



**Effortless**  
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Summary: A lot can happen in a year. You grow, you change, you learn from your mistakes. And Kiera had made a lot of mistakes to learn from. But she had learned, and she was determined to never cause a man pain again, especially the amazing man who currently held her heart. But life offers new challenges for every relationship, and when Kiera's love is put to the ultimate test, will it come out the other side unscathed? Love is easy...trust is hard.

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Many thanks to all of you who have supported my writing and asked for copies. Thank you so much for your encouragement, as it means the world to me. I hope you get as much from reading this as I did from writing it.

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language, and sexual situations. It is intended for adult readers.

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# Chapter 1

## **My Boyfriend, the Rock Star**

According to the channel four weatherman, it was the hottest summer on record in Seattle. Since I'd only been here a little over a year, I took the kind man's word for it. As I was smashed into and bumped up against, I felt that heat in the skin of every person that touched me. It was a little revolting to have strange people rubbing up against my body. It was even more revolting when some of those strangers decided that being crammed together in a group like we were, gave them the freedom to invade my personal space. I'd smacked more hands off of my butt in this one afternoon than in the entire time I'd been at Pete's bar.

Sweat poured down the back of my t-shirt and I momentarily cursed my fashion choice. As I glanced up at the cloudless, azure sky, the mid-day sun hit me square in the eye, blinding me. I rolled up the short sleeves of my black-as-night shirt, then went to work tying a knot above my bellybutton, just like MaryAnn from Gilligan's island.

But then I smiled, remembering why I was wearing it and what I was doing in this crowd of sweaty bodies. As I stared past the few rows of glistening people in front of me to an empty stage, a nervous energy flooded into me. Not for me. No, for my boyfriend. Today was his big day. Today was his band's big day and I bounced a little on my feet as I waited for him to bound up onto that stage. I knew that at any moment he was going to rush to that microphone and the awaiting crowd was going to scream ear-splittingly loud.

I couldn't wait.

Hands next to me grabbed my bare arms. "Can you believe it, Kiera? Our boys are playing Bumbershoot!"

I looked over at my best friend, my coworker and my confidante—Jenny. Her face didn't have sweat pouring down it like mine and she only looked gloriously dewy, but the sparkle lighting up her eyes was exactly like mine. Her boyfriend was playing the Seattle Music Festival for the first time too.

Squealing a little in my growing eagerness, I clutched her arms back. "I know! I can't believe Matt actually got them booked here." I shook my head, impressed that my boyfriend was playing in the same venue that Bob Dylan was playing on later tonight. Hole and Mary J. Blige were playing in the next couple of days.

Jenny looked over when some stranger ran into her; he seemed completely stoned. Glancing back at me, her blonde ponytail lightly flicking my face, she shrugged. "Evan says he worked really hard to get them this spot. And it's prime! Saturday afternoon on a perfect summer day, smashed right in-between two great acts. It doesn't get any better than that."

She tilted her head up to the sky, the rays of the sun glinting off the white lettering on her matching black t-shirt, a t-shirt glorifying the full name of our favorite band—*Douchebags*—although, they shortened it to D-Bags, for marketing purposes.

I nodded when her face returned to mine. "Oh, I know, Kellan said he—"

A sudden eruption of sound disrupted my conversation and my eyes automatically darted to the stage. Smiling broadly, I watched what had the getting-raucous crowd's complete attention. Our D-Bags had finally decided to grace the crowd with their presence.

The assemblage before the outdoor stage started jumping and hollering as Matt and Griffin hopped on stage first. Matt was his normal, contained self, acknowledging the fan fest with a small smile and a slight wave. He quietly walked to his microphone and strapped on his guitar. I hollered for him, but it was a mess of noise and people around me and the guitarist didn't hear my voice. His light blue eyes scanned the crowd nervously as he adjusted the strap on his shoulder.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Griffin, his attention-seeking, horn dog of a cousin, ran up and down the front of the stage, smacking people's hands and pumping his fist in the air. His pale eyes scanned the crowd, and even though I wasn't yelling for him, he actually did hear me. Spotting Jenny and I back a ways from the front, he pointed at us. Then he lifted his fingers up to his mouth in a V position and did suggestive things with his tongue that made my cheeks flame hotter than the steamy sunshine I was standing in. I immediately looked away.

Several people around Jenny and I laughed and looked at us. My embarrassment tripled. Jenny beside me saucily exclaimed, "Ewww, Griffin!" then started laughing with the crowd. I shook my head, wishing my sister, Anna, hadn't been at her photo shoot for the Hooters calendar today, so she could, maybe, attempt to keep her pseudo-boyfriend in line.

Evan had come up during the middle of that display, and seeing Griffin sexually harass us, he looked over our way. He smiled and waved, blowing a kiss to Jenny. She snatched it in the air and blew him one back. His warmhearted smile got even bigger, but once he'd acknowledged us, he twisted to take in where he was, and his dark eyes seemed awed. I laughed at the look, happy that the good-spirited man was taking a second to enjoy his success.

Then the scream got so loud my ears started ringing. I actually half-closed my eyes it was so painful. The girls right next to me, looking all of fourteen, started clutching each other and chanting, "Oh my God, there he is. Oh my God, he's so hot. Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!"

I grinned and shook my head, amazed and amused at how my rocker boyfriend could affect people. Of course, I completely understood. Lord knows he had completely affected me in the beginning. Still did, honestly. Even just watching him confidently strut onto the stage, the stage he owned with every fiber of his being, my body tingled for him.

Kellan walked up to his microphone slowly. Or maybe it was a regular pace and my mind was just on the slow-motion button. Whatever the reason, it seemed to take him forever to get to where he was headed. He had one hand up, waving to the mass of people clamoring for him and he ran the other back through his thick, bed-head hair. The heat and

sweat made the sandy-brown mess stick out even more crazily and he looked just completely edible.

I bit my lip as he finished his saunter to his mic stand. He scanned the crowd as he adjusted the height on it. I knew from experience just what the front row was feeling as those midnight-blue bedroom eyes washed over them. He had a way of looking at you that made you feel like no one else existed in the world, even if a crowd was around you. Add that to the sexy half-smile on his face, and you got a man who could ignite you with just a glance. He was igniting me now, and he hadn't even spotted me yet.

As his face turned away, hopefully looking for me out in these masses, I studied his jaw line—strong, masculine, so freakin' sexy it hurt. The girls behind me seemed to think so, too. From amongst the screaming, I clearly heard, "*That* is going home with me tonight," and, "God, that man is completely fuckable." I resisted the urge to turn and tell them that he was taken, keeping my gaze focused on him instead. I shouldn't be jealous or irritated by fans, but their comments were a little less cute than the fourteen-year-old's.

As Kellan's eyes finished with one half of the crowd, they swung over my way. Like magic, he spotted Jenny and me instantly. She waved then whistled with her fingers in her mouth. I flushed and smiled as those amazingly intense eyes locked onto mine. He nodded at me and mouthed, "I love you."

The stupid girls behind me started moaning that he'd said it to them. I again ignored the desire to acknowledge that I knew him and to tell them that he was mine. It wouldn't change their feelings towards him one tiny little bit and I'd only end up opening myself to endless questions about our personal life. Questions I did not want to talk about with complete and total strangers. I'd gotten enough of that at school before Kellan and I had even gotten together.

Instead, I discreetly mouthed that I love him too and gave him a couple of thumbs up. He laughed at my move and shook his head, clearly confident that he'd completely kick ass on stage. And he would. If anything, Kellan had been preparing himself for a moment like this for years now, playing small bars and clubs down in L.A. and then up here,

after his parents had died. He'd sort of been preparing for this his whole life.

Slinging a guitar over his shoulder, he wrapped his hand around the microphone. The screams intensified again when it became obvious that he was going to speak. Over the sound system, I heard his warm laugh, then, "Hello, Seattle!" The girls around me jumped and screamed his name. I laughed and tried to move away from some of the more revved up girls, although, with nowhere to go, I only ended up bumping into a couple of guys in front of me.

Muttering apologies when they glared back at me, Kellan's voice hit me again. "We're the D-Bags...in case you didn't know..." another long screaming session, "...and we've got something for you...if you want it."

He raised an eyebrow after he said that, eyeing some of the women up front a little too suggestively for my taste. But, I knew it was an act. While his face clearly said, *screw me later*, that wasn't what was in his heart. I was in his heart. Heck, I was tattooed over his heart. I smiled, knowing that not one single woman here was aware of that fact. Well, besides Jenny, anyway.

He held up a finger to quiet the crowd. They surprisingly did back off, a little bit. "Do you want it?" he asked suggestively. The crowd loudly indicated that they did. Jenny was hollering her answer through her hands, so I joined in.

I noticed Matt shaking his head, smiling as he flexed his hand. Evan was now sitting in front of his drums, moving his body to an unheard beat and spinning a stick in his hands. As Kellan eyed the crowd, I watched Griffin try to get a couple of girls to lift their shirts. I didn't keep looking to see if they did.

Kellan brought his hand up to his ear. "Well, if you want it, I'm gonna have to hear you ask for it." There was hooting and hollering and more obscene suggestions tossed out from behind me, but I didn't care. I no longer cared about any of them, because Kellan brought his eyes back to mine and the pure joy I saw on his face was enough to make all of the forward women, all of the grabby men, and all of the sweaty strangers, completely worth it.

It was like watching his soul come alive as he smiled down at me. He loved this. Aside from me, it was the one thing that Kellan really lived for. True, he tried to act like it didn't matter, like he just did it because it was something to do at night, but over time I'd come to see that that was just his way of coping. I think a part of Kellan was afraid that this would get snatched away from him. He hadn't grown up under the best of circumstances. Quite the opposite. He'd had the horror story childhood that would have had most people running straight for booze and drugs. But Kellan had found music, and music, along with a seriously healthy sexual appetite, had saved him from a life of mind-numbing addictions.

Kellan flicked his wrist behind him, and Evan, waiting for his cue, immediately began to play.

The song was fast, catchy, and even though I'd heard it a bazillion times, I started jumping up and down with the excitement of it. There was just something about the crushing, noisy bodies rubbing against me, the deafening vibrations of the severely amped-up music, and the hot sun beating away on all of us, that sent electricity through the crowd. It gave *me* a rush. I could only imagine what Kellan was feeling.

His voice cut through the music, perfectly on time. No matter what he was feeling off the stage, in this, Kellan was a professional. The countless practices and small shows around the area had paid off well; his voice was spectacular. A high-pitched, feminine squeal surged throughout the crowd as his microphone drifted the words over the open area. He was singing an older song, a D-Bag classic, and several people around me were singing along. Since I'd watched Kellan write songs before, it was a little awe-inspiring to witness his lyrics be repeated back to him, especially in a crowd this size.

He beamed as he strummed and sang. A distractingly sexy half-smile was on his lips. It never failed to amaze me that he could play his guitar and sing at the same time. Me? I could barely do just one of those things. Jenny waved her hands in the air and hooted and hollered for her man and I did the same, happy that I could come out and support him today, support them all today. Well, maybe not Griffin.



The song ended with a thunderous reaction from the crowd, even the guys directly in front of me. I was ecstatic for Kellan and the boys. They deserved the success. Kellan put his guitar away for the next song, popping the microphone off its stand. The stage here was wider than Pete's and with more room to walk around, Kellan also had more room to flirt. Moving into the next song, his eyes slipped over the crowd in ways that I was only used to them slipping over me.

It bothered me a little, but I let it go. He was just excited to be here, excited to play. He'd slipped back into the aggressively sexy guy that I'd first seen on stage. The sexed-up behavior had seemed over-the-top to me on that very first glance that I'd had of him, but the audience here was eating it up. Hands were stretching out to him from everywhere, even from rows behind me. I wasn't quite sure what those women expected him to do. Stage dive? I furrowed my brow, hoping he didn't do that. He could get hurt...or fondled to death.

As he propped a foot on a speaker and leaned out to grab a fan, I idly wondered why that one. Did he like her hair? Was she the most excited one in that section? Did she have the biggest...voice? Shaking my head, I pushed it out of my mind. He had so many things to concentrate on up there, he probably wasn't thinking at all. Just reacting to a fan asking for more of him. And they could certainly touch him. I wasn't such a jealous harpy that I couldn't handle a few caresses. Within reason, of course.

And Kellan was good with keeping most of his flirtations on the stage. He would never look or act the way he was while he was singing in our day to day life. You wouldn't even know he was practically a rock star in-between his shows. Really, he seemed a little lazy to the untrained eye. But I knew his mind was always busy, even if he was just slinging back cold ones at the bar.

As the heat only increased throughout their set, I started to wonder if Kellan might strip down. It wasn't a preposterous idea; he'd done it before while singing. A couple of times, from what I'd heard. He was wiping himself off with the lower half of his shirt whenever he got the chance, his shirt rising to the edge of his upper abs, each line still gloriously defined. With the symphony of screams whenever he did that, I was sure the crowd would approve if he chose to remove it. The bulk of the crowd, anyway.

I wasn't sure how I felt about women ogling my boyfriend in that way. I wasn't sure how I felt about his tattoo being exposed either. That sort of bothered me more. But after a quick wipe, he always let his plain, white t-shirt fall back into place. I preferred to believe that he liked keeping his tattoo a secret too, like it was something just between us. And it should be. Even though it was on *his* body, it was incredibly personal for each of us. It had kept him connected to me while we'd been apart. It had helped seal us when we'd gotten back together.

Once their allotted time had diminished, the band members each gave small bows and Kellan thanked the crowd for listening. He was happier than I'd ever seen him as he backed away from the stand. His eyes flicked down to mine in the crowd. No, I was wrong before. The look he was giving me now was the happiest look I'd ever seen on him.

