question with a question like always.

“Ryan needed someone to remain present in here with you guys so he could speak to the warden without anyone being alerted that the room is now empty,” he says with a shrug, repeating Ryan’s words to us, and it makes sense, but I’m still mad at this fucker.

“You’re a shithead,” I bite out, pushing up off the table to stand at my full height, and he shrugs. Fucking shrugs.

“I did whatever it took to help Eden. That’s what matters, and realistically, if I hadn’t, you wouldn’t know what you do



now,” he reasons, raising his eyebrows expectantly, and even though my hands fist at my sides, I have no words to fucking say. Not one.

“Don’t get fucking smug, Archie, it doesn’t suit you,” Hunter mumbles without lifting his gaze from his lap. The door bursts back open again, and I gape in surprise as I watch Ryan push my father into the room with blood dripping from his nose as he coughs and splutters.

Holding crumpled papers in his hand, my dad looks scared while Ryan appears calm and collected with his bloody knuckles.

What the fuck? I can’t stop the laughter that bursts from my lips at the sight of my father like this.

“Hurry up, Grant, I haven’t got all fucking day,” Ryan says, his tone firm but almost bored, and it’s mind-blowing watching him with a different persona. He’s back in protective mode over us, just like he was the night we were questioning Billy, but to see him do it with my dad brings me a whole new level of joy.

My dad drops a stack of signed discharge papers on the table in front of me, anger burning bright in his eyes. He sees this as nothing more than a challenge to make something stick to me and have me back here as soon as possible.

“Make your way to the front, you know the process. All of the items you came in with will be in the property room ready for you,” he hisses, swiping at the blood dripping over his lip, and I know better than to stand here and argue.

“Let’s go, guys,” I murmur, not taking my eyes off my dad as Hunter grabs the papers and Xavier leaves the room. Archie is nowhere in sight. When only Ryan and my dad remain in

the room with me, I try to formulate a sentence amongst the jumbled mess inside my mind.

“Fucking go, boy, before I change my fucking mind,” he sneers as my heart hammers in my chest.

I take a step toward him and he actually flinches as I come to stand shoulder to shoulder with him, facing the opposite direction. “You’re nothing but your little title. One day, I’m going to strip it all away from you and leave you with no power at all.”

Ryan meets my gaze, nodding at the door for me to go first, and every fiber of my being begs me to turn around and show him more of my anger and rage, except I keep walking toward the exit. Freedom and hope are waiting for me.

I am determined to use all of this energy to figure everything out with Eden.



## XAVIER

I don’t care to ask how Ryan got Tobias’s dad to move this along so quickly. It had to be more than the bloody nose. I’m just glad he did whatever it took, but of course, it then took almost an hour for them to actually find our shit which was definitely done on purpose.

Stepping outside of the prison, I hear the security alarm ring as the gates close behind us. I shut my eyes, take a deep breath, and enjoy the feeling of freedom once again. The air in the yard isn’t the same as the air out here, not even a little bit. I just need a second to bask in the relief of no longer being caged up in a prison cell.

“You ready?” Tobias asks, coming to stand on my left as he runs his fingers through his hair, and I nod.

“I’m parked over here. Let’s get in the truck, and then we can figure out what’s next,” Ryan murmurs as he heads in the direction of where he’s parked. We all fall into step behind him, including Archie. Little fucker. I hate that he played us, but I hate that he’s right even more. We wouldn’t have known the secret *she* was carrying had he not played us. Motherfucker.

Beating everyone to the front seat, I climb in beside Ryan, hoping I can get some more information out of him, but he doesn’t lift his head from his phone as the others climb into the back. I want to get home, shower, and feel a little more like me again, but I know that won’t happen without Eden being nearby. I need to grovel like my life depends on it.

I tap my fingers on my thigh as Ryan puts the truck in drive, and I wait for him to offer any information without someone asking, but he says nothing. I haven’t got time for niceties.

“Are we heading straight for Eden?” I ask, and Ryan glances at me, confusion in his eyes as he looks at me like I’m crazy.

“Uh, no,” he responds. My spine stiffens as I wait for him to expound, but again, he doesn’t.

“Why the fuck not?” Hunter asks, leaning forward and cutting off my own rant as my hands clench in my lap.

“I told you, she ran,” Ryan says slowly, making sure we understand his words, and my brows knit together in confusion.

“Right, we wanted her to run, but now we’re out so we can help her,” I murmur, but Ryan shakes his head.

“I don’t think you understand. I promised her I would help you *after* she was safe because she doesn’t want or need your help. Besides, you guys will just lead everyone straight to her. It’s better if you just stay here and continue with school,” Ryan clarifies, and my eyes almost bug out of my head. He has got to be fucking with us, right?

“What’s the fucking punch line?” Tobias blurts from the backseat, and when I look over my shoulder, I see both him and Hunter wearing matching expressions of anger as they glare at the back of Ryan’s head, while Archie watches the town pass by out of the window.

“I’m being serious, and while we’re on the topic, Bethany would really prefer it if you three came and stayed with us for a while. I know you have that whole house to yourselves up there, but Ilana and Reza also have access, and if we want to make any progress at all in this town, we need you to not have any more interactions with her.”

“How the hell is that on *topic*? No, I want you to take us to Eden,” Hunter demands, but the stark truth in Ryan’s words doesn’t have me agreeing with him.

“You can’t keep us away from her, Ryan. Over my dead fucking body. Especially not when she drops a bombshell like that and disappears,” I mutter, and I see he’s about to respond, so I raise my hand to stop him. “I get it. I get her wanting to make sure she does the right thing for the baby, and I can’t tell you how much I appreciate her not fucking us over and just leaving, so I’m not mad. We just... This is a lot for all of us, and we deserve a little more information than we’ve already

been given.” Staring out of the window, I try to take a calming breath.

He gives me a reluctant nod in response that I catch out of the corner of my eye, but he doesn’t offer to help build the bridge between Eden and us. Glancing over my shoulder, I meet Hunter’s gaze, and like always, I know we’re on the same team and thinking the same shit. I tilt my chin ever so slightly, and Hunter clears his throat.

“We’ll come and stay with you guys, but we’re going to need to grab some things first,” Hunter says, and Ryan’s shoulders sag in relief, likely knowing Hunter just made Bethany happy and he doesn’t have to feel her wrath. Any other time, I would be laughing my head off at him being pussy-whipped, but at least she’s here, at least they’re together, and at least they’re fucking happy.

“No worries. I can drop you off, and then you can meet us back at the house because you’re going to need Xavier’s SUV for tomorrow anyway,” he murmurs, and he’s right, we will need the SUV, but not for school.

The reason we’re agreeing to stay with them is because Bethany is the one who will give in first. Then she’ll convince Ryan to help set us up with the location, and we’ll find our way back to Eden. It really is as simple as that. It’s going to take a little time, but it’s possible, and it’ll be worth it. I just hate having to be patient.

Nobody else says a word, each of us likely trying to wrap our heads around what the fuck is actually going on with our lives, but no one expresses what the fuck they’re feeling. It’s uncomfortable as hell.

I don’t realize we’re outside our house until the engine cuts off, pulling me from my mind which is repeating all of the

what-ifs I can think of.

“Do you guys want Bethany to make a late lunch?” Ryan asks as I open my door. I shrug and decide to let Hunter do the talking as I head down the driveway, not bothering to say goodbye since we’ll see him again soon enough. Archie can go fuck a duck as well while we’re at it. Asshole.

I gaze at my feet and almost reach the door when I hear Tobias call out my name. I turn around to glare at him when he nods, indicating for me to look to my left. My mother’s car. Fuck all of this shit. Of course she’s fucking here. Tobias’s dad must have fucking called her or something as soon as we left the prison.

Pushing my shoulders back, I clear my face of any emotion as I turn to the door and step inside. I head straight for the living room, it’s where she always tends to go when she likes to make a brief appearance, and I find her standing in front of the fireplace, looking at herself in the mirror.

“Mother.”

I hear Tobias and Hunter behind me as she watches us all through the reflection.

“How does freedom feel?” she asks with a slight grin on her lips, and I want to smack it straight off her fucking face, but instead I do nothing, forcing myself to act unfazed.

“Are you here for any particular reason?” I counter, answering her question with one of my own, and she gives me a pointed stare, her hands on her hips as we remain relaxed.

Turning to face us, she brushes invisible lint off the collar of her pristine white silk shirt as she looks us over with disdain. “Eden hasn’t been seen in almost forty-eight hours, and your father seems to be under the impression she has fled

Knight's Creek. You three wouldn't happen to know where she is, would you?" she questions in a sickly sweet voice, and I shrug.

"We were in prison because of her. I don't want anything to do with her anymore," I tell her through clenched teeth, hating the taste of the lie on my tongue, but the way her smile grows tells me I said the right thing. Although, I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop because she seems to agree too easily.

"Excellent. Well, I will leave you boys to it, but if you do catch wind of her whereabouts, please let me know," she says, starting to walk from the room, but she pauses as she reaches the open archway leading to the front door. "Oh, and it's been made official that Montgomery has stepped down as mayor. You know I'm running for the position. I'm exactly what this town needs, but there isn't anyone running against me. If it remains this way, I could be stepping into the role much quicker. I will need my son present to show a united front to the locals." Her smile doesn't falter once, and I almost bark out a laugh at her fucking audacity.

I nod once, biting my lip as anger boils under the surface of my skin as she offers a half wave and saunters out the door. None of us move until we hear the front door click shut, and then I release the breath I was holding.

"We need to put a stop to her, Xavier. None of us are safe from her as it is, but having her as the mayor as well is good for no one," Hunter murmurs, and I sigh, completely in agreement.

If Ilana Knight becomes the mayor of Knight's Creek, we're all fucked.

NINE





## EDEN

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It's so fucking quiet out here, a complete contrast to where we've just come from, and even though there isn't technically an ocean, the lake offers the perfect alternative, still giving me a sense of peace.

It's almost lunchtime, and I haven't been sick yet. I feel like we have made progress with that today, but my lack of energy and tiredness knows no bounds. Bethany promised that's absolutely normal.

Making my way around the wraparound porch with my laptop and phone in hand, I find Charlie and Lou-Lou sitting at the picnic table. They're just down the steps, closer to the lake, so I make my way over to them. It confuses me that they're here to protect me because I feel like I don't need it, but I'm glad they're here all the same. This isn't something I would have wanted to do alone.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty, are you ready to do some work?" Lou-Lou asks, dressed in yoga pants and a loose tee. I nod, taking the seat beside her as Charlie taps away on her phone, smiling up at me. We all had to make the switch to untraceable phones, and none of us can get used to the difference in technology. No social media, no nothing.

“Has Ryan emailed it all over?” I ask, and she turns her laptop to show me her screen which is filled with work.

Ryan set up some kind of connection so any emails sent to our usual email addresses would be rerouted to alternates we’re going to use here. This is so no one in Knight’s Creek can trace us while we don’t look completely off the grid either.

It still leaves me shaken how helpful Bethany and Ryan are. They never try to shelter or smother me, but they have my back every step of the way. I love it. If I’m honest, it feels like their level of protection is filling a void my father left behind, and I’m reveling in it.

“Hey, Eden, sorry. I was just messaging Archie,” Charlie murmurs, placing the phone down on the table with a guilty look on her face, and I can see that there is something on the tip of her tongue she wants to say.

“Spit it out, Charlie,” I prompt, raising an eyebrow at her as I open my laptop.

She runs her fingers through her brown hair. “Uh, they’re out. Ryan got them out,” she replies, and I swallow past the lump in my throat.

“That’s okay, we knew Ryan was going to help them when they reached out after I left. I’m glad he was able to do it so quickly,” I mutter, not making eye contact with either of them as I purposely distract myself by turning my laptop on. I don’t know how to process how I feel about them being free, and I definitely don’t want to figure it all out in front of the girls.

“Yeah, I know, I just thought you should be aware. Ryan needed someone present when he went to get them yesterday, so Archie went with him. He also mentioned they wanted your location, but Ryan refused to give it.”

My heart pounds in my chest. I don't know how I feel about them wanting to know where I am after I dropped what I can only assume was a huge surprise on them. But I blurted it out like that because they were acting like douchebags instead of saying it how I wanted to—calmer, softer. A part of me feels like they only want to know where I am now because of the baby, even if I could see right through them.

“That’s good,” I manage to respond, keeping my head down because I know my face will give me away. Is it ridiculous that I miss them? Even when they’re assholes, they seem to think they’re doing it for a good reason, and it may infuriate me, but fuck. I can admit I wish they were here.

“Archie said they’re in school today and they don’t look happy, but they have at least moved some of their things over to stay with Bethany and Ryan for a while,” she adds, her hands in her lap as she looks up through her lashes and meets my gaze, shocked by the fact they’re actually listening. At least they’re taking this shit with Ilana seriously.

Nibbling on my bottom lip, I don’t really know what to say. My emotions are fucked up at the minute, and I can feel my stomach churning with it all. I just don’t know how to handle it. A part of me wants to burst into tears, while the other part wants to lash out and scream with anger.

Turning to my left, I find Lou-Lou looking at me closely with a soft smile on her lips, and she squeezes my shoulder as she clears her throat.

“So, the ob-gyn is coming today?” she asks, changing the subject, and I sag in relief as I rub my hands together.

“Yeah, Bethany said they are sending someone they trust to the cabin, someone on Ryan’s payroll but not linked to

Knight's Creek at all," I answer, and they both nod in understanding.

"Are you nervous?" Charlie asks, and I scratch my cheek while I consider her loaded question as I look out over the lake.

"I guess I don't really know what to expect so early on. I think they're just coming out to give me all the do's and don'ts and what to anticipate going forward. So I'm not nervous about that, but I'm nervous about everything else," I answer honestly, and she reaches across the table to squeeze my hand.

Trying to compartmentalize the issues I'm facing is far more difficult than it was when I first showed up in Knight's Creek. Ilana and Reza are still out there searching for me, and now my life has changed forever because I have to come to terms with the baby and the whole process of being pregnant.

"Anyway, I should definitely get some schoolwork done. I need to continue learning before they realize I'm on the run because I *don't* need to be a high school dropout mom," I mutter. I'm already feeling irritated over the stigma that comes along with being an eighteen-year-old pregnant high school senior.

"Screw them," Lou-Lou grinds out, and I huff in agreement.

I have spent far too long trying to please other people by following all the rules, only to end up here, like this, and I refuse to fucking do it anymore. I feel like I've been tossed around, getting whiplash from all the different directions everyone is trying to pull me in, and I can't stand it.

I'm going to please myself and do whatever it takes for me and my baby to have the best future. That's my priority, my

*only* priority.

Well, after I fucking survive the wrath of Ilana Knight and what feels like the majority of the population that is Knight's Creek.

My phone vibrates on the table, and I look down at the screen to see Bethany's name flashing with an incoming text message. I click the button, and when her message lights up the screen, my heart pounds in my chest.

**Bethany: On a scale of one to ten, how much do you NOT want the boys to come to you?**

Fuck.



## HUNTER

The school bell rings, signaling the end of class and the start of lunch, and I drop down into my seat at our usual table, already fucking annoyed with the fact *I'm sitting here*. I glance in the direction where Eden would sit with Charlie, and it causes a pain in my chest not to see her there, and no matter how much I rub at it, the pain doesn't ease.

We played nice last night, listening to Bethany drone on about how we are all, and I quote, "*Pea-brained mothertruckers with no balls and giant man boobs.*" I don't know where she gets this shit from, but all that matters is we definitely wore her down by the end of the night with a mixture of our best behavior and truthful displays of sadness worked a number on her.

We are so fucking close to her caving and telling us where Eden is, I can taste it on my tongue, but she's definitely

making us work for it. I can't stand to play another fucking game of Monopoly while rewording my apologies repeatedly.

“Hey, Hunter,” Roxy purrs as she leans forward against our table, her black crop top hanging so low her tits are on the verge of falling out, but I refuse to acknowledge it and have her thrust them in my face or something.

“I've already told you to fuck off once today,” I grumble, swiping a hand down my face in annoyance, and she pouts. “If I have to say it again, you won't like the consequences, especially not after what you tried to do to Eden at the party,” I add, and her mouth moves as if she's about to defend herself, but thankfully Tobias interrupts her from beside me.

“How about you try to sell your body elsewhere, you gold-digging bitch, and get the fuck out of our faces.” Well then, I couldn't have put it any better myself if I tried. I'm definitely not the only one at my fucking limit.

I just want to eat my fucking food in peace, wallow in my own self-pity, then figure out how the fuck I can get Eden's location.

KitKat goes to take the chair beside Xavier, but before her ass touches the seat, he's shoving it out from under her, and we all watch as she falls flat on her ass in front of everyone. Laughter echoes around the cafeteria, but the three of us keep our mouths shut. It wasn't done to embarrass her or to make a scene, it's Xavier's way of telling her to fuck off.

“How fucking dare you do that to me?” she screams, jumping to her feet and straightening her mini skirt. God, do these girls not have any actual clothes? Everything they wear seems like it's missing half of the material.

“Take your skanky ass and get the fuck away from me before I do more than let you drop to the floor,” Xavier grinds out, no question in his words as he ignores the noises coming from the cafeteria. Everyone is trying to get their snippet of the drama unfolding.

With a huff, she turns on her heel and marches from the room with Roxy and a few other cheerleaders hot on her tail.

When everyone is out of ear shot, I lean back in my seat, wiping my hand over my mouth as I look down at the plate of food in front of me.

“I’m so fucking done for the day, guys,” I mutter, my fingers tingling with my blown nerves. It’s been like this all day.

“Message Bethany,” Tobias says, pushing his own plate of steak and potatoes away as I reach into my pocket and grab my phone.

**Me: So have we played by your rules long enough yet?**

I expect to have to wait a while for a response, but the little dots appear at the bottom of my screen almost instantly.

**Bethany: What do you mean?**

**Me: Don’t play coy, Bethany, we both know it doesn’t suit you.**

**Bethany: No really, I’m not a f-u-c-k-i-n-g mind reader. What the hell are you talking about?**

Oh, fuck this shit.

“What is she saying?” Xavier asks, bracing his forearms on the table as he leans forward.

I shake my head. “She’s playing dumb and it’s getting on my nerves so I’m going to call her.”

I hold my phone to my ear, and it rings through once before she answers. “What do you want, Hunter? I’m having an excellent time watching Bluey with Cody,” she says sarcastically, and I have to refrain from rolling my eyes.

“That’s cute, but I’m going out of my fucking mind here,” I grumble, and Tobias nudges my arm. “*We* are going out of our minds,” I correct, and silence fills the phone as she says nothing in response.

“I get it, I really do, but if you three want to live your best life, that means getting out of this town, and to get out of this town and never look back, you need to go to college, which means you have to graduate high school, Hunter,” she argues, and I run my fingers through my hair.

“Consequences be damned, Beth. I can’t fucking sit here pretending to have no concerns or feelings about all of this when it’s literally tearing me apart from the inside out,” I admit, the words heavy on my tongue as I refuse to look at the other two, my gaze zeroed in on my lap.

“Hunter, I—”

“No, Beth, you’re not getting it. We did what you asked. We came here, but I can’t, okay? I just can’t anymore. Hold on a second.” Rising from my seat, I head for the exit, not even sure if Tobias and Xavier are behind me, but I need to have the conversation with Bethany I should have had this morning.

Thankfully, she respects my pause. The second I’m through the double doors, I’m blindly walking toward Xavier’s Jaguar SUV, my mind completely focused on the words circling in my mind. As I near the passenger side door, the



lock clicks open, and I glance over my shoulder to see both Xavier and Tobias marching toward me.

With a nod, I climb into the passenger seat, sighing as I rest my elbow on my thigh and hold my head in my hand as I continue to press the phone to my ear.

I'm so consumed with it all. I just walked here blindly, paying no attention to what's actually going on around me, and that can be dangerous.

"Hunter, are you okay?" Beth questions gently, and I have to bite my tongue to halt my harsh response before my internal filter can stop it. I don't deal with my emotions at all, and it feels like my insides are going to explode.

"No, Beth. No, I'm not," I tell her as Xavier climbs into the driver's seat and Tobias sits behind me. Knowing we're in a private spot now, I can be more open about what's running through my mind. "I need you to understand, Beth, that Eden is carrying a child that one of us fathered. It doesn't matter who, we're a team. I can't sit back pretending everything's all good when the other part of me is someplace I don't know."

"Hunter—"

"No, Beth. No," I say louder, leaning back in my seat as I clench my hand on my lap. "How can I protect either of them when I'm not there? We had nothing but pain from our parents, Beth, but if anything, this feels worse."

"Hunter—"

"Stop interrupting me!" I yell, slamming my fist on the dashboard so hard that I worry the airbag is going to deploy.

"Well, if you would just fucking listen to me, I would tell you that she gave the all clear," she shouts back, and I pause.

“Wait, what?” I ask, dumbfounded as I look across to Xavier whose eyes are as wide as mine, and I feel Tobias pat me on the shoulder.

“I messaged her while you were going somewhere private.”

“And?” I whisper, my brain not connecting her words properly for fear of it being a joke or a lie. It feels like it takes an eternity for her to speak. My heart pounds in my chest as I pray for the right words to come out of her mouth.

“And she said if you’ve figured out how to pull your finger from your ass, she needs you.”

“We’re headed back to your house right now.”

TEN



## EDEN

---

**Bethany: It'll be a while until they get there. We're being extra cautious. Let me know how the ob-gyn goes.**

Taking a deep breath, I place my phone on the dining table, and then I grab my bottle of water to swallow down a St. John's Wort to ease the nerves building inside me.

I have no idea what to expect from the doctor, then when I add in the fact I've somehow convinced myself it's a good idea for the guys to come here, it makes my head spin.

I pull my hair from the permanent bun that lives on top of my head at the moment, letting the waves fall down my back, then I comb my fingers through it before quickly braiding it to the side. I don't think having my hair pulled so tight is helping with my headaches.

"What do you want to do this afternoon? I could make us some homemade pizzas with the stuff we have here, and we can watch some cable or a DVD from the cabinet upstairs if you'd like," Charlie offers as she falls back onto the sofa.

I smile. "Honestly? That sounds perfect," I reply, brushing my hands down my oversized band tee as Lou-Lou steps in through the front door, spying me over at the table.

“Hey, girly, the ob-gyn is pulling up now. Do you want us to come with you? Or would you prefer some privacy?” she asks, and I stall. I don’t want to admit that I wish the guys were already here with me. I don’t even know how they’re going to act when they arrive, so I push that thought to the back of my mind.

“I’d prefer to meet with them alone,” I answer truthfully. I need to stand on my own two feet like I have since my dad passed away and prove to them how hard I’m willing to fight for my child.

“No worries at all, that’s cool,” Lou-Lou assures me with a smile before stepping back outside to greet a small woman who’s walking toward the cabin. She has a large bag over her shoulder, and she must be five feet tall maximum, her blonde hair pulled back off her face into a professional bun at the back of her head.

My gaze is fixed on the woman as Lou-Lou greets her, seemingly giving her stamp of approval as she waves the doctor toward me. As she nears, the smile on her lips is one of genuine joy, like she’s spent so many years smiling that it naturally falls this way, and I can’t help but feel a jab of jealousy over it.

“Hi, you must be Eden,” she says as she steps into the lounge and offers her hand for me to take. I step forward, clasping it with mine. “I’m Melody.”

Her hand is soft, her hazel eyes are warm and gentle, and she’s the total opposite of who I expected Ryan to send, but I guess ob-gyns don’t come looking like hardcore businessmen.

“Nice to meet you, Melody,” I mumble, pulling my hand from hers as I instantly begin to wring my fingers together in

front of me nervously. I have no idea what to expect right now, or what she expects from me.

“The exam will probably be best in your room or somewhere comfortable where you can lie down. I just need to bring my supplies with me,” she informs me, pointing down at the large, bright orange case at her side. I nod toward the stairs, leading the way with her right behind me. Just as I turn at the top of the stairs, I look back to see both Charlie and Lou-Lou staring up at me, and I really fucking hope that isn’t sympathy in their eyes. I don’t need *anyone’s* pity.

Reaching the end of the hallway, I push the door open to reveal my room, but even though this is technically my space, with Melody here, I suddenly feel out of place and intrusive, not knowing where to stand.

As if sensing my discomfort, Melody clears her throat. “How about you take a seat on the bed, Eden, and I’ll get a few things set up while you get comfortable? Then I can talk you through what we’re going to do today and what the next steps are going forward,” she says. Her voice is like honey, instantly soothing me.

I perch on the end of my made bed as she takes a seat on the plush gray chair in the corner, opening her case in her lap. I sit in silence, watching her organize everything.

“Sorry about the wait. I’m ready to start if you are?” Melody confirms, smiling warmly at me, and I attempt to offer one in return, but my nerves are getting the better of me. If the situation was different, I would have googled what to expect before she arrived, but with a basic phone, and our emails running offline, I don’t actually have access to the internet in order to do any research.

“I’m good,” I manage to say, and she nods.

“Perfect. I’m going to ask you some questions and fill in your chart today. If there is anything you’re unsure of or don’t know the answer to, it’s absolutely fine. I’ll also check your weight and blood pressure. Then, when we get you into a hospital, we can do all the examinations and have a look at doing some ultrasounds to check the baby too.”

Her voice is sweet, but I’m already feeling a little overwhelmed and the list she just started rattling off has me trying to swallow past the lump in my throat.

*“Prenatal vitamins... Family history... Father...”*

She’s looking at me to respond, her hands placed casually in her lap as she offers me a soft smile, but I can’t manage any words, so I simply nod.

“Alright, let’s check your weight first and then your blood pressure. While I’m doing that, I can start asking you a few questions so I hopefully don’t sound like I’m bombarding you,” she continues with a smile, and I take a deep breath, amazed at how well she can read my emotions without me even saying a word.

She places a scale on the floor by the window, and I kick my Converse off. I don’t need them adding to my weight right now, even if it is the least of my worries. I stare blindly out of the floor-length window instead of down at the number until she tells me it’s okay to step off.

Filling in the booklet in her hand, she looks over at me and points me back to the bed. I take a seat and let her do her thing as she checks my blood pressure, the device pinching the top of my arm as I fight to hold back my wince. I’ve never liked the compression from the cuff.

“Excellent, let me just jot that down on the sheet as well, and then we can talk through everything else.”

“Fab, thank you,” I murmur, not really sure what else I’m supposed to say.

Taking a seat in the gray chair, she flips through the booklet she has and settles on a page before meeting my gaze.

“Do you want to go over the medical history questions with me first?” she asks, and I shrug. She flips the page, running her pen down the words until she finds the questions she’s looking for, not pushing for answers I don’t have.

“Is there any history of gestational diabetes in either yours or the father’s family history?”

I instantly feel the color drain from my face, and the desire to puke overwhelms me.

I just fucking gape at her, my mouth slightly open as I try to say any word at all. Any. Word.

I have no fucking clue about my family’s medical history. Fuck, up until a few weeks ago, I had no idea who my biological family actually was. And the father’s family? Take your fucking pick. It would help if I knew who the father actually fucking is. I mean, it’s an Allstars’ baby, but after that? I have no fucking clue.

I’m a whore, a fucking whore, just like Asheville High branded me.

I can confirm that all of their families are totally batshit fucking crazy. Is that hereditary?

I realize she’s still staring at me, waiting for an answer as my fingers tremble, and I finally shut my mouth.

*Say something, Eden. Fucking anything.*



“I’m a fucking whore, aren’t I?”

The words blurt from my mouth before I can stop them, and my hand clamps over my mouth as I try to get control of my outburst. Please let the ground open up and swallow me whole. I have nothing left to offer this world with a stupid mouth like this.

“Eden, I don’t think you’re a whore,” Melody murmurs, and I scoff, my eyes wide as I stare her down.

“Melody, can I be real with you?” I ask, and she’s nodding before I’ve even finished the sentence. I’m glad she’s agreeing, because my internal filter is not playing games right now. This poor woman is about to get my life story. “I recently found out that my mom and dad aren’t actually my parents. Well, my dad is my biological dad, but my mom isn’t my biological mom. It turns out my true biological mom is dead, and I have a twin brother, whose dad isn’t his dad because, duh, twins, we have the same parents. But my dad is dead too, so now we’re practically orphans. I barely know anything about my parents, so their medical history is a bit out of reach for me right now.” I know I’m fucking rambling, but the words just won’t stop.

“It’s okay, Eden. It’s just to get a good generalization of your medical background, we don’t—”

“And then the father. Fuck. Shit. Sorry. I don’t even know who that is. Well, I technically do, but which one of the three is going to be a little difficult to guess at this stage, but let’s be real. If it comes out frowning, it’s Xavier’s because he doesn’t know how to crack a fucking smile. If the baby comes out smiling, it’s obviously Tobias’s because he loves to smile. And if this baby is all broody with a penchant for the sound of a guitar, then you can go right along and tick Hunter’s box.”

This woman is going to sign me up for the psych ward. I can feel it. She gapes at me, just like I just did to her as I flail my hands around while I talk. At least I left her as speechless as she left me.

“It sounds like you have a lot going on in your life right now, Eden,” she finally says, crossing her legs as she leans back a little in her seat. “Would you like to continue to unload, or would you prefer for us to move along? Whatever suits you,” she adds, searching my gaze to figure out how I want to proceed, her tone genuine and kind as she meets my eyes.

“Please, move along,” I insist, dragging my hands down my face, and she nods.

“So, Eden, let’s have a quick walk through on your menstrual cycle. When was your last period?” I think I love this woman. She doesn’t pause, she just moves right along with the conversation like she actually said she would.

“Oh, uh, a little over six weeks ago, so mid-September,” I answer, remembering the way Hunter took care of me, making me freak the fuck out at the time, but that was just Hunter being... well, Hunter.

“Excellent, and are you on any form of contraception?”

“I have the implant, which is why this is all a huge surprise to me, if I’m honest,” I blurt out, looking at the slight scar on my left arm where it was inserted, and she hums in response.

“Ah, yes. Unfortunately, this can happen from time to time. No contraceptive is ever one hundred percent, but methods like the pill or the implant can be weakened by other medications,” she informs me, offering a sympathetic smile, but I continue to chew on my lip, unable to respond. “More

specifically with the implant, if you have taken any antibiotics, any medication for epilepsy, or even—”

Her words cut off as her face pales, her eyes fixed behind me, and I look over my shoulder to see what has her attention, but I have no clue. All I see are my cosmetics. It instantly sets off an uneasy feeling in my stomach, and I know she’s about to drop something on me that I’m just not ready to hear.

I finally build up the courage to ask, “What’s wrong?” and she turns back to me with what looks like tears building in her eyes.

“Eden, have you been taking St John’s Wort?” she questions, and I frown, nodding as I meet her gaze. She’s already shaking her head. “Eden, natural remedies like that, they... they can make the implant stop working.”

Her words ring in my ears as my mouth falls open, and I gape at her. I watch as her mouth continues to move, but not a single word registers in my brain.

The St. John’s Wort is the reason I’m pregnant. Well, the sex is the reason, but why my contraception didn’t work? Fucking St. John’s Wort? Does she know how many of them I’ve actually fucking taken?

My breathing stutters as I feel short of breath, and my vision blurs as someone strokes my arm. I feel like I’m about to pass out.

Hunter gave me those tablets, fucking Hunter. Did he know? Did he fucking know what he was going to do to me? Please God, tell me that isn’t true.

I’m glad they’re on their fucking way, because I’m going to fucking kill him.

ELEVEN



## XAVIER

---

“I swear to fucking God, do not make me regret this,” Ryan growls, his voice stern as he hands me the GPS location on a piece of paper to add to the Jag’s navigation system.

“We heard you the first time, Ryan,” Hunter grumbles, stepping out of the front door and tossing his duffel bag into the cargo area before turning back to us.

“Well, let’s make sure it fucking sticks in your brain then, shall we? If I catch wind of any shit, I don’t care who you are, I’m going to fucking gut you. If she breaks a nail or stubs a toe, it’s going to be your fucking fault,” he bites out, and I say nothing, simply raising my eyebrow as I look at Bethany who is nodding along in agreement, her arms folded across her chest.

“What he said,” she adds, and Tobias scoffs.

“Yeah, yeah. We heard you. Now can we please leave?” Tobias asks, swinging his arms at his sides, ready to climb in the Jag and get the fuck out of here. I’m right there with him.

“Fine, but honestly, you guys better stay up to date on your schoolwork too. We need to keep everything as normal as possible so we don’t throw up any red flags. I told the girls the same as well. We want to protect you, but we also don’t want

to harm your future,” Bethany warns, pulling Hunter in for a hug. She wraps her arms tightly around his neck, her eyes falling closed as she breathes him in.

I don’t know how he got so lucky to have someone who shares his blood love him so much. None of us know a lot about when she was younger, but she risked the earth for them both, and she’s definitely the reason we still have him in our lives.

“Alright, that’s enough of your mom voice, Betty,” Ryan teases, lightening the situation, and she rolls her eyes as she steps back from Hunter. “Do you all have the phones I gave you?” he asks, referring to the cheap, untraceable burner phones he gave us last night.

“Yes, and we left ours on the kitchen island,” Tobias responds with a sigh. “Please, can we go now?” he repeats, stepping up to Bethany to give her a quick hug before moving to the car.

Hunter follows him, and I awkwardly stand there for a moment as Bethany looks at me with hope in her eyes. When we were younger, it took a while for Tobias to join in on the little hug parade, but it has never been my thing. I can see her eyeing me now, and a strange part of me almost considers it, but instead, I offer a half-smile and nod my head.

“Thank you,” I murmur honestly, and she smiles at me, likely knowing I don’t like to say those words as much as I don’t like to hug her.

Hunter climbs into the passenger seat while Tobias relaxes in the back, leaving me to close the trunk as I round the SUV to the driver’s seat. Looking inside, you wouldn’t believe that we packed for the three of us to be gone for a while. It barely looks like we’re going away for a night. I probably have the

most with two duffel bags stuffed full of clothes and other personal items, but Tobias literally has a backpack.

Climbing into the driver's seat, I buckle myself in and look in the rearview mirror at Tobias. "Are you sure you packed all your shit?"

"I don't need my shit. Everything I need is already there waiting for me," Tobias replies, and I don't think he's ever spoken truer words.

Pulling out of the driveway, I watch as Ryan and Bethany disappear in the distance while Hunter plays around with the music, none of which registers in my mind since I'm so focused on the destination ahead. We've got a four-hour drive on our hands, and I'm wondering if we can make it in three.

"Has anyone considered what we're going to do when Ilana realizes we're not in Knight's Creek or at Bethany and Ryan's house?" Tobias asks, and I sigh because honestly, no, no I haven't.

"What else are we supposed to say or do? She's a threat to what's mine, *ours*, and our priority needs to be Eden," I respond, and neither of them argue with me. Do we need to deal with my mother? Yes, but right now just isn't the time. Although, I feel the choice that needs to be made is getting closer every day.

"What's that you've got there?" Hunter questions, looking over his shoulder at Tobias, and I peek a look in the rearview mirror as we merge onto the freeway, my foot hitting the gas pedal hard which distracts me from whatever he's doing.

"Oh, this is a baby book or a parenting book. I don't really know what to call it, but you bet your ass I'm going to show up there knowing more than I do now," he says, not lifting his

head from the book in his hands, and I want to pull the Jag over and make one of the other fuckers drive.

How can I learn about all of this shit while I'm driving?

"Wait, can we get something like that on Audible?" I ask, remembering seeing an advertisement for some book reading app, and I see the others shrug out of the corner of my eye. "Listen, I'm not being left out of all this baby knowledge shit. You either start reading out loud or Hunter finds an alternative. I'm already on her shit list, and I'm not letting you assholes get ahead of me with all this," I grouse, my knuckles turning white with the grip I have on the steering wheel.

"Or you could read the book and *I* could drive the Jag," Tobias retorts, and I practically growl.

"Over my dead fucking body," I snap, not after I let one of them drive when I jumped off the bridge after Eden. I still haven't recovered from it, even if I did get to sit beside her. It has to be extreme measures for me to hand over the wheel to my Jag, but more importantly, the control that comes with being the driver.

"Fine," Tobias grumbles, flipping through the pages as he tries to find the best place to start.

We drive like this for hours, literal hours, without a rest stop because fuck, we need to get to our girl. Now. I never want to hear Tobias's voice again, and some of the information in that book is gross as hell, but I'm desperate to know exactly how far along she is so we can compare the size of the baby to the graph in the book. A fucking graph.

"We're two minutes out," I mutter, interrupting Tobias talking about cravings, but the book is soon forgotten as we all have our eyes peeled, watching for a driveway to appear.



There is nothing along this road, it's simply lined with trees and shrubs, except for the huge house up ahead. The closer we get, the more it looks like a fortress. Slowing the car, I stop outside of the black wrought iron gates.

It's almost six in the evening, and I know they're trying to hide Eden, but even from here, it looks like no one is home. I can't see a single light on. The gravel path, lined with a freshly mowed lawn, leads up to a white two-story house with an upper floor balcony. I don't know what I was expecting, but this isn't it.

"How the fuck are we supposed to get through the gates?" I mutter, glancing around, but I don't see anything to help us get inside.

"I'll call Ryan," Hunter says, pulling his burner phone from his pocket as the creaking of metal pulls my attention back to the gates. We watch them open slowly.

"Perfect, they must have seen us pull up," Tobias pipes up, and I nod in agreement, slowly driving the car up the driveway and coming to a stop at the front door. I can't see any other cars here, but I know they didn't bring Eden's G-Wagon, because Ryan said they used it as a decoy. They must have somewhere to store the vehicles out of sight. Good call.

Looking at the door, I take a deep breath, not ready to step inside and face Eden's wrath just yet. I deserve it, that much is true. I know I'm going to have to grovel on my knees for all the shit I put her through, but the fact she agreed for us to come to her only fills me with positivity—even if I have pushed her away and played with her emotions so carelessly.

The sound of a car door slamming pulls me from my thoughts, and I glance to my right to see both Hunter and

Tobias already making their way to the door, bags in hand, so I rush to join them.

Hunter still has his phone to his ear as he knocks on the wooden door. “Hey, Ryan. Yeah, we’re here now,” he says, glancing over at me with a frown on his face as I move to stand beside them. The door unlocks, and the sound is so subtle I almost don’t hear it.

Tobias moves ahead, and Hunter and I follow behind him. He pushes the door open as he calls out Eden’s name, but something is off, the place is eerily quiet.

“Guys,” Hunter murmurs, making Tobias pause at the bottom of the grand open staircase in the foyer. “This fucking phone doesn’t have a speaker option, so you guys need to move in,” he adds, and I step closer at the same time Tobias does while Hunter turns up the volume.

“What’s going on?” I ask, feeling in my gut that we’re missing something, and then I hear Ryan clear his throat through the line.

“She’s not there,” he responds, and my heart starts to pound in my chest as my eyebrows furrow in confusion. What the fuck does that mean?

“You need to start explaining,” Tobias bites out, catching me by surprise with his harsh tone, but he’s saying what the rest of us are thinking. We just fucking drove for four hours. Is someone playing a joke at our expense?

“I need to be sure you aren’t being followed. Leave your Jag parked where it is so it’s clear from the main road and head inside. I’ll call again in an hour, unless someone shows up, then call me immediately.”

With that, the line goes dead, leaving us all staring at the device with far more questions than we had moments ago.

Where the fuck is Eden?

“Fuck,” Hunter breathes, a mix of anger and irritation in his voice as he pockets the phone, scrubbing the back of his neck.

“I think I hate that I love his level of protectiveness over Eden, but I *hate* that it’s at our expense,” I admit, running a hand through my hair while I look around the foyer as Hunter shuts the front door.

“Agreed,” Tobias says with a sigh. “What are we supposed to do for the next hour then?”

“I don’t fucking know,” Hunter grumbles, stepping farther into the house, likely in search of the kitchen, when I hear Tobias shout my name.

“Who the fuck is that?” he hollers, pointing out of the window beside the door.

I frown, squinting through the blinds at the car at the end of the driveway. “Get Ryan back on the fucking phone, Hunter,” I growl, but when I look to my right, he already has the phone to his ear.

“Yeah, someone’s fucking here, Ryan... Yeah... A black sedan... Yeah... Fuck...”

What in the actual fuck is going on?

The sedan is driving down the gravel road, my eyes tracking its every movement as Hunter hands me the phone and I lift it to my ear.

“Xavier?”

“Yeah.”

“How likely is it that the sedan is linked to Ilana?” Ryan asks, and I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment as I take a deep breath and focus on the car as it comes to a stop in front of the house.

“I’m going to say definitely. Although it’s usually an SUV, I wouldn’t put it past her to change it up to try to catch us off guard with different vehicles,” I tell him, watching as Hunter waves us farther into the house.

“Okay, I just told Hunter where you guys need to go, but I need you to be fucking quick,” Ryan orders, and I pick up my pace as I follow Hunter and Tobias down a hallway. A hurried glance over my shoulder shows two guys stepping from the car. They look up at the house and eye my Jag.

A part of me wants to fucking turn around and beat the shit out of them. How fucking dare they follow us, especially for my mother? Although I’m more pissed at the fact they obviously want us to lead them to Eden. Fuck. Thank fuck Ryan thinks of everything.

“This way,” Hunter shouts, taking a right at the end of the hall. He swings the door open so fast it slams against the wall before he rushes down some steps. Where the fuck are we going?

“What’s the plan, Ryan?” I ask, jogging down the stairs to keep up with them, but my answer comes from Hunter when he turns the light on.

Who the fuck is Ryan Carter, and does he secretly identify as Batman?

I pause at the bottom of the steps, watching as the lights flicker on, revealing a set of security cameras to the left, a

black Nissan GTR right in front of us, and what looks like a tunnel straight ahead. Everything else is literally concrete.

“Get in the fucking car,” Ryan orders as I catch sight of the security system showing the two guys stepping into the house through the front door.

“I don’t like running, Ryan,” I growl, my hand paused around the handle of the driver’s side door as Tobias climbs into the back of the car. Thankfully, Hunter stuffs our bags into the trunk. I was nearly leaving without my shit.

“I know you don’t, but this isn’t about any of us, Xavier. It’s about Eden and the baby. Now get in the motherfucking car and drive down the damn tunnel. It’ll place you about three-quarters of a mile away from the house. I’m texting you the location now. The quicker you put space between you and these fuckers, the quicker you can drop to your knees and grovel to your girl,” he shouts, the line going dead as Hunter calls my name.

“Let’s go, Xavier!” he hollers, half in the car as he looks at me with uncertain eyes. I take a deep breath, swing the door open, and drop into the seat without a word just as the text message comes through.

“Enter that into the navigation system, Hunter,” I order, handing him the phone as I find the fob for the car in the center console. I press the button to start the engine.

“Permission to punch Ryan square in the face if this is another stop on his fucking mouse trap,” I grumble, flooring the gas pedal as Hunter hums in agreement.

Lead us to the Garden of fucking Eden.

TWELVE



# HUNTER

---

The car creeps down a dusty road, the water shimmering to our right as the moonlight illuminates parts of the secluded area. We come to a stop outside of a cabin perched perfectly overlooking the lake.

None of us says anything as we stare up at the wooden exterior, our eyes burning with tiredness. Neither Xavier nor Tobias napped, even though they could have, and my eyes feel dry from watching the road nonstop. The detour house Ryan had sent us to was a four hour drive in the wrong direction. The. Wrong. Direction.

I fucking get it, I do, but fuck, I have no energy left. It's a little after two in the morning, and I know Eden is going to be fast asleep, so we won't be able to see her until she wakes up. That just irritates the hell out of me.

"Let me out of this fucking car, it's cramped as hell back here," Tobias grumbles, so I reluctantly climb out of the GTR and pull my seat forward so he can get out and stretch his legs. Admittedly, it really is a tiny space back there.

"It looks like Lou-Lou is still awake," Xavier mumbles, climbing from the car and pointing toward the cabin. I can make out her outline, the colors from the television

brightening the room, but I can't see anyone else with her. The slight touch of hope I feel over the thought of being able to see Eden is quickly diminished.

