

# *The Promise*

BY MAHLATSE MOKONE

© Copyright MAHLATSE MOKONE 2013

This is a legally distributed free edition from [www.obooko.com](http://www.obooko.com)  
The author's intellectual property rights are protected by international Copyright law.  
You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only. No  
part of this publication may be reproduced or distributed commercially without the  
prior written permission of the author.

This free edition must never be offered for sale in any form.

## CHAPTER 1

I raked my brush through my dark hair, it's long and thick, and the auburn tint is only visible in the sunlight. Given that I was already late I didn't have time to do anything fancy with it.

My gaze dropped to the necklace my Mom gave me when I was little. I absolutely loved it; it had a very vintage style to it. It looked priceless yet simple and my mother claim that it's been in her family for generations.

I'm Katelyn Melanie Gilbert, proclaimed one of the popular girls high school. Everyone saw me as the spoiled mean girl who always gets what she wants. Sometimes the false perception people have of me bothers me. I was not mean, I was outspoken. I was not spoiled; I was privileged.

I sighed and stood up from my dressing table, it was a Monday. I hated this day with a passion as any 16-year-old 10<sup>th</sup> grader would.

"Mom!" I called out, and minutes later she appeared on the doorway, leaning against it. "Have you seen my black Chanel bag anywhere?" I asked.

"Did you check your bottom drawer? You always leave stuff there and forget them sweetie." She said with a slight smile. She walked further into my room; her movement was effortlessly elegant.

Lucky Melissa Gilbert is a very beautiful woman, and I'm not even being biased because she's my mother. For a woman in her forties she could easily pass off as being in her early thirties. Almost everyone says I look like her, although I don't have her green eyes. They're her most beautiful feature, sometimes I wish I had them too but I have my Dad's eyes instead. Not that I'm complaining.

I think I unconsciously idolize my mother, but would never admit it to myself and especially to her, I don't even know why.

I went to the drawer next to my closet and pulled at the bottom one, indeed I found my bag under a whole heap of stuff I've been looking for. I made a mental note to always look there when I lose something.

"Thanks." I said to her when I turned back, "Sure." she said sitting on the edge of my double bed, its then that I noticed she was dressed for work. She wore a mid-length beige dress and black heels. Her long hair was tied into a neat chignon. She looked professional and chic.

"Can we talk?" she asked and I sighed, "I'm late Mom, can't we talk later?" I said, putting all my stuff in my bag.

"This won't take long Katelyn." She said patting the empty space next to her; she used her no nonsense tone, when she did there was no arguing with her. I obliged, settling next to her.

"This is about your little sister." She said and I threw my arms up

"What about her...?" I asked exasperated, she gave me a hard look and I kept quiet. "You know what." She said then sighed, "Janie feels like you're neglecting her, she thinks you don't like her," she added.

"That's crazy, I love her." I said and she nodded

"I know, but she needs to hear that and see it from you." She said, "You're her big sister Katelyn, she looks up to you, it wouldn't hurt to pay some attention to her," she added tucking some of my hair behind my ear.

"Janie is not exactly lacking any friends Mom." I pointed out and she gave me a knowing look. "You know that's not what I meant." She said "Spend time

with her, go to the movies with her or the beach, or something. It would mean a lot to her," she added and I groaned giving up.

"Fine, I'll go talk to her." I said and she kissed my cheek, stood up and left.

I shook my head finishing getting ready, my Mom's gift is persuasion. No wonder she has Dad wrapped around her finger.

When I was done I walked out of my room, closing door behind me and headed towards Janie's, which was around the corner from mine. I knocked and heard her reply to come in. She was slightly surprised to see me walk in; she looked ready for school too, though she was in middle school.

"Katelyn." She beamed and I smiled at her, my 12-year old little sister was a bag of sweet potatoes. She was nice but a little obnoxious sometimes, which is why I liked to stay clear of her. I never thought my doing so would hurt her feelings.

She had the same black hair that ran in our family but her blue eyes were lighter than the rest of ours.

"Hey Janie, want to do something fun after school?" I asked and she quickly nodded, obviously excited. I chuckled at her reaction "Okay, we'll chat later okay?" I asked and she eagerly agreed.

I went down the hallway and down the long staircase; the mansion I called home was breathtaking from the outside as it was on the inside. It could go from being my sanctuary to being my personal hell with the crazy family I had. I loved every single one of them but getting on each other's throats was inevitable. Or was that just my own teenage angst talking?

I paused when I saw my Mom and Dad in the kitchen, she was laughing with her head back and my Dad was smiling at her with his arm around her waist and a cup of coffee in the other hand.

I smiled at the scene in spite of myself, I don't think I fully understand the love they share, blame it on my age or whatever. But I lived in a society that doesn't believe in true love or its existence for that matter. It was good to see that it was there, and I hoped that one day I'd get to experience it myself.

They were cute but still nauseating sometimes; they're still my parents after all. I bend down and walked in between them, purposely hinting for them to stop. I guess they got the message because they gave each other a knowing look.

"Morning angel." Dad said to me as I grabbed the fresh toast off the toaster and quickly buttered it.

"Hi Dad." I replied; I gave up trying to get him to stop calling me by that nickname. I quickly took in his well-suited appearance; my Dad was a world-renowned corporate mogul, and that also came with some media attention. The name Jesse Gilbert meant a lot of things to many people but to me he was just my Dad. My overprotective, sweet, but sometimes annoying father.

I took another bite out of the crispy slice as I made my way out the kitchen island, "Your brother left a couple of minutes ago." Mom said and I shrugged, "Okay." I said lamely; I didn't really care about JT's whereabouts.

"And Janie—?" Dad probed and I rolled my eyes "Don't worry Dad, Mom already gave me the 411. She and I are going to have some sisterly bonding after school." I said and he flashed me a brilliant smile.

"I have to go. Bye." I said giving them both quick hugs and rushing out towards the garage; our massive garage was an automobile exhibition. I got into my silver Jaguar XK convertible; I inhaled the brand new car smell and smiled to

myself as I pushed the start button. It was a birthday present from my Dad and now that I have my driver's license I can drive it on my own. It's a pretty luxurious car for a 16 year old, but hey, when your Dad is a multi billionaire anything goes right? He loved to spoil me; hell he named his private plane after me. Something he let me grow up believing I owned. Then again he spoils all of us, he named his massive yacht *Janie's heart*, and his island after my Mom.

I drove out of the circular drive way and out of the tall metal gates. I didn't mind the drive back to the city much; I loved the fact that we were secluded from the rest of the town.

The city of angels held a special place in my heart; I loved everything about this city. The palm trees, the weather, the glitz and glamour; I've always been down with what LA had to offer.

I pulled up on my high school's parking lot, indeed I saw JT's red Maserati on its usual parking spot. Oh yes, my big brother JT.

The proclaimed bad boy and the school's hottie; they were also wrong about him. There's such an extreme need to class everyone in high school, its sad. It mostly just clouds and narrows our judgment in everyone and everything.

JT was the student body president and the school's football quarterback; this was his senior year. He had the same overachieving mentality as Dad; he was intelligent and driven. Others say I have those qualities as well, but I just did what I thought was necessary, nothing more nothing less. JT was also the overprotective big brother over Janie and I, as if dealing with Dad wasn't bad enough.

The only thing JT did that pissed me off was date Adrianna Sparks, the blonde cheerleading captain and overall bitchy bimbo.

She was nice to me when JT was around but as soon as he was gone she sharpened her claws. Just being around her was exhausting and I preferred not to be but I couldn't get away from her because she's forever clinging onto JT.

I got out of my car and saw Tess approach me, Theresa Collins has been my best friend since middle school, no one understood me like she did.

She was a natural redhead, she mostly wore it long and wavy, and she had warm brown eyes, she was an overall pretty girl. I hugged her when she reached me

"I'm so high-jacking that bag." She teased as we walked out of the lot.

"How about you ask nicely instead." I said and she chuckled. Many of the students had already arrived, going through the main entrance of the school. Walking through the crowded hallways of St. Josephs High School felt like torture sometimes. I'll never understand why my parents decided to send us to public schools. Then again the thought of attending at one of those uptight snobbish private schools made my skin crawl.

We walked over to our lockers and I took out my books for the first period,

"Come over to my house after school." Tess said locking hers; I grimaced.

"I can't, I promised Janie we'd do something today." I said and she chuckled

"Your parent's idea?" she asked and I nodded "Well why don't you bring her over too?" she asked and I thought about it for a short while.

"That's actually a great plan Tess, I'll suggest it to her and let you know." I said and the bell rang making me slightly wince.

"I know; it gets to me too, every time." Tess said and I sheepishly smiled at her, she entwined her arm with mine, "Lets get this over with." I said and we walked to our first class.

## CHAPTER 2

I was glad when I walked into art class; this was the only class Tess didn't take with me. Somehow that never deterred me from absolutely loving it. I would always sketch stuff when I was little; I guess I got my love for art from my Dad.

*I admire art my angel but you have the talent to create it* he once said to me.

I made my way to my desk; the other students quickly filled the classroom as well. I absently toyed with my pencil waiting for them to settle down, a brief silence made me look up.

My gaze locked on the new guy talking to Mr. Anderson, he had dirty blonde hair that hung loose around his hairline. He definitely had an athlete's body but he was not bulky. He also looked slightly older, 17, 18 maybe? I was pretty sure he was new here, with his looks; I would've noticed him before. I had a new definition for 'hot guy' now and for a moment I caught myself ogling him like most of the girls in this class.

*What the hell!* I chastised myself, forcing my gaze down again. Mr. Anderson introduced him as Brandon Carter; I stole a peek at him again and tried to make quick observations about him. From the way he dressed, he's from a well-to-do family. His expression gave off a sense of confidence, maybe a little cockiness?

He also looked like he had a wild streak...trouble; he was trouble.

Just my crappy luck! The one guy I felt slight attraction to had to possibly be a total prick.

Mr. Anderson instructed him to take an empty desk, that's when I realized the only empty one was right behind me. I didn't know weather to be glad or pissed off, all I knew for sure was that I couldn't afford to be crushing on the new hot guy who was obviously trouble.

He walked over with leisurely strides and our gazes met for a second; he had beautiful grey eyes, they were sharp, intense and mischievous. I broke the connection when I felt my pulse pick up a little, besides I was positive he was used to girls being starry-eyed around him. He certainly didn't need me to add to that tally.

Mr. Anderson started the class and I felt a weird feeling come over me, it felt a little electric and warm. The feeling was not unpleasant; it just caused uneasiness and tension. I shook my head, trying to get rid of whatever *it* was but nothing worked. Was I getting sick? Was I imagining it? What the hell was it anyway?

A sharp breath escaped me when the feeling disappeared.

I wondered what had caused it in the first place, or if it was all in my head. Then I thought maybe the Brandon guy caused it. I quickly dismissed that silly thought and tried to focus on the lesson.

After the bell rang for lunch break I went out of the class, not daring to look in Brandon's direction. I made my way to my locker staking my books in and closed it. I rested my forehead against it for a second and Tess showed up

"Whoa, you look flushed. Are you okay?" She said and I managed a smile for her, I didn't know why I felt so drained. "I'm fine." I said.

"Well did you hear?" she said opening her locker, I raised my eyebrows at her

"There's a new hot guy in school." She said and I swallowed hard

"Yeah, I heard." I said leaving it at that.

"I got a load of him on my way to music class, damn that boy is fine. Well not JT Gilbert hot, but hot nonetheless." She said and I frowned.

Tess has had a crush on my brother for as long as I can remember, she thinks he doesn't know she exists but she's my best friend and she's been to my house a couple of times, of course he knows her.

"Ew Tess, you know how I get when you fangirl over my brother." I said and she rolled her eyes. "Come on, lunch's on me." she said.

We went to the cafeteria and like any other high school; everyone sat in their respective cliques or inner circles. Everyone knew who I was, but I wasn't your conventional popular girl. My normally wary nature didn't make me bubbly or easy to hang out with.

Tess and I grabbed a tray and took turns filling it with food; I turned only to bump into Adrianna. I tried to still my tray, but a small portion of my food spilled onto her cheerleading shirt. I unconsciously apologized, she gasped

"Watch where you're going you little twit!" she hissed and the little remorse I felt vanished. I was about to make a snappy retort when JT appeared out of nowhere

"Is there a problem?" He asked nonchalantly, his blue eyes looking between the two of us.

Adrianna plastered a fake smile, "No, just a mistake." She said and I rolled my eyes. She at least knew JT well enough to know that their relationship would be over if he thought she was mean to me. But I knew my brother well enough to know that he wasn't easily manipulated, a part of me knew that he could see through her. What I couldn't understand was why he was still with her.

"Let's go sit down Ade." He said to her then gave me a smile that I didn't return, I looked back to see them walk over to their table. Adrianna looked back too and shot me an icy glare that I definitely returned.

I started towards Tess when I noticed a pair of grey eyes watching me, my stride faltered a little. Brandon turned his attention back to his new set of friends whom were mostly girls, and I didn't like the fact that it bothered me.

I sat down on my table, it was on the far corner and only Tess and I sat there, we both loved it because it allowed more privacy.

"Are you okay?" Tess asked, referring to my near fight with Adrianna "Yeah." I said monotonously. She looked at the pair

"She's all wrong for him." She said, "What does he see in her?" she added, and I also glanced at them. "Beats me too." I muttered then flinched. Realizing that I asked myself that question out of annoyance and she did so out of hurt. I sometimes forget the feelings Tess has for my brother and I knew his relationship with Adrianna hurt her. Even though she downplayed it most of the

time. I didn't want to be in a position where I have to take sides, especially if it's between my brother and best friend.

"Anyway." She said in a dismissive tone, classic "I saw the hot new guy staring at you, he looked at you like he knows you." She said and I sighed.

"I didn't mention? He sits behind me in art class and his name is Brandon." I said unenthusiastically as I started picking on my food. She gave me an incredulous look

"No miss I-don't-care, you left out that piece of information." She said and I smiled apologetically "Sorry miss know-it-all." I said.

"And...?" she probed, with a mischievous look in her eyes "And what?" I asked and she groaned, "What are you going to do with him?" she asked.

"What? Nothing." I replied quicker than I would've wanted. She shook her head, "Come on Katelyn don't tell me you don't like him, because I know you do." She said, as a matter of fact.

"What do you mean I like him? I don't even know the dude." I said and peeked at him, still talking to the group of girls who laughed and smiled at whatever he was telling them.

"But I bet you want to change that." She said suggestively, and I turned my gaze back to her "No." I said decisively. I had to remember that he was trouble.

"No? Come on Katelyn. You are ridiculously beautiful, even that Adrianna chick hates you for it. Brandon doesn't stand a chance if you go after him full throttle." She said, and I snorted. I was more afraid that I wouldn't stand a chance.

"Look at him Tess; that guy is bad news. You really want me to get mixed up with that?" I asked and she thought about it for a moment.

"But then you would've gotten a taste of him, aren't you curious?" she asked, wasn't everybody? "The taste wouldn't be worth it when I'm poisoned." I said without thinking and she stared at me for a while.

"Wow, you just went lyrical on me right now." She teased and I chuckled

"I know right? Lets just let it go, okay?" I asked and she nodded. Our conversation shifted into comfortable spheres until the bell rang. I hoped the last remaining periods in the day passed without any events.

### CHAPTER 3

I parked on Tess' driveway and checked my watch, she asked me to give her a ride to school today. A few minutes later she came out the front door, and got in the car. We air kissed each other then I drove out.

"I had fun yesterday, Janie is cooler than I thought." She said and I smiled nodding "I know, you and me both." I said.

Janie liked the idea of hanging out at Tess' place even better.

We pulled up at school and got out, Tess chuckled grabbing a flyer

"Girls' choice dance." She said and I took it from her looking at it. They mentioned it at the beginning of the semester but I didn't think they'd actually go

through with the idea. The last function similar to this one was the spring dance last year, which I found an excuse not to attend.

"Its three weeks from now, this is going to be fun." Tess said and I simply nodded, she rose her eyebrow at me "You're not going to bail again, are you?" she asked and I shrugged.

"Well it's a girls' choice dance Tess, I don't even know who I'm going to ask." I said, and she chuckled as we walked into the building.

"Why don't you ask that Brandon guy? I'm sure he'd love to take you up on your offer." She said nudging my shoulder and I gave her a hard look.

"Okay, okay I know I said I'll never mention him. Geez." She said and I gave her a brief smile. I didn't dare mention that I dreamt about him last night; I was still embarrassed I did. My smile fell when Adrianna and three of her minions came up behind Tess. She pivoted to face her but Adrianna's cold gaze was fixed on me

"Your stupid clumsiness yesterday better not happen again." She spat then got a little closer "For your sake, you better stay out of my way or we're going to have a serious problem." She added.

I looked at her silently, I wasn't in the mood for this, I really wasn't. Tess snorted

"Oh it was just a mistake Adrianna, get over it and go crawl back into the hole you came from." She said, I slightly smiled at my best friend; she always stepped in when I wasn't prepared to fight my own battles.

Adrianna slowly looked at her "I don't remember ever talking to a pathetic side-kick, who are you again?" she asked then chuckled darkly "Oh yes, you're the chick with the hots for my boyfriend, I saw the way you look at him. It's a shame really, given that he never spares you a second look." She spat and her minions giggled, she leaned towards Tess "He's mine, get over *that*." She whispered.

Without another word Tess turned and walked away, leaving the group of mean girls with satisfied smirks. She and her minions didn't fully understand how vulnerable of a spot they just attacked, but I did.

"What is wrong with you Adrianna? Why do you keep following us around like you're obsessed or something? Leave us the hell alone!" I barked, slamming my locker shut and went to go find Tess.

I went into the girl's bathroom "Tess?" I called out and she came out of one of the stalls. "Hey. I'm fine." She said, "Don't give me that look." She added going over to the counter basins. I leaned against them looking at her closely, but her expression didn't give much away.

"Are you sure?" I asked and she nodded running her hand through her red hair

"I realized two things." She said taking out her lip gloss, applying it lightly "One, I refuse to cry because of *her*. Two, what's the point of crying over reality?" she said then looked at me when the bell rang. "Let's go." She said and I followed her out.

We came around the corner when JT stopped in front of us; well he had perfect timing. "Katelyn can I talk to you?" he asked me and smiled at Tess "Hello." He said, "Hey." Tess replied with far less enthusiasm then turned to me "I'll see you in class." She added to me and walked away. JT stared after her for a second



"What's wrong with her?" He asked and I shook my head.

"Nothing's wrong with her, what do you want JT?" I asked with a far sharper tone than I would've liked. JT started for a second, he looked like he wanted to say something but decided against it.

"We have a family meeting, so don't make any plans for this afternoon." He said then walked away. "Great." I wailed when I remembered that I left a book of mine in my locker, I would've remembered it if it weren't for Adrianna's tirade.

I opened it and a couple of my things fell to the ground, I groaned realizing that my slamming it earlier was the cause. I crouched down to pick them up and strong looking hands were already helping me. Surprised, I looked up into amused grey eyes and I felt my heart jumpstart.

*Get a grip!* I thought, chastising myself for reacting the way I did around him. He practically gathered all my things and stood up, so I did too, still staring into his eyes. I hoped to God I wasn't gaping at him when he smiled, handing them back to me. I snapped out of it and took them murmuring a thank you. I was careful not to touch him, but his warm skin came into contact with mine. The feeling I got in art class yesterday pulsed through me again and a quiet gasp slipped from my lips. "Hi, I'm Brandon." He said pleasantly and I tried to ignore what his smooth deep voice did to me. "We have art class together." He added and I forced a smile onto my lips too.

"Yeah I remember. I'm Katelyn." I said glad my voice was steady.

"I know." He said and I looked at him dumbfounded, he did? "You do?" I blurted out and he smiled. "I think everyone does." He said slowly and I nodded feeling a little stupid. Of course everyone knew me.

"Mr. Carter, Ms. Gilbert. Class. Now." I heard the principal's voice behind me and I looked back to see him a couple of feet away, glaring impatiently at us. That's when I noticed the empty hallway; I cursed inwardly putting my things back and grabbing my book.

"Of course Mr. Hammond, sorry." Brandon called back to him then smiled down at me "See you later." He added before going passed me. I exhaled in a rush and closed my locker. I practically ran to science class, I found the teacher ready to start the lesson.

"Sorry I'm late sir." I muttered, chagrinned; I was never late before.

"Don't let it happen again Ms. Gilbert, take your seat." He said and I went over to my table and sat next to Tess. "Where the hell were you?" she whispered and I sighed "Lost in the Brandon vortex." I muttered quietly and she gasped.

"Oh my god, I want details at lunch." She said and the lesson began.

I was more excited than usual to go to art class, and I knew for certain that a gorgeous looking guy with beautiful grey eyes had something to do with that. *See you later* Brandon's words echoed in my mind and I shook my head sadly.

I couldn't nurse the infatuation I was slowly having for this guy; it would just end badly.

Like Tess promised, she grilled me at lunch. She interrogated me like I had a hot make out session with him, but nothing happened, he was just being nice by helping me; end of story.

I walked into the class and he was already seated, doodling something on a scribbler. He looked up and smiled when I walked to my desk, I didn't want to be rude so I smiled back before I took my seat.

Mr. Anderson walked in “Good day class.” He said, “Please find yourself a partner because we’re going to do our class project in pairs.” He added. Everyone got cracking trying to find a suitable partner and I considered my options. I was about to go ask McKayla when I heard Jessica ask Brandon to be her partner.

“I already have one, sorry.” He said, and I tried not to let that bother me, why does it matter to me anyway?

“Really? Who?” I heard her crestfallen voice ask, “Katelyn.” Brandon simply replied, shocked I turned sharply to look at him.