The crowd around us started shifting, some staying to watch the next show, some leaving to check out another venue. Bumbershoot had dozens of artists playing at any given time, from the big names, to the locals, like the D-Bags. Having been here just last year with them, when Kellan and I had just been friends, well, as much of friends as we had ever been, it was a little surreal to see their name on the lineup posters. I'd snagged about three dozen of those posters as mementoes.

Giggling, Jenny locked her arm with mine and pulled us towards the side of the stage. The guys were alternating between acknowledging the fans and unplugging their stuff. Kellan grabbed his prized guitar, and with a smile and a nod at me, ducked behind the stage. Jenny and I approached a metal railing fencing off the backstage area from the rest of the populace. And just in case the fence wasn't enough of a warning, a couple of yellow-shirted security guards were shooing people away.

Waiting in the spot where I knew Kellan would eventually appear, I, for a moment, wished I was forward enough to sneak behind the fence. I wanted to be with him, to give him the huge congratulatory hugs that were bursting my prideful stomach apart. But it was off-limits to normal folk, like me, and I didn't want to cause a scene by getting busted by the burly guys who put Pete's bouncer to shame.

Sighing as I watched Evan and Matt disappear from the stage, Griffin leaning over to suck face with some blonde before he too vanished, I again wished my sister was here. Anna was hot, by most men's standards, and she could get into places closed off to plain-Janes, like me.

After what seemed like an eternity, Kellan came out, sans guitar, sans the rest of the guys. Rushing up to me, he leapt over the metal rail. The security guards glanced at him, but they were more interested in keeping people out, not in. A small scream erupted from the knot of people also waiting for their rock-god, but this god headed directly for me.

Immediately his arms were around me, sweeping me into a hug. With his exuberance I thought he might sling me over his shoulder and twirl me around. If I also hadn't been sure that he'd smack my bottom a few times, turning my face beet-red, I might have let him do it. But I'd prefer it if those sorts of things were done in a more private setting. And Jenny and I weren't the only girls waiting around back here for the band.

So, giggling as he lifted me up, I made sure to sling my arms firmly around his neck so he couldn't get too carried away. His smell hit me instantly. That undeniable aroma that was purely him. Clean, manly, seductive...it was a scent that lingered with me, even in my dreams.

Kellan laughed and squeezed me tight, the air compressing from my lungs until he set me down again. Pulling back, his impossibly blue eyes glowed at me. "That was so much fun! I'm so glad you were here...did you like it?"

His eyes sparkled in a shaft of sunlight as he grabbed my shoulders and squatted down to look me square in the eye. I giggled more at his question. Really? Of course I liked it, I loved watching him perform. His expression was so sweet, in his joy. Almost innocent. Cupping his warm cheeks, I nodded. "I loved it. You guys were amazing! I'm so proud of you, Kellan."

His face beamed even more at my praise, then he seemed to notice something that he hadn't before. His fingers around my arms pushed me back a smidge and his eyes traveled down my chest. I swear I felt the heat increase in a straight line down my body by his gaze alone. Stopping at my exposed navel, his lips twisted devilishly and he peeked up

at me from under his so-long-it-wasn't-fair eyelashes. The smoldering desire in his gaze was enough to quicken my breath. Kellan's innocent moments never lasted very long.

"I like your shirt."

His voice was melted sex. Yes, melted...sex.

I flushed all over. He could still make me feel like he was looking at me for the first time, not the thousandth time. He still gave me butterflies.

Just as I was about to come up with some response to his comment, Kellan was attacked. Not literally, but female hands did grab his arms and twist him around. Laughing adorably, he let go of my shoulders and basked in the affections of his fans. Some of them looked at me with raised eyebrows, but then I was ignored. That was fine by me. I'd rather not be in Kellan's spotlight, if I could help it.

As Kellan started signing things and getting his picture snapped with cell phones, I shook my head. It was so weird. I constantly forgot that he was a little famous. I mean, I was used to the girls at Pete's, but we weren't at Pete's. Watching that fame follow him to such a public venue was kind of hard to wrap my head around. As I watched, the next girl in the crowd clamoring for him to notice them pulled down her tank top to expose the cups of her bra. She begged him to sign her chest. He glanced back at me really quick, but then he did it...and he had plenty of room to sign his name, if you know what I mean.

My cheeks flamed hot and I felt a knot of tension in my stomach. Yeah, I tried to be cool with his life, but his face in her chest while he signed away with a sharpie was a little much. As was her hands on his ass. Just as I thought to shove the vixen away, a firm hand rested on my shoulder.

"He loves *you*, Kiera. He's just playing."

I looked over my shoulder at Evan. He'd come out from behind the metal fence while I'd been preoccupied with watching Kellan. Kellan could do that to me—make me oblivious to the world. My habit of

getting so wrapped up in him that everything else around me blurred into the background was sort of a weak point in me. I was working on it.

Evan's jovial face was grinning at Kellan as he slung his tattooed arm around Jenny's waist. The perky blonde gazed up at Evan with adoration. Being the front man, and drop-dead gorgeous, Kellan got a lot more notice than the other guys, but Evan certainly had his followers, too. They were behind him now, waiting for the sweet, teddy bear of a man to disengage from his girlfriend.

His warm brown eyes glancing down at me, he pointed his other tattooed arm at my boyfriend. "It's sort of his job, you know, to keep the fans wanting more."

I glanced over at Kellan, now smashed in-between two girls kissing his cheeks while a third forever captured the moment with her camera. I was certain the photo would be on the internet within hours. I sighed. At least he drew the line at them kissing him on the lips since we'd gotten together. He didn't used to. And yes, those pictures were on the internet too.

Looking back up at Evan, I shrugged. "I know...I just wish he wasn't so good at it." My voice came out a little sullenly and Evan chuckled, clapping my shoulder as he finally twisted to acknowledge his fans.

With Jenny by his side, Evan signed autographs and made playful small talk with complete strangers. Jenny did too. Standing back from the mayhem a bit, I marveled at how comfortable they both looked. Me? I'd rather die than have to make multiple introductions over and over again.

My eyes darted to Kellan's broad back, where a woman had her hand resting a little too low for my taste, and I quickly averted them. No point in making myself jealous by watching. Instead, I glanced over at where Matt had quietly joined the fray. He looked just as uncomfortable with this part as me. He enjoyed playing, enjoyed being on the stage, enjoyed creating and making music. That was where his passion lied, not in the people-pleasing part. But he nodded politely, taking a couple pictures and signing a couple of t-shirts.

Attached to Matt's arm was his equally quiet girlfriend, Rachel. She was a beautiful mix of Latin and Asian with bronze skin and deep brown hair. She held the hand of her spiky, blond boyfriend, not looking jealous by the attentions he received, but not looking like she wanted to partake in the socializing either. Not one for crowds, Rachel had watched the performance from the lawn nearby. She was quieter and shyer than me...which was saying a lot. Rachel was Jenny's roommate, and she and Matt had started seeing each other last spring, around when Kellan and I had officially gotten together. The low-key pair was still going strong. Their personalities blended very well. They were sort of adorable.

The last D-Bag to stroll into the awaiting crowd was less adorable. I rolled my eyes as Griffin sauntered through my line of sight, his hands fondling anything that he could. Some girls smacked him, others giggled. He always returned to the giggling ones. His form of signing autographs usually involved tongue. It turned my stomach, watching him. Honestly, I didn't get what my sister saw.

Matt's near identical released a girl he'd just deep-throated and swung his head around, looking for more prey. Unfortunately, Griffin's horny eyes fell on me. His thin lips twisting into a familiar curl, he started walking over my way. I instinctively started backing up. Griffin was one person that I liked to keep some distance from. He had a tendency to be a little...grabby. Tucking his chin-length blond hair behind his ears, he threw his hands out to the side, conveniently brushing against a fan's breast as he did.

"Kiera, my future lover! I'm thrilled you came to check me out." His hand went down to his cargo shorts and cupped his...stuff. "Did you like what you saw?" he asked, tilting his head.

Wanting to gag, I twisted to leave. Close enough to grab me, he sidled up and snatched my hand. When he looked like he was going to place my palm on his junk, my eyes widening in horror, my fingers were suddenly torn away from his. Stepping between us, Kellan shoved Griffin's shoulder back. "Fuck off, Griffin," he muttered, shaking his head and rolling his eyes.

The bassist shrugged and found some other girl to touch him. I breathed a sigh of relief and sank into Kellan's side. "Thanks."

Chuckling, Kellan kissed my head. "No problem. I know how much you love conversing with Griffin." I cringed as Kellan waved goodbye to some of the fans that were lingering, maybe hoping he'd stay and chat with them all day. No, Griffin was about my least favorite person to talk to.

Twisting us around, his arm firmly attached to my waist, Kellan started walking us away from the private area and back to the main part of the park. Almost subconsciously, like they'd follow him anywhere, his band members started trailing after him. Looking back, I watched Matt and Evan strolling along with their arms around their girls. Griffin strolled along with his hand scratching his privates. In a way, they did follow Kellan anywhere. When his parents had died, Kellan had sort of ditched everything to come up here, and they'd all followed him without a moment's hesitation. They'd been here ever since.

Fixing my focus back on the man beside me, I slung my other arm around his waist, cinching him tight. I couldn't imagine what that day must have been like for him. It was true that Kellan had good reason to hate his parents, they were abusive, cold-hearted bastards, blaming Kellan for all of the miseries they'd felt in their lives, but still...they were his family. The only close family he'd had. Their death had deeply affected him.

He'd only been nineteen at the time, away from their torture for only a year, since he'd run away to Los Angeles right after high school. Nearly right after the ceremony from the way he told the story. And he hadn't told them he was leaving, he'd just done it. They'd never even searched for him. Kellan had told me once that when he finally had called them, to let them know that he was, at the very least, still alive, they hadn't sounded like they had cared either way, like they'd done their jobs and he could live or die on his own. It was a miracle Kellan wasn't completely messed up.

Jerks.

Griffin coming up and clapping Kellan on the back snapped me out of my dark thoughts. With Matt and Rachel behind him, he pointed to a band playing in the distance. I could hear the heavy rock beat in the

sweltering air. "We're gonna go check out some of the other bands. Comin'?"

Kellan looked back at Evan and Jenny, but they were sappily gazing at each other, absorbed in some quiet conversation that I couldn't hear with the multitude of bodies walking back and forth around our group. A few females passing by looked at the four guys like they seemed familiar, but none of them stopped for more than a couple of seconds.

Looking down at me, Kellan started to ask me what I wanted to do. My body answered for me. My stomach growled so loud that even Jenny broke away from her tender moment to laugh. I closed my eyes for a moment while I felt Kellan's body chuckling softly at me. Cracking just one eye open, I attempted to glare at him. He found that even funnier and laughed a little harder.

Glancing up at Griffin, Kellan shook his head. "I think we'll get something to eat first." Smacking Griffin's back, he added, "We'll catch up with you later."

After watching the physically similar cousins walk off, melding into the crowd around them, Kellan smiled down at me. "Should we get some food in you, noisy?"

I smirked and rolled my eyes, but then his lips were on mine and I couldn't have cared that he'd been teasing me. With his hand brushing over my cheek as he ran his fingers through the hair above my ear, his warm lips expertly leading mine as he forced a small space between our mouths, and the tip of his tongue flicking out to briefly touch mine, I didn't care about much of anything anymore.

My hand reached up to securely tighten in his hair. I tried to angle him so his gently probing tongue was all over mine. All over my body would be nice too. Chuckling, he broke free from my mouth. Surprisingly, just that brief intimacy had my heart racing and my breath faster. It took so little for him to turn me right on.

Grinning crookedly, he tilted his head. "Do you need a minute?" he whispered, raising an eyebrow.



Gathering my senses, I smacked his chest and started to storm off. Wasn't I just thinking earlier that I needed to work on not letting Kellan so completely absorb me? Hmm, I had a feeling I'd be working on that one for a while. Feeling a little dazed, I headed off to where I thought the food was. Laughing a little harder, Kellan grabbed my elbow and twisted me the other way.

Smiling in that seductive, devilish way that he could, he nodded his head up the concrete path, opposite of where I'd been going. "Food's that way." His smile widening, he added, "Unless you had something else in mind?" I instantly pictured finding a secluded spot in this massive campus and letting that tongue do...all sorts of marvelous, wondrous things to me. My breath stuttered a bit.

Shaking my head out of my steamy thoughts, I started marching up the path towards the one craving I'd let myself cave into here. I was not about to indulge in public sex with my rock star boyfriend. As much as he would like that, I did have some self control.

Still chuckling, still amused by me, Kellan easily caught up and slung his arm back around my waist. Smiling down at me as Evan and Jenny fell into step behind us, he murmured, "So adorable. What *am* I going to do with you?"

By the time we'd reached the pizza stands, I'd thought of at least a half dozen things he could do to me.

Once we were all full of food and music, and enough memories to cement this day into our brains forever, we all met back up at the staging area so the guys could get their instruments. Well, not Evan. Drums weren't as portable as the other instruments, so one set was brought in for all of the bands to use. Except the big acts at the end of the night. They would take the time to bring in their own.

With Matt, Griffin and Kellan all having guitar cases slung over their backs, our group earned a lot more attention than before. They did have a special area for band members to exit the park that wasn't quite so public, but Griffin, being Griffin, insisted on heading out the main gate. Out of all of them, Griffin enjoyed the limelight the most. He was already living up his fifteen minutes.

Stopping for a few more autographs and pictures, it seemed to take forever to get to the parking lot. But eventually, we did. Jenny gave me a quick hug, telling me that she'd see me tomorrow at work. Evan then gave me a huge bear hug, also jokingly telling me that he'd see me tomorrow at work.