Tobias takes off toward the cabin, and I quickly follow behind, reminding myself to come back for our bags in a minute. Each of us just needs to be closer to Eden. I scan the outside of the cabin, observing the spotlights that are still on. It's perfectly rural around here. If anyone approaches, we should have a clear view, especially with the outdoor lighting that seems to go all the way around the porch and to the back as well.

I've seen the way Eden looks at the ocean on Freemont Beach, and I hope she's been able to find some form of peace at the lake too. I can't begin to imagine what she's going through, but I need her to know she isn't alone.

As Tobias climbs the few steps up to the porch, the front door swings open to reveal Charlie. Her arms are firmly crossed over her chest, and the glare on her face instantly tells us how happily our arrival is going to be received.

I really don't have time to deal with her shit right now, and the words are ready on my tongue when she drops her arms and sighs.

"Where is she?"

"Is she sleeping?"

"Is Eden—"

We pause, cursing under our breaths when we all talk at once, our words lost amongst each other. I swipe a hand down my face as Charlie just stares at us bleakly.

"No, she isn't sleeping. Something upset her when the ob-gyn was here yesterday," she says quietly, glancing at her



watch. “She hasn’t said a word since, and we’ve struggled to get her to eat. She—”

“Where is she?” Xavier growls, cutting off her little speech. I stand tall, ready to hurry to wherever she says. The thought of Eden being quiet and subdued doesn’t sit well with me.

“She’s around back, but—”

I don’t hear anything else she says as I move to the right, following the porch around to the other side of the cabin, the sounds of Tobias and Xavier right behind me spurs me on. I want to see her first, but the second I round the corner and spy our girl sitting on the end of the dock, her toes dipped in the lake which must be freezing cold at this time of night, I pause.

The wind tosses her blonde hair as she stares out over the water. She has a blanket around her shoulders, and with the way the porch light shines down on her, I can see the goosebumps on her bare legs from here.

It somehow also has the ability to make her look like a fucking angel, all pure and innocent. All ours.

It’s Xavier who takes the lead this time, moving slowly toward her, but his footsteps aren’t quiet against the wood as he walks along the small dock. She must hear us approach, but she doesn’t pull her gaze from the lake.

“Eden,” Tobias whispers loud enough for her to hear, but she doesn’t even blink. Xavier glances over his shoulder at me, but I don’t know what to say or do in this situation, especially since I don’t know the cause of the problem.

Brushing past the others, I come to a stop at her left side, wetting my dry lips as I search my brain for the best way to approach her. I decide to drop down beside her, but as soon as

my ass hits the wood, she turns to me with the darkest look in her eyes that I've ever seen.

She looks hurt, betrayed, and broken, and I have an inkling that this is all somehow going to be our fault.

I just stare at her open-mouthed as I watch her eyes gloss over. Tears are on the brink of pouring down her face, but she quickly turns away from me, looking to Tobias as he takes the spot on her right.

I instantly get the sense we're overwhelming her because she jumps to her feet, wrapping the blanket tighter around her shoulders as she turns and steps straight into Xavier. He manages to catch her before she trips and falls, leaving Tobias and me to watch them embrace.

I can feel the awkwardness from here, but I would do anything to feel her skin against mine right now. I understand we have some explaining to do, but I want to know what has her so upset first.

“Hey, before you get mad at us, I just want you to know that I've been reading a parenting book the whole way here, and I have some crazy random facts that I've learned,” Tobias rambles, jumping to his feet. His hands are clenched by his sides, and I can see he wants to touch her, but he's doing his best to respect her boundaries. “But maybe I could enlighten you with all that tomorrow,” he adds as Eden stares at him blankly.

She glances down at the dock as Xavier holds her shoulders, and when she looks back up, there is a fire burning in her eyes that wasn't there moments ago.

There she is.

There's my Eden.

Eden twists out of Xavier's hold, and his arms drop to his sides as she takes a step to her left so she can see all of us. I don't want to rush her, but I need to fucking understand what the hell is going on.

"Did you know?" she finally whispers, and the three of us continue to stare at her in confusion.

"Did we know what?" Tobias asks, his brows knitting together as we remain motionless. She casts her gaze over us, which only makes me uncomfortable. I don't know what Eden is searching for, and I can't stop nibbling on my bottom lip, but she lets out a little huff when she can't seem to find whatever *it* is.

Crossing her arms over her chest, the checkered flannel blanket pinned beneath her arms, she looks out over the water.

"It's funny. I was nervous about you guys coming here. I was worried I'd made a huge mistake by caving and not wanting to be alone in this whole mess, but I just couldn't deny myself. Then, the ob-gyn showed up, and I had no idea what to expect because I've had no access to the internet to find out what I'm supposed to do as a pregnant woman."

She looks down at her feet, and a wave of sadness flows off of her, but I force myself to remain still. Watching her shoulders sag and her arms tighten across herself, I don't want to admit it, but she almost looks... defeated. It's clear she needs her space right now, physically at least.

"So Melody, the ob-gyn, asked me about my family's medical history, and it sent me into a downward fucking spiral," she murmurs, lifting her gaze to Xavier's, who nods slightly in agreement, but I don't think she sees it. "I only just found out the clusterfuck that is my biological parents, and both of them are dead so I can't really ask them, now can I?"

“I’m sorry, Eden,” Xavier mutters barely audibly, and I’m shocked at his choice of words. Xavier Knight apologizes to no one, not even in sympathy. Yet here he is, doing it for Eden.

Any other time, I would ask him what he’s actually apologizing for. The possibility of getting Eden pregnant? His mother being the biggest cunt ever? Spilling the beans on her bio parents or for just being a huge dick?

“You might want to hold your shitty apology for now, I haven’t even fucking started yet,” she bites back, skimming her eyes over all of us before she clears her throat. “*Then*, she wanted to know about the father’s family medical history, and I’m sure you can imagine how *that* made me feel,” she says sarcastically, shaking her head. Tobias goes to step toward her, but she lifts her hand, stopping him, and he instantly steps back.

I have never felt more helpless in my whole entire life than I do right now. Not even when I was a child in that hellhole I called a home. How do we make this all better for her?

“That doesn’t matter, Eden. We’ll each give you the information you need just in case,” I offer. Well, whatever information we can provide because our parents are either dead or cunts. I mean, they’re all cunts, but mine are thankfully dead too.

“Do you not see how much of a whore I am because I *don’t* know who the father of my unborn child is?” she yells suddenly, her arms out wide as pain flashes in her eyes. The blanket drops to the dock, forgotten in her anger.

“Don’t ever fucking say that again,” I growl, my face heating with anger, unable to reel myself in, but I refuse to let her speak about herself like that.

“I will say—”

“No, you really fucking won’t,” Tobias chimes in. “You are not a whore. You will never *be* a whore, and like Hunter said, you will never call yourself that again,” he demands, his hands fisted at his sides, and I’m glad we’re both on the same page.

Casting my gaze in Xavier’s direction, I watch as he just stares at her helplessly, and for once, I don’t blame him for keeping his mouth shut. She’s already mad, he’ll only make it worse.

“But I feel broken, and it isn’t even because of that,” she exclaims, digging her fingernails into her scalp as she grips her hair, giving us her back for a moment as she turns away. If it’s not any of that making her react like this, then what the fuck is it? It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask, but when she turns in my direction, her eyes filled with venom, I pause. “Hunter, why don’t you share the reason why I’m standing here broken with the group?”

Wait... what?

The fuck did I do?

“What is she talking about, Hunter?” Xavier asks, his gaze laser focused on me, and I raise my hands in surrender.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Eden,” I respond calmly, keeping my eyes on her, but she scoffs at me like I’m being ridiculous.

“Did you know that certain medications or natural remedies can weaken the efficiency of contraceptives? Including the implant I have in my arm,” she states evenly, pointing at her arm as if we can see it through her skin, and I shake my head.

“No. No, I didn’t know that,” I answer honestly, confused about where she’s going with this. She glares at me hard, like she’s trying to see inside my mind. Her nose is wrinkled, and her eyebrows are lowered as she searches my eyes for the truth.

“Bullshit,” she calls out when I don’t seem to give her what she wants. I look helplessly at the other two, but they’re as powerless as I am right now.

“Eden, I didn’t—” My words cut off as I try to take a step toward her.

“You didn’t do what, Hunter? Fuck with my contraception on purpose? You sure fucking did, and I want to know if either of these motherfuckers knew what you were up to as well,” she grinds out, swinging her arms out wide as she turns in a slow circle, raking her eyes over each of us, anger and hurt etched into her pupils.

My heart pounds in my chest as I scramble to find the right words for her. Whatever she thinks I did, I really fucking didn’t.

“Eden, I—”

“Hunter, Melody found the St. John’s Wort sitting on my bedside table. The fucking tablets *you* gave to me,” she yells, stepping forward to jab me in the pec, and my chest squeezes. “The tablets that can stop the efficacy of the implant, Hunter. Look me in the eye and tell me you didn’t fucking know.”

“No. No, Eden. I didn’t fucking know,” I plead, panic racking my body as I step toward her. My finger barely touches her arm before she steps out of my grasp.

“Don’t lie, Hunter Asheville. Don’t you dare fucking lie to me,” she demands, her voice lacking the bite it had earlier as

she looks up at the night sky. I trail my eyes over every inch of her face, her lashes fanning over her cheeks as she takes a deep breath.

“I’m sure there’s a misunderstanding, Eden. Hunter wouldn’t—”

“Don’t fucking stand there and tell me you know what Hunter would and wouldn’t do. I’m fucking pregnant, and the reason why came straight from his fucking hand,” she cries out, tears tracking down her face, and I stand incapable of helping her. Desperate to rid Eden of her pain, but I know there are no words I can say that are going to make her listen to me right now. “I can’t even look at you,” she whispers, her gaze fixed on the wooden dock beneath us before she shoulders past Xavier and rushes toward the cabin.

It catches me by surprise to see Charlie and Lou-Lou huddled together at the door, protectively watching over Eden. They likely heard every word that’s been said, and the glares they throw my way tell me I’ve definitely been painted as the bad guy here.

The door slams shut behind the girls after they head inside, and I feel Xavier and Tobias eyeing me, waiting for a well-deserved explanation. With a deep breath, I sigh, scrubbing my hands down my face as I remember the night I gave them to her.

Did I know that those tablets would do this? No. But I’m one hundred percent sure the person who gave them to me knows about that little tidbit of information though, and that all makes sense.

“What the fuck, Hunter?” Tobias says, a glare firmly on his face with his hands in his pockets as he tries to understand

what the fuck happened here, but there's no time for that. Xavier needs to know, they both do.

“Xavier, I took those tablets with me to Eden's the night she was on her period, when everyone else was partying.”

“Right.”

“The night I ran home to get her some treats.”

“Get to the fucking point, Hunter,” Xavier growls.

My body shakes with realization, and it feels like my heart is bleeding. “Ilana gave me those fucking tablets, Xavier.”



THIRTEEN



# EDEN

My eyes feel like they're glued shut. A complete lack of sleep and pure exhaustion forced me to eventually pass out last night. I've clearly reached my limit for emotional baggage.

The thought of someone tampering with my life like this destroys me on another level. I don't think I've ever seen the Allstars look so helpless, but they can join the fucking club. I'm glad they get to feel like the rest of us always do.

I looked into Hunter's green eyes last night, and he appeared as bewildered as me, but my anger refused to see the ache in his gaze. If I had stuck around longer, I know he would have convinced me on the spot that he didn't know any more than I did, but I just wasn't ready to let go of my pain so easily. The Allstars' arrival kicked the numbness out of my system, and I was suddenly feeling something.

I can't imagine they've left, and I know Hunter may want to plead his case or offer some form of explanation, but I need five more minutes of sleep before I even contemplate getting up.

Prying my eyes open, I blink a few times as I see the natural light from the window filter in. I could have sworn I closed the drapes properly last night, but apparently I didn't.

Dragging my hand down my face, I sigh. Fuck, it's warm in here.

Stretching out my legs, I jolt when I realize they're trapped under the covers, and then I slowly register an arm banded around my waist holding me firmly against a chest.

Motherfucker.

How the hell did I sleep through someone climbing into bed with me? And how did I not recognize someone was here as soon as I opened my eyes? Dammit. Glancing down at the tan arm around me, I instantly know it's Xavier. He has the smallest mole at the top of his forearm, and it's right there, eager for me to run my finger over it.

Brushing my hair from my face, I take a deep breath, ready to turn around and give him a piece of my mind, but his hold tightens ever so slightly.

"Good morning, Nafas," he whispers sleepily against my ear, moving closer to spoon me as he acts all casual. It's almost like nothing happened yesterday and we aren't hiding out at some cabin at a lake I'd never even heard of until now.

"Is it really a good morning?" I toss back, forcing myself to remain calm and not get riled up as I relax into him. It's emotionally draining, and I'm just not ready to feel like shit as soon as I've opened my eyes. I need a break.

"I could make it better," he offers in response, and I have to hold back the eye roll begging to come out and play at his insinuation. This isn't my kind of foreplay, not today.

"I mean, you could start by explaining what the fuck you're doing in my bed," I retort, finding it much easier to remain calm and have a civilized conversation with my back to him like this. If I can't see his reactions and facial

expressions, I can just assume they're exactly what I want them to be—him feeling despair and heartbroken for being a cunt toward me. Not likely, not even a little bit.

His arm loosens as he strokes his fingers down my bare arm, and I shiver at the contact, squinting against the sunshine brightening my room.

“I have a few reasons, all of which are completely selfish. Are you sure you want to hear them?” he murmurs, and I nod, knowing whatever he's going to say will piss me off, so I may as well get it over and done with.

“Go on,” I prompt when his focus is on stroking my arm and not actually answering me. Although, if he does try to stop, I'll force his hand back, because it feels too fucking good, like tingles dancing down my spine. It's distracting. He probably got the fucking idea from Hunter.

“Reason number one: I am not fucking sleeping in the car. I'm also not sleeping on the damn sofa like the other two jackasses. Reason number two: I couldn't bear the thought of you being alone after yesterday. I've never liked the pain in your eyes, Nafas.”

“Why do you call me that?” I blurt out, interrupting him when I can tell he's about to hit me with a third reason, but I've asked him enough times to deserve a fucking answer by now.

His fingers pause on my arm, and I can feel him considering it. Finally deciding to tell me the meaning of what he's been calling me since the first night I met him in Knight's Creek and didn't even know his name.

“Please,” I add, pleading for just a fragment of information, and he sighs, his body tensing before he murmurs

the words.

“It means, my breath.”

Butterflies consume my stomach as my face heats. I can feel the foreign sensation of my fingers tingling with shock, and I almost can't breathe with the honesty in his answer.

“But you called me Nafas before you even knew my name,” I murmur, trying to turn and face him, but he quickly pins me against his chest so I can't.

“And you took my breath away the second I saw you standing on your balcony looking down at the ocean.”

I'm stunned, completely blown away. This is not what I expected at all. “What language is that?” I ask. My heart is pounding so hard I have to divert the subject slightly so I can try to catch my breath.

“My father, Reza, is like a quarter Indonesian. His grandmother was from Indonesia, and she used to call me Nafas all the time. I never really understood the need to call someone the nickname until I saw you.”

Who the fuck is this guy lying beside me right now? How has Xavier Knight, the asshole of all assholes, been calling me something so heart melting since the day I fucking met him? The arguments, the anger, the bullying. It all happened with Nafas on his tongue. All of it. What the fuck does that even mean?

“I can hear your brain overthinking, Eden. I told you I loved you. You didn't believe me, and that's okay. But the third reason I climbed on top of your bed to lay with you is because I just needed to be near you to sleep. It was completely selfish. You can tell me to leave or you can tell me how I can fucking fix everything I broke.”

Every word cracks my soul a little more like his confession is a sledgehammer breaking through the brick walls I continue to try to build around myself.

Xavier's hold on me relaxes enough for me to finally turn around and face him, which is more difficult than I expect since I'm under the covers and he's on top of them. His eyes aren't fully alert yet, but they're swirling with emotion. He's still wearing the navy polo shirt and jeans that he had on when they showed up early this morning. His hair is a mess, but he does look rested.

"I don't know how to fix something this messy. Like, what is there to fix? We are just a chaotic wreckage of what Knight's Creek has made us," I answer honestly as he lifts his hand to gently stroke my cheek. I press my face into his touch.

"I know, but we're going to make everything right. For us, for you. Whatever it takes." I search his eyes, only seeing the truth, and that scares the hell out of me, but there is something we still haven't discussed. The elephant in the room.

"What about the baby, Xavier?" I ask, bile rising in my throat in fear of his response, even though I know I will raise the baby with or without the three of them anyway.

"What about the baby, Eden?" he counters calmly, and I'm instantly desperate for him to call me Nafas again, wanting to hear the word on his lips.

"Well, the fact that there is one to begin with," I say, refusing to blink in case I miss his reaction, and when he frowns at me, my heart lurches in my chest, fearing the worst response.

Looking up at the ceiling, I try to take a deep breath, scared to see the expression on Xavier's face as my emotions

try to get the best of me, but I blink it all away.

“I feel like you’re waiting for me to say something, and I don’t know what’s the right thing to say,” he murmurs, lifting his hand from my face to rub the back of his neck nervously.

“I want you to be honest with me. I feel like I’m waiting for you to be mad because I told you all I was on the implant, and—”

“Nafas, I was there last night. I heard about the stupid fucking pills. That’s no one’s fault. Not yours, not mine, not even Hunter’s,” he states, and he covers my mouth when I go to interrupt him, my eyes widening, but the fact he called me Nafas has me feeling a little fucking soft toward him right now. “I don’t want to argue about Hunter with you. There are obviously things you don’t know, and things I feel like you need to speak to him about, but honestly, he’s broken over this, Eden. Fucking broken.”

I can feel my emotions rising inside of me again, completely torn and mixed together, making it a real bitch to decipher how I’m actually feeling. It’s too early in the fucking morning for all of this drama. I know if I push Xavier right now, he’ll tell me what I need to know, but he’s right, I want to hear it from Hunter. I guess I owe him that after he stood there and let me yell at him last night.

I nod in agreement, and he moves his hand from my mouth, but not before dragging his thumb across my bottom lip, sending a shiver down my spine.

“I want to kiss you so badly,” he whispers so quietly I barely hear him over the ringing in my ears.

He would usually just take from me, so to hear him voice it before just taking action, turns me to jelly. He doesn’t even

ask, he just fucking murmurs a truth at me, and that's what has me moving toward him. My lips touch his softly, and I think I catch him by surprise because it takes him a few seconds to respond. But when he does, he isn't the usual demanding Xavier I'm used to.

He delicately drags his lips against mine, and I feel like I'm on fire as he cups the nape of my neck and leisurely takes his time exploring my mouth. Gasping, I break the kiss, and he teases his tongue along the seam of my mouth before I drag my nails along his scalp and pull him closer, needing more.

Our tongues slowly stroke against each other, and a moan slips from my lips as I get lost in him. Fuck. I don't even know how to describe the connection I feel with him. This is a completely new side that I've never seen before, and I want more of him.

Xavier leans back, separating our lips, and I grumble at the loss, which only makes him grin.

“Eden, I love you, I love your lips, but we have some heavy shit going on right now. I need us to work through whatever could be an issue now so I can get straight to the loving part. I want to establish what and who we are together without any more hurt from within our little bubble of four, alright?”

I stare at him, speechless, as I sweep my tongue over my lips to see if I can still taste him. He's right. This motherfucker is actually right, and I hate to admit it. I also hate that he said those three magic words again and I just can't seem to respond to them. I don't know what's holding me back, but I'm never going to be able to assess my feelings when he's this close.

“Who the fuck are you? There is an imposter in Xavier Knight's body, and I think I want to keep him,” I say, looking



up at him as he shifts onto his elbow and looks down at me.

“This is who I want to be, Nafas, without the air in Knight’s Creek intoxicating me. I want to be this person. I want to feel love, happiness, and joy. I want to take pictures of you that don’t have you fucking leaving me. I want to be so passionate about life that I’m completely unbearable in the best way possible, and I want all of that with you, the baby, and Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee,” he admits, his smile growing with each word, and I can’t stop my own lips from curving too.

“It sounds like you have a lot of expectations of me,” I tease with a grin, and he shrugs.

“Ohio State has always been my dream, but I would much rather follow you wherever you go, even if that’s a random cabin in the middle of fucking nowhere. We aren’t meant to live our lives in fear, and I know I said to run, but we won’t run forever. This baby may not be biologically mine, but it doesn’t matter, because it will be my brother’s, and we are here whether you like it or not.”

“I can already feel you telling me to talk with Hunter. On second thought, I’m not sure if I like this version of you,” I grumble, rolling my eyes at him as I lean up on my elbow. I shake my head, my stomach queasy, and I try to smile. “But that’ll have to wait because I’m going to be fucking sick.”

FOURTEEN



# EDEN

---

If this motherfucker tries to feed me any more food, I'm going to knock him the fuck out.

When we came downstairs, we found the cabin empty, but the sound of Charlie and Lou-Lou laughing outside had me glancing out of the window to find them sitting around the picnic table with a sullen Tobias and Hunter.

"Eden, why don't you just have a little more fruit or a cookie or something?" Xavier says, gently pushing the plate closer to me, and I glare at the side of his head.

"Xavier Knight, stop trying to fucking feed me. I said I'm full, so I'm full," I grumble, pushing the plate into the center of the table before folding my arms over my chest.

He sighs. "But is the baby full?"

Oh my God. Planting my hands on the table, I stand, watching him watch me as he leans back in his chair far too casually.

"I don't know, why don't you just fucking ask it?" My voice continues to rise, so I force myself to take a deep breath. I'm thankful everyone else is outside, although they may still hear me from there.

Just as I'm about to step away from the table, Xavier places his hand on my stomach and I freeze in place, my eyes widening in shock at his delicate touch. His fingers splay out across my tummy, and my gaze is transfixed on every inch of his hand.

"Good morning, peanut. Are you still hungry?" he murmurs, his voice somehow sweeter than usual as he looks lovingly at my stomach.

How is that so fucking cute and so asshole-ish all at the same time?

His gaze lifts to mine, and there's heat in his eyes. I shake my head. He knows what he's doing to me. He slowly strokes his fingers over my tank top as he continues to hold my gaze, turning me to putty in his hands.

"They can't hear you," I mutter, locked in place, not wanting to ruin the moment, and he grins.

"Tobias' parenting book told us it's never too early to get the baby used to our voices. I'm just letting the baby know who the awesome one is first," he states with a shrug, slowly dropping his hand from my body and squeezing the top of my thigh as he rises to his feet. leaving me to simply stand and gape at him.

Smug fucker.

I don't think I'm ready for the information these fuckers have read in a baby book. I should have been doing that, but now they likely know more than me, which actually fills me with excitement. Eventually I'm going to have to bite the bullet and ask them to let me read it as well.

"Whatever you say," I whisper in response, not knowing what else to say because his touch has me willing to agree to

just about anything right now.

Cupping my chin, he sweeps his thumb over my cheek as he looks into my eyes. “Are you ready to find the guys and have a talk?” he asks, and I sigh, maintaining eye contact with him.

Am I ready? No. But do I know I need to do it? Yes. Keeping all of this emotional turmoil swirling inside of me isn’t doing me any good. A part of me hopes that hearing Hunter explain the whole natural remedies situation will help me piece my broken soul back together, then I’m all ears.

I nod in response, not finding the words, and he kisses my forehead gently, making my eyes fall closed as chills run through my body at his gentleness. Goosebumps rise all over my skin as I shiver under his touch.

I really have no idea who this guy is, but Xavier Knight is a big fucking softy underneath, and I can’t deny how much I like this side of him. My mind can’t even process how good he’s making me feel right now.

I’m sure everyone outside must have been able to hear us in here, but thankfully, they’ve given me the space I needed and time with Xavier I didn’t know was so necessary. It doesn’t go unnoticed that it’s Xavier I’m leaning on right now. After everything that has happened since I arrived in Knight’s Creek, he has probably been the fucking worst, but at the same time, my soul completely calms when I’m near him. I’m finally willing to admit that.

“Let’s go then, Nafas,” he murmurs, placing his hand on the bottom of my spine as he nudges me toward the door. There he goes with that fucking nickname again. So. Hot.

Fortunately, he moves us to the front door instead of the rear, giving me a second to step around the porch and gather myself before we join the others. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my strung out nerves.

It's warm again today, so I'm wearing a pair of ripped denim shorts and a loose white tank top with a pair of sandals. Xavier is still wearing the same clothes from yesterday, as he hasn't left my side since we woke up. Clearly, finding his bag is not a priority for him right now.

I let him shut the door behind us so we can follow the wraparound to the back of the cabin, the sun beating down on us as my gaze falls to Hunter and Tobias.

They look like they haven't slept a wink, but Hunter appears much worse. He looks hollow, like what I said last night destroyed him. Even from here, I can see the strain in both of their gazes. I knew he was shocked by my claims when I yelled at them under the night sky, but seeing him in this state now, I know I need to hear him out.

"Morning," Charlie says cheerily, and I offer a half-smile as I glance at her, feeling awkward as fuck with everyone's attention on us as Xavier continues to move us toward the group.

"You guys okay?" Lou-Lou asks as she pulls her blonde hair up into a ponytail, and I nod, coming to a stop beside the bench.

Neither of the guys say a word as they stare at us with a mixture of emotions washing over their faces, but the sight of Xavier's hand on my back has their eyes sparkling with hope. Do I want to feel hopeful too?

“I’m okay,” I finally answer, quickly glancing at the girls sitting side by side before I turn back to Hunter and nibble nervously on my lip. “I’m sorry you guys all had to come outside,” I add, feeling bad that yet again people are going out of their way to help me while I wallow in my own damn pity.

“It’s all good, girl. We’re enjoying the weather anyway,” Charlie replies, tilting her face up to the sun just to prove a point, but it calms my discomfort.

“We can give you four a few minutes if you need it,” Lou-Lou hedges, and I meet her eyes, reading the *I’m here if you need me* look all over her face. She always knows how to help me. One day, if she ever needs me to be there for her like this, I’ll drop everything to be by her side just like she’s done for me. She’s exceeded every expectation I’ve ever had of her, proving me wrong time and time again.

“Please,” I respond, appreciating the girls as they stand without question, both giving me side hugs before they move to the back porch.

“Will you be okay with these assholes if we pop into Bishop and buy more groceries since we have extra guests?” Lou-Lou asks, side-eyeing the guys, and I nod as Xavier encourages me to take a seat with a wave of his hand.

“Thank you,” I call loud enough for them to hear before dropping into the newly vacated seat.

I can feel all three of them staring at me, but I keep my face turned toward the lake as I try to figure out how the hell I should approach this situation. What do I even say? Where do I start?

The sound of the minivan starting up pulls me from my thoughts. I blink a few times as I lace my fingers together in

front of me, leaning on the table as I turn to face them.

Hunter sits directly in front of me with Tobias to the left, opposite Xavier. The longer the silence stretches out between us, the harder it becomes to start a conversation. But like always, Tobias is there, ready and willing to ease the situation.

“Hey, Eden, did you know a mother’s heart grows, beating faster and stronger to support both herself and the baby?” he states, wearing a smile on his lips as he eagerly nods at his own words, and I release the breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

“No, I didn’t know that,” I answer honestly, crossing my legs under the table as I sit taller. My eyes fall to Hunter who sits slumped across from me, his gaze pleading with me to hear him out. “Just like I didn’t know about natural remedy tablets,” I add, instantly feeling like a bitch as he drops his chin to his chest, concealing his eyes from me, and I have to reel myself in.

“Hear him out, Eden,” Xavier says from beside me, rubbing his hand down my spine, and I take a deep breath, keeping my eyes on Hunter as he looks up at me through his lashes. Sadness is etched into every part of his green irises. When I don’t speak, raising my eyebrow expectantly, he swipes a hand down his face, seeming to struggle over his words too.

It feels like my heart is going to pound out of my chest from watching the storm continue to swirl in his eyes, nervous over what Hunter’s explanation will be.

“Eden, I swear to you, I didn’t do this on purpose,” Hunter begins, his voice rough and thick with pent-up emotion. Watching his eyes fill with unshed tears, I feel my own eyes do the same in response. My soul feels his pain as he speaks.



“Then I need you to explain to me how this all happened, because I feel like something so specific as St. John’s Wort was given to me for a reason,” I respond honestly, feeling Xavier and Tobias watching Hunter and me, but neither of us break eye contact.

“They were,” he mutters, and my heart stops as I feel the color drain from my face. “Just not by me,” he adds, and I scrub at my face, not understanding his words.

“If it wasn’t you, then who?” I press, hoping that will lead me to the answers I need and deserve, and I watch as his gaze flicks to Xavier’s before returning to mine, then he takes a deep breath.

“The night I brought them to you was the night I ran home to put together a blood bag for you. I mentioned that someone said they were helpful, and I took the tablets from their hands without a second thought, desperate to get back to you and be what you needed,” he admits, tapping his fingers on the table. I nod for him to finish, unable to find my own tongue as his eyes laser in on mine. “Eden, Ilana gave them to me.”

No.

No way.

No. Fucking. Way.

My heart roars wildly in my ears, the sound blocking out everything else as I stare at him in shock. The pain and distress etched into his facial features tell me he’s speaking the truth. From his pinched eyebrows to the vein protruding from his forehead, he looks as broken and devastated as I feel.

Before I can fully process what I’m doing, I’m up on my feet and walking around the table to his side. He sits back, facing me with his eyes closed almost like he expects me to

physically attack him and he's just going to take it. I watch as a single tear slowly weaves its way down his cheek, and it breaks me a little more.

Lifting my leg, I straddle him, taking him by complete surprise as I wrap my arms tightly around his neck and pull him close. It takes him a moment, but he gently wraps his arms around my waist, and we sit there for what feels like forever holding each other.

I feel every inch of his body pressed against mine as I let his words slowly settle over me. I have no clue what the other two are doing, but my attention is solely on Hunter and the need to ease his pain along with my own. I got so mad at him yesterday, channeling all my anger his way, and sadly, he was just the middleman.

I can already tell by the look in his eyes that he's never going to forgive himself, and I need him to see that I'm okay after hearing his truth. He could have slipped me rat poison or something, that would have been much worse, but that fucking bitch is going to get what's coming to her.

"I'm so sorry, Eden," he whispers against my neck, and I tighten my hold on him.

"There's nothing for you to be sorry about, Hunter. This wasn't your fault. If she hadn't given them to you, she would have found another way. We all know it," I murmur, my hatred for Ilana growing with every word, and I didn't think that would ever be possible. I feel Tobias's and Xavier's eyes on us, but I don't turn to see if they agree.

"I know but—"

"No, Hunter," I interrupt, leaning back to meet his gaze as I cup his jaw. "This isn't on you, none of it is. She did this.

Ilana wanted to fuck with me before I even fucking stepped foot in Knight's Creek," I state, every word true. "But I just don't understand what she stands to gain from doing this," I add, at a complete loss for the motive behind it.

Looking over my shoulder, I find Xavier already watching me, his hair messy like he's been running his fingers through it while I've been talking to Hunter.

"I have no idea, Eden. We didn't realize any of this until you said it last night, and then we pieced it all together," Xavier murmurs, reaching out to lightly touch my arm as Hunter holds me firmly in place, but I struggle to relax.

I want all of the answers, and I want them now, but I know that isn't possible.

"So the reality of the situation is I'm pregnant because Ilana deemed it so," I mutter, glancing around at the three of them. They all duck their heads, feeling the shame when it isn't ours to bear.

"Well, technically, the peen in the vajeen made the sperm inseminate the egg," Tobias rambles, trying to lighten the situation, but when he sees my raised eyebrow, he waves a hand in front of his face. "But ignore me, that's all semantics," he quickly adds, and a slight giggle passes my lips by surprise.

"I'm sorry you're dealing with all of this, Eden," Hunter murmurs, dragging his lips across my shoulder, and I relax more into his hold. It almost reminds me of the time he pulled me from the ocean, yet it feels completely different. I was truly broken then, and I'm not now.

"Me too, bubble," Tobias inserts, adjusting his beanie, and I have no idea how to respond. "Can we talk about the peanut in your tummy now?" he asks, and my eyes widen in surprise

at his directness. The fact that he sounds sweet about the baby calms me enough to nod in agreement.

“I don’t really know where to begin,” I admit, brushing my hair behind my ear as Tobias smiles at me softly.

“You don’t need to begin anywhere. I just feel like we need to make sure we’re all on the same page first,” he replies, placing his hand out, palm up, on the table as he looks at me, begging for me to meet him halfway.

I easily slip my hand into his, my body thrumming with the touch of his calloused fingers stroking my knuckles as he continues to look into my eyes, likely seeing my soul.

“Have you decided if you’re keeping the baby?” he asks quietly, my chest tightening as I stare at him in shock, and he instantly panics over the expression on my face. “I’m only asking so everything is out in the open. This is your body, Eden, and more importantly, it’s your choice. We want to do whatever is best for *you*.”

I calm at his choice of words and soft tone, but my mind goes crazy. Looking around at Xavier and Hunter as well, I find them nodding in agreement. That is the first time someone has specifically said it’s *my* body, and admittedly, I appreciate that they’ve made it clear they’re not going to overrule me every step of the way. The fact that they’re still sitting here with me fills me with so much emotion I don’t know how to handle it. My hormones are definitely getting the better of me.

There is hope here for me, for us. They never would have shown up and treated me like this if they didn’t mean it. Besides, there are only so many times Xavier is going to say those three magic words to me before they start automatically sinking in.

Taking a deep breath, I relax my shoulders. “It doesn’t matter how or who fucked with me to make my contraception stop working, they’re going to pay for it, but I’m going to do everything in my power to have this baby and raise them in a safe and loving environment, no matter what. I’m going to be more than what is expected of me,” I say the words with pride, and each of the guys smile at me as I speak the truth. I refuse to be another statistic.

“We’re going to be here every step of the way, Eden. I already told you, it doesn’t matter who the father is, we’re a family anyway. We will also be more than what our parents think of us, we’re not going to follow in their footsteps. Well, except your dad, it seems like he was a safe place for you. We want that for our baby,” Xavier murmurs as he stands before walking around to our side. He takes a seat on the table behind me so he can touch me.

I nod in agreement, absorbing their touch as they each offer me some form of comfort, but I know I need to offer the same in return.

“I don’t want to hold anyone back, I—”

“Stop talking shit,” Hunter growls, surprising me as he squeezes my hip lightly. “It’s not a case of whether we want to be here or not, the important question is, whether you want us here.”

Before I can respond, Xavier cuts in. “I told you upstairs, Nafas, we’ll figure this out together, as one. No going back. No second-guessing anything. Just the four of us with a plus one on the way.”

“Be ours, Eden. Properly this time, as equals, as a team, as partners,” Tobias adds, and I try to gulp past the dryness building in my throat.

“You can’t keep pushing me away. I hate your choice of protection techniques. They fucking suck,” I grumble, turning to give the three of them my death glare, and they all nod.

“We won’t,” Hunter agrees, cupping my jaw, and when I look at him, I can see the pain leaving his eyes. He knows I don’t blame him anymore.

“Then I want to make this work too,” I tell them, my heart pounding in my chest, and when I glance at Tobias, his wicked grin makes me pause.

“I’m going to make you so fucking happy for saying that, bubble,” he murmurs, sending a shiver down my spine.

“Is that so?”

“Uh-huh. I read that it’s common for a woman’s sex drive to increase when pregnant, especially in the first trimester,” he states with a cocky tone, and I just blink at him.

That explains a lot. I mean, my sex drive is high anyway, that’s never been an issue, but I have been completely obsessed with chasing the O for the past few weeks, and it’s getting to a compulsive level.

My face must give me away, because Tobias’s grin widens and he trails his fingers over my wrist as Xavier grazes his lips against my shoulder, leaving Hunter to squeeze my ass.

Fuck.

Am I really going to just give into their touches after they tried to push me away again?

Yes. Yes, I fucking am.

“Take me inside and make me happy then,” I order, my voice huskier than I remember, and it’s Hunter who chuckles this time, pulling my attention to him.

“I think we’re perfect exactly where we are, love.”

Holy shit.

FIFTEEN





# TOBIAS

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I watch as Eden's blue eyes widen with desire, and my dick pulses beneath my shorts as the lust in her eyes hits me hard. I can see she's at war with herself, wanting to make it a challenge for us to take her inside while also wanting to give us exactly what we want all in the same instance.

What did we do to fucking deserve this girl? I'm going to make sure we never, and I mean *never* let her down again. She deserves better than that. She deserves the best of us, and we're going to give it to her.

"You think I'm going to let you fuck me on a picnic table?" she asks, gazing down at Hunter as she wets her lips, and I don't think she realizes she's doing it. This fucking woman.

"If I traced my fingers around your pussy right now, would you be wet with the idea?" Xavier whispers in her ear loud enough for all of us to hear, and she shivers as she stammers over an answer.

"Cat got your tongue, bubble?" I tease, lifting her hand to my lips and kissing her pulse point.

"You're being assholes," she grumbles, arching her back against Xavier, and Hunter scoffs.

“Why are you grinding against my dick then, Eden?”

The glare she sends his way only confirms his question, and it makes me grin when she turns that same look around on Xavier and me too.

“All of this talking is going to have the girls back from the store quicker than we would like, bubble. Do you want to carry on talking, or would you prefer we use our tongues for more important things?” I question, watching her gulp hard as she nods.

“I feel like you guys are talking a lot more than me. We’ve already established I’m grinding against Hunter’s cock. I need to feel you. I need you to bring me to orgasm, like, yesterday,” she sasses, cupping my face with one hand as the other tangles in Hunter’s hair.

Xavier’s restraint snaps first as he trails kisses down her neck, tilting her head to the side as he laps at her pulse.

“You’re wearing far too many clothes, love,” Hunter mutters, searching for the button on her denim shorts, and she moves to sit directly between Xavier’s legs, tilting her hips willingly for Hunter to discard them.

Not wanting to miss out on the action and the ability to finally touch our girl, I inch forward. My fingers find her waist as I slowly drag them up her body, taking her tank top with me, only to reveal a white lace bra. Fuck. Hot.

Her moan is muffled, and when I glance up to meet her gaze, I find her lips crushed against Xavier’s, but he raises her arms for me to remove her top, and the second their lips part, I dive in, tasting my bubble on my tongue.

I will never get enough of this, of her. No one was ever meant to be ours like she is. None of this was meant to happen.

No girls, no drama, nothing that would hinder our plan to get the fuck out of Knight's Creek. I spent so long thinking she would make things harder for us and mess up our plans, but in reality, Eden's presence has only made me want to fight harder, and now that a baby is a part of all this, I will do everything in my power to protect both of them.

I tease her mouth with my tongue, and she opens willingly, a hiss passing her lips as Hunter removes her shorts. I cup her chin, holding her in place as Xavier teases her nipples through the lace.

"More, please," Eden begs against my lips, and it excites me because we've barely fucking started. We're going to have her so satisfied she's going to fall into a sex-induced sleep while the three of us count all of our blessings that we're here with her.

Leaning back, I look down at Eden in just her matching bra and panties. Xavier has practically pulled her into his lap, and he has her legs spread over his thighs as she leans her head against his shoulder, her back flush against his chest. I stare in awe at her eyes, already hooded with desire.

Heaven.

Bracing one leg on the bench seat, I move toward her chest. Xavier cups her tits, encouraging me to move closer, and I graze my teeth against her tight nipples through the lace, reveling in the gasp that falls from her mouth.

Looking up at her, I watch as Xavier turns her head and captures her mouth as she tilts her hips, a moan passing her lips. I glance to my left just as Hunter moves the scrap of material covering her pussy to the side and teases her entrance. Goosebumps erupt along her skin. So fucking responsive.

Dragging my finger across her collarbone, I swipe down, taking the lace fabric with me. I love how her perky tits bounce as I reveal them, her nipples somehow tighter with the slight breeze blowing around us.

“You guys are fucking teasing me,” she mumbles against Xavier’s lips, and I suck her nipple into my mouth, flicking it with my tongue as I pinch the other one, and her complaints instantly turn to whimpers.

She wraps her fingers around my arm, her nails pinching my skin as she holds me close, and I have to use my free hand to squeeze my cock. Otherwise, I’m going to come before we’re even finished with foreplay.

“Fuck, Hunter, please do that again,” Eden cries out, and I can’t stop myself from releasing her nipple to see what has her so eager, but in an instant, her fingers are in my hair, underneath my hat, pinning me against her chest, and that only arouses me more.

Grazing my teeth against her nipple between teasing flicks of my tongue, I focus solely on the pleasure I’m giving her, listening to her gasps and moans getting louder as Xavier swallows them. When her fingers grip my hair at the back of my head in a firm hold, I know she’s reaching her peak, and I force myself not to get overexcited.

Her body locks up tight, and I hear Hunter grunt in approval. As her hold on me relaxes, I lean back to look at the scene before me.

The flushed pink covering her chest and neck hits me straight in the dick, her body limp between Hunter and Xavier as she tries to catch her breath. I can’t stop myself from running my finger down the side of her face and swiping the loose tendrils of hair behind her ear.

“I swear to God, somebody better get inside of me right now,” she demands with her eyes half open, and before anyone can say a word, Hunter is pulling his cock from his shorts and dragging Eden toward him.

Moving willingly, she braces her legs on either side of him, placing her hands on his shoulders as he guides her down his thick length. Eden’s mouth falls open as she takes him in, inch by inch, and I’m completely transfixed by her body as she adjusts to the stretch.

Xavier pulls the hair tie from Eden’s hair, letting her blonde locks cascade down her back as he strokes his fingers through it.

“I need all of you,” she pleads, and I pause. I don’t recall the fucking parenting book saying anything about group sex, and I don’t want to hurt her.

“Eden, is that—”

“Don’t fucking deny me, Tobias. You either fill me up all at once like you did last time or you fucking train me, I don’t give a shit, but I need to feel close to all of you, and I need it to happen sooner rather than later,” she bites out, her eyes ablaze with need, and I look helplessly at the other two.

“Eden—”

“I said don’t fucking deny me,” she growls, glaring down at Hunter who tried to reason with her. Xavier holds his hands up in surrender.

“Fuck, Nafas. We’ll do a train, but if you need to stop, you have to tell us, okay? I’m not overwhelming your body with us all at once,” Xavier cautions, giving into her, which was always a given because it’s hard to say no to her these days.

I drag my hands down my beanie. “I’m going to go grab a cushion,” I holler, rushing for the door quickly as her moans continue to fill the air.

I don’t want to step away, but I don’t want her doing all of the work either. If I get to be inside her, I’m going to treat her like a queen, and I can’t do that if she has to feel the harsh wood of the picnic table beneath her.

Charging into the cabin, I search wildly for a cushion, quickly grabbing one off the sofa. I hear Eden cry out from here, which has me moving even faster than I already was.

Blindly running outside like a damn idiot with a large cushion in my hand, I watch as she slowly rises up from Hunter’s lap, staring at them both as their chests heave with each breath they take. Her hands are already searching for Xavier, who pulls her back against his chest, giving her a second to catch her breath.

As I slowly walk toward them, Hunter pulls her panties down her legs while Xavier murmurs in her ear. She nods before she lowers herself onto her knees on the opposite side of the bench. With her back arched and forearms braced on the table, her nipples grazing the wood, she looks fucking breathtaking.

I’m so focused on her, I don’t realize Xavier is lining himself up behind her until a cry flies from her lips and her body jerks forward.

“Be fucking careful with her, X,” Hunter growls, his hands fisted on the table as he watches them like his dick wasn’t literally just snug inside her pussy.

“Shut the fuck up, Hunter. Fuck me hard, Xavier. Now,” Eden commands, pushing up so her stomach is away from the

table. Her eyes roll back in her head as Xavier cups her tits and sinks inside of her again and again. He's definitely holding himself back a little, but she's certainly not complaining.

Feeling the distance between us, I join them and place the cushion on the table as sweat trickles down my spine. Fuck. Pulling my t-shirt over my head, I toss it to the ground, not caring where it falls as her eyes find mine.

“Keep your eyes fixed on Tobias while I fuck you, Nafas. Let him see exactly what I do to you,” Xavier says, and when her lips part, my body tingles with need.