“Oh.” She said then she spared me a bitter look before she walked away, I couldn’t really fault her, I’m sure I would’ve felt that way too had I been in her position. I looked back to Brandon who shrugged nonchalantly

“You don’t mind, do you?” he asked, the curve of his lips taunting me. I think the real question was, did I want to mind? “No.” I heard myself say and he smiled then sat next to me. It was then that I noticed his amazing scent; it was a blend of leather and ocean air, intoxicating and unavoidable, just like him. I took another deep breath savoring it, how could I have missed it when we were in the hallway? Then again I was distracted with the rest of him to notice it. When the class settled down Mr. Anderson wrote *descriptive drawing* on the board.

“Descriptive drawing, basically its art with text. A picture worth a thousand words.” He said with a smile “You will complete a pen and ink drawing using words to determine values. By choosing a picture to work from with high emotional content.” He added then he took out an example and showed it to us.

“Select words that describe the picture’s content, that will help ensure the success of your project. I do encourage you to be creative, so illustrate quotes, music lyrics, poems, go crazy and have fun with it.” He said.

“Words should be placed together tighter, made bolder etc. to achieve darker values. Any question?” He added then answered the questions from the students.

“Get to work on this project immediately, I’m giving you two weeks to complete it.” He said “Please make sure that you do your best because this project will make up 50% of your grade for this term.” He added.

I’ve never tried drawing with words before, it looked challenging but the end product looked breathtaking.

“This is going to be hard.” I said and Brandon chuckled, the sound was very inviting and carefree “This is going to be fun.” He said, his gaze falling to my mouth. I had a feeling he didn’t particularly mean just doing the project, I swallowed hard. Turning my gaze back to Mr. Anderson, *what did I get myself into?* I thought.

## CHAPTER 4

I lay on my bed, doing my homework with a catchy pop song blaring through my earphones. Janie walked in and jumped onto my bed, I paused my iPod and looked at her questioningly.

"Daddy said to call you downstairs." She said and I put my pen down and got off, following her out of my room. JT said we're going to have a family meeting; we hardly had those, unless they had a big announcement to make. We got downstairs to find Dad on the couch, flicking through the channels on the flat screen. I sat next to him and he smiled at me,

"Hey angel how was school?" He asked, turning his gaze back to the screen. I crossed my legs on the couch "Okay, Mr. Anderson gave us an art project." I said, "Drawing with words." I added and he grimaced.

"I heard its not easy, but if anyone can do a great job, its you." He said, tapping my chin with a finger and I smiled at him.

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind when I'm ready to give up." I said, not mentioning working with Brandon on it. Why did I agree to partner up with him anyway? The last thing I needed was to be spending more and more time with him. *You know exactly why you agreed; you want him.* The little voice inside my head taunted me, and I slightly shook my head. I looked around, JT and Mom where nowhere to be found

"Where is everyone? I thought this is a family meeting." I said,

"That would be our fault, we're holding them up." Angela said with a grin walking into the great room with Mom following behind her. My eyebrows shot up in surprise and elation.

"Angie." I exclaimed, jumping off the couch to hug her. She and Jason fell in love and moved out when I was about 12 years old. They would come to visit sometimes but it was not as frequent as I would've liked, I was always close to her growing up. She and Jason are now living in a small town outside of LA with Jamie, their 3-year-old kid.

"Aw Katie, you grow into a beautiful young woman every time I see you." She said and I laughed, delighted to see her. Maria also came in to greet her with as much surprise as I did, I wondered if Mom and Dad planned this surprise visit. Just then JT came in from the garage with Jason, who greeted me with his trademarked bear hug.

We all had a wonderful dinner after catching up; afterwards Angie and I sat in the kitchen finishing up the dessert. Mom was upstairs with Janie and I wasn't sure where the men where in the mansion.

"How are you doing, really?" she asked eyeing me and I took a spoonful of ice cream. "I'm okay." I said and she raised a suspicious eyebrow.

"Why do I smell boy trouble?" she said and I suppressed a blush, she chuckled "So there is a boy, do tell." She added.

I sighed "Its not like that, he and I are not exactly going out, but I like him its just that...its complicated." I blurted out and she eyed me for a while.

"Seems to me like you need some advice...have you tried talking to your Mom?" she asked and I snorted.

"I can't exactly talk to her about this." I said and she frowned "Why not? I was under the impression that you have the coolest mother ever." She said and I slightly smiled. "I know; it's not like that." I said and she eyed me, encouraging me to elaborate, "I don't know, she always seems so busy and stuff, I don't think she'll be interested." I added. Mom and I have a disconnection that I don't have with Dad. We used to be pretty close when I was younger but now that seems to be changing, either she's pulling away or I 'am.

"That's crazy Katie, your Mom is never too busy for you." She said then paused "That's not really it, am I right?" she asked and I looked at her and sighed,

"It's a part of it." I said "Everyone's always saying 'oh Katelyn you look so much like your mother' I feel like I'm expected to be like her and I'm nothing like my Mom." I added quickly and she chuckled.

"You're her daughter for heaven's sake, what makes you think that?" she asked and I grimaced "Well she's beautiful and well rounded...I'm nothing like that." I said and she shook her head

"What makes you think you're not any of those things?" She asked and I rolled my eyes "Hello—?" I said waving a hand at myself,

"Oh boy, you certainly inherited her modesty." She said chuckling "No one expects you to *be* her Katie, there's nothing wrong with the way you are." She added and I smiled at her nodding.

"Did she have you talk to me?" I asked and she shocked me by shaking her head, "But she feels like the older you grow the more the two of you drift apart, that's hurting her you know." She added. I looked down at my empty bowl, feeling a little bad. I didn't consider how she might feel about our 'disconnection'; I guess it looked like I favored Dad over her. I silently vowed to change that.

I maneuvered through the pumped up crowd with a packet of snacks and two cans of cold drinks. I stopped in front of Tess and she grabbed our food from me so I could take a seat. "Has the match began?" I asked and she shook her head.

Today was the first qualifier in the football regional championships; the stadium was grazed with our school's gold and green colors. One thing our football team had going into this game was home ground advantage; the atmosphere here was electric.

The opponents were the first ones to come onto the field and soon enough our team came on too with our mascot leading the way.

"Go Gators! Woo!" Tess screamed along with hundreds of fans in attendance. The cheerleading squad did their routines followed by the school's anthem, then the match was underway.

"Wait, is that Brandon?" Tess asked and I tried to ignore how my heart leaped at the mention of his name. I looked around the crowd "No silly, in the team." She added and I looked towards the field baffled.

"Where?" I asked and I looked to where she pointed, "He's the fullback." She said and indeed I spotted him before he put on his helmet. He and I agreed to meet after the game to work on our project; I just didn't think he was *in* the game.

"I didn't know he was in the squad." I said absently and she chuckled

"I didn't even know he tried out, I must be losing touch." She said.

The game was an exciting and tight one, but in the second half our team fell back a little and they found themselves 3 points short of winning with only 8 minutes on the clock. Unfortunately we were seated close to where the cheerleading squad was cheering. They started to sing JT's song; it was a crowd favorite much to Adrianna's delight. Who I'm pretty sure had the squad practice it more than any other routine. I remembered Tess once saying "Love the song, hate the people singing it"

I bit my nails as the timer counted down from 3 minutes, "Come on Gators!" Tess screamed after a nervous glance at the timer too; just then JT passed the ball to the fullback and the crowd went wild when Brandon tore through the linesmen to score a touchdown. Tess and I jumped out of our seats screaming along with everyone else.

The celebrations went on as the arena slowly emptied, Tess and I leaned against the railing as we watched the team below. I saw JT and Brandon have a celebratory handshake, I felt myself smile; it was their teamwork that won the game. They were interrupted by Adrianna who wrapped herself around JT laughing; I looked away from them before I started puking.

I turned my gaze back to Brandon who was now standing with Rhiannon, one of the cheerleaders. She was laughing and he was smiling at her, from where I was standing they were both flirting and enjoying it. The only sad part was that I didn't enjoy watching it as much.

"You want to go?" Tess asked me and I looked at her, we were both up here and where we really wanted to be was down there with them. "Yeah." I said pushing away from the railing, not bothering to look back down again as we walked to the exit.

I walked through the corridor, not sure which class Brandon said we should meet at. This part of the school was less occupied than the rest. It was quieter here, which was convenient for the drama club with the theater being just down the corridor.

"You look lost." A deep voice came up behind me, startled I pivoted to face Brandon, and he smiled "Hi." He said. I chuckled sheepishly at my jumpiness "Hey." I replied and he motioned with his hand towards an empty class. I walked in suddenly nervous to be alone with him, then again if I was going to be working with him for the next two weeks I had to get used to it. Just like I had to get used to girls like Rhiannon being all over him, hey, he loved it, so what was my problem?

I placed my backpack on the table "Are you sure we can use this class?" I asked, taking out my stationary. I turned my gaze back to him; he settled onto a chair opening up his MacBook.

"Yeah, I heard these classes are hardly ever used." He said sparing me a look,

"You're settling in quite well for a new student." I said and my voice sounded slightly begrudging and he chuckled. "Do I?" he said. That's when I noticed his blonde hair was slightly damp; I was guessing he took a quick shower in the locker-room before meeting me here. My gaze slid over his frame, he wore a black V-neck tee with a pair of blue jeans. My eyes went over his muscular arms,

*Damn that boy is fine* Tess' voice went through my head.

"Great game. You're really fast." I said to him and he looked surprised for a second "You were there?" he asked.

I nodded "As well as the entire student body." I said and he chuckled

"I thought your brother was the star of the show." He said, and then motioned with his hand for me to sit next to him.

"I thought you weren't going to show up." I said walking over to him, "Why would you think that?" he asked. I shrugged

"Well you won the game, I thought you'd be out celebrating with the rest of the team." I said and he smiled tearing his grey gaze from the laptop

"I couldn't think of a better way to celebrate than this." He said softly and my heart picked up speed then I looked towards the screen of his computer.

"Um...what are you looking at?" I asked; this is going to be harder than I thought. "A couple of pictures I thought we could use." He said

We scrolled through a couple of them, but there was one that he claimed was his favorite. It was of a man and a woman embracing, the emotion on both their faces was an intense blend of pain and happiness.

"I like it because a lot can be said to describe this, the bitter-sweetness of reconciliation." He said and I looked at him before turning my gaze back to the picture. I got the sense that this picture held a special meaning to him personally, but I liked it too, it was very touching.

"I like it, let's use it," I said.

## CHAPTER 5

"I seriously hate gym class." Tess wailed as she tied her kicks, I chuckled fastening my ponytail "Well we just have to suck it up." I said when I knew I hated it just as much. I sat down on the bench tying my own shoes "So..." Tess started with a very suggestive voice "How has working with Mr. blonde and delicious been?" she asked and I chuckled.

"Come on Tess, he has a nickname now?" I said and she shrugged then gave me a hard look "It's been three days now and you haven't dished about him yet, give it up." She said and I sighed, "There's really nothing to dish about, we work well together, that's it." I said.

It was true, Brandon and I made a great team, and it was almost crazy how in sync we were. Working on this project with him would've been easier if I didn't also have to fight the attraction I had towards him. Taming my heart was a problem every time we got really close, accidentally touched or when he would playfully try to flirt with me. I knew that for him doing that was second nature, hell I'd even see him do it with other girls. Knowing it was just a game to him didn't stop it from reeking havoc on my feelings.

Tess groaned, "Give me something to go on here Katie." She said and I eyed her

"Well he's not a jerk." I said and she paused a little "You sound disappointed," she said then chuckled "I see, you were hoping he was a total prick so it'll be easier for you to hate him instead. Gee tough break." She added sitting next to me.

"Tell me about it." I said, unfortunately Brandon was nothing like I'd hoped. He was easy going, smart, funny and charming as hell. He was also very distant and wary; our conversations never went further than small talk and playful teasing. Which made it very hard to decipher the kind of person he really was, but one thing I knew for sure was that he's a troublemaker.

Our couch blew her whistle and called us onto the court for a volleyball game. Towards the end of the game I jumped high trying to reach for the ball and I bumped into someone, falling down only to land hard on my ankle.

Everyone stopped playing and rushed to my aid, I grunted as pain shot through it. Our couch had Tess and a few others help me to the nurse's office.

She examined my ankle, and then she said it wasn't sprained, much to my relief. She said I just exerted too much force onto it, thus causing the pain. She advised that I take it easy and not apply too much pressure to it.

She went out of the examination room for a while

"Are you okay?" Tess asked with a frown and I grimaced "Yeah, I'm fine." I said then winced and she shot me a sympathetic smile before she let out a low curse. "I totally forgot I have musical practice this afternoon, I have to go." She said grabbing her bag "Will you be okay?" she quickly asked and I nodded.

"Yeah, go, see you tomorrow." I said and she gave me a brief hug before going out of the room. I sat up from the small bed and sighed, minutes later I was surprised to see Brandon walk through the open door. "Hey you." He said with a gorgeous smile, I let out an incredulous chuckle "Hi yourself." How on earth did he find me? He revealed a white lotus flower and handed it to me "I thought this might cheer up the patient." He said and I blushed but smiled taking it, knowing he picked it up from the bush of flowers outside the building. I tried not to read too much into the sweet gesture.

"Aw you shouldn't have." I said with tease, taking a small whiff of the flower and he chuckled settling onto the chair by the bedside.

"I didn't have time to get a proper bouquet." He said and I nodded "I figured." I said then remembered my question "How did you know where I was?" I asked and he shrugged "Word travels fast." He said and I gave him a knowing look.

"If I didn't know any better I would say you're following me Mr. Carter." I said with mock disapproval. He didn't confirm nor deny my theory, he just gave me a sly smile but the look in his eyes clearly said 'are you sure about that?'

I blushed; of course he didn't, ugh! What was I thinking?

"How are you feeling?" He asked, "Better." I said, glad for the change of topic. Just then the nurse came back and gave me a prescription list.

"Just some painkillers and muscle rub creams. You can pick them up from a local pharmacy on your way home." She said "Just put some ice on it for a while and you should be good." She added with a smile.

"Thank you." I said and she nodded then walked out. I looked at Brandon

"Sorry we couldn't work on the project today." I said and he shook his head

"Don't sweat it, we'll make up for lost time." He said, "You won't be able to drive, I can take you home if you like..." He suggested

"I'll do that." JT said appearing on the doorway, I sighed inwardly when Brandon stood up "See you tomorrow." He said before JT stepped aside for him and he walked out. JT replaced him on the chair

"Tess told me about you, you look better." He said and I nodded "I 'am." I said and he paused eyeing me long enough for me to shift uncomfortably.

"What's going on here Katie? What did I just interrupt?" he asked tersely and I rolled my eyes, overprotective brother mode again, here we go.

"Nothing. He's just my art project partner, that's it." I said "So no, nothing's going on here." I added with exasperation and he paused then nodded.

"You're a smart girl, I don't need to tell you why you should keep him at arm's length." He said sparing the flower in my hand a look, "He's a cool guy but he's quite the ladies man. Be careful." He added and I nodded stiffly.

Of course I knew that, I've seen him with Rhiannon a couple of times, but even I knew she was not the only one. JT didn't say anything I didn't already know deep down inside, so why did I cringe inwardly when he confirmed it?

"I'm done here, can we go home?" I asked, suddenly feeling deflated and he nodded standing up.

"Can you walk?" he asked when I eased onto the floor, I nodded and he helped me slowly walk out of the room. I threw the flower into the trash next to the exit.

I was sprawled on my bed with my books when my door opened; Mom stepped in "Dinner's ready sweetie." She said with a smile. I nodded "Thanks Mom." I said "...Mom?" I asked before she could walk out and she paused eyeing me.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" I asked and she closed the door "Of course." She said then sat on the edge of my bed, next to me. "What's on your mind?" she asked. Things between us were better I guess, we were spending more and more time together. If there was any distance between us, I wasn't going to be the one to cause it.

"Boys." I said and her brows shot up "I need advise." I added and she chuckled

"I appreciate you're brutal honesty sweetie." She said and I chuckled too, knowing I could've found another way to say it, but I honestly couldn't think of one. "There was no better way for it to be put Mom." I said and she nodded knowingly. Her green gaze was intent on my face

"And by boys you mean that one you were working on the project with?" she asked and I nodded. Brandon and I hardly found time to work on it so we decided to meet on the weekend. He came over to work on it and he got to meet Mom and he almost left without meeting Dad but he knocked off at work earlier than usual. I twitched nervously when they shook hands, but Dad was very cordial towards him, much to my relief. I made a mental note to do something for him to thank him.

"Yeah, Brandon." I said and she nodded remembering "Ah yes." She said then a slight smile tugged on the corners of her lips as she eyed me again "You like him, don't you? I saw the way you were looking at him," she said and I blushed, was I that transparent? I nodded.

"I do. A lot." I said sheepishly and she chuckled "Well don't go mentioning that to your father." She said and I rolled my eyes "I'm not crazy Mom, I can't even tell JT." I said. Her eyes narrowed

"He seems to like you too, what's the problem?" She asked; he likes me? He likes every girl in school, that's the problem. "He's all *wrong* for me." I said meekly.

"Ah, the bad boy appeal." She said nodding; I looked at her "You sound like you know what I'm talking about." I said and she smiled gently "I do."

"Was Dad like that?" I asked, finding it hard to imagine him being that way.



She chuckled "Your father was much worse." She said sweeping my hair out of my face sobering up "Sweetie with some guys its just all an act, a façade. There's always something underneath all of it, you just have to look past the mask." She said "But with others it's just who they are, those ones you can't change. Instead you end up changing yourself just to be with them." She added. "So which category does this Brandon fit in? If he's bad just for the sake of it, run fast and don't look back." She said with a hint of humor in her voice but her gaze was serious, almost worried. She surely didn't give me the advice I was expecting.

"Oh come on Mom, aren't you going to forbid me to see him or something like that?" I asked, maybe if she did I'd actually listen. I didn't want to deal with this; I didn't want to deal with the mystery that was Brandon Carter. But I couldn't completely forget him either.

She smiled "I'll save that part for your father." She said and I chuckled "I know very well how this works sweetie, if I do that, I'll only be pushing you towards him." She added standing up "I trust you Katie, you have a good head on your shoulders, we raised you that way. You'll make the right decision for *you*." She said and I smiled at her "Thanks Mom." I said and she leaned down to kiss my forehead "I love you." She said softly and I nodded "Love you too." I said and she walked away opening my door "You coming?" she asked tilting her head towards me "I'll be down in a minute." I said and she walked out closing it behind her, I slumped onto my pillow. That's the thing; I was scared of making the wrong decision.

## CHAPTER 6

The hallways of St. Josephs were buzzing with excitement with the girls' choice dance being only a week and a half away. Girls have been all over the place asking their boyfriends, friends, even acquaintances to the dance when I wasn't even sure I was going.

The only thing on my mind was that the weekend was finally here, I met Tess in the parking lot before we headed inside. We walked arm in arm

"Did you here about Christy's party? Everyone's talking about it" She said and my brows furrowed "Who is she again?" I asked,

She rolled her eyes "She's that preppy senior, I think." she said and I nodded when it rang a bell now. "Are we even invited?" I teased and she chuckled.

"My friend, you are Katelyn Gilbert, you're always invited to parties. You just never show up." She said and I laughed at her over exaggeration, I was not, well not all the time.

"And if you decide to go, I get to tag along. Come on Katie, it'll be fun." She added when we reached our lockers.

I opened mine "I don't know Tess, I doubt my parents will let me go." I said, almost sure of it, I grabbed my physics book and closed it. Tess' brows furrowed, "Just use the 'but I never go anywhere' card, I don't think they'll say no to that.

Tell them you're going with me, that'll put them at ease." She said and I thought about it for a second, I didn't go to parties because I didn't enjoy them that much. Tess gave me her famous puppy dog eyes and I chuckled

"Okay! Geez, I'll try, but I'm not promising anything." I said and she squealed hugging me quickly then closed her locker.

"I promise it's going to be fun, we'll make sure of it." She said and the bell rang, we started walking to class when I heard someone call me from behind. I turned to find James walking towards me. James was my science class partner, he was an awesome guy, funny, a little nerdy but I liked him, as a friend. But he has recently made it clear that he wanted us to be more. We were never going to happen because I just didn't feel that way about him. On the other hand I didn't want to hurt him or possibly lose a good friend. Our relationship was easy at first but now it gets uncomfortable in some instances.

If I could will myself into liking him, I really would, but as great as he was he just wasn't Brandon. I flinched at that thought; he was certainly better for my health than Mr. blonde and delicious, as Tess called him.

Tess gave me a knowing look then chuckled "I'll see you in class." She said starting to walk away. "What? Don't leave me alone with him!" I whispered harshly after her but she kept walking. I'll get her later, I promised myself.

James caught up to me "Hey." He said with a smile that I returned "Hi." I replied; he ran his hand through his brown curly locks nervously "Uh so I don't know if you heard about the upcoming dance." He said and I nodded "Yeah I did, but isn't it a girls' choice?" I asked, starting to panic that he might want to ask me.

"Oh yeah, but I waited anxiously for you to ask me so I thought I should do in instead." He said sheepishly "So, you want go?" he asked.

My gaze shifted uncomfortably only for it to lock with Brandon's, who was leaning against the wall of the passageway, was he scowling at us?

"Katelyn?" James' voice came through and I snapped out of it "I...uh...I'm not even sure I'm going James, I don't want to have to bail on you at the last minute." I said hoping he'd leave it at that.

"Well at leased keep me on stand by in case you do decide to go." He said and I looked back to where Brandon was standing in time to see him get dragged away by Rhiannon with her arm firmly around his, he was laughing at whatever she was saying to him. I looked down, "Sure." I said and we walked in the opposite direction towards our class.