Smiling at them, I waved goodbye as they headed off together in Jenny's car, probably on their way to Pete's, since Jenny had to work tonight. I'd gotten the night off, so I could spend the evening with Kellan. Because of their afternoon gig at Bumbershoot, Kellan and the guys had the evening off from the bar. Not that that would stop the rest of the boys from spending the night there anyway. They could never be peeled away from Pete's for long.

I congratulated Matt as I gave him a scant, one-armed hug. He wasn't as overtly affectionate as Evan was and I tried to respect the level that he was comfortable with. Smiling shyly at me, he thanked me for coming. Rachel smiled and waved goodbye as she and Matt put away Matt and Griffin's instruments and got into Griffin's Vanagon.

Griffin, perhaps seeing that I was doling out hugs to D-Bags, decided that he wanted to be a D-Bag, too. Checking his breath in his palm, he started striding over to me. I put my hand out to stop him, but I think it was more Kellan clearing his throat, quite loudly, that finally made him pause. Rolling his eyes, Griffin waved his fingers instead. "We're going to Pete's. Catch you guys later."

Kellan laughed and clapped him on the back before twisting to open the door of his sleek muscle car. A 1969 Chevelle Malibu from what Kellan had repeatedly told me. Shiny black with chrome all over, it was possibly the only possession, aside from his guitars, that Kellan cared about. He'd found it cheap in L.A. and had spent most of his time that first summer of his newfound freedom fixing it up. It was his pride and joy...and ever since the one time I'd stolen it, he never let me drive it.

Sliding into the leather bench seat, he glanced over at me as I slid in too. "Your place or mine?" he asked, exaggerating the huskiness in his voice.

I laughed as I leaned over to kiss him. Still trying to keep our relationship on an even keel, instead of bursting right into the red-hot zone that we so easily could dip into, Kellan and I were still living apart, still taking things slow. "Mine," I breathed, trying to be as sexy as he was, but, I'm sure, failing horribly. Although, he did bite his lip as he looked over my face. Flushing instantly, I sat back and ran a loose lock of hair behind my ear. "Anna's gonna be late tonight, so we'll have the place to ourselves."

His grin widened as he started the car, the hearty engine roaring to life, its growl as sexy as Kellan's smile. Feeling the heat in my cheeks, I shook my head and added, "School is starting soon, so I should really start going through my stuff."

That wasn't really what I wanted to do tonight, but the intensity of his gaze was riling my body up, and I hated how much he could see himself affecting me. I wished I could be more subtle around him.

Twisting his lip, he seemed to contain a laugh. "Uh-huh, school stuff. All right. I'm great at...school stuff." His mouth breaking out into a heart-stopping grin, he pulled his car away from the place he'd just completely rocked.

## Chapter 2

### Peace

We pulled into the parking area of the apartment that I shared with Anna about twenty minutes later. Kellan still had a fantastic smile on his lips as he shut the car off, and I knew he was still a little high from the adrenaline of being on stage. While I could think of no greater torture than being the center of attention in front of hundreds of complete strangers, not to mention singing in front of said strangers, he lived for it.

He was grinning ear to ear as he met me in front of his car, humming one of his songs. Smiling up at him, I looped my arm through his. I had no desire to live his life, but I would happily bathe in the aftereffects of it. We'd been through so much in our path to each other; his joy now brought me joy, too. I'd much rather see a delighted smile on his face than tears in his eyes.

After swishing the door open dramatically, he led me to my tiny two-bedroom place here. While it was postage-stamp small, it did have a pretty spectacular view of Lake Union. Following him through the door, I sighed tiredly and switched the light on. Removing my purse from around my body, I set it on a small table while Kellan shut the door. Mere seconds after I was done, my body was jerked forward and then slammed back into the front door.

I had time to gasp but that was it. Kellan's body pressed against every inch of me, his lips hungrily attacking mine. Without a thought, my fingers snuck up into his hair, twisting around the long strands. My heart surged forward so fast I thought I might collapse to the floor. Kellan's firm grip around me wouldn't have allowed that, though. Everywhere, from his chest, to his chiseled stomach, to his sensuous hips, was flush against mine, pressing into me like he wished we could be closer.

As the fire in me started to heighten, the arousal I felt for him burning away every other thought in my head, my breath quickened. His breath was quick too between our hungry kisses, our light tongue flicks. Then his hand traveled over my bottom, curving around my thigh to the back of my knee. Shifting us slightly, he grabbed my leg and adjusted it up his hip. Lining us up perfectly, his aroused body pressed into mine, just where I needed it to.

Groaning, I tightened my hands in his hair and firmly attached my lips to his. A sultry noise escaped his throat, rumbling through his body as our mouths moved together intently. It stoked the fire already in me to a boiling point. I needed him. All of him. Now.

Arching against the door, I broke away from his glorious mouth. "Kellan," I moaned out, instantly grateful my sister was not here, "...bedroom..."

His lips traveled down my throat, his tongue flicking every erogenous zone on the way down. I groaned again, rubbing myself against him, trying to dull the ache somehow. A chuckle left his mouth as the tip of his tongue traced my collarbone. He was enjoying this, enjoying teasing me. Pushing his shoulders back, I frowned at him. He cocked an eyebrow at me, the edge of his lip curving up in a similar manner. It was so incredibly hot, especially with the desire smoldering in his eyes. No one could do bedroom eyes like Kellan could.

Then his demeanor completely changed. Smiling playfully, he let go of my leg that he'd hitched up his side. Tilting his head as he watched me struggling to breathe like a normal person, he took a step back. "Are you ever going to move back in with me?" he asked, his thumb coming up to trace the line his tongue had slid down earlier.

I blinked at his sudden change of direction, my head feeling sluggish as it fought against the desire to push him back into the living room and take him on the monstrously ugly orange couch. I was pretty sure he'd let me. Wondering if he'd really just asked about us living together again, I took a side step away from him. It was also a side step toward the hall, toward my bedroom, and the smolder in his eyes came back a little.

Smiling impishly, he nodded his head that way. "Because I really hate having sex on a futon." Winking, he added, "Not that I won't, though."

Smirking at him, I reached out and grabbed his hand. "You're the one that kicked me out," I said, managing to keep my voice light, even though the memory was a painful one for me.

Backing us towards the hall, I watched a flash of that pain wash over his face. It was gone instantly though. Shrugging, he laughed out, "Well, it sounded like a good idea at the time."

My hallway was a short one, with my room at the end closest to the front door. Anna's room, the larger room, was at the end of the hall with our tiny, shower-only bathroom in the middle. Kellan's place wasn't all that much bigger, but it seemed like a spacious mansion in comparison.

Stopping us in front of my closed door, I put my other hand on his chest. "No, it was." My hand traveled up his neck to cup his cheek; he leaned into my touch. "You and I needed space. We needed to get our heads on straight."

He smiled a little, then sighed. "Well, now that they are...why don't you come back?" His voice lowering, he stepped into my body, his arms wrapping around my waist. "I know we've taken things slow, but I still want to move forward...with you."

I swallowed at the warmth in his voice, the love in his eyes. I wanted that too, I really did, but, I was trying to be a stronger person, my own person and I knew that if I moved back in with him, he'd be my world again. I'd drown in him.

Smiling encouragingly, I ran my fingers back through his hair. The serious look in his eye softened as I caressed him. In as reassuring of a voice as I could, I softly said, "I think it's better if we keep waiting." Switching my hand to run my thumb over his cheek, I added, "I've sort of come into my own being with my sister. I don't want to fall right back into needing a man to feel...complete."

I bit my lip, hoping he wasn't offended. His insanely blue eyes ghosted over my face, taking in every feature. Inhaling deeply, he squeezed me a bit tighter. "What if I'm the one that needs you?" His face was completely, heartbreakingly serious. Shrugging, a tiny smile broke into his lips. "I hate sleeping alone."

Even though he'd said *sleeping* alone, I knew it was more than that. Kellan hated *being* alone. Oddly, it was something we had in common. But knowing we needed this, I threw on a bright smile and shook my head. "You'll be alright." His tiny smile curved into a disgruntled one and I laughed, slinging both of my arms around his neck. "Besides, we almost always end up sleeping together anyway."

I flushed bright red after I said it, instantly realizing how suggestive it sounded. He grinned at me adorably, reaching behind me to open my bedroom door. Laughing at my comment, he shook his head. "Exactly." Pushing my door open, his eyes came back to mine, playful now. "Think of the gas money we'd save." He tilted his head, walking me backwards into my room. "And rent, you wouldn't have to pay that, living with me. You could work less, concentrate on school more."

He smiled and shrugged, like it made perfect sense. And logically, it did. Emotionally though, I thought we were in a good place now and maybe we shouldn't mess with that. Freeing one hand to flick on my light, I sighed. "I like my life, Kellan. I finally feel...well rounded."

As he closed my door with his foot, his hands slinked down to cup my backside. Smiling devilishly, he murmured, "Yes, I know, very well rounded." I smacked him on the shoulder as he chuckled. Then he sighed, pulling my body flush to his and kissing me softly. "Fine."

I melted into his lips, savoring the taste of him all wrapped up in the smell of him. Pulling apart, he kicked off his shoes with his toes and tilted his head at my lumpy futon. "But that seriously sucks. Can I at least buy you a decent bed?"

Smiling as I stepped out of my flip-flops, I grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the bed he hated. He was right, it was lumpy, with a heavy bar in the middle that dug into your back, but it was a large one and there was plenty of room on it to...roll around. Backing up to the

edge of the futon, I grabbed the bottom of Kellan's t-shirt. "Of course. You can even help me break it in."

His seductive grin in place, he helped my fingers remove his clothing. "Hmmm...you may have sold me on this idea."

Laughing, I ran my hands down the wondrously etched lines in his chest. His breath hitched when my fingers traced the black ink of my name swirled over his heart. Nothing in this world was as beautiful to me as that tattoo, except the man bearing it.

"Anything that ends with sex, sells you." I giggled.

Kellan playfully pushed my shoulder back, and I sat down on the bed that sagged a little in the spot that was technically the "sitting" area when it was folded up. Scooting into the center of the bed, the hard support bar apparent under my body, I felt heat rush through me as Kellan leaned over the edge of the mattress. His eyes peering up at me, he huskily murmured, "True."

My breath hitched as I watched him crawl over to me on his hands and knees. Leaning over me, my breath embarrassingly faster, he eyes scoured the length of me. Feeling the pure sex appeal radiating from him, I swallowed. It sometimes amazed and mystified me that this man was mine, practically any time I wanted him. It was still a little miraculous to me that out of every person in the world that he could be with, he'd picked me. I still didn't see why.

Smiling as his lips came down to mine and my hands traveled back up that smooth, perfect chest, I whispered, "Whore."

He laughed in my mouth as his body settled beside mine. "Tease," he breathed, his hand coming up to run through my hair.

I laughed at the terms that we'd once used to hurt each other with, being used as affectionate phrases now. Things were like that with Kellan. Cold one minute, red hot the next. Our going slow was how we were working on keeping the relationship even, consistent. Kellan didn't seem at all worried that we'd burn out, but I sometimes did. After all, he could have anybody. Even if he was experiencing something with me that he'd



never had before—a true, deep to his core love—a secret, buried part of me knew that now that he'd been opened up to love, he could find it again with someone else if he wanted to.

God, I hated that thought.

Pushing back my doubts, I instead concentrated on what I had no question about. Right now, Kellan wanted me. Right now, Kellan loved me and only me. And right now, my sister wouldn't be home for hours.

Dressed only in his worn denims that hugged him so perfectly, his sculpted chest above me as he leaned over my body, Kellan worked his mouth softly against mine as the fingers of his free hand spun around a dark lock of my hair.

My fingers were busy as well. They'd moved up to his wonderfully messy head of hair. It was so much fun to bunch it around my fingers and I couldn't resist giving him a light tug. He grinned against my lips. Then my fingers trailed down his neck, enjoying the lean muscles, and the light pulse of his veins under his skin. From there they decided to swoop up and over his shoulder blades, lingering for a moment on the tensing and releasing muscles as he played with my hair. Their only natural course after that was straight down his back. My lucky fingers delighted in the smooth, lean expanse of skin on the way down to his waistband. Of course, halfway there, they decided to head back up to those shoulder blades and retrace the path down to his waist. But this time, I lightly scraped my nails across his flesh instead of the softer, gentler finger pads.

"Don't tease me," he muttered as he sucked on my lower lip.

I laughed lightly as I remembered harshly digging through that perfect skin once before...in an espresso stand, no less. I felt my face heat as blood rushed to my cheeks. It was sort of an embarrassing moment for me. Kellan pulled back from our kiss to look over my features, probably noticing my flushed cheeks and understanding my expression. His finger ran along my cheek before sweeping over my lips. "Do you have any idea what that did to me, when you scratched me?"

His lip twisted devilishly at the memory while my blush surely deepened. Not being able to speak, I merely shook my head. He smiled wider and leaned over to my ear. "I think that's what made me come."

My eyes closed for a second at hearing him say it and I chuckled despite myself. "I didn't realize you were so kinky," I whispered.

With a smirk he laughed out, "You're the one that cut me."

I giggled again, feeling my embarrassment slide off of me with the laughter. "You're the one that liked it."

He kissed my chin gently before pulling back with a raised eyebrow. "You didn't enjoy doing that?"

I bit my lip and looked away from the cocky look of self assurance on his face. Of course I'd like it. It had done as many amazing things to my body as it had done to his. A tiny bit of guilt washed through me. I did feel bad for hurting him, for drawing blood. That was a little more than was called for.

Surprising him, I shoved back his shoulders. He grunted and said, "Hey," as he tried to crawl back over to me. Laughing, I kept him away with one hand while I squirmed out from where I was partially entangled in his legs. Before he could complain, or manhandle me back into position, I straddled his hips.

As he was facing sideways, he started to flip onto his back, a huge grin lighting his face at my forcefulness in taking the top. I laughed harder as I shoved his shoulder down, keeping his chest on the mattress.