I smile softly, trying to act cool even though my body is literally fucking burning for her, and the sparkle in her eyes does something to my soul. I have never felt like I belonged anywhere with anyone or for anything, except for my boys. But with her, my bubble, our Eden, I know I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

“Oh, fuck. Fuck, yes,” Eden chants as she orgasms around Xavier's cock, his own ripples of ecstasy crashing through his body as they slow their pace, coming down from their high together.

As much as my body is begging for her, I don't want to push her too far. I've read the book, and she confirmed her sex drive is high, but the book didn't mention being in a relationship with three guys. All of whom are casually fucking a pregnant woman on a picnic bench out by the lake. As hot as it fucking is, respecting her is my number one priority.

“Tobias, if you don't get your ass over here and let me touch you, I'm going to scream,” Eden growls, her eyes on mine as Xavier steps into the lake, using the clear water to wash himself. Hunter sits across from her, watching every move Eden makes.

Not one to disappoint, especially when her eyes still sparkle for more, I hold my hand out for her, and she takes it willingly. I maneuver her so her pretty ass sits on the table.

“I want you to scream, Eden,” I murmur as I drop my shorts and climb up on top of the table, and she naturally lies back on the cushion behind her.

I wet my lips at the sight of her, and I groan when I see cum trickle down her thigh.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

That should not be this hot, it really fucking shouldn't, but seeing her with her legs spread pleading for all three of us, I don't hesitate as I nudge farther between her thighs.

“I like it when you make me scream,” she murmurs in response, a grin on her lips as her fingers wrap around my cock, guiding me to her entrance. The feel of her wet folds pulls a moan from my lips before I even feel her tighten around my dick.

“I like it when you don't hate me so much that you let me be this close to you,” I respond, our breaths mingling together between us as I forget the other two are nearby, my focus all on Eden.

“Well, I like it when you don't... fuck.” She gasps as I slowly pull out and thrust back in, hitting her so deep my balls slap against her soft skin. “So good. I like it when you don't *make* me mad at you,” she rasps, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip, and I grin down at her.

Neither of us speak as sweat drips between us, the sun beating down on our bodies as she lets me close to her again. Tilting my head, I take her nipple into my mouth as I continue



my pace, my thumb finding her clit as her back arches up off the table.

“You are so fucking hot, love,” Hunter murmurs from my left, making us both look his way, and when we do, he’s pulling on his cock as he watches us. Of course he is. Apparently he loves it when I make our girl come.

Glancing at Eden, I don’t pause my thrusts, and the grin on her lips tells me she’s remembering the same thing I am, and that’s all I need to open my mouth.

“Are you sure it’s Eden you’re hot for? Because it seems every time I’m getting her off, you’re watching and jerking off.”

I pinch Eden’s clit, and she curses as I grin. Hunter stares at us in confusion.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Hunter grumbles, but I’m too busy feeling Eden’s pussy tighten around my cock. I lean forward again to graze my teeth against her taut nipple, and like magic, she groans long and low as pleasure ripples through her body. The feel of her pussy squeezing my cock has me tumbling over the cliff with her too. Eden’s nails dig into my back, enhancing my pleasure with pain.

Pulling my lips to hers, she languidly molds her lips to mine, my emotions heightened as I look down at her. I can hear Hunter mumbling about what the fuck I meant, but I’m still lost in Eden’s eyes. Without a shadow of a doubt, I know one thing.

I love this girl.

With every breath I take, I know it’s true.

SIXTEEN



## EDEN

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The air feels stagnant. The breeze you would usually expect near the open water is nonexistent in comparison to the ocean. We've done our schoolwork for the day and emailed the completed files back to Ryan, who then organizes and returns them to school as if they've come from our email addresses, just without them being able to trace us—he's helping us keep up the ruse that we're still in Knight's Creek. Now, we're lying around the lake.

Tobias found some sun loungers in the storage shed at the side of the cabin, so we've decided to put on our swimsuits and absorb some vitamin D.

After falling into the Allstars' arms yesterday, the cabin has been calm and relaxing, all of us enjoying the quiet before we have to revisit literally *everything* happening around us. I'm quite happy to stick my head in the sand for a while longer, but at some point, our little bubble of bliss will burst.

Rolling over, I get comfortable on the sun lounger as the sun beats down on us.

Lou-Lou packed extra swimsuits, so I'm wearing a black two-piece since I didn't consider bringing anything like this for myself. I can't stop looking at my stomach, wondering if

it's suddenly going to pop out like a huge neon sign, showing I'm definitely pregnant, but Bethany said I won't show for a while. I am happy about that, though, because as much as I have been cool with everyone here knowing, this is my limit. Everyone here, with the addition of Bethany, Ryan, and Archie, are my bubble of protection.

No one outside of them needs to know, it's likely safer that they don't, for me at least.

Especially not Ilana, since she's the one fucking doing this. My brain still can't comprehend what she wanted to achieve by messing with my birth control. To push a wedge between Xavier and me and the guys as well? To hurt me in the worst way possible? I don't know, but I'm not really wanting to find out either, because no matter what, the whole situation is still twisted and cruel.

The music from the country music station playing on the radio rings out around us, but I'm not familiar with anything they've played so far. It beats sitting here in silence though, which is what we would be doing otherwise, since all of our phones have been replaced with burner phones that are older than hell and don't give us the ability to listen to our playlists.

I can feel eyes on me, and the hair on the back of my neck stands on end. It's like I have spidey senses when the Allstars are near. Peering through my lashes, I lift my arm to block the sun from my eyes, and I find Tobias grinning at me, his parenting book in hand. He looks hot as fuck wearing his beanie and a pair of orange board shorts, his abs bare for me to see.

I already know he's going to have another fun pregnancy fact for me, and I'm already at my limit with him and his random facts. I'm now completely aware that babies cry in the

womb, women over five feet, five inches tall are more likely to carry twins—which fills me with a lot of concerns since I am five-seven myself—and later down the line, nipple stimulation will help bring labor on.

Excellent. Perfect. Not at all what I wanted to hear.

“Just say it, Tobias,” I mutter with a sigh, even though I secretly love seeing him so excited. It makes me feel like we can fucking do this.

“Not another one,” Hunter grumbles with a groan from my right side, and I hear Xavier scoff too. Lou-Lou and Charlie are sitting at the picnic bench, laughing every time Tobias drops a random fact.

“Quit moaning, Hunter,” Tobias singsongs, twisting to lie on his front as he searches for the words in the book again. “Did you know babies can be born with teeth?”

Ew. What?

“Please tell me you’re joking,” I mumble, my thighs clenching in fear at his words, but he nods eagerly.

“Nope, it’s one-hundred-percent true,” he replies, flipping through the pages for more details, and I swipe a hand down my face. I don’t think I can deal with that. Like, at all. “It’s also pretty common for women to poop during labor. Imagine, bubble,” he says with a laugh, and my skin pales as I go queasy with the thought.

“Toby, shut the fuck up now,” Hunter growls, reaching out to lace our fingers together, and I turn to him with a smile, appreciating the fact he can see I’m struggling. He offers me a playful wink.

Every touch, every taste, every murmur between us all feels very different all of a sudden. It all seems like *more*, and

I'm trying to be as cautious as possible, but it's very difficult when they're being so attentive. I feel like my heart and expectations are on the line.

"Can someone please talk about something else so he can't keep coming up with this shit?" Xavier adds, throwing his rolled up t-shirt at Tobias, who whines but puts the book down on the small patch of grass at his feet.

"We can talk about the fact that the Allstars lost their game last night to the Raiders," Charlie says quietly, holding her phone in her hand, and I wince, knowing the reason they lost is because their star players are here with me. I can only assume Archie messaged her.

"I'm so sorry," I mutter to no one in particular, and Hunter's fingers tighten around mine.

"Don't apologize, bubble, you didn't force us to come here, we chose to," Tobias soothes, reaching over to stroke his hand across my stomach, and I shiver under the contact. My body is ready to combust at any minute from the slightest sensual touch.

"I get that, but I also know how important this is to all of you," I respond honestly, sitting up. I instantly miss the loss of Tobias's touch as his hand slips off me, but Hunter still holds my hand.

I don't know how to take them seriously right now when they're sitting around me looking this damn hot. None of them are wearing shirts, so their abs and pecs are on display like works of art. Xavier is rocking a pair of navy swim shorts, while Hunter wears black, both a stark contrast to Tobias's board shorts.

“It’s only really important to me, Eden, but it’s nothing in the grand scheme of things when it comes down to you or the game,” Xavier tells me, sitting up on his lounge on the other side of Hunter and leaning his elbows on his thighs. “Football is my passion, it always has been, but a lot of that has always been because it’s my ticket out of Knight’s Creek and away from my mother. I wanted nothing more than to leave for Ohio State and never look back, but if I have to sacrifice that to be with you, then so be it,” he states so matter-of-factly, I can’t stop my jaw from hitting the ground as he looks me straight in the eye.

“I would *never* want you to do that, like ever, Xavier,” I insist, my brows knitting together as I look him over. I know what it feels like to have the course of your life ripped apart uncontrollably by someone. I’m never going to do that to Xavier, Hunter, or Tobias.

“I’m not saying you would, what I’m saying is I’m aware of the difficult decisions that will need to be made, and I want you to know exactly where I stand.”

“Me too,” Hunter adds, squeezing my fingers.

“Me three,” Tobias chimes in, nodding eagerly, and I have to refrain from rolling my eyes at him.

“Then I feel like we need to have a serious conversation about the future,” I murmur, looking at the three of them, nerves zapping around inside of me at the thought.

Hunter nods in agreement. “I know what you’re saying, love, but that’s a little difficult when everything is so uncertain right now. With so many possibilities and secrets surrounding us, it’s hard for us to know what we can and can’t commit to going forward.” His thumb strokes back and forth along my

knuckles as he tries to soothe me, but I still can't let the subject rest.

"In an ideal world, what would the next step in your future look like?" I question, nibbling on my bottom lip. Both of the girls look away, hearing the seriousness of my tone and offering me what little privacy they can.

"With you and the baby."

My heart pounds wildly in my chest when all three Allstars say the exact same words at the exact same time. They make it sound like it's as simple as that. All fucking Tarzan claiming their Jane and creating a baby in an instant.

It takes a moment for me to find my tongue, and I have to take a deep breath, feeling my face redden with embarrassment at their words.

"I mean other than that," I squeak out, my voice far higher than usual, and I don't miss the giggles coming from the table, but I can't look at them right now.

"Well, we would have you and the baby at Ohio State where we would all work toward being the best people we can be, for ourselves, for each other, and for the baby," Hunter answers, and I think I'm going to choke on how sappy this is all fucking making me.

"What he said," Tobias adds, pointing in Hunter's direction. Xavier nods along too, and I shake my head at their casual attitudes.

"Okay," I murmur, not really sure what else to say to something like that.

Xavier raises his eyebrow at me. "Okay, as in we can work toward that goal, or okay, as in I'm going to live my life as far away from Ohio State as humanly possible?" Xavier asks, his



words calm even though I can see his eyes swirling with conflict.

I clear my throat. “As in, I would be willing to look into what living near Ohio State would be like,” I mutter, my heart pounding in my ears as my nerves get the better of me until I see Xavier smile from ear to ear. It’s the most real smile I have ever seen on his face, and I hate to be honest, but I continue on. “But Hunter is right, there is far too much going on right now for us to have any sense of stability for the future. Your mother isn’t going anywhere anytime soon, and I’m never going to have a safe and free future if she is constantly hiding in the shadows waiting to attack.”

“We’ll figure it out, I promise,” Xavier assures me as Tobias comes to sit beside me, stroking my thigh as Hunter brings his lips to my hand, kissing my knuckles. I feel delirious right now, completely consumed by them, and I know something is going to come crashing down around us eventually.

Standing, I straighten my bikini bottom as I look out over the water. My mind is a jumble of thoughts with the mention of the *future* lingering in the air.

“What the actual fuck?” Charlie bursts out, rising from her seat as she glances down at her cheap phone with a frown, and before I can ask what’s going on, Lou-Lou beats me to it.

“What’s up?”

Charlie’s gaze fixes on Xavier as she announces, “Archie just messaged to say Ilana has officially been sworn in as mayor of Knight’s Creek. Somehow, she’s figured out a way to bypass the law which means Ilana has not been elected by the voting public. She’s on the news right now.”

Xavier doesn't seem surprised by her words, nor do Tobias and Hunter, but they all stand and rush inside the cabin to see for themselves while I stand in shock, watching them.

My heart races in my chest. The thought of Ilana having more power over the town, over me, sits like a rock in the pit of my stomach. I don't know whether my headache and nausea have suddenly come on from the pregnancy or from the latest news... *Ilana is the mayor of Knight's Creek.*

Putting one foot in front of the other, I head toward the cabin where Tobias waits by the door with a soft smile on his face as he reaches for my hand.

As I step inside, Tobias tightens his grip on my hand as he remains at my side, guiding me to take a seat on the sofa, but my eyes are glued to the television. Ilana fills the screen with her fake smile and designer heels. Her hair hangs perfectly around her face, and her pants suit sits just right with her silk blouse buttoned all the way up to her neck. Anyone else would think she's an angel, but we know the truth.

Motherfucking cocksucker.

Xavier stands closest to the television, his jaw tight and his hands clenched as he stares at his mother. Hunter is planted firmly to his right. Lou-Lou and Charlie stand by the dining table with a mixture of nervousness and concern on their faces, watching everything unfold. We all give Xavier the space he so clearly needs.

It takes me a second to figure out where Ilana is on the screen. She's standing front and center in the driveway of Xavier's house, her hands poised in front of her. I recognize the front door, and the view of the ocean to her left is ingrained in my memory.

*“I’m here as a person of Knight’s Creek, born and raised, ready to make the changes this town needs for us to continue to rise. Derek Montgomery did what he could as the previous mayor, but I am ready for us to evolve. Our focus must be on our children, as they are our future. With that in mind, I want to call upon the people of this town to help me find my beloved son, Xavier Knight, and his dear friends Hunter Asheville and Tobias Holmes.”*

Brushing a stray tendril off her face, she remains the epitome of a concerned mother, and it irritates the fuck out of me as she tries to contort her face to make herself look sad, but all the Botox makes that difficult.

*“They are vital members of our community, legacies of the founding families, and pillars of our future. They haven’t been seen since they were released from Holmes Correctional, and our priority is to make sure they are safe. If anyone is aware of their location, please contact local law enforcement. We are also keeping our eyes open for Miss Eden Grady and Miss Charlie James. Children, if you are seeing this, please come home. Knight’s Creek is a safe place for you, and we want to make sure you are taken care of.”*

She waves at the screen, and the evil glimmer in her eyes is barely visible before she disappears as the news channel goes back to the reporters in the studio, cutting the live feed. My throat is dry as Xavier turns to look at me, his hazel eyes bleak and full of determination all at once. Everything we just spoke about suddenly feels even more up in the air than moments ago.

“That is the closest she has ever come to airing our private matters so publicly. She really isn’t fucking around,” he states,

lacing his fingers together and bracing them on top of his head as he stands stock-still.

It looks like Ilana Knight just decided to step it up a level and do the unexpected by making a public plea. One day we're going to be one step ahead of her instead of the other way around.

SEVENTEEN



## EDEN

---

The town of Bishop is way cuter than I expected. The shops, bars, and restaurants look a lot more vintage than I'm used to. It's all quirky store fronts and no big chain stores, a complete contrast to Knight's Creek.

The only issue with small, quaint towns is that everyone literally knows everyone, so much so that the way the people keep looking at me tells me they know we're from out of town. I can't shake the tingles running up the back of my neck as I turn down the next aisle with Lou-Lou and Hunter, our shopping cart filling with snacks and treats as we go. I'm kind of naïvely hoping one of the two are figuring out actual meals because I haven't been.

"Ice cream, we need all of the ice cream," Lou-Lou shouts, forcing us to stop in front of the freezer filled with Ben & Jerry's as she folds her hands across her chest, scanning the variety before us.

The store isn't massive, with maybe ten aisles holding the essentials, and it feels quite modern inside compared to the rest of the town, possessing high quality surveillance systems that Hunter pointed out.

“I will never truly understand girls and their need for ice cream,” Hunter says with a sigh, but when I glance at him, he’s grinning at me knowingly. It seems Hunter likes to rile me up, especially when he knows what kind of response he’s going to get from me.

“That’s because you don’t understand the important things in life, my friend,” Lou-Lou remarks without even looking over her shoulder. I grin, but the heated gleam in Hunter’s eyes as he stares at me and my stomach has my mouth turning instantly dry. He’s wearing a backward baseball hat today too, with his gray shorts and plain white tee, and it has me even hotter for him.

I don’t know who these fucking guys are anymore. I’ve seen them cold, calculating, and fierce, but having them dote on me feels like an out of body experience. With one glance from him like this, I’m eager to jump him like a spider monkey. I want to say it’s all my hormones, but I know it fucking isn’t. What I feel for them has been building all along, even against my better judgment.

Lou-Lou clears her throat, pulling me from my intense stare off with Hunter, and the way she raises her eyebrow as she gives me a pointed look almost has my cheeks heating. I need to get a grip on myself. My clit begging for attention, even when we’re in a public place and people are present, is getting a little out of control.

Hunter chuckles, throwing his arm around my shoulders at the same time he leans into the freezer with his other hand. The cold blast does nothing to calm my body as he pulls out a tub of chocolate fudge brownie ice cream. My man fucking knows.

We walk casually behind Lou-Lou, letting her lead the way and fill the cart. She keeps checking to ensure I haven't randomly decided I have a craving, but even when I say no, she throws extra chocolate and sweets in the shopping cart just in case. She added fourteen bags of Swedish Fish Tails without even looking in my direction, remembering my love for them, and it makes me smile.

As we approach the checkout, the young blonde girl stares us down, her button nose scrunching as her lip pulls into a sneer as we start to unload everything, and it instantly gets my defenses up. I just wanted to get out of the cabin for a little bit, I hate feeling cooped up, but I would rather not be dealing with unnecessary animosity while I'm at it.

What doesn't sit right with me is the fact that this just feels like a vacation and not like we're running for our lives. I mean, we don't have any of our usual gadgets and technology, we're not on high alert, and we're not quivering in fear like we do in Knight's Creek.

Instead, we're lying around the lake, watching movies in the evening, and popping into the local town for snacks. A part of me feels like we're letting our guard down too quickly and too easily, but the others are adamant we're okay. Completely safe, and well protected.

I hope so.

The man in line before us grabs his bags and leaves the store, and as we step up to the register, the girl eyes Hunter slowly, taking her sweet ass time looking him over from head to toe as he loads everything onto the conveyor belt.

I grind my jaw, flexing my fingers as I watch her do it, even with his arm coming down around me, but I somehow manage to keep my mouth shut. Her gaze meets mine, and the



heat fizzing beneath the surface quickly diminishes as she glares at me.

Swiping the hair back off of her face, she arches her back to seem taller while making her cleavage more noticeable, and I want to smack the bitch. Hunter's arm tightens around me, but I don't relax or pull my gaze from hers.

"You guys are new around here," she comments, slowly starting to scan our items, and Lou-Lou thankfully manages to respond politely as she side-eyes me. Apparently, my jealousy is quite noticeable. Who knew?

"Yeah. We're just staying with family for a few days in the next town over, but we were passing through and decided to grab a few things," she says casually, nodding for Hunter to help her pack the items while the cashier continues to eye us. Searching her uniform, I find a little black and white name badge almost covered by the open collar of her shirt—Kimmy.

"Where are you from?" Kimmy asks, and I freeze, my back stiffening at her interrogation.

"White River," Lou-Lou answers, not lifting her eyes from the groceries, and I have to force myself to take a deep breath.

I don't like the vibes this girl is giving off, and I don't mean the way she's openly eye-fucking one of my guys either. I can't put my finger on it, but I shake my head. I'm being paranoid, I know it. Fuck. *Get a grip, Eden.*

Leaving the Knight's Creek twisted life behind me is obviously more difficult than I thought.

"What's your name, handsome?" Kimmy says, looking at Hunter, and I'm at my limit with this damn girl. I take a step forward, but Hunter sighs and shakes his head, which halts my approach.

“I’m going to be a dad. Want to see pictures?” he replies, smiling wide at her, and I almost choke on my own fucking spit. Coughing and spluttering at the way he just fucking said that so excitedly. Lou-Lou rushes to my side, patting my back and handing me a bottle of water out of nowhere.

I don’t fully hear her response, my own reaction overwhelming me, but Kimmy quickly goes back to sorting the groceries as Hunter gives me a knowing look. Motherfucker. He doesn’t even bother to make sure I’m okay, too pleased with his lady repellant line apparently.

It takes me forever to get my breathing under control, along with drinking the whole bottle of water, and when I can finally breathe without coughing again, everything has been bagged up and paid for.

Lou-Lou pushes the cart as Hunter links his fingers through mine, leading me toward the exit with his grin still firmly in place, and we almost make it outside before we hear Kimmy calling, “Hey, wait. Excuse me!”

We all turn to face her, and she’s waving her arm around like we could actually see her doing that when we were looking in the opposite direction.

“Do you play football? You look familiar,” she asks, her gaze on Hunter, and my heart all but stops in my chest as I feel my palms sweat with nervousness.

“Oh, honey, he gets that all the time. It’s the height. But really, Mr. Butterfingers over here can’t even run in a straight line, never mind catch a ball,” Lou-Lou responds quickly with a chuckle, and I have to force myself to laugh along, although I’m pretty sure I sound like a strangled cat.

Not waiting to see if the answer pacifies Kimmy, Hunter tightens his grip on my fingers and pulls me straight toward the minivan without a backward glance.

“What the fuck was that?” I mutter, admittedly panicked, but Hunter doesn’t respond until he’s placed me in the passenger seat, helped Lou-Lou unload the cart, and climbed into the driver’s seat before putting the minivan in drive.

“I don’t know, probably nothing, but I don’t want us to wait around to find out,” he answers, and I nod, not feeling all that confident myself either. But the touch of his hand against mine settles some of my anxiety as he focuses on the road ahead.

“I’m texting Ryan,” Lou-Lou murmurs, phone in hand, and I frown.

“Why?”

“Why not? Anything at all, big or small, needs to be on his radar. We don’t need any surprises, Eden,” she murmurs, her focus on the phone as I look at her over my shoulder.

That makes total sense.

“Have we put ourselves in danger?” I ask, remembering Ilana’s televised plea for the boys’ safe return, and Hunter clears his throat.

“We’ve got it covered, Eden. Don’t worry,” he mutters, turning the radio up and hitting the gas harder as we head out of town. I don’t retain any details of Bishop as we drive through, worry clouding my mind.

Hunter’s touch grounds me as he squeezes my thigh, and I place my hand on top of his as we travel back to the cabin.

Every time silence descends around me when I'm with one of the guys, I expect to feel awkward in some way, needing a background noise to fill the void, but I just feel so comfortable around them all now, I probably feel calmer than when they're all talking.

The minivan slows as we approach the cabin, pulling me from my daze, and I swipe a hand down my face, trying to rid myself of the worry that has been building inside of me since Kimmy opened her mouth.

Hunter is out of the minivan in a flash, taking huge steps around the front of the vehicle to get to my side before I can even unclip my seatbelt. He swings the door open and offers me his hand with a soft smile on his lips.

"Please be a dick for a minute just so I can make sure there really isn't an alien living inside of your mind and controlling your body," I murmur, placing my hand in his and letting him pull me from my seat.

He rolls his eyes. "Or how about you continue explaining what you and Toby were talking about the other day?" he mutters, and my mind instantly recalls having the three of them around me, making me feel like a fucking queen. Tobias may have goaded him a little, but now I'm the one left to do the explaining. I should have known this was going to happen.

Batting my eyelashes, I clear my throat. "I have no idea what you're—"

"Eden Grady, don't you lie," he fake scolds, raising his eyebrow at me as he pulls me in close. Looking up at him like this, I find myself melting under his touch, wanting to give him everything he asks for. "Tell me or I'm letting you go for a swim," he threatens, and it makes me giggle.

“Fine,” I grumble, placing my hands on his pecs as I wet my lips, trying to find the right damn words for this. “So a few weeks ago, Tobias, uh, had me spread out on the patio set, helping me chase an O while you were in the music room, and I may have watched you jerk off when Tobias pointed out that the glass isn’t tinted from the outside.”

My heart pounds wildly in my chest as I watch an array of shock and annoyance cross over his face as my words register.

“What?” His brows are knitted together as he palms my hips, his green eyes searching mine as he tries to understand.

“The glass in the music room is tinted so the light doesn’t go in, but it’s not tinted on the outside looking in, so everything is completely visible,” I murmur, staring at his chest as I speak, too nervous to see his reaction.

“Fuck,” he whispers under his breath. “And Tobias knew about this?” he confirms, and I clear my throat, nodding in response. The second I feel him release his hold on me, I know this isn’t going to end well.

“Shit. Hunter!” I call out, trying to grab his t-shirt, but he’s too far out of reach, storming toward the cabin before the words even leave my mouth.

I glance around, not seeing anyone else out front with us, not even Lou-Lou, and it’s almost embarrassing how I get so wrapped up in the guys I don’t have any awareness of what’s going on around me.

Chasing after him as he climbs the few steps up the porch onto the wraparound, I hear laughter coming from the back. Hunter must hear it too, because he follows the noise. I struggle to keep up with his long, powerful strides.

“Hunter,” I shout again, but he completely ignores me and he doesn’t slow his pace. Trying to keep up with him, I round the back of the cabin to find Charlie on the phone, Lou-Lou sitting across from her on the picnic bench—leaving the groceries abandoned in the car—and Tobias and Xavier chatting quietly on the dock.

Nobody looks our way, even though it sounds like Hunter’s feet are pounding on the wood beneath us as he makes a beeline for the guys near the water.

Fuck.

“Tobias,” I holler, nervous for whatever Hunter is about to do, but since I can’t actually see his face, I can’t gauge how mad he is, but either way, Tobias needs a little forewarning.

His head whips around, searching for me at the sound of my voice, and I point at Hunter quickly storming across the dock. Tobias twists to face Hunter, frowning as he starts to raise his hands in surrender, but Hunter is like a bull in a china shop.

As we rush past the girls, they look at me in confusion, but my focus is on Hunter and Tobias. Xavier stares at Hunter, also with a frown on his face, as Hunter comes to a stop right in front of a shirtless Tobias, literally toe to toe, glaring down at him.

“What’s up—”

Tobias’s words are cut off by the shove Hunter gives him, his arms flailing at his sides before he lands in the water with a splash.

I hear Charlie and Lou-Lou giggle behind me as I come to a stop beside Hunter, staring down at Tobias with my mouth wide open, watching for him to reappear from the clear water.

He's all dramatic when he breaks through the surface, his black hat dripping wet as he pulls it from his head. Tobias glares up at Hunter, clearly expecting answers as he splashes water in his direction with a pout on his lips.

"What the fuck, man?" he grumbles, and Hunter scoffs.

"How about 'what the fuck' to you, asshole? Since when have you been able to see into the music room from the outside?" Hunter complains, placing his hands on his hips. Tobias's eyes almost bug out of his head as he flicks his gaze to mine, and I wince, lifting my hands in apology before he looks back at Hunter.

"Uh, it's not my fault you never leave the lights on in the music room when you aren't in it, otherwise you would know the whole room is illuminated. Besides, it made Eden come so hard around my fingers, man. You would have done the same," Tobias responds, his grin firmly in place as Xavier laughs, making Hunter suddenly step toward him and shove him off the fucking dock as well.

"Hunter," I gasp, watching as Xavier hits the water too, his entire body submerging before he rises, his clothes sticking to him as he gives Hunter a death glare.

"They're assholes, Eden," Hunter states blandly, glancing over his shoulder at me. He stands on the edge of the dock looking down at them like he's the fucking king of the castle.

I roll my eyes at him. "Yeah, and so are you," I remark, pushing against the firm muscles in his back and sending him toward the water to join them. At the last second, Hunter somehow manages to get his arms around me, pulling me down with him.

I barely manage to hold my breath before we plunge into the lake. Hunter releases his hold on me instantly, and I kick my feet off the bottom as a hand wraps around my arm and pulls me to the surface.

“I’m fucking soaking wet now,” I complain more to myself than anyone else.

Blinking my eyes open, I wipe the water from my face and see Xavier is the one holding me up. Even at five-seven, I don’t quite reach the bottom, but thankfully, he does comfortably.

Laughter has me looking back up at the dock to find Lou-Lou and Charlie staring down at us before they hold hands and leap into the water too.

“Cannonball!” one of them screams, before the spray from the water hits me in the face as I cower into Xavier’s hold, shivering at the cool temperature of the lake as my body adjusts.

Glancing around, I find Hunter and Tobias messing around in the water closer to the picnic table where the water levels aren’t as high, trying to fucking dunk each other. Xavier’s arms tighten around me as I watch them with a smile on my face. God, we’ve needed a moment to be carefree and have no worries, and it’s crazy as hell to see them like this.

These guys are assholes, but they’re my fucking assholes.



EIGHTEEN



## EDEN

---

I don't know how long we stay in the water, our clothes sticking to us, but it's fun, relaxing, and it gives me a break from the worry that was building inside of me from the incident at the store.

Charlie bowed out first, her phone ringing with a call from Archie. The fact that they can only talk through the phone makes me feel bad. I hate that they're separated right now because of me, but they both seem okay with it, even if it does make me uncomfortable with how I'm affecting people's lives.

Xavier and Hunter climbed out soon after, grumbling about the state of their clothes being glued to their bodies, while Lou-Lou complained about wrinkling skin, leaving just Tobias and me in the lake.

"What are you thinking about, bubble?" Tobias asks, wrapping his arms around my waist from behind and resting his chin on my head. My hands instantly cross over my chest to squeeze his biceps as I relax back into his hold.

"Honestly, everything and nothing," I answer, sighing as I close my eyes, trying to process my thoughts.

"Can I help with anything?" he asks, and it makes me smile. He's always the first to ask. It reminds me of the

manhandling when we first met. “I could just listen and help you work through whatever’s on your mind.”

“I would appreciate that,” I tell him truthfully, tilting my head back and opening my eyes to look up at him, and he nods. His hat is firmly back in place, and his chiseled abs are on display through the ripples of water as he looks me over.

“Do you want to stay in the water or dry off?” He strokes my cheek, not stopping until he reaches my collarbone, and it gives me chills.

“Can we get out and maybe use the huge tub in the bathroom? I haven’t gotten around to soaking in it yet.” It’s getting later in the day, the clouds are slowly rolling in, and the sun isn’t keeping me as warm as it was, but I need some form of water to lull me into a calm state.

“Whatever you need, Eden,” he murmurs against my ear, nudging me toward the cabin, and the second we step out of the water, we’re shivering from the cold.

“Fuck, it’s cold,” I grumble, pulling at the jumpsuit material clinging to me. Tobias comes to stand at my side, wrapping his arm around my shoulders as he rushes us toward the back door.

Stepping into the house, I find Lou-Lou and Hunter arguing over who is making what for dinner, the pair of them grumbling about what a good fucking meal is for a pregnant woman, and I can’t help but roll my eyes as Tobias directs me toward the stairs.

“What are you guys doing?” Xavier asks from his spot on the sofa, almost pouting as his eyes fixate on Tobias’s hand on my hip. His question makes Charlie look up from her phone to see what’s going on.

“Eden wants to make use of the bathtub. We’ll be down for food in a while,” Tobias answers, patting my butt when we get to the bottom of the stairs as a gesture for me to keep moving.

“I’ll come help,” Xavier says, but Tobias is already shaking his head, water dripping from us. I decide I want no involvement in what’s about to go down between them. I can’t deal with them bickering over who spends time with me on a good day, but when my mind is so preoccupied with worries and concerns, I just can’t handle it. Maybe someday it’ll turn me on to have them fight over me, but if anything, it just stresses me out.

Continuing up the stairs, I don’t look back as I head straight for my room in search of some pajamas to slip into after my bath. When I open my bedroom door, I pause at the sight of all of the Allstars’ belongings mixed in with mine.

It’s strange to see. This is the closest the four of us have been, and it feels oddly comforting to see their t-shirts and shorts mixed amongst my dresses and underwear. Opting for one of Hunter’s t-shirts, which has been thrown over the back of the chair in the corner, and someone’s boxers from the chest of drawers, I carry them into the bathroom to find Tobias fiddling with the taps.

I didn’t even hear him come up the stairs. I really need to get better at being aware of my surroundings.

The bathroom is wall to wall cream and beige tiles, the floor and ceiling included, and it makes the room feel warmer. The walk-in shower, bathtub, and vanity are all white porcelain, with fluffy, terracotta colored towels piled up on the shelf in the far corner.

“Which one of these scented bubbles do you want, bubble?” Tobias asks, a grin on his face as he finds himself

amusing, and it's infectious.

"If there is anything coconut, I'll have that, if not, any scent will do," I tell him, placing the clothes in my hand on the vanity before unzipping the back of my dripping wet jumpsuit. I drag the material from my body, cringing at the sound of it slapping against the tiled floor.

Glancing in the mirror, I catch sight of Tobias looking at me through the reflection. His heated gaze caresses me from head to toe before starting all over again. The way he looks at me makes me feel like a fucking queen.

Pulling the hair tie out of my messy wet hair, I shake my head a little, letting it fall naturally down my back before I reach behind me to undo my bra, but Tobias beats me to it.

"Let me help you with that," he murmurs against my neck, coming to stand behind me. He uses the mirror to watch me, appreciating how the lace material covering my breasts reveals my tight nipples. "So beautiful," he whispers, and I stand taller, prouder, under his appreciative gaze.

I don't remember when he discarded his t-shirt, but all that stands between us are my panties and his board shorts, and when his fingers trail down my rib cage, lifting the waistband of my panties from my hips, I gasp.

"Eden Grady, I'm helping you into the bathtub. Stop thinking naughty things until after you've unloaded all your problems onto me," he chides, his lips grazing my neck as he speaks, and a shiver runs down my spine.

"You're such a fucking tease, Tobias Holmes," I grumble, using his full name too, and he smiles down at me as he turns me around.

My hands instantly fall to his chest as he pushes the lace down my legs, and I step out of them without moving my gaze from his.

The fire in his eyes tells me he's as turned on as I am right now, but he's working as hard as he can to be respectful and talk with me first. I appreciate it, but it doesn't mean I can't be a tease too.

Dragging my hands down his torso, I slowly run my fingers over every dip between his muscles. I slip my hands under his shorts, circling them around to his back and dropping them as my hands glide over the globes of his ass cheeks.

I watch as he bites his lip, his breathing increasing, and he splays his hands across my hips, forcing himself not to grip me hard like he usually would. I roll my eyes. I'm seconds away from jumping him before we even have time to talk, but as if sensing my next move, he takes a step back, putting unnecessary distance between us, and I glare at him.

This motherfucker knows exactly what he's doing. The grin on his lips and the sparkle of mischief in his eyes tells me so.

"Get in the bathtub, Eden," he orders quietly, and I go willingly without pause.

The tub is a massive circle, and completely out of place in a cabin in the woods, if I'm honest, not the rustic feel you expect, but I won't complain if it gives me a chance to climb in with one or maybe two of the Allstars. It even comes with a set of steps leading up into it.

As my foot touches the first wooden stair, Tobias wraps his hand around mine, helping me into the water, and when I step

into the tub, I'm surprised how high off the ground it actually is. Before I can lift my second foot over into the warm water, Tobias gropes my ass, bending to plant a gentle kiss to my clit, and my head falls back at the contact.

"Fuck," I moan, watching him squeeze his hard cock tightly before this continues, even though it's him fucking doing it. "Get in the bathtub, Tobias," I demand, repeating his words. I slip my hand from his before he sends me over the edge, and slowly lower myself into the water.

Apparently, one of the things Tobias read about yesterday was how a pregnant woman shouldn't have the water too hot when bathing or showering, and my heart hurt instantly at the thought of not having steaming hot water. But it hasn't been as bad as I expected, even if he has tested the temperature for me beforehand every time, making sure it's not too hot before I get in.

The water comes to a stop just beneath my chest, and the way Tobias looks me over as he steps into the water tells me he's pleased with that as he shuts the faucet off.

The bubbles around us smell of coconut, and I instantly find myself relaxing in the water even with Tobias maneuvering me to sit me where he wants. Pulling me closer to the center of the tub, he places my legs over his while still keeping me at arm's length so I can see him properly. The steam billows around us as we sit face-to-face.

"Hit me with it, bubble. Tell me what's going through that pretty mind of yours," he murmurs as he strokes my arm, and I sigh.

"I don't even know where to start," I mumble, trying to take a deep breath, and he cups my cheek.

“How about you say the first thing that comes to mind, and we’ll start there?”

Silence surrounds us for a moment, his soft smile encouraging me, and I have to force myself not to glance down between us because if I focus on his cock right now, I’ll do what I always do and cover my emotions with sex, and I don’t want to do that with these guys.

“Why is Ilana so hell-bent on ruining *my* life? But Archie, my twin brother, doesn’t seem to feel her wrath at all?” I ask, even though I know he won’t have an answer.

I tilt my head back, looking up at the ceiling as I let my words hang in the air between us. It’s something I haven’t been able to stop thinking about since I found out Archie is my biological brother.

I get Archie’s family is likely to have felt pressure from Ilana, it’s inevitable, but she isn’t on the warpath to bring him down like she is with me, and it leaves me even more confused.

“I wish I knew the reason for all of the shit she does, Eden, especially to you. But I agree, it definitely doesn’t make any sense for her not to target Archie like she does you. I’m sorry you have to deal with any of this,” he soothes, his voice soft as he strokes my cheek, encouraging me to look back at him, and I do.

“I just don’t understand what could have possibly happened for her to behave this way,” I muse, and he nods in understanding, empathy etched across his face.

“I get it. Every single one of us seems to have to deal with someone else’s actions, actions that do nothing but cause harm to innocent people, and it makes no sense. I wish your life was



easier, Eden, but I have to admit, I'm not sorry it brought you into my life." He trails his fingers through the water, causing ripples as he mindlessly moves the bubbles around us.

Swallowing hard past the lump in my throat, I nibble on my lip. When I think about everything that has happened to me because of Ilana, I want to wave a white flag and surrender, not wanting to deal with the pain and suffering anymore. But without being torn from my home in White River and forced to Knight's Creek, which has done nothing but try to destroy me, I would never have known I had a twin brother. I never would have met Bethany, Ryan, and Cody, and most of all, I never would have felt the rush I feel when I'm around the Allstars.

I just wish it wasn't all at the expense of my father's death. Inhaling a deep breath, I try to keep control of my emotions, but the reality is far too harsh.

He's never going to meet his grandchild, if I survive Ilana that long, and he's never going to see me with Archie, with my friends, and in love. What's crazy to me is the baby is the one subject I'm actually not freaking out about yet.

Tilting my head back, I close my eyes for a moment and focus on the things that are making me happy right now. As much as I hate to admit it, it's the Allstars who force my heart to skip a beat, keep me grounded, and show me how much they care, even if it is in the most ridiculous of ways.

I know I feel it and I hate it. *It* makes me feel reckless, weak, and exposed, but I can't deny how the Allstars make me feel anymore. When I heard Xavier say the words the first time, I could have laughed in his face with how ridiculous he sounded, but now I feel like I'm the ridiculous one for not seeing it sooner.

“What are you thinking about right this second, Eden?” Tobias questions, pulling me closer against his body as I search his gaze, my heart pounding in my chest from a mixture of arousal and fear coating my body.

“I’m thinking about you, about us, all of us,” I manage to say, stroking over his shoulders as my eyes stay glued to his.

“Anything in particular?” he presses, his blue eyes scanning mine as I shake my head. It’s a complete lie he sees right through, and he grips my chin, holding me in place as he raises his eyebrow. “Tell me,” he mutters, his lips an inch from mine as my pulse pounds in my neck.

“I don’t know how,” I admit, curling my fingers in the brown hair at the back of his head, his hat nowhere in sight. He moves me closer, his cock brushing against my pussy.

I don’t know what my expression looks like, but I can tell by the sparkle in his eyes that he knows *exactly* what I can’t bring myself to say.

“Then show me.”

That I can do.

I press my lips to his, delicately kissing him as he drops his hand from my chin to my throat, flexing his grip, and then I get lost in him.

Feeling the touch of his skin everywhere, I melt in his hold as we devour each other. The water sloshes around us as I press my chest to his, wanting him as close as possible. I love the feeling of my nipples against his skin, pinned between us as he explores my mouth, his tongue taking just as much from me as I am from him.

“I need to feel you,” I plead, moving my hand down his body to find his cock, but he shakes his head.

“Let me show you too, Eden,” he whispers, his eyes blown with need, and I crush our mouths back together.

This feels different, even more different than it did before. I never wanted more than one night, but these guys make me want endless nights, and now they have me hooked on the thought of forever.

Shuffling us around, he lifts me up out of the water and places me on the thick bathtub rim in the corner, pushing all of the products to the side as he spreads my legs wide and stares intently at my core.

Bracing my hands on either side of me, I lean against the cool tiles so I can keep my balance, his stare alone making me turn to jelly.

He slowly drags his finger from my clit to my center, and I gasp at the touch, his eyes meeting mine as I rake my teeth over my bottom lip. Circling his fingers around my core, he slides them through my folds and back to my clit.

I’m on the verge of growling at him to quit fucking teasing when he leans forward and swipes his tongue along the same path his finger just took.

“Fuck.”

My back arches up off of the tiles and my hips roll to grind against his face as a ripple of pleasure rocks through me.

With the second grind of my hips, Tobias slowly presses his fingers inside me, swirling them to stroke my G-spot, and my pussy clamps down around him as he continues to lap at my clit.

“That feels so good,” I praise with a gasp, and I can feel him grin against me.

“It always will, bubble,” he mutters, brushing his lips against my sensitive spot before scraping his teeth against my clit, and I almost slip back into the water as the electricity zaps through me.

“Please, please, please,” I chant as he continues, my body propped up by the walls as I feel the pending orgasm ready to explode.

Without needing any further encouragement, he sucks on my clit as he fucks me with his fingers, and my head slams almost excruciatingly hard against the tiles behind me as my mouth falls open. My body shatters into what feels like a million pieces, but he doesn't relent, riding out every inch of my orgasm with me.

When I can't take anymore, my body still twitching, Tobias pulls his fingers from my core and lines his cock up with my entrance.

“Do you need a minute?” he asks, and even in my drunk-like state, I glare at him.

“You better not keep me waiting, Tobias.”

My words are soft, pleading, and they make his face light up as he slowly sinks into me, filling me up and leaving me gasping for breath.

I'm completely drawn to his eyes as I wrap my arms around his neck, the feel of him inside me nearly overwhelming. Crushing my body to his, he fucks me slowly, dragging the ridges of his cock over every sensitive spot in my center, and it feels so good I could cry.

The pressure of his fingertips digging into my ass cheeks tells me there will be bruises tomorrow, and I'm desperate for them. I want him to mark my skin like he's marking my soul.

Our noses brush together as our gazes remain locked on each other, my mouth open as I see past the blue in his eyes to his soul, his heart, his turmoil, his everything.

My toes tingle with the telltale sign of another orgasm, and Tobias's stuttered movements tell me he isn't far away either.

"Fuck, Eden. Fuck," he whispers against my lips, my pussy squeezing his cock as my body is hit by the biggest wave of pleasure rushing through me at the same time his cock pulses deep inside me.

All I can hear is white noise, my body consumed with his every touch as he slowly drags the ecstasy out between us. Falling back into the water, I watch it splash around us as he takes me with him, but he holds my chin and turns me to face him.

I can already hear it, like time stills, and my heart beats wildly in my chest as I watch his lips move.

"I love—"

Bang.

Whirling around, we both turn to the door to see Hunter filling the space, his eyes wide as he checks us over.

"You guys better come down," he says gruffly, swiping a hand down his face. "Eden's phone vibrated downstairs on the dining table where Charlie was sitting. She didn't intentionally look, it was a reflex thing, I guess, but it isn't good, love."

Wait, what? "What isn't good?" I ask, already losing the high I was just riding with Tobias as I take in the worry on Hunter's face.