I got downstairs to find Mom and Dad on the couch watching TV and having a glass of wine; Mom lay across the sofa as he massaged her feet. This was their typical Friday night these days and they seemed to love it more and more. They used to attend a lot of junkets, gala events and parties in the past, but now they only step out in public when they really have to. We'd sometimes tag along with them, but the press wasn't as interested in the kids. I'll admit though, it was nice being labeled the princess of the Gilbert dynasty; it made me feel a little significant. Their conversation stopped when I stood before them "I have a favor to ask." I said nervously and they both looked up at me questioningly.

"A girl from school named Christy is hosting a party at her house in Malibu, can I go?" I asked and they both stared at me silently

Dad gave me a reluctant look, before he could say no I babbled, "Please Daddy, Tess is coming with me, I already promised her." I said trying to guilt them; I also decided to play the card she suggested.

Dad eyed me "Please." I tried one last time, giving him my patented sad look I knew he couldn't resist.

"I want you back here by 11pm." He said "Deal." I quickly said "Will your brother be there?" he asked and I sighed, I knew he'd feel a lot better knowing JT would be there to watch over me. "Yes JT will be there, and if not I'm pretty sure you'll send him." I said exasperatedly and he and Mom chuckled.

"Fine then, you can go." He said and I squealed in excitement and kissed them both on the cheek before rushing back upstairs.

I grabbed a quick shower and walked back to my room to call Tess, I put her on speaker when she answered, "We're on for tonight." I said throwing the phone onto my bed and walking over to my closet. Her scream of excitement blared through the small speaker. I chuckled

"Don't get too excited, we have a curfew of 11pm." I said, "We can totally work with that." She said "Alright, get ready, I'll come pick you up in an hour." I said, "Okay girl." She said before the line went dead. I went further into my closet, it was a small-sized room, it wasn't as enormous as my parents'. I finally found a one-shoulder blue cocktail dress; it was above knee length. It was an *A&A Designs* number off their summer collection; I had it before it even came out. It helps when your relatives own the brand; my aunts Allison and Amanda said they designed it with me in mind. The moment they launched their clothing line it blew up and now they are renowned stylists and designers to the stars.

I paired it with 3-inch Manolo heels, I was a flat shoes kind of girl, but sometimes I get inspired by the skyscrapers my Mom occasionally wears. I brushed my hair down; I applied a small amount of make-up, which was an unusual thing for me. When I was done I went back downstairs only to be stopped by Dad, I slowly turned around. "What are you wearing?" he asked, disapproval in his tone. "It's a dress Daddy." I said, self-consciously smoothening its skirt and his blue gaze narrowed, "I don't care what it is angel, you're not going out looking like that." He said and I frowned turning my gaze to Mom "Mom!" I wailed for her to help me out. She turned her gaze to Dad "Put a jacket over it sweetie." She said and I groaned going back upstairs. She could've easily convinced Dad to let me go, I didn't get what the big deal was. We already established that I'd have a bodyguard tonight, speaking of, I wondered if JT had already left for the party.

When I got my long jacket they gladly let me go, I shook my head walking over to my Jag, I noticed JT's car wasn't there.

I drove to Tess' house and waited for her on the driveway, she soon came out looking wonderful in her black dress and the red ankle boots I bought her to match her fiery hair. She climbed into the car.

"I'm so glad I wore my best outfit, I would've paled next to you girl, wow." She said and I smiled at her "Oh come on, you look gorgeous Tess." I said as I pulled away. We arrived at the Malibu mansion, with cars parked outside and on the driveway. I could hear music emanating from it as more people started to arrive. "Lose the jacket girl." Tess said and I did then we went inside. Judging by everyone there I was glad we dressed up a bit, it would seem as those we overdressed but in LA it was quite conventional.

As conventional as we might look I couldn't help but notice the few heads that turned every now and then. I didn't know whether to blame it on our outfits or that we hardly attended these parties. Tess and I went through the crowded house, and popular dance music echoed through every corner. We spent a great deal of time moving around the big house and admiring its stylish interior and its splendid view of Malibu beach. We got settled in the huge living area, which looked like it had been rearranged to make space for a dance floor. The glass walls were completely open to the big front pool area. We leaned against the counter watching everyone have a good time, that's when we noticed Christy playing the perfect hostess. She was a lovely girl, with her straight brunette locks and hazel eyes, not to mention her model type body. She spotted us and a look of surprise crossed her features and she walked towards us.

"Katelyn, Tess, I didn't know you were coming." She said greeting us with a warm smile. I returned her smile "I hope we're not intruding." I said, questioning whether or not we're welcome. She chuckled shaking her head.

"Not at all, I'm actually glad you came to my party, I heard you weren't into them." She said and I nodded, not bothering to elaborate.

"You have a beautiful house." said "Thank you, enjoy the party." She said then walked outside.

"She's nice." I said, genuinely surprised. I didn't know that much about her though, "I know, she's like the only nice prep I know, and she's not in the cheerleading squad." She said and I chuckled, it made sense then. My gaze went to the group of girls coming up the steps into the pool area, I sighed "Speaking of," I said and Tess looked to Adrianna, Rhiannon and the rest of their clique. "Great, the bubbleheads are here. Now the party can begin!" she said sarcastically and I laughed at her vehemence. She put her plastic cup down, "I'll be right back okay?" she said and walked away when I nodded. I turned and faced the counter, "You want to dance?" A smooth familiar voice came up behind me.

## CHAPTER 7

Already accustomed to this, I nearly smiled to myself as I slowly turned around to find Brandon staring down at me. His grey eyes swept all over me with clear appreciation "You look beautiful." He said softly, he said it so tenderly I felt it like a caress, I took in a shallow breath sweeping my hair behind my ear self consciously. "Thanks." I said blushing scarlet; it was the first time he'd ever said that, and I suppressed a smile. *He thought I was beautiful.* That's when I noticed his appearance too, he wore a light brown shirt and he had its sleeves rolled up, he complemented it with a black waistcoat and jeans. He looked incredibly handsome, my gaze went to his golden hair, it looked silky soft and I caught myself wondering if it felt that way to the touch.

"Why do you keep sneaking up on me?" I asked, it was starting to become a trademark of his, he chuckled "I swear I don't do it intentionally...sometimes." He added with a cheeky grin, I shook my head at him, unable to keep from smiling

too. It was infectious.

"So how about it?" he asked, holding out his hand, I suddenly panicked remembering that he'd asked me to dance. I panicked not because I had to dance, I loved to, I freaked out because I had to dance with *him*. Being that close to him does terrible things to my common sense, haven't I proven that many times?

"I have to find Tess." I said turning to walk away only to be yanked back by the waist, his arm unlocked around me but he kept his hand on my arm, making sure I didn't try to escape again.

"Brandon, let go!" I quietly hissed as he started pulling me to the dance floor "Come on Katelyn, I won't bite." He said, but it sounded like he might. He held my hand and twirled me around; he frowned when I refused to loosen up "You're not going anywhere until you give me this dance." He said and I raised my eyebrows at him "You might want to be careful, I have a bodyguard tonight." I threatened and he smiled "If you mean your brother, oh he's too preoccupied with that blonde chick." He said and I sighed defeated. I wasn't sure if I sighed because JT wasn't available when I needed him or that Brandon still doesn't know Adrianna's name, everyone did. I guess I should feel special that he at least remembers *my* name. How pathetic is that?

I decided to humor him so I could get him away from me. A song I liked started and I also started to enjoy dancing with him. I turned around and he gently put his hands on my waist pulling me a little closer and his scent hit me like a sucker punch. I wished I had the will power to tell him to get his hands off me, but I didn't.

"When we're not working on our project, you avoid me like a plague, why?" he said over my ear. "That's because you are." I said honestly and he chuckled "Ouch." He said then paused "And James is not a plague I suppose?" he added, and his voice was laced with bitterness that shocked me a bit. What was his problem with James? He twirled me around to face him.

"What's your problem? I think James is a great guy." I said and he chuckled without humor, "The guy is as boring as a rock." He said and I frowned "I resent that." I said trying to pull away but couldn't. "I'm not trying to offend him, I just think you could do so much better." He said and I raised my eyebrows at him "Really? Like who?" I asked and he smiled "Like myself." He said and I paused in surprise, always thought flirting was second nature to him so I tried not to read too much into it. But he'd never admitted to wanting me before.

"You look a little surprised, you're a beautiful girl Katelyn, I don't see how I can be faulted." He added with a lower voice.

I slightly shook my head, just like he can't be faulted for how he acts around every other girl; I had to remember that he's given me no inclination that his feelings for me are true.

"Right." I said sarcastically "James may seem boring to you but I enjoy his company, it's just easy with him." I said without thinking and he frowned, a strange emotion touching his gaze "Do you have feelings for James?" he asked, and I thought I heard a hint of hurt in his voice.

"No." I said, I couldn't lie about that; it was quite obvious. Even so, why did I just admit that? It was none of his business either way, was it? He grinned, "He's just a good friend. So I don't appreciate you insulting him." I added. "I didn't mean to, I was just trying to point out that he's not the right guy for you, you don't want easy." He said, moving closer "You want excitement, a challenge and a

bit of danger." He added softly, his hand moving from my waist to sweep my hair over my shoulder and lightly brush the back of his fingers against my neck. His grey eyes boring into mine, I could hear my heart drum in my ears.

"And you're so sure I want those things and that *you* have them with you?" I asked, not quite sure why because it really didn't matter. He stopped dancing and smiled "Come with me." he said holding out his hand again, giving me a choice again.

It seemed as though when it came to Brandon my mind and heart were always fighting for superiority and my heart always won because I placed my hand in his and he led us outside. We walked to his black Audi RS5 convertible "Where are we going?" I asked pausing when he opened the door for me.

"We're just ditching the party for a little while." He said motioning for me to get in and I did. I knew it was stupid to trust Brandon of all people, but I just did, I couldn't even explain it to myself. The engine purred to life and we drove out and down the seaside road, there weren't many cars on the road. I watched Brandon the whole time; I could see that he loved the drive and the open road. He looked at me and smiled "You want to know how it feels like to fly?" he asked then he pushed some button on the side of the gear. I chuckled nervously "Don't kill me." I said and he laughed, "You better hold on tight princess." He said and the engine gave an aggressive grunt when he put his foot down on the gas. I watched in a mixture of shock and amazement as we blurred forward, but he was right, it felt like we were flying. With the smell of ocean air whipping against my face and hair, I smiled "You are crazy!" I shouted to a smiling Brandon. "Then go crazy with me," he shouted back over the rushing wind.

*Why not* I thought as I spread my arms wide and screamed into the night at the top of my lungs, actually feelings like I could fly. I don't know how long I did that before I slumped back on the seat laughing with Brandon. We finally slowed down and eventually stopped, I wasn't sure where exactly but we were still at seaside and we could see the moon reflected on the water, it looked breathtaking. We sat on the rear of the car just enjoying the view and cool ocean breeze.

Soon enough we were back at Christy's house with the party still in full swing, I hoped Tess and JT didn't freak out wondering where I was. I smiled when Brandon cut off the engine "That was fun, thank you." I said, meeting his gaze, really meaning it.

"You're welcome." He said gently but he didn't smile, the look in his eyes was too intense but I couldn't look away. Before I could stop myself I reached over and swept his hair away from his eyes, down behind his ear to his nape, my hand lingering there; I was right, his hair felt amazing to touch. A small gasp escaped my lips when I realized what I just did, I pulled back but Brandon caught my wrist. He gently kissed my fingers then he slowly leaned down to kiss me, I felt myself lean towards him as well. As if a switch had been flicked in my mind, my head snapped to the side and I pulled back glancing at my watch.

"I-I have...to go." I said with an unsteady voice as I reached for the door and pushed it open. "What? Wait—" Brandon said and I looked back,

"I'm sorry Brandon, some of us have curfew." I said stepping out of the car.

"Katelyn..." he said before I cut him off "Thanks for the ride." I said before I closed the door. Glad he'd put the hood up on our way back, so our little moment was kept away from prying eyes. The last thing I needed was gossip following me

around on Monday. I neatened my wind blown hair as I rushed back to the house *what the hell were you thinking!* I shouted at myself. I placed my hand on my forehead, I shouldn't have even agreed to going anywhere with him. I nearly kissed him for heaven's sake! My hand still tingled from the feel of his lips; I shook it, hoping to get rid of the lingering feeling.

I found Tess talking to a girl from our class, I pulled her aside "I was looking everywhere for you..." she trailed off as she zeroed in on my expression "Are you okay? You look a little flustered." She added and I just nodded "Can we go?" I asked and she must've sensed something was not right because she agreed without protest or questions.

## CHAPTER 8

I dreaded this Monday more than usual; the thought of having to face Brandon made me sick to my stomach. And I owed Tess an explanation for Friday, I'd avoided talking to her about what happened all weekend, I needed to get my own head straight first. I came to the conclusion that Friday's events changed nothing; I'm still going to avoid Brandon as much as I can, as usual. Nothing has to change because nothing happened, right?

So came into art class and I greeted him cordially as I would any other day, but I could still feel his lips against my skin and I wondered how they would feel against my own. *You're doing it again* the rational voice in my head scolded and I was glad when Mr. Anderson started the lesson. When the bell rang I hurried out of the class, but Brandon was easily keeping up. "You're dead serious about avoiding me, aren't you?" he asked, an intended joke but his tone sounded a little frustrated. "That's nothing new really." I said not breaking my stride, "I'm guessing you don't want to talk about Friday?" he said; it wasn't much of a question. My heart sped up, this was exactly the confrontation I was dreading. I reached my locker and decided to play dumb "What about Friday?" I asked, with a cool voice. I met his narrowed gaze after closing it.

"You're really going to pretend like nothing happened?" he asked this time; I took a deep breath then quickly regretted it because all I could smell was him. "I don't have to pretend because nothing did happen." I said; he was about to reply when I cut him off "We're still meeting in the afternoon right?" I asked, our project was nearly done, much to my relief.

"Of course, hey don't change—"

"Brandon, hi, I wanted to ask you something." Rhiannon said stepping in between us, she shot me a glare before looking back at him. I wasn't sure if I was pissed or glad she interrupted us. But she at least gave me a chance to run and I decided to take it. I thought I heard him call after me but I kept walking. Rhiannon was probably going to ask him to the dance, and the thought of him saying yes irritated me. I didn't want to have to compete with Rhiannon and God knows whom else. You fight for something that's yours, or something you strongly believe you have a claim to and Brandon doesn't fit in any of those

categories.

"You what!" Tess said before she burst into a fit of laughter, I nervously looked around at anyone close to us in the cafeteria. "Keep your voice down Tess." I said in a stern voice. She stifled her laugh "Well that would explain why he cant stop looking at you." she said looking over my shoulder and I tensed, I fought the urge to turn around, "Is he looking this way?" I asked, and she smiled "Yep, like he has been for 45 minutes now." She said, "Stop that." I scolded and she chuckled but looked away.

"I feel for you my friend but this is great entertainment for me," she said and I couldn't help but giggle too "You're having a ball, aren't you?" I asked "Absolutely" she confirmed with a smile. "I don't get why you're doing this Katie, he wants you and you want him. You guys have this primal attraction, why fight it?" she said and I gave her a knowing look and she sighed.

"Yeah I know, I know." She said holding up her hands, she took a bite out of her apple and took a deep breath. "I guess I should've just let JT interrupt you guys." She said absently, her gaze far away. I got a feeling there was more that transpired than what she led on. I looked at her questioningly "Well?" I asked,

"I was walking back to you when I saw you on the dance floor, I was about to make myself scarce so you could get some time with Mr. blonde and delicious. But I saw JT start to walk your way with a clear intension of breaking up the party." She said and she chuckled sheepishly "I didn't know what to do so I ended up dragging him away and I basically pushed him up against the wall. He was just as surprised as I was." She added. I wasn't sure what JT thought about *that* but I knew it must've been embarrassing for her considering her feelings for him.

"Wow, you don't play around do you?" I teased, I decided not to get cranky with her about her feelings for JT, I wasn't a hundred percent okay with the idea of my best friend with my brother, but who was I to say?

"Nothing like backing a guy up against the wall to let him know you want him." I continued my teasing, "Cowards like me should take a page out of your book." I added with a sigh. She shook her head, slightly amused

"I'm bold but not that bold." She said "So in my stupid attempt to distract him from you guys and my sudden attack, I ended up asking him to dance. Thankfully he was sweet enough to agree, or else that would've been humiliating." She added and my eyebrows shot up, well well...

"You danced with JT?" I asked; I'd never seen him do that except with that wretched girlfriend of his. "It looks like I'm not the only one who had an interesting night." I added and she surprised me by frowning.

"I had a great time, but it wasn't long before Adrianna practically pushed me away from him." She said and my own smile fell "Oh." I said.

"I think he felt bad because he promised me a dance again soon." She said and my gaze narrowed. I doubted guilt had anything to do with that offer, but I didn't dare voice that thought. I didn't know JT's angle here, but I had a feeling he liked Tess more than he led on.

"But either way Adrianna helped keep him distracted, when I went back to find you, it didn't take much to figure you went out with him." Tess said and I shook my head "And I nearly did something I'd regret." I said. She raised a mocking eyebrow at me "Really? You would've done anything but regret that Katelyn Gilbert." She said, challenging me to deny it. I threw a piece of candy



wrap at her and she ducked it laughing. The bell rang and I passed by my locker before heading to class. I picked up the note that fell to the floor and read it,

*I'm not easily deterred princess, Brandon.*

Nice! I thought bitterly, I had become some kind of challenge for him and I had a feeling he wasn't going to stop until he got what he wanted. I sighed and went to class after cramping up the note and throwing it into the bin.

Like he agreed we met and worked on our project, it was nearly finished and looking absolutely stunning. It also helps when you have a fairly talented partner. Thankfully Brandon didn't bring up Friday again, or the note he left in my locker. I didn't know whether to be relieved or suspicious, I knew he was far from being done with me. I had pretty conventional reasons why I should stay away from him, but I also had an inexplicable fear of getting close to him.

No matter what he says, he'd soon get bored chasing after me and seek his next prey. I'll have to be faced with the choice of either accepting his advances or watching him walk; it would've been a no-brainer if I weren't so crazy about him.

After we called it a day, we cleared up and walked towards the door "So, you're going to the dance with Rhiannon?" I asked, then immediately bit my tongue, cursing inwardly. Why on earth did I have to go and say that? Of course I didn't like the thought much but I had no business sticking my nose where it didn't belong. I quickly turned for the door after a pause, desperate to get out "I'm sorry, that's really none of my business" I said turning the knob. I slightly opened it before Brandon shut it again with his hand. It remained on one side of my head, firmly keeping the door closed, I didn't turn to face him, he was standing way, way too close.

"Then make it your business." He breathed, I realized then why he played it cool the entire time. He wanted me to crack first and damn it I played right into his hand. His scent was like a blanket around me and I could laterally feel the heat radiating from his body, that's how close he was. I rested my forehead against the door, I wasn't built for this, I really wasn't. Some girls might love it but it only exhausted me.

"Just let it go Brandon." I said quietly "There's a line of girls waiting for the attention you're wasting on me. Why do it?" I asked, not sure I really wanted to know.

"Isn't it obvious princess?" he said, so quietly that I wasn't sure he'd even said it. He moved his hand and stepped away a little "But if you want to know, she did ask, but I refused." He said, having more space to breathe, I turned to look at him "You did? Why?" I asked incredulously, no one ever refuses the pretty cheerleaders. He gave me a brilliant smile as we walked out

"I want to go to the dance with *you* Katelyn, I want you to ask me," he said with a serious tone despite his nonchalant expression. I stared at him shocked for a moment, I didn't know what to say, or do.

"I—" I started when I heard someone call my name; I turned to see Tess gesture for me to come over, I breathed out, grateful for the chance to run. "I have to go." I said to him, turning and quickly walking towards Tess. I knew it was rude to leave him hanging like that and I might come to regret it, but he threw a curveball I wasn't prepared to deal with. Tess took me by the arm and we walked outside

"I was about to quietly walk away when I saw you completely freeze over."

She said and I chuckled uneasily "I know, I owe you one for saving me." I said getting in the car.

## CHAPTER 9

The one thing I've always hated more about high school was that the line between a rumor and the truth could get amazingly blurred. It was all over the whole school that I was secretly dating Brandon Carter, now Rhiannon and her friends were nastier than usual. I didn't have time for her pettiness because she thought I was some kind of a threat. I sighed inwardly, if there was a competition and Brandon was the prize, I certainly was not even in the race.

Tess and I sat on the bench as I sipped on some cold water; we had a 15-minute break from gym class. We were having an easy conversation when a girl walked up to us, I've seen her once or twice in the hallways but I didn't know her personally.

"Hey." She greeted us and we extended it back "Hey Katelyn, can I talk to you for a sec?" she asked and I looked at Tess then back at her "Its okay in front of her." I said and she nodded. "I'm Leah, by the way. I know you don't know me very well, but I heard you and Brandon are a thing." She said and my shoulders fell on a heavy sigh "We're not." I said simply.

"Even so...just be careful of him." She said and my eyes tightened, she paused "He's an ass." She added, as if that was the least offensive description she could come up with. "He'll treat you like you actually mean something to him before he completely forgets you." She continued. "I'd know; I tasted rejection from him first hand." She added and I didn't even flinch, I just stared at her blankly.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked, because she genuinely didn't seem like she had an ulterior motive. She shrugged

"You seem like a nice person, and one less disillusioned girl is something I guess." She said "Or maybe I want good karma." She said with a smile I couldn't return. I nodded and she walked away after saying goodbye. Tess put her hand on my shoulder

"You okay?" she asked and I looked at her forcing a smile this time "Yeah, why wouldn't I be?" I asked and she didn't probe any further.

I was glad to finally be putting the finishing touches on our project; it looked amazing. After today there'll be no reason to keep hanging around him anymore, I should've been happy. And Leah's word of advice was still weighing on my mind a bit.