Once I was firmly seated on his lower spine, he twisted his neck to look back at me. "What are you doing?"

My hands played over the expanse of pristine flesh before me while I answered him, a little huskily. "Well, I do feel guilty about hurting you..."

He twisted around more as his lips smirked at me. "I did mention that you made me come, right?"

I felt that flush return at hearing him say that word again—come. It wasn't even a dirty word, really, but hearing it pass his lips reminded me of toe-curling, blood-boiling, life-altering moments of ecstasy. Just hearing him say the word made me want him even more. Smiling, I pushed back that feeling...for now.

"I want to make sure you're not...damaged."

I ran my hands up his back, leaning over him so my hair brushed his skin. I delighted when I noticed him shiver when my long locks touched him. His eyes flicked over my face and his voice dropped. "I only have one scar that can be attributed to you."

His eyes rested on mine and my breath caught at the love I saw in that gaze. I didn't think I'd ever get used to seeing how much he adored me. It made all the flirting I'd witnessed earlier irrelevant. None of those fan girls got that look from him. None of those fan girls got to have this level of intimacy with him. Not anymore. Evan was right, he played with them but his heart was mine.

I nodded, surprised at how my eyes were misting. My thoughts tumbled over to the memory he was referring to and I bit my lip. It was a long time ago that he'd taken a knife wound while trying to defend my honor. It was one of the most amazing and horrible things that anyone had ever done for me. Amazing that he'd stood up for me, and horrible that he'd been hurt. My fingers traveled down his ribs, touching the mattress as I curled them around his body. I leaned over and kissed the edge of the scar where I felt the roughness cutting into that once smooth skin. He sucked in a breath, his stomach clenching as my lips moved over the old wound.

I smiled and kissed across his back as I thought of one other major wound he'd gotten because of me. True, this one didn't have an external scar, the fracture having been reset without surgery, but I knew it was damaged, under the surface. My hands ran up his arms, squeezing the left one, where he'd broken it while getting into a fight with Denny so many months ago.

I leaned forward and kissed that arm and his eyes softened as he watched me. I knew he understood my gesture. "I adore you for all your scars," I whispered as I leaned over and gave him a soft kiss on the lips.

His hand came up to grip my head, keeping me trapped in the loving softness of his kiss. He deepened it and the fire of anticipation coursed through me when his tongue brushed over mine. My breath sped up and I leaned into the kiss for a moment before I stopped myself.

Skillfully, I pulled away from his hand trapping me to his mouth. With a playful scowl I smacked his shoulder. "You stop that. I'm not done with my inspection."

He sighed and rolled his eyes. "Well, can you hurry up? So I can make love to you and not this awful mattress?" He pressed his hips against the bed beneath him for emphasis and I laughed. Laughing himself he muttered, "We could switch positions when you're done?"

Ignoring that, I sat back on my seat at the base of his spine and turned all of my attention to his glorious back. He seemed fine, definitely no thin trails of puckered flesh from me tearing into him. I leaned forward to kiss his skin and then I noticed it. I paused as I looked more closely. It was faint, so faint you wouldn't notice unless you were literally an inch from his skin, like I currently was, but it was there. Thin, white streaks down his back, right where I'd raked him. I smiled inwardly that a part of our crazy, intense night was still with him, maybe forever. As much as I hated that I'd caused him pain, I was a little happy that a reminder would be with him, wherever he went.

"Ah, found 'em," I muttered.

He started to ask me, "What?" when I playfully drug the very tip of my tongue over the vague white line. He cut off what he'd been about to say and a shudder went through him. Emboldened, I let my tongue make a trail up between his shoulder blades and up the back of his neck. Kellan squirmed and dropped his forehead to the pillow, his breath definitely faster. Another old memory seizing me, I very gently bit the back of his neck. He groaned.

Before I could really process it, and definitely before I could stop it, he twisted underneath me, bringing up his arms to pull me down to the bed. All of the air whooshed from my lungs with the force he used to get me off of him. I giggled when he crawled on top of me. His lips attacked mine, his tongue practically searching for my tonsils.

I pushed him away from me. With desire evident in his smoky bedroom eyes, he growled, "I said don't tease me."

I smirked and ran a finger across his parted lips. "Payback." I raised an eyebrow at him. "At least I didn't do that in a crowded club."

His face startled. It was almost like he'd forgotten about that very intense moment when he'd licked me in the middle of a packed dance floor. Denny and Anna had both been somewhere in that club at the time. His brow scrunched together as his eyes turned recalcitrant. "That wasn't very nice of me, was it?"

I slung my arms around his neck and shook my head. "No, it wasn't...but I liked it."

His guilty eyes turned playful again as he thought about that night. "I couldn't resist." His fingers trailed up my arms, raising them over my head and causing delightful shivers to course down my body. "You had your arms up here." He cocked one over my head and brought the other one above it. Holding both wrists in one hand, he trailed his finger down my nose to my mouth. "You were biting your lip as you danced." I bit my lip again as I watched his hungry eyes recreate the sight of me that had pushed him over the edge. His finger floated over my lip and down between my breasts. I closed my eyes but he kept going, dragging the finger over my still exposed belly button to my shorts. He played with the waistband before bringing a hand to my hip bone. "And these...these hips..." He leaned over me to lightly breathe on my face, our lips brushing. "These hips drove me straight to madness."

He brought his lips down to mine and released my hands. I wrapped my arms over his head, firmly holding him to me. When we paused for air, I muttered, "You were watching me?"

He ran his nose along my jaw, flicking his tongue for an occasional taste. "Ceaselessly." His lips traveled back and forth along my jaw. "I have many things to atone for, and I hate what happened between us later, but I'll never feel sorry for tasting your skin that night." I gasped and arched against him, lifting my head so his lips could revisit my neck.

He obliged and feather-light touches made their way down my skin. His mouth still on my neck, his fingers tore at the knotted section of my shirt. In one smooth move he lifted the dark material up and brought it over my head. His eyes lingered over my body for a second before he harshly unhooked my bra and ripped it off of me. My body pulsed with need as his burning eyes visually caressed me.

With a sigh, he dropped his head to my stomach. "I need this flesh," he muttered as his tongue ran up me.

Fire shot through me at the contact and I writhed under his touch. "I need you too, Kellan."

He dragged his tongue between my breasts. "I need to see your face when I do this." He flicked his tongue all the way up to my neck and I closed my eyes and groaned in response.

"I need to hear you when I do this." He brought his lips, and that miraculous tongue, to my breast, swirling it around the nipple.

I arched my back and dug my hands into his hair. "God, yes..."

His breath heavy, he brought his lips to my ear. "I need to be inside of you...as deep as I can go." My body ached with his words, my light shorts suddenly horribly uncomfortable as the pleasant tingling between my thighs shifted to a full-on throbbing ache. I moaned loudly and tried to kiss him but he pulled away.

He hovered above me and I opened my eyes to gaze at the god-like man before me. His expression burning with desire for me, he swallowed heavily. "And I need to hear you beg for it." His expression asking so much more than his words, he added, "Do you want me?"

The throbbing that I didn't think could get any worse, intensified, and my mouth found his. "God, Kellan...please, yes, God...please. I want you...I want you so much." I also meant more than just the words. He was asking me if he was the one I really wanted to be with. I was telling him, as plainly as I could, that he was.

I mumbled more pleas for him while our mouths enacted what we both wanted. With heavy breaths and frantic fingers we pulled off the remainder of our clothes and he did exactly what he'd said he needed to do.

Smiling as I woke up the next morning, I yawned and stretched. My arms and legs didn't collide with another warm body in my chilly bed, but I wasn't too surprised. Kellan was almost always up before me. I wasn't sure why, but the boy was an early riser; he got up at the crack of dawn nearly every day. He also was a night owl, usually staying up just as late as I did, even on nights I closed at the bar. The man was sort of miraculous when it came to sleep. It did eventually catch up with him, but he could go for days on very little of it. Then it would hit him like a brick wall and he'd sleep for twelve hours straight.

Shaking my head at him, I inhaled deep, my smile widening. My favorite smell in the world, aside from Kellan's natural scent, was wafting through the house—coffee. Kellan was brewing a pot in the kitchen. That was definitely one of the perks of waking up with him.

Peeking an eye open, I saw that he'd left my bedroom door cracked a bit. From the other room I could hear the pot peculating and the sound of Kellan getting cups ready. He was also humming a song. Relaxing back on my pillow, I just enjoyed the sound for a minute. I pictured him out there, singing away in just his boxers. It was a delightful image.

The sound of a key entering a lock broke the stillness of the morning. It was immediately followed by the front door cracking open. Sitting up on my elbows, I frowned. Was Anna just now getting home? I knew she'd worked late last night and then mentioned she was going out with some of the girls from work, but this was late, even for her. Unless, of course, she'd already been asleep...somewhere.

Maybe she'd met up with Griffin, to congratulate him on his big event. But, it just as easily could have been somebody else that she'd hooked up with. Anna and Griffin had a weird relationship. When they were together, they were inseparable—all hands and tongues and, ugh, grinding. But when they were apart from each other...well, you'd never even suspect that they were involved. They were very open to being with other people. It was odd to me, but it seemed to work for them so I didn't say much about it.

When Anna's bright voice sounded a greeting, I immediately hoped Kellan wasn't in his boxers. I even looked around the ground to see if his clothes were still on my floor. Luckily, they weren't. While he and Anna only ever acted friendly around each other, I didn't need my sister ogling him anymore than she already did. Physically, she'd kept her distance once she found out that we were involved, but like any fine piece of art, her eyes lingered on Kellan, appreciating the masterpiece before them. I understood. I appreciated him daily.

"Hey, Kellan, good morning."

"Mornin', Anna. You're out late...or early."

Kellan laughed as Anna sighed, a heavy bag clunking to the floor. "Yeah, went to Pete's. Ran into the guys."

Kellan chuckled lightly, probably surmising what I had earlier, that she'd been entertained by Griffin until the wee hours of the morning. It hurt my stomach a little to think about what they'd probably been doing, and as I forcefully made my sluggish body stand up, I tried not to.

Anna laughed huskily while I grabbed some lounge pants out of my dresser, quickly throwing them on my naked body. "I heard you guys did great at your big show." Anna sighed forlornly. "I'm sorry I had to miss it."

Seeming like it made no difference to him, Kellan replied with, "It was just a show, nothing you haven't seen before. Don't worry about it."

I shook my head as I threw on a thin, comfortable shirt. Just another show? He was so casual about the whole thing. I knew that it had meant



something to him, though. It had excited him, invigorated him. I'd seen it when he'd shoved me against the door last night. I bit my lip at that thought and quickly ran my fingers through my thick hair a few times, eager to see the passionate man again.

Stealthily walking out of my room, I immediately saw Anna and Kellan in the kitchen. He was leaning back against the counter, facing me, his arms crossed over his chest as he carried on a quiet conversation with my sister. She had her back to me, her long, luxuriously shiny hair ridiculously perfect for the early hour.

Watching them, I tilted my head. If my sister had had her way last year, the two of them would have ended up together and I'd be walking up on a couple, instead of a couple of friends. As his lips curved into a small smile while he spoke softly—his hair a distractingly charming mess—I could easily picture them as the gorgeous pairing they would have been.

Raising my chin, I inhaled a big breath. That wasn't what happened, though. He'd never touched her. My sister had no idea what his lips felt like, what he tasted like, what his fingers felt like, what he sounded like when he was making love. She'd never heard him say I love you. But I had...repeatedly.

That confidence pushing aside my lingering insecurities, I meandered into the kitchen. They both twisted to look at me when I stepped into the small room. Kellan's small smile for her turned into a wide one for me, his deep eyes brightening.

He smiled down at me as I slung my arms around his waist. "Mornin', sleepy," he breathed, kissing my head.

Exhaling contently, I buried my head in his neck. "Good morning."

My sister sighed. "God, you two are adorable." Smacking my arm, she rolled her eyes. "It's annoying."

I smiled, laughing a little. "Good morning, Anna. Late night?"

Grinning devilishly, she bit her perfect, red lip and cocked an eyebrow just as expertly as Kellan could. "Oh, yes." Her finger shifted between the two of us. "And I can guarantee you it wasn't as cutesy as your night."

I flushed and looked away from her and she laughed, her voice throaty and seductive in a way that mine never would be. Kellan laughed with her, squeezing me tighter. "I wouldn't say our night was cute, Anna."

I flashed my eyes up to Kellan and smacked his chest, my face reddening even more. While Kellan's and my love life might be a bit tamer than he was used to, and my sister for that matter, I didn't need him chatting about it. Grinning down at me, he said nothing further and I relaxed. Kellan wasn't exactly an open book, and he generally didn't talk about his life much. Thankfully, that included our sex life.

Anna snorted and I looked back at her. Her face in a playful grin, she said, "I know." She poked my shoulder. "I know how hot you guys can get." My jaw dropped and my face paled. She laughed and jerked her thumb towards the hallway. "My bedroom is only one room away from yours, Kiera." Raising her eyebrows, she leaned in and muttered, "Maybe the two of you could remember that in the future?"

I covered my face with my hand and twisted into Kellan's body. God, sometimes I did forget. Being with Kellan could just be so...consuming. Chuckling as he held me close, rubbing my back, Kellan causally answered her. "We'll try and keep that in mind, Anna. Thanks."

Laughing, Anna rubbed my shoulder. "I'm just teasing you, Kiera. Go ahead and scream away, I don't mind." As I peeked at her from between my fingers, I watched her eyes rake over Kellan's body. "Lord knows I would," she murmured.

Kellan chuckled again, shaking his head before kissing mine again. Winking at him, she patted my arm again. "Well, I'm off to bed. I'm beat."