"You got another message. It was sent to the burner phone. I think our time on the run may be over."

NINETEEN



# XAVIER

---

People say it all the time. As children, we're programmed to disagree with our parents on many things, which can lead to those dreaded four words, *I hate my parents*. In my case, however, I really, *really* fucking do.

When I was a child, I don't remember my mother ever really being this harsh, but realistically, I spent far more time with the nannies than I did Ilana and Reza. That was just how things were, and no matter how much that may have broken me as a child, I would be far worse if I had spent more time in their presence.

I have learned to live without supportive and loving parents. I have learned to live with my need for control and always put myself first since my mother never did, my brothers close behind. Now, I have Eden. She's never asked me to change, though I'm sure she has wanted to. I'm a dick, it's not a surprise, but she makes me want to be a better person, a better man—for her at least.

The sound of footsteps making their way downstairs pulls me from my thoughts, and I turn to find Hunter marching down with Tobias and Eden hot on his tail.

Hunter swings his arm out in my direction, where I stand hovering over the phone like it's about to come to life and tell us all of the answers, but that doesn't seem likely.

Eden looks exhausted from the news of her impending text message, while Tobias glances between Eden and me, likely searching for guidance. None of us like to feel helpless, and Tobias is the worst. He'll usually mask it with a shrug or a joke, but that won't work right now. Not in front of us all, and not when he can clearly see that isn't what Eden needs.

As Eden moves toward me, I watch her squeeze Tobias's hand in support. I've never been jealous of my brothers, but I'm close to feeling that way. I want to be her pillar of support too, especially since we haven't really helped as much as we possibly could have previously. I'm desperate to make up for it now.

She comes to a stop beside me, looking up to meet my eyes as I turn the phone in her direction. I watch as she takes a deep breath before following my line of sight.

I don't need to look, I already have, the words etched into my mind. Lou-Lou is standing on the porch like someone is suddenly going to appear and she'll scare them away with her stance alone, but I don't think she understands how my mother plays.

***Unknown: You can run, but you can't hide. You were doing so well until Asheville was spotted. Wednesday. Fall back in line or face the consequences.***

I'm sure if these burner phones could receive images, there would be a frightening photo with the text threatening Eden into submission as well. Just like when they sent that awful image of her father.



I focus on Eden, trying to decipher her reactions and emotions. Her knuckles turn white as she grips the phone in her hand, and she clenches her teeth as her eyebrows furrow.

“Can I see?” Tobias asks, and it makes Eden jump, but she releases his hand which he discreetly shakes out before taking the phone she passes to him. As he reads the message, she turns to search for Hunter, her back brushing against my front as she does, and I pin her to my chest with a hand gently placed on her stomach.

She looks hot as hell in Hunter’s Puddle of Mudd tee, but she would look hotter in something that’s mine. I clearly need to buy more appealing options for her. I don’t miss the way she relaxes into my hold as I place a soft kiss to the base of her neck, trying to make any tension or stress disappear as quickly as it came, but the underlying tone in the cabin is unmistakable.

“It must have been that girl, Hunter,” Eden murmurs, and Hunter nods in agreement as he rubs the back of his neck nervously. He’ll likely be eating away at himself for blowing our cover, but it would have happened eventually. “But it doesn’t make sense. How or why would that girl know to contact Ilana?”

“You’re forgetting Ilana’s televised plea for the boys. We saw it here, it could have easily been played across multiple channels,” Charlie reasons, shutting the fridge door with her hip as she carries a fresh bottle of water to Eden who murmurs her thanks.

“Fuck,” Tobias mutters, placing Eden’s phone on the table as silence descends around us.

I should have known we would have been better to keep traveling, fucking leave the country or whatever. Nowhere is

too far for that woman's reach. But now there's the baby too. We need to keep Eden out of direct danger, and as much as I want to growl and demand everyone follow my lead, I know that doesn't work with her. It never has, and it never will.

The sound of a phone ringing breaks the silence, and Hunter fumbles to pull his phone from his pocket, glancing at the device before bringing it to his ear.

"Ryan, one minute," he answers, stepping toward the dining table and placing the phone on the wooden top. Everyone falls into a seat, but I keep Eden close, letting her drop into my lap as Charlie calls Lou-Lou in.

No one says a word as the girls join us, making sure to lock the front door before sitting down. I almost tell them not to bother, no one is on their way here, but we may as well listen to what Ryan has to say first.

Hunter takes the seat across from me, while Lou-Lou and Charlie sit beside him. Tobias takes the spot to my left, his fingers intertwining with Eden's as I squeeze her thigh, and she places her hand on top of mine, leaning back against me for silent support.

Whatever happens, I know we've got this. We're family now. Our bubble of three, the Allstars, has officially been extended.

"We're here, Ryan," Hunter mumbles, trying to turn the volume up as high as possible, and we all instinctively lean closer.

"Eden, I have no idea how they've gotten a hold of your number. I'm interrogating the team now because clearly Ilana got to someone. I can't think of any other reason," Ryan says

with concern in his voice, and I nod in understanding like he can see me.

“It’s not your fault, Ryan. I think we know who reported seeing Hunter,” Eden replies much calmer than I was expecting. I feel her lean back into me a little more, like she’s pulling strength from me. That’s a totally new feeling, one I could most definitely get used to.

“Well, I’m taking care of it. I want you to know that,” Ryan responds, anger radiating from his tone, and I’m glad. Some fuckers need to pay for this.

“Are you going to send any muscle to us?” Lou-Lou asks, and I shake my head.

“That won’t be necessary,” Ryan and I both say at the same time, making Lou-Lou and Charlie look at me in confusion. Eden glances over her shoulder to meet my gaze. “At any stage, during any of the shit Ilana has put you through, has she ever come in guns blazing?” I question, watching Eden’s mind tick through all of the interactions and situations she has been in.

“No, not once. The closest was when I was forced to leave White River, but even then it was my mother’s fear when the SUV door opened that pushed me into the driver’s seat. No one ever stepped out, the threat was enough,” Eden answers, and I squeeze her thigh in support.

“Exactly. Ilana Knight likes power, control, dictatorship. She is not in favor of getting her hands dirty, and the only way to wield power is with words if she wants to keep her paws clean,” I reason loud enough for everyone to hear with my gaze still fixed on Eden’s.

“Your mom is a bitch,” Lou-Lou states, and I scoff because that’s a fucking understatement and everyone here knows it.

“So she isn’t going to come charging in here, which leaves us to do what? The message just said Wednesday. What does that mean?” Charlie muses, pulling everyone’s gaze to her, and I study her for a moment.

I don’t think Charlie has ever felt the wrath of my mother, or anyone else for that matter. Somehow, she’s been able to live in her little bubble, hidden away from Ilana’s radar, yet she chooses to be here with Eden, protecting her. Maybe it’s because I’ve never put myself in a position to notice her loyalty before, but my respect for Charlie has grown massively. Even when we were kids, I don’t remember her really going above and beyond for anyone, always opting to hang on the fringe of social groups.

“That’s Ilana’s way of letting us know when she wants us back in Knight’s Creek, living under her roof and playing by her rules again,” Tobias answers, hitting the nail on the head, and everyone sighs as Lou-Lou stands and braces her hands on the back of her chair.

“I’ll support whatever you want to do, guys. Whatever you want, my resources are literally at your disposal,” Ryan vows through the phone, and I have to bite my tongue so damn fucking hard I think it might bleed. I know this isn’t my decision to make.

Silence falls over the table, no one saying a word, and I don’t miss Hunter’s slightly raised eyebrow at my current quietness, but I lean my forehead against the back of Eden’s head, giving nothing away.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen a table filled with so many strong personalities sit in silence like this,” Charlie mutters,

squeezing her hands together on the table in front of her, and I sigh.

“Agreed. Don’t you have anything to say, Xavier? You always seem to want to overpower everyone and make them fall in line. Are you really going to sit there and not throw out any commands?” Lou-Lou taunts with a handful of sass, and I say nothing as I swipe a hand down my face. She may be right, but I refuse to acknowledge her. Although I take the hint and give Eden a little nudge, ignoring the smirks on both Hunter’s and Tobias’s lips.

Sitting tall, I pull Eden back with me, loving the feel of her against every inch of my body. Keeping my hand on her thigh, I use my other hand to pull her hair back from her face, tucking it behind her ear, and she looks back over her shoulder at me.

“Eden, everyone’s waiting for you to answer,” I say gently, and she stares at me with her eyebrows knitted together in confusion.

“Me?” she repeats, pointing to her chest, and I nod. She glances around the table to find everyone staring at her expectantly. Turning back to me, she runs her tongue over her teeth as she searches my gaze. “Even you?” she asks like that can’t be true, and I shrug.

“The alpha in me wants to hide you from the fucking world, build a tower, and name you Rapunzel just to keep you safe, but you would hate that with every fiber of your being. So if I want to remain by your side without you resenting me, then I’ll learn to keep my mouth shut and let you make your own decisions. I’m here for you. We’re all here for you, Eden,” I answer honestly, a grin on my lips as I refuse to look

at anyone else because I know I'm showing a softer, more vulnerable side right now which is only meant for her.

“Who knew pulling you from Knight's Creek would have such an impact on you, huh?” she murmurs in response, wearing a matching grin on her lips as we bask in our own little moment together. “Will I still get this version of you if we go back there?”

“No,” I reply, watching the smile drop from her lips. Her eyes darken as she tries to move out of my hold, but I keep her in place. “You'll get a better version of me, Nafas. You'll get this side of me, and the side that will do anything and everything to protect you from my mother, all with you fully aware of every situation and no longer being left in the dark.”

Her eyes search mine, only seeing the truth as I hear Tobias grumble beside me.

“How is Xavier Knight, the biggest asshole of them all, tossing out so many smooth fucking words at the minute? Unbelievable.” He pauses briefly, holding out his arm before looking at Hunter with a grin on his face. I roll my eyes, already anticipating the shit that'll fall from his lips. “Pinch me. I'm pretty sure this is a dream, but I just want to be sure because this Xavier has never existed before. Maybe he's had an alien body invasion or...”

It's on the tip of my tongue to say I can see the love in his eyes for our girl as my own comeback, but I'm adamant mine was there first. Besides, I've been the worst dick and require the most growth to be a fucking decent human being, so I deserve a head start in all of this relationship and loyalty shit.

“You guys are ridiculous and make me want to be sick,” Lou-Lou chimes in with a roll of her eyes before her gaze

settles on Eden. “What’s it going to be, girly?” she asks, and everyone’s gaze follows hers.

Eden fidgets in my lap for a moment before sitting back a little more, her spine straight as she taps her fingers on the wooden table.

“Running from Ilana was never the right option. It’s not the right response to her threats. She’s never going to back down and leave me alone, and I’m never going to truly understand what I did to deserve this or why my father deserved to die,” Eden begins, and I agree with every single word.

“Whatever you want,” Hunter says, repeating Ryan’s words, but I think we all know where this is heading, and I crack my neck, readying myself.

“Ilana Knight likes the challenge, the control, and all that other shit. I want to go back. I want to let her think she has all of her little pawns back, but I want to fight for me, for us, and she won’t get anywhere near my goddamn baby. Over my dead fucking body.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do, Eden,” Tobias agrees, rubbing his thumb across her knuckles.

I’m going to protect them both with everything I have, with every part of me, or fucking die trying.

TWENTY





# EDEN

---

Sitting shotgun beside Xavier with Tobias and Hunter in the back, I flick through the music stations in the minivan, desperately missing being able to use the playlists on my phone. I'm hoping we can get our devices back now that the whole running shit is done with, or it will be when we actually arrive in Knight's Creek.

When we drive past the gas station I pulled up to when I first arrived in Knight's Creek, I know we're getting close, the dreaded welcome sign coming up soon.

After much debate, we packed our shit up yesterday and set off this morning. Ilana said Wednesday, but it's a long ass drive back, and it'll give us the rest of today and tomorrow before we have to show up to school on Wednesday. We will hopefully have a plan in place by then. We need one.

Xavier places his hand on my bare thigh, just beneath the hem of my shorts, as he keeps his eyes fixed on the road, and I place my hand on top of his, loving the contact. It's like the three of them have been alternating between who fucking touches me, because I've placed my hand on top of Hunter's on my shoulder a few times, and Tobias has been lacing our fingers together as he sits directly behind me.

Lou-Lou almost passed out with excitement when Hunter handed her the keys to the GTR, explaining all the guys wanted to travel with me and it was too cramped in the back of the damn thing.

She blew out of Lake Sabrina and right through Bishop, heading straight for Knight's Creek, and I can definitely picture Charlie holding on to her seat for dear life. When Hunter mentioned they were going to beat our asses home, Xavier simply shrugged, announcing he had precious cargo and had to go slower.

Sappy motherfucker.

"Are you okay?" Hunter asks, and I turn to glance at him, nodding in response as I try to find my voice.

"I'm okay, just sad that we didn't really get out from under her claws. I'm ready for her control over me to be done with, but I also understand I need to tread carefully if I don't want her to go to extremes and murder me," I reply calmly, almost feeling numb about the whole fucking situation. No one responds, because honestly, at this point, what is there to say?

I'm right. I know I am. It doesn't mean any of us have to like it, we just need to fucking solve the puzzle that is Ilana Knight.

My heart sinks a little as I see the Knight's Creek welcome sign up ahead... *Where the sun shines bright and the waves crash hard*. I fucking hate those words with a passion. When we pass it, I instantly feel a sense of nervous energy wash over me. This is her territory. Ilana can literally ruin me here, and I need to get my shit together.

"We've got this, Nafas," Xavier murmurs, squeezing my thigh, and I force a smile to my lips as I glance his way, but he

doesn't believe it for one second. "I mean it, Eden. Whatever it takes, we're going to do it," he adds. My heart believes his words and I trust him, I trust all of them, but in my head, I just don't know if they alone will be enough.

Leaning forward, I turn up the indie music a little, drowning out my worries as Xavier heads toward Bethany's house. I close my eyes, not wanting to see the town as we drive through. Instead, I think about all the things I want from my future—a healthy, happy baby, an education, a career, and a family where we all love and support each other with everything we have.

"We're here, bubble," Tobias says, pulling me from my thoughts. He strokes his fingers along the back of my neck, and I shiver as I watch the gates to Bethany's property open for us.

I spot the GTR instantly, already prepared for Lou-Lou's smug grin when I finally see her, but what fills me with excitement is the sight of Bethany standing at the front door with Cody in her arms.

She's wearing her yoga pants and a loose tee, and her hair is up in a ponytail. I can only dream that I'll look as put together as she does when I'm holding a toddler, and it fills me with hope. Cody claps his hands as Xavier parks the minivan, his blond curls bouncing with his excitement.

Xavier must see the buzz in me because he lets go of my thigh and leans across me to open the door so I can jump out. I don't look back at the guys, not even Hunter even though she's his sister. I have missed these people so much.

My feet carry me toward Bethany and Cody, and my brain still hasn't fully caught up as I stop right in front of her and throw my arms around the pair.

God, how did I go a week without seeing them? I can't do that ever again. I missed every piece of being in their presence, and it reminds me how much they truly are my family.

“De-de, De-de, De-de,” Cody chants, wrapping his hands around my neck, and I have to step back from Bethany to hold him against my chest comfortably.

“Hey, little man. Have you been a good boy?” I ask, brushing his curls from his face, and he grins wide, his blue eyes sparkling as he nods enthusiastically.

“If by good boy you mean s-a-t-a-n, then yes, he's doing an excellent job at that,” Bethany grumbles, making me smile. The sound of the front door opening pulls my attention to Ryan who's stepping out.

He offers me a smile as he approaches us. I feel a hand on my back, and I glance over my shoulder to see Hunter standing beside me, stroking Cody's cheek, and my heart fucking swells at the little bubble we're in.

Hunter holds me like I'm special, and then with a child between us? Fuck. How did this suddenly become our lives, our future, and why do I like it so damn fucking much?

I can't see Xavier or Tobias, but I know they aren't far away—it's impossible not to sense their presence.

“Did you miss Eden, Cody?” Hunter asks, and he giggles in response, bringing his sticky fingers to my cheeks and squishing them together.

“Yes!” he shouts, louder than is necessary, but we all laugh at his outburst.

“Did you miss Uncy Tee-tee too?”

“Uhhh, no.” Cody shrugs his shoulders, completely unfazed, making everyone laugh harder—well, except Hunter. He pouts like Tobias usually does, and it makes me smile even more.

“Eden, come inside and get a drink. You must be exhausted,” Bethany says after she catches her breath. “Besides, Lou-Lou is inside and needs to brag about driving the GTR to someone else other than me,” she adds with a roll of her eyes, and I grin.

“Bethany’s right, Bubble. You head in. We need to chat with Ryan for a minute, then we’re going to head to our house,” Tobias tells me, coming to stand to my left, and I feel an instant pinch of sadness at the thought of them leaving. When did I suddenly become so codependent?

“You’re not staying here?” I ask, glancing around to find Xavier standing by Ryan too, and they all look at me guiltily. Is this a fucking conversation they had without me after saying we would be all open and communicating and shit?

“It makes sense for us to let Ilana see we are back living in the house, and having you here while we do that makes it safer,” Xavier reasons, taking control of the situation as Bethany grabs Cody from my arms so Xavier can stand toe-to-toe with me.

He cups my cheek as Hunter remains pressed against my side. They’re fucking overloading my senses on purpose so I don’t fucking argue, but in this case, I understand where they’re coming from, and they’re right. I don’t need to be caught in the middle of *that* right now.

“Fine,” I murmur, stroking my hands up his chest, needing to touch him for one more minute if they’re going to leave so suddenly.

I hate the fact that we've gone from living in such a small space and all cramming into the same bed every night, to the reality of being in separate houses. Fuck. My hormones are turning me into a needy bitch.

He kisses me lightly before whispering, "I love you, Nafas."

What the what?

I feel like I can't breathe, my emotions suffocating me as I try to find those three words to respond, but instead, I just gape at him like a fucking idiot.

"I know, don't worry," Xavier murmurs.

He steps back, casually letting Tobias take his spot, and I'm still reeling in shock when he crushes his mouth to mine, my arms trapped between us as I pour all of my emotion into his lips, not caring who's watching. But this is our thing right now, Tobias's and mine, showing each other what we don't yet have the words to express.

I feel Hunter hold me up, his arm still around my back as he watches me kiss the others, and when Tobias releases my lips, Hunter doesn't give him a chance to change his mind, quickly turning me in his arms to face him.

I can't explain the look in his eyes, but he definitely heard Xavier's words and felt the energy between Tobias and me. Taking my hand, he gently places it over his beating heart, the pace matching my own as it pounds beneath my palm.

"I'll tell you when you're ready to hear it, but just know that my heart beats for you and only you."

Dead.

I am dead.

I can't survive all of this rawness, not a single drop.

"I think I'm going to cry," Bethany whimpers, breaking the spell I'm trapped under, and I blush bright red because she definitely heard every fucking word that was just said, but Hunter shrugs like it's a nonissue.

Pecking my lips, he squeezes my fingers once more then releases me, not acknowledging what his sister said before she drags me inside.

Holy motherfucking shit.



## HUNTER

I almost just fucking said I love you to someone.

I. Love. You.

Not to Bethany, not to Ryan, and not to Cody.

I almost said I love you to a girl. Not just any girl, Eden.

The words keep bouncing around in my mind, and I feel like I could pass the fuck out right now, but I somehow manage to remain on my feet as I watch her slip inside Bethany's house.

*"I'll tell you when you're ready to hear it, but just know that my heart beats for you and only you."*

That was no lie, not a single ounce of it, but I could see she was as panicked as I was, our eyes saying more to each other than our mouths. I feel like I said something monumental while chickening out of saying the real thing, but with the way her shoulders sagged in relief, I know I made the right choice.

“Hunter, are you okay?” Tobias asks, waving a hand in front of my face, and I shake my head, trying to clear my mind as I focus on the guys. The front door is shut, and I don’t even know how long it’s been closed.

Fuck. I need to get my head in the game, especially since we’re back in Knight’s Creek. We need to sleep with one eye open and have someone watching our backs at all times.

“Yeah, I’m good,” I manage to murmur, slipping my hands into the pockets of my jeans as I look at Ryan and Xavier.

Ryan searches my gaze for a moment, like he’s trying to get into my head, but he eventually nods before waving for us to follow him to the separate building to the right of the house. No one would know it was there if Ryan didn’t tell you, but it’s probably the most important part of the whole damn place.

Following the gravel path, Ryan leads with Xavier close on his heels and Tobias behind me. I watch as Ryan enters the security codes and biometrics before the door clicks open and we all step into the white annex. To anyone else, it probably just looks like a pool house.

The walls are lined with surveillance footage. There are probably forty screens in total, and about seventy percent of them are for the house, while the rest are surrounding our home on the beach and a few spots in and around Knight’s Creek. There are also five screens set up for someplace Ryan refuses to talk about. I think I asked once, but he never offered to explain, so we left it at that.

“Any luck finding a mole in the team, Benji?” Ryan asks, addressing the man sitting in the far corner at a desk, tapping away without lifting his gaze to greet us. His buzz cut hair and huge build make him look like the most dangerous man on



Ryan's team, but apparently he's a big softy who prefers to destroy people with technology rather than fists.

"Not yet, boss, but the second I know, you will too," he responds, and Ryan rolls his eyes.

"Don't fucking call me boss, asshole," he grumbles in response, and Benji chuckles.

"I was trying to make you sound cool in front of the family," he retorts as he continues to tap away on his keyboard, not even looking over at us, and Ryan waves us into the second room on the top floor.

"Just ignore him. He's my best friend, always has been, and sometimes I just fucking wonder why." That sounds a little too familiar with the three of us, but we're brothers, first and always, and we now have a magnetic force that will forever hold us together—Eden.

With her feisty personality and the way she doesn't realize she wears her heart on her sleeve, I can't believe I ever doubted she was it for me. The day she walked into our lives, gracing us with her presence at Asheville High, with her blonde locks and badass attitude, I never would have predicted this. Ever. But now I can't breathe without her.

We follow him to the large conference room, where the table is set up as a U-shape with a coffee machine in the corner. I drop down into the cushioned chair closest to the door and sigh as Xavier and Tobias follow suit.

"What do you have for us?" I ask, rubbing the back of my neck, still trying to get over what almost happened outside.

Ryan opens the cupboard at the far end of the room with a key before heading back to us. "I want to be able to see inside your world, boys. It'll help keep you, Eden, and the baby safe

if we can have our eyes on Ilana as much as possible. We could also benefit from having a camera in the office your mother uses in town. Is there any chance of that being a possibility?” Ryan asks, glancing at Xavier who immediately nods.

“She wants me to play the doting son while she settles into the role as mayor. Well, she did before I ran, but I’m sure I can figure something out,” Xavier says with a sigh, taking the tiny case from Ryan’s outstretched hand and putting it into his pocket.

“There are four miniature surveillance devices in there. I think that should be enough for us to cover a little ground,” Ryan says, finally taking a seat. “So how is Eden doing? Do I need to break anybody’s kneecaps?” he asks casually, and I roll my eyes.

“Did it look like she was upset to you out there?” Tobias counters, raising an eyebrow at Ryan, and it surprises me because he usually stays quiet in times like this with Ryan.

“No. No, she didn’t,” Ryan mumbles, swiping a hand down his face. “If anything, she almost looked—”

“Don’t fucking say it,” Xavier interrupts, rising from his chair as Ryan stares at him in confusion.

“But I was—”

“I know what you were going to say, but let’s not jinx anything until my mother is taken care of,” he grumbles, leaning forward to brace his hands on the table. “Is there anything else we need to do?”

“As of right now? Not that I can think of yet,” Ryan answers, relenting on whatever he was going to say.

Tobias and I stand too.

“Perfect. I’ll let you know when it’s set up,” Xavier tells him, heading for the exit without another word. Tobias follows him, but as I go to leave with them, Ryan catches my arm.

“Hey, are you sure you’re good? You seemed a little overwhelmed out there, and I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop, but you guys weren’t trying to be quiet either,” Ryan says softly, releasing his hold on me as he glances at the empty doorway the others just walked through. “I know feelings aren’t always the easiest, and Bethany is fucking full of them in comparison, so I wanted to make sure her gushing didn’t make anything worse.” Ryan rubs the back of his neck, clearly as uncomfortable as I am.

Taking a deep breath, I nod in understanding. The thing about Ryan Carter is that I can’t really remember much about when he arrived. I just know that when he did, our lives began to change for the better. He protected Beth, which led to him taking me under his wing as well.

He knows my history, probably more than I do, so he understands emotions and feelings have never been my thing at all, but I’m still not interested in having a conversation about this with him.

“I’m good, but thanks,” I murmur, beelining for the door before he thinks of another way to reword his question and get me to unload my emotional baggage onto him.

Rushing through the building, I step outside to find Xavier in the driver’s seat of his Jag, rubbing the steering wheel like he’s missed the fucking thing. I spy Tobias in the front seat beside him, so I slide into the back, slamming the door shut without a word, and they both glance at me over their shoulders.

They probably fucking know he just tried to talk feelings with me, and it makes me cringe. They must also see it on my face, because they both turn away quickly. Xavier puts the car in drive and peels out of the driveway.

Music plays on the radio, and even though I'm not focused enough to register who's singing, I find myself humming along in my mind, lyrics about pain and torment seem quite fitting right now.

I miss Eden already. It's ridiculous. How did we ever survive without her? I've spent so long feeling lost, and now she's like the light at the end of the tunnel and I'm willing to do anything and everything to get to her.

I don't even realize we've made it across town until the car slows to a stop and I see the house in front of us. This place has always been a safe haven for us, especially when we were just Ilana's little minions, willing to pacify her for an easy life. Now? It almost feels like a dungeon. Knowing she can show up at any moment and ruin our lives weighs heavily on my mind.

As we climb from the car, none of us say a word, each of us trapped in our own thoughts as we step up to the front door. Tobias unlocks it with his palm and we all slip inside. We're greeted with silence, but it's the kind of silence that has me on the edge of my seat expecting something to jump out and announce its presence.

It's not until we make it to the living room when I see why I was feeling this way. There, on the fireplace mantel, stands an envelope with *Allstars* scrawled across the front of it in bold, black writing.

Xavier moves first, plucking it from its spot, and tears into the paper to find a photo inside. It's a photo of Eden, Tobias,

Xavier, and me out by the pool where we fucked. Together. Naked. Lost in the passion. And my blood boils at her attempt to tarnish what was a beautiful moment between us.

Fuck this bitch.

“What does she want?” I growl, fully expecting her to have written on the other side, and when he flips the card over, I’m not wrong.

***I’m glad you boys came to heel. Be at my office Tuesday morning at nine a.m. sharp***

She just gave us the opening we needed to plant the devices, but she doesn’t need to know that. Thank you very fucking much, you cunt.

TWENTY-ONE



# EDEN

I stretch out, yawning as my body finally catches up to the fact my brain has decided to start the day. Rubbing at my eyes, I blink them open to see the sun trying to break through the closed curtains.

I'm not ready to be awake yet, not even a little bit, but I feel like there is so much to do today that sleeping in isn't an option. Moving my arm out at my side, I pat the cold, empty spot and instantly pout.

Not that I want to admit it, but it definitely took forever to fall asleep last night because there was no one here in bed with me. Apparently, I have become accustomed to the presence of the Allstars sleeping next to me after our little stint at the cabin, and I don't know how to come back from that. Being alone sucks in comparison.

Grabbing my phone, I check the time and see it's a little after seven in the morning. I drop the device on the bed beside me when I see no pending messages or missed calls, then I close my eyes again for another minute so I can rest.

The guys called as soon as they had gotten home yesterday, explaining the note waiting for them, and my heart instantly lurched. Ryan explained their plan to set up

surveillance at her office. I didn't like it, not even a little bit, but the Allstars seemed to think they knew what they were doing, and I couldn't exactly demand for them to trust me to know what I'm doing and then not do it in return.

Worry sits heavy in the pit of my stomach, or that could be another wave of nausea with the baby, but either way, I need to get up and maybe nibble on one of those ginger cookies Bethany has had on hand ever since we found out I'm pregnant.

Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I sit there for a moment, letting my body calm from the sudden movement because I feel close to hurling all over the floor. Add that to the incessant headache I seem to have coming on, and I'm ready for the day to be over before it's even begun.

Rising to my feet, I trudge to the connected bathroom on autopilot, sweeping the loose tendrils of hair out of my face as I turn the shower on. I brush my teeth while I wait for the water to warm up, feeling a little light-headed. Fuck today already.

I step into the shower and let the water cascade over my body as I wash my hair, using my favorite coconut products which smell so damn good. Feeling refreshed, even with my pounding headache, my stomach doesn't seem as queasy. Thank God.

I'm still overwhelmed with the way the guys treated me yesterday before they left. I don't know what it was, but everything felt very different between us compared to the last time we were all in Knight's Creek. It fills me with hope that things aren't going to go back to how they were before we left when it was me versus the Allstars.



Although, it completely blows me away how much closer each of us were to saying those three words. Well, Xavier did. He says them so confidently and wholeheartedly, and it's on the tip of my tongue to say them in return, except it never seems to be an expectation—or he's putting space between us as soon as he says them so he doesn't feel hurt from me not saying them in return.

Fuck, I never considered that.

I don't want him to feel that way, especially not because of me.

*Eden, you need to get your fucking shit together and drop the final wall standing between you and all of the possibilities with the Allstars,* I berate myself.

“I love you,” I say to the stream of water pouring over me, testing the words while no one is around to hear me. They don't feel half as daunting as I thought they would. That feeling may not be the same when someone is standing before me, though, speaking the words that I have only ever uttered to my parents.

Shutting the water off, I wrap a towel around my body before stepping back into my room, heading straight for the closet to pull out something comfortable and thin so I don't overheat. Opting for a pair of black fitted shorts and a tie-dyed Ramones t-shirt, I quickly dress and choose to French braid my hair down both sides of my head instead of blow drying it.

Grabbing my phone, I make my way downstairs, debating whether it's too early or needy of me to contact the Allstars. This is new territory for me, and I definitely feel out of my comfort zone, but it's totally worth it to feel the high I get from being around them.

When I reach the bottom step, I hear laughter coming from the kitchen, laughter I'm all too familiar with, and it has me picking up speed to get there quicker. Pausing in the doorway, I watch Bethany, Ryan, Cody, Hunter, Tobias, and Xavier as they sit around the breakfast bar, a smile ghosting my lips.

It feels like I haven't seen them in forever. Although, with one glance at them, I can tell they're dressed to go straight to Ilana's office from here. They're all clothed casually. There are no shorts in sight, but also no suit pants because that would just be too far.

Watching Hunter smile as Cody plays with his finger, I lean against the doorframe, my eyes feasting on him in his white Henley and dark jeans. I love seeing this side of him instead of the usual closed off persona he has in school. His demeanor is softer, and his love for Cody radiates off of him. It's addicting to see.

Tobias is laughing at something Bethany is saying, his head thrown back as he claps his hands together. I notice his hat is firmly in place, with wisps of his brown hair sticking out of the bottom. As I look him over, I see he's wearing jeans, a plain white tee, and a black jacket. Tobias almost looks more gangster than business casual for their meeting, but I fucking love it.

Xavier surprises me the most, fist bumping Ryan. They both have grins on their faces, and he seems rather pleased with himself. His black skinny jeans and matching black Henley make him look all serious, so to see him relax and be himself like he was at the cabin, even if only for a moment, fills me with happiness.

If there is anything to solidify that we could work, it's this scene before me where I get to see them be the best versions of

themselves when they don't even know I'm watching. They're not putting on an act or saying whatever they need to appease someone.

Am I scared? Hell yeah. Do I know what the future holds? No.

But more importantly, do I love them? My thoughts over not saying those magic words to Xavier continue to play on my mind.

With every beat of my heart, the answer is *yes*, without a shadow of a doubt.

“Good morning, Nafas,” Xavier says loud enough for everyone to hear, and all eyes fall to me as I step farther into the room.

“Good morning,” I murmur as he moves toward me, wrapping his arms around my waist as I rise up on my tiptoes and instantly press my lips to his, not waiting for him to make the first move. I need him to know—well, all of them really—that I'm in this just as much as they are.

As I lean back, reluctantly pulling away from his lips, we both sigh. Blinking my eyes open, I didn't even realize I closed them as I see the surprise in his gaze. Apparently, making the initial move hasn't gone unnoticed.

“I can definitely handle morning meetings with my mother if they're going to start like this,” he murmurs, stroking a fingertip down my face before lacing our fingers together and leading me to the rest of the group.

As I approach everyone, Ryan and Bethany sit side by side, while Tobias and Hunter sit on the other side, leaving Cody at the head of the table in his high chair. Xavier

reluctantly releases my hand to take the spot beside Ryan again, and I walk toward the seat beside Tobias.

I stroke my fingers through Cody's hair as I pass, and Hunter reaches out, pulling me into his side with a kiss to my forehead. I can't contain my smile. The butterflies in my tummy are going all sorts of crazy.

"Good morning, love," he whispers into my hair before releasing me, and I practically fucking float to my seat where Tobias instantly intertwines our fingers, resting our joined hands on his thigh as he pecks my cheek.

"You look pretty this morning," Tobias compliments with a smile on his face, and I roll my eyes.

"She looks pretty every morning, Toby," Hunter grumbles, and I avoid everyone's eyes, only now just realizing that there are pancakes laid out on the table with a variety of toppings everywhere.

Taking a clean plate from the side, I grab just one, drizzling a small amount of maple syrup over the top, all with one hand, when a bottle of water is placed before me.

I look up to see Bethany smiling at me as she holds out a bottle of pills, and I take them, murmuring my thanks. She remembers everything, storing the information to help ease everyone else's lives. I mentioned yesterday that I had been waking up with the worst headaches, and now here she is, offering me pain relievers.

"So are you guys ready to see Ilana?" Ryan asks, looking around at the Allstars, and they all sigh. Tobias's fingers tighten around mine, and I can't bring myself to ask him to let go so I can eat, wanting to offer him whatever support he seems to need.

“We’ll be fine. We came back and agreed to her terms, so that’ll work in our favor,” Xavier says, a tight smile on his face, and I frown.

“Are you sure? You left the correctional facility without her approval. Isn’t she going to be mad about that?” I ask, voicing the biggest worry I’ve had circling around in my mind since they left yesterday. I glance at Xavier, and Tobias lifts my hand to his mouth, kissing my knuckles before placing my hand by my plate, encouraging me to eat.

“Ilana loves putting us in there, but she doesn’t tend to meddle in the semantics of keeping us there unless she really wants to make the charges stick. That was simply a warning from her,” Xavier responds, and Hunter and Tobias nod along. It reminds me of Ilana having them arrested under the guise of assaulting Graham.

“As long as Ilana feels like she’s in charge, then she doesn’t add any pressure. The main concern is how we twist the fact she knows we were with you,” Hunter adds, and I rub my forehead, trying to come up with something myself too.

“Tell her you were there to try to get me to fall in line. The photo she has of us was from before you went to prison,” I suggest, sitting back in my seat, feeling rather pleased with myself, but as I glance around, I find all three of them looking at me like I’m crazy. Ryan and Bethany say nothing, opting to fuss over Cody instead.

“I told you things would be different, Eden, which means *not* doing things like that,” Xavier states like I might have forgotten the promises he made, but I shake my head.

“There is a huge difference because I’m fully aware of the situation this time and I am literally the one telling you to do it. We want her to think you’re on her side, so this is how we

do it. Tell her you're lying to me so you can break me or something, she'll fucking love that," I reason, firm in what I'm saying, and Ryan clears his throat.

"Eden is right," he agrees, making the guys even more restless, each one of them fidgeting in some way.

Hunter swipes a hand down his face, struggling with what we're saying, but I'm right, I know I am. This will keep us safer for a little longer.

"You think it will work?" Tobias asks, looking only at me, and I nod, wetting my lips.

"Yes, yes I do."

"Then that's what we'll do," he responds, popping a piece of pancake into his mouth as if nothing else needs to be said, the others relenting along with him.

Huh, having them actually hear what I have to say feels strange but empowering all at once. Let's hope it wasn't all for nothing.



## TOBIAS

Stepping out of the Jag, I brush my hands down my t-shirt, plucking away invisible lint as the others follow me out of the SUV.

Xavier hands the keys to the valet guys, slipping them each a fifty to have them park the Jag away from the building in a secure parking lot Ryan actually owns instead of somewhere Ilana has direct access to.

“You ready?” Hunter asks, but neither of us answer him as we fall into step, heading toward the automatic doors of the office building.

It’s only four stories high, but it all belongs to Ilana. None of us are all that familiar with what she actually does, except run shady casinos and launder money, and now, apparently, being the new mayor.

The usual bodyguards are at the door, eyeing us as they always do, but no one steps forward to pat us down as the receptionist greets Xavier.

“Good morning, Mr. Knight. I’ve been asked to send you up to the fourth floor. Someone will be with you as soon as possible,” she says enthusiastically, pushing her tits together as she talks, and I hold back my eye roll.

If this poor girl thought getting a job at Ilana’s office would get her closer to Xavier, then she was truly mistaken. That’s not how this works. Never has, never will. Xavier doesn’t offer any form of response as we automatically head for the elevators, our shoes squeaking against the white marble flooring.

This whole place is too damn clinical for my liking—white on white on white. There is no personality, just pricey items, which is all this town seems to care about. It’s so fucking boring, just like them.

The elevator doors open as we approach, and two men dressed in suits step out, giving us a wide berth as we brush by them when entering the large elevator space. It’s wall-to-wall mirrors in here, and just as original as the outside. The dark carpet feels like a black hole in comparison.

Xavier hits the button for the fourth floor as Hunter clears his throat. “At least she didn’t send us to the fucking basement, that would have been a red flag,” he mumbles, and I huff in agreement. That’s her style too. We’ve been down there before, and I’d rather not remember *that* experience right now.

Silence falls around us as the elevator takes us up, and when the doors glide open, Xavier steps out first, any sign of a smirk or happiness completely nonexistent as he wears his game face.

It takes me a second to remember what’s on this floor, but when I walk out of the elevator after Xavier, it all comes back to me. It’s just one large conference room with a set of double doors, the only thing separating us from the wide-open space.

Wordlessly, Xavier pushes both doors at the same time, letting them swing open hard enough that they only just miss smacking against the walls. I bet it took everything in him to control the force he used, because we all know if they bounced off the walls, Ilana would have been able to read his foul mood from a mile away.

I walk into the conference room after Xavier, with Hunter taking up the rear, to find Ilana sitting in her seat like she’s the motherfucking queen. There’s a phone in her hand as she looks up at us, and she murmurs into her cell before placing the device down on the table in front of her.

“Boys, how nice of you to show. And early too, I might add,” she remarks with a fake smile, waving her hand out in front of her. “Please, take a seat.”

Not one of us utters a single word as we approach the long table that could easily seat twenty people. She sits dead center on one side, leaving us to take the three seats facing her.



Xavier obviously falls down into the chair opposite her, while Hunter takes the one on his left and I go to Xavier's right.

"You wanted to see us?" Xavier prompts once we are all seated, not wanting to waste time or let her dictate the entire thing, and I lean back in my chair, getting comfortable.

I can't imagine what it must be like being Xavier Knight. As an outsider looking in on his family dynamic, I really don't know how he has survived so long with this dragon breathing down his fucking neck day after day. I know my parents are bad, but Xavier really didn't get a mother, not really, and that's fucked him up more than he'll ever admit. Let's not even discuss his father. He has no fucking spine.

"Hmm, so where have you been?" she asks, raising her fake, tattooed eyebrows at us, and I squeeze the arms of my chair, hating her condescending tone.

"You know where we were, Mother. Is that all you called us in for?" Xavier counters, sounding bored. His body language screams inconvenienced as he crosses his ankles and laces his fingers together on the table.

"Don't get smart with me, Xavier, it doesn't suit you," she snaps, her voice dripping with disdain, and I have to bite back my own response. Nothing gets me angrier than a fucked up parent attempting to talk down to us.

She can choke on a bag of dicks if she thinks we're ever actually going to listen to her again, but she doesn't need to know that.

"Care to tell me who you've been with?" she questions, crossing her arms over her chest with an expectant look on her face, and it's Hunter who responds this time.

“I feel like you already know that too, Ilana. Especially since I was with her when one of your little minions saw me,” he states, matching her pose, and I almost get giddy with excitement. I love riling this witch up.

“How about we skip to the part where we explain ourselves?” Xavier interjects, tapping his fingers on the table, and Ilana shakes her head, glaring at the three of us before she sighs.

“Fine, but it better be good, because I have the warden on speed dial,” she warns, and I almost laugh. She never calls him Grant Holmes. Apparently straight up “warden” holds more power and makes her feel better.

“That won’t be necessary, Mother. We were there for you. When the warden was so kind as to let us out, we went to school the next day to find Eden hadn’t been around. So after a little digging, we decided to investigate for ourselves. We couldn’t really tell you what was going on because then Eden would have gotten suspicious, and we didn’t need that, now did we?”

Her gaze is icy as she looks us over with uncertainty in her eyes, and that’s when I finally open my mouth.

“Ilana, you know what eighteen-year-old girls crave the most?” I ask, not waiting for her to respond. “Attention and love. That’s what makes them tick, which is exactly what we were offering Eden to lull her into a false sense of security,” I reason, repeating Eden’s words exactly as she said them herself before we left. I hear Hunter clear his throat, which almost feels like a fucking pat on the back for keeping a straight face.

“Carry on,” Ilana mutters, leaning forward in her seat as she keeps her gaze focused on me.

“We told her everything is going to be okay, and that we would always be by her side. We were so close to bringing her home, then you made contact, which only sped up the process, and we made sure she did what you wanted instead of fleeing.”

I could be a fucking actor with the level of smoothness I’m giving off right now, like I haven’t practiced these exact words in my head on the way over here. Keeping my body relaxed and acting unfazed, I tilt my mouth into a slight grin.

None of us speak again, letting the silence extend and forcing Ilana to be the one to break it. I don’t even shift my foot, since this woman has the ability to smell weakness from a mile away.

“If you expect me to believe all of this, I need to know what you plan to do to support me going forward.”

I stare her down, struggling to breathe in case I say something wrong. This isn’t my area of expertise. It’ll have to be good old Xavier who gets her to believe us, because I can see the slight gleam of doubt in her pointed glare.

“How about you tell us what you would like us to do to support you? We’re not really going to be following orders if we’re the ones making the decisions, Mother,” Xavier replies calmly, and I’m about ready to fist bump the fucking air with glee, because this bitch loves nothing more than to be told she holds the power.

“That’s my son,” she says with pride, rising from her seat before turning to look out of the window, almost like she’s staring down at all her pawns. “I’m glad you’re so willing to help. For now, I want you to leave Eden Grady to me, which means you straight up keep the hell away from her. I have plans for her myself. Plans that will involve you when I’m

ready. Then, and only then, will I be able to see if you're as worthy as you say you are."

Her words send chills down my spine. I don't like the fact she's keeping us in the dark, but it shouldn't fucking surprise me.

"If that's what you want, that's what we'll do," Hunter answers, and she smiles over her shoulder at us.

"It is. Now, you're dismissed."

TWENTY-TWO



# EDEN

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Fuck, I don't want to be back here.

I stare up at Asheville High, the steps taunting me, begging me to take them and walk straight into my impending doom. I want to be sick, and not because of the baby for a change.

My grip on the steering wheel of my G-Wagon doesn't soften as I sit in the parking lot, looking up at the cloudy sky. It's been raining off and on all morning, which is frustrating when the temperature doesn't actually drop as well, so now it's hot and wet. What the fuck do we wear in these situations?

I opted for a loose fitted tee, conscious of my body even though I'm not showing, with a pair of leggings, Converse, and my leather jacket on hand if needed.

I can feel the guys looking at me from Xavier's Jag in the next row over, but none of them rush me. It feels strange not to see them on the path leading up to school like they usually are, but we've also arrived separately because we need to keep up the ruse for Ilana. It was a group decision, but I still fucking hate it.

I realize my childish, stubborn ass made things worse, which resulted in her sending them to Holmes Correctional Facility, and I refuse to be that dumb bitch again.