"Hey, I'm not quite sure about these lines, you think we can't fix them up a bit?" I asked Brandon while I stared at the drawing. I heard him get off his chair and walk up to me. He peaked over my shoulder; he was standing too close again. I tried to avoid him and my responsive heart to no avail. He leaned down

"Huh, I see what you mean." He said, and I felt his warm breath wash over my neck "You could make them a tad bit darker by adding small dots, there..." He

said pointing to the area "And there." He added then moved away.

After I calmed my nerves I saw that his idea could work, really well. I smiled at him "That's a really good idea." I said and he smiled too "You're good." I added, it was true, having him as a partner was nearly unfair to everyone else, it shouldn't have been this easy, and it was because of him.

He shrugged almost sheepishly "I try my best." He said and I laughed, "Fake modesty doesn't really help your bad boy image." I teased. He cocked his head to the side "Is that how *you* see me?" he drawled, taking a step forward.

I almost groaned; he wasn't going to make this easy for me was he? I turned my gaze back to the picture. "Well you don't need me to confirm what you already know." I said. "Oh but I do." He replied scooting closer again "Maybe then I'll know how to get into that pretty little head of yours." He added tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear.

I felt something in me snap, with the weight of my feelings for him, the pressure of the rumors and his relentless pursuit, I just couldn't take anymore. I slapped his hand away and put my arm in between us creating some much needed distance. A muffled scream of frustration tore from me "I'm not doing this!" I shrieked "I'm not playing this sick game of yours or what ever you call what you do to girls." I added fiercely. He stared at me shocked for a second

"What is your problem?" he asked, I heard a slight fault in his cool tone. "My problem is you, Leah came to me and warned me about you." I said and he didn't even seem fazed by that.

"So?" he asked and I chuckled incredulously "So?" I repeated, feeling my anger rise "Do you even remember her? She's one of her many female friends I supposed." I said and he shook his head

"Why are we even talking about her, it doesn't really matter either way." He said and my hands balled into fists. He didn't get it, he didn't get how things worked in the girl world and he didn't even care. I took a few steps back

"It doesn't matter? Who do you think you are?" I'm almost shouting at him now, "You don't get to toy with people's emotions like that Brandon, its just wrong." I added then took a deep breath trying to regain my composure. I've never had to go off at someone like that, ever. It shocked me too,

"You know I used to think this was all just fun to you, some sort of twisted pastime but I'm starting to think that's just who you really are." I said bitterly and his grey gaze hardened with anger.

"You don't know anything about me," he said with a cold tone, "Yeah, I don't and I'm sure you don't let anyone else know either." I replied in the same manner. His jaw clenched, *I don't need to tell you why you should keep him at arm's length* I remembered JT's words. Everyone's been voicing their opinions on him and I was sure they weren't lost to him, but it was time I said what I thought.

"You know what my theory is? I think that someone you cared about hurt you before." I said more calmly "And that this..." I waved a hand at all his gorgeous glory "...is just a defense mechanism." I added. His eyes narrowed but he kept quiet so I continued, "I think a girl broke your heart once and now you're on a mission to break the heart of every girl you come across. Just to prove to yourself that you can too." I said and walked up to him "That's awesome Brandon, really, bravo." I said then pointed at him, my finger touching his chest "But you know where guys like you end up? Alone and miserable." I said, not feeling anger anymore, just sad indifference "So I'm sorry if I don't want to be

caught up in your crap.” I added then turned to walk away. I’ll fix the drawing some other time, right now I just wanted to get the hell away from him. I grabbed my backpack, going for the door.

“My mother left me when I was six.” He said and I froze “I’ve never seen her since.” He added and I slowly turned to look at him. His expression revealed nothing but his stormy grey eyes showed the pain I had no doubt he felt over his mother. He had been hurt, just not the way I thought he was. I felt myself walk slowly back to him as he reluctantly continued to tell me about her.

“My father loved her, but according to him she never felt the same way. All she cared about was the fortune that came with him.” He said never looking away from me “And when she got her hands on it-having me secured that-she ran for the hills.” He added. His eyes tightened “She left her husband but how could she abandon her only child for such superficial things.” He said with a tone that made my throat tighten with emotion.

I couldn’t help but think about him growing up with that kind of hurt and rejection, especially from someone who’s supposed to love you and be there no matter what. I looked down suddenly feeling terrible for some of the things I said to him. I said he’d end up alone and miserable and he might’ve even had a taste of that in the past. I didn’t know I was rubbing salt into a wound.

“I-I’m sorry Brandon, I had no idea.” I said, swallowing hard. A smile tugged on the corners of his lips but it seemed blank, and it didn’t reach his eyes.

“Of course you didn’t.” he said “But I guess your theory is correct, to an extent.” He added then turned around.

Impulsively, almost instinctually I touched his shoulder, he turned to face me again and I wrapped my arms around him. He tensed with shock for a moment then he hugged me back, holding me tightly to him and burying his head in the crook of my neck. This was a bad idea and for once I didn’t care.

I didn’t condone his actions but at least I understood the reason behind them. He’s just a boy, hurting and seeking love he was deprived off from a young age, which made him seem less cold and calculating. It also made me want to help him.

“Not all women are cold hearted mercenaries Brandon, some of us can love unconditionally.” I whispered, truly believing it. I had been blessed and showered with it; he had not. He didn’t know what that was. He lifted his head to look at me and the emotion in his eyes hit me like a ton of bricks. His hand moved from my waist to gently caress my cheek.

There was an honest and sincere essence in the way he was holding me now, he was not the troublemaking heartbreaker, he was just Brandon and I was completely under his spell. My lips parted to let in a much-needed breath and his eyes fell to them. “I want to kiss you, please don’t stop me,” he said with a strained voice, he sounded like he’d get on his knees and beg if needed be. I nodded, I wanted to be kissed, I needed to be kissed by *him*.

He leaned down to press his lips against mine; they felt soft and amazing as they moved tenderly with mine. The kiss grew more urgent and my hands involuntarily went into his hair, what a bold move for someone who has never been kissed before. I wasn’t even sure I was doing it right; I just followed Brandon’s lead, which was slowly driving me crazy.

He pulled away but his lips lingered on the corner of my mouth then they travelled down my jawline. I tried to calm my heart and breathing, I heard his

breathy chuckle "This was better than the one we had in my dreams." He said and I blushed, knowing exactly what he meant, I've had a couple of dreams that he starred in. Though I was not brave enough to admit it.

"You haven't done this before, have you?" he whispered against me then pulled back to look at me. I looked down, how did he know that? Was I that terrible at it? "Don't make fun of me." I said and he smiled.

"I wasn't going to, I'm actually glad I'm your first kiss." He said, "I'm I that bad?" I asked and his smile turned into a grin "You rocked my world princess, especially when you grabbed my hair, that was hot." He said and I chuckled blushing violently. He touched my red cheek "Look at you blushing, I've scandalized you. The Gilbert men are probably going to skin me alive." He teased "But you're so worth it." He added placing brief kiss to my shoulder. I laughed "Its just a kiss Brandon." I said, its not like we were doing anything indecent.

"Yeah and my services are available if you want an extensive lesson on kissing." He said, okay it was time to get out of this boy's arms now. I chuckled pulling away from him and he let go "You're bad. Bad for me." I said and he laughed, "But you'll have me anyway, right?" he asked and I shook my head at him smiling, it seemed like it, did I honestly have a choice? I don't know. "Let's finish this project." I said walking back to the drawing table.

I found Tess waiting for me in the lot, we climbed into the car, she was eyeing me closely enough to make me slightly uncomfortable. I looked at her

"What's up with that grin on your face?" she asked and I tried to frown. "What?" I asked and her eyes widened after a moment. Tess could read me too well sometimes "Oh my God you—"

I nodded sheepishly "I kissed him." I said and she threw her head back laughing. "Well good for you girl, I hope you blew Mr. blonde and delicious away, someone had to." She said and I chuckled "He said I rocked his world, is that good?" I asked and she smiled "That's great." She said then playfully pushed my shoulder "And how was it for you?" she asked and I sank in my seat, remembering "It was just...wow." I said and she grinned.

"So are you two like a thing now?" she asked and I touched my lips absently, at the time I didn't think about what outcome it could have. "I don't know." I said truthfully and she shook her head. "Well either way Mrs. blonde and delicious there's no running away from him now." She said and I pushed her this time around and she chuckled. Did I want something with Brandon? I'm not sure but against my better judgment I was going to let the chips fall where they may.

## CHAPTER 10

The past four days have been rather interesting, partially due to Brandon and I spending more and more time together. With our project out of the way we got to know each other a bit more, and I found that we have a lot more in common than I thought. We would've made great friends if the crackling attraction between us weren't a constant reminder that we could never be.

He also told me a bit more about himself; that he moved here from Stamford Connecticut, about his dad and childhood. I was flattered that he'd wanted to share that with me, I doubted anyone else knew some of the things he has told me. Tess and I sat on the lawn at the back of the school grounds; it was near the football field.

I saw Brandon approach us and I felt my mood improve like there's a switch that can be flicked, he got closer "Hey girls." He said with a smile at both of us "Hi Brandon." Tess said standing up, "I gotta go see Mr. Franklin. See you later." She said to me then walked away. My gaze followed after her; she was always so quick to leave me alone with Brandon. I wondered if deep down inside it bothered her that I've been spending time with him. It didn't seem like it though, and besides at this rate we were both going to have to get used to it. Brandon replaced her beside me

"Guess who got an A on the art project?" He said with a smile when my eyes widened "What? Us? No way." I said incredulously and he only nodded. I delightfully threw my arms around him then quickly pulled away again "Wow, I so couldn't have done it without you." I said and his smile turned into a grin "Let's just say we make an awesome team." He said "Agreed." I said smiling too.

My gaze fell to the ring on his right index finger, it was square shaped with a grey moonstone. It was a nice ring and I wondered what it meant to him because he never took it off. Probably a gift from a loved one, *or some girl* the jealous voice taunted me. "Nice ring." I said and he was taken aback for a moment then glanced at it "Nice necklace." He said looking at it this time.

"So did you hear about the hiking and camping trip?" he asked, I heard about it but didn't put much thought into it "Is it like a school thing?" I asked, did that mean he'd be going too? I was suddenly very interested. "That's the idea, are you coming?" he asked and I nodded reluctantly "Are you?" I asked and he gave me a sly smile.

"Would it matter either way?" he asked, I tore my gaze away from him and looked at the clearing "No." I said and I heard him chuckle "Lair." He said softly and I stifled a laugh of my own.

I noticed his St. Josephs high school Alligators duffle bag "You going to practice?" I asked and he nodded. Ever since his match-winning touchdown he's become a vital player in the football squad. "I could use my own personal cheerleader." He said and I chuckled playfully pushing his shoulder "Yeah right." I said. He gave a fake sigh "Well a guy can dream." He said then he kissed my cheek before he stood up, I tried to stifle a blush but he started walking away.

"See you later alligator." I called after him and he turned and flashed me a gorgeous smile "After a little while princess." He called back. I watched him until he disappeared around the building wondering what was up with this nickname or endearment he gave me.

I wasn't sure what kind of relationship we had; weather or not we were exclusive. Well his female acquaintances were never far away, but I took pleasure when he'd blow them off now. Should I place any meaning into that?

I shook my head at myself, I was totally falling for him and it was too late to try and do anything about it. With a sigh I stood up.

I looked around the trunk of my Dad's Mercedes SUV to check if I left anything for the camping trip, well if I did then I'll burrow from JT. He'd be annoyed but he wouldn't refuse. I said goodbye to my parents and Janie, "Come on Katie." JT called after me from the front seat and I stuck my tongue out at him, a signature move so he says, and I climbed into the car. Tim closed the door after me and got into the driver's seat. Tim replaced Jeffrey when he retired as our butler, he's maybe in his mid thirties; I guessed. We quickly made it to school; other students seemed to be arriving as well.

I was glad to see that most of the school was not going on this trip; I saw a few faces I recognized and a few that I hoped wouldn't go altogether.

Honestly spending three days with Adrianna and her posse was not going to be pleasant, and I didn't see them as the outdoorsy types. Either way, I wasn't going to let them rain on my parade, especially if I'm with the crazy girl walking towards me.

"Katelyn, I'm so glad you decided to do this." Tess said after hugging me, "Or do I have to thank Brandon for that?" she added quietly. I shook my head at her.

"He's not the reason I wanted to come okay?" I said a little too defensively and that wasn't lost to her. "Whatever you say princess." She said mocking my nickname and I couldn't help but chuckle.

Tim loaded my things into the enclosed cargo trailer behind the school bus and when he was done I thanked him and he nodded cordially and drove off.

We got into the bus, it was almost full and it was the only one scheduled to leave. I looked around the bus as Tess and I looked for empty seats. There were about seventy students in it. We finally found two empty seats and I looked at the back of the bus and I saw the group of jocks and I spotted Brandon. He was in conversation with them but his gaze was on me.

He smiled and winked at me, I returned the smile before settling in my seat next to the window and Tess followed. JT went passed us to his teammates no doubt.

The bus started to fill and then finally we began to move, slight excitement crept into me, surprising me. I've gone camping with my family many times before, but I at least had to admit to myself that Tess was right. Spending the whole weekend with Brandon in the great outdoors was the exciting part.

I pulled out my iPod and settled comfortably in my seat.

I didn't know I had drifted off until I woke up; the bus was still on the road. I pulled out my earphones and I turned my head to see Brandon occupying Tess' seat. He smiled at me looking up from his iPad. "Hello, sleepy head." He said.

I shifted uncomfortably, a little chagrined that I fell asleep and that he was here the whole time. How long was I asleep anyway? I didn't feel that groggy.

"Don't worry you've only been asleep for 30 minutes." He said, answering my unspoken question. "Where's Tess?" I asked looking around; glad my voice wasn't throaty. "She was kind enough to trade seats with me," he said then

chuckled "She's having fun with the boys." He added. I turned and looked back and indeed I saw her with the jocks, laughing with them.

"Don't worry I warned them to play nice." He said and I frowned, I was going to have a talk with her about manners. Then I decided against it when I saw JT in the seat next to her; that's exactly where she wants to be, in the center of his attention. That scene couldn't possibly be sitting well with...I then spotted Adrianna and a few of her friends scowling at the group; Rhiannon and Brea where glaring at my direction. I sighed and sat back on my seat then thought, *to hell with them*; Brandon wants to be with me. In a mischievous attempt to work them up, I leaned my head against his shoulder and inhaled deeply, taking in his oh so lovely scent. He smiled and surprised me when he kissed my hair tenderly.

"I could get used to this." He said and I chuckled "Hmm" I said, me too.

"Hey I thought gadgets are not allowed when camping." I said with mock disapproval at his iPad. He chuckled "Yeah like you abide by that rule." He said referring to my iPod and I playfully pouted. His playfulness disappeared when he touched my pouted lips with his thumb; I slightly turned away from his touch in an attempt to derail his intensions. Is he crazy? He can't kiss me now.

"Not here Brandon." I whispered and he raised an eyebrow "If you haven't noticed we have an audience." I said, and no matter how much I dislike Rhiannon and her friends, I don't want her to combust with rage. He smiled but let me go, I breathed easily; glad I didn't taunt his own mischievous side.

## CHAPTER 11

Most of the bus ignored Mr. Hamilton, our chaperone along with Mrs. Greene as he babbled about our trip and learning outcomes. Half an hour later we stopped on what looked like a hiking trail, LA was nowhere in sight. I was suddenly glad I was dressed for any outdoor activity. He got out of the bus and Mr. Hamilton told us that he had more or less arrived at our destination. Also that we'd set up camp at a sight later on but now he wanted to show us something.

He and Mrs. Greene led the way for us up the trail, we climbed and passed the beautiful plants and trees "I know this place." Brandon said next to me and my head whipped towards him in surprise.

"You do?" I asked then noticed that we were trailing slightly behind, mainly because Brandon was walking leisurely, bored even.

"My uncle and I used to come here a bit, he's the outdoors kind of guy." He said then I understood why he looked bored. "Mr. Hamilton is going to show them a small waterfall down this trail." He said and I frowned at him.

"Thanks for the spoiler alert Brandon." I muttered and he smiled apologetically "Besides, I want to show you something better." He said with a cute boyish grin, his grey eyes flashing with excitement, how can I possibly resist that?

I looked at our group in front; they seemed not to notice us much. "I don't



know Brandon, we can't separate from the group." I said.

"They won't even notice we're gone, we'll be back before they do." He said beckoning me with his eyes and hand "Come on princess." He added softly with a megawatt smile. I sighed in defeat and took his hand as we discreetly went up another trail; no one seemed to have noticed us. Except for Tess, whose eyes widened then she looked ahead before anyone could notice. I knew she'd cover for me should anyone ask.

"You're a bad influence on me." I said, but feeling giddy with adrenaline, Brandon chuckled "Just when I thought I was the best thing that's ever happened to you." He teased and I snorted, "Okay ease up on the conceit buddy." I said and he grinned. I became wary of this trail and if he knew where he was going, it was not as clear as the one we were on. He stopped and looked me straight in the eyes, his grey gaze serious and searching "Do you trust me?" he asked and I paused taken aback by his vehemence. I nodded slowly, it was true, I trusted him, I wouldn't have gotten into his car that day if I didn't. He smiled then kissed my forehead.

"Good, I'll keep you safe." He said fervently, as if he'd do so with his own life. What I didn't understand is why he'd say that.

"I'm not scared." I said, maybe that was the reassurance he wanted. We passed tall and bushy trees and ferns. I then got an idea.

I stopped then tapped his shoulder "Tag, you're it." I said and he grinned, "You can't possibly beat me at this game Katelyn." He said and I folded my arms, raising a challenging eyebrow. He ignored me "The only way it can be fair is if I give you a head start." He said then closed his eyes. He really wants me to hide? Here? He'd never find me. I then smiled to myself, maybe that would teach him some modesty. I tiptoed away from him as he began counting to ten. I hid in a very large fern a few feet away from him; I could see him as he opened his eyes and they sharply scanned the area. He began to move and so did I, making sure I'm as silent as can be as I maneuvered between the ferns. I turned into a large rock when I saw him walk towards me but he then stopped and went the other way. I tried to look for him but he was nowhere in sight. I peeked around the big rock then I squealed when I was grabbed by the waist from behind and lifted off the ground. "Gotcha." Brandon said and I laughed in amused frustration, oh right he knows the area. I put my arms around him and he eased me back to the ground, letting me slide down his body.

"I believe you owe me a kiss." He murmured caressing my chin and bottom lip, I smiled "Oh how ever will I pay up?" I teased and he smiled kissing me. I giggled when he planted chaste kisses all over my face.

"How did you find me?" I asked "Hmm?" he kissed my hair, "How did you know where to look?" I asked, honestly in this place, I could've been anywhere but he found me without breaking a sweat.

"I followed your scent." He said, what? He looked at me "Your perfume, its quite hard to miss." He clarified, then I frowned, does that mean I wear too much? Hell.

He chuckled then shook his head "I like it." He said then he ran his nose down my neck, inhaling deeply "Its decadent." He whispered and I chuckled when he pulled away and took my hand. He likes the way I smell, good, because I love the way he smells.

We continued up the path until we came across a surface runoff with

shallow waters flowing in a very strange but beautiful pattern. Brandon moved forward and he looked at me when I refused to move.

"Oh no, I'm not crossing that." I said; I don't want to get wet. He rolled his eyes "Come on Katelyn, our destination is right up ahead" He said. I shook my head stubbornly and he sighed then scooped me up over his shoulder, I didn't even have time to squeal my surprise. He started to move, stepping on rocky places that had less water and I groaned, "You're exasperating." I said and he chuckled "This runoff flows to the waterfall." He added when we reached dry ground. Oh.

He took my hand again and we walked for a few minutes then turned a corner, through another heap of plants and into the clearing. My mouth dropped as I took in the stunning view, we were up on a hill overlooking a valley covered by perfectly green and lavender colored bushes and flowers. It was breathtaking.

"Oh my God." I breathed. "Better, right?" he whispered wrapping his arms around my waist. "I doubt anything tops this...wow." I said reaching for my phone then snapped a few pictures. Tess was going to be livid if I didn't take a picture.

We sat on a rock for a moment chatting and enjoying the magnificent view; way too soon he got up. "We better join the group before they send in a search party." He said holding out his hand "We'll, take a shortcut." He added then we started walking back to where we came. He turned right into an even dodgier trail but he was right, it took us a few minutes before we joined everyone else. Students we still admiring the waterfall, which paled next to the view Brandon just showed me. Mrs. Greene came up to us, with relief and anger in her expression. "Where were you two? You know you're supposed to stick with the group." She admonished us with a low voice so the others wouldn't hear.

"Sorry Mrs. Greene, I got a little light-headed and Brandon helped me back to the bus." I said evenly, impressed with myself given that I'm a terrible liar.

"When she felt better, we followed your trail." Brandon injected just as perfectly. She eyed us speculatively "Are you okay?" she asked me and I nodded "I'm absolutely fine now." I said with a smile and she nodded then walked away. Brandon looked at me and smiled "I'm in awe of you." He said and I chuckled then curtsied "Why thank you." I said and we walked up to the students. Tess saw me and shot me a 'you have some serious explaining to do' look. I sighed inwardly and mouthed, "I know".

We drove 10 minutes south from where we stopped and we set up camp in a nice level clearing. The sun was already starting to set. After supper the boys got a big fire started and we all gathered around it, as we roasted marshmallows and everyone took turns telling scary stories. The later it got the more chillier the air became, Brandon rubbed my arms "Where's your jacket?" he asked with a frown.

"In my bag in my tent." I said and he shrugged out of his hoodie and handed it to me, I slipped it on and zipped it up, it smelled like him, only more potent.

Considering that we were in the presence of a dozen other students it felt like we were in our own little bubble. It quickly burst when Rhiannon sat on Brandon's other side after practically shooing off some other scruffy looking boy.

I winced when she tugged on his arm and started making small talk with him, completely avoiding me. Brandon acknowledged her coolly and even so I

felt like the third wheel, maybe if I went away he'd relax.