Twisting away from us, she started sashaying back to her room. The tight pants she had on emphasized the curve of her hips. Anna was

definitely beautiful and provocative. Sometimes it was hard to live with her never-ending perfection, but she was family, and she'd swooped into my life when I'd needed her the most. She'd helped me get back on my feet when both men in my life had dumped me. She'd helped me find a place to live when I'd had nowhere to go. She'd helped me heal my shattered heart when I was sure I couldn't. She'd even helped Kellan and I get back together. No, whatever her eccentricities, I loved her.

I was smiling and shaking my head at her when she tossed back, "I'll be out like a light if you guys want to go at it again?"

I sighed as Kellan laughed. Pulling back to look at him, I smacked his chest again. "Would you stop encouraging her?" He smiled, still chuckling and I sighed again. "I wish the two of you had a better hobby than trying to embarrass me."

Twisting me around to face him, he placed a tender kiss on my forehead. "Well, you wouldn't have to worry about it at my place." Rocking my hips back and forth, our bodies touching and retreating enticingly, he added, "Maybe I'll just embarrass you back to my home?"

Raising an eyebrow, he grinned crookedly at me. I wanted to smack him again, but that look was too damn sexy. I ended up kissing him instead, which, of course, made him chuckle.

Kellan stayed with me all afternoon, helping me go over everything and anything that had to do with school. I was starting my last year soon. I had everything ready to go, all my classes lined up, all my books purchased, but going over my plan helped me to not feel so nervous about it.

I don't know why I was still nervous about the first day of school. You would think that after sixteen grades, I'd be used to it by now, but I wasn't. That first day of school phobia had even made me delay starting college after high school.

My mom and dad had been furious about that, but I'd just been too nervous to do it. My mom had been going through a small cancer scare at the time, a small lump found that she'd had to have removed. Even though they'd protested, I'd taken the opportunity to stay home with her

while she went through treatments. She hated me missing school, but it worked out for me. I got to take care of her and delay doing something that terrified my eighteen-year-old self.

She was one hundred percent better long before the school year was up, and begged me to quit wasting my time with her and enter late. I'd already deferred for a year, though, so I took all the time I could.

I may have delayed for another year, but eventually Anna had had enough and had marched me down to the office after my year hiatus and forced me to get registered at the school I'd already been accepted to—Ohio University. And of course, once I was there I was fine. It was getting through the door that was the hard part for me. I was working on that too.

But I suppose my delay had ended up being a good thing. I probably wouldn't have met Denny if I hadn't taken that year to lounge around my parents' place. And then, if I'd never met Denny, I definitely wouldn't have ever met Kellan. Even though I hated how we started, how much we'd hurt Denny, who was an incredibly good guy who really didn't deserve everything we'd put him through, I was still grateful that fate had led me to Seattle, to Kellan.

Kellan thought my nerves were cute. He didn't seem to get nervous about much of anything. He could probably walk into the first day of school, thirty minutes late, completely naked, and be absolutely fine. I smiled to myself as I reconsidered. No, people and places may not affect him, but feelings did. Telling me that he loved me for the first time had sure scared him, probably worse than all of my first day jitters combined.

Well, it was nice to know that he wasn't impervious to nerves.

I was majoring in English this year, a fact that Kellan teased me about. He seemed to think I'd be better suited for Psychology. Personally, I think that was because he wanted me to take another class like my Human Sexuality course last year. He was sort of incorrigible when it came to the baser instincts. Not that I had much room to talk, at least, not when it came to him. I just couldn't stop myself from wanting to be all over him whenever he was near.

After a full day of helping me map out everything, right down to which path I needed to walk through in the quad, it was finally time for me to go to work.

Smiling as we walked through the apartment's parking lot, I started to grab the keys from his hand. "Can I drive?" I asked playfully, walking backwards in front of him as I tried to jiggle the keys out of the death-grip he had around them.

Scowling wonderfully, he shook his head and jerked his hand away. "No, you cannot."

Stopping and putting my hands on my hips as he walked past me, I stuck my lip out. "Why not?"

He took two steps and then stopped and walked back to me. His mouth was instantly sucking on my pouting lip. I was instantly no longer pouting. Against my skin, he murmured, "Because...that is my baby, and I don't share her." He growled that to me and my breath quickened.

"I thought I was your baby," I managed to squeak out.

Smiling, he grabbed my hips and pulled me into his. "You are." His lips returned to mine, his kiss deep, territorial almost. When I felt that familiar fire starting to ignite, when I was ready to yank off that bothersome t-shirt and glorify his body with my tongue, he broke apart from me and breathed, "And I don't share you either."

As my body was a delightful, gooey warmth of sensuality, I could have melted right there into the sidewalk. He laughed and finished pulling me to the car. I—quite happily—scooted into the passenger's side.

Still smiling over his declaration of possession, it wasn't too much later that we arrived at my second home here in Seattle. Well, third truly. Kellan's place will always feel like home to me. Even with all of the bad memories that lingered there.

Parking in the stall that his Chevelle frequented so often that it was unofficially known as “Kellan’s Spot,” he shut off his mechanical baby. If only he could turn me off so easily. I still felt a little worked up. Not the best way to start my shift, and that was probably the real reason why Kellan had done it. He may call me a tease, but that boy enjoyed making me squirm.

I stepped out of his car right as he walked around to open my door. He frowned that I hadn’t waited, then he held his hand out for me. I took it, like I always did, and we walked hand-in-hand to the large, rectangular building where Kellan found peace.

While Pete’s was comforting and familiar to me, it was sort of solace for Kellan. He came here to play, to get away, to socialize, to, at one time, pick up girls, and I think to shut off his mind for a while. I’d disrupted that peace for him when I was working here while we’d been suffering through figuring out our relationship, but the serenity was back now and the lazy smile that curled around his lips as we stepped through the door clearly showed that.

Holding one set of the double doors open for me, he gallantly led me in, kissing my hand as it extended away from him. He generally did something physical when we walked through the door. Sometimes it was a peck on the cheek, sometimes his hand snuck around my waist, but there was always something. Some sort of announcement to the room— *I was his*.

He’d wanted that when our relationship was secret, and now that it wasn’t, he let everybody know it. Including the sulking bartender who was watching us.

Rita had been here since Kellan first arrived, when he’d come back from L.A. She’d had her sights set on him immediately and, husband-b damned, sometime in the past few years, she’d successfully had him. It made me a little nauseous. She was at least twice his age, over-tanned leathery skin, over-bleached blonde hair, and a sense of fashion that left nothing to the imagination. I’d never asked Kellan about their hookup. Honestly, I didn’t want to know...ever.

Her lips twisted up when Kellan shifted his head to acknowledge her. All he gave her was a slight incline of a greeting, but you'd think he'd just walked up and licked her by her reaction. All sultry smiles and hooded eyes that were, I'm sure, mentally undressing him, she leaned over the aged bar that ran the length of the wall beside the front doors.

Practically purring, she murmured, "Hey there, Kellan...Kiera." My name was clearly an afterthought.

I smirked at her and twisted to face Kellan. "I have to go put my stuff away. Usual?"

I tilted my head and he ran a finger back through my hair, tucking a lock behind my ear as he bit his lip. It was charmingly attractive. "Yeah, thanks, Kiera."

Smiling at him, I leaned up to kiss his cheek. Not satisfied with a peck, he twisted and found my lips. My face heated, knowing Rita, and a good portion of the rest of the room, was staring, but I let myself indulge in a small moment of PDA. I immediately stopped the moment when I felt his free hand come around to squeeze my backside. Kellan didn't always do subtle PDA.

Pushing his shoulder back, I pointed at him in warning. Laughing, he shrugged and gave me an *I'm innocent* smile. It was a complete and total lie, he was nothing near innocent, but it was adorable and I rolled my eyes and laughed as I turned away from him.

As I made my way to the hallway, I passed about five sets of tables that all had their eyes glued on where we'd been by the bar. The women at those tables alternated between him and me as he made his way to the far back corner of the room near the stage where the guys traditionally sat. I could feel myself being appraised with every step I took. Self-conscious, I kept my head down and walked a little faster. It was one thing for him to be admired by so many people, it was quite another to be judged if you were worthy of him or not. And by the leers and twisted lips I saw, it was clear I was falling short of their expectations. Again, I tried to not let it bother me, but the ego is a frail, tender thing.

Exhaling in relief when I was through Kellan's admirers, I made my way to the back room, where the employees kept their stuff. Jenny and Kate were coming out of it as I approached. Kate, a tall, graceful girl with the world's bounciest, most perfectly put together ponytail, beamed at me. I'd seen her work a double shift two nights in a row, and her hair had still looked liked she'd just done it five minutes ago. I don't know what she used on it, but she should look into endorsing the product.

"Hey, Kiera. I hear the show rocked yesterday!" A long, auburn strand curled around her neck as she spoke, a neck so slim and elegant, it was practically begging to be draped in diamonds.

I nodded eagerly as I worked past them in the doorway. "It was. They were incredible!" I sighed, thinking how perfect Kellan looked on stage. They say some people are just born to be on one, and Kellan was one of those people. Idly, I wondered what that meant for us...long term.

Jenny tilted her head at me curiously, her red Pete's shirt emphasizing every curve that the men here swooned over. She was the sweetest person, though, and completely loyal to Evan. "You okay, Kiera?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Yeah, just nervous about school starting up." And Kellan becoming a bone fide, across-the-globe rock star. It was weird to both want a future for someone, and desperately not want it at the same time. I wished him all the success in the world, but only if I didn't have to share him. Man, one more thing I needed to work on. Good thing college is all about self discovery.

Jenny smiled and patted my arm. "Don't worry. You're super smart. You'll do great."

I nodded, feeling silly again for even worrying about school. Jenny was right. Kellan was right. I knew the grounds. I knew a lot of people there. I knew a lot of the professors. And I had a scholarship that practically paid for the whole thing. I had nothing to worry about. Nothing to fear but fear, right?

Kate nodded with Jenny, her light brown, almost topaz eyes wistful. "Yeah, you're so much smarter than me. I gave up after one semester." I



frowned sympathetically, but then she swished her head to look down the hall. "Hey, is Kellan here? I want to ask him about the show."

Shifting to a smile as I pictured Kellan leaning back in his chair, people watching while he waited for me to bring him his "usual," I nodded. "Yeah, he's here."

I couldn't keep the dorky grin from my face and they both giggled at me before shuffling off together. What? My boyfriend was a super-hot musician with fabulous hair, a rock-hard body, and my name tattooed over his chest. Who wouldn't grin about that?

I shoved my stuff in a locker and hastily threw my hair up in a ponytail that was nowhere near as perfect as Kate's. Sunday nights weren't too terribly busy, since the band didn't play, but there was still a lot of moving around and not having my hair flopping all over my face was a good thing.

When I stepped back out to the main part of the bar, I saw that my D-bag boyfriend wasn't alone anymore. Leaning back in his chair, a foot casually propped on a knee, he was chatting amicably with Sam, the bouncer here.

Sam was a big guy, burly and muscular. He finished off the intimidating scowl he kept on his face by completely shaving his head. It just made him seem all the more menacing. He'd been friends with Denny when Denny had gone to high school here for a year. He'd taken Denny in, after we'd broken up, when Denny just couldn't live with Kellan anymore. Understandable, given the circumstances. From what I heard, Sam and Denny still talked occasionally.

Kellan had also gone to school with Sam and Denny. It was how they all knew each other. Even though Kellan was a couple of years younger than them, he'd formed tight bonds with Sam and my ex. And Kellan still talked to Denny too. A fact that never ceased to amaze me.

But now the pair was going over more pleasant topics than last year's drama. Kellan had a huge smile on his face as he spoke to Sam, occasionally flicking his hands in the air, gesturing. Sam listened with a small

grin on his usually imposing features. I figured Kellan was talking about the show.

Shaking my head, I went about getting Kellan the beer he'd wanted. I just couldn't get over the fact that my boyfriend had played a major venue. Even if his band didn't go anywhere else, that would be something that he could tell his grandkids about. I smiled even wider as I approached Rita. Kellan with kids...even the thought gave me goose bumps.

A couple of hours into my shift, the rest of the band strolled in. Kellan was at the front of the bar when they burst through it. He'd finally been cornered down by Kate, who wanted to know everything about yesterday. I heard Kellan try and play it off like it was nothing, but Kate wouldn't let it go and asked him question after question, most of them along the lines of—"Weren't you nervous? Didn't you feel like peeing your pants?" Kellan always laughed at her and told her no, but I don't think she bought his answer.

After being hounded by her for a while, Kellan almost looked relieved when he twisted around to acknowledge his band mates strolling in. Once they were all four together, the bar broke into applause and ear-splitting whistles.

I joined in with the merriment; I was just as proud of them as the other patrons. Evan smiled as he looked around, his warm eyes grateful and appreciative. Matt seemed horribly embarrassed. His face flushed with color and he quickly looked back at the door, like he wanted to run through it. Kellan chuckled and shook his head as he put his hand up in acknowledgment. They all seemed a little thrown by the attention.

Except Griffin, of course. He was throwing kisses with his hands in-between deep, dramatic bows. If Kellan hadn't clapped him on the back to make him stop it, I think he would have started in on an Oscar-worthy speech once all the noise died down.

Still shaking his head, Kellan said a polite thank you to the crowd once it was quiet enough to hear him. Matt immediately darted to their table, thankful to disappear. Laughing at the guitarist, Evan walked over to Jenny, lifting her into a mammoth embrace. Kellan shoved Griffin

forward, but not before the bassist loudly exclaimed, "My Johnson is gladly accepting all forms of praise...if anyone wants to congratulate me privately."

I rolled my eyes and looked away as Kellan smacked him across the back of the head. Seriously, my sister must have a screw loose to date that man. If what they were doing could even be considered dating.