A knock on my door startles me, and I glance to my left to see Archie smiling through the glass at me. God, I've fucking missed him more than I thought I would. Living with Bethany and Ryan offers me a new sense of peace, but I feel the distance with Archie.

"Let's go, cookie!" he shouts, and I roll my eyes at his level of energy this morning, turning off the engine as he opens the door. The rain instantly gets the inside of my G-Wagon wet. Great. "Good morning. Are you okay?" he asks, his eyes searching mine, and I nod.

"I'm fine, I just don't really want to be here," I admit. Although, I'm sure he already knows that by the disappointment on my face. We're here for no one but Ilana's sake right now, and that pisses me off even more.

"You've got this, Eden. You always do. And I'll be here every step of the way," he assures me with a smile, shutting the door behind me as I step from the vehicle. I'm really not feeling his positive mantras this early.

"Me too," Charlie adds, fastening her black knit cardigan as she comes to stand beside Archie. I watch as they embrace, their arms banded tightly around the other as love literally washes over them. The air crackles when they look into each other's eyes, and it doesn't gross me out as much as it used to.

I want to be able to love freely like this, with no one trying to force us apart, no secrets, and no pretending we don't like each other to keep up appearances. I just want my life to not be exhausting for five fucking minutes, but that seems like too much of an ask these days.

"I got my bitch too!" Lou-Lou hollers as she joins us. Her black leather pants, white tee, biker jacket, and combat boots make her look like a badass.

Somehow, Ryan pulled some strings, and for the foreseeable future, Lou-Lou is going to attend Asheville High along with us. I don't know *what* he did, and I've decided it's not my business to find out. These guys seem to know what they're doing, and as much as I'm an independent woman, they know their shit. So if I get Lou-Lou here as an extra layer of protection, then I'm not going to complain. Bethany is more than happy to set up another guest room for her too.

My life seems to have been pretty sheltered in comparison to theirs—until I was forced to Knight's Creek, of course. This has been one hell of a roller coaster so far, but I'm done letting Ilana beat me down and try to break me.

I've hit rock bottom, literally in the ocean at Freemont Beach, before Hunter pulled me from the waves in my drunken state. The realization I felt in that moment, that I wanted to live, mixed with the news I'm pregnant is what has me determined to find my way out of this fucking town.

“Thank you,” I tell all three of them. Things may have been difficult at times, and I may have underestimated everyone on my team in some way or another, but they're all standing here, being the support system I never knew I needed.

Not one of them responds, but they all smile, likely knowing my hormones are making my emotions go crazy again. I feel a war of hope and nerves battling inside me. I guess this will be our moment of truth. I can't stop myself from swooning over the Allstars, but I haven't forgotten how that has ended for me before. I just love the high too much to be cautious. If they fuck me over, though, there will be no coming back from that. I know I deserve better, and so does my baby.



Tilting my head to the sky, I feel the rain starting to fall a little heavier as Lou-Lou links her arm through mine and guides me toward the building. I follow her willingly, letting her pull me through the parking lot where I spot the Allstars still sitting in Xavier's SUV. I'm desperate to wait for them, but I bite down on my bottom lip and keep going.

It sounds like their conversation with Ilana left them at an impasse yesterday, and I know it's playing with their need for control, but it hasn't changed how they've been with me. They've kept me up to date on what's happening and told me exactly what she said, all while being caring and supportive. The part I'm more nervous about is what she thinks she's going to get Xavier to do. I can handle her coming at me, but the idea of her forcing him into a difficult situation scares me more than my own safety.

I focus on my surroundings as Charlie and Archie lead the way, with Lou-Lou and me following. I spy the fucking cleat chasers and a couple of guys from the football team in their usual spot on the path leading up to the school building.

I haven't fucking missed seeing Roxy and KitKat, not even a little bit, but there they stand, like they think they fucking run the school. I really don't want any drama, but I'm silently hoping that Xavier will knock them down a peg or two when the Allstars walk the halls again. They look far too smug for my liking.

Distracting myself, I look at Lou-Lou. "I'm sorry you have to keep putting your life on hold for me. I don't know what Ryan knows that I don't, but I appreciate you being here like you wouldn't believe. I just feel bad about it," I admit, squeezing her arm, and she smiles at me.

“Eden, you’re my friend no matter what. Back in White River, things were very different. You lived on the other side of town, not knowing what my family actually did, and I liked that. You were there whenever I needed to step away from all of the crazy without even realizing how you were helping me. This is me returning the favor,” she states casually, and I try not to gape at her.

“Is it lame if I literally just say samesies? Because I have no words for that,” I admit, and she grins, shaking her head as she looks forward, her calm, cool demeanor changing instantly.

My focus shifts to the group in front of us. With every step we take toward the cheer squad, my tension increases, my gut telling me they’re not going to just let us pass. If I have to smack a bitch to protect my own body, I fucking will. What scares me the most is the fact that if they know I’m pregnant, that information will likely make them lash out at me even more. I fear an actual attack against me would be even more expected.

The second we step onto the path, their laughter and conversations seem to become louder, more animated, encouraging everyone to look their way, but I’m too busy anticipating their physical movements than to actually pay attention to what they’re saying.

The back of my neck tingles, and I hope that’s from the Allstars heading our way and not because some fucker is creeping up behind me.

“Look who it is, the whore of Asheville High has returned,” KitKat singsongs loud enough for fucking Bethany to hear back at her house. I cringe internally but keep my face impassive. I’m so fucking done with that word. *Whore*.

I glance their way, not wanting them to think they can intimidate me, but the sneers on their lips tell me they want to make up for all the time I've been gone. And all the stupid shit they've wanted to say or do to me is on the tip of their tongues.

“Move out of the way, Roxy,” Charlie says with a sigh as she comes to a stop in front of Lou-Lou and me, Roxy blocking her path as Archie glares at her.

“Shut the fuck up, James. No one gives a shit about you,” Roxy snaps, and my defenses instantly rise. This fucking bitch. She can try to tear me down, I don't care, but she can leave Charlie out of it.

“Hey, back off,” I demand, moving to stand beside Charlie as Lou-Lou releases my arm and circles around the other side of Archie.

“You don't get to make orders around here, whore. You've caused enough damage to this town. Now, I'm taking control over Knight's Creek again with the Allstars by my side. I've already been told they want nothing to do with you anymore. You're back to being trash until we decide what to do with you,” she states with a venomous smile, and my hands clench at my sides, my nails digging into my palms as I try to calm myself down.

The only person who would be under the impression the Allstars and I are not together is Ilana. Otherwise, the rest would be rumors, but she seems pretty certain she knows what she's talking about.

I store that information away to analyze later as Lou-Lou positions herself between Roxy and me.

“That’s excellent. You can have your little painfully plain and uninteresting fucking town, no one gives a shit. You win, Pinky. Now run along and find Perky, and get the fuck out of our faces,” Lou-Lou says far too calmly, and I watch as KitKat and a few of the other girls move closer to us from our left.

This is about to turn into a basic bitch beat down, I can feel it. The fact Lou-Lou called them the same nicknames I do without me saying a word has me desperate to fucking laugh like a seal at the whole thing.

“Who the fuck are you? Do you even know who you’re talking to?” KitKat sneers, her five inch stilettos sinking slightly in the wet grass beneath her feet as she moves closer to Lou-Lou.

Who the fuck comes to school in the pouring down rain wearing stilettos, an orange miniskirt, and a pale pink top?

Like who? Seriously.

Roxy isn’t any better in her gold minidress. They look like they’re heading for nightclubs or the streets. At least Roxy has the smarts to wear flat sandals.

Not wanting to give KitKat the opportunity to touch Lou-Lou, I move to step in front of her to block her path, but an arm is suddenly across my chest—it’s Charlie as she moves between KitKat and me.

These girls are not fighting over me, that’s ridiculous.

“Nothing to say?” Roxy snickers, taking another step toward us, and it feels like we’re being circled by a pack of hyenas as the cheer squad moves closer.

“Darlin’, if I wasn’t choking on the stench of your breath, I might actually be able to get a word in,” Lou-Lou comments

in response, her body tense, and I cringe at the damn playground insults they're throwing at each other.

I don't have time for this, not even a little bit.

"Let's go," I murmur to Lou-Lou and Charlie, glancing over my shoulder to see Archie looking back at the Allstars who are standing at the edge of the path, watching what's going down without intervening.

Fuck. The last thing we need is for them to intervene. I shake my head slightly at the Allstars, and none of them look happy. No one else would be able to tell, their facial expressions are completely impassive, but *I* see the tension in Xavier's jaw, the clenching of Tobias's hands, and the way Hunter almost looks like he's bouncing on his toes, ready to move toward me.

Pushing my shoulders back, I straighten my spine as I grip Charlie's arm, trying to move us along, but I barely manage to take two steps before I'm being shoved backward, and that's when all hell breaks loose.

Charlie swings her right arm back, hitting KitKat straight in the face. The crunch of her knuckles as they connect with KitKat's jaw makes my own teeth rattle.

"Eden!" Archie shouts from somewhere behind me, but I refuse to take my eyes off of the girls in front of me.

While KitKat is recovering from the blow, leaning over, Charlie glares down at her, ready to go again if she moves. Flicking my gaze past them, I find Lou-Lou holding Roxy by her hair, and the grip she has is like a vise on Roxy's skull.

I watch in slow motion as Lou-Lou lifts her leg, yanks Roxy's head down at the same time, and smashes Roxy in the face with her knee. They're all fighting like animals. How am

I even supposed to attempt to keep the baby safe if this is what I walk into on my first day back to school?

One of the girls from the cheer squad screams with fury before rushing toward me, and just as I go to defend myself, I'm being lifted off the ground. I feel like I'm fucking flying as a hand tightens around my waist and another scoops under my legs, and I look up to find Archie carrying me away from the carnage.

He rushes me to my G-Wagon and sets me gently on my feet. I barely manage to catch my breath before he wordlessly turns on his heel and sprints back to help Charlie. Being lifted into the air unexpectedly caught me off guard.

I frantically search the crowd that has formed, watching the shit show unfold, but I don't spot the Allstars anywhere. God, I hope Lou-Lou and Charlie are okay.

A bang on the hood of my G-Wagon snares my attention, and I glance over my shoulder to see Xavier looking me over, scouring me from head to toe to ensure I'm okay before he speaks.

"Get in, Nafas. We're getting out of here," he rumbles, walking around to the passenger side door as I fumble to unlock it.

Stepping inside, my heart still pounding in my chest, I look him over before starting the engine.

"Where are Tobias and Hunter?"

"We played rock, paper, scissors. I won, so I get to leave with you while they have to force themselves to act completely unfazed by the shit that just went down," he answers calmly, his hand moving to cover mine, and I relax a little from his touch.

“You played rock, paper, scissors,” I repeat, and he nods. They played rock, paper, scissors while everyone else was in the middle of a brawl. The laughter that bursts from my lips is uncontrollable. You literally cannot make these assholes up.

“And where are we going?” I question, putting the car in drive now that my body isn’t shaking with adrenaline, and he smiles.

“Back to Bethany’s.”

Looking into his eyes, I find myself pausing, stopping the car before I even pull out of the space to give him my full attention.

“Kiss me,” I whisper, needing the reminder that everything that just happened doesn’t affect *us*. Not that I know why it would, but I need to feel his lips now more than ever.

Knowing they didn’t fuck everything up with their caveman tendencies, blowing everything we have done to keep Ilana calm, overwhelms me. It shows me we are a team, and this is all worth fighting for. This is the progress we need.

Without pause, he leans across the center console, brushing his lips softly against mine, and I go lax in my seat.

“I love you.”

TWENTY-THREE





## EDEN

---

I dig my teeth into my tongue so hard I'm sure there's blood.  
There has to be.

*"I love you."*

*"I know."*

I fucking said those three magical words, and his response... *I know*. At least he responded, I guess. It's a hell of a lot better than what I said to him when he muttered those words to me. I always said nothing or brushed over the conversation instead.

Is this payback for that? I don't know, but now I'm starting to regret saying them. My palms sweat as I take the last turn, and Bethany's house comes up on the right as silence continues to fill the G-Wagon.

The gates open as we near, the system recognizing my license plate, and then I come to a stop outside of the front door while Xavier taps away on his phone.

Unclipping my seatbelt, I glance over at Xavier to find him already staring at me. I haven't been able to look in his direction since I last spoke, so it surprises me to see his tense jawline and wild hazel eyes.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, instantly annoyed with myself for being concerned over the lousy response he gave me earlier.

With a sharp nod, he lifts his phone in the air. “I was messaging Ryan. No one’s home. He said you have a key anyway, and the gate will only open for their plates or yours. Bethany will be back in about three hours,” he explains, looking up at the house.

I’ve never been here without one of them around. It feels strange, but I don’t feel like a trespasser.

“You don’t have to wait around if you want to head back to school,” I murmur, avoiding his gaze as I open my door and step down, not waiting for another disappointing response.

I hear his car door slam shut after mine does, but I continue toward the house, letting the rain coat me like a second skin as I dig out the key from my bag and unlock the door before stepping inside.

“Hey, what’s your issue?” he asks briskly, his voice strained as he shuts the front door behind him.

How do I explain that I’m just being a petty bitch who feels like she got her feelings hurt over something I’d literally been doing myself? I’m a hypocrite. I’m a fucking moody, hormonal hypocrite.

“I’m fine,” I respond, not pausing as I make my way to the kitchen. I need a fucking drink. Sadly, a nonalcoholic one, but a cold fruity one will do.

“Eden, will you just stop for a minute?” he growls. He doesn’t grab me or force me to stop, so I continue until I reach the breakfast bar, dropping my bag down on top of it as I try to swipe my wet hair back from my face.

Taking a deep breath, I stand tall and turn back to face him. He's much closer than I expected, his chest heaving as water drips from his hair, and I watch as a single drop slides down his cheek. I want to be mad at him, but the second I see him, I want him inside of me more.

"Why do you have to be so damn hot?" I grumble, kicking my Converse off as he stares at me in confusion. His brows knit together as he scrunches his nose.

"What?"

Giving him the side-eye, I sigh. "Don't act like you don't know you're hot." I plant my hands on my hips, and I know I'm not making sense right now, but fuck him.

Frowning down at me, he rubs the back of his neck. "I'm confused. Can you tell me what the fuck happened between leaving school and getting here?"

I can't help but roll my fucking eyes at him because *of course he doesn't know*. Unnecessary annoyance builds in the pit of my stomach as I drop my hands from my hips and look at him helplessly.

"I said I love you," I blurt out, and the confusion deepens on his face.

"Right, and I love you too," he replies, taking a step toward me, but I point my finger at him, and he stops, frowning harder.

"That's not what you said back to me in the car." I almost feel like I want to stomp my foot in a temper tantrum, while also itching to berate myself for acting like a needy bitch.

Realization washes over his face, and his eyes widen as he looks me over before he huffs out a laugh. I was on the verge

of fucking apologizing for my whiny ass, but he can suck it now.

Unzipping his jacket, he tosses it on the countertop, revealing his Asheville High jersey underneath, and the tight fit around his biceps almost distracts me enough to forget what we're even talking about.

“Eden,” he murmurs, taking a step toward me again, and I let him this time. He brings his hands to my hips, instantly stroking his thumbs back and forth over my t-shirt, and my muscles tense with anticipation. “You just fucking told me you love me while you were driving. You can't do that to a man. I'm trying to be better for you, for us, for the baby, but hearing those words come from *your* lips had my dick so hard my fucking vision was blurring.”

“Oh,” I mumble lamely, at a complete loss as I stare up into his eyes.

“Do you think I wanted to lay you out bare across the hood for every motherfucker in sight to catch a glimpse of what's mine?” His jaw is tense, and his eyes darken.

My body thrums with electricity from his words alone. “Well, I would have been down for that.” My response makes him grin down at me with a slight shake of his head as he drags his teeth across his bottom lip, which has me clenching my thighs.

“And I would have given you what you wanted if it wasn't for the observers, the rain, and the chance it would get back to Ilana and blow all of this up in our faces,” he says sincerely, and I almost pout at the lost opportunity.

Placing my hands on his chest, I slowly slide them up to his neck, playing with the collar of his jersey as I look up at

him coyly.

“Xavier, I have to admit, I love this whole persona you have going on. I enjoy feeling like your equal, but I’m also not going to lie and say I don’t miss your asshole alpha side too,” I purr, watching his eyes widen in surprise.

My heart pounds in my chest as I speak the truth, nervously awaiting his response, and I see the moment he slips back into the role I hate to love so damn much. His jaw tightens, his eyes flare with the challenge, and the slight sneer to his lips reappears.

“Is that so?”

“Uh-huh.”

In one quick move, he lifts me off the ground and places my ass on the countertop, putting my face about four inches above his as he spreads my thighs to stand between them. My hair frames my face, cocooning us as I lean my forehead against his. He keeps his hands under my thighs as my fingers stroke his neck.

“I think that’s what makes me love you most, Nafas,” he says, our breaths mingling together as he stares deep into my eyes.

“What?” I question, frozen in a trance.

“You saw the worst parts of my soul first, and you still somehow managed to fall in love with me,” he answers, his tone raw as I trail my hands up his neck to cup his face.

I don’t know how to respond to that. It feels too real, too delicate, and it almost makes him too vulnerable. He closes his eyes for a second and takes a breath, and when they reopen, wild and determined all at once, his gaze tells me what he wants.

*Me.*

“I need you to make up for the fact you didn’t bring me to orgasm spread across the hood of my G-Wagon now, because that sounds like a damn good fantasy,” I mutter, leaning closer to trail my tongue along his bottom lip, and the sultry look in his eyes almost brings me to my knees.

“I’m going to fulfill that fantasy and any others you may have, Eden. We’ve got plenty of time. But I need your fantasy to be me fucking you right here, right now.” He pulls me closer, our bodies flush as he grinds his cock against my core, and my mouth falls open from the sensations.

Fuck. I really don’t want to come all over the damn countertop in Bethany’s kitchen, but I also really don’t want to move from this spot.

As if sensing my inner turmoil, Xavier grins at me. “If you want my fucking dick, Eden. It’s here or nowhere.”

Dammit.

Before I can even respond, his hands are on the hem of my t-shirt, pulling it over my head to reveal my black lace bralette, a sight he looks more than happy to be feasting his eyes on.

I don’t stop him or even consider it, enjoying his touch too much.

His calloused fingers trail over the edges of my bralette, feeling like flames against my skin as he drags the straps down my arms, exposing my nipples, before unfastening it and letting the scrap of material fall to the floor.

“I have a fantasy for right now,” I breathe out, his gaze instantly flashing to mine as I sink my teeth into my bottom lip. I know I could say just about anything to him right now and he’d agree.

“I like how you think you can make demands, Nafas,” he teases, reaching over his head to pull his jersey off, and I almost come from watching him. Men have no idea how hot that shit is. We should be able to bottle it or make a porn website for women solely for this.

Before he can toss the material aside, I grab it from his hands and quickly tug it over my head. It’s huge on me, but it smells so fucking good.

“Fuck me with your jersey on, number nine,” I purr, leaning back to brace myself on my hands, and he just fucking stares at me.

I think I just broke Xavier Knight.

“You were fucking made for me, Eden Grady,” he rumbles before crushing his lips to mine, and I sit up, trying to fight him for control.

I dig my fingers into his hair, our tongues dancing together as he slowly lays me back against the table.

“I need you, Xavier,” I murmur against his lips, and he hisses with need.

“I’ve pictured you like this, spread out before me with nothing but my jersey on since you wore it to the game,” he admits, moving back to pull my leggings down my thighs, taking my panties along with them.

I feel exposed, but in the best way possible. I’m eager for more of him.

Xavier nudges my thighs farther apart, his gaze focused between my legs as I huff in annoyance, all my patience gone, but he just grins wider.

Refusing to wait for him to make the next move, I trail my fingers down his jersey, heading for my core, but just as I get to the apex of my thighs, he wraps his hand around my wrist. I meet his gaze, a growl on my lips, but he doesn't seem fazed at all.

“If I'm going to let you come right now, it's going to be from my cock and all over my cock, or not at all.”

Wow.

The feminist inside me wants me to bury him, but the other part of me, the desperate and needy little hussy side has me widening my legs, encouraging him.

“Show me what you've got, big man,” I goad, and before I've even finished my sentence, he's unzipping his denim jeans and revealing his thick cock.

His fist tightens around his hard length, and he makes a show of dragging his hand up and down. Motherfucker.

“Xavier, I swear to God. You fuck me now or you watch me do it myself. Don't think I haven't got my toys here,” I bite out, and his eyes flare at my words, but he instantly drags the head of his cock over my clit.

This asshole thinks he's in charge, but I know he's too soft on me really.

When he drags the tip to my entrance, feeling how wet I am without him actually touching me yet, his eyes instantly lift to mine, and his head tilts back at the feel.

“Fuck, Xavier. You're teasing,” I growl, propping myself up on my elbows as he releases his cock and strokes his thumbs across the apex of my thighs, my muscles tingling under his touch.



“You asked for it, Nafas.”

As he says Nafas, his cock finds my pussy and he thrusts inside of me hard and fast. My mouth falls open with a cry on the tip of my tongue as he stretches my core. I can feel every ridge of his cock, every vein, and every ounce of heat coming from him, and I feel like I’m going to combust.

He holds himself deep inside of me, giving me a second to adjust before he slowly drags his cock out and thrusts again.

“Fuck,” I groan, my senses on fire as he lifts my legs up in the air and rests them on his shoulders, and the new angle almost has me bucking up off the table.

“Please, Xavier. Please,” I plead, his cock rubbing just right as I bring my fingers to my clit, but the motherfucker pushes my hand away.

“I said by my cock or not at all.” His voice is firm and full of determination as he doesn’t relent his assault on my pussy.

With my legs still against his shoulders, he tilts my hips up higher, bringing my ass completely off the surface beneath me, and he strokes against my G-spot.

Holy fuck.

My hands fall to my chest, squeezing my breasts as they beg to be touched, and he thankfully doesn’t stop me. His movements become more uneven, my pussy clamping down around his cock, and just when I’m on the verge of begging him to let me touch myself, he bites my calf.

White-hot light flashes in my eyes, and my jaw hangs loose as the bite mixes with the pleasure and ecstasy ricocheting through my body, setting every nerve ending on fire with my orgasm.

Sounds bounce around the room, noises I've never heard either of us make before as we ride out our climaxes together. Xavier's cock pulses inside me, making my own orgasm drag out longer.

Completely satiated, I close my eyes, the intensity overwhelming. When he pulls out and slowly lowers my legs, I'm almost ready to fall asleep, but he quickly scoops me up in his arms and cradles me against his chest as I pry my eyes open.

My clothes are scattered across the kitchen, tossed without care, and his cock still hangs out of his jeans, but he carries me upstairs slowly and gently, like we didn't just fuck like rabbits on the kitchen breakfast bar.

He steps into my room, heading straight for the bathroom, and I smile softly as he places me on the vanity, the cool marble making me cringe, but the sight of him turning on the shower and reappearing with a cloth moments later makes it all worthwhile.

Who knew the same guy could be so demanding and so sweet all while being the biggest dick I've ever met? I shouldn't be surprised. These Allstars have done nothing but surprise me from day one.

"Are you okay, Eden?" Xavier asks, pausing in front of me, and I nod, my chest warm with what *almost* feels like happiness.

Taking a deep breath, I look into his hazel eyes and repeat the words I said earlier.

"I love you."

"You're trying to get my dick hard again, aren't you?" he retorts, a grin on his lips as he cups my chin.

“You better fucking say it, you—”

“I love you too, Nafas. I love you too.”

TWENTY-FOUR



# XAVIER

Walking through the hallways at Asheville High, I feel every pair of eyes on me as I make my way to the cafeteria with Hunter and Tobias.

After everything that happened yesterday morning, including when I left, a new sense of fear and caution has settled around us. We may have been away, but they've had a stark reminder that it definitely isn't the cheer squad that runs this place. Not even a little.

Lou-Lou's and Charlie's stance only worked in the Allstars' favor, reminding everyone Roxy and KitKat aren't comfortable at the top of the food chain. After I left with Eden, Tobias and Hunter stepped in, raining verbal hell down on everyone, thus the balance was restored.

Good. That's just how I like it.

Stepping into the cafeteria, I instantly begin searching for Eden, but I don't see her anywhere. Where the fuck is she? I take another look around the room, and I don't see Charlie or Lou-Lou either.

"Can you see Eden or is it just me?" I ask, glancing to my left to see Hunter shaking his head.

“Let’s get our food and sit before we message her,” Tobias mumbles, and I sigh, nodding in agreement.

I really fucking hate all of this. Making it look like we’re not madly fucking in love with her is proving very difficult, but this time, instead of making her the pariah of the school, we’re ignoring her, which in turn makes everyone else ignore her.

I grab a tray, quickly stock up on two steaks and a helping of mashed potatoes, and head for our usual table. As I drop down into my seat, Tobias and Hunter take the two spots across from me, and it catches me off guard when Archie falls into the seat to my left.

“Where the fuck did you come from?” I grumble, casting my eyes around the room again, but she’s still not there.

Archie doesn’t respond, he simply offers me an eye roll that his sister has clearly helped him perfect. Damn twins. It’s still so strange how nobody saw it until my mother dropped that tidbit of information, and now I can’t not see the similarities—their eyes, for one, and the way they grin at the most random shit. It’s odd as fuck.

“Have you seen the girls?” he asks, and I shake my head.

Forcing myself to eat, I let my mind drift back to yesterday, remembering the feel of Eden around my cock as she lay on the countertop with my jersey on. My. Jersey. If that’s not every guy’s wet dream, I don’t know what is. The fact that she was the one to ask for it only made it hotter.

She said I love you. *She fucking said it. Finally.* I had begun to see it in her eyes the more I said those three words to her, but I fucked it up like a fool when she finally said those words to me. I promised I wouldn’t boast to the guys. She

needed her moment with them herself, but I think the fact we didn't screw her over yesterday like a niggling part of her thought we would only solidified how real this is for us.

*I know.*

What a dick. But it was totally worth it to get her all riled up like that. She always comes a little harder when she's mad, and I'm not against it.

"Has anyone heard anything from KitKat or Roxy?" Hunter asks, taking a bite of his burger before he scans the room again, but he won't find her, I already checked. Again.

"Nope. Not since Roxy's parents showed up, kicking up a stink and demanding Eden, Charlie, and Lou-Lou be expelled," Tobias answers, and I sigh at how ridiculous these people are.

From what Hunter said, the fight got completely out of hand. Lou-Lou and Charlie pounded into the fucking gold diggers, but they deserved it. They like to start a lot of shit, especially when they feel threatened, so I'm glad they got knocked back a step or two. They needed a fucking reminder of who's in charge here.

"Can you believe Roxy's dad though? He was a drunken mess when he showed up, he was even vomiting in the hallway. I don't think he's taken it very well that your mother is now mayor," Archie interjects, and I cast my gaze his way.

I didn't know that, and out of the corner of my eye, I can tell Tobias and Hunter didn't know that either, their eyes widening in surprise. Losing such a high-ranking position within this town with these kinds of people will hit anyone hard. We're going to need to keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn't get too reckless, because he will either become

desperate to please Ilana, which puts Eden in danger, or he will want to get back at Ilana, and I don't want him thinking that would involve me at all.

I pull my phone from my pocket, ready to send Eden a message, when the screen flashes with a missed call from my father. Excellent. He can fucking wait for a call back. My voicemail icon flashes too, but I'll listen to that later.

I haven't spoken to him since he let me take Eden to see her mother, and that was a complete shit show. He's offered no explanation for the situation, and I guess I haven't pushed for one, my attention solely on Eden.

Deciding I can't wait for the girls to show up, I hit Eden's name, lifting my phone to my ear as I hear it ring. We don't have a clue who is working for Ilana in Asheville High, and we don't want to give it all away so easily, but this, not knowing where she is, is fucking ruining me.

"Hello?" Lou-Lou's voice filters through the line, and it instantly has me on high alert. I tense as I glance at the guys.

"Where's Eden?" I growl, looking down at the table and resting my head in my hand as I try to shield myself from everyone in the room.

"Wait... Why do you have Xavier saved in your phone as Anaconda? Is it because he has a big dick? I know he has the big dick energy going for him, but—"

"Lou-Lou, not right now," Eden mumbles, cutting off Lou-Lou's inquiry.

Any other time, I would be focused on what Lou-Lou's saying, preening like a fucking peacock at her words, but the retching sound that follows Eden's statement has me rising



from the table. I immediately meet Hunter's and Tobias's gazes.

"Is that Eden?" I ask, my heart pounding in my chest as I focus all my attention on her response, and Lou-Lou hums.

"Yeah. She ran from class earlier, and she hasn't stopped being sick since. She's complaining of a headache too. I don't know whether she's picked up an illness or if it's..." She trails off, not wanting to voice it out loud, but I know what she means. If something is wrong with her, she needs to be checked over. Now.

"What the hell is going on?" Tobias demands, watching me as I try to remain calm.

"Hunter, I need you to call Ryan right now. Tell him we need a doctor or nurse as soon as possible. Someone who can tell us what's causing the sickness," I order, ignoring Tobias's question because I can't fucking answer it here.

"Okay," he responds simply, not asking for further details because he knows I can't explain right now. My food is long forgotten, and I don't plan to spend another second here.

"Archie, go get your car and bring it around to the fire exit over by the gym," I demand, and he's up out of his seat in seconds, not questioning me as he rushes from the room.

"X, I need you to tell me what the fuck is going on right now because you're acting like someone has been decapitated," Tobias bites out, rising to his feet and planting his hands on the table in front of me.

Fuck, wait... Am I overreacting? I don't think I am, but it's not life threatening... that we know of. Shit. It could be. The cafeteria practically disappears around me, my vision

narrowing to the path out of this room. I'm hyper focused on getting Eden out of here.

"She's not well, but it could be serious. We don't know any of this shit, and I need a doctor to give me the facts," I bite out. He nods in agreement and moves toward the exit without me saying another word.

"Xavier, please keep a low profile. We both know she'll murder you in your sleep if you blow this all out of the water for the sake of her vomiting," Lou-Lou warns, reminding me she's still on the phone, and I sigh.

"Fine. Where are you guys? I need you to get to Archie," I grumble, raking a hand through my hair as I try to keep my emotions at bay and my face impassive. She explains how close they are before ending the call.

Wordlessly, we exit the cafeteria. A few people track our movements, but the deadly glare on my face keeps everyone at arm's length. I hear Hunter murmuring to Ryan on the phone, hopefully arranging something as we head for the main exit.

Every fiber of my being wants me to go to the hallway I sent Lou-Lou to, needing to check on Eden with my own eyes, but that would only piss her off. So instead, I race down the steps, the shit weather still hovering over the town, as raindrops splatter at my feet.

I unlock my Jag and climb inside. With Hunter beside me and Tobias in the back, I start the engine but don't move, waiting until Archie's red car drives by. I see a flash of blonde hair in the backseat signaling she's there.

"What did Ryan say?" I ask, counting to ten before I actually start moving the SUV.

“They’re setting up the medical room, and someone will be there within the hour,” he answers, his gaze focused on the taillights of Archie’s car.

*Please let Eden be okay.*



## EDEN

Oh my God.

If I retch one more time, I think my actual stomach is going to fall out.

I’m done.

There is nothing left in me. With the unbelievably high level of nausea and the nonstop vomiting for the past forty minutes, my head has been pounding, and I just want to fucking sleep.

I feel so gross. I have to admit, I thought Xavier was going to go all alpha caveman on me and completely ruin everything we’ve put in place to hide our relationship at school. But surprisingly, he listened when Lou-Lou reminded him not to cause a scene.

His Jaguar has been right behind us the entire way back to Bethany’s house, and all I can worry about is being sick all over the Allstars when we pull up.

Charlie helped pull my hair back into a ponytail at the nape of my neck to keep it from getting in my way or falling into the toilet, all while Lou-Lou gently rubbed my back. I feel ridiculous, and now they’re all overreacting because it’s just a bit of morning sickness that just won’t fuck off.

“Eden, do you want to have a sip of water?” Charlie asks from the front seat, shaking a bottle between us, and I reluctantly take it because I know I won’t keep it down. All I can think about, though, is that whenever I was violently sick like this as a child, my dad would tell me to stay hydrated.

I rest my head on Lou-Lou’s shoulder, the memory of him instantly leaving me in a solemn mood, reminding me of what I’ve already lost. I take tiny sips of the water as Archie slows the car, approaching Bethany’s house, and the gates open.

*Please, don’t let Xavier have overexaggerated on the phone. I don’t need Bethany and Ryan worrying any more than they seem to be doing already.*

That’s all I fucking need, more of them hovering over me and making me feel like a damsel in distress.

As Archie parks the car, I refuse to wait around for assistance from anyone, so I swing the car door open, unbuckle my belt, and scramble from my seat as quickly as possible. The only issue is, I barely take two steps before it feels like my world is tilting on its axis.

My head leans to my right, and my body almost slumps with it as I become light-headed and dizzy. *What the fuck is happening to me?* My legs almost turn to jelly, and just before I crash onto the gravel beneath my feet, someone catches me.

I look up into green eyes as Hunter stares down at me with concern while I try to blink the fog away.

“Are you okay, love?” he asks, stroking a loose tendril of hair back off my face as I remain unmoving in his arms.

“I’m either dying or this baby is fucking with me,” I slur out in response, my tongue heavy in my mouth, and he offers me a sympathetic smile.

“I’ve got you,” is his only response as he swipes his arm under the back of my legs and lifts me off the ground. Happy for him to take the strain from me, my lack of energy has me resting my head on his shoulder as he carries me inside, my hands placed on my lap because I have no energy to hold onto him. My eyes drift closed with exhaustion as the rain pours down on us.

“Hey, are you guys alright? Ryan said something was wrong with Eden,” Bethany calls, her voice getting louder as Hunter walks in her direction.

“She seems to be lacking something. I don’t know if it’s her B-12 or iron or something, but she’s been hydrated all day, so I’m not really sure,” Lou-Lou rattles off, surprising me, and I want to know where she got all that information from, but I just don’t have the mental strength. All I want to do is sleep and rest my body.

“The doctor is setting up his equipment in the room. Do you want to head to the kitchen for a few minutes while we wait? The nurse is there, and she can take your temperature, blood pressure, and everything else they might need to diagnose you before seeing the doctor,” Ryan suggests, and I force my eyes open, knowing he won’t take anyone else’s response but mine.

“That’ll be fine, Ryan. Honestly, I’m okay. I just need to nap,” I mumble, glancing in his direction. He gives me a pointed look as I feel Hunter and the others glare down at me, their eyes burning into the back of my head.

“She’s talking shit. Don’t listen to her,” Xavier says, stepping into the house and out of the rain. Hunter quickly carries me inside behind him, and I don’t miss Bethany’s concerned gaze.

She's the one I need to speak to. Bethany's the only other person here who has been pregnant.

"Bethany, tell them," I holler, not actually seeing her but hoping she can hear me, and Hunter sighs.

"I know you probably think we're being a little overbearing right now, I get it, but you're our girl and carrying our baby. I would rather we get everything checked out and it be nothing than the other way around," Hunter murmurs, leaving me speechless.

Well, when he puts it like that, I don't really have an argument.

I keep my mouth shut as we enter the kitchen, and he places me on the countertop so he can meet my gaze when he steps back.

My cheeks instantly flush, but not from everyone's attention or from being sick. It's from the fact I'm sitting in the exact same spot where I was yesterday, fucking Xavier.

I feel my gaze instinctively flash to his, and a knowing smile graces his lips. I give him the stink eye as he wipes his hand over his mouth, smothering his grin.

When I don't feel like death, I'm going to gut him with a rusty spoon. Motherfucker.

Although, the other part of my brain is planning things we could do as a team with me at this height, but I have to shake my head and focus on what's actually happening with my body right now.

"Hi, is this Eden?" a woman asks, and I glance to the entryway of the kitchen, not needing to respond since Tobias speaks on my behalf, guiding her to stand before me as the rest of them watch expectantly.

I feel a little uncomfortable and overwhelmed with Bethany, Ryan, Xavier, Tobias, Hunter, Charlie, Archie, and Lou-Lou observing, likely waiting for me to break into a thousand pieces over a little vomit.

“I’m so sorry, but can we take this somewhere more private?” I request, avoiding everyone’s gazes, and she nods softly with a gentle smile on her lips as she signals for me to follow her. I slide off the breakfast bar as quickly as I can.

She must be only five feet tall. Standing before me in her lilac scrubs, with brown hair, a round face, and big brown eyes, she just has a calming presence about her.

“The doctor should be ready now anyway. If you just want to—”

“Eden, please,” Tobias rasps from the other side of the table. The rawness in his tone has me halting in my step, and I glance back to see each of the Allstars staring me down with pleading eyes while everyone else looks anywhere but at us.

“You can come,” I murmur, and it takes the three of them a second to catch up to what I said, but when they do, they quickly move toward me, slowing just before they knock me over. I have to remember this isn’t just my baby. They deserve to be a part of this too, and the relief they feel over me letting them in is evident on their faces.

Xavier waves his hand out in front of him, encouraging me to take the lead, but I link my arm through his instead, needing the physical and mental support which he gladly offers. The touch of his lips on my forehead as he leads me out of the kitchen and down the hall fills me with butterflies. It’s going to take some getting used to, seeing them and feeling them be like this with me, caring in a gentler way as opposed to their constant alpha, big dick vibes.

It takes me a second to recognize which room the nurse is leading us to, but I'll never forget waking up in this bed after being ran off the road and nearly killed.

God, my life is full of so many complications. I can't even decide if my life is easier or harder than it was then, and it wasn't all that long ago either.

"Hi, I'm Doctor Pieteron. I'm a general physician, but I also extended my residency and have a doctorate in the ob-gyn field as well," he says, introducing himself as we step into the room.

"Hi," I reply as Xavier guides me to the hospital bed. I take a seat, eyeing the doctor as I do, my sole focus on him.

He must be in his forties at least, with cropped brown hair and hazel eyes. He seems nice, and Ryan must trust him enough to let him into his house. I can tell he is trying to get me to relax, but the energy coming from my guys makes me nervous.

"How far along are you, Eden?" Dr. Pieteron asks, glancing up from the tablet in his hand as the nurse helps me lie back on the bed.

"Uh..." I forget for a moment what Melody said when I saw her at the cabin, my brain stuttering as I try to remember the timing. "The last ob-gyn I saw helped me work it out, so I think I'm about to be five or six weeks, but I'm not entirely sure," I finally answer honestly, and he nods. There's no judgment in his face, he simply listens.

"Okay, and it was mentioned you've been sick a lot?" he asks, even though it feels like a statement, and I hum in agreement.



“Well, a lot today. But yes, I’ve been vomiting frequently, with headaches, general nausea, and dizzy spells,” I respond, trying to give him as much information as possible. He plops the tablet down on the unit to the side before rolling a machine toward us. I hear one of the guys bite back a groan, likely because they probably don’t realize all that’s involved with this pregnancy shit.

It looks like a computer monitor with a weird-ass keyboard, wires, and some kind of wand attached to it. It all seems fine until Hunter moves to stand between the doctor and me, his hand raised to keep the guy back.

“What the fuck is that for?” he demands, staring wide-eyed at the machine, and Tobias laughs.

“Fucking hell, Hunter. It’s to do a transvaginal ultrasound. Now step the fuck back and let this man show us our baby,” Tobias says with a huge grin, rubbing his hands together, and my heart rate starts to accelerate.

See the baby? We’re going to see the baby?

My eyes are already watering at the prospect, and Tobias must spot my complete fucking break down because in the next second, his hand is in mine, squeezing my fingers in comfort.

Dr. Pieteron starts explaining what he’s going to do, but it all goes in one ear and out the other. My brain is too focused on the fact we’re about to see the baby. My baby. *Our* baby.

The nurse steps forward and murmurs for me to lose the bottom half of my clothing, and I do so quickly, no shame at how many people are in the room, before I retake my spot. She politely offers me a sheet to place over my midsection, down to my knees, and I nervously wait for the next step.

My eyes fall to my stomach like I'm a damn fucking Teletubby whose belly is going to come to life, so it catches me by surprise when she squirts jelly onto what looks like a wired up dildo, and the doctor moves toward us, taking it from her outstretched hand.

Hunter has barely moved back to give them any space, and Tobias and Xavier have stepped closer on my other side, their hands ghosting over my skin, offering me support.

“You may feel a small amount of pressure, but we have to play around a little to get a shot of your uterus, okay?” he explains gently, and I squeeze Tobias's hand, anticipation building inside of me.

The instant the device touches me between my legs, I want to fight against the invasion, but I take a deep breath instead, knowing how important, and clearly normal this is.

A noise fills the room, coming from the machine, and the four of us all stare at the back of the monitor, holding our breaths as the doctor does his thing. When it suddenly sounds like a chugging train, the doctor smiles over at us, completely unfazed by the fact there are three guys in here with me.

“That's the baby's heartbeat,” he informs us, and my heart swells in my chest.

Holy. Fuck.

I feel like I can't breathe, too scared to do anything loud enough that will overpower the sound of my baby's heartbeat. It's a sound I will never forget.

I just can't believe it's real. All of this is real. I can't even put into words how much love I feel in my heart right now.

“Sorry, just for clarification, you mean baby's as in the baby, or as in babies plural?” Xavier asks, and I think I'm

going to be sick.

“Sorry, just the one. Here,” he answers, turning the monitor around to show us the faintest black blob on the screen, and I have to squint really hard to see it, but it’s there. “I’d say you are six to seven weeks along.”

In. My. Body.

I haven’t considered how that is going to grow and get out of me. It’s going to break me. One hundred percent.

Taking a deep breath, I calm the panic rising inside me and repeat the words in my head.

There is a baby inside of me. Growing. I need to nurture them. Help them grow.

I knew I was pregnant, but to hear the heartbeat and see the tiny shadow? This makes it one thousand percent real. I don’t even realize there are tears trailing down my face until Hunter swipes his thumb across my cheek, but I’m even more shocked to see the emotion in his eyes mirroring mine.

“Eden,” Xavier murmurs, tearing my gaze from Hunter’s to his, and I watch as a single tear tracks down his cheek, his eyes like portals to his soul. “I’m going to do whatever it takes to keep you both safe from Ilana. Whatever. It. Takes. You’re mine, and she no longer gets to threaten your life like this. We need to plan, and we need to do it now, because by the time our baby is born, she’ll be six feet under.”

TWENTY-FIVE



# EDEN

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I park the G-Wagon, taking a deep breath as I look up at the Freemont house.

It's been a while since I've been here, and although it doesn't feel as foreign as it did when I first arrived, the Freemont house still doesn't feel like *home*.

Richard will likely be in there somewhere, Stevens too, hiding in the shadows and avoiding any form of communication. Archie will likely be holed up in the game room or out on the deck.

The Freemont house was usually a safe haven for me, but it was a controlled environment under Ilana's thumb, and Richard was probably feeding her information. On what, I'm not sure, but I don't care to find out either.

I managed to have an uneventful day at school yesterday for the first time in forever, and now I'm starting my weekend here.

The weather has cleared up today, not a cloud in the sky, and the temperature is slowly starting to mellow out, so I opted for a pair of leggings, one of Tobias's hoodies, and my Converse.

Turning off my G-Wagon, I grab my bag and swing my car door open, dropping my feet to the ground, but I still don't move to the house. Glancing over my shoulder, I see Xavier parked across the street in his Jag. Tobias and Hunter sit with him, and I offer them a tight smile.

They want to be here to support me and help move everything from my old room, but when I told them I wanted to do this alone, needing the time to myself, they reluctantly understood. So they're going to either sit in the Jag or relax inside with Archie, but they're giving me the space I asked for right now, and I couldn't appreciate it more.

After seeing the doctor, he ran some blood tests and determined my iron levels were extremely low, so I'm now dosed up on iron tablets, B-12 vitamins, and anti-nausea capsules. If someone shakes me, I feel like I might fucking rattle with the amount of pills inside me, but I feel so much better already, and I guess that's what matters most.