I tried to get up but he had my hand and wouldn't let go, I tried a little harder to free myself but he wouldn't budge. He turned his grey gaze back to me, an obvious warning for me to stop fidgeting. Then he started ignoring Rhiannon altogether until she glared at both of us and stood up.

"What were you doing?" he asked, his tone terse and low enough for my ears only "I was going to go sit with Tess, you know, give you and Rhiannon a chance to talk." I whispered with more venom than I would've wanted.

He inhaled sharply "Don't." he said "Don't what?" I asked and he eyed me

"Run. It—" he shook his head "—bothers me." he added and I swallowed hard. Realizing that he cares for me more than I thought, and that my taking off probably reminds him of his mother's abandonment. I sighed, I couldn't promise not to run, that's what I do when shit hits the fan, it's *my* defense mechanism. But I did promise myself that I'd show him that one could care for him unconditionally. I leaned my head against his shoulder, hoping that would give him some extent of reassurance.

"Ignore Rhiannon and the others." He said, "I'm crazy about you, no one else." He said quietly reassuring me too. Then he raised our entwined hands and kissed the back of mine and I grinned.

## CHAPTER 12

Brandon let me keep his hoodie when everyone turned in for the night; I lay awake in my sleeping bag hugging it close to me, still marveling its scent. I looked towards Tess, who looked blissfully asleep. I couldn't sleep much because Brandon's words still rang loud in my head *I'm crazy about you, no one else*.

I missed him already, how crazy is that? I want to see him and I wondered if he's asleep or if he'd appreciate an impromptu visit. Then I cursed inwardly as I remembered that we're not allowed to cross over to the boys' side of camp and visa versa.

Do I dare try? I know that I want to see him, badly for some odd reason. If I get caught I'll be in a heap of trouble, *but what if I don't?* I thought. With that I slowly and quietly got up.

"What are you doing?" My head snapped to Tess who was regarding me suspiciously. I blushed, "I'm going to visit Brandon." I said and her eyes widened.

"Who are you and what have you done with my best friend?" She said with mock disapproval and I smiled "So I'm guessing you're not going to stop me?" I said and she chuckled "Stop you? Girl I'm giving you my full support, just don't get caught." She said and I chuckled too. Tess was always up for mischief and rule breaking, in fact she used to complain I was too uptight. I opened my tent and peeked out, the coast was clear.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do." She whispered and I rolled my eyes at her then put on the hoodie and stepped out into the night. I quietly made my way across to the group of tents belonging to the guys. I had no problem identifying Brandon's tent on the far right.

I carefully opened it and stepped inside, I was glad to see Brandon was not sharing with anyone. Brandon looked up at me; too alert for someone who just woke up. I was glad to see that I didn't exactly disturb his slumber "Katelyn?" he asked, almost as if he weren't sure he was seeing right.

"Hi." I said self-consciously, I've never done anything this bold before, and I'm unsure of weather or not I'm welcome. "Hey." He replied with an incredulous chuckle and he sat up and pulled back his blanket "Get in here, aren't you cold?" he asked and I scooted next to him getting underneath the fluffy blanket.

"Comfortable?" he asked and I nodded smiling and he grinned, "What are you doing here?" he asked and I looked at my hands "I came to visit you." I said and he eyed me "You're just full of surprises aren't you?" he said and I chuckled "Good ones?" I asked and he nodded "Always."

He continued to eye me long enough for me to feel my cheeks heat up; his close proximity was not helping. "Why don't you tell me the real reason why you're here princess?" He said softly and my heart rate spiked up. I met his warm gaze and opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out. He raised an eyebrow,

"Well I couldn't sleep, and I was thinking about what you said...about how you felt about me," I said, God why was I so shy?

"D-Did you mean that?" I asked and his brows furrowed slightly. "Of course I did Katelyn, why would you think otherwise?" he said and I shrugged. "And?" he probed and I cursed inwardly, I was hoping he'd stop questioning right there.

"I wanted to see you." I whispered, "I missed you." I added reluctantly meeting his gaze. A strange emotion passed in his eyes before his gaze shifted "Hmm and what can I do to right that wrong?" He said touching his chin and I chuckled "I don't know, surprise me." I said and he smiled cupping my cheek and kissing me. I let him slowly ease me back down on top of the sleeping bag, not breaking his sweet kiss, which he kicked into high gear. And like in that empty classroom I responded involuntarily.

My hands raked through his silky hair as I kissed him back, he pulled away and began trailing his kiss down my jaw and neck. I tried to steady my out of control breathing and heartbeat. He unzipped his hoodie on me and pushed it aside as he resumed kissing me. I was way out of my league here and I knew it, but my head was too clouded. With his scent, with his kisses, with this scorching hot feeling running through my whole body.

With these foreign feelings that were both scary and enthralling...but they felt so good. His warm hand went to the small of my back underneath my sweat top, and the contact made me gasp, the feel of his hand on my skin was amazing. His arm went all around my waist to pull me up against his warm body and he kissed my shoulder. From somewhere deep inside me, panic bubbled up

"Wait." I breathed and he froze then looked up "We can't do this...I can't—" I struggled with words and he sat up, bringing me with him.

"I know." He said tenderly and I met his gaze "You do?" I asked a little confused. He nodded "I wasn't going to...I'm sorry, I wasn't intending on taking it that far Katelyn." He said sincerely, and when I looked into his eyes they were apologetic and a little sheepish. I paused taken aback by his reaction and words; I thought he wanted this. I felt myself smile

"Well what do you know, Brandon Carter can be a gentleman." I teased hoping to lighten the heady atmosphere in the tent. He smiled warily

"I wasn't going to take advantage of you princess." He said cupping my cheek "I'm sorry I made you think I would." He added and I looked down, he really does care. I chuckled incredulously "Good, because my Mom would kill me and my Dad would kill you, I doubt I'd like that, I've grown quite fond of this bad boy." I said and he grinned "Have you now?" he said and I nodded. He zipped up his hoodie again and kissed my forehead, I eyed him the whole time.

"I thought you wanted to." I said, still shy. The last time I felt this uncomfortable was when Mom had 'that talk' with me years ago.

He met my gaze and chuckled without humor "I'd be crazy not to, but not now. For you, a guy should get on one knee first." He said and my eyebrows shot up. Did he really believe that? Did I? I never really thought about it before.

"You would do that?" I asked and he smiled pausing for a minute "Yes, if I had a ring with me," he said and I punched his shoulder playfully "Very funny." I said sarcastically. "Who said I was kidding?" he teased but there was a serious undercurrent to his tone. "If that's your way of asking me if I'd wait for you Katelyn, the answer is yes." He said when he sobered up.

I kissed his cheek and he gave me his patented megawatt smile "Thank you." I said, I don't know why his words mean so much, but they do.

"You could thank me by going to the dance with me," he said and I rolled my eyes "But I wasn't planning on going." I said and he cocked his head to the side.

"Well now you are, with me." he said and his tone challenged me to say otherwise, I groaned "Have you always been this pushy?" I asked. "Is that a yes?" he asked and I smiled in spite of myself "Yes, yes. We'll go to the stupid dance." I said and he smiled "Perfect." He said then sighed "As much as I'd love to keep you here, I don't want you getting into trouble." He said giving my hand a squeeze. I got out of his warm blanket with exaggerated slowness, making his smile broaden.

"See you later alligator." I said starting for the tent door and he grabbed my arm pulling on me so I fell onto his lap. He kissed me briefly and sweetly "In a little while princess." He whispered and I grinned blushing. I got up and walked out. Tess was wide-awake when I returned back to my tent and got into my sleeping bag.

"I thought I was going to have to drag you back." She said and I chuckled, "So, how was your visit?" she asked and I paused a little "It was...interesting." I said, it nearly got too interesting and I fought back a blush as images came flooding into my head. Geez, no more skating on thin ice when it comes to that boy.

Tess eyed me suspiciously but I closed my eyes, after a minute she sighed and closed hers too.

The following day was more hiking, and we had teamwork challenges and games, where it was the boys versus girls or we got mixed. I genuinely had fun, except when I was forced to work with the cheerleaders from hell. Brea pushed me into the rocky pond we were supposed to cross and claimed it was a mistake. I used my hands to cushion my fall so I ended up scrapping them. She and the rest of her mean friends had a good giggle, which was silenced by Brandon's menacing glare as he got in to help me.

He scooped me up easily, on any other occasion I would've stopped him but because I knew it would piss off the bubbleheads I let him carry me. I knew it

was petty to make them jealous but they deliberately tried to humiliate me and I wasn't feeling too mature about it.

Another person who wasn't too pleased was JT but I couldn't be sure if it was because I got pushed or that I was in Brandon's arms. Someone he has warned me off before. He knows I'm seeing him now, hell everyone does, but he hasn't said anything about it since that day.

*You're a smart girl* his words ran through my mind, *Be careful.*

I'm trying, but weather or not I stood a chance at 'keeping him at arm's length' I have no idea. He also showed me a good time during this camp, he'd sneaked us out to go show me more sights and we talked and had a great time. Whenever we weren't together, I'd watch him and he'd watch me. We'd both smile when we did that at the same time. It seemed liked we grew much closer since our encounter in his tent, and it scared me a little. I shouldn't like him this much, this soon, should I? Or was I the only one falling here? That thought upset me even more.

I was bummed out when we prepared to leave the site Sunday afternoon.

## CHAPTER 13

Tess was beside herself with excitement when I told her I was going to the dance after all, she even set up a time and date for dress shopping.

"We have to go look for really nice ones tomorrow afternoon." She said as we went to science class. I smiled "Yeah, it'll be fun." I said hoping I sounded just as enthusiastic. I wouldn't even be going if it hadn't been for Mr. blonde and delicious. "So who are you taking to the dance?" I asked, she's never mentioned her date yet, or if she even had one.

"Yeah, I'm going with Liam." She said; my eyebrows shot up "Hastings? The right back?" I asked and she nodded then smiled "Yeah, oh and he asked *me*," she said, I could tell she was pleased to have him as a date but he's not the ultimate for her. I nodded "Yeah he's cute." I said and she chuckled "I know right? He asked me in the bus." She said and I paused,

"Right in front of JT?" I asked a little shocked and she frowned "Don't worry his poker face was unfazed by that, and why would it be?" she said a little sadly and I decided to keep quiet. Maybe I was wrong about JT feeling something for her too, who would blame him? With that bitch Adrianna's claws so deep in him? I stopped my train of thought before I got worked up.

We got into class and I took my seat, my table had already occupied by my partner James who greeted me coolly. I felt myself frown; he didn't use to treat me with such indifference before and I wondered what caused it.

"So...you and Carter huh?" he said and I stilled for a second, I wasn't going to like where this is going "Its getting serious?" he asked, I've asked myself that very question but its still too early to tell for sure.

"As serious as can be expected." I said hoping he'd let it drop.

"So I'm guessing you're taking him to the dance then?" he asked and I tensed again, realizing why he'd been so cold these past couple of days. He'd asked me

to the dance first and I left him hanging and now there's Brandon...oh boy.

"Well yeah, we are going out after all." I said, hoping it didn't sound as cold as it did in my head. With that he frowned,

"And you're sure he's that type?" he said with slight bitterness, his questions were really starting to piss me off.

"What are you getting at James?" I asked more sharply than I intended and he shrugged "Come on Katelyn, everybody knows he's got a bit of a...reputation, I'm just being a friend and I don't want to see you get hurt." He said and I took a deep calming breath, I'm really getting sick and tired of hearing that.

"I get it, I understand the draw." He went on with the same bitter edge. According to him what was the 'draw' to Brandon? His looks? His charm? His money? If so then he didn't get it, they all didn't. I hated Carter the arrogant ladies man, I couldn't get away from him fast enough in the classroom the other day. But what made me stay was Brandon, the person behind his defense mechanism.

"Just giving you a heads up." He added "Thanks." I snapped hardly meaning it and I was glad when class started.

I tied my kicks for the second round of our volleyball match; I glanced warily at the cheerleading squad practicing a yard away from us. I didn't understand why we had to play here of all places, just listening to their voices put a slight dent in my game, but I most tried to ignore them.

I served the ball and the opposing player stroke it hard and it flew off all our heads. I'm guessing it went to the cheerleaders because I heard our someone ask them to pass it over; I had my back to them and didn't bother to turn around.

"Katelyn, watch out!" I heard Tess call to me before a ball hit me behind the head with enough force to make me fall to the ground.

Tess rushed towards me but I looked to where the ball came from only to see Adrianna and the rest of them giggling while Rhiannon covered her mouth with feigned shock.

"Oops, sorry." She called out to me, barely stifling her own laugh, I saw red. Could she be any more obvious that she did that on purpose? With irritation from my talk with James still fresh on my mind and her constant humiliation of me, I snapped. I swiftly got up with one thought on my mind; I'm going to kill her!

"Oh no, no—" Tess trailed off as I darted off towards her; she folded her arms, as I got right in her face.

"I 'am this close to losing it with you Rhiannon, so why don't you tell me what your problem is." I shouted at her. A small audience gathered as she laughed coolly "Look at you sharpening your tiny claws, and everyone thinks you're so perfect and sweet." She said with biting venom. My eyes closed for millisecond as I realized I knew her problem all along.

"Really Rhiannon? This is about Brandon? Still?" I asked and her mouth curved into a resentful frown and for once I felt sorry for her. "I'm not doing this with you, I'm not going to have a catty fight with you over a guy who clearly wants only one of us, and we both know who that is." I added and the small crowd made a sound. "Do us both a favor and get over it, this thing you keep doing is wasting my time." I said then turned to walk away.

"Right, like he is wasting his with a little twat like you?" she called after me

and her friends giggled. I could've just walked away like I didn't hear her, but we've already established that my tolerance for her has worn off. Besides I want to show her just how tiny my claws are.

"Oh yeah, just so he doesn't have be around a little bitch like you." I said and gasps emanated from somewhere around us, but all I saw was her priceless expression. Our couch appeared out of nowhere and she stepped in between us with a livid face.

"Both of you. The Principal's office. Now." She shouted at us and we shot each other a glare before I turned around.

"I will not tolerate such behavior at my school!" Mr. Hammond almost shouted at us, after grilling us about our fight. Rhiannon and I sat a considerable distance away from each other, both of us refusing to even look at one another.

"I want you both in detention and don't even think that's the last of your punishment." He said, "Get out of my office." He added.

After the long day and detention finally ended I walked through the empty hallway towards the door. I pulled out my phone, Tess probably left and I hitched a ride with her this morning. Maybe today was not the best day to leave my car at home, just my crappy luck again!

"Hey, I know I'm supposed to give you a ride but something came up at home." Tess said after she picked up, "Everything okay?" I asked frowning.

"Yeah, I'll tell you later. Anyway someone offered to give you a ride." She replied as I pushed through the double doors and before I could ask her who, I saw Brandon waiting across the parking lot. He was leaning against his black Audi before he straightened and smiled when he saw me. I chuckled inwardly, feeling my mood improve.

"Well speak of the devil. Are you sure you didn't arrange this you sneaky girl?" I asked returning his smile. Tess' laugh rang through the small speaker "Me? Sneaky? Oh I'm not the one being late to classes, making late night visits and getting into fights with mean girls. Seriously Katie, I never thought I'd say this but ride on!" she chimed. I chuckled as I walked towards Brandon

"Way to go sum up the most interesting two weeks of my life." I teased and she chuckled "Oh and I'll be sure to send Mr. blond and delicious a thank you card." She added and I shook my head smiling.

"Chat later." I said and I hung up when I reached him, he gathered me in his arms and I welcomed the embrace. I was greeted with his unmistakable scent and I sighed. I haven't seen him all day, yet my whole day's events revolved around him. I couldn't help but roll my eyes at myself.

"I never figured you to be the detention type." He teased, with an innocent look on his handsome face. He knew exactly why I was in detention; it probably reached his ears before I even got into the principal's office. I was also a little chagrinned, I never saw myself as the kind of girl to get into a nasty fight over a guy, regardless of how gorgeous, charming and brilliant he is, or how crazy I 'am about him. Rhiannon pushed me way too far.

I shot him a scowl "Don't you start with me." I said and he held up his hands before he opened the door for me.

"My parents are going to kill me for this, so get me home so I can get it over with." I added settling onto the red leather seats. He closed the door with a smile and walked over to his side. "You don't really have die now you know." He said as he started the car. I looked at him bemused,



"I was thinking that you could have dinner at my house tonight." He said and I stared at him for a moment. "With your family?" I asked, as he pulled out.

I've never been to his house before, or even met his family, but he's talked a lot more about them now. He is very fond of his father, stepmom and his 9-year-old stepsister.

"That's the plan." He said eyeing me for a second; I glanced at my all too casual, even a little scruffy appearance. "Brandon I 'am not dressed for that, at all." I said and he chuckled warily.

"You're honestly worried about the way you look?" he asked, I glared at him and he sighed "You look beautiful princess, as always. Trust me," he said and I paused then decided to give in "Alright lets do it." I said and he stepped on the gas turning onto the highway. I took out my phone and quickly texted Mom about my plans. 'Okay, have fun.' Was her reply minutes later.

## CHAPTER 14

Brandon's house was a Mediterranean style two-story mansion, complemented by lush gardens and classic LA palm trees. It was very beautiful and huge but not as big as my family's retro Spanish design estate.

Anxiety started to slowly creep into me as Brandon opened the door for me. This was a bad idea, what was I thinking? I'm terribly underdressed and my hair probably looks like a haystack.

I nervously raked a hand through it as Brandon and I walked up to the covered front porch. "You look fine." He said surprising me and I gave him a small smile before he turned the doorknob. We walked into the huge entry hall; the receiving area opens to a formal dining room. A bronze haired woman probably in her mid thirties approached us with a warm smile. From Brandon's description this was his stepmom.

"Honey, welcome home." She said to Brandon with a brief kiss to his cheek before she faced me with a welcoming smile when he introduced us.

"Katelyn its such a pleasure to finally meet you, well aren't you just a lovely girl." She said and I tried hard not to blush "Thank you, its nice to meet you too Mrs. Carter." I said and she rolled her hazel eyes.

"Please call me Ellie." She said kindly and I smiled, just then his stepsister I presumed came rushing down the curved staircase. She had the same hair color as her mother but she had Brandon's grey eyes, which I guessed they both got from their father.

She ran to Brandon who smiled catching her in his arms, I felt myself smile at the scene; she seemed very found of her big brother. Who isn't?

"Connie this is Katelyn. Katelyn this is Constance." He said and she smiled at me

"Hi." She said waving and I chuckled waving back "Hey sweetie."

"You have pretty hair." She said and I smiled, the Carters are big on compliments aren't they? Which made me relax a bit about my appearance.

"So do you." I said as Brandon put her down.

"Katelyn will be staying for dinner." He said to Ellie and her smile widened.

"I wouldn't have it any other way." She said then she held out her hand to Connie "Come on sweetie, lets go do your homework." She said and Connie immediately took it. Ellie gave us a parting smile and went back up the stairs with her.

I met Brandon's gaze and smiled "She's very nice." I said, glad that he was one of the lucky ones who don't have a stepmom from hell.

He smiled too "Yeah, Ellie's a jewel." He said, "I didn't realize that until you practically forced me to." He added and I looked at him bemused then I remembered what I said to him before we first kissed.

*Not all women are cold-hearted mercenaries Brandon; some of us can love unconditionally.*

He took my hand "Tour?" he asked and I smiled "Please." I said and he did just that, taking me all over his house and showing me some of its rooms. We passed through the great room with a unique fireplace; it opens to the rear-covered veranda with an expansive pool. We went over the hardwood bridge over the pool to the backyard patio. He said he likes to come there and think.

I can see why, the sight of the small garden waterfall flowing into the pool could keep anyone serene.

I presumed that our last stop was his room, which was as stylish as the whole house. It had copper interior with soft illumination over the wall panels. It also had glass doors into the deck overlooking the backyard.

We talked a little before I noticed an acoustic guitar next to his desk; "You play?" I asked pointing to it and he nodded "A little." He said almost sheepishly.

"Oh my God, you never told me." I said playfully punching his shoulder before I went over and grabbed it. I sat back on the bench at the foot of his bed, running my hand on the smooth dark wood. "You write?" I asked and he nodded "Only melodies though." He said and I smiled handing him the instrument "Play something for me." I pleaded and he reluctantly took it.

He began playing a slow and hauntingly soft melody, all I could do was stare at him bewildered. When he stopped he looked at me in question, I paused.

"That was beautiful." I breathed and he smiled, he played me a couple more melodies then I raided the iPod on its docking station. I hit play on the last played track "I love this song." I said to him and he smiled after putting down his guitar.

He took me by surprise when he grabbed me and started dancing, we both laughed as he twirled us around his room with careless grace.

I abruptly stopped when I saw Ellie at the door with an amused look on her face, "Sorry, I knocked and no one replied." She explained and I blushed, why was I blushing?

"Dinner is ready." She added and Brandon nodded "We'll be right down." He said and she closed the door behind her.

When we got downstairs we found Ellie setting up the table laughing with a man who sat at the head of the table, I knew first hand he was Brandon's father. The resemblance was confirmation. He stood up when he saw us and smiled,

"You must be Katelyn." He said extending out his hand "Its good to meet you, I've heard a great deal." He added and I shook it smiling back.

Geez, what has Brandon been telling them about me? "Likewise Mr. Carter." I said, "Please sit." He said settling back on his chair. I sat on his left and Brandon next to me, Ellie and Connie sat on his right.

Brandon's family were very welcoming, they never for a second made me feel like the visitor during the course of the dinner. I was a little bummed when I had to go. I said goodbye and Brandon and I walked out towards his car.

"They like you, you know?" he said and I eyed him "My Dad especially." He added with a wary chuckle "He's probably thrilled that I'm seeing the daughter of the billionaire mogul. He'd probably have me marry you by 18." He said and my eyebrows furrowed.