A few minutes after the guys were seated, Pete, the middle-aged, weary owner of the bar came out to congratulate them. With a thin smile on his lips, he shook hands with each band member. While Pete looked far from unhappy, he didn't seem thrilled either. Kellan had told me once that Pete had no talent in finding bands to put on his stage. It was the main reason the D-bags played here so much. Pete and his business partner, Sal, had made a deal with Kellan and the guys, not too long after the boys moved up here. The two men agreed to let the boys have the exclusive rights to the stage every weekend, if they wanted. It gave the boys a home base to play from, and a safe spot to store their instruments. And for Pete and Sal, it allowed them to stop searching for gigs that would bring in the customers. It was a win-win; the band brought in a lot of customers.

With a slight frown on Pete's brow as he shook Kellan's hand, I figured he was starting to believe that his act might outgrow him...and then he'd have to start looking for talent again.

Once Pete left the guys to their drinking, clapping Evan on the back as he left, the bar subdued back to normalcy. Most of the people started engaging in their own conversations, only a few going up to congratulate the boys personally. Thankfully, none of those few were women congratulating Griffin in the way that he wanted.

A few female fans did eye Kellan, but nothing more than the I-want-you eyes I was used to him getting. None of them seemed quite brave enough, or drunk enough, to approach his table, though, and I was just fine with that.

Throughout the course of the evening, the D-bags eventually left their bar. Matt left by himself an hour or two after arriving, a shy smile on his face as he said that he had plans with Rachel. Griffin rolled his eyes as

his cousin left, gesturing obscenely with his hand in the air over his naughty parts. Thankfully, he left about an hour later, some blonde bimbo on his arm. She gave him sultry, seductive eyes as they left, and I was pretty sure she'd give him the praise he'd wanted earlier. I shook my head and ignored the sight of Griffin leaving with another woman. It happened all the time. I'd asked Anna about it once, but she'd only shrugged and said she didn't care. He was free to do whatever he wanted. Her too.

Evan stayed until closing, escorting Jenny out when she was done with her duties. Kellan stayed, too. Feet kicked up on a chair, he watched me with a deliciously provocative smile while I wiped off some tables nearby. And Rita watched him just as provocatively.

Yep, everything was back to normal.

Refusing to sleep in my bed again, Kellan drove us to his place instead. A small, peaceful smile was on his lips as he pulled onto his street. I wasn't sure if that was because he was coming home after a couple of days, or if he just enjoyed having me come home with him. I supposed it was a little of both.

His tiny, white two-story house was dark as he shut the car off. When we'd all lived there, Kellan, Denny and me, the house had seemed warm and alive with activity. Now that it was just Kellan, the house seemed a little quiet. As Kellan cracked his door, I thought maybe that was the real reason for his smile. Kellan preferred a bustling house. I'd gleaned that out of him when I'd asked him if he'd rent out his room again.

With a slight frown, he'd told me, "I've thought about it. But I don't know...it feels like yours, and I don't want to give it to someone else." Those words had warmed me considerably, but when I'd asked him if he needed the rent money, he'd only shrugged and said, "No, renting out the room was never about money." Sighing, he'd added, "I just don't like being there alone."

God, sometimes he just broke my heart.

Stepping into the entryway, my eyes drifted around the familiar space. It was sort of a double-edged sword for me. I loved being here with

Kellan. I loved the memories of cuddling with him on the couch and making love to him in his room, but...Denny was here, too.

His ghost seemed to linger in the spaces he'd been. Leaning against the kitchen counter drinking a mug of tea. Lying back on the couch, watching sports on TV. Showering in the bathroom, sometimes with me. And our room, the first room we'd ever shared as a couple, was the room that Kellan refused to rent out again. The ghosts were heaviest in there. So heavy, that I refused to go in there. I couldn't even look at the door. As it was closed when Kellan and I walked into his bedroom, I thought that Kellan probably didn't go in there either. Like I said, double-edged sword.

Propping his guitar case in the corner of his room, finally having taken it out of his car from playing at Bumbershoot, Kellan watched me as I sat on his bed. With soft eyes, his vision flicked to the closed door across the very short hall upstairs. "You alright?"

Throwing on my brightest smile, I leaned back on my elbows. Kellan's face brightened considerably. "Of course, I'm fine." That was mainly true. I was fine. I'd let Denny go and I'd slowly begun to forgive myself for cheating on him. But being here was difficult for me sometimes and Kellan knew it. I think that was the real reason he didn't pressure me more to move in with him. I just wasn't ready to deal with the ghosts every day.

Sitting down beside me, he laid a palm on my thigh; it ignited me instantly. "I'm glad you're here," he whispered.

Sitting up, I laced my arms around his neck. "I had no choice. You wouldn't let me drive your car, remember?"

He chuckled and leaned in to kiss me. Lightly laughing myself, I threaded my fingers back through his shaggy hair and laid back on his pillows, bringing him with me.

He was instantly engaged, hands running over my body, his own body sneaking into position alongside mine. As I thought of all of the women who'd wanted him this weekend, women who he'd only briefly flirted with, or politely acknowledged, or in some cases completely

ignored, my heart swelled. He didn't want them. He wanted me. He loved me. And God, how I loved him, too.

# Chapter 3

## Distractions

Kellan's room was still dark when my eyes peeled open. Moonlight filtered in through his window, highlighting the objects that he'd collected over his life. There wasn't much—some paperbacks on his bookshelf, a few CDs scattered along the top of it, the Ramones poster I'd picked up for him last summer while out shopping with Jenny. Besides some pocket change and a couple of well-used notebooks, the only thing on his dresser was a bottle of some sort of hair product. Kellan said that a woman from high school had turned him on to the stuff and he'd been using it ever since to "manage the mess." I was fairly certain from the slight smile on his face when he'd said it, that he literally meant the words "woman" and "turned on." His high school years scared me a little bit.

Other than our clothes strewn about the floor from last night, the only other things of note in his room were his guitars. His main guitar, the one still tucked away in its black carrying case, was leaning against the wall beside an older, clearly worn one. Since Kellan never used that one while playing, I figured he kept it for sentimental reasons. Plain and seemingly inexpensive, he'd told me it was the first guitar he'd ever had, and the only possession he'd taken to L.A. with him when he'd run away. It was quite possibly the only thing from Kellan's childhood that was a happy memory for him. And, since his parents had literally tossed everything of his when they'd moved to this house he'd inherited, it was also the only memento of his youth. His childhood scared me a little bit too, just for a completely different reason.

As I fingered the smaller, silver guitar around my neck, the symbolic keepsake of him that he'd given to me when we'd been breaking off our affair, a keepsake that never left my body, I twisted my head to look at what had awoken me.

The sheets tangled and twisted around his body, his bare chest silver in the faded light pouring through his window, Kellan moved restlessly beside me. His brow furrowed, his face distraught, he was shaking his head and murmuring something I couldn't make out. I twisted around to touch his cheek, but he flinched away from me like I'd hurt him.

"Kellan," I whispered, "you're dreaming...wake up."

His hand fisted the sheets near his hip. His breath picked up as he shook his head again and whimpered. Carefully adjusting my body to a comforting position beside him, I leaned over and soothingly hushed him. Draping my arm over his chest, I could feel how rapidly his heart was racing. Tears pricked my eyes as I wondered what he was dreaming about. With Kellan, it could be any number of horrible things.

Leaning my head against him, I kissed his shoulder. "Wake up, baby, it's just a dream."

He started saying, "No," then, "Please." His face cringed away from me. His legs drew up to reflexively curl into a ball. Kissing his shoulder again, I lightly shook him. "Kellan, wake up."

Taking quick, shallow inhaleds, his body trembled under my fingers. Just as I considered turning on his lamp to wake him up, he gasped and his eyes flew open. Immediately propping himself up onto his elbows, he shied away from my embrace. Looking around with wide eyes, he seemed lost, like he didn't know where he was. With his breath still quick and his body still quivering, he swallowed over and over.

I reached out and cupped his cheek, forcing his gaze to mine. His confused eyes narrowed. "Kiera?"

I nodded, scooting closer to him. "Yeah, it's me. You're okay. It was just a dream, Kellan."

His rigid posture slumped back and he closed his eyes and hung his head. "Just a dream," he muttered. My heart cracked a little watching his face. Kellan's bad dreams weren't really just dreams. They were more like memories. I wasn't sure which bad memory Kellan had been reliving, but I knew it had terrified him.



Inhaling slowly, he took a couple of deep breaths. When he was calmer, he peeked back up at me. Running a trembling hand across his mouth, he shook his head. "I'm sorry if I woke you up."

Swallowing the emotion in my throat, I flung my arms around him and crushed my bare body to his. His arms loosely came around me and I could still feel his heart surging as adrenaline coursed through him. "It's okay." Kissing his cheek, I gave him a few moments to collect himself. When he settled back down to the pillows, his fingers rubbing the bridge of his nose like he had a headache, I propped myself up on his chest. "You want to talk about it?"

Bringing my hands up to his temples, I pressed my thumbs into the soft spots, taking over his headache reducing massage. He closed his eyes and relaxed into my touch. "I was back at home and my dad..." he stopped and swallowed, "it was nothing...just a dream."

I bit my lip to stop my sigh. His past was just something he didn't like to talk about. In fact, I was pretty sure I was the only human on earth that he'd ever confessed his history to. While Evan was aware that he'd been beaten badly, since Kellan had drunkenly spilled the beans once, and Denny knew about the abuse, having witnessed it himself, Kellan had never told them that his father wasn't his father. No one else knew that his mother had had an affair on her husband and gotten pregnant by another man. Then that horrible woman had claimed that she'd been raped. Because of the lie, or maybe because of the truth, the man who'd raised Kellan had been brutal with him...and his mother had done nothing to stop it.

I hated them both.

"Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?" I whispered, kissing his jaw.

He stirred, inhaling deep. Opening his eyes, he gently pushed me off of him and rolled me to my side. Pressing his body into mine, his no longer shaking, he cupped my cheek and tilted my head up. Attaching his warm lips to my neck, he murmured, "Yes, I'm done with talking."

My heart picked up its pace as his hand left my cheek to run down my side. I knew he was diverting his mind with my body. I knew it, yet I couldn't seem to stop him from doing it. He pushed me to my back, leaning over me as his lips worked their way down my throat. My fingers automatically locked into that marvelous hair as every section of skin that he touched on me suddenly burned.

My breath was embarrassingly fast as his hand rubbed a circle into my hip. He was purposely avoiding every spot I most wanted him to touch and it was driving me crazy, shutting my mind off. I shoved his head down a smidge when he kissed along the top of my breast and he chuckled before conceding. All thought of his earlier grief was gone from both of us as his mouth closed around a nipple, his tongue drawing a circle around the peak. Aching, I cried out and rocked my hips towards him.

A deep sound of satisfaction rising up his throat, he seemed just as pleased being the one giving the pleasure as I was receiving it. As his teeth lightly dragged across my tender flesh, his finger, equally as light, ran right between my legs. I was already ready for him; I think I was in a constant state of semi-arousal just being near him. I arched my back and ran my hands over my face and through my hair.

"Oh God," I muttered as his finger down below matched the motion of his tongue up above. The two hot spots were making every coherent part of my body melt away. I probably couldn't have even come up with my own name if someone had been around to ask.

Chuckling again, he peeked up at me with a devilish smile. "No, just me," he whispered. The part of me that could still get embarrassed wanted to smack him, but then he switched to the other breast and my head dropped back, my eyes closing.

"Oh God...yes."

Groaning a bit himself, he left my breast and slid his tongue up my throat. His finger also changed position, sliding inside where I wanted him to be. Working his way up to my ear, he sucked in a quick, erotic breath. "I love it when you say that," he whispered huskily.

I groaned and found his mouth, not even caring anymore that I hadn't brushed my teeth in a while. He didn't either, kissing me back just as fiercely as I kissed him. His finger gently moving into me was joined by another; I moaned, clutching his hair. His thumb joined the action, swirling around the sensitive part on the outside; I cried out again, my hands switching to his shoulders, forcibly trying to move him on top of me.

He resisted, chuckling and groaning almost simultaneously. "I love how much you want me," he muttered, his mouth moving to my jaw.

My body moving in perfect rhythm with his hand, I squirmed and whimpered. I hated how easily he could reduce me to a begging, quivering mass of hormones...and I loved it too. "Yes, I want you...now...please."

I could feel him grinning as he placed kisses along my skin. He did love it when I asked for it. Pressing his body into mine, I could feel how much he wanted me, too. I whimpered as he pulled his hand away from me, but then he settled himself between my legs, the hard length of him resting tantalizingly close, and my complaint shifted to a moan. Then he did...nothing, nothing but continue to kiss me.

It was torture. Pure, blissful torture. Having him so close sent my body into overdrive. I was practically clawing at his back, squirming underneath him, doing anything I could to move him into position. I couldn't, though. He held himself against me, but perfectly out of reach. It drove me crazy.

And my reaction drove him crazy. His breath was fast, his lips frantic. He groaned as his fingers explored my body. He moaned my name as he dropped his head to rest in the crook of my neck. Barely able to stand it another second, my hand trailed down his chest, his abdomen, the deep V that led straight to what I wanted, what I needed. My hand wrapped around him, hard, ready, pulsing under my fingers. A slight wetness coated my thumb as I swirled over the tip of him and he clutched the sheets again, but in a good way this time.

"God, I need you," he breathed in my ear. I started to feel like he meant more than just for a physical release, but he adjusted his hips and plunged right into me, and I wondered nothing more about it.

My hand fell away as he sunk in deep. We both made equally passionate groans of relief. Then we started moving together. In-between fast breaths and soft moans of pleasure, our lips searched the other's. He quickly brought me right to the brink, my cries more frantic with each thrust. Then, right as I was about to go over, he stilled his hips, not moving at all. It was an aching torture that made me dig into his backside, trying to get him to keep going.