Seeing the baby on the monitor changed something inside me, making the whole thing real, and in that moment, I wanted my dad more than anything in the world. My heart feels like it's bleeding for him all over again, knowing he won't get to be a part of this, and that's why I'm here.

I want to get all of my things and take them to Bethany and Ryan's. They're adamant I should stay with them, and admittedly, that's where I feel the safest. There are boxes and cases in the walk-in closet here that I didn't even open, and if there is anything that will make me feel closer to my dad, then I need it desperately.

Taking one final deep breath to settle my nerves, I stand tall and head for the front door, key in hand as I approach, but Archie opens it before I even get there.

“Hey, cookie. You okay?” he asks, stepping back to let me in with a wide smile on his face, and my eyes cast around the open living space.

“Yeah. Are you?” I respond, hating the small talk, but I haven’t really asked him that lately. I feel bad, but unfortunately, I’m swimming in constant hot water with an issue always around the corner. I’m more than ready to get some down time with him though. Eventually. Hopefully.

“I’m all good. Whatever you want to take with you, place it at the top of the stairs and we’ll move everything to the SUVs for you. Anything you have no interest in keeping or taking with you, leave it in the closet and I’ll get Stevens to take care of it, alright?”

“Thanks, Arch,” I murmur, squeezing his arm before I take the stairs and find my old room on autopilot. I am constantly searching my surroundings, praying I don’t run into Richard today.

I don’t know why I feel so strange in the Fremont house now. I guess it’s because so much has changed since I first showed up. I’m definitely not that same girl who first arrived anymore.

Opening the door to my room, I’m startled by how nothing has changed at all. It’s completely untouched, although someone must have been in to tidy it up at some point, because there isn’t a single sprinkle of dust anywhere. They must have cleaned around my things.

One of Hunter’s t-shirts is still lying over the back of the chair by the balcony doors, a bottle of my perfume sits on the nightstand, and a pair of my shoes remain by the door. I don’t know who made sure this happened, but I appreciate it.

Releasing the breath I'd been holding, I decide it's best to start with the bulk of the things I still have here in the closet, then I can do a clean sweep of the room once that's done.

I turn the light on in the closet, drop my bag at the door, and look around at everything I have here. Apart from the few pieces of clothing I have hanging up, there are three suitcases and five large brown moving boxes.

Rubbing my hands down my thighs, I look around, and decide to start with the boxes. I need to be ruthless with my take or leave decisions today. If anything holds value, I'll keep it. Otherwise, I've survived this long without the things so they can't be that important.

Pulling my phone from my bag, I scroll through Spotify and find my latest playlist. I've named it "Fuck Ilana Knight," which is filled with angry and angsty songs. I hit the shuffle button, place it on the vanity, and head for the boxes.

The first is filled with leggings, oversized t-shirts, and party outfits packed in tight. I could use the leggings and oversized clothes right now, so I move the whole box out to the hallway without any strain.

As I place it down at my feet, I hear Archie and the guys chatting casually while some sports commentator talks on the television, and I smile at how things almost feel normal for a minute.

Moving back to my closet, I hum along to the dance tune that fills the room as I open the next box to find another pile of clothes. When I filter through the contents, I frown when I come across folders. Placing the clothes beside me on the floor, I drop the box to my feet as I kneel over it and pull out three red binders.



The spines read, “Analytics,” “Finances,” and “Data”.

It takes me a second to recognize that these are from my dad’s office back in White River. There were always binders, papers, sticky notes, and pens scattered across his desk in organized chaos, and a flash from the dream I had a few weeks ago plays in my mind.

Maybe I could find a piece of evidence in here that could help me figure out what happened to my father. The suspicious part is the way they were boxed, with the clothes hiding them from view. I have an inkling my mother gave the folders to me on purpose.

My heart rate kicks up a little, and the nerves in my fingers tingle as I tuck them back into the box, lay the clothes on top of them, and place it by the other box out in the hall.

Rifling through the three remaining boxes, I mainly come across more clothes and trinkets, and I’m almost embarrassed by how much stuff I actually fucking have. Discarding any of these items makes me feel like a spoiled brat, and for some reason, I refuse to act that way, so I bring each box out to the hallway.

Taking a minute to relax before I attack the suitcases, I swipe my hair up into a ponytail. I’m completely zoned out when I hear a little knock on the closet door, so I almost jump out of my skin in fright when I turn around to find Archie standing there.

“Hey, how is everything going?” he asks, glancing around the room before offering me a bottle of water. I take the lid off and gulp half of it down. This is much harder than I was anticipating, but I won’t tell these guys that, otherwise they’ll come and take over.

“I’m okay. I just have the last two cases to go through and then I’ll be all sorted,” I answer, rolling the first black case to the center of the room, unsure how long I’ve actually been here.

“I’m not saying the guys made me come up here to check on you so they weren’t the ones getting in trouble, but I have been *forced* to ask if there’s anything you need help with,” he says with a grin, and I shake my head. That makes total fucking sense, especially from the Allstars.

I’m just about to tell him I’m all set on my own when something occurs to me. It’s been on my mind for the longest time, and I’ve never known how to broach the subject with him, but now that he’s here and it’s just the two of us, I can ask him without an audience. I just need to find the fucking strength to ask it.

I remember questioning Tobias, but he was as confused as me when it came down to it. I need to finally voice it to Archie too. It’s been rattling around in my mind for what feels like forever.

“What’s wrong, cookie?” he asks, raising an eyebrow at me as I settle on the floor beside the horizontal suitcase, unzipping it as I try to find the words.

“I want to ask you something. I don’t want it to come out wrong or make you feel bad or anything. But I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately, and I just want to understand,” I say quietly, looking up at him, and he instantly falls down beside me, crossing his legs as he meets my gaze.

“You can ask me whatever you want, Eden. I’ll answer it,” he replies with determination, even though his body seems tense.

I clear my throat. “Okay, I, uh, fuck.” I pause to take a breath before finding the strength I need to fucking spit it out. “Why do you think Ilana has never targeted you the way she has me?”

There, I said it. I hold my breath, watching his eyes as I wait for him to respond, and it surprises me when all I see is sadness.

But not for him, for me. From the way he inches closer and squeezes my shoulder, I can feel how much he wants to take all of this pressure away from me.

“I asked Richard the same question after you lived here for a week or so when I noticed you started to become a human target in Knight’s Creek,” he mutters, and I freeze on the spot. This was not what I was expecting him to say. “I think we both know there is a lot going on that we aren’t aware of. A lot of history we have no understanding of.”

“What did Richard say when you asked him?” I whisper, my heart pounding wildly in my chest as I wait for his response.

“He said Ilana is targeting *you* because your dad didn’t hold up his end of the deal. Or, uh, our dad. Whatever,” he rambles, rubbing the back of his neck, and I frown.

“What does that even fucking mean?” I grumble, swiping a hand down my face, and he shrugs.

“I told Richard I would take your place. Whatever Ilana wanted to do to you, I would take the punishment instead. I even showed up at her house, her office, everywhere, but her security team just laughed at me. That is, until Reza stopped by.”

Wait. What the fuck? How did I not know about any of this? I would *never* have let him take on Ilana and her wrath, never. I can see Archie knows that. The gentleness in his eyes as he smiles at me tells me he would have done whatever it took if he could shift Ilana's attention.

There's nothing I can do about it now. It's all about learning as much as we can so we can use everything to our advantage.

"What did Reza say when he showed up?" I ask, intrigued what input the guy who is holding my mom captive could have. I can't believe Reza actually showed up here as well.

"He didn't really say much about the *why*. Instead, he explained why it was in our best interests to follow Ilana's way. Something about how everything they did couldn't have been for nothing. How he refused for them all to end up the same way. It was weird, like he was a little broken and upset while trying to act unfazed."

Archie's words only confuse me more, but I nod along with what he's saying until I can properly think it through.

Opening the suitcase, I sift through the clothes as I try to process what Archie has said, my mind completely lost to another layer of secrets that this town holds. As I mindlessly look through the clothes, I come across a shoe box inside the suitcase.

I move the clothes to the side, revealing two more shoe boxes, and I pull one onto my lap. When I open it, I stare in shock at the stacks of photos inside. There must be hundreds. The top one was taken more recently, during Christmas of last year. My dad, my mom, and me, all standing in front of the Christmas tree with the biggest smiles on our faces.

My heart aches at the memory of my dad at that moment. Seconds after the photo timer clicked, he broke into song, singing “Feliz Navidad” at the top of his lungs like he always did.

I miss how happy he always seemed. He was determined to turn every frown upside down while also remaining the biggest kid I ever knew.

Closing my eyes, I hold the photo to my chest, taking a moment to let my heart bleed out for him. A hand squeezes my shoulder, and I look up to see Archie smiling softly down at me.

“Can I look with you?” he asks, his voice raspy as he glances in the box and sees photos of my dad. I nod, placing the box between us.

Neither of us speak as the playlist continues to offer background noise, all of our focus on the box. I don’t know how long we sit there, passing photos back and forth between us with heartfelt smiles on our lips, but it feels like an eternity as we offer each other snippets of our childhood memories.

“Do you recognize this guy?” Archie questions, tilting the photo in his hand so I can see.

I frown. There are two men standing side by side. One is clearly my dad, who’s much younger, but I can’t seem to place the other. “I don’t think so,” I murmur in response as he drags a hand over his face.

“I feel like I do,” he responds, and I don’t want to tell him that’s not really possible, but I don’t want to be rude. When he flips the photo over, in my dad’s rough handwriting, it reads, *‘Me and Dad’*.

That's his dad? My grandfather? And Archie thinks he recognizes him? My palms begin to sweat as hope swells in my chest.

Glancing back at the box, I flip through them all, bypassing the earlier ones that I'm in as I search for something more specific, until I stumble on another photo with my dad sitting beside the same man, but there is a woman seated to the left of my grandfather too.

They're sitting on a wooden bench at the beach. My dad must be our age or slightly younger, and they all smile wide at the camera, but what has my heart pounding in my ears and my palms sweating is the woman.

She may have aged, but I would recognize her anywhere.

"Eden, is that who I think it is?" Archie murmurs, our faces almost touching as we stare at the photo, and I nod, my body numb with shock.

"Yeah, that's... that's Linda," I answer, slowly turning the photo over to find the three words I was expecting to find. *'Me, Mom, and Dad'*.

"Does that mean...?"

"Yes," I manage to whisper, my throat clogging with emotion as I glance at Archie. "Is she... Do we... Oh my God."

I drop the photo, my hand flying to my mouth as I try to contain the shock I'm in. I know Charlie's grandmother, Grandma J, said they may still be alive, but I didn't think I would be able to find them, especially not in Knight's Creek, or that they would actually be someone I have seen and interacted with.

“Did you know?” I ask, looking at Archie, and he shakes his head instantly.

“I swear, Eden, I didn’t.”

It doesn’t make sense. They must have known Archie was their grandchild, which only tells me they’ve kept their distance for a reason. I rack my brain, trying to figure out if they knew I was Archie’s twin.

We’ve never mentioned my last name in front of them, and I’m not sure if they heard the gossip mill when Archie was exposed as my twin brother, which tells me Linda doesn’t know.

I can’t believe I’ve been in this town and spoken to my grandmother without either of us being aware. She’s been so kind toward me, and she’s hilarious—I can instantly see where my dad got his sense of humor from.

A sob begs to slip from my throat, but I manage to swallow it down, refusing to let my emotions control me anymore.

Looking in the box, I spot another photo of just Linda and who I can only assume is Pete, my grandfather, and the huge name on the side of the diner. Only, in the photo, the huge sign says “Grady’s.”

Fucking Grady.

If I needed any confirmation, it’s here right in front of my eyes, but I just don’t know how to process it, any of it, at all.

“That’s me,” Archie gasps, reaching into the box and pulling out a stack of photos with a rubber band tied around them, and my eyes widen along with his. There are photos throughout the years of Archie growing up, from a baby still in

diapers to him standing tall and proud in his Asheville High football jersey.

“How did my dad have these?” I think out loud, not expecting a response because neither of us have a clue.

None of this feels like it makes sense. I want to climb in my G-Wagon and race over to the diner, but my gut tells me that won't be safe. We've learned that the hard way, and I don't want to put anyone else in danger, but we need to figure this shit out.

“What's going on up here? You guys are way too quiet,” Hunter says, and I glance up to see him leaning against the doorframe. My heart lodges in my throat as I try to find an answer.

How the fuck do I explain all of this? How do I find the words? I went from thinking I had no family aside from my twin, to finding out I have grandparents who *are* alive and live in the same town as me.

I can't. Instead, I pick up the photo of my dad, Linda, and Pete sitting together and hold it out to Hunter, not rising from my seat as I show him the back where it states their names.

He reads the words, crouching down before me as he looks at me expectantly. I turn the photo around, watching as his green eyes widen in shock.

“Well fuck.”



TWENTY-SIX



# HUNTER

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We stand in the conference room in Ryan's security office, with everything Eden found spread out across the table as we all try to decide where to begin searching. From family photos, pieces of their history printed for us all to see, and more importantly, Carl Grady's work files.

We could be here for a while, but even if the documents offer an inkling of information, the time spent will be worth it. We'll take all that we can get, because right now, we don't have much to work with.

Cody is asleep on a travel cot in the corner of the room, while Ryan and Bethany sit at the end of the table with tight smiles on their faces as they, too, look around at everything. Archie sits to their left and Xavier sits beside him, followed by Tobias, who has Eden wrapped tightly in his arms as she sits in his lap. She strokes her fingers across the nape of his neck just under his black hat, and it has me desperate for her touch too.

The pain and shock that was scrawled across her face earlier today has calmed a little, and I think it's because she can feel the love and support for her in this room. Lou-Lou went to go let Charlie in, so it'll be a full house any minute.

As if reading my thoughts, the door bursts open and the two girls step inside, heading straight for Eden. They both manage to give her a side hug and nothing more than a muttered “Hi,” since Tobias won’t release his hold on her. I don’t miss the way Eden leans into him more, not complaining in the least over the physical protectiveness he has around her right now.

“So what is all of this exactly?” Lou-Lou asks, walking around the table to sit on the other side of Bethany. Charlie follows her after she gives Archie a sweet kiss. I remain on my feet, moving in a little more to brace my hands on the table so I can look down at the documents and pictures before me.

“Honestly, a complete bomb of nothing or everything,” Eden responds, sitting taller, but she still keeps her back firmly pressed against Tobias’s front, and it almost makes me jealous.

I want to rip her from his claws and embrace her like he is now, but I know deep down my time will come. So I look away from them, catching a glimpse of Xavier whose hands are clenched on the table as he stares at them in the same way, and it at least pacifies me that I’m not the only one.

“We’ll look over every inch of this,” Ryan says, repeating the same words he used when I called him from Eden’s old walk-in closet at the Fremont house.

“Thank you, I really appreciate it,” Eden murmurs, glancing at Archie as she clears her throat. “So far, I recognize those three folders from my father’s office back in White River. Archie and I glanced through the photos and stumbled across a piece of knowledge I still can’t quite comprehend, which is where we were when Hunter stepped into my room,” she explains, her gaze finding mine, and the appreciation I see warms my soul.

I would do anything for this girl, literally anything. Calling Ryan to help feels like something so inconsequential, yet it made all the difference to *her*.

“What did you learn?” Charlie asks, glancing between Eden and Archie, concern etched on her face as she intertwines her fingers together on the table.

Eden and Archie glance between each other, and it almost looks like they’re having a twin conversation in their minds, deciding on who should be the one to tell her, but neither of them can seem to find the words when they turn back to look at her.

I clear my throat, and everyone looks at me, but my gaze is fixed on Eden’s who sees the silent question in my eyes. She nods.

“They found out who Carl’s parents are. They’re still alive and very present in the town, in Knight’s Creek,” I speak, and Charlie’s eyes widen in surprise.

“Who?”

“It’s Linda and Pete,” Archie blurts, the strain and confusion evident on his face as Charlie scrapes her chair back to jump to her feet, rounding the corner so quickly her glasses almost fall off her face.

She drops into Archie’s lap, and everyone gives them a moment as Tobias holds Eden tight. I reach out to squeeze her shoulder, and her delicate fingers wrap around my hand. I spy Xavier’s hand on her thigh as well, all three of us offering our support as silence descends over the room.

“I’m so shocked. I can’t imagine how either of you are feeling,” Charlie finally says, leaning back to address Eden as Lou-Lou nods in agreement.

Eden offers a tentative smile in response. “It’s okay. I’m hoping to process all of that as we go through the documents and pictures. I honestly showed up there to get clothes and any other items I thought I might need, so when I came across this stuff tucked in amongst my belongings, I was stunned. But I’m determined, now more than ever, to finally figure out what happened to my dad. Sorry, our dad,” Eden replies, her eyes shining with strength and determination as she looks at the documents placed around the table, avoiding everyone’s gazes.

“We’ve got this,” Bethany states. She’s the best damn life cheerleader in existence with her three word chant that she uses far too much in life, but the fact that she uses those same three words with Eden as she did with me when we were younger fills me with love on a whole new scale.

I know deep down, if given an ultimatum between Eden and me, I wouldn’t even come close to winning. I say that like she didn’t literally change the course of our lives when we were kids, but she is protective of Eden, and it means everything to me to have my two favorite women be on the same team.

“Archie also mentioned that when he tried to approach Ilana to take the heat off me, it was Reza who randomly showed up at the Fremont house,” Eden says, looking at Archie to continue.

He swipes a hand down his face, his facial features looking as grim as before. He feels just as helpless as me, but I’m hoping this will push him to fight harder and dig deeper, just like Eden.

“He gave me this whole spiel about how it was in everyone’s best interest to follow Ilana’s orders. He muttered something like, ‘It can’t all have been for nothing,’ and how

he refused for this to end the same way as Carl. But his back was to me, and he was talking under his breath as he was leaving, so when I asked him what he said, he didn't respond. Reza just left, and I haven't seen him since."

I nod along, but my gaze falls to Xavier, who looks bewildered by the whole thing. He says nothing, because we didn't know anything about Reza's visit.

"Let's see what we find here. Then, if necessary, I will go to him. We know he's keeping Jennifer tucked away, but the reason behind that has never made sense to me," Xavier declares.

"Alright, start digging then," Ryan orders, clapping his hands, and like magic, we all move into action.

Eden wants to know what the hell happened to her father, and we're going to *finally* fucking give this our all to make it happen. Eden's mother, Jennifer, seems to be the ultimate bitch of a parent, in my opinion, but she didn't send Eden away with all of this shit without reason.

That thought spurs me on, and while everyone starts going through photos and organizing random pieces of paper, I head straight to the work folders at the same time Ryan does.

"I'll take the analytics, you take the data file," he murmurs like the bossy asshole he is, but I take the folder from his hands and finally drop down into a seat.

Opening the file, I see it's filled with sheet protectors, and when I scan through them, it all looks like software coding details.

"Hey, Eden. What did your dad do for a living again?" I ask, glancing over at her, and she looks back at me with a slight crinkle to her nose.

“He was in IT.”

“Do you know who he worked for? Which company, his actual job title, or anything like that?” I question, dropping my gaze back to the documents in the folder as I stare at it all in confusion.

If anyone can understand any of this information, it’s me. I just need to focus.

“I don’t. I’m sorry. I know he was obsessed with how things are made, like computer games, systems, and stuff like that, but his job and the company he was employed at was never something I came across. I was apparently too naïve, living in my own little bubble,” she admits, sounding defeated toward the end, almost like she’s embarrassed.

“That doesn’t make you naïve, Nafas. You felt safe enough with your dad to not feel the need to know every little detail of his life. That’s very rare, and you’re extremely lucky,” Xavier mutters, reassuring her as I flip through the wallets.

This is literally all data for codes, but not an actual location or website. If I’m right, it’s more about transactions, breaching security software, and burning holes to get into high-tech systems for big businesses.

These are all high grade levels of programming. Carl Grady did a little more than just work in technology, that’s for damn sure.

I grab the finances file and spread it open beside the data file. I can hear everyone cooing over baby photos of Eden and Archie, and there are a few shocked gasps, but I don’t look up to see what holds all of their attention.

I’m on to something here, I can feel it, so I need to remain focused.

The entire finance folder is filled with bank statements, every single one from an off-shore account, and the numbers are far from small.

“Please tell me you have something golden in there that would link up to the fucking dates, details, and jobs Carl took,” Ryan says quietly beside me so only I can hear him, his words making me pause.

Glancing at the folder before him, I see what he means. There are dates, times, locations, and actions, each one explaining what would look like a job Carl did. I pull the finance folder closer to me, grabbing the analytics file from Ryan too, and then I quickly flip through the papers to get the dates to match up between the two files.

There, in black and white, the analytics document reads:

*June 26th, 2012 - 11:04am - Hacked into federal website.*

When I turn my gaze to the finance file, there was a payment of five hundred thousand dollars moving from the Cayman Islands to the US bank account before being dispersed into six separate transactions back overseas.

“Why would he store all of this information?” Ryan asks, making me jump a little. I forgot he was there, and he was apparently reading over my shoulder, but I’m glad he’s seeing the same connection I am.

“I’m not sure. I think it’s things he’s done, based on the level of coding in the data file, but why keep detailed information on every single thing?” I muse. When a shadow casts over the paperwork, I look up to see we have everyone’s attention.

Xavier stands over us, looking down at the documents. My gaze goes to Eden first, who’s still sitting in Tobias’s lap. Her



brows are knitted together in confusion as she tries to look at the paperwork in front of me, but it doesn't make any sense to her.

Tobias kisses her shoulder, distracting her as he swipes a baby photo off the table and places it in his jacket pocket. Sneaky asshole, he better get me one too.

"I know what this is," Xavier says standing behind me with his finger pointed at the document, hovering over one of the bank account names.

*Bellamore.*

My heart rate increases as I gaze up at him, his tense jaw telling me exactly where this is going.

"How?" Ryan asks, glancing at Xavier who sighs.

"Bellamore is one of my mother's companies," he states simply, and the room goes quiet as all eyes focus on him.

"So... what you're saying is my dad was doing jobs for Ilana?" Eden questions, a sigh heavy on her lips, and as much as none of us want to say yes, that's where everything is pointing to.

"I think so, Nafas. I have a feeling if I ran a check against these other businesses too, they would all fall under my family name," Xavier tells her, his hands falling to his sides as they clench with anger. He's likely hating that he's associated with Ilana now more than ever.

"Why would he be forced to run from this town with only one of his babies, leaving the mother behind, only to continue to work for the woman causing all of the issues?" Bethany asks with disbelief in her tone as her body sags with exhaustion.

I swipe a hand down my face.

“I mean, that sounds exactly like something my mother would do,” Xavier comments as Eden rises from Tobias’s lap.

“The question is, how did working for Ilana wind up getting my father killed? Why did we have to run if this was the case? There are photos here from Archie’s mom to my dad. Photos of Archie with notes on the back, explaining his growth, likes, interests, and love. Was this allowed? Were these the rules?” she bites out, her tone getting harsher as her emotions heighten, and I totally get it.

I don’t blame her for feeling this way at all.

“We seem to open a door only to find two more on the other side every time,” Archie adds, voicing exactly what I’m thinking.

“I’m sick of the fucking rules. They cause more heartbreak than anything else, and I’m at my limit. My father’s death is definitely because he broke one of Ilana’s rules. I can feel it,” Eden exclaims, her voice cracking slightly, and I can’t say she’s wrong in her assumptions.

“Let me get Benji to look into this a little more, connect the dots for us. There’s another account on here I’m familiar with too, and he’ll be able to help with that,” Ryan inserts, standing from his seat as he pulls his phone from his pocket.

“Thank you,” Eden rasps, the stress showing on her face with her tense jaw and tired eyes. I want to comfort her, to show her that we’re here, but her posture makes it seem like she doesn’t want to be touched right now.

“Eden, why don’t we eat then figure out how you want to move forward?” Bethany offers with a soft smile on her face.

Eden nods, moving around the table to link their arms together, and like the piper, the other girls follow.

Before they leave the room, Eden turns to face us, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear as she sighs. “I want to be able to go and see my grandparents. Archie and I aren’t the only two alive with our blood. Linda has been nothing but sweet to me. They’ve played by the rules, keeping their distance from Archie the whole time, but enough is enough. My number one priority is to go to them.”

With that, she turns on her heel and leaves the room.

I watch her go, as do Xavier, Tobias, Archie, and Ryan, all of us giving Eden the space she needs for a minute.

When the girls are completely gone, Ryan clears his throat and looks directly at Xavier. “While everyone else is out of ear shot... I know what you said about your mother, about the only way to be free of her. I have someone lined up. I need you to be sure this is how you want to proceed. There’ll be no judgment here if things have changed.”

Xavier frowns at him, a scoff ripping from his lips. “Haven’t you seen what she’s done here again? Nothing has changed. If any of us want to survive Ilana, the only option is to kill her. I have no remorse for that decision.”

TWENTY-SEVEN



# EDEN

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My heart pounds wildly in my chest as I clench the steering wheel, and I'm not even in there yet. Archie sits quietly in the passenger seat, but I can tell he's just as nervous as I am. We seem to have the same mannerisms when it comes to nerves, and neither of us are going to have a bottom lip left if we keep nibbling on them.

I tilt my head back against the headrest as I close my eyes and take another deep breath. Breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth, I try to push any worry away with it.

“We've got this, Eden. We're here together, supporting each other. Everything is going to be okay.” Archie's assurances wash over me like a lifeline that I hold onto for dear life.

It's Monday morning, and I'm sitting in my G-Wagon outside Pete's having a fucking meltdown. Everyone agreed it was worth not going to school today so we could do this. Fuck Ilana and fuck her rules. But now that I'm here, I don't know if I have the balls to drop a bombshell on them. Saying I'm going to walk in there and tell them who I am and actually doing it are two very different things.

“What if it’s a huge mistake, Arch? Like, what if they chose not to make themselves known to you? What if they never cared?” I whisper, opening my eyes to look inside the diner as Archie grips my hand in his.

“Cookie, that woman has fussed and doted over me every time I stepped inside for as long as I can remember, but even more so after Mom passed. She was cementing herself in my life without breaking whatever shitty rules were in place. Pete too. He doesn’t come out very often, but when he does, there’s always stress and strain etched into his face, and I have a feeling I know why now,” he murmurs, and when I look at him, I can see how much he believes his words. The smile is back on his face, which encourages me to do the same.

I’m scared, I know I am. I don’t think I can handle any more rejection. That’s what it feels like I’ve had from my mom, and there were definitely no open and welcoming arms from Richard either, that’s for sure. Then, all the back and forth with the Allstars has left me in a spin. But even though our biological parents are both dead, there are biological grandparents right here. I have hope rising in my stomach just thinking about it.

I *need* something to cling to. I *need* to know that Ryan and Bethany aren’t the only two decent people in the damn world willing to offer me family status and unconditional love.

“I think we should just go in, Eden. Let’s approach each hurdle one at a time if we have to, but I want you walking in there like the badass you are. You are strong, determined, and filled with fire, and I refuse to let anything put out your flame.”

I gape at him for a moment, surprised by his words, but he opens his door and steps out before I can respond. I watch

every step he takes as he makes his way around to my side of the SUV, opening the door for me too, and he waits patiently, letting me step out when I'm ready.

I hate to admit it, but I wish Tobias, Hunter, and Xavier were here with me. I feel like that makes me weak, but really, I'm just vulnerable, and I have to learn the difference. It was the right decision for them to go to school like normal today, even if they have messaged me twelve times and it's not even nine a.m.

Unbuckling my seatbelt, I turn back to the open door to find Archie holding his hand out for me to take, which I do willingly.

Brushing my hand down my loose, navy tennis dress, I lift my sunglasses up on top of my head, nestling them in my messy bun. My face is totally makeup free because Bethany promised me my hormones were going to make me cry during this encounter whether I liked it or not, and as much as I didn't like the sound of that, I took her advice anyway.

Archie is as casual as ever in a pair of jersey shorts and a plain white tee, with a baseball cap secured on his head, pulling his blond hair back off his face.

My hands are trembling. Thankfully, Archie hasn't released my hand, and as much as the rumor mill annoys the fuck out of me, I don't care if it adds fuel to the fire right now. My twin brother is my pillar of support in this moment, and this is us offering each other solidarity.

I let Archie push the door open, the sensory overload requiring me to take a second to adjust. I hear the general hum of conversation from the few patrons in here, the sports news channel playing in the background, and the usual clattering of cutlery and dishes.

The smell of bacon fills the air, but it turns my stomach instead of making me hungry. I refused to eat anything before coming here, the fear of spewing out my guts weighing too heavily on my mind.

“Hey, you two, grab your usual table. I’ll be over in just a minute,” Linda hollers from across the diner as she carries a tray of drinks to a table, and I stumble to find a response, but it seems I’ve forgotten how to use my damn tongue as I just stand and gape at her.

“Thanks,” Archie manages to answer, pulling me along with him toward the booth we always take, and I fall down into the seat across from him. I instantly look through the window to see the ocean below. God, as much as I loved the lake, it’s not the beach, and it reminds me I haven’t been to the ocean in forever. I need to move that up my to-do list. It’s paramount to calming my soul.

My brain feels scrambled. I have no idea what we’re supposed to do from here. I was too busy stressing over actually getting inside the fucking building, I didn’t really plan what to say.

I mean, I have so many fucking questions, but trying to formulate them now that I’m here feels like way too much work.

“What drinks am I getting for you guys?” Linda asks, coming to a stop by the table.

Pulling my gaze to her, I take her in again with fresh eyes. Her cropped blonde hair is perfectly styled into a pixie cut, and her blue eyes sparkle, full of wisdom, but this time I notice the tiniest speckle of sadness in the corners. It’s only noticeable now that I’m really looking, and it makes my heart lurch.



The sound of Archie clearing his throat pulls my eyes to his. “Eden, what do you want to drink?” he says, repeating Linda’s words, and I shake my head, pulling myself together so I’m not just gaping at her.

“Are you okay?” Linda asks, and I almost pull a muscle in my neck as I whip around to look at her.

That is a far more loaded question than she knows. Stammering, no sounds come out as I already feel tears prick the back of my eyelids.

Fuck.

I am more than this. I deserve better than what I’ve already been served, we all do.

“Grady,” I blurt uncontrollably. “My name is Eden Grady,” I add, my hands clenched in my lap as my eyes burn. I refuse to blink as I stare at Linda, watching for her reaction.

The pad and pen in her hand clatter to the floor as she gapes between Archie and me, her own mouth moving with no words coming out.

It’s as if time stands still while the three of us all stare at each other. One of her hands lifts to her mouth, her fingers trembling, as the other falls to her stomach—likely from nausea hitting the pit of her stomach, just like mine.

The noises in the diner drift away, replaced by the pounding of my heart in my ears.

Her eyes well with tears, and then she clears her throat, swiping a hand down her face before she looks back at us with determination now etched into her features. I sneak a glance at Archie, who’s gaping between Linda and me. Emotions are overwhelming all of us.

“Out!” Linda yells suddenly, making me jump in my seat with surprise. Archie does the same, and when I turn back to her, she isn’t even at the table anymore. “Everybody out. I’m sorry for the inconvenience. Anything you’ve had already is on the house, but we need to clear the diner. Now.”

Her words leave no room for argument, and I watch in stunned silence as the whole fucking place clears out. Families, couples, businessmen. Everyone. There are looks of inconvenience, but no one grumbles loud enough for us to hear.

As the last table moves toward the exit, the sound of a door slamming near the kitchen catches my attention, and I look up to find a man standing with his hands on his hips, giving Linda a pointed look.

“Linda. I love you with all that is holy, but please tell me what the fuck you’re doing kicking out the guests and locking the door?” he grumbles, tossing his apron on the back of a chair, and my mouth goes dry.

He looks like what my dad would have looked like in twenty-something years. He has cropped hair, deep blue eyes, and permanent tan lines on his arms and neck. He’s stocky with a six-foot frame, and it’s crazy how much he looks like home.

“Not now, Peter. Get a pitcher of peach iced tea and bring it out. We’re going to need it. Well, we’re going to need the tequila, but that’ll have to wait until later,” she states, turning to face him, and the raw emotion is back on her face.

“Sugar, what—”

“She’s here, Peter. They’re both together. It’s everything we’ve prayed for,” she mutters, pointing in our direction, and

Pete glances over at us in confusion.

I watch as he slowly flicks his gaze between Archie and me, and it's the craziest experience watching him slowly realize the similarities between us and Linda's words.

"No," he whispers in shock, moving toward us.

He comes to stand at the table, his palms hitting the wood as his breathing becomes a little more rapid. His eyes are wild yet filled with unshed tears all at once. The love, pain, and sheer heart on this man's face blows me away. His hair is gray, matching his eyes, and wrinkles mark his face, showing his wisdom and life lessons as he stands before us.

"How are you here? When we got the news about Carl, we thought..." His voice drifts off, unable to fall from his lips, and I understand his confusion. I hate seeing the pain in his eyes too, but a part of me is relieved they know about my dad because I was not prepared to be the one to utter those words and shatter them.

"We have so much to talk about," Linda says softly, coming to stand beside Pete, rubbing his back soothingly as she looks between Archie and me. "Let me get the tea. This old man's not going to be able to move from this table until he's wrapped you in his arms and held you tight," she adds with a smile before heading to the back, leaving the three of us to stare at each other in silence.

Pete keeps looking at Archie, trying to find the words to explain, but he comes up blank, so instead, he casts his gaze to me, and the same thing happens.

My hands sweat, so I wipe them on my dress before I slowly rise to my feet beside him. I have no idea what I'm fucking doing, but instinct is guiding me right now.

Leaning back off the table, Pete looks down at me, only a few inches taller, and as he turns to face me properly, I wrap my arms around his waist and he pulls me in so tight I feel like I might stop breathing.

The bear hug he gives me as his body shakes with sobs overwhelms my own emotions, and I find myself crying into his polo shirt. My whole body feels like I'm floating as he holds me exactly as I remember my father always did.

I have no idea how long we stand here, but when I feel another set of arms join us, I glance out of the corner of my eye to find Archie winking at me, his own face blotchy as tears stream down his cheeks.

“Oh God, you guys started all the hugging without me. Since when was I not the head of this family anymore?” Linda grumbles, but I can't see her. The feel of her hand on my shoulder as she tries to hug both Archie and me at the same time hits me with another wave of love, and my emotions continue to spiral.

I cry for all the moments we have missed.

I cry because my father isn't here to witness us together.

I cry for everything that has been taken from us.

I cry for the family I never knew I had.

I cry because I know I will not allow this to be my child's future.

I don't know who steps back first, but Archie hands me a pile of napkins from the center of the table, and I take them willingly.

“Let's sit, shall we?” Pete murmurs, sniffing over his own words as he climbs into the booth. Linda takes the spot beside

him, and I follow Archie, sitting on the opposite side.

Everyone takes a moment to catch their breath. I glance at Archie, and he's already looking at me, making sure I'm alright. I can see the question in his eyes, and I offer a small nod in response, his usual smile firmly in place. I lace my fingers together, fiddling with them as I try to calm the energy building up inside me. This is a lot, and it has my brain all out of sorts.

"I don't even know where to begin," Linda says, wiping tears from her face, and it hurts my heart. This isn't her fault. None of this is.

"We don't expect you to start anywhere, Linda. It's not a surprise to us that threats have been made somewhere along the line. We understand doing everything possible to protect those you love," Archie assures her, and my heart swells at his words as he squeezes my hand in support.

Nothing summarizes everything happening around us quite like that.

"I know. But I also respect how hard it must be for you to sit there knowing that we've known who you are all along, Archie," she answers, sadness thick in her blue eyes. Pete wraps his arm around her shoulders, brushing a kiss to her temple.

"Five minutes before Eden arrived, I was told who she is to me. I did nothing, said nothing, and continued on with life like I was required to. That's what I was told, that falling in line would be the only way I could keep her safe, so that's what I did. So I understand it, I do," Archie murmurs, offering me a guilty smile at the reminder of the secrets we've faced, but I squeeze his hand in response this time to let him know it's okay.

“Apparently it’s how we love in this family—wholeheartedly—because otherwise, someone ends up in danger, getting hurt, or even murdered. But we’re done loving each other from afar. It feels like history is repeating itself, and we don’t know why. I refuse to end up like my biological parents, either of them,” I say, determined to make a change, and Pete nods in agreement.

“I’m so heartbroken you have to live these lives,” Linda sobs. “No parents, no knowledge or understanding of what this town actually stands for, and no strong support. We promise to help however it’s needed.”

I have to turn away for a moment before I cry again. Biting down on my bottom lip, I glance out at the ocean, focusing on the waves crashing against the rocks, letting it lull me into a sense of calmness.

“I have a lot of issues with Ilana Knight. I’m trying to learn everything I possibly can so I can understand why,” I finally tell them, feeling safe enough to be honest with what we need, and as I look at Pete, his face turns red with rage as Linda scowls with fury.

“That bitch,” she spits out, and I almost choke on air in surprise at her outburst, my hand falling to my chest with shock.

“That is too tame of a word. I tell you that every time, sugar. Let’s get a drink, then we can try to explain everything to you,” Pete says, and Linda raises her eyebrow at him in surprise before looking back at us as he sorts the glasses and iced tea that Linda placed on the table earlier.

“What Pete means is that we have had to keep our mouths shut throughout everything for the exact same reasons you mentioned—protecting family. But we support you. If you

think you can break the cycle, we'll tell you everything we know.”

I nod appreciatively as I accept my glass of iced tea from Pete. Thankfully, the smell doesn't make me want to gag, but we all need another moment to gather ourselves, because I have a feeling this will change everything.

I'm desperate to run to the car and grab my phone to update the guys and Bethany on how welcoming my grandparents have been so far, but I don't want to break the spell we're all currently under.

Taking a deep breath, I glance at Linda and relax my shoulders. “All we know so far is Ilana has it out for me, but not Archie. Our dad is dead, our biological mom died from cancer, Richard is useless, and my mother is apparently being kept safe by Reza,” I reel off, and they nod in understanding as I go. “Other than that, Ilana's been getting a little crazier lately, but it doesn't help that I have a relationship with Xavier, I guess,” I add, feeling like it's important for me to be honest with them if we want the same in return.

“Ilana got her bitchy high and mighty attitude from her parents, who got it from theirs, and so on,” Pete grumbles, and I frown.

“What does that mean?” Archie asks, beating me to it, and I nod in agreement with his question.

“It means the damn town is called Knight's Creek because the Knights managed to pull off a coup. Do you know what this town was called a long time ago?” Pete asks, and we shake our heads in unison.

“Grady Grove.”

Two words. Two small insignificant words that make so much fucking sense all at once, showing the driving factor behind Ilana and all of the ancestors.

“So the Knights got power hungry,” I state, and Linda scoffs.

“Power hungry is not passing the ball off to a teammate because you want to score the winning points. Power hungry is sabotaging a race so you come in first place. They have spent the past half a century controlling who lives and who dies.” She stops her rant to take a drink, likely trying to calm herself down as we process her words.

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

“So this has been going on for a long time?” I ask, and Pete hums in confirmation.

“But why?” Archie questions. Swiping a hand down his face as he looks at me with wide eyes.

“For control. The Gradys ran the town, fairly, I’m told, even if I may be a little biased. In the seventies, Ilana’s great-great-grandmother decided she was done playing by everyone else’s rules. It’s written in the town hall that the first born of each founding family can change what they choose to be recognized for, and if more than one family agrees to switch or to amend their family’s field, a vote can be held and the changes can be made.”

How backward is this damn town? I’m so confused.

“I’m sorry, can you dumb it down for me?” I request, pressing my fingertips into my temples as Linda gives me a sympathetic smile.

“Basically, the first born of the Knights, like Xavier, might want the beach to take their name, but the Freemonts would



have to agree to the change,” Pete explains, and I nod, squinting as I try to stop the impending headache from this confusing shit.

“Okay.”

“So, like I mentioned, back in the seventies the Knights decided they wanted the town to be named after them. The Gradys declined the exchange, but the Knights refused to back down, pushing and forcing the Gradys into a difficult situation. I was never told the details, but it didn’t make a difference. They fought with everything they had until my father wound up dead,” Pete manages to say, his hands clenching on the table as my mouth falls open in surprise. “Then they barged their way in, pushing on bylaws to strong-arm the Grady family into submission.”

Is this all a joke?

I glance at Archie who sits in as much shock as I do, but the pain coming from Pete is undeniable.

“So Eden’s the eldest?” Archie asks, putting two and two together quicker than me, and Linda sighs.

“Yes. Two more minutes, Eden, and this little snot bag would have taken the brunt of everything,” she murmurs, and my hand clenches Archie’s tighter. I would have *never* let that happen.

If things were the other way around, we would still be sitting here now, side by side, supporting each other.

“So Ilana wants to threaten and harm me, and then what? Scare me into submission or force me to leave Knight’s Creek? Make me agree to whatever terms she demands or I’ll wind up dead too?” I muse, my heart beating hard in my chest as the reality of how serious this is sinks in.

“The thing is, we’re a laid back, chilled out, happy family. We always have been. We didn’t want the power, we just wanted the heritage and the tradition. But that was all lost because the Knights desired more than what was actually theirs,” Pete explains, and my heart bleeds for him. He’s already lost so much family because of this. His father, his son.

“Why don’t we already know about this?” I ask, confused why no one has told us this before.

“Because you guys aren’t old enough. The deeds to the founding family titles are handed down when you turn twenty-eight, and then you get to make whatever decision you please,” Linda replies, pouring herself another drink.

I feel mentally exhausted by all of this new information. I could definitely nap right now. My nerves are frayed, and a small headache is starting.

“Why was I taken from the town and hidden then?” I question, needing to be told instead of just continuing to make assumptions.

“Because Ilana learned who was born first between you and Archie before your mother even left the maternity suite,” Linda bites out, anger etched into every word.

“But why run? I wouldn’t be given the choice until I was twenty-eight, and they could have convinced me to just agree to keep things as they were,” I murmur, beyond confused by all of this.

“It was the safest option. The threats they got when Anabel was pregnant had everyone fearful. Ilana drove everyone apart, putting a wedge between them so they could keep you

safe. I'm going to assume no one has told you about the group dynamics when they were younger?"

"When who was younger?" I ask, glancing at Pete, but he just smiles.

"Carl, Anabel, Jennifer, and Richard were all together. They loved each other with everything they had, but Ilana hated it. She hated that they were so happy in a polyamorous relationship. She was obsessed with Carl, the forbidden fruit her parents warned her about, so when she couldn't have him in any capacity, she lashed out."

I gape in shock at what she is saying. All four of them were in a relationship together? I can't act too surprised, look at me with the Allstars, but it still catches me off guard.

"I'm stunned," Archie comments, looking at me with wide eyes, and I do the same. I wasn't expecting *that*.

"Oh, they had been in love forever. I even thought Reza would be a part of their circle too, but one day, he just stopped showing up at the diner, stopped hanging around with everyone, and a few months later, he was engaged to Ilana. I know the four of them tried to talk to him and many tears were shed over what felt like a betrayal to the group," Linda adds, and my eyes almost bug out of my head.

This explains so much, but my brain still can't fully fucking compartmentalize everything for any of it to make sense. It's all ridiculous, and completely how this town functions.

Vibrating interrupts us as Archie apologizes and pulls his phone from his pocket. He glances down with a grin as Hunter's name flashes across the screen.

“I have a feeling this call isn’t for me,” he teases, and I roll my eyes. It definitely won’t be.

“Is everything okay?” Linda asks, and Archie chuckles as he shakes his head.

“It’s the Allstars. They’re calling to make sure Eden is okay,” he replies, placing the phone in front of me as the ringing stops.

“Girly, those boys have had it hot for you since the second you showed up,” Linda says with a grin, making Pete roll his eyes.

“Those boys are going to have to answer to me if they think they’re going to touch my granddaughter,” he grumbles, a pointed look on his face, and I can’t help but smile at him.

It warms my soul to hear him call me his granddaughter, my chest swelling with pride at the title, but there is something I need to address here first.

“Uh, about that. I’m pregnant.”

TWENTY-EIGHT



## EDEN

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Who knew Hunter Asheville drove a fucking Tesla? I didn't. But when he showed up at Bethany's an hour ago, wearing his dark jeans, white tee, and leather jacket, I soon learned, and I almost came on the spot just from looking at him.