"Because of my Dad?" I said "Ouch, and here I thought I was special." I muttered and he smiled softly, taking my hand.

"You *are* special, to me," he said kissing my hand, "Smooth." I said with mock disapproval and he grinned opening the door for me. It's hard not to believe he's sincere when his grey eyes sparkle like that. At the rate at which I'm falling for this boy, I really hope he *is* sincere.

"No way." Tess said and I smiled eyeing her "No lie." I said as I parked on the side of the road. "I thought I was in trouble for picking a fight with Rhiannon." I added as we got out.

"And they just didn't mention it?" Tess probed, disbelieving, my eyes wandered around Rodeo drive before settling on her. "Just like that. I know for a fact they know it happened," I said. Tess' brows furrowed as we walked down the famous street, passing a few designer shops. "Your parents are awesome but they can be weird sometimes." Tess said and I chuckled "I know right? They can be unpredictable at times, which is a very bad trait for parents to have." I said and Tess laughed too "Anyway, enough about your parents, lets shop." She said with excitement clear in her voice. I smiled at her as we made our way to our favorite store. The *A&A Designs* store was a home away from home; we loved to come here even if we weren't buying anything. Mainly just to visit my cool aunts.

"Katie, Tess, what a pleasant surprise." Mandy said hugging us both tightly

"Hey aunt Mandy." I said, admiring her new haircut, she ditched her long straight golden locks for a sophisticated bob. She looked amazing, as usual.

"Ally just went to go fetch lunch, she'll be back soon though." She said, "What can I do for you girls?" she asked, sensing that we were not just stopping by.

"We're looking for killer dresses for our dance tomorrow night." Tess said and she smiled "You came to the right place, we have everything from designer dresses to our own collection, go wild." She said glancing at her Rolex "I wish I could stay and help but I have to meet up with a supplier, don't worry Gina over there—" she pointed to a woman in black dress pants and the store's shirt, who waved kindly "—will help you with anything you need, on us." She said.

I was about to protest but she silenced me with her finger "But nothing, honestly, I thought you'd be better than your mother, have we taught you nothing?" she said, playfully admonishing me causing me to smile.

"Alright." I said and she gave us a parting smile before she swiftly disappeared out the back. Tess and I looked at each other for a second before we squealed in excitement and began our raid.

Tess ended up picking a brown silk knee length dress from the store's

collection, along with nude heels. I chose a grey chiffon printed long dress by Vera Wang, in homage to Brandon's eye color. I paired it with black Louboutins that were 2 inches out of my comfort zone, but hey, I'm feeling ambitious lately.

I twirled in front of Tess and she jumped out of her chair clapping her hands together in appreciation.

"You're going to be a knockout Katie, you look amazing." She said and I smiled at her, and gazed at myself in the mirror.

"I agree; it's a good choice." Gina said with a smile and I nodded "We'll take them." I said and she nodded too before walking away.

## CHAPTER 15

Part of my punishment for getting into a fight with Rhiannon was being the social committee's slave. I was sent to do everything in preparation for tonight's dance, I ran all over the school. I was finishing setting up decoration on the refreshment section when Brandon appeared. He gave me a smile I couldn't help but return even though I was a little preoccupied.

"I don't think Cinderella had to prepare the ball herself." He teased and I glared at him "You know you and your smart mouth should..." I said before he cut me off "Should what?" he taunted with a smirk and I smiled.

"Should kiss me, rather than annoy me," I said and his eyebrows rose then he looked around the school's auditorium, which was crawling with people getting the place ready "And here I thought you hate PDA." He whispered.

I looked up at him through my lashes "Lets just say you have me questioning a few things Eddie." I whispered back using his middle name which brought a heart stopping smile from him.

He took my hand and slowly raised it to his mouth not breaking eye contact with me, and the air suddenly got thicker. "You sure about that? Because I'm good to go." He murmured placing a kiss to my knuckles, immediately causing my cheeks to flush, why does he always have to be right?

"Okay, maybe not." I muttered snatching my hand back and he chuckled "I figured." He said putting his hands in his pockets leaning against the table. My eyes went over his body; his athletic torso was dressed in a tee and a black leather jacket, paired with blue jeans. *He's truly something else* I thought in pure feminine appreciation. Just then my mind wandered back to that night in his tent, I've never really been able to get it out of my mind. Sometimes I wonder what would've happened had I not stopped him. It's been different between us since then, we're suddenly more...intense, it's inexplicable. But then again what do I know? All of this is still oh so new to me.

And right now our feelings for each other are stretching to spheres I'm a little afraid of exploring. *If that's your way of asking me if I'd wait for you Katelyn, the answer is yes.* He once said.

"What time should I pick you up tonight?" he asked playing with a decorating ribbon, I met his grey gaze. "I thought we should meet up here

instead." I said and he stopped, frowning "What?" he asked.

"I really didn't want to make a meal out of this, the less...formal it is the better." I said reluctantly. "And how are you going to get here?" he asked, "I'll drive, or Tim can drive me whichever one works." I said.

"Except me doing it? Katelyn—"

"Please." I said softly, batting my lashes at him and he paused then shook his head in resignation "Fine." He said and I smiled broadly. "That's not fair you know." He added and I rose an eyebrow "What is?" I asked, as I cleared up glad to be done.

"That eye thing you do." He said with mock disapproval and I chuckled, *welcome to my world* I thought, glad I dished out as much as I was receiving.

"You like it?" I teased and he smiled as I walked back to him, "It will be my undoing." He said putting his arm around my shoulder as we walked out.

I shut off my Mac after Skyping Tess, I had not seen her at all today, but then again not many came at all, everyone was preparing for the dance. Which I should also do before I'm late. I rushed to my bathroom to take a quick shower. When I came back into my room I found Mom and Janie there, "Need a hand?" Mom asked with an amused smile, she knows I know nothing about getting dolled up. I smiled back "Please." I said sitting down on my dressing table.

Mom parted my hair then side-swept it after creating retro waves, my hair actually looked like a movie star's. So did my make up when she was done with it. I grinned looking at myself in the mirror, "Mom...wow." I said lost for words.

She only smiled "Up, lets get you into that dress." She said and I stood up fetching it from my closet and she helped me into it.

Janie fetched the box with my shoes and I pulled them out, Mom raised an eyebrow, she knows I hate high heels.

"Inspired." She said and I gave her a sly smile "Yeah, by you." I said and she chuckled. I stood up from my bed and twirled in front of them.

Janie clapped her hands and Mom just stared at me then she looked like she was going to cry, "Aw my little girl is growing into a young woman, next thing you're out of high school, then college, then you'll start a career, get married..." She said and I smiled "Whoa slow down there Mom, I'm only going to turn 17. You're still stuck with me, for now." I said and she hugged me "I love you, you look beautiful." She said and my own throat tightened with emotion "I love you too." I said hugging her again and we both chuckled when Janie joined in our group hug.

We got downstairs and Mom made me pose for a picture, or two.

"I have to send this to your father, he'll be disappointed if he didn't get to see you like this." She said and I frowned "When is he coming back again?" I asked, he left for a business trip to Washington two days ago, I missed him terribly, I couldn't imagine how Mom was feeling.

"Tomorrow evening." She said then she called Tim who appeared in the great room minutes later "Yes, Mrs. Gilbert?"

"Can you drive Katelyn to her school?" she said, and he nodded "Of course." He said and she looked at him "And for the last time Tim, its Lucky." She said and he smiled apologetically. "That's completely unnecessary." I said and Mom shook her head at me "You shouldn't be driving yourself to the dance sweetie." She scolded, "Tell me why Brandon's not taking you again?"

I rolled my eyes "Because I told him not to." I said and she shot me a 'do I want to know' look and I shook my head smiling.

Tim ended up driving me anyway, soon enough we parked in the school's lot, which was graced with rented limousines.

Tim opened my door and helped me out of my Dad's sleek Maybach "I'll be right here if you need me." he said, I wanted to suggest that he go back home but knowing him, it'll be in vain. "Thank you." I said and I slightly lifted my dress as I walked away. I spotted Brandon a yard away, talking to a friend; he looked breathtaking in a black tux. I guess he sensed someone was watching him because his head snapped to my direction and I stopped. He barely said goodbye to his friend as he began walking towards me almost as if he cannot believe its me.

He stopped in front of me "Someone pinch me." he breathed and I smiled goofily, he took my hand kissed it, reverently bowing his head "Princess." He said, my heart skipped a few beats, how on earth can he make me feel this way? Make me feel like royalty, make me feel beautiful and precious?

"I would bow at your feet but then I'd ruin my tuxedo." He said, I decided to play at this game too "And I will not have any of that, given how handsome you look in it." I said taking his extended arm "I hear your kingdom is well renowned in this area my prince, I was hoping you would show me a good time." I said and he grinned, "It would my pleasure, your highness." He said and we both chuckled heading into the auditorium.

The huge place was already crowded with students in formal attire, dancing and mingling. We walked through the crowd, saying hello to some friendly faces. I saw Tess standing with Liam close to the DJ stand, they both looked to be enjoying themselves. But when she started scanning the place, I wonder if she was looking for the date she wishes she had.

I looked around for JT as well and I couldn't see him, although I saw his girlfriend from hell. That was unusual; whenever Adrianna is close I know JT is never far away.

Tess saw me and she walked towards us with Liam, I hugged her with a smile while Brandon shook hands with Liam. "You look fantastic." I said; her dress was simply amazing. She smiled "Well your aunts made it, of course it looks fantastic." She said and we both chuckled. We all talked for a while then we separated "You want a drink?" he asked as we made our way to the refreshment table. I smiled cheekily "Yeah, vodka shots." I teased and he chuckled,

"Nice try." He said and I laughed too.

A popular pop song ended and a slower song started, Brandon put his plastic cup down "May I have this dance princess?" he asked and I placed mine down too, taking his hand after a coyly curtsying.

He led me through the crowd onto the dance floor and he pulled me into his arms, I put my hand on his shoulder and the other in his own. He moved us both with effortless grace and I meekly smiled. For a second I wished for time to stop, for us to remain in that beautiful moment a while longer. But inevitably it ends, no matter how perfect a moment it is or how badly you never want it to end, it just does. All you can do is hope to have another one tomorrow.

But tonight, I was planning on having multiple and Brandon helped do just that. We dance a bit more before I had to leave and go to the bathroom.

I walked into the bathroom and almost collided to a group of girls, laughing.

When I came out of the stall I nearly groaned when I saw Brea fixing her lip-gloss on the mirrors. She shot me a fake smile as I went to the counter basins. I returned the favor, "Having fun?" she asked, surprisingly with no sarcasm in her voice. "Immensely." I said and she chuckled.

"Aw look at you, you're completely smitten with him, and who could blame you? He's a catch." She said and I eyed her impatiently "What are you getting at Brea?"

"I'll admit you two do look cute together, it's just a shame it's not...real." She said and my brows furrowed. "Brandon is the kind of guy who cant have a steady girlfriend even if he wanted to, it's just not in his nature." She said and I took a deep breath trying to calm my aggravated nerves.

"Say whatever you want to say Brea, because I'd like to get back to him." I said and she shook her head. "Really? Oh he's not bored at all, I saw him getting hot and heavy with Adrianna down the corridor." She said and I stopped breathing for a moment, *she's lying* the rational voice inside me chanted.

She made a sympathetic sound at my expression "You don't know, do you?" she asked and I kept quiet "They've been secretly seeing each other for a while now." She added. I snapped out of it, for a while? For a while Brandon has been with me, when does he have the time to see Adrianna if he's spending all of his time with me?

"You're pathetic Brea, this is a new low." I hissed and her eyebrows rose "You don't believe me? Go look for yourself." She said with a confidence that sprung doubt deep inside me and then she grabbed her purse.

"You're too naïve for a guy of Brandon's caliber, what did you think? That it'll be different with you?" she said "Guys like him don't change honey." She added and I hit panic mode as I recognized her words.

*Those ones you can't change. Instead you end up changing yourself just to be with them.*

I tried to swallow past the lump that was forming in my throat. Brea must've seen that because she shook her head, pity evident in her blue eyes. I wasn't even sure if it was fake or not, "But you already knew that, didn't you?" she said quietly, and then started walking towards the door. She paused beside me

"And that's when it all comes full circle little Katelyn, with Brandon, you have a harmless fling with him, not a full fledged relationship. Or else you just end up getting hurt." She said almost apologetically then she walked out leaving me in the empty bathroom.

## CHAPTER 16

I couldn't feel my legs carry me out of the bathroom and down the corridor. I could've went the other way, back to the dance knowing very well that I'll find him there waiting for me. Sadly I didn't have that confidence and because deep down inside I knew some truth rang in Brea's words.

*I'm crazy about you, no one else.*

I gave him a chance because I saw something in him I knew I just had to have. Why was that derailed just because some mean girl said otherwise? He's done anything but plant a seed of doubt in my head, so why didn't I turn around? He deserved my trust and I felt guilty that even now I didn't give it to him.

I decided to make a deal with myself, I'll look for him and if I don't find him, this is the last time I will ever doubt him.

I turned a corner and no one was there, I turned again and froze, Brea wasn't lying for once. There they were lip locking. Adrianna had both her hands on his face firmly holding him to her and suddenly Brandon pulled away.

"Next time I'll let you kiss more than just my lips." Adrianna purred and I felt a bile rise in my throat. I closed my eyes for a second hanging my head, this is what he wants, girls like Adrianna, not naïve expectant girls like me.

I just wish he'd had the decency to cut his losses with me first. Brandon was about to say something but he stopped and his eyes locked on me, slightly widening.

Adrianna turned around to face me; she had a satisfied look on her face. I snapped, how dare she have that smirk on her face, did she forget she's seeing my brother? I decided to dwell on my rising anger than shuttering hurt and betrayal.

I walked up to her "I never thought it was possible for you to disgust me more than you do right now." I hissed at her "The fact that my brother has anything to do with you makes me sick to my stomach." I added.

She stared at me with a little surprise, I didn't dare look at Brandon, if I did I'd crack, I knew I would. "Well I'm going to end this so called relationship if it's the last thing that I do." I spat, even though my heart was breaking with each second that ticked by, all I could think was that this bitch was breaking JT's as well.

I couldn't protect mine, but I'll make damn sure Adrianna doesn't hurt my brother.

"You're going to break it off with him and you're going to get your claws out of him and leave him alone, or so help me God Adrianna—" I said getting in her face as my voice rose higher.

"Katelyn..." Brandon said and my head snapped to him

"Not a single word from you!" I shouted, "I have nothing to say to you." I shrieked and he blinked a few times, a flurry of emotions passing in his eyes. Bewilderment, pain, regret?

I stared at him for a second and chuckled without humor, it sounded wrong, even to my ears as I held back tears. I refuse to cry.

"Leah was right, you're an ass. They were all right, and deep down inside I knew it too. But shame on me for choosing not to believe it," I said with quiet resignation. Suddenly I couldn't stand the sight of both of them, I couldn't stand



to be here anymore. I turn on my heel and do what I do best.

I heard Brandon call after me and his footsteps follow as I quickly stalked back down the corridor. I carried my dress, vaguely aware that I was wearing high heels as I made my way towards the double doors and I pushed through them.

I warily welcomed the night breeze as I continued towards the car, "Katelyn please..." Brandon shouted after me running towards me now.

"Leave me alone!" I shouted back, my voice making a small echo through the empty parking lot "Don't come anywhere near me."

Tim must've seen me coming because he suddenly walked out of the car towards the back passenger door. His expression bemused but grave as he looked between me and a fast approaching Brandon.

"Take me home." I whispered when I reached him, and I wasn't even sure he heard me until he nodded stiffly and opened the door for me. I swiftly got in and he shut the door behind me. Turning to stop Brandon from getting any closer to the car. "I'm going to ask you to hold it right there." I heard him say with an arctic voice. Brandon held up his hands then I couldn't hear what Tim was saying to him anymore.

Brandon's eyes were searching for me inside, looking like he wanted to leap away from Tim to get to me. I knew he couldn't see me through the heavily tinted windows, he couldn't see how much I was hurting, which provided a sense of comfort. Suddenly Brandon flinched looking back at Tim before he took a few steps back and I couldn't look at him anymore. Tim made his way around the car and got in. I didn't look at Brandon as the car pulled away from him.

Tim didn't say anything in the ride back home only timidly asked if I was okay.

My body was on autopilot when I got back home.

I stopped in the entrance hall finding Mom with her feet up on the sofa and a glass of wine in hand; she was staring blankly at the TV. She looked distant, almost sad and I knew she missed Dad. Seeing her like that broke the dam and I started crying. Was I going to look like that from now on too? Missing Brandon and knowing I can't be with him?

I couldn't possibly compare myself to Mom, the love she and Dad have I could never fathom. But looking at her now, I considered if that was my fate as well and it hurt, knowing that unlike her, it wasn't ending in the near future.

Mom's head snapped to me and she stood up with a worried and pained but understanding look on her face. She knows, of course she knows.

I wondered if it was her maternal instincts kicking in, she held out her arms and I walked into them, crying a little harder and she sank us both back on the couch. She held me tightly and silently for a while until I calmed down, even then we sat like that, I appreciated the silent comfort. It meant more than anything she could say or do.

"Shh, I know it hurts sweetie." She said softly and I looked up at her "Do you?" I asked and she nodded. "I said you were growing up, and sometimes getting hurt is part of that." She said gently stroking my flushed cheek. "I hate seeing you like this, but I can't stop it from happening." She added. I sat despondently, keeping quiet.

"You want to tell me what happened?" she asked and I shook my head "Tomorrow?" she probed and I nodded, continuing my mute responses.

"I actually just want to go to bed." I said my voice monotonous, Mom frowned but nodded "Alright sweetie, you need anything?" she asked and I shook my head standing up. "I love you." She added when I started walking away.

I stopped then turned back to her, I kissed her forehead "I love you too Mom." I said giving her hand a squeeze. I went up the stairs and found myself in my room. Last time I was here I was smiling, excited and hopeful for a great night, funny how those very beautiful moments can also turn sourly wrong.

I was exhausted to the point where I didn't even have the energy to get out of my dress and undo my make up.

I fell into a troubled sleep.

After JT left for the day I sat on the counter of the huge kitchen island, slowly picking on my scrambled eggs. This Monday was gloomier than usual and I just didn't want to face it, at all. But all things considered, I felt fine, almost even liberated. Or was that my autopilot self talking? I shrugged inwardly.

Dad came into the kitchen and kissed my forehead "Morning angel." He said, his deep voice measured. I knew that Mom gave him the 411 on what happened Friday when he came home. He along with Mom and JT were cautious around me, it irritated me. I wasn't sulking all weekend, was I? I know that I did everything I would normally do on any other day.

"Morning Dad." I said as cheerfully as I could, meeting his assertive blue gaze. He was immaculately dressed in his charcoal grey business suit, his usually tousled ink black hair neatened. He looked powerful and untouchable; he also looked like my Dad. Then I saw it, concern and a little frustration? I sighed inwardly.

Dad has made it his life mission to protect my siblings and I and in this case he's rendered helpless and I don't think he's coping well with that.

I knew then that a serious talk was imminent and he's only giving me space for now, I'll take it any day.

Just then Mom came in, looking professionally chic as usually in her black pencil skirt and red silk blouse, along with her high red pumps; her long hair in a low ponytail. "Hey sweetie." She said to me with a smile "Hi Mom." I said before she turned her smile on Dad and they shared a chaste kiss, Mom giggled when Dad playfully placed more kisses on her face.

I think they forgot about me for a moment, a small smile played at the corners of my lips. On any other day I would've made a snide sound or comment to stop them but they looked so happy. Somehow seeing them didn't make me feel miserable; it gave me...hope. For what exactly, I have no idea.

I stood up from my chair "I have to go." I said after a glance at my watch "Bye." I said after they bid me a quick farewell.

I got in my Jag and started it but didn't go, I couldn't help but think back to the conversation I had with JT Sunday afternoon. I had to tell him about Adrianna, convince him to end things with her.

*I looked at JT expectantly but he just watched me quietly and sympathetically, was that for me? "Are you okay?" he asked, his voice laced with concern and I started,*

*"JT, I just told you your girlfriend kissed another guy and...God knows what else*

and you ask how I'm doing?" I asked not quite believing his reaction, that's just it, he wasn't reacting, not the way I thought he would.

He shrugged impassively "Yes, I care about you here." He said and I closed my eyes realization dawned on me. He was never in love with Adrianna; he didn't care what she did. "You don't care about her, do you?" I asked knowingly and he smiled "Come on Katelyn, I thought you knew me better than that. You really believe I could genuinely care about her, she's not capable of caring about anyone but herself." He said, amen to that! But I still didn't understand.

"But then why go out with her?" I asked, and he shrugged "Ade might be cold but she's easily influenced, I could control the way she and her friends treated you...most of the time." He said and I made a double take, suddenly remembering the many times Adrianna would be nice just because he was close by.

"That's crazy." I breathed "Whoa, you took this whole big brother thing to the max didn't you? Hell, you can't do that JT." I said and he chuckled at my vehemence. Then he held up his hands "Okay then, besides its ineffective." He said then he sobered up "Anyway, I'm waiting for a better offer to come along." He said distractedly. My gasp brought his attention back to me.

"You like Tess!" I said pointing at him as if that'll make him admit it "I knew it!"

"What? Did she say anything?" he asked, he's not denying it, wow.

"I...no, she didn't." I lied, I couldn't tell him my best friend's true feelings about him, she should do that. JT nodded and I saw a little hint of disappointment in his eyes, wow, he really does like her back.

"You should talk to her though." I encouraged, at least one of us should get what we want.

## CHAPTER 17

I parked my car next to Tess' blue VW Polo; she got out and walked towards me. She hugged me tightly but briefly "Hi, I tried calling you yesterday but you didn't pick up." She said and I smiled apologetically. I was having a heart to heart with JT but I wasn't about to tell her about him either.