With a strained voice he whispered, "Just wait, Kiera." I didn't think I could. I felt like I was going to explode. I wanted to whimper, I wanted to cry. Then he moved again.

Holy hell, the fire that surged through my body...I never knew anything could feel that good.

He did it two more times, stopping, then starting; I even begged him to do it on the last time. Then he didn't stop anymore. Then I didn't think he could, even if I asked him to. With his head buried in my shoulder again, he groaned so erotically, I instantly clenched around him, finally having the release that he'd kept from me for so long. It was...glorious.

He cried out as I squeezed around him and I felt him releasing into me. After a few final thrusts, he stopped moving, breathing heavily as he laid on my chest. I was a little surprised to feel that we were both slightly damp from the exertion. You wouldn't think sex could actually be a workout, but if done right...

Feeling lightheaded, I closed my eyes, wrapping my arms around his head. When our breaths had stabilized and our bodies cooled to normal, I looked down at him still resting on top of me. He hadn't moved at all. He was still...a part of me.

Hoping he hadn't fallen back asleep like that, I poked his shoulder. "Are you going to...move?"

He grunted then stretched, still not pulling out. "No, I'm good."

I giggled as I threaded my fingers back through his hair. "You can't stay there, you know." I felt myself flushing horribly and was instantly glad the room was still dark.

He peeked up at me, the moonlight glinting off his mischievous eyes. "I'm just saving us time." He grinned crookedly as he moved his hips a little. He was still sort of semi-aroused and the movement sent a shiver through my body. My eyes fluttered before refocusing on his smugly attractive face. He raised an eyebrow. "You know, for when you're ready for round two."

Rolling my eyes, even though a part of me was considering it, I shoved his shoulders off me. He laughed genuinely, finally removing himself and slinking to my side. "I was just being practical," he murmured, nestling into my body and kissing my shoulder.

His eyes closed as peace washed over his face. Sighing, I kissed his forehead, making his smile widen. Curling into him, I thought of his face before that little romp. What he'd done to block out the memory had been pretty spectacular, but now that it was over, I was thinking about it again. I hoped he wasn't thinking about it anymore. I didn't really want to bring it up, but I did want to make sure that he was okay.

"Are you alright?" I asked, running my hands up his chest.

He made a deep, satisfied noise in his throat. "Completely," he murmured, his smile a charmingly crooked one. I smacked his shoulder and he peeked an eye open. Seeing that my face was serious, his smile faded. His finger came out to tuck a damp lock behind my ear. "I'm fine, Kiera," he said, his tone more subdued.

I nodded, burying my head into his shoulder as he put his arm around me.

I kept a close watch on him for the next few nights, but he slept soundly from what I could tell. Only the normal nighttime adjustments that we all made during sleep, not the restless thrashing that came from nightmares. I didn't stay with him every night, but more often than not I fell asleep by his side.

It was comforting for me, having him touching my body as I drifted into dreamland, but I think it was even more of a comfort for him. He would pop into my apartment on nights that he stayed out late, really late, playing other clubs and bars around the Seattle area. He said he didn't like slipping into a cold bed. Well, okay, the way he'd phrased it was, "If I'm going to slip into a bed in the early hours of the morning, I want it to be warmed up by your hot little naked body."

I didn't actually sleep naked. Not unless he was there to put me to bed that way. Wearing pajamas was a habit that he was constantly trying to get me to break, telling me, "Why do you need clothes if I'm just going to rip them off?" But the gist of his comment was that he wanted to be warm with me, not cold and alone by himself.

But after a few weeks of watching him closely as he cuddled next to me, I stopped worrying about the dreams that sometimes plagued him. Instead, I started worrying about my upcoming reentry into higher learning. My schedule this year was the toughest, and I knew I was going to be studying nearly every waking moment I had. While I was one of those weird people that thrived on the challenge of school, I wasn't looking forward to so much of my free time being absorbed with it. But Kellan was patient, and a pretty good study buddy—when he wasn't trying to distract me with sex—and free for the bulk of the day since he "worked" nights, so I knew I'd still get to spend a lot of time with him.

But I meant what I said when I'd told him that I felt more well-rounded living with my sister, and I tried to hang out with other people besides my boyfriend. In fact, Jenny had decided that she wanted to try her hand at art, and had cajoled Kate and me into taking a class with her. We went every Monday and Wednesday morning, usually stopping for espressos afterwards.

The Monday before my school started up again was my last class. If I'd been getting graded on this course, well...I'd have received my first "F" ever.

"Well, Miss Allen, it's a very nice use of...color."

The kind, older woman who taught the course out of her home, used to teach art at one of the local high schools. She patted me on the back,

her lips in a tight smile, as she complimented me on the only positive thing that she could say about my elementary level bowl of tropical fruit. While I'd been working on the thing for three weeks, it looked like something a six-year-old had drawn and colored in one afternoon. Artist, I was not.

As the teacher walked over to commend Kate on her perfectly proportioned apples, I wondered if the retired school teacher had been around when Kellan was in school. Then I wondered if she'd been at *his* school. Maybe he'd taken her class. Maybe she'd been his teacher, complimenting him on his study of the female form. Instantly I started to think that maybe she'd "taught" Kellan in more ways than one; a scowl formed on my lips.

A light laughter broke my train of thought and I looked over at Jenny watching me. "It's not so bad, Kiera."

With the end of her pencil, she pointed to my pathetic attempt at realism. "It's sort of...Picasso-ish."

I frowned, but then laughed with her. Picasso wasn't really what I'd been going for, but then again, art was subjective. One man's garbage was another man's Monet. Maybe I had a future in it after all. Looking over at Jenny's drawing, I reconsidered. No, out of all of us, Jenny was the one with a future. She'd passed up fruit bowls ages ago, and was on to drawing people. What she'd created with just a pencil blew my mind.

She'd drawn the band...our band. It was a close-up of them on stage—Griffin and Matt on their guitars, jamming away, Evan beaming with joy behind his drums, and Kellan, singing away on his microphone. She'd even managed to capture the devilish curl of a smile that Kellan got when he sang. It was breathtaking, and put my sad little bundle of grapes to shame.

Sighing, I pointed at her drawing. "That's amazing, Jenny. Really, you've got a knack for this."

Her face blossoming into a wide smile, she looked back at her picture. "Thanks." Erasing a minute pencil line on Matt's guitar, she looked back

at me. "I was thinking of having Pete put it up at the bar when I was done with it." She shrugged. "You know, as an homage to his boys."

She giggled and I nodded. "No, that's a good idea." Watching her perfect a shadow line across Kellan's jaw, making the masculine right angle stick out even more, I shook my head. "I think they'd really like that, Jenny." She nodded as she went back to work on it, and thinking of the bassist she was working on, I snorted a little. "You should probably draw a flasher in there somewhere for Griffin."

She laughed. "Yeah, definitely." Scrunching her pale brows, she shook her head. "What is up with him and your sister anyway? Are they together or not?"

Sighing as I turned back to my misshapen fruit, I shrugged. "No idea. They don't act like they're together, and they certainly aren't exclusive if they are." Looking back at her, I shook my head. "But they, um, see each other at least a few times a month."

Jenny nodded, her blonde locks dangling around her shoulders. "I know. He talks about it whenever they do." She shrugged one shoulder. "I asked him once what they were and he said..."

Biting her lip, she didn't finish that sentence. Not sure if I really wanted to hear anything Griffin said about my sister, I raised an eyebrow. "He said what?" I asked cautiously.

Avoiding looking at me directly, she sighed softly and looked around. I didn't take that as a good sign. While no one was close enough to hear her, she leaned towards me anyway. "He called her his...fuck buddy." Her lips twisted into a grimace and she rolled her eyes.

My cheeks flamed red hot and the only coherent sound I could make was one of disgust. Seeing my expression, Jenny shook her head again and went back to her pencil drawing of the revolting man. "Yeah, I know," she flicked the image of him on her paper with her pencil, "he's a tool."

Adjusting the eraser of the pencil to his waistband she grinned at me mischievously. "Maybe I should just neuter him?"



I busted out laughing, the entire room of quietly working, artists-in-training twisting to look at me. My cheeks heating even more, I dropped my head into my hands and let the giggles take me over. If only taming Griffin could be that easy.

Kellan and I had the evening off together, so after art I headed over to his place. Driving over there, I considered how rare it was for us to get a matching night off, unless I asked for one on an evening he wasn't playing anywhere, it usually didn't happen. As school was starting tomorrow and I was a bundle of nerves about it, I began to wonder if Kellan had asked Matt to keep this night open when he'd lined up the gigs for the month. It wouldn't surprise me if he had.

Jenny dropped me off at his place and she and Kate waved goodbye. I had a car, Denny's beat-up little Honda, but Anna had pretty much taken it over. She always asked before she could use it, but I was actually a little relieved that she did take it so much. It seemed more like her now than my ex boyfriend. Besides, I was horrible with stick shifts.

Kellan was out when I got there, his front door firmly locked as I jiggled it. As his car was still parked in the driveway, I figured he'd taken advantage of the beautiful, sunny afternoon to go for a run. Pulling my keys out of my bag, I flicked through the ring until I found his. We'd each exchanged keys not too long ago. "The next step," Kellan had called it. Stepping into his home, the coolness of his empty entryway hit me. I set my heavy bag to the floor with a rush of relief. Knowing I'd probably end up staying the night here, I'd packed everything I needed for tomorrow—clothes, books, paper, pens and pencils.

Examining the book bag with narrowed eyes, I took a mental inventory for the hundredth time. Just as I was wondering if I'd packed the Lit book that I needed, Kellan's front door opened again. I glanced over at him, looked back to my bag, then snapped my head back to him. He'd gotten hot while running and his shirt was draped over his shoulder. His lean, toned body was glistening as he stepped through the door, wiping his face off with the edge of his tee. His breath was heavier from his exercise, and his abs clenched and relaxed in such an appealing way that I could not stop staring.

I finally did when he chuckled at me. "You're obsessed, you know?" he laughed out, scrubbing dry the edge of his hair with his shirt. I flushed instantly, thinking he meant me staring at his body all the time, but he raised an eyebrow and pointed to my bag. "You're going to be just fine."

I relaxed, feeling my embarrassment sliding away. Rolling my eyes, I shook my head. "I know. I honestly don't know why it twists my stomach so much."

Grinning, he turned and shut his front door. My eyes darted down his bare back to the loose track pants he had on, but I managed to snap them back up to his face when he turned around again. "I know just how to get your mind off of it."

Enjoying the playful look in his eye, I tilted my head as he came up to me, slinging his arms around my waist. "Oh?" I asked, lightly resting my fingers on his damp chest, his skin deliciously soft to the touch.

Grinning crookedly, he raised an eyebrow and looked down my body. "Yep." I bunched my brows at the amused look on his face. Laughing, he released my body and kissed my cheek. "Just let me clean up first."

Watching him move around me to go upstairs, I nodded, my lips still twisted as I wondered just what he'd come up with to occupy me. Still laughing at my expression, he smacked my bottom before hopping up the stairs two at a time.

Smiling at him, I shook my head and walked into the living room to distract myself from the thought of him in the shower. It got a little hard to do when I heard the water turn on. I had to turn the television up and force myself to be suddenly fascinated with marine plant life.

By the time I actually *was* interested in estuary ecosystems, even leaning over my knees as I focused on Kellan's big screen, he finally came back down. Twirling a lock of hair around my finger, I didn't hear him at first. Not used to being ignored, he grunted and leaned over to kiss my neck. I startled when his lips brushed my skin, then smiled and closed my eyes. I tilted my head to give him better access.

“Is this how you’re going to distract me?” I asked lowly, starting to feel like he could distract me that way all afternoon long.

Chuckling deep in his chest, he grabbed my waist and pulled me from the couch in one swift, playful move. “Nope.” Smiling, he flicked the end of my nose with his finger. “I have a better idea.”

Taking in the sight of him dressed in my favorite deep blue shirt, a color that made his eyes seem impossibly beautiful, I pursed my lips. “You’re not interested in...playing with me?” I’d really thought that would be his plan.

His lips curved up into a smile that screamed sex, but he shook his head. “Oh, I intend to play with you.” Laughing, he grabbed my hand and led me into the kitchen. Over his shoulder, he added, “Just not the way that you’re thinking.” Sitting me down at his table, he leaned over the back of me and kissed my cheek again. “At least, not yet anyway.”

As I shook my head and bunched my brows, wondering what the heck we were doing, he started rummaging through his kitchen drawers. Humming to himself, a small smile permanently on his face, his hair wonderfully messy and slightly damp around the edges, he opened and shut every junk drawer he had.

When I was just about to ask him what the heck he was looking for, he finally made a happy noise and grabbed something shoved in the very back of a crammed drawer. A crooked smile on his face, he looked back at me at his table and lifted his hand to show me what he’d found.

“Playing cards?” Smiling, I shook my head. “Are we playing pinochle all afternoon?”

Frowning at me, he raised an eyebrow. “Pinochle? Are we sixty?” His grin returning, he opened the pack of cards, tossing the jacket back to the counter. Shuffling the cards, he sat down opposite me at his table. “No, we’re playing poker.”

Shaking my head, I murmured, “I’m really not that good at poker.”

His smile brightened gorgeously. "Well, that is actually perfect, because we're playing strip poker."

Flushing all over, I immediately stood up. Laughing harder, he grabbed my hand. "Come on, it will be fun." He lifted his eyebrows suggestively. "I promise."

Knowing my face was bright red, I slowly sat back down. "Kellan...I don't know..."

Leaning back in his chair, he eyed my body across from him very slowly. When he reached my face, he asked, "Have you ever played?"

I sighed and shrugged. "No."