Now, sitting shotgun beside him as he drives us through Knight's Creek on a Saturday morning, I can't stop peeking at him to see if his face will suddenly reveal where we're going.

The Lost Prophets blast through the speakers as Hunter drives, his hand resting on my thigh. It's just the two of us, which feels odd yet calming at the same time. They're a package deal, although they're the worst at sharing sometimes, but it's always the four of us.

I need this, a little quiet down time, especially since Monday was such an emotional wreck. Although, I don't regret a single second of it. I've gone to Pete's every day after school with Archie, and Charlie came yesterday too. I'm desperate to go with my Allstars as well, but keeping a low profile by not being together publicly prevents that.

School was quiet for the rest of the week—too quiet if you ask me—but I think most of that was because Pinky and Perky weren't around. From what I can gather, Lou-Lou and Charlie

didn't fuck them up that much, so it makes no sense for them to have stayed away for the rest of the week.

The suspicious and skeptical part of me feels like it's part of some huge plan to lull me into a false sense of security, only to rip me apart when I least expect it, but that sounds far too fucking selfish and self-centered, so I haven't breathed a word about it, even if it does have me on edge.

"Where did you go?" Hunter murmurs, and I turn to look at him, shaking my head as I pull myself from my thoughts.

"I was just thinking about how crazy this week has been. Informative, eye opening, and emotionally draining all at the same time," I answer honestly, and he squeezes my thigh.

"We've got you, love."

"I know, it's just taking me a minute to process everything while acting indifferent about being away from you guys at school, and then building some kind of relationship with Linda and Pete all of a sudden," I reply, glancing at him as I place my hand on top of his and intertwine our fingers.

"You mean having Linda *build* you up because she knows you're pregnant and won't stop feeding you," he teases with a grin, and I roll my eyes.

He's not fucking wrong. That woman is going to destroy my waistline before the baby is even here.

"That. Exactly that," I grumble as he pulls his hand from mine and puts the car in park.

I look around at where we are. Hunter doesn't move, letting me take in my surroundings, and when I gaze past him through his window, I see the record store, Broken Records, and my heart leaps with excitement.

“I said I had the perfect distraction for you, Eden, and I’ve been promising to bring you here for a while, so here we are,” he murmurs, staring right at me, and I think he might say more, but I cut him off by pressing my lips to his.

His lips sear mine, his touch delicate but hot all at once. Leaning across the center console, I grip his neck, pouring everything I feel for him into the kiss, and he pushes back with what feels like *more*. Hunter grabs my hips and somehow maneuvers me into his lap like it’s nothing, all while our mouths continue to meld together.

He slips his hand under my t-shirt, and I feel his calloused fingers on my bare back. I purr like a damn kitten into his mouth, which he definitely likes if the hardness growing between my legs is anything to go by.

Our kiss turns languid, unhurried, but full of passion, until we pull apart, and I have to blink my eyes open a few times before I can see properly. When I look at Hunter, his eyes are blown, and his teeth rake over his bottom lip as he stares down at me. My breathing comes in heavy pants, and my expression is likely the exact same as his.

My heart thunders in my ears as we look at each other, energy zapping through my body. We’re in our own little bubble, and I want to continue getting lost in him, but he brought me here for a reason. I want to at least step inside the damn store before I spew my feelings all over him while dry humping his thick cock.

As if sensing my inner turmoil of what to do next, he takes the indecision away from me as he opens his door. Watching the door rise open is a weird sight, but Hunter wordlessly helps me out before following me.



Brushing my hands down my black yoga pants and straightening my white, buttoned, sleeveless top, I try to calm my racing heart as he leads us toward the door, both of us still riding the high from inside the Tesla moments ago. I notice the closed sign is still up in the window even though it's past eleven a.m.

I look at him over my shoulder with confusion in my eyes, and he winks.

“I wanted to be here alone with you, so it's just for us today,” he tells me, making me fucking swoon like a damn princess in a fairy tale as I simply smile in response, not knowing what to actually say.

Pressing his chest to my back, he leans around me to unlock the door, and when it swings open, I gasp at how good it fucking smells—leather, vinyl, and wood. The three scents are all too familiar, no matter which record store I go into, and the combination always makes me feel like I'm home.

“After you, love,” Hunter whispers against my ear, and I shiver as I force myself to take a step inside, my fingers instantly gliding over the first rack of old CDs.

There are four rows of CD racks, and a whole wall filled with vinyls, while guitars, a few other instruments, and a drum set line the back of the store with the checkout area tucked away in the corner. Old memorabilia t-shirts hang from the ceiling, and I think I may have found a slice of heaven in this twisted town.

“This is amazing,” I murmur, trying to take it all in, and Hunter chuckles.

“You look like a little kid in a candy shop.”

“I feel like one,” I admit, looking over my shoulder at him coyly, and his grin widens.

“I would expect most girls to get this feeling at a makeup store,” he comments, coming to stand beside me as I flick through a couple of albums.

I scoff. “Well, I thought we had figured out that I’m not like most girls,” I retort, and he hums.

“That’s very fucking true, love, in all the best ways possible.”

I preen under his words and gaze as the energy crackles between us. Looking around, I can’t stop the question from falling from my lips. “What made Bethany and Ryan buy this place?”

“Uh, music was an important part of my childhood. A safe haven. This was their way of making sure I always had it. But, Bethany is the better one to explain all that. It almost feels like it’s her story to tell,” he murmurs, his eyes finding mine, and I nod in understanding, not pushing him for more.

I move toward the wall lined with vinyls, instantly spotting my dad’s favorite—Pink Floyd. Damn, this cover will forever be in my dreams. He loved this album so much. Every day when he got home from work, he would blast a song through his record player, and nine times out of ten it would be this one.

Gently taking it off the shelf, I run my fingers over the cover before I flip it over and glance at the back.

“Your dad?” Hunter asks, catching me by surprise as he steps up beside me. I nod, the ball in my throat stopping me from talking, but he thankfully doesn’t push for more.

Keeping hold of it, I continue down the wall, looking through the vinyls when I spot the one I loved the most—Nickelback. I have a memory of my dad buying it for me when we went into town one time, although I can't even remember where we were living. I wasn't allowed to even listen to it at the time because it was explicit, but apparently I refused to leave the store as a toddler without it, completely obsessed with the cover for *All The Right Reasons*.

It makes me sad that my mom didn't manage to pack that for me when she was busy rushing me out of the door. The thought of my mom hits me straight in the gut. I haven't heard from her since she called me when I was at the cabin.

Did I throw my phone in the water? Yes. But when we got back to Knight's Creek, Ryan had a new iPhone waiting for me with my old number transferred over, and I still haven't heard anything from her. Maybe someone doesn't care as much as she says she does.

Actions always speak louder than words, and her actions have said nothing at all.

"Hey, I was wondering if you wanted to finally have that little guitar lesson?" Hunter asks, distracting me from my thoughts, exactly like he said he would, and I smile as I nod.

"Lead the way," I answer, and he wraps his arm around my shoulders and guides me toward the instruments.

I've been excited for this, but now that we're here, I feel nervous. I've heard Hunter play the guitar, and he's phenomenal. Now, I'm going to sit here and make a fool out of myself, and he's going to hate me for ruining the music.

Nestled behind the drum set are two folding wooden chairs. Hunter releases me to pull them open and place them

on the floor as I look up at the guitars hanging on the wall.

“I’m going to start you off on acoustic, if that’s okay?” Hunter asks, pulling down a sleek wooden guitar as I continue to stare at the blue electric guitar that hangs beside it.

“I’m going to be awful no matter what, so whatever you think,” I say in response, and he rolls his eyes at me as he pats the seat beside him.

I sit nervously on the wooden chair, rubbing my knees as I try to stop the slightest tremble in my hands, and Hunter offers me a knowing smile.

“Everybody starts somewhere, love. You’ve got this, so stop worrying,” he soothes, and I take a deep breath.

“I don’t want to disappoint you,” I mumble, the words falling from my mouth before my filter could stop them, and I squeeze my eyes shut. What a fucking idiot. Why did I say that? And why did I mean it too?

“Eden Grady, you tell those emotions to fuck off. I need my badass girl who believes she can do anything,” he says calmly, and when I open my eyes, he’s looking at me expectantly. Rolling my eyes at him, I get more comfortable in my seat, and he chuckles. “There she is.”

I glare at him but keep my lips sealed. He’s trying to get a rise out of me, and I’m not falling for it. “Just show me what to fucking do,” I grumble, and he grins even wider like a crazy motherfucker.

“So bossy,” he murmurs as he places the guitar in my hand and lifts the strap over my head.

I look down at the instrument, not knowing what to do next. He lifts my hand to press my fingers to the strings or whatever they’re supposed to be called, and my other hand

instantly goes to the part where I know everyone strums their fingers.

I try to remember the hold I saw Hunter have on his guitar when I watched him through the window, but my grip doesn't relax much, and he thankfully doesn't try to correct me.

"I'm going to give you a quick rundown of the anatomy of the guitar, and then we'll try a few chords, alright?"

"Sure," I agree, having no clue at all as he brings his chair around so he can face me head-on, and our knees brush ever so slightly, giving me chills.

"Okay, so from top to bottom, these are your tuning pegs, fret board, obviously your strings, the sound hole, the bridge, and then the actual body of the guitar," he rattles off, and I just nod like I know exactly what he's talking about, but nothing is actually sinking in.

"Uh-huh," I manage to chime in for good measure, but he likely knows I'm full of shit.

"Your hand is in chord position, so we're going to have these pretty little fingers gripping the strings while you strum with your other hand," he says casually, like it really is as easy as he describes, and I look up at him.

"Sure."

The smirk on his lips has my own tilting slightly before I glance down at the guitar again. Fuck it. I may as well have some fun if he's willing to teach me a thing or two.

"I already popped in on the way over to you this morning and tuned the guitar for us," he informs me, and I gape in surprise at the lengths he's willing to go through to do this for me, but he doesn't notice, or at least he pretends he didn't as he continues, "I have a chord sheet here too."

He places a black stand to my right. It holds a sheet of paper with notes scattered across them and letters beneath them.

I sit in silence, listening to every word he says, trying to make the tutorial stick as he explains something about elephants and donkeys growing big ears, but I can just feel myself getting overwhelmed as nothing makes any sense.

I strum my fingers across the strings and place my fingers exactly where he says, and I can see the patience in his eyes, but I also feel like I'm wasting his time.

After what feels like an eternity, I finally find my voice. "I'm terrible and I'm torturing you. Maybe we should just stop and you can play me a song instead," I suggest, and he grins at me with a knowing smile.

"You're not terrible, Eden. You're a beginner," he states in response, and if he wasn't lifting the strap over my head and taking the guitar from my hands, I would have been worried he wanted me to carry on. "But I can play a song for you. Want to hear one I've been working on?" he says, rubbing the back of his neck nervously as he tweaks the tuning pegs slightly. A blush creeps over his cheeks as he focuses solely on the guitar, and I nod instantly, like he can fucking see me.

"Please. I've only really heard you that one time when you didn't know I was listening, and it was amazing," I murmur, lifting my feet up onto the edge of my seat and wrapping my arms around my legs as I stare at him with excitement.

I don't know why he seems nervous, he's a pro.

Clearing his throat, he adjusts the guitar in his lap, his gaze flicking to mine as he peers up at me through his lashes while he remains hunched over the guitar.

He starts to play the chords naturally, from memory, and his eyes fall closed as the soft melody fills the store. It's breathtakingly beautiful. I can't take my eyes off the way he moves his fingers across the strings as I let the sound consume me.

I get goosebumps from hearing him play, then he opens his mouth, and my skin ignites.

*It was always meant to be me.*

*Only me.*

*Life works in mysterious ways, flipping  
my life upside down.*

*But now you're here, looking back at me,  
and I can't move.*

*You make me want to be free. Be me.*

*Be everything you need.*

*My heart, my soul belongs to you.*

*I can't breathe unless you're near.*

*I can't hope unless you feel it too.*

*And it's all because I love you.*

I feel my face redden, but it's not from embarrassment, it's from pure, raw emotion. He sings every word to me from deep within, and it completely blows me away. He continues to play a few more chords, and when I shift my gaze from his hands on the guitar to his face, I find his gaze fixed on mine. I suddenly can't handle him being so far away from me.

As I rise to my feet, he instantly stops playing and pulls the guitar over his head, propping it against the wall beside him.

He's barely sitting upright in his seat before I fall into his lap, my fingers finding the hair at the nape of his neck and twisting in the blond strands as I look deep into his eyes.

"I love you, Hunter Asheville."

His green eyes widen at my words, the words we've both been tiptoeing around lately, but if I can admit it to Xavier, then I can willingly give my heart to Hunter too.

"Eden, you don't have—"

"I know, but I mean it with every inch of my heart and soul. I trust you to be exactly what I need. I want to explore the future with you," I murmur against his lips, and his smile melts my heart.

"You have no idea how much I want that too, Eden," he whispers with a sigh. "I've had nothing but my brothers for so long, I never believed there could be more for me. I'm not ashamed to admit that Bethany saved us from our parents, and I've spent every day since looking over my shoulder for something to carry out the death I was saved from."

I lean back a little, staring at him in surprise with how open he's being with me, and my heart hammers in my chest.

"Hunter—"

"You make me want to hope for the future. You make me want to have plans, set goals, have dreams, and fucking live, Eden. I want to live, and I want to do that by your side, with my brothers and our baby. I love you."

He rests his forehead on mine, wrapping his arms around my waist as I try to say anything in response, but I used up all my words on the three most important ones: *I love you*.



Instead, I press my lips to his, using my mouth to try and show him the words we just uttered to each other. I feel exposed, vulnerable, and desperate for his touch. Everything about today has been intimate on another level, and I want him closer.

His grip tightens on my hips as he rises from his seat, taking the few steps to the wall to pin me against it. Fuck. Clawing at his leather jacket, I pull it down his arms, and he braces me against the wall with his hips as it drops to the floor, but it isn't enough.

I need him. I need all of him.

"Please, Hunter," I beg, not really knowing exactly what it is I need, but he tears at the cute little button-down top, the pearl buttons pinging in every direction as he exposes my white lace bra, and I gasp.

Motherfucker doesn't get to rip my shit without some kind of consequences for himself.

I smash my lips against his, dragging my teeth harshly against his bottom lip, making him moan as my fingers find the collar of his white t-shirt. I grip it as tight as I can and pull with everything I have, the sound of the material ripping loud in the empty store, and I grin against his lips.

I manage to get it down to his abs, but then I give up, pleased with myself as I stroke his muscles, watching them twitch under my touch.

"You're going to pay for that, love," he growls, looking down at me with a menacing gaze that only makes me hotter before he leans forward and bites down on my nipple.

"Fuck. Don't tease me with your threats, Hunter," I taunt, and he practically snarls against my skin as my head falls back

against the wall behind me.

“If you’re pushing for a reaction, you’re going about it in the right way,” he bites out, shifting so his thigh presses against my core at the same time he drags his teeth across my nipple again. I moan in ecstasy, which only encourages him.

“Show me what you’ve got,” I purr, and lightning fast, I’m being ripped from the wall and whirled around. Hunter takes a seat with me in his lap, but he turns me around to face away from him, and I find we’re at the drum set.

Glancing over my shoulder, I stare at him in awe as he drags what remains of my top off my body, and he quickly unclips my bra along with it. Kicking my sandals off, I plant my bare feet on the floor and tilt my hips up to help him as he removes my yoga pants, taking my panties right along with them.

I’m naked in a record store. Glancing toward the door, I can see a few people walking down the street, but no one is looking in, and even if they were, the racks of CDs and the drum kit in front of us mostly block us from view.

If I’m honest, I’m too far gone to even give a shit.

I stand and take a step toward the drum set before I turn to glance at him.

“It’s no use if only one of us is naked,” I tease, grinning at the fact his eyes haven’t moved from my pussy since I turned around.

Stroking my hand down my abdomen, I watch his gaze heat as I brush my fingers across my clit while I lean back as gently as I can against the drum behind me.

Without a word, he stands, tearing off the rest of his t-shirt and shaking it to the floor as my thighs clench together in

appreciation. His eyes remain fixed on my fingers stroking my clit while he unbuckles his jeans and drops them to the floor, and I groan at the sight of him being completely commando underneath.

My mouth falls open as I circle my clit a little faster, maintaining pressure as I watch him grip his cock.

“Turn around, Eden,” he orders, and I shiver at his demand, nibbling my bottom lip as I consider my next action. “I won’t ask again, love. Turn around and grip the snare. Now. Before I take us home unsatisfied.”

My gaze flashes to his, the challenge clear in his green eyes, and I turn around to look at the drum set, not actually knowing what the fuck he’s talking about.

As if sensing my confusion, he presses up behind me and moves my body so I’m angled slightly to the side as he places my hands on the drum.

“Now don’t let go,” he murmurs against my neck, leaving goosebumps in his wake.

Holy fuck.

I instantly miss his presence behind me as he steps away, my skin suddenly feeling a chill in the air, and when I get annoyed with waiting, I look over my shoulder to find him walking toward me with a set of rubber drumsticks.

What the fuck is he up to?

“Turn around,” he orders, and I do so without argument, because damn do I want him inside of me.

He leaves me waiting for what feels like an eternity again, and before I lose my shit, I feel him stand behind me before trailing his fingers down my spine, making my back arch. He

doesn't stop, sliding his fingers between the globes of my ass and all the way down until he circles my clit, and I bite back a moan.

Hunter pulls away and moves to my side before dropping to his knees in front of me. The way he looks up at me reminds me I have all the power, even when he's ordering me around, but he knows I love it far too much. Although, if I said stop, I know he would.

He leans forward, and my body trembles as he strokes his tongue from my entrance to my clit, my knees already wanting to give out under the intense pleasure building within me.

"Please," I beg, needing to feel him inside me, but instead, he lifts one of the drumsticks to my lips.

"Suck."

He doesn't say please, just... suck. And fuck me, I wrap my mouth around the rubber and work it over like it's his cock, my eyes fixed on his as I do. It feels odd in my mouth, the rubber hard but not solid.

His tongue circles my clit as he pulls the drumstick from my mouth, and I groan at his perfect strokes as he slowly teases my entrance with the rubber as well.

Holy fuck.

I choke on a moan as he slowly fucks me with the drumstick while tasting every inch of me at the same time, and my knuckles turn white as I grip the edge of the drum in front of me. God, if I didn't know what it was, I would just assume he had one of my toys here with us. It's so fucking hot.

"Shit. I'm so close," I cry, straining as he grazes his teeth against my sensitive nub, and my orgasm starts in my toes before ripping through my body as my climax takes over.

As my heart rate slows, I feel Hunter withdraw from me completely. I almost hiss in annoyance until I feel his hands circle my hips before his cock slams inside of me. The drum shifts slightly under my hold.

“Oh my God,” I gasp as another orgasm tears through me, and I sag as I try to hold on to the drum, but I’m not strong enough.

Hunter pulls me against his chest, moving us backward slightly until he takes a seat on the small stool at the drum set, all while his cock remains firmly nestled in my core.

“Ride me, Eden,” he murmurs against my ear, and I brace my hands on his thighs as I tilt my hips and grind against him while his chest remains against my back.

He is so deep inside of me, and the angle has him hitting my G-spot so perfectly that I gape in surprise as my body tingles again. How the fuck?

I don’t know if my body can take anymore, my nerve endings still going haywire with the previous two, but Hunter only encourages my movements, thrusting his hips up while he’s seated deep inside of me.

“I can’t, Hunter, my legs,” I mumble, my body overly sensitive as he lifts me off his cock and lays me down on the floor, not caring what’s actually beneath us as we get lost in each other’s eyes.

“I can stop—”

“Don’t you fucking dare, I’m just turning to jelly,” I growl, pulling him closer to me so he’s situated between my legs. He doesn’t need any more encouragement to thrust back into me again, but this time, he’s gentler.

Hovering over me, our eyes remain connected with each slow, firm stroke of his cock. My chest heaves as my nipples graze against his chest, the love clear in his eyes, and I pray mine are the same. When I feel him stiffen inside of me, his thrusts faltering as he comes, he ignites my third orgasm.

I can't see anything, my vision blurring as pure pleasure turns my body to mush.

I don't know how long we lie here, both of us trying to catch our breaths, but when I finally manage to open my eyes, it's to find Hunter already looking down at me.

“I'm going to love you forever.”

Yes. Yes please.

TWENTY-NINE



## EDEN

---

Everyone falls into their seats in English class as Mrs. Leach sits at the front of the room tapping away on her laptop. It still feels weird stepping into classes and no longer having to sit between the Allstars. I mean, I want to do it now more than ever, but our little ruse seems to be keeping everyone at bay for the minute, so we don't want to rock the boat.

I haven't heard anything from Ilana or the person sending me the threatening text messages in what feels like forever, and she also hasn't called Xavier demanding he prove his loyalty to her, which has us all on edge.

So now I sit toward the front of the class between Lou-Lou and Charlie, with Archie on her other side, and blend into the sea of students. It's still odd that everyone is ignoring me since the Allstars are. If my school life here had started like this, things could have been completely different. I'd be happy. I think.

Cackling from the hallway has me tensing as I drop my bag to the floor, knowing full well that annoying fucking sound belongs to KitKat and Roxy. I'm not ready for another round of their petty shit.



Sitting up straight in my seat, I fluff out my loose-fitted band tee and straighten my leather jacket before bracing my forearms on my desk. I look and feel like a bloated PMSing bitch this morning, and I'm super self-conscious about anyone figuring it out.

I glance out of the corner of my eye to see Lou-Lou doing the same, ready to put herself between me and the cleat chasers if necessary.

Any murmuring in the class is instantly gone the second they both step into the room in their cheer uniforms and their gazes zero in on me. If looks could kill, I'd be melting into my chair from the stares they give me, but to my surprise, they say absolutely nothing as they take their seats in the far left of the room.

Mrs. Leach clears her throat, garnering everyone's attention in the class, and I focus on her, although I desperately want to glance over my shoulder at the guys, but that won't help the situation right now.

As Mrs. Leach opens her mouth to speak, Billy interrupts.

"Aren't you guys going to cat fight again? It was hot as shit last time, and I could totally provide some mud and bikinis to make it real interesting, if needed," he comments, full of arrogance, and I have to refrain from rolling my eyes at him as he looks around the room, trying to hype up everyone in the class.

"No, it's all good. Eden Grady's time has run out anyway, she's going to get exactly what's coming to her," Roxy says full of glee, and my blood turns to ice. My heart pounds in my chest as I manage to keep my focus straight ahead and not rise to the bait.

A few other students chuckle at her words as I remain impassive, even though I want to jump to my feet and demand she explain herself. My phone vibrates in my pocket as Mrs. Leach shushes them, and I take a quick peek as she sets up the projector for the lesson.

**Tobias: You're doing amazing, bubble. Don't pay attention to her, she isn't worth it.**

His words make me smile, offering me support without drawing attention to us. Thank God for technology. Slipping my phone back into my pocket, I catch sight of Charlie beside me, her cheeks flaming red with anger. I focus on the screen, showing her as much as them that we're not reacting.

“Good morning, class. We're going to watch *To Kill A Mockingbird* today so we can compare it to the read-throughs we have done. I want you to take notes on what was done differently in the movie compared to the book, and then in our next lesson, we're going to discuss why we think they made changes,” Mrs. Leach states, and a buzz fills the room. Everyone always seems to get excited when we don't actually have to work and it's just movie time.

I slouch back in my chair, getting comfortable as Mrs. Leach retakes her seat and presses play on her laptop. The opening sequence plays for all of ten seconds when the screen cuts out.

I frown along with everyone else as Mrs. Leach stares at her laptop in confusion, pressing a few buttons, but nothing happens.

“I think I know what's wrong,” Roxy calls as she rises from her seat, walking the long way around the class so she can shoulder past me, and I have to bite my lip to stop myself from yelling at her.

I don't pay her any mind, turning to Lou-Lou with a roll of my eyes when the screen suddenly bursts to life again, but when I turn back to the screen, it isn't *To Kill A Mockingbird* playing, it's my mother on the screen.

She looks completely battered and bruised. I rise to my feet, my heart pounding in my chest as I struggle to breathe, my hands braced on my desk.

I don't see anyone else in this room, my focus is zeroed in on my mom.

Her blonde hair is sticking up in every direction, her usual sleek hairdo completely ruined. Dirt and blood are smeared across her face, her eyes are swollen and bruised, and her clothes are in tatters as she stands with her back against a black wall.

The whole thing looks like something out of a horror movie.

I'm too afraid to blink in case I miss something, because all she's doing right now is blinking rapidly on camera with tears pouring uncontrollably down her face.

"Tell her, Jennifer," a man demands. I recognize the voice, but I'm too fixated on my mom to try and register whom it belongs to.

"Please, please don't do this," she begs, and my heart fucking bleeds out on the floor around me.

"You tell her or she watches you die," a woman orders, and I fucking know with every fiber of my being that it's Ilana.

She's gone too fucking far. Too damn far. I'm going to be sick.

“Eden, baby, I’m so sorry,” my mom blubbers as someone touches my shoulder, but I don’t turn to see who it is. Someone could take me out with a baseball bat right now and I wouldn’t see it coming, my tunnel vision only seeing the screen.

“Tell her,” the woman screams again, and my blood boils with rage as a gloved hand punches my mom square in the face.

I feel my mom’s cry in every cell in my body. My vision blurs with my own tears of anger and pain as I feel someone press against my back, somehow grounding me when my mind is desperate to float away.

“E-E-Eden, they want you to check your phone and follow the coordinates they sent to you. You have two hours to get here, a-a-and if you don’t, I die,” she stutters as I struggle to breathe. “But screw them, Eden. Don’t you dare come here. Do you hear—”

Her words are cut off with another punch to the face as the screen turns around, revealing a man in a black balaclava, nothing else visible.

“Bring the baby daddies too. It’s finally a family event,” he says, his voice distorted, and my legs give out from beneath me, but the body pressed behind me holds me to their chest as I fall apart in their arms.

It’s like the world goes black, but I can feel every touch, every movement, and I even feel the heat beat down on me all of a sudden.

I can sense the world moving around me while I remain trapped in my mind, the sound of someone calling my name

slowly breaking through the mental walls I've put up to protect myself.

“Eden? Eden, I need you to talk to me, respond, anything at all, okay?”

“Come on, love. I know you're in there.”

“Nafas, I need you to squeeze my hand, something, please.”

I feel like I'm floating on a cloud, but the mention of squeezing someone's hand has me registering the fact that my fingers are weakly laced together with one of theirs, but the touch is there. Trying to take a deep breath, I do as they ask and squeeze with everything I have, and it must work because the praise I get in response encourages me to get out of my head.

“That's my Eden. Now open those pretty fucking eyes so I can take a picture of you looking at me for once,” Xavier murmurs as someone strokes their finger down my face, and I try to blink my eyes open.

The light filters in at first, blinding me for a second, but when I adjust, I find Xavier, Hunter, and Tobias all hovering over me with Charlie, Lou-Lou, and Archie standing just a foot away.

“Are you okay?” Hunter asks, cringing at his own words, but I nod, understanding that he means me, not the whole bullshit that just went down in there. It feels like a fucking dream, but the anger and concern on everyone's faces only confirms that it wasn't.

I feel like a fucking damsel in distress, and I hate it.

Groaning, I lift myself up to a sitting position and glance around me. They laid me down on the grass outside the main

entrance of the school. No wonder my ass feels wet, the sprinklers must have only just finished.

I swipe my hand down my face as I try to process everything they just said, and then I remember what my mother's orders were.

"I need my phone. I need to get the directions," I mumble, patting my pockets, but Tobias stops me, placing his hand on my arm as he looks over his shoulder.

"I think there's been a change of plans," he states, and I frown in confusion.

Looking past him, I see an SUV parked on the sidewalk, completely bypassing the parking lot behind it. Reza stands beside the vehicle, his body tense as he shields the sun from his eyes and watches us. He's waiting for me, for us. At least he's being fucking patient about it for a minute while I try to get over my shock and figure out my next steps.

"Why?" I ask, panic setting in as I realize we lost our time to prepare, speak to Ryan, and come up with a plan.

"We don't know when that footage was filmed, Nafas. They probably reconsidered their plans after Jennifer told you to not go," Xavier replies, rubbing the back of his neck as he glances at his father too.

"How the fuck is any of this happening right now?" Charlie says with tears in her eyes as she casts her gaze at us all, and I sigh.

"Because Ilana *always* gets what she wants, and she apparently loves nothing more than to control everything by torturing people," I bite out, and no one argues with me. Clearing my throat, I look at Xavier. "I'm going to assume he won't stand quietly by for much longer," I add, and he nods.

“I would assume not,” he answers honestly. I hold my hand out to Hunter for him to help me to my feet, which he does, before pulling me into his side as we stare at Reza, my death glare firmly in place. With Hunter to my left, Xavier to my right, and Tobias on the other side of him, I feel like a damn powerhouse.

We’re a fucking team. And with Lou-Lou, Charlie, and Archie standing just off to the side too, I know we can figure something out.

“Then let’s go,” I growl, causing everyone to look at me, but chatter from behind us distracts me.

Glancing over my shoulder, I see half of the damn school standing at the top of the steps looking down on us.

KitKat and Roxy stand dead center, and I pray for someone to just give them a motherfucking shove off of the damn thing. I would like nothing more than to watch them fall to their deaths, but we really don’t have any time to spare.

Turning back to face Reza, I put one foot in front of the other, not letting the audience make me falter, but Lou-Lou steps in front of me and wraps her arms tightly around my shoulders.

“I’m going to call Ryan right now,” she whispers in my ear, and I nod.

It’d fucking help if they knew exactly where we were going though, but I can’t really consider all of that at the moment.

Lou-Lou releases me, but I find Archie standing right behind her as I go to walk toward Reza again. The pain and confusion in his eyes guts me. I can feel him on the verge of stepping in and trying to offer himself up as he practically

bounces on his toes, but it's not him they want, that much we know, and I don't want him to get hurt unnecessarily.

"Please don't, Arch. Keep Charlie safe and watch Pinky and Perky for me, because we all know they played a part in this too," I murmur, and he sighs as he rakes his hands through his hair in frustration. "I love you. You're the best brother I could have ever asked for," I add, leaning up on my tiptoes to give him a hug, and he tenses beneath me.

"Why are you saying that like you're worried you'll never see me again?" he asks, and I just squeeze him tighter, unable to give him the answer he wants.

Stepping back out of his hold, I squeeze Charlie's shoulder, unable to hug anyone else without my world becoming too emotionally overwhelmed. Standing taller, I pin my shoulders back and stalk toward Reza, not even waiting for the Allstars, but I feel all three of them at my back.

It seems like it takes a thousand steps to get to him while happening all too quickly at the same time.

Xavier links his fingers through mine, and I panic for a moment, until I remember what the guy at the end said.

*"Bring those baby daddies with you."*

So they're making the baby known. I don't care if they weren't aware of us actually being together, my number one priority now is to protect our baby with every breath I have. It was Ilana who contributed to the baby, what is the next part of her plan? I can't wrap my head around it.

Silently, Reza opens the rear door and waves us inside. I want to say something, scream at him, and berate him with every word imaginable, but I don't want to lose my cool in



front of the audience we have. I don't want them to see how vulnerable I really am right now.

Nobody deserves my wrath right now except Ilana.

She deserves every inch of the venom running through my veins, so I bottle it up. My body practically rattles with vengeance. She's going to pay for what she has done to me once and for all.

THIRTY



## EDEN

---

The car is silent. Like deathly silent. How is Reza not even trying to offer an explanation to his son? His fucking son. But no, he just sits up front in this fancy ass SUV with a fucking makeshift partition up so we can't even see him, and I'd bet all my money that's because he feels guilty as fuck.

Before he let us step inside, he had us discard our phones, which he literally tossed into a nearby garbage can before climbing into the driver's seat. I'm so done with this twisted town, making me get new devices over and over again. Now, we're somewhere in the middle of fucking Mount James, completely surrounded by trees, and nothing says horror movie like being in the middle of nowhere, even if it is broad daylight.

I already want this to be done with, I just can't shake the feeling that I'm going to wind up dead. Ilana is finally done with her games now that she's officially drawing me out, and I know that isn't going to end well. Not that I'm going to tell the guys that, they're already on high alert.

The back of the SUV has a three-three layout with everyone facing the middle, so Tobias is sitting dead center across from me, while Hunter is on my left and Xavier sits to my right.

Hunter has his fingers laced with mine, Xavier has his hand on my shoulder, and Tobias is leaning forward, stroking my thigh. A small part of me wants to tell them to give me some breathing room, but I don't want to go into an emotional spiral again like I did back at Asheville High.

“Are you feeling a little calmer now?” Tobias asks quietly, as if reading my mind, and I nod, knowing my mood and emotions will determine theirs too.

My mind is a complete fucking mess. The fear of driving toward my impending death outweighs the badass determination I was feeling before I stepped into the car.

That's when it hits me. My eyes widen as I look up at Tobias through my lashes. He's already searching my face with concern.

I have said those three words to everyone but him. Everyone. But. Him.

I can't die knowing I never whispered them to him, feeling the meaning behind them, when I know I said it to Hunter and Xavier. I just can't.

My palms sweat, and my heart feels like it's about to pound out of my chest, but I scoot forward anyway. The three of them are likely wondering what the fuck is actually going on.

“Tobias, I—”

I... what? I stammer. Licking my lips, I lean forward, releasing Hunter's hand as I pull Tobias's from my lap, squeezing his fingers as I look into his eyes.

Taking a deep breath, I try again. “Tobias, I can't get out of this SUV without saying something I have wanted to say since the cabin,” I murmur, and he frowns, adjusting his hat with his

other hand as he leans toward me. Our faces are so close it wouldn't take much for me to touch my lips to his.

“Eden, I don't understand,” he replies, and I try to offer a soft smile. My heart feels like it's going to burst through my chest. I hate that I'm having to do this in front of the others, but I have no time.

“Tobias, I need you to know that I love—”

“Shut the fuck up,” he interrupts, and my eyes widen as I lean back in shock as anger and annoyance fills his gaze.

What the actual fuck?

“Don't you dare tell me that for the first time because you think you might not get another chance to say it. Don't you fucking dare,” he spits out, his hand tightening around mine as his gaze remains focused on me.

“I just—”

“No, Eden.” He cuts me off again, and it fucking angers me too, until he drops to his knees at my feet, holding all of my attention. “I'm going to tell you I love you later tonight. I'm going to shower you with kisses, taste that sweet pussy of yours, and bring you to the edge over and over again until you can't take anymore, and then I'm going to tell you I love you.”

I try to swallow past the lump in my throat, his words lighting me on fire from the inside out as I nod, excited for my impending orgasm.

“And I'm going to tell you I love you before I suffocate you with the damn pillow for edging me and interrupting me when I speak, but only after you've given me an orgasm,” I whisper, and I watch the grin transform his face.

“That’s more like it, bubble,” he says before pressing his lips to mine, and I fist his t-shirt, deepening the kiss and showing him I love him in the way I’ve gotten so used to doing.

“I think we’re here,” Xavier murmurs, breaking the moment, and I close my eyes for a second as I release Tobias and gather myself back together.

When I open my eyes, I look out of the window to find us at a complete stop in the middle of a forest. Nothing but trees surround us, and even the sun is blocked from view, making it feel darker than it actually is.

I can’t see anyone here as I glance out of Hunter’s window. I notice there are two more vehicles, so I can only hope we aren’t alone with just Ilana and her security team.

The sound of the driver’s door slamming shut pulls my attention to Reza, and in an instant, all three of the guys move to block me.

Hunter opens the door before Reza can even get to it, stepping down from the SUV with his gaze fixed on him until Tobias drops down as well, trying to be a barrier between the enemy and me.

Xavier holds me back, his chest pressed against me as he whispers, in my ear.

“I love you with everything I am. I’ll do whatever Ilana says to keep you safe. Anything. I need you to remember that.”

I barely manage a response before Tobias turns and holds his hand out for me, and as I catch sight of Reza’s expression, he quickly turns away. Clearly guilt *is* something he’s familiar

with, adding to the shame written all over his face. He's under Ilana's thumb like everyone else.

Stepping down, Xavier remains close to my back as Tobias sandwiches me in, while Hunter stands to the side, glancing around the area, and I watch as anger washes over his face.

"This way," Reza mumbles, pointing us in the direction Hunter is staring. I can see he wants to say more, his eyes pleading with Xavier's, but it almost feels like it's too little too late.

We walk around the SUV to find shadows off in the distance. It really is crazy how dark it seems. I can make out six people, but I couldn't tell you who each person is.

Slowly making my way through the grass, watching for the tree roots under the smattering of leaves, I wrap my arms around myself as the chill in the air picks up.

As we near, I finally see my mom. She's on her knees, and my heart drops to my feet. I try to pick up my speed, but Tobias keeps me back, letting Hunter lead the way, and as much as I don't want to, I comply. We need to be able to assess the whole situation first.

Hunter stops as Ilana turns to face us. She's a mere twenty feet away. Two of the other people are some of her bodyguards, and then there's the man in the balaclava. So the man in the balaclava on the tape wasn't Reza? Fuck.

Looking around them all, I realize a huge hole has been dug in the ground, and I freeze as the whole scene chills me to the bone. What the fuck is going on here?

"Oh, how nice of you to finally arrive. I'm glad the girls were able to get my message to you," Ilana says, her voice

sickly sweet, and it irritates the hell out of me. I don't care for any of her fake shit right now.

This is my first time coming face-to-face with this vile bitch, and after knowing everything she has put me through, I'm not as scared as I thought I would be. Not at all.

Ilana stands proudly like she did that day outside of our home at White River. With her tailored navy pants and cream silk shirt, she looks every inch the businesswoman she's supposed to be, but it amuses me a little to see her wearing designer rubber boots. Even now, when she's in the middle of the fucking woods, she still refuses to get herself dirty from the deeds she wants done.

"Your message was received, Mother. What is the meaning of all this?" Xavier asks, his hands in his pockets as he strolls forward to block me from view, but I move to his side.

I refuse to let this woman see me as weak.

Moving closer does me no favors, though, as I step nearer to the deep hole to find an open fucking wooden casket down at the bottom, and bile rises in my throat.

I flick my gaze back to Ilana's, and she's already watching and assessing me with a sneer on her lips. I have to fight not to roll my eyes. I ignore her as I look at my mom on the ground. Standing this close, I can see the gag around her mouth and the restraints binding her arms behind her back, and anger rages inside me. I hate seeing the bruises marking every inch of her and the pain swimming in the unshed tears in her eyes.

She may not have been here for me since everything went to shit, but she unfortunately fell victim to Ilana's games, and as much as I hate it, I can see how easy it is for everyone in



this town to fall back into the roles Ilana gives them. She's the puppet master, and we're the toys she entertains herself with.

My mom's sobs break my heart as Hunter steps back and moves to my left, ghosting the back of his hand against mine. I try to take every little ounce of strength I can from him.

I watch as Ilana walks the long way around the hole, dramatically drawing out her response, and it riles me up even more.

Where is Tobias?

Looking over my shoulder, I find him right behind me, less than three feet between us, and I try to offer him a strong smile, but the tightening of his jaw tells me I'm not doing that good of a job.

All I can think about is putting my hands on my tummy to protectively shield the baby, but I don't want to draw attention to us. Knowing that she knows and being in front of her while *knowing* she knows, are two completely different things. The little video confirmed it, but I don't know how this will play out just yet, and I don't want to put us at more of a disadvantage than we already are.

I watch as Reza moves to stand on the other side of Xavier, but he's suddenly pulled to the side by one of Ilana's bodyguards, and I can't stop my mouth from falling open in surprise. I was too busy watching Ilana to see anyone else moving. Distracting bitch.

The four of us all watch as Reza lets the bodyguard restrain his hands behind his back and push him toward my mom, and my eyebrows knit together in confusion. He drops to his knees beside my mom, his gaze on the ground as my mother's sobs get louder.

My body screams at me to step closer to her, to help her, anything, but any action from me is halted as Ilana comes to a stop in front of me. I force myself not to flinch, my eyes locking with Ilana's.

"Is there a particular reason Dad is restrained?" Xavier asks, trying to keep his voice neutral, but his jaw is tense and his hands continue to clench at his sides.

"Because he didn't follow the rules, Xavier. Care to join him?" she retorts, her eyebrow raised as she flicks her gaze to his, but she doesn't give him time to respond. "I brought you here for other matters. If you'd all like to follow me, the moment of truth can begin," she states, waving her hand toward Reza and my mom. The bodyguards watch our every move as I take small steps to follow after her.

I feel the guys all around me, and a hum of uncertainty courses through my veins as we come to a stop in front of my mom. Her eyes plead for forgiveness, but the coffin in the ditch just to my left still holds my attention too.

I feel like there are too many moves left on the chessboard. Ilana is the queen, the most powerful piece on the game board, and more importantly, the one with all of the moves that everyone's afraid of.

Where did the guy in the balaclava go?

Trying to search around the small clearing we're in without drawing too much attention to myself, I spy him hovering by Ilana's SUVs. His identity is another fucking piece to the puzzle we have no damn clue we're putting together.

"Where shall we begin, hmm?" Ilana asks, to no one but herself, as she begins to pace right behind Reza and my mom,

my body trembling with the unknown hanging over our heads.  
“Reza, where do you think I should start?”

She pauses behind him, gripping his hair to force him to look up at Xavier, and I’m surprised to see so much pain and anguish in his gaze.

“Wherever you want, Ilana,” he mumbles, barely loud enough for us to hear over the sobbing coming from my mom. Ilana grins at Xavier when she notices him twitching while he watches.

“That’s what I’ve always liked about you, Reza. You’re always happy to please me if you think it might keep others safe, but that’s not the case today, remember? I told you what I had in store for you if you didn’t pick Eden and the boys up, and I told you what was going to happen even when you did,” she says, her voice high as if she’s excited, and I glance to my right, finding Hunter who looks about as confused as I am.

“And what’s that?” Tobias asks, surprising me, and Xavier clears his throat as Ilana whips her head around to look at Tobias. “I’m only asking because we are dragging this out something crazy, and we have things to do. Maury is going to rock up at any minute at this rate,” he continues casually, shrugging his shoulders like the whole thing is what you see every day, but it only seems to anger Ilana.

“I want you to know that Reza is a piece of shit who dropped his friends and lovers in record time when I offered him money. I offered him everything his little heart desired so he would be with me, and how does he repay me? By still trying to protect one of *them*,” she bites out, and my gaze flicks between Reza and my mom, remembering what Pete and Linda mentioned about Reza being a part of their circle before he suddenly stopped showing up.

Reza shakes his head and sighs, leaning back so he can look at the four of us. “That’s not true and you know it. You offered me an ultimatum, and I took the option that saved the ones I loved from your wrath,” he says calmly, but Ilana growls, kicking him in the back of the head, sending him flat on his face in the mud.

I instinctively take a step forward to help him, but Xavier grips my wrist to keep me back. When I whip my head around to look at him, he shakes his head slightly, so I take a deep breath, trying to follow their lead.

“Why are we taking a trip down memory lane again? It’s boring as shit,” Hunter calls out, and I frown at him. Why the fuck are they purposely pushing her when she’s in this psychotic state?

“Because I want Xavier to know his father never loved me, never loved us, and everything I wanted in a man, a partner, was never achieved by this motherfucker,” she bites out, and it dawns on me.

Every time they push her, she loses her cool and answers the question. We’re getting answers by angering her.

“I love my son,” Reza growls, trying to lift himself up and look at Xavier. Ilana gives him a helping hand, threading her fingers in his hair and pulling him back to sit on his legs. The pleading in his eyes as he stares at Xavier guts me, begging his son to believe he’s speaking the truth.

“I asked you to kill Carl Grady like you have killed everyone else I asked you to, and you refused, why?” she spits out as Jennifer’s eyes widen.

Reza swallows hard, my eyes transfixed on his Adam’s apple as he tries to gulp. “I told you the answer to this at the

time.”

“I want them to hear it,” Ilana hisses, her fingers tightening in his hair.