I suddenly flinched remembering the dozens of missed calls Brandon left on my cell and voicemails I just deleted without listening to.

"Yeah I know, I'm sorry, I was in hibernation" I said and she chuckled "Even heartbroken you're funny as hell, ladies and gentlemen the amazing Katelyn Gilbert." She said and I bowed chuckling too, it felt good.

I was making progress, Friday was starting to fade like a bad dream but I knew seeing him today was going to set me back a few steps.

I felt like I was being watched but when I looked around nothing was out of the ordinary and no one seemed to be paying attention to me.

Tess and I made our way up the steps and into the building.

The day went by very slowly, but considerably normal, I was only anxious at lunch, knowing I'll have to see Brandon but he wasn't there. I don't know if I was relieved or even more anxious. But now as I sat on my chair in art class, I just want to run back out.

*You can do this Melanie*, I chanted to myself as the class filled with students. I just have to get through a few more weeks and quarterly tests then I'm free to go on a three-week vacation. I need the distance and rest.

I looked up in time to see Mr. blonde and delicious enter the class, he looked like his usual handsome self, though he looked like he could use some sleep.

The small dark circles were hardly visible; you'd have to have spent a great deal of time studying him to notice the change. *Like me* I thought sadly, looking down. I felt his eyes on me as he made his way to his own desk.

"Katelyn..." he started softly after a pause and I shook my head silencing him "Don't." I said in the same tone without turning to look at him.

I was grateful when Mr. Anderson called the class to order and he began the lesson. Suddenly the bell rang, disrupting my autopilot mode. I quickly got up and left the classroom, maneuvering through the students.

I heard Brandon call me but I kept walking, I'm not ready to deal with him just yet, he caught up to me grabbing my waist to halt my escape. He let go but he took hold of my arm this time around. "Christ Katelyn, stop running, please." He said and I struggled to pry my arm free "Let go." I said quietly.

His grey eyes darkened "Why haven't you answered my calls? I was...worried." He said and I stared blankly at him.

"That's sweet, but I had nothing to say to you." I said, my voice just as blank as my stare; he ran his free hand through his glorious golden locks.

"Why won't you listen to me?" he asked, his voiced laced with rooted frustration.

"What are you trying to do here Brandon?" I asked, my voice coming to life "Explain? Apologize? Well there's no need. Because I realized that we never really had a thing, I was never really your girlfriend." I hissed, trying to keep my voice down and he flinched "And that's okay I guess, I just wish you didn't have the gall to pretend and treat me like one." I said and he almost looked wounded "How can you say that after everything?" he said and I shook my head.

"How could you two-time me after everything?" I said, and his eyes closed. I started to take notice that we were attracting some attention in the hallway.

"It's not what you think Katelyn." He said and my eyebrows shot up "Oh my God, you're really going to feed me that crap? I hope she makes you happy." I said trying to free myself again but his hold on me was unwavering.

"Katelyn please—"

"Don't you Katelyn please me!" I shrieked, feeling tears threaten to spill but I held them back, I didn't know how long I'd do that for. If I had to endure one more minute of this or his touch, I'll breakdown. "Damn it Brandon, damn you! Let me go, you're causing a scene." I said my voice breaking at the end. His eyes quietly beseeched mine but I glanced at the small crowd of whispering spectators.

"Let her go Carter." I heard JT's voice behind him before I saw him, anger evident in his blue gaze as it fixated on Brandon's back. For once I was for JT's intervention. Brandon's eyes glazed over and he turned his head towards JT but didn't turn or let go of my arm.

"Stay out of this Gilbert, I just want to talk to her." Brandon said coolly, but warning was clear in his voice too.

"It looks like she's done talking to *you*. Now let her go before I put my fist upside your head." JT said, menace in his tone now palpable. Brandon looked back at me, his grey eyes pleading with me again. In the battle of wills Brandon was not backing down and I knew he wasn't intimidated by JT. But if he cared about me at all he'd let me go and spare me this humiliation.

*Oh just let me go Brandon.* I thought and as if he heard my unspoken plea he reluctantly let go of my arm. I spared JT and him a look before I turned and the small crowd made way for me, as I walked towards the exit. I felt the pained look in Brandon's eyes like an electrocution, but I was the one hurting here, I was the one betrayed. I walked towards my car grateful that I didn't have gym class today; I had to get out of here. Fast.

JT and Brandon could possibly get into a brawl over this and the fact that I didn't care spoke volumes about my detachment. I got into my car and I leaned my forehead against the steering wheel and let out the tears I've been holding back all weekend, soft sobs shaking my body.

*The taste wouldn't be worth it when I'm poisoned,* I remembered my own words a month ago. I was wrong, even poisoned; the taste was worth it. If given the chance I wouldn't try to change the decision to go out with Brandon. But I would change these feelings that have taken root so deep in my heart.

Students started to slowly flood the lot and I quickly used the back of my hand to wipe off the tears and I started my car.

I felt a whole lot better when I got home; having left school early there was no one home. I found Maria in the kitchen who offered me a snack, I curled up on the sofa and distracted myself with TV.

About an hour later Mom and Janie came into the great room, Janie smiled and jumped onto the couch next to me. I smiled back at her; her enthusiasm was always infectious.

"Hey honey." Mom said to me putting her laptop bag on the corner table, "Hi Mom." I replied gazing back at the flat screen "How was your day?" she asked in her concerned measured voice, I resisted rolling my eyes. "Fine." I said, not bothering to get into my dramatic day. Janie tugged on my arm standing up

"Katie lets go to the game room." She said her eyes bouncing up and down in anticipation. Why not? I could use a distraction from everything.

"Sure." I said standing up to "Wanna to bet?" I asked as we walked towards the hallway. She nodded "Bring it on! I can beat you at anything." She said and I couldn't help but giggle.

Two weeks blurred by, I would sometimes zone out unaware of what was happening around me. The only time I felt like myself was when I was with Tess or Janie, they forced that right out of me.

My life is exactly how it has always been prior to Brandon, so why did it seem colorless all of a sudden? What disturbed me the most was that there seemed to be no end in sight.

Brandon for one was going about his life as though I didn't exist anymore. I'd see him everyday but he kept his distance and he'd hardly gaze in my direction if he were close by. *He's only doing what you told him* the little voice

inside me would point out whenever I'd get upset about it.

Its true, I told him to stay away from me and he obliged, what else did I want?

"Katelyn?" JT said in exasperation and my gaze zeroed in on him "Don't forget about Saturday." He said and I nodded "I haven't forgotten." I said, Mom and Dad asked us to help out at one of the charity homes. They normally did the work themselves when they find the time but they'd also involve us. I loved taking part in it, and I loved everything the Gilbert Foundation has done.

"Tess, are you coming with us?" I asked Tess and JT shot her a look I couldn't understand. It looked as though they were hiding something, but it was probably some boyfriend/girlfriend thing they do. I still can't wrap my head around the fact that they're seeing each other. The great thing is that they both looked very happy, which was more than fine by me. "Uh...no, a cousin of mine is coming over this weekend, my parents would think its rude if I where to leave." She said.

I nodded, though I was bummed out, Tess normally went with us.

The bell rang and we all stood up, JT kissed Tess' forehead then walked away. I chuckled at her as we made our way to our lockers. "You've got it bad." I said and she smiled sheepishly "I know." She said "I just never thought he felt the same way, I hope someone's not playing a practical joke on me," she said. "I doubt he's that heartless." I said "Well I have art class, see you later." I added.

"Good day class." Mr. Anderson said after we all settled down and he removed a cover from a canvas to reveal a painting. "Today well be focusing on interpreting art. Debates can ensue on the meaning or message behind certain artwork." He said as he walked around the classroom, "Now I want you to take a good look at that painting and I want to hear what you can make of it." He said.

I looked at it myself, it looked very impressive and gallant but there was no authenticity to it; looking at it didn't inspire any emotion out of me. And that's what I want out of art, to connect to it emotionally. Mr. Anderson listened to the mixed opinions of the students then he called my name.

"Well its grand I'll give it that much, but to me it just looks like unorganized explosions of random energy, thus meaningless." I said and Mr. Anderson nodded then looked behind me and I tensed.

"Mr. Carter I see you shaking your head, you have anything to add?" he asked

"Certainly, I'll have to disagree with Ms. Gilbert, had the artist been more subtle with their technique, it wouldn't have translated as well." Brandon said and unlike the rest of the class I resisted turning to look at him too. "This painting is more abstract and requires one to look beyond the complex symbolism in order to decipher the true meaning of it," he added and I resisted rolling my eyes.

"But in some cases such as this one, what you see is what you get, honesty and simplicity get the message across. To an observer sometimes the connection is just not there, no matter how deep you try to look—" I added before Brandon cut me off.

"There is always meaning behind the mystery of a painting, sometimes things are not always what they seem." He said and Mr. Anderson halted our argument with a raised hand.

"Fair points made by both of you, and that's what we're talking about

people, different interpretations from different perspectives.” He said and the rest of the class looked back at him looking thoroughly entertained. He continued to listen to other students’ analysis. His voice faded into the background and I tried to calm my aggravated nerves. I knew that our heated debate had nothing to do with the damn painting; it was personal.

Feeling his gaze on me I turned to glare at him and found him watching me with a strange emotion in his grey eyes. We just stared each other down for a moment; it was the longest we’ve looked straight at each other for a while now. I felt my annoyance slip away the longer I stared at him, his own gaze softened a little and I looked away before I crumbled.

My focus turned back to Mr. Anderson, trying by all means to unsuccessfully avoid the ridiculously good-looking boy behind me. Story of my life these days.

## CHAPTER 18

“Are you ready?” JT asked, I nodded and he started his Maserati and pulled out off the circular driveway. I was excited to be doing some charity work today, I always felt good afterwards and the people there were awesome.

“Its too bad Tess couldn’t come with us, I know she loves this just as much as I do.” I said, and then frowned, Tess didn’t mention that her cousin would be visiting until that day in the cafeteria. “True.” He said.

JT surprised me when he turned into a pathway then cut off the engine. I looked at him questioningly “What are we doing here?” I asked and he smiled slyly.

“We’re just waiting for a friend.” He said and I threw my hands up “Well this friend of yours better not take long or were going to be late.” I said.

5 minutes later a black Audi convertible pulled up across from us, I stared at it in shock, there’s only one person I know who drives that car.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I breathed and JT checked his watch then chuckled “Right on time.” He said as Brandon got out of his car and walked towards us.

“Mom and Dad did not ask us to do anything, did they?” I asked knowingly as I watched Brandon take off his Ray-Ban aviators walking towards JT’s door.

“Nope.” He said and he opened the door and got out, I watched as they shared a comradely handshake and Brandon got in replacing JT. This was the ploy all along, getting Brandon alone with me where they know I wouldn’t try to escape.

This is exactly what I didn’t want; given the chance Brandon could sweet-talk me into anything, even forgetting that he broke my heart.

“Hello princess.” He said nonchalantly, I didn’t even reply as I reached for the doorknob but it was locked. I sat back on the chair, closing my eyes for a second.

“Brandon, let me out.” I said quietly, “I’m afraid I cant do that.” He said, JT walked over to my window and he rolled it down.

"Damn it JT, one of you better let me out of this damn car right now." I said more sharply "Relax will you, you and Carter are just going for a ride, you need to talk." He said. "Do I look like I want to talk!" I hissed.

"And if you weren't so stubborn we wouldn't be resorting to such extremes." He said. He was a traitor! Not so long ago he seemed determined to protect me from Brandon, what's changed?

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have a date with my girlfriend." He said then he nodded towards Brandon before he walked away. Of course there was no cousin, Tess was in this too, she was a traitor too!

"Tell Tess I'm mad at her too!" I called after JT but he ignored me. He got into Brandon's Audi and drove off. I folded my arms with a huff and groaned inwardly after taking a huge whiff of Brandon's scent. I turned my glare on him and a small smile tugged on the corners of his lips.

"I've always loved your temper." He said, "Oh Don't." I scoffed "So you and my brother are like friends now? You know I knew you'd get to him too." I said and he shook his head. "No were not, your brother is very head strong. We just have an understanding, were both on the same team." He said.

"Oh yeah? And what team is that?" I asked, still angry.

"It's called the we-want-Katelyn-happy club, you should join." He said his own voice clipped.

"No shit." I retorted and his jaw clenched as he watched me with frustrated sadness in his grey eyes. I felt a twinge of guilt, I knew I was being a bitch but I was not backing down.

"You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?" he asked with a low measured voice.

"No." I said more softly. He nodded starting the car "I figured, but like I said, I'm not easily deterred. Besides we have all afternoon." He said pulling out of the pathway and back onto the road.

"Alright, lets talk about what happened and what you think you saw." He said and I snorted, "What I think I saw? I'm pretty sure I saw you sticking your tongue down Adrianna's throat." I said.

"Would you just shut up and listen for one second!" he shouted his eyes flashing before he turned them back on the road. I clasped my mouth shut, stunned for a second. Brandon has never shouted at me before, he never had reason to.

He took a deep breath "Unfortunately you're not the only one who's on edge today princess, my patience is wearing thin." He said softly, his tone apologetic. I kept quiet causing him to briefly glance in my direction again before he continued.

"This would've happened way sooner, but your brother asked me to give you some space." He said with a grimace, indicating that he hadn't liked the idea at all. I thought back on the last two weeks, I thought he was done with me. Somehow knowing that he hadn't given up on me gave me slight pleasure.

"But I've just about had it with waiting, we're going to resolve this today." He said

"Are we going to your house?" I finally asked and he shook his head.

"I thought we both might need mutual territory." He said. There was a pause for a few minutes, with only music softly playing in the car.

"I've figured out the real root of the problem here. It's not even about my



supposed cheating.” He said, “You don’t trust me. You never did,” he added and I swallowed hard. “You just thought we both could live with that. I can’t say that I blame you...but I *really* hope I can change that.” He whispered.

I looked out the window; I knew he’d be able to peel off every last bit of my shell. A hot tear rolled down my cheek and I didn’t bother to wipe it away.

“Why are you doing this? Why not save yourself the trouble?” I asked, I certainly was not irreplaceable; I knew that. “Unfortunately I’m in way too deep to do that.” He said, feeling his gaze on me, I turned to look at him. I saw some of his vulnerability, which soothed my own. “I can’t let you go now princess, not when I’m falling in love with you.” He added.

We stopped by at a recreational park in the hills; we had our first ever official date here. We had a picnic and a really unforgettable time, I realized then just how crazy I was about him.

He opened the door for me and helped me out; I was still reeling from his earlier confession. I didn’t dare inquire further though out of some stupid fear that he’d take it back. We settled into a wooden bench.

“After you went to the bathroom and didn’t come back I went after you.” He continued his side of the story “I ran into Adrianna and she told me you were still in there, she dragged me down the corridor with the excuse that she wanted to talk to me,” he said then he shook his head. “She spent a couple of minutes blabbing about trivia things, I wanted to ditch her but she wouldn’t let me leave.” He added and I listened silently.

“Soon thereafter she received a text, which no doubt was from a friend, her entire demeanor changed. I didn’t understand why that was until she came onto me and you appeared seconds later.” He said and I gasped, suddenly everything made sense.

“Brea. Brea sent that text.” I whispered, still shocked, but it made perfect sense. Her confidence, she knew I’d find them at the right place at the right time because they both orchestrated it perfectly. Brandon raised an eyebrow in confusion and I realized that we were both played.

“I was with her in the bathroom, that’s why I took so long.” I said “She told me that you and Adrianna have been seeing each other behind my back and that she saw you two kissing.” I said. His brows furrowed, as it dawned on him too.

“Adrianna kept me distracted while Brea planted a seed of doubt in your head.” He said “Then she sent you to me knowing very well that what you’d find will confirm what she’s been telling you.” He added and I could hear the disgust and anger in his tone.

“I didn’t know what to believe...I was so heartbroken.” I said and my voice broke and he took me into his arms. I leaned my head against his shoulder and he gently swept my hair out of my face.

“I know; I don’t blame you. It all comes back to what I’ve been saying; you didn’t trust me. If you did, you would’ve went to look for me back in the auditorium.” He said “Honest to God Katelyn, where would I find the time to see Adrianna when I’m constantly following you around like a lovesick puppy?” he said.

I sniffed back the tears that were threatening to spill, “I know, that was my initial thought too.” I said and he gave me a look “Was it now?” he asked in mock

offense. I punched his arm playfully "You know that's not what I meant." I said and he shrugged "Actually everybody knows I'm crazy about you, except you." He said and I nodded sadly to myself.

"What do we do now?" I asked and he looked forward.

"Well for one I'd like my princess back." He said with a measured and careful voice, I smiled realizing that I'm not the only one with moments of doubt. I went back into his arms and he held me tighter.

"I'm not going to ask you to trust me, I realize that I have to earn that and I'm willing to do that." He said softly.

We sat at the park for a while and the sun was starting to go down "Lets get out of here." I said and he looked at me questioningly "And go where? Should I take you home?" he asked and I shook my head, "Your house." I said; I didn't know why I wanted to go there, I guess I missed the place, just like I missed the person living in it. After a moment of apprehension he agreed and we stood up.

## CHAPTER 19

His house was empty when we got there, except for a housekeeper; who welcomed us at the entrance hall before walking away after a parting smile.

"Where's your family?" I asked as we went into the great room, "They went away to a ski resort for the weekend." He said, "They wanted me to come with but I refused, I wasn't up for it." He said and I frowned.

"You're here alone?" I asked, even though that was quite obvious, he must've caught what I meant because he chuckled warily.

"I'm used to it." He said with a shrug "When I was younger I used to remain with the staff whenever Dad went on a business trip." He added; I shook my head, imagining how that must've felt like.

"You must've been lonely sometimes." I said and he dismissed it with his hand "Would you like something?" he asked walking over to the kitchen island.

"That mean milkshake you make, I miss it." I said and he chuckled, "Coming right up, I'll be right back okay?" he asked "Sure." I said then he disappeared into what I presumed was the pantry.

I stood up and walked around the great room then found myself going up the staircase towards his bedroom. I opened the door and walked inside, for a moment I felt like I was intruding then remembered that I'd been in here a couple of times before.

I walked over to his queen-sized bed where his jacket lay, I picked it up and pressed it to my face and inhaled. I smiled at the thought that I looked like a stalker; I put it down and sank to the edge of the bed. I ran my hand over the soft duvet remembering all the make-out sessions we've had on this very bed. There's no denying that I want Brandon physically or is that my raging hormones talking? Once again I thought back to that night in his tent.

The door opened and I saw Brandon come in with a glass of milkshake, I smiled "I thought you bailed out on me," he teased as he walked over to me. He

crouched down in front of me and gave me the glass; I took it and placed it on the nightstand. His brows furrowed in confusion, I took a deep breath.

"Remember that night you said you'd wait for me?" I asked and he cocked his head to the side "I'm ready." I whispered and I watched his grey eyes widen then blink a few times. For once I took Brandon Carter off guard, hell I even took myself off guard but this is what I want. If I'm ever going to lose my virginity I want it to be to him. He claims I don't trust him, but giving myself to him this way is the biggest act of trust I can think of.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked looking at me over his long lashes, his usually smooth and confident voice sounded unsure and conflicted. I put both my hands on the side of his face forcing him to get up "Yes." I said. He looked down at me for a while, his eyes showing his inner battle. I smiled inwardly; he really does love me.

"If we do this and you end up resenting me for pushing you Katelyn, I can never forgive myself." He said running a hand through his golden locks. I shook my head, he didn't push me this is my idea. "That won't happen, I want this, I want you." I said and after a momentary pause he reached out and encircled my waist, lifting me off his bed. I put my arms around his neck and kissed him. He slowly lowered us both on the bed, not breaking contact. He continued his assault until all I could smell and feel was him; his lips halted on the crook of my neck and he looked up at me. His eyes were molten grey, absolutely breathtaking.

"You sure you want this?" he asked and I nodded then he rolled off me "What are you doing?" I asked dumbfounded. "I'm looking for protection." He said opening his nightstand drawer. "You have condoms?" I asked my voice a little higher than I would've liked, it's like a bucket of ice cold water had been poured on top of me. Suddenly what I was about to do became very real.

Brandon glanced at me then "I think they gave them to us in health class about a week ago." He said his brows furrowing "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." I said looking down "Can you give me a minute?" I asked getting off the bed "Sure, take your time." He said with a frown of concern and I grabbed my handbag and walked into this bathroom shutting the door behind me. I quickly fished for my phone with trembling hands. *Get a grip Katie!* The little voice in me scorned, as I pressed the speed dial for Tess.

"Hey you." Her voice came through "Hey Tess, I need a favor. If my parents or JT call tell them I'm with you having a sleepover." I said keeping my voice low and she paused. "Uh okay, where are you really? Your voice sounds shaky, are you okay?" she asked sounding more alarmed.

"I'm fine, I'm in Brandon's bathroom." I said and she gasped theatrically "Oh my God, you're going to do it aren't you?" she asked.

"Yeah and I'm freaking out about it, I mean it was my idea and all—"

"Whoa slow down, is this what you really want?" she asked, "Despite the fact that I'm on the verge of a nervous breakdown in his bathroom, yeah I want to do this." I said sitting on top of the closed toilet seat.

"Then go for it, just take deep breaths, it passes I swear, I was nervous too with JT—" she said before I cut her off "Ew Tess, I don't want that image in my head." I said; I wasn't tolerating it tonight.

"Okay, okay, just relax and follow his lead, I'm sure he knows what he's doing." She said, "I'll cover for you, promise." She added "Okay." I said then we

said our goodbyes. I stood up and I looked at myself in the mirror, giving myself a quick pep talk. I really did want this, and I didn't want to chicken out now.

I discarded my lite jacket and my shoes; I let my hair down, raking my hands through it. I applied a small amount of lip-gloss. After another deep breath I walked back out.