“Because I will always love him, just like I will also love all of them,” Reza responds, and my heart bleeds for him. I can’t imagine what ultimatum she gave him to make him give them all up, sit on the sidelines, and watch them love each other for the small time they had before Ilana forced them to separate and run.

“How does that make you feel, Xavier? That your father loved a man—sorry, *two* men and two other women *more* than he loved us?” Ilana goads, and Reza looks utterly defeated as his gaze fixes on Xavier.

“I couldn’t really give a shit if I’m being honest,” Xavier replies, swiping a hand down his face. “Can we get to the part where you explain why you have us all here?”

I feel like a fucking idiot just standing here, watching and listening for her next move, but I don’t know what else I’m supposed to do.

“Always so impatient, Xavier. You get that from me,” she says, preening before us as she releases her hold on Reza. There’s a crazed look in her eyes as she moves to stand before us. “The point is, he spent the past twelve months having an affair,” she sings, and I watch as Reza’s face pales and his eyes dart around with panic.

“And?” Xavier prompts with a sigh, completely bored, and Ilana smiles.

“And he didn’t know that I knew all about it. He thought I didn’t see any of it. Your father was completely unaware that I

was making the other person do everything I wanted, needed, to make our special guest fear for her fucking life.”

My blood turns to ice at her words, fear coating my veins as Tobias tries to nudge me behind him, but I refuse to move.

“No,” Reza wheezes, his eyes scanning between Xavier’s and me, but I look at my mom whose eyes widen too.

It’s not her.

She couldn’t have been doing this to me all this time.

Please, dear God, not my own mother.

“Richard, why don’t you come join us?”

My heart feels like it’s stopped beating in my chest as I watch the man dressed head to toe in black pull the balaclava off his head, revealing Richard Freemont.

No.

His face is stained with tears, and shame gleams in his eyes as he moves to stand in front of us.

“Richie,” Reza whispers, and my mom’s wails pick up around the gag as I stare in shock.

“Well, now that the reunion is over with, let’s get to the fun part. Xavier, my friend here is going to give you gun number one.” Ilana waves one of her bodyguards closer, and he offers a gun to Xavier.

Xavier slowly takes it from his hands, looking to his mother to see what she expects of him.

*I’ll do whatever it takes, I need you to remember that.*

That didn’t include killing people, did it?

“Okay,” Xavier murmurs, glancing at Hunter and Tobias first before his eyes settle on me for a moment, as if reminding me of the words that just played in my head.

“Gun number one either has you pulling the trigger on your father or Hunter,” she tells him, a hint of laughter in her words as she bounces on her toes in excitement.

“Like fucking hell Xavier will aim it at Hunter,” I snarl, done listening to her doing all of the talking. She’s said her piece, she’s had her fun, but no way in hell will she threaten Hunter’s life.

No. Fucking. Way.

“Ah, the pregnant princess has finally found her tongue, huh?” she shouts as she walks behind my mother. My mom’s eyes widen at Ilana’s words as I clench my hands, my nails biting into my palm as I try to remain calm.

“You don’t really let anyone get a word in when you’re going off on a rant,” I scoff, my hands trembling as I watch every move she makes.

“Little girl, I’ll tell you when it’s your turn to face your ultimatum. Maybe you should have a little St. John’s Wort to calm you down, take the edge off,” she taunts, winking at me, and I want to charge at her and beat the fucking shit out of this bitch, but knowing that her bodyguards have guns, and God only knows what other weapons, makes me pause.

“Leave her alone now, Ilana,” Richard mumbles, defeat in every syllable, and even I want to roll my eyes at how ridiculous his plea sounds.

Without warning, she reaches into her rubber boot, withdraws a small pistol, and aims it straight at Richard before pulling the trigger.

My heart lurches in my chest as I watch the bullet hit his forehead. Blood, brain matter, and his skull shattering is all I can see. He drops to the ground as the life leaves his body, and Reza and my mother cry out in heartbreak as I stand in complete shock.

I think I'm going to be sick. Bile rises in my stomach as I turn away from the scene before me. Tobias pulls me into his side, holding me tight, and I manage to keep the vomit at bay.

What the fuck is any of this?

“Eden, don't look away, we're just getting started!” she shouts, a manic laugh following, and it takes everything I have to turn and face her again. “Now, want to hear *your* ultimatum? Yeah? Get in the casket or I will shoot your mom, dear old Jennifer.”

I can barely hear her over the pounding of my heart echoing in my ears. Tobias's grip tightens around me, but my thoughts are going a mile a minute, and my vision only sees this bitch before me.

“That's enough, Ilana,” Hunter grinds out, but nothing is going to stop her from getting what she wants.

If I can keep her occupied, doing exactly what she demands, then that gives the guys some time to come up with a plan—or at least I hope so, because I have nothing else to go on right now.

Trying but failing to take in my surroundings, I take a deep breath and run my trembling fingers down my pants. I go to take a step forward, but Hunter catches my movement and instantly walks toward me, but in doing so, one of the bodyguards points a fucking gun at him.



“I’ll go in the casket!” I yell, making sure I have everyone’s attention. Ilana smiles, but I’m just focused on protecting Hunter.

“Well, don’t keep me waiting then,” she says, waving me toward the casket.

Tobias reluctantly releases me when I glance at him over my shoulder, trying to offer a reassuring smile. I cast my gaze at my mom, pain thick in her eyes, but I can’t bring myself to look at her right now. Not when everything’s falling apart. This feels like the moment I was trying to prepare for—my impending death.

“—ill —ee!” Jennifer shouts, her words muffled by the gag, but Ilana pays her no mind as she comes to a stop beside me at the side of the hole in the ground.

She’s going to bury me alive like she’s been indirectly threatening to do since I arrived in Knight’s Creek.

“—ill —ee!” my mom screams again, and I turn to glance at her. Ilana does the same as my mom tries to stand, but she stumbles forward instead.

She’s trying to say *kill me*.

Tears well in my eyes at the desperation on my mom’s face, but I try to offer her a reassuring smile. I remember her telling me they buried her, but she got out. She’s kneeling right here with me now, so I can get through this too, right?

“—ill —ee —pees,” she yells, tears streaking down her face, and Ilana growls.

“Can we shut that bitch up?”

Whirling around, she aims her gun at my mom and pulls the trigger at the same time she smacks her arm into my chest,

sending me flying backward.

I land in the box, my back smacking awkwardly against the wood as my breath leaves me. Thankfully, my head is uninjured, but the three foot drop definitely made an impact. I scramble to get back on my feet as I try to gasp for breath, the sounds of others shouting and screaming filling my ears. When I hear another gunshot go off, my heart lurches in my chest as I try to figure out where the sound came from.

*Please, God, no. Don't let her hurt anyone else. Especially not someone I care so much about. Please.*

I beg to myself, fear ripping through my body as I look up in time to watch Ilana's body fall carelessly on top of me, trapping me in the coffin with dirt sprinkling over us from her fall.

Kicking and screaming, I try to shove her off me, but she's so heavy it proves difficult. The sound of the gun clattering against the wooden casket resonates in my mind as liquid drips over my face from Ilana.

Glancing at my hand, I tremble at the sight of my red stained fingers, and then it hits me.

*She's dead.*

THIRTY-ONE



# TOBIAS

---

Eden's scream rips through the air, and I stumble over my feet, trying to get to her as quickly as I can. My foot slips as I near the gaping hole in the ground, but I manage to stop myself before I tumble in after her.

It takes me a second to figure out where Eden begins and Ilana ends, since they're a jumble of arms and legs, but I quickly roll Ilana's limp body to the side so I can pull Eden out. I fall on my back with a huff, holding Eden tightly against my chest, and my heart pounds as my ears ring from the sound of the gunshot.

One minute Eden was looking down at the coffin, and the next, Ilana was shooting Jennifer while simultaneously shoving Eden into the ground. Then, all hell broke loose.

Xavier pulled the trigger of his gun, which was aimed at Ilana, but it was filled with fucking blanks. Blanks. Reza rose to his feet as Hunter tried to take down one of Ilana's bodyguards, and I was rushing toward Eden when the sound of another gunshot echoed through the air. Ilana dropped dead before our eyes. But I can process my thoughts on that later, right now, my bubble needs me.

“Hey, Eden? Are you okay?” I ask, not wanting to let go of her but needing to look her over from head to toe at the same time. She groans in response as she goes to roll to her side, but Hunter lifts her up effortlessly. He places her on her feet, and it takes a second for Eden to steady herself.

“I don’t know,” she answers, her voice hoarse as she tries to brush the dirt from her clothes. It’s a completely lost cause, we all know it, but nobody interrupts her.

“Nafas,” Xavier croaks, rushing toward us. I step to the side so he can see for himself that she’s okay, watching as he drops to his knees at Eden’s feet and rests his head against her stomach.

I can’t comprehend the level of death and destruction that surrounds us. Three dead bodies, two security guards knocked out, and Reza whimpering as he curls up into a ball. I’ve never seen so much blood in all my life.

“My mom?” Eden murmurs, and my heart hurts for her. The bullet Ilana shot hit Jennifer straight in the chest, her body instantly dropping to the ground like a rag doll.

“I’m so sorry, love,” Hunter responds, and tears track down her face as she sinks her teeth into her bottom lip. She strokes Xavier’s hair before stepping back and wrapping her arms around herself as her emotions consume her. Xavier stands, concern shining in his eyes as we watch her put some distance between us.

I can’t even imagine how she must feel. Her two biological parents are dead, and she was present as the other two died. Fuck. Someone better know a damn good therapist to help my girl through this. I’ll pay whatever it takes to support her. Damn, maybe I should change my college major so I can do it myself?

The sound of roaring engines breaks my internal thoughts as Eden steps under Hunter's outstretched arm, and we watch as four SUVs drive through the trees and stop on the other side of the ditch.

I position myself in front of Eden, just like Xavier does, but when the door swings open and Ryan steps out, I relax my stance.

Bethany joins him moments later. I watch as her gaze finds Eden's, her eyes wild with fear as she looks her up and down. Hunter releases Eden who finds herself suddenly wrapped in Bethany's arms, the pair of them crying.

Ryan regards the fucked up scene before him as Archie, Charlie, and Lou-Lou all step out of another vehicle and walk toward us.

Fuck. Archie.

"Xav—"

"I've got it," he grumbles, squeezing Eden's shoulder before blocking Archie and Charlie from coming any closer. I try to take a deep breath as I watch Ryan gulp, running a hand through his hair.

"We tried to get here as soon as possible," Ryan murmurs, his eyes swinging back to the devastation and lost lives as Lou-Lou comes to stand with us. It's obvious she wants to console everyone, but she doesn't know how. Thankfully Eden must see it too, because she steps out of Bethany's hold and moves right into Lou-Lou's.

I'm sure they have a lot of questions, but trying to formulate any answers right now requires more brain power than I've got.

“How did you guys know where to find us?” Eden asks as she steps back from Lou-Lou and places herself between Hunter and me. Both of us instinctively take a step closer to her, even when there’s barely any room to begin with.

“Three ways, if I’m honest,” Ryan answers, turning from the carnage around us to look back at Eden. “Reza tried to contact my security team when you were on your ride over here, Richard left a note at home which Archie found when he got in, and—”

“And I planted a tracking device on you when I hugged you back at school,” Lou-Lou interrupts, wearing a sheepish smile on her lips as I recall her hugging Eden before we headed for Reza and the SUV.

“Thank you,” Eden whispers, and Lou-Lou shrugs like it was no big deal, but fuck. We were lucky nothing happened to us with all the fucking shots fired.

“Was it you who shot Ilana then?” Xavier asks as he approaches the group. Archie and Charlie are with him, and I can only assume he explained the situation to Archie. Bethany offers them both a hug, likely seeing Richard’s corpse mere feet away from where we stand.

“That would be me,” someone calls out from behind me, just as Ryan was about to open his mouth and respond.

Turning to look over my shoulder, I watch as a guy not much older than us walks toward our group. In black combat boots, matching tactical pants, and a long-sleeved, skintight black top, this guy looks like something out of a fucking *Die Hard* movie. His brown eyes look tired, and it appears as though he’s run his fingers through his brown hair a time or two.

“And who might you be?” Xavier asks, looking him over exactly as I do.

The guy grins. “Roman, Roman Steele-Rivera. The favor Ryan called in,” he adds, justifying why he’s here, and we all look at Ryan for clarification.

“Honestly, Roman, I appreciate it so much, we all do,” Ryan responds, moving forward to fist bump him.

“Why have I never met this guy before?” Hunter questions, and Ryan rolls his eyes.

“Of course, Hunter, let me introduce you to every single person I know who is trained to kill people. Fuck me, with the attitudes you three have, someone would wind up dead,” Ryan grumbles, and Eden nods in agreement, making me snort.

“I’m going to head out, if that’s all. Luna and the guys have been expecting me home for days, but this bitch was hard to get eyes on,” he grumbles. “What I wouldn’t do for a fucking dragon juice right about now too,” he adds, and Charlie claps her hands—claps her motherfucking hands like a damn seal in the middle of a fucking crime scene.

“Those are my favorite,” she says with a grin, and Roman’s eyes widen comically.

“Right,” he exclaims as he reaches out to pat Ryan’s shoulder. “Good seeing you, man. I hope everything is alright now,” he remarks, casually pointing in the direction of Ilana’s dead body.

“Hey, you know I’m all for pushing my luck and stuff, but I actually have one more favor to ask. Let me walk you to a car and get you out of here,” Ryan replies, leading him away from the group, and like a synchronized dance, we all turn to look at Bethany.



“What favor?” Hunter asks, folding his arms over his chest, and she scoffs at him while also wiping tears from her eyes.

“I think he’s connected to Bryce Steele who’s Ryan’s silent partner with the whole security stuff,” she answers. It’s a little too open-ended for me, but everyone else seems cool enough.

Remembering my own words from earlier, I intertwine my fingers with Eden’s and pull her close to me, making sure to obstruct her view of the dead bodies lying around us as I move her toward the closest SUV.

Opening the rear door, I stand back for her to climb in first before quickly getting in behind her. When I look over my shoulder, I see both Xavier and Hunter glancing in our direction, but they give us the space I need as I shut the door.

Eden lies down on the leather seats, resting her head in my lap, and I move to brush the hair from her face, trying to make sure I don’t cringe at the blood still smeared across her.

“I’m so proud of you, bubble,” I whisper, and she frowns.

“Why?”

“Because you fight, you fight for everything, and now, now there’s nothing left except for us to hope,” I answer, and she opens her eyes, searching mine to see the truth in my words shining back at her.

“I love you so much, Tobias.”

“I love you too, baby momma.”

THIRTY-TWO



## EDEN

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“Get your hands off the goddamn food before I cut your fingers off,” Linda grumbles, smacking Tobias’s hand as he tries to grab a slice of pizza. I can’t stop the bubble of laughter that escapes my lips, making him glare at me.

I blow him a kiss, and his grin quickly returns as he taps his foot against mine under the table. Damn him for knowing just a single touch can make me breathless.

The chaos around us and the buzz in the air feels like magic. I’ve never been in a room full of people who have suffered such heartache, but then all at once, the puppet master is no more.

Ilana is dead. Fucking dead. I had to witness the death of so many others, my mom included, but knowing Ilana no longer controls any of us makes me hopeful for the future—the future I could never see without my father at my side.

“Two more minutes, and Linda will have brought out enough food to feed a damn army,” Pete grumbles, with a knowing smile on his face as he tosses a dish cloth over his shoulder and shakes his head at the spread before him.

It feels weird sitting in Pete’s without being in our usual booth, but there are far too many people for us to all squeeze

in there.

It's been two weeks since we were in the middle of Mount James, hearing the sound of gunshots as our lives changed forever. There were funerals held for my mom and Richard, which we attended, but Ilana was shoved in a box without a service because that bitch deserved to rot in hell alone. Her dirty laundry was aired all over the news, "The Mayor of Knight's Creek—Dead," and no one shed a single fucking tear.

Linda wanted to have a little get-together, and it feels weird having everyone in one place. They rearranged all the tables in the middle of the room, closing the diner to the public, and they haven't stopped bringing food out for the last fifteen minutes in preparation.

My heart aches for my mom. Even though she wasn't the woman I needed her to be since all of this happened, she was still the woman who raised me—teaching me how to braid my hair, talking me through the female body, and being a shoulder to cry on when I was small.

I hate that the last words I heard her say were "kill me." Trying to draw Ilana's attention away from me ultimately got her killed, but I just keep telling myself that at least my dad isn't alone anymore. I hope they can find peace together, because I forgive her.

Sitting with my back to the windows overlooking the ocean, I try not to pout at my view of the parking lot, especially when I have my Tobias facing me as I force myself into the present and out of my mind.

I have Xavier to my left, and Bethany, Ryan, and Cody to my right. Linda and Pete are holding up the end seats, leaving Tobias facing me, and Hunter to the left with Archie, Charlie, and Lou-Lou on his other side.

It's crazy to me how my life has turned upside down this year, but I somehow managed to find these people—people who mean more to me than I ever thought possible. I'm going to be forever grateful that I don't have to suffer my loss alone anymore. *I'm* not alone anymore, and that makes my heart swell in my chest.

“Okay, everyone, dig in,” Linda announces, placing a plate of burgers down, and everyone follows her orders, delving into the sea of food laid out for us. There are pizzas, subs, wings, ribs, and so many different types of potato side dishes, my brain hurts with the decisions ahead.

The chatter around the table quiets as everyone eats, so when Xavier places his hand on my thigh, I tense under his touch. I can't handle him teasing me at the table right now.

Glancing to my left, I find him already smiling at me, and it relaxes me immediately. The smile on his face is one I haven't gotten used to yet, but Xavier Knight is finally learning to be Xavier Knight in his own right, and not who his mother forced him to be. He's still an asshole to everyone outside of our little bubble, but to me, he's fucking poetic, and it makes my heart pound knowing I made the right choice by choosing him.

“Everything okay, Nafas?” he whispers, smirking at me as he rubs his thumb across the bare skin along the hem of my dress.

I nod, biting my bottom lip as I shiver under his touch, forcing down the moan that's desperate to escape.

“I think she seems a little tense. Aren't you, love?” Hunter adds, a grin on his lips as I glance across the table at him. I want to wipe that smug grin off his face. Shithead.

Tobias keeps tapping my foot with his under the table, wearing a soft smile on his lips as he opts for the safest option and keeps his mouth shut.

“How about you all shut the f-u-c-k up and leave her alone, you smelly c-u-m socks,” Bethany responds for me, sticking her tongue out, and Linda bursts out laughing from her seat at the end, making Bethany blush a little, which only makes me join in on the laughter.

“Did you guys hear Roxy was packing up all her things and moving out of the Montgomery family home with her father?” Charlie asks, and a few people murmur they did while I frown.

“I didn’t. What happened?”

“Apparently, Daddy Montgomery spiraled, spending all their money, or what little they actually had left, on liquor and gambling. He blew every last dime. From what one of the girls on the cheer squad was saying, they’re moving into the trailer park in the next town over,” Charlie explains, her eyes lighting up as she grins, and I roll my eyes. I don’t care about Roxy or KitKat and their future, it’s not going to impact me.

Tobias laughs, patting the table as he grins at Charlie’s news. There really is no love lost between us and Pinky and Perky.

Charlie is one big gossip sometimes, but I love her. I can’t say Roxy doesn’t deserve all the shit that comes her way, but she’s no longer on my radar. I have bigger things on my mind to deal with in comparison to what she and KitKat are doing—but I secretly hope KitKat suffers from long-term acne, fungal infections, and catches an STD or two.

I smother my grin, getting carried away in my thoughts, but when I turn to glance at Bethany, I can tell she sees right through me, the grin on her face matching my own.

“Hey, did you learn anything else about getting deeds and rights when you turn twenty-eight?” I ask, grabbing a piece of delicious floppy cheese pizza as I wait for her to respond, and she sighs.

“I went down to the town hall, but there isn’t much there for me to see without being twenty-eight yet. Ilana definitely went for mayor to have more control over all of it,” she mumbles while everyone else is in their own little bubbles of conversation. I’m sure if we cared enough, Ryan would figure out the details for us.

“Do you have any idea what you’ll do with the Asheville name? Keep it as the high school or request to make changes?”

“It’s not my name anymore, so for all I care, it can burn to ash, but I need to eventually talk with Hunter about it. A part of me would like to pull it from the damn town altogether and never look back,” she answers honestly as Ryan squeezes her shoulder in support, and I nod in understanding.

Their parents are dead. I’m never going to have to deal with their level of crazy, but I know whatever their parents did was irreversible. It made Bethany stronger in every sense of the word, but I dread knowing how or what they had to do to get to that point.

Tobias’s parents, on the other hand, are alive and breathing, but those motherfuckers no longer get to sink their claws into him. Ryan made sure to force an investigation into the warden, and he’s been stripped of his title and role at the prison. It’s about time he lost the reins.

“So what are you guys planning for the future now that you have your freedom?” Linda asks, and I look to my left. She directs her question more to the Allstars than me, and the three of them glance at each other as if they’re hoping one of the others will answer.

“Uh, in what way?” Xavier finally responds, rubbing the back of his neck, his food long forgotten as he keeps his other hand on my thigh.

“I mean after you graduate. What are you going to do now that your mother isn’t determining your every move?” she questions, taking a bite out of a huge slice of pepperoni pizza, and the guys look at each other again, like they haven’t really thought about it since all the chaos.

Rolling my eyes at the three of them, I look at Linda. “We’re going to graduate with the best freaking grades we can get then go to Ohio State,” I answer confidently, feeling the Allstars staring at me. “I’m probably not going to start until the spring semester, or I’ll wait until the following enrollment, but that’s a problem for future Eden. Ya know, the one not carrying a child around so casually,” I say with a grin, and Xavier’s hand moves from my thigh to my stomach.

I can’t wait for us to finally feel the baby move.

“I like it,” Bethany says as Linda smiles wide with pride. As I turn to look at Bethany, I catch sight of Archie nodding enthusiastically.

“I may have received my early acceptance form the other day for Ohio State too,” he announces proudly, and my smile grows wider. That fills me with joy, because I really want to work hard on being a part of Archie’s life and letting him deeper into mine.



“Samesies,” Charlie adds, and excitement bubbles inside me.

Ryan sighs, and I frown as I look past Bethany to see him, but there’s still a smile on his face.

“All I’m hearing is I have a small time frame to build a new home for the Carter family in Ohio,” he grumbles, and she giggles beside him.

“You want to follow us?” Hunter asks, a hint of surprise in his voice as he stares at Bethany, and she nods.

“Are you joking? We’ve only remained here to be close to you, motherfucker,” Ryan teases with a grin.

“Mothertrucker!” Cody shouts, making everyone gasp, and Bethany smacks the back of her hand against Ryan’s chest. Ryan smothers his laugh, but there is fear in his eyes.

“I love you, knucklehead. Maybe not as much as Eden, but, ya know, a lot,” Bethany says, and I smile at her words. “Besides, I want our babies to be close,” she adds, and I think my heart might explode with love.

These guys are all sappy as fuck.

“What about you, Lou-Lou?” Tobias asks, and I look her way too, appreciating Tobias’s effort to keep my friends involved.

“I—uh, Ryan,” she mumbles, looking nervously at her food as Ryan clears his throat.

“We’re trying to get Lou-Lou out of a situation. I’ve called a few favors in, so she’s going to go to college in Emmerson Grove up north.”

My eyes are fixed on Lou-Lou. She’s not upset by Ryan’s words, but I can see a mixture of relief and anxiety on her

face, which has me nodding in understanding.

“Do you need anything from us?” I ask, and her eyes widen in surprise.

“No, I’m all good,” she assures me, an appreciative smile on her lips.

“If that changes, you tell me. Do you understand?” I state, not fucking around as I point my finger at her and glare. She has been there for me through all of my shit, so you bet your ass I’ll be there for her too.

“Thank you, Eden.”

“Let’s celebrate!” Pete calls out, walking around the table and placing shot glasses down in front of everyone. “Don’t worry, honey, yours is a bit of iced tea. I just didn’t want you feeling left out,” he tells me with a grin, and I roll my eyes.

“To making our own families,” Tobias says, and everyone murmurs their agreement. The wink he offers me makes me giddy as I place a hand on my stomach before I raise my shot glass filled with iced tea.

I smile at everyone around the table, the new sense of happiness and freedom we all finally have fills me with so many emotions it brings tears to my eyes.

Life is a rollercoaster. Some are crazier than others, but they’re ours.

Our hopes.

Our dreams.

Our desire to live.

I never thought I knew what I wanted for my future, and now, it’s all I can see.



# EPILOGUE

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*“And to round up our starting lineup tonight, let’s make some noise for our star QB, Xavierrrr Knighttt!”*

The crowd goes wild as Xavier runs out onto the field, hot as hell in his red, white, and gray uniform, and I try not to swoon into a puddle at my own feet.

I join in with the crowd from the family section of the stands, overwhelmed with pride for all three of my men, but only two of them are on the grass—Xavier and Tobias. They’re fucking smashing it, hands down, making memories and taking trophies like it’s everyday life.

Hunter, my deep soul, decided to step back from the game when we moved to Ohio and focus on what he loves the most—music. I am right there for him. I’m completely obsessed with his creative mind and his raw, musical talent.

He’s adamant he doesn’t want to actually perform himself, so we’re all set up with the plan to start our own record label, where I’ll use my marketing and business degrees to run the background stuff with him too.

*Ocean Beats.*

It’s going to be amazing.

Hunter squeezes my thigh, gaining my attention, and my heart swells when I look at him and baby Carter, our little bundle of joy—or destroyer of sleep, vomit monster, and crotch goblin, as we also like to call him.

He is absolutely everything. We decided to name him after our two favorite people—Bethany and Ryan Carter.

Carter Carl Grady.

He's the center of our universe. At just twelve months old, he already makes everything worthwhile. Life is exhausting in the best way possible.

Our little Grady baby. None of the guys wanted to tarnish him with the Asheville, Knight, or Holmes last name and the stigma they feel themselves, so it was their decision more than mine to name him Grady, but it suits him.

His blond hair, pudgy cheeks, and piercing blue eyes make him my double. But it's crazy as he has moments of looking like each of my Allstars. It's funny how children pick up mannerisms from the people they're surrounded by. He's going to break hearts for sure, but in the future. Way, way, way in the future. When I'm dead, or he's forty, either one.

“When do I get some Carter cuddles?” Bethany asks.

I look past Hunter to see her pouting, and I grin. “Are you sure you have enough space to hold him with that huge baby you're carrying?” I question, and she glares at me as she rolls up her sleeves, her eight month pregnant belly completely bubbled out.

Everyone is so excited for Cody's baby sister to arrive. We're completely overrun by men, and one hundred percent ready for some much needed girl power. I'm beyond ready to watch all these guys melt when she arrives.

Hunter holds out Carter for her to take, and she instantly cuddles him into her side as Cody pops out from behind her leg, Ryan hot on his heels.

“Dee-dee!” he exclaims, making my smile grow even wider, and I manage to catch him as he chucks himself at me. This kid’s vocabulary is amazing now, but he is never going to call me anything except Dee-dee. He doesn’t care if he knows my name is Eden.

They drop down into the seats on the other side of Hunter, Ryan offering a slight wave as he coos over Carter as well.

“Are you guys ready for a baby free night?” he asks, and I exhale in relief.

“You are too good to us,” I answer with my hand on my chest. We’ve been working our asses off in school, juggling childcare, and finding time for each other. Tonight is the first night the guys have willingly agreed to allow Carter to have a sleepover with Auntie Beth and Uncle Ryan. I’m all for it.

“I’m going to call you at—”

“Nope, no you’re not!” Bethany shouts, interrupting Hunter before he can finish his sentence, and I have to clap my hand over my mouth to stop my laugh, Cody copying the move with me.

It looks like Hunter is about to argue, but the crowd goes crazy with cheers and clapping. We look out onto the field to see Tobias rushing the last ten yards. I jump from my seat as he makes a touchdown, bouncing Cody in my arms as I do.

It fills me with joy as I watch the team celebrate together, Xavier and Archie right there with Tobias as Charlie screams with the college’s cheer squad.

Who knew our lives would get to be like this? Full of happiness.



My motherfuckers won the game, 38 to 24, and they're one step closer to the playoffs. I'm so fucking proud.

"Nafas," Xavier calls out, followed by the sound of the front door swinging open and hitting the wall because he's a damn animal. I roll my eyes.

Stepping out of the bathroom, I wander into the open-plan living room and kitchen area of our condo to find a sweaty Xavier and Tobias, still in their dirty uniforms. They *never* hang around after a game, it's always a race for who can find me first.

"I'm here," I murmur, leaning against the doorframe with my arms folded over my chest. Their eyes find me instantly, raking over me from head to toe as I stand completely bare. Not an inch of fabric on my skin.

"Holy fuck," Tobias groans, fixing his beanie. Knowing he reacts to me exactly as he did two years ago, like nothing has changed, makes my body tingle.

"What's the hold up, love?" Hunter asks, coming to stand behind me as naked as I am, pressing his cock into my lower back. I bite my lip to hold in my moan, watching as both Tobias and Xavier glare at him. "What? It's not a party for one, assholes. Hurry the fuck up," Hunter says with a grin, kissing my shoulder before lifting me up off the floor bridal style and carrying me back into the bathroom.



The sound of the other two racing after us makes me giddy. The second we got back from the game, I was instantly on edge with the quiet that had fallen over our home without Carter, so I decided an orgasm or two would help distract us.

“Oh, if we’re sharing, your ass is mine tonight, bubble,” Tobias sings, and I hear him clapping as Hunter steps into the bathroom and places me in the whirlpool bath straight away.

I’m obsessed with the jacuzzi bathtub. It’s big enough for six, so it’s got plenty of room for the four of us to have some fun, and past experiments have confirmed it. The bathroom in general is just a complete relaxation sanctuary. With stone and cream tiles covering every inch of the room except the mirrored wall, a built-in jacuzzi bath, a four-man walk-in shower, and his and hers sinks, it’s my perfect paradise.

Hunter leans forward, kissing the valley between my breasts, as Tobias and Xavier storm into the room. Their sneakers are already gone, as are their shirts, and there’s no hesitation as they start to undo their uniform pants.

“I think Hunter has had more of your time today, so he gets your mouth,” Xavier murmurs, wearing a sexy smug grin on his face as he stares me down. “Your pussy is mine tonight,” he says, and I have to squeeze my thighs together to try and calm myself, but it’s no use.

I catch Tobias’s eyes widening in surprise at Xavier’s words. Everyone is acutely aware of what he’s insinuating for the first time.

Xavier has learned to share me, and group sex is hands down my favorite, even if I am obsessed with one-on-one time too, but even then, he always fucks my mouth, just like the first time we all played together. So the thought of him inside of me at the same time as Tobias has me ready to orgasm.

“I can do that,” Hunter agrees, his lips still pressed against my chest, teasing his mouth against my skin. “I already fucked our girl this morning when you guys had to leave for practice.”

“You motherfucker,” Tobias grumbles, and my head falls back as I bite down on my bottom lip, my eyes closing as I groan. It’s hot as fuck when three ridiculously hot guys bicker over who gets you most, but right now they’re not touching me.

“If you don’t get your asses over here and touch me, I’ll take care of myself,” I threaten, smiling, and when I reopen my eyes and look in their direction, I find them completely naked. Just how I wanted them. “Now, please. Hunter has had me wearing this all damn day in preparation,” I tell them, turning around to show them the plug Hunter has been stretching me out with, and their moans only heighten my own excitement.

“Whatever you wish, Nafas,” Xavier murmurs as I look over my shoulder at him.

Hunter grazes his teeth over my ass, and I practically purr in delight as Tobias inches closer, stroking his fingers up the inside of my thigh.

“Someone please get in the bubbles with me,” I demand. Tobias teases the entrance to my core, while Hunter runs his tongue over the globe of my ass as he starts to wiggle the plug. My teeth slam into my bottom lip, close to drawing blood as ecstasy bursts through my body.

I hear the water splashing and glance to my right to see Xavier right beside me, his cock hard and thick in his hand as he nears me. I pull him nearer, wrapping my fingers around his wrist to get him as close as possible.

He stands in front of me, skimming his hands down my waist as he looks deep into my eyes, and I get lost in him.

My legs buckle as Tobias thrusts two fingers into me, at the same time Hunter removes the plug from my body, and Xavier wraps his hand around my throat.

Fuck.

How am I meant to survive with all this big dick energy in my life?

At least I'll die from climaxing too hard. That's the best way to go.

Xavier leans down, crushing his lips to mine, and I fight him for control as my eyes fall closed, letting them explore my body.

I drag my hands up Xavier's abs, over his chest, and around to the back of his neck, all while he still adds pressure to my throat.

"More," I grind out as Hunter and Tobias work my pussy in tandem, and Hunter bites my ass for the third time. Tobias moves into the water and grazes his teeth along my thigh, and my orgasm rips through me without warning, causing me to cry out.

"Fuck," Xavier whispers against my lips, wrapping his hand around my back to keep me upright.

I feel the loss as Tobias and Hunter move away from me, but I can't turn to see where they're going since Xavier hasn't released my lips.

A second pair of hands holds my hips, and Xavier reluctantly lets me go, his hand relaxing around my throat as

he takes a seat on the ledge before he quickly pulls me back toward him.

“Xavier isn’t sharing very well,” Tobias complains, and I can hear the pout on his lips as Xavier kisses my stomach and pulls me closer to straddle his lap.

Looking over my shoulder, I find Hunter still out of the water, stroking his cock as he watches me, and it makes me feel even more desirable. They all have a way of making me feel like a fucking goddess.

Tobias stands right behind me with his cock in his hand as he rubs lube all over his thick length, and I’m eager to get to the next step where they fill me up so good.

I glance at Xavier, who must be able to see the gleam in my eyes, because he lines his cock up with my entrance and thrusts hard and fast, my mouth falling open on a silent moan.

Holy shit. He feels so good.

His eyes close as his own mouth falls open, and I love watching one of my guys feel as good as I do.

“Toby, I want to see you both spearing her while she gets to taste my cock,” Hunter orders as he climbs into the water, the bubbles lapping at my thighs as I slowly grind on Xavier’s dick.

“Are you ready?” Tobias asks, but when I look over my shoulder, I can’t tell if he’s looking at me or Xavier for confirmation, so I plant my hands on Xavier’s shoulders, brushing my hard nipples against his chest as I lean up on my knees, and slam back down on his length. If that isn’t answer enough, I don’t know what is.

Tobias strokes a hand down my spine, and I shiver under his touch. Goosebumps erupt in his wake until he slowly

pushes a finger inside me, stretching me to accommodate him, but the plug made that a whole lot easier.

“Please,” I beg as Tobias kisses my shoulder, my movements on Xavier slowing as I try to get ready for Tobias too.

“Anything for you, bubble,” he whispers in my ear before lining his cock up at my hole, his dick slick with lube. I hold my position above Xavier, letting Tobias sink inside of me slowly.

My body feels like I’m on fire, ready to combust as they fill me together, and the stretch and burn only enhance the pleasure rippling through me as Xavier’s eyes roll back in his head.

Just when I think I can’t take anymore, Hunter caresses a hand down my cheek, pulling my gaze to his before I focus on his cock proudly pointing in my direction. It’s red and throbbing for my attention, and I don’t want to disappoint.

I keep my tongue flat as I open my mouth for him. He doesn’t try to tease me, instantly letting me taste his cock. The weight of his thick length on my tongue, mixed with the friction of both Xavier and Tobias inside me, makes me feel like I’m ready to explode.

“So fucking beautiful when you take us all, love,” Hunter rasps, his fingers gripping my hair to hold me in the perfect position as Tobias thrusts into me, knocking me farther down Xavier’s cock at the same time, and we all moan.

“Fucking made for us,” Xavier growls, digging his fingers into my hips as he leans forward to graze his teeth against my nipple.

I can't. I fucking can't. It's all too much. It's everything, and my body can't take it.

I hum around Hunter's cock as my pussy clenches around Xavier, my orgasm tearing me apart from head to toe as ecstasy spikes through my veins.

"Oh God, oh God," Tobias chants, his thrusts stuttering as he reaches his climax too.

"Shit," Xavier bites out, sucking hard around my nipple as he comes inside me.

Hunter slips from my mouth, jerking his cock as he growls, and cum shoots from his dick, landing across my face as he finishes with us.

I feel like I'm going to pass out, my body dragging out the best O ever as my eyes fall closed, because I'll be damned if this motherfucker gets cum in my eye.

"I fucking love you," one of them murmurs, and I nod, completely exhausted as I feel someone lift me from the water, the cool air touching my skin. I can't even recall when Xavier and Tobias slipped from my body.

I keep my eyes closed as someone lays me down on our super soft blanket, knowing they'll take care of me like they always do.

Drifting in and out of sleep, I feel someone press their lips to my forehead before whispering, "Sleep, Eden. We've got you."

I want to whisper back that I know, that I've got them too, and that they and Carter are my everything, but sleep takes me, and realistically, I'm not worried. I can tell them that tomorrow, or the day after, or the day after that.

We have forever and a day, which is more than I ever wanted, but never enough for what I need.

## Afterword

Well holy motherfucking shit. How the hell did we complete another series?!

Luna, Jess, and Eden have all made it, and I'm completely stunned!

Eden's story went NOWHERE it was supposed to, NOWHERE LOL but this was their story to tell, they just use my fingers to press the keys on the laptop haha!

But honestly, what a ride!

I'm not cryin', you're cryin'!

Seriously though, I'm soooo excited to give you Burn To Ash - Bethany and Ryan's story! They were never supposed to exist, like at all, until I got to the chapter where Eden met Cody for the first time in Toxic Creek, and what can I say, the rest is history!

Is there an opening for Lou-Lou? - You bet your ass there is LOL - again never supposed to happennnnnn haha!

Butttttt, there is a story in my head, rumbling around that I'm trying to breakdown, and honestly, I'm not sure if it will work as a Contemporary romance for her, or a Paranormal/Fantasy romance for my main gal Tora who has



been screaming at me since before Eden's story LOL you're going to get them both, I'm just not sure which order yet! My thought process is to flick between the two, but we'll see.

So, I wholeheartedly hope you loved Eden's story as much as I did, and I want to say a huge thank you for being here!

# THANK YOU

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You know where this is going to begin, where it always does, with my main man, M to the M - yes he has MM initials - yes like Eminem - and yes this was a selling point hahaha! Truly my rock, and forever my solace, I love ya boo!

My babies, fam-a-lams, absolutely baby-kins, yes I am this level of annoying parent haha. To have two children who understand when mum is working, and working so hard, that they appreciate it, and become your biggest cheerleaders, completely melts my heart.

I love you gassy and musty!

To my PA, best friend, Queen Acehole, Lifey Wifey, Valerie. It's your mothertrucking birthday today! Of course we have to release it on such a special occasion. I hope you have the most fabulous day, you deserve it! I don't know what I'd do without you! Thank you for being crazy!

To Bubble Queens, thank you for putting up with this flaky ass hoe LOL Here's to getting more words, and even more noodles!

Bellaluna Designs, BAE's, you rock my world. The level of pride and joy I feel looking at the covers for Eden is indescribable. I love you long time!

Thank you to Monica, Jessi, Catherine, Amy, and Hope for giving me your everything and making my books sparkle as always, you guys rock!

Thank you to Jess, for structuring my shit and smoothing all the edges.

Sarah, girllllll, I love your eyes all over this. You're a freakin' rockstar!

## About the Author

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KC Kean is the sassy half of a match made in heaven. Mummy to two beautiful children, Pokemon Master and Apex Legend world saving gamer.

Starting her adventure in the RH romance world after falling in love with it as a reader, who knows where this crazy train is heading. As long as there is plenty of steam she'll be there.



Also by KC Kean

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**Featherstone Academy**

*(Reverse Harem Contemporary Romance)*

[My Bloodline](#)

[Your Bloodline](#)

[Our Bloodline](#)

[Red](#)

[Freedom](#)

**The Allstars Series**

*(Reverse Harem Contemporary Romance)*

[Toxic Creek](#)

[Tainted Creek](#)

[Twisted Creek](#)

**Standalone MF**

[Burn to Ash](#) coming November 2nd

**Read on for an excerpt of My Bloodline from the Featherstone Academy Series.**

## My Bloodline Excerpt

I'm a little stunned.

She's caught me off guard if I'm honest, but I'm trying to not show it. Veronica has shown up a few times over the years, barely hung around for five minutes, then she's gone again. I'm trying to process what she just said and the scene in front of me. I move towards Rafe trying to gain his attention. As I do, one of the guys that seems to be here with my mother, steps behind me and locks the door.

"Rafe, what's going on?"

He looks at me with such anguish in his eyes, I'm halted. He looks broken, this can't be because of the fight. I mean I knew he'd be angry when he eventually found out about it, but the look on his face is something else entirely. We're not hearts on our sleeve's kind of people, but I can see the emotion in his eyes, the devastation.

"Luna, don't be rude, aren't you going to greet your mother?"

"Last I checked, I don't have a mother, you can leave now," I blandly respond, keeping my eyes trained on Rafe.

This woman is bat shit crazy. Standing here like she's given me the world and sacrificed herself to do so. The only

one here that has sacrificed is Rafe, so it's him I'm going to look towards... to try and understand what the hell is going on here.

She cackles like I just told a cheap joke, slowly trying to approach me, forcing me to sneer in her direction.

“Luna, don't be silly. We're here to assist your transition to Featherstone Academy. Rafe knew this day would come. We don't have time to waste, especially if you want to grab a few of your things before we leave.”

“Leave? I'm not going anywhere, definitely not with you or to some random Academy. I'm happy where I am, and I'd be even better if you would actually just fuck off, and take your fucking muscle men with you.”

These guys are just milling around, taking up space. Clearly here to back my mother.

Before she can respond there is pounding on the door and shouts from the other side. I recognize Jake's voice, and as I go to unlock the door, a rough callous hand wraps around my arm. It's the same guy who trapped us in here. Well I assume it is, these guys are like standard issue bad boys, I haven't been able to differentiate them yet.

“Get your fucking hands off of me,” I growl, as I glare at him.

He loosens his hold only slightly. “I can't let you open that door, Miss Steele.”

What does this fucker mean, he can't let me? I don't answer to this guy. I'm practically growling through my teeth at him. I go to step back, but his hand remains wrapped around my wrist.

The. Fuck.

The thunder in my eyes finally has this guy letting go.

Damn straight, asshole.

If looks could kill I'd have burnt him alive with the fire in my glare, but instead I'm gonna have to get physical.

"Luna," Rafe calls, gaining my attention. Distracting me from the pounding on the door and this dead man in front of me.

I move towards Rafe. His tattooed hands braced on his knees, his long brown hair is slicked back into a man bun, his brown eyes searching my face. I don't like how his olive skin seems pale. I've never seen his giant frame look so small.

"Rafe, you need to explain to me what's going on. Why are you here? Why is Cruella back? And what is with the D list boy band?"

"I'm sorry, Luna, so sorry. I'd hoped things had changed and we'd avoided all this. I thought I'd been able to keep you out of their hell hole, but I was naive enough to believe your mother's words."

He rubs the back of his neck, his sign for being stressed.

"I did everything she asked to make sure they stayed away from you. It wasn't enough, I'm truly sorry, Luna. I swear if I'd known I'd have got us the fuck out of here when she first found us."

My mother moves to the center of the room, clearly missing out on all the attention.

"Like they wouldn't have found her Rafe. This is bigger than all of us and you know it. Don't try and sugar coat it and make her think there's hope, that'll only make it worse. I haven't got time for this and I've been as nice as possible, but



we need to get moving. We've wasted enough time having to come find her. I humored the girl, I allowed her the time to fight, now let's go," she says, waving her hands in the direction of the door.

"Honestly, what the fuck is going on? Stop talking like I'm not standing right here."

My brain can't process what is going on around me. I have so many questions right now, but I can't seem to figure out which one to start with.

"Luna, I'm sure you are excited and have plenty of questions. I'll answer them in the car, we need to get moving. Now," Veronica responds, irritation ruining her whole sweet act.

Download My Bloodline [here](#).