I stopped dead at the sight of his room; it was darkened a little except for the soft light from the wall panels and the candles on each corner of the room. It looked very romantic and it soothed my wrecked nerves. Brandon had discarded only his shirt and he was lying down with his arms crossed behind his head staring at the ceiling. He looked almost unreal.

He saw me and sat up "Wow." I said referring to his room; he smiled sheepishly "Over the top? I thought it might make it special." He said, unsure of himself.

"This is special alright." I said, he held out his hand and I realized that I haven't made any move forward. He took my hands in his when I reached him

"God princess, you're shaking." He said then he frowned "You don't have do this you know." He said and I sighed.

"I know." I said gently pushing at his chest forcing him to lie back down on the pillows "But I want to." I said climbing on top of him this time. I kissed him and for a short while he lay there letting me do my thing, but I didn't know what to do with him.

He put me out of my misery when he flipped me onto my back again; he looked into my eyes giving me another chance to stop him. I nodded, giving him the go ahead and he began to undress me.

My eyes fluttered open and I smiled as I felt Brandon's lips lightly brush my earlobe "And she's back." He whispered, tightening his hold on me and I chuckled sheepishly "Did I pass out?" I asked and he smiled. "You didn't pass out, you just simply fell asleep, sleeping beauty." He said and I snorted.

I remember him holding me afterwards; I must've drifted off to sleep then.

"Are you okay? Did I hurt you?" he asked, his tone more solemn. "No." I whispered, "It was amazing, you were amazing." I said and he smiled. After the initial discomfort it was indescribable, nothing could've prepared me for it. I connected with Brandon on a level I never thought possible and I knew my fate and feelings for this boy were sealed. I then remembered something,

"You said you love me," I said in quiet elation and he raised an eyebrow "But you already knew that." He said and I grinned, "Did *you* know?" I asked "What?"

"I love you too." I whispered and he kissed me briefly.

"What time is it?" I asked and he frowned then glanced at the clock on his side "Just after 10, I should probably take you home and cook up a very good excuse why you're so late." He said.

"I can't go home." I said, "I'm having a sleep over at Tess' house." I said and he smiled sinfully, "Aren't you a bad girl?" he said chucking. He pushed the covers away from me "Does that mean I have you all to myself?" he asked placing kisses on my bare stomach "All night?"

"Basically yes." I said as my insides did somersaults, my eyes widened as it dawned on me that he meant we'd do it all night. I grabbed his head stopping his scorching trail up my ribcage. "But I'm hungry." I added and he chuckled as he

lifted his head "I didn't feed you did I? How inhospitable of me." he said. I smiled thinking *how can I not love him when he's like that?*

"Come on then, lets fix you a late night snack." He said.

"And he makes a mean sandwich as well." I pronounced after swallowing, he chuckled finishing his own. "Glad you like it," He said then he reached over and wiped some mayo off the corner of my mouth and he licked his thumb making me chuckle. He only had on a pair of sweat pants, and I wore his robe.

"Oh Brandon, you couldn't put on a shirt?" I asked with mock disapproval, and he gave me his megawatt smile.

"Why should I when you're enjoying the view?" He said and I smiled, that was undeniable, he had an impeccable body even for a teenager and I knew it was due to his rigorous training and sporting activities.

He fell quiet for a short while then he touched my necklace, I held his wrist trying to understand what he was trying to do.

"This is very beautiful." He said, "Do you believe in magic Katelyn?" he asked too solemnly for me to laugh at his ridiculous question.

"Well if you asked me if I believed in the Easter bunny, I'd say no." I said and he looked at me "What if I told you it exists and that we can wield it?" he said and this time I did chuckle "I'd say you're crazy." I said.

"Come on Katelyn, you see miraculous things happen all the time, don't you ever wonder how they come about?" he asked "Psychics? Magicians?"

"What are you saying?" I asked, alarmed now. "Don't freak out." He said, "Why would I freak out?" I asked and then I saw his moonstone ring glow then I jumped off my barstool with a yelp when our empty plates floated from the counter into the sink.

With wide eyes I looked from the sink to him to his glowing ring "That did not just happen." I breathed touching my forehead. "That's what I was trying to tell you." He said reaching out to me but I instinctively backed away. He dropped his hands and he looked down for a moment "That's impossible. What are you?" I whispered, backing further away.

My subconscious still knew that this was the boy I loved but every bit of my instincts told me to run. Brandon stood up and I broke off into a run only to be halted by an invisible wall, I couldn't go anywhere.

"Brandon?" I shrieked, I looked towards him and he flashed in front of me with unnatural speed and I screamed my surprise. "Hey shh shh, I'm still me, I'm not going to hurt you, relax." He said holding my face in both his hands. His familiar touch broke through the fear and confusion.

"Are you some kind of supernatural?" I chocked out and he shook his head "No, I'm as human as can be, the only supernatural thing here is my ring, it contains the power not me, I just control it in some sort of telekinesis." He said, I felt myself sway a little and he picked me up in his arms and put me on the couch.

"Are you okay?" he asked sweeping my hair out of my face and I shook my head. My eyes widened again "When you said we..."

He paused "I meant you and me." he said and I shook my head again, frantically "No, I-I cant do what you just did right there." I said and he nodded. "You can, you're just not aware of it," He said then he pointed at my necklace, "That necklace of yours has the same power." He added. Oh hell no.

## CHAPTER 20

"How can you be so sure? This is just a mere necklace," I said and he shook his head, "Feel that." He said and we both fell silent.

Suddenly a very familiar warm sensation went through me and I gaped at him, remembering now. It's the same feeling I got that first day he came into art class, it was from him. "You remember that?" he asked, I swallowed hard and nodded.

"That's how I knew you were like me, my uncle told me that you get that feeling only when you're near someone who possesses the same power." He said, "We can feel and smell each other's essence." He added. It made sense now why his scent was so strong to me and how he was able to find me that day in the forest. I ran my hand through my mussed hair, what he's telling me was not quite sinking in well. "And your uncle, how does he know this?" I asked.

"He gave me this ring." He said and I was starting to notice a pattern here. "My Mom gave me this necklace, she said its been in her family for generations." I said, "How could she not tell me this?" I said more to myself.

"Maybe even she was not aware of its power, my uncle said there are some who go through life never knowing." He said. Had I not met him, I would've been one of them. "Or maybe she did and she just wanted to protect you, there are dangers to wielding this power." He said with a frown.

"How come I can't do what you did," I asked, I was aware now.

He smiled "Your ability to control your necklace has to be triggered, either through self preservation, fear or sheer force of will." He said.

"What triggered your own?" I asked "I willed myself to, my uncle helped me." he said "The one you like hiking with?" I asked and he nodded.

"We're normally linked to the person who passes the power onto us." He said and I frowned "You mean I'm linked to my Mom, how? Like emotionally?" I asked and he nodded again "How you feel will affect her and visa versa." He said then suddenly I remembered that day I came home from the dance and found her looking lonely on the couch. I was able to hold it together until I saw her and I started crying.

I fell silent for a while trying to process everything "I know it's a lot to take in." he said stroking a strand of my hair, "No kidding." I said meekly.

"There's one more thing." He said and I looked at him "These things are our lifeline, we can never take them off even if we try or we die." He said.

After a long shower in my room I came down the stairs with a mission to get some answers. I knew Mom had them. I only found Dad on the couch reading his Sunday newspaper, he looked up from it and smiled.

"Hey angel." He said "Hi Dad, where's Mom?" I asked, "She just went outside." He said and just then Mom entered the great room from the back.

"Hi sweetie, how was your sleepover?" she asked and I paused a little "It was great. Fun." I said and she nodded as she settled next to Dad.

I decided to cut to the chase, not bothering to sit down "Though the weirdest thing happened to me earlier in the day, I was told that I can wield some magic with my necklace." I said and I watched them both tense. This is

interesting.

Mom looked at Dad with wide eyes and I knew I was right. She knew the necklace's power and decided to keep me in the dark and somehow Dad's in on it too.

"Who told you that?" Dad asked with an eerie calm voice and I suddenly felt like I shouldn't mention Brandon "Some fortune teller at the pier, at first I didn't think much of it but judging from both your reactions there's some truth to it." I said then looked at Mom "So why don't you tell me the truth?" I asked, feeling anger bubble up inside of me. Mom paused then stood up facing me, her green eyes wary.

"It's true, your necklace contains magic you can wield once you come into your full powers, but there's a chance that might not happen." She said, "I didn't tell you because I wanted to protect you sweetie." She added suddenly looking a little pale. I threw my arms up.

"By keeping something like this from me? How is that protecting me Mom!" I was almost shouting now. "Watch your tone Katelyn," Dad admonished, his tone terse. "You knew about this too Dad and neither of you thought to tell me, I had a right to know!" I said more quietly.

I saw Mom reel and Dad jumped off his seat to steady her "Calm down angel!" Dad mildly shouted at me now, which shocked me until I remembered what Brandon said to me.

*We're normally linked to the person who passes the power onto us.*

"Mom?" I asked hovering over her too, my initial anger forgotten. She held up her hand "I'm fine." She said to both of us but neither of us took her word for it.

"What's going on here?" we all looked up to see JT standing a few feet away, watching us with a look of worry.

"Let's go outside." Dad said to JT then he kissed Mom's forehead, "You, better watch yourself angel." He said to me "You do something like that again I'm grounding you for the rest of your life." He added and I nodded then he stood up and JT followed him out the glass doors with confusion.

I looked back to Mom, some color was returning to her cheeks "Can I get you anything?" I asked "Water." She said and I fetched it quickly, feeling a little guilty, I didn't know what I was doing to her in my tirade.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sweetie but I'd be lying if I said I regret it," She said then she told me some things Brandon already covered last night.

"You can't blame me for trying to spare you all of this." She said "That necklace nearly killed me once." She added and my eyebrows shot up.

"Its powers are not to be wielded carelessly." She added.

"How did you come about controlling yours?" I asked and her gaze narrowed "Mine were triggered by fear, your father was in grave danger." She said with a tone what said she wasn't going to elaborate; I decided to let it go.

"Be careful sweetie, I don't want anything to happen to you." She said and I hugged her as a sign of peace. "I know Mom, I'm sorry about that, it's just all very—" she stopped me with a small smile "I know."

I sat with Brandon on the floor of his bedroom; facing each other. He had his arms locked around my waist and my legs were on both sides of him. I was

feeling much better now that I was with him.

"How are you feeling?" he asked resting his forehead against mine, I breathed out

"I've had better Sundays." I said and he smiled apologetically.

"I confronted my parents about my necklace." I asked and he lifted his head in surprise "You did? How did it go?" he asked and I grimaced "Not so well, I even made my Mom sick." I said, "That's not your fault." He said and I shrugged.

"It sure felt like it, but she ended up telling me everything. Which put things into perspective." I said and he gave me a questioning look.

"I want to wield my powers too." I said and his eyebrows shot up "Help me." I added and he paused for a moment frowning. "Katelyn maybe that's not such a good idea, your Mom was right to try and protect you." He said "I only told you because I didn't want to keep this a secret from you, but unfortunately that meant you knowing about yourself too." He added.

"And I'm glad you did, I'm going to be fine, I just want do it too, please." I beseeched and he shook his head, resolved.

I pouted, "If you don't help me, I'm not going to let you touch me again." I said and he raised an eyebrow at me then his hand went into my hair and he grabbed the back of my head tilting it back.

"Are you blackmailing me?" he asked "That's a cheap shot princess." He added.

"You've left me no choice Eddie." I murmured and he let me go. He buried his head in the crook of my neck "You smell heavenly, I could just eat you up." He said with a gentle bite to my shoulder. I stifled a giggle because it tingled a little and I pulled back the strap of my tank top.

"Help me and you can." I said boldly and he raised an eyebrow then rolled his eyes "Why resort to such devious means? Why not flutter your pretty blue eyes at me, I'm pretty sure that'll be just as effective." He said and I smiled.

"You don't say?" I said then did just that "Will you pretty please help me?" I asked and he sighed, "You're not going to let this go, are you?" he said and I shook my head "Fine." He said.

"Let's try to trigger them by will." He said then he took my hands in his and told me to close my eyes. When I did he told me to calm myself and concentrate deep inside me.

"Focus on moving something or yourself, but will it with your mind." He said, I closed my eyes tighter and tried to make the guitar by his desk move. When I felt nothing out of the ordinary I opened my eyes and groaned. "It's not working." I grumbled, "Try again, harder." He said his own eyes still closed, "You have to believe you can do it first, your subconscious still refuses to believe in the existence of magic, break through that wall first." He added.

I did it again, but nothing worked. He opened his eyes "Can't you trigger them for me, with your own or something?" I asked and he shook his head.

"You have to do it yourself. And willing it out of you won't work" He said then he frowned and stood up. I watched as he went to his desk; he looked for something in there and walked back holding a wooden handle.

He sat down and flipped it, revealing a small dagger; my eyes widened "What are you doing?" I asked with a high-pitched voice.

"You love me don't you princess?" he asked and I looked at him then at the knife, starting to panic "Yes, you know that, why are you even asking that?" I said



quickly and he lightly stabbed his neck with the sharp point, "Brandon!" I screamed in horror, I instinctively reached out to him but was stopped by that invisible wall, my eyes widened as I realized that he's doing this on purpose.

*Mine were triggered by fear; your father was in grave danger*

"Brandon, stop this!" I shouted at him "Break through the shield Katelyn." He said then he flinched running the blade slowly down his neck opening the cut a bit more. I screamed when more blood pooled to his shirt, hot tears streamed down my face and a strange feeling coursed through me, it felt like adrenaline, only supercharged. I banged my hands at the wall and it was gone.

"Oh my God Brandon." I cried; taking the dagger from him and throwing it aside, my hands were covered by his blood trying to figure out how to help him. "We have to get you to a hospital." I tried to stand up.

"No Katelyn, its okay, I'm fine." He said stopping me and I looked at him

"What do you mean you're fine, you're bleeding," I wailed but was silenced when I watched the wound slowly close, then it was completely gone. I gaped at him, lost for words.

"We can heal ourselves, among other things." He explained slowly, he means to say he was never in any real danger. Anger exploded inside me and I repeatedly pushed at him "You crazy, reckless bastard!" I shouted at him and then jumped to my feet walking away "Come on Katelyn, don't be like that." He said grabbing my arm. I snapped and turned sharply to slap him across the face.

"Okay, I deserved that." He said slowly turning back to face me "It was the only way." He added. "The only way!" I scoffed "I was scared for your life." I added. He smiled causing me to look at him dumbfounded "True and that was effective." He said, "Katelyn, you did it." He added as if I was missing something vitally important.

"I did it?" I asked, testing the words as though they were foreign and he nodded excitedly. I gasped as I realized what I did "Oh my God! I did it!" I beamed then I ran to him throwing myself at him, he caught me in his arms and he laughed as I knocked him down, my earlier outburst forgotten.

\* \* \*

## CHAPTER 21

*One year later...*

It's been almost a week since Brandon's graduation; it was bittersweet. I'd miss having him around school, just when it was starting to seem less like torture. He was off to college and my best friend and I were finally going to be seniors next semester.

"How does it feel?" Tess asked over the phone "You're finally going to join the my-boyfriend-is-in-college club." She added. JT went to Stanford a year ago, he made an effort to visit as much as he could.

I sighed "It cant be that bad, is it?" I asked and she chuckled "No it's not that bad, I just miss him sometimes, besides he's not thousands of miles away." She added and I paused. "Okay, what's with the pause?" she asked.

"I don't know, its *my* boyfriend, he's been a little offish lately." I said with a frown I knew she could hear in my voice. "Hey, he's just a little busy, you know going to college and stuff." She said, "Yeah, I know." I said.

"Where did he say he's going?" she asked, "I think he's still weighing his options, he got a few scholarships from impressive varsities." I said, JT also had the same dilemma but he ended up taking Stanford because it was closer to home. But mostly I knew he did because of Tess.

"Varsities that are very far away." She finished for me; I bit my nail "Am I selfish for worrying about that?" I asked and she reassured me the only way Tess knows how, sometimes talking to her is my saving grace.

"Where would I be without you huh?" I asked and she laughed "Lost in Narnia." She teased and I chuckled "I have to go, chat later." I said then hung up.

I got dressed quickly; I was meeting Brandon at the beach today. When I got there, it was a little deserted; there were only a few people. Brandon was already there, waiting for me. I stopped a little to look at him; he was walking along the shore barefoot, his pants were rolled up to his shins. He seemed to be staring at the ocean deep in thought. He must've heard me approaching because he pivoted then smiled.

I smiled and he caught me in his arms and kissed me, I made a disapproving sound when he broke the kiss. "Hush up or you're going in the water," he said and I chuckled "Only if you'll get in with me." I said and he smiled putting his arm around my shoulders. And we continued his stroll along the shore.

We spent hours there, time flew by as we talked, played, splashed each other with water and everything in between.

We finally caught a moments rest when we sat on a sea rock by the beach. I looked at Brandon and he seemed to be watching something very closely. I followed his gaze and found two kids playing with a boomerang.

Sensing my confusion he smiled still looking at them "Its interesting, that no matter how hard you throw a boomerang, it always comes back to you." He said with an undercurrent to his tone. Why did it unsettle me?

He looked at me then "That's me with you princess." He added and we stared at each other for a long while. He broke the connection when he turned his grey gaze back to the sea.

"I've decided to go to Yale." He said and I paused for a moment not sure I

heard him right then I ran my hand through my hair. Yale was in Connecticut, "You're going back home." I whispered looking down, feeling surprisingly steady maybe because he's still here.

"And your family?" I asked, "They're moving too." He said and my eyebrows shot up "Because of you? Is this even about you wanting to go to Yale?" I asked and he shook his head. "They gave me the option of staying in California—" He said "But you chose to go." I finished for him with a meek voice. "Why?"

"Listen to me Katelyn." He said putting his hands on both sides of my face "This is for your sake, for both our sakes." He added.

"This thing between us is getting more intense by the day. That's not necessarily a bad thing but we both still have so much to learn." He said then he swept my hair over my shoulder. "You're young and very beautiful princess, you have your whole life ahead of you, a life you haven't started living as yet. You deserve a chance to see and experience all that life has to offer without anything or anyone holding you down." He added and my eyes closed for a millisecond. I understood what he meant and a part of me agreed with him, but the thought of not being with him was crushing.

"You think that's what this will lead to?" I asked, my voice thick with emotion. "There's no telling for sure but I don't see how it couldn't." He said and I nodded sadly because even I could see it, both of us putting our individual goals and independence on hold in order to make our relationship work. My wanting him to stay here was a testament of that, I shouldn't be holding him back from going anywhere he wants, he is only 19.

Tears fell from my eyes as realized that I have to let him go, that we have to let each other go. Both of us couldn't deny that was the best way for us.

"Hey." He said softly wiping away my tears "I can stay—" I shook my head "I want you to go," I said smiling sadly "I want those things for you too silly. You're young and very handsome." I said repeating his words to him "Go and conquer the world, you deserve it." I whispered.

"I love you, you know that don't you?" he asked kissing my forehead, I nodded "Yeah, I do." I breathed. "When are you leaving?" I asked. "The day after tomorrow." He said and I nodded. "I wish I could say goodbye to your family but that's not such a good idea for me, give Connie a kiss for me, tell her I'm sorry" I said and he nodded "I will." He said resting his forehead against mine. The fact that this was goodbye was surreal. "Let's promise each other something." He said then paused "I think I found my other half in you, if that's true and we're meant to be together, nothing will stop that from happening. We'll end up together." He said and I smiled, I would like nothing more than to believe in that. That I'm destined to be with him despite the odds.

"We'll find our way back to each other." He added "Like the boomerang?" I chuckled sadly "Like the boomerang." He repeated. He hugged me so tightly that I found it hard to breathe a little "Will I ever see you again?" I wailed.

"If I'm right about us, definitely." He murmured and I nodded "Promise." I whispered.

He kissed me and all to soon he let me go and stood up.

"Princess." He said then kissed my hand, bowing his head like I'm actual royalty, it was almost my undoing.

He began walking away after mouthing I love you, I watched him until he was out of sight. I turned my gaze back to the impending sunset and for once it felt as

though the sun wont rise in my world for a very long time.

I checked the time and stood up myself, I had to head back home before everyone started worrying. With one last look at the blue horizon I turned and walked away.

“Katelyn!” I heard Mom call from the house and I went through the glass doors into the great room. I found her in the kitchen. “Hey sweetie, this came for you today.” She said pointing to the package on the counter and my eyebrows shot up. I walked towards the island and grabbed it shaking it a little. I unwrapped it and opened the box; I froze for a second.

“What is it?” Mom asked and with numb hands I took out the blue boomerang inside and held it up. She looked between it and me in confusion but I didn’t pay her any attention. My hand ran over the softwood and I found *KMG + BEC* engraved into it. I picked up the handwritten note in the box and read it,

In honor of pretty blue eyes and promises  
I love you,  
Brandon.

“Who is it from?” Mom asked, “Its from Brandon.” I said my voice sounding choked. It’s been four days since we said goodbye at the beach, I’ve done a very good job at convincing myself that I was fine. Seeing this now felt like I was reliving all those emotions again.

“Oh, when is he coming back?” She asked and I realized I only told them that he went out of town. “He’s never coming back Mom.” I whispered my voice breaking and she immediately walked over to me and held me. I succumbed to the pain I’ve learned to tuck away so well.

\* \* \*

If you enjoyed reading my book please send me a quick message via the Feedback link on my obooko.com download page. I will be delighted to hear from you.

Coming soon:

*The Promise: Fulfilled*

*Please note: This is a free digital edition from [www.obooko.com](http://www.obooko.com). If you paid for this e-book it will be an illegal, pirated copy so please advise the author and obooko. We also recommend you return to the retailer and demand an immediate refund.*