Grinning, he nodded, still shuffling the cards. "Good. Then it will be a new experience for you." He tilted his head, his lip curling perfectly. "And I like giving you new experiences."

The flush from my cheeks rushed down my body as he stared at me intently. I suddenly wanted to play more than I'd ever wanted anything. I couldn't even remember what he was distracting me from, and I supposed that was the point.

Tucking my hair behind my ears, I pointed my thumb at his wide-open kitchen windows. "What about...your neighbors?"

He shrugged. "What about them?"

Looking away from the heat in his eyes, I swallowed. "I don't want them looking...at me."

Laughing huskily, he stood and pulled down some blinds rolled up near the top of the windows. When they were closed, he sat back down and raised an eyebrow. "Better?"

I nodded, not believing that I was actually considering this. Smiling at me, he laughed again. "Would it make you feel any better if I told you that I'm not very good at this either?" Laughing more, he shook his head. "I'm generally the first one naked."

My eyes widened as I flashed down his body. "You've played?" I asked, quite stupidly. It was Kellan I was talking to after all, the man who used to have threesomes like they were everyday occurrences. Of course he'd played strip poker. He'd probably played much more intense games that I did not want to think about.

He only smiled and nodded to my question, his face amused. Then he started dealing cards and explaining rules. I sighed listening to them, then mentally thanked myself for wearing a bunch of light layers today.

Over the course of the afternoon, I lost my shoes, socks, jeans and all but one of my short-sleeved t-shirts. Kellan was no better off, having lost his shirt on the very first hand and his jeans on a really bad bluff. Thank goodness girls generally wore more clothes than boys. More relaxed than when we'd started this little game, I laughed as I watched him reach down to take off his last remaining sock, setting down my pair of Queens in triumph.

Shaking his head, he muttered, "Trumped by the Queen....story of my life."

Giggling, I kissed the air then dealt us another hand. Scooping them off the table, he fanned the five slick cards in his hand as he studied them. Kellan had wanted to play traditional poker, not the style that's all the rage on TV now. Much like his car, Kellan liked the classics. His face was expressionless as he leaned back in his chair. Not that I really noticed his face. His bare chest was far too appealing. He looked very comfortable being nearly nude by the refrigerator.

I tried to match his casualness, since I was still far more dressed than he was, but it was odd to be sitting at the breakfast table in just my underwear. I played with the necklace at my throat while I studied the cards in my hand. Not bad, a low pair, but not great either; I'd have to take three on my turn and hope for the best. Glancing up, I found Kellan watching me with a small smile on his lips. He raised an eyebrow. "Nervous?"

His eyes flashed to my necklace and I instantly stopped playing with it. So much for tells, although, the thought of taking off my last shirt was

making me far more nervous than my lack of cards. Of course, if I won the hand, Kellan's next piece of clothing was those delightful black boxers he liked wearing. And I was pretty sure he wasn't wearing two pairs today.

Smiling effortlessly, I shook my head. "No?" I glanced down his body and raised my own eyebrow. "You?"

Biting his lip, he shook his head. "Nope. In fact, I don't even need any more cards. How about you?"

I contained the frown I felt coming. I really didn't have the best hand, just a pair of threes. Kellan would know that if I dealt myself more cards. I really didn't want to give him that satisfaction, especially when his lips started curving into a smug, seductive smile. Lifting my chin, I reminded myself that Kellan was awful at this game and he probably had nothing. Smiling softly, I shook my head. "Nope, I'm good."

He ran his tongue over his bottom lip, then drug his teeth over it. It was freaking hot and my mouth dropped open a little. "Yeah, I know," he whispered, laying his cards down. Blindly, I laid mine down, too.

Still staring at his mouth, I didn't notice what he had. When he chuckled, I finally blushed and looked down. "Crap." Shaking my head, I stared at his low pair...of fours. He had made me believe that he was bluffing, and unfortunately, I'd fallen for it.

Sighing, I gave him sad eyes. "Really?"

Laughing, he leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. "Deals a deal, Kiera." His smile not leaving him, he blatantly stared at my chest.

Sighing again, I plucked at the fabric near my waist. It wasn't as if he hadn't seen me before, it wasn't as if I didn't still have a bra on, but there was something nerve-wracking about causally taking off my clothes in broad daylight, with Kellan staring holes through me but not being anywhere near me. It quickened my breath.

"How did you ever talk me into this?" I muttered, lifting the fabric up and over me.

When my plain, white, practical cotton bra was exposed, Kellan's eyes started to smolder. Running my hands along my arms, I resisted the urge to hide myself. It helped that Kellan looked like I was wearing the sexiest lingerie on the planet, like my slight curves were the most voluptuous he'd ever seen. Finally peering up at my face, his grin turned devilish. "I love this game."

Laughing a little, I tossed my shirt at him. Just as he was inhaling it, a dopey grin on his face, the doorbell rang. I immediately tried to snatch it back, but he stood up with it and took a step away from me. His face lit up as he set it on the counter. "Oh good, food's here."

Crossing my arms over my chest and my legs over each other, I was instantly conscious of how little I was wearing. As Kellan stood tall and straight, hands on his hips, he seemed oblivious to the fact that only one piece of dark, loose fabric was hiding him away from the world.

"What food? What are you talking about?" I squeaked out, feeling my cheeks heat.

Grinning, he tilted his head at me. "I thought you might be getting hungry, so I ordered some pizza on your last bathroom break."

As I gaped at him, he turned to leave the kitchen. "Kellan!" He looked back at me and I flung a hand out at his glorious—but mostly bare—body.

His hands patted his chest, then his hips. "Oh...right." Smiling, he walked over to his pile of clothes near the table. I expected him to step into his jeans and pull them up, but he only rifled through them to get to a pocket. Seconds later, he pulled out his wallet. "I should probably pay them, huh?"

I sputtered something unintelligible, and he leaned up and gave me a brief kiss. As my hand was still gesturing to the expanse of smooth, muscled skin he was showing, he finished standing and hurried out to grab our food...in just his boxers.

Shaking my head, I grabbed his shirt by my feet and held it up over my chest. It wasn't as if I could be seen from the entryway, but if they saw Kellan like that, well, then they would probably assume that he wasn't half-dressed alone. It made my cheeks heat and I sunk my head into my hands. Well, that's what I get for being with a man that had no idea what being self-conscious felt like. He knew he looked good, and he didn't really care who else knew it too. Some days, I'd give anything for that sort of confidence. Yeah, that was also on my list of things to work on.

I heard him open the door and greet someone. Then I heard giggling...female giggling. Sighing, I shook my head. Of course the pizza person would be a girl tonight, on the night that Kellan decides to answer the door in his skivvies. I pictured him leaning against the doorframe, every wondrous muscle distinct and defined as pizza-chick drooled over our pepperoni. At least my name on his chest would be distinct and defined for her, too.

Sorry, girlie, but the hot man handing you a twenty right now belongs to me. See, it says so right there on his pec. I smiled and rolled my eyes at myself.

The giggling never stopped the whole time she was here, and it seemed like forever as I waited. When the door finally shut and Kellan sauntered back into the kitchen, pizza box in hand, his smile was beautiful. It faded a little when he saw that I'd covered up with his t-shirt in his absence. He pointed at me, a smaller box in his other hand. "Uh-uh, that's cheating. You have to stay as naked as you were when I left."

I rolled my eyes and dropped his shirt to the floor. "Even when you're flirting with the delivery girl?"

Setting the larger box on the counter, he twisted his lips at me. "I wasn't flirting."

Deciding to try on that self-confidence that oozed from him so fluidly, I stood up. His eyes traveled down and back up my body, his smile evening out. "You weren't?" Coming up to stand in front of him, I leaned back on a hip and mimicked a pose that every sexy underwear



model used. Pointing at the smaller box in his hand, I asked, "Then what's that?"

Shrugging, he bit his lip. "She had some extra breadsticks. She said we could have them if we wanted."

I shook my head and he chuckled. Quickly setting down the box, his arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me tight to his body. I laced my arms around his neck while his lips traveled up my throat to my ear. "I can't help what women find appealing." His mouth danced over mine, soft and feather-light, while his hand ducked inside my underwear, cupping my bottom. "But *I* only find you appealing," he murmured.

Breathing much heavier, I attached my mouth to his. He could have given her a lap dance for those breadsticks right now and I wouldn't have cared. Well, okay, I would have cared, but I would have let it go. He may be the object of many people's affections, but I was the object of his.

Just as I was considering removing the last piece of his clothing, he stepped away from me. Grabbing my hand, he twirled me out from him and then back to him. Laughing, my hand touched his chest for a moment before I was swirled away again. His laughter joined my own, and with only the merriment of our joy as music, we danced for a moment in his kitchen...in our underwear.

We never went back to our game after that, just snatched up greasy slices between dips and twirls. Eating and laughing, Kellan completely swept away any lingering nerves I had about the next morning. He completely washed away any thoughts of self-consciousness too. By the time we were a few slices into our pie and through a few of his hard-earned breadsticks, I was shaking my modestly covered booty for Kellan. Nearly in hysterics when he chose to copy my move, I enjoyed finally feeling a small speck of his confidence.

And he was the reason I felt it. His gaze, his touch, his smile, his laugh, no one had ever made me feel...worshipped...quite like he did. I felt like I could do anything as I danced in that kitchen with him and I knew, without a doubt, that I really would be fine tomorrow.

# Chapter 4

## Gossip

I woke up the next morning far earlier than I'd intended to. A small flutter of nerves in my stomach told me that I was doing something potentially embarrassing today. I pushed the feeling back as I sat up. Unlike the dream I'd just awoken from, I wouldn't be tripping in front of the class today. No, the only sort of embarrassment I'd feel was walking the halls with a rock star. I was pretty sure Kellan would feel the need to walk with me to my first class, like I was a Kindergartener going to school for the first time, but that was okay. Having him beside me drew all of the attention to him, and he didn't mind being everyone's focal point.

Looking around his empty bedroom, I wondered where the rock star was. Standing, I slipped on my underwear and grabbed one of his t-shirts from his drawer. It smelled amazing as I slipped it over my head and I briefly considered wearing it to school with me. My first class today was British Literature with a focus on turn of the century feminism, but surely those long-deceased, forward thinking writers would understand the allure of Kellan Kyle's clothing?

Knowing I was up way too early, hours before I had to get ready, I headed downstairs to where my boyfriend most likely was. Not surprisingly, I found him in the kitchen, perfect and causal, dressed in worn jeans and a light shirt. He was leaning against the counter as the coffee brewed. With the coffee scent mixing with the wondrous scent of him, I smiled and walked over to where he was watching me.

Before I could say anything, he spoke one of my favorite words. "Mornin'."

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I snuggled into his chest. “Good morning.” It still being an indecent hour, I yawned after my greeting.

Chuckling, he rubbed my back. “You don’t have to wake up with me. You can sleep in until your school starts.”

Resting my chin on his chest, I peeked up at him; his dark blue eyes seemed completely rested, intense and alive with a passion waiting to be stoked, just under the surface. “If you’re up, I want to be up.” Scrunching my brows, I added, “Why do you get up so early, when you’ve got nowhere to be?”

Sighing softly, he looked away from me. “Well, let’s just say that my childhood trained me to wake up at the crack of dawn.” Looking back to me, he shrugged. “Waking up on my own was preferable to being woken up.” Shaking his head, he softly added, “I guess the habit stuck, now I can’t seem to stop waking up early.”

I bit my lip, hating what had been done to him at such an early age, hating that it still affected him, even years later, even with the abusers dead and gone. Feeling a remembered melancholy seep into his eyes, I shook my head and forced myself to smile brightly. “Well, I’m glad you do. Quiet mornings with you are some of the best memories that I have.”

His sad smile widened into a peaceful one as he ran some fingers back through my hair. “Me too,” he whispered. “I always looked forward to you coming down to see me.” He shrugged. “Even if it was just for a little while, it still made me feel like we were...together.”

His smile started to fade and I reached up to cup his face. “We were, Kellan. We were together...even if it was just for a little while.”

Memories of all of our stolen moments together swept over me as I touched his face—laughing with him, quiet conversations, holding him, being held by him, being angry with him, being insanely jealous over some harlot he’d been with the night before, even though I’d had no right to be. Falling in love with him... Most of it had started right here in his kitchen, waiting for the coffee pot on the counter to finish brewing.

Lost in the memories, lost in the dark blue depth of his eyes studying mine, I nearly jumped out of my skin when the phone rang. Kellan smiled and chuckled at me as my heart raced about a million miles per hour. I smacked him on the chest as he gently pushed me back and walked over to the obtrusive thing. The shrill sound stopped when he picked up the corded handle.

“Hello?” Leaning back, Kellan smiled at me as I took some deep, calming breaths. Then his eyes shifted over to stare out the window as he listened to the voice on the other line. “Hey, Denny, long time, no hear.”

My eyes widened as I listened to my boyfriend greet my ex-boyfriend. It was...odd. I knew they still talked, I still talked with Denny too, it just rarely happened when I was in the room. Tilting my head, I considered leaving Kellan to have a private conversation with the man that I knew he still considered family, despite everything.

Just as my body turned away, Kellan’s voice stopped me. “Yeah...she’s right here...hold on.”

I twisted back to Kellan holding the receiver of the clunky, green phone out to me. Shrugging a little, he whispered, “He called here for you.”

His face and voice were smooth as he said it, but I thought I saw a slight crease in his brow, and I wondered how he really felt about me still talking to Denny. Knowing he had nothing to worry about there, since Denny and I were completely over, not to mention distanced by thousands of miles since Denny was back home in Australia, I smiled comfortingly and grabbed the phone from him. Kellan remained where he was against the counter, making no attempt to leave me to my privacy. I could understand why.

The butterflies in my stomach flared up again as I brought the receiver to my ear. It had been a while since I’d talked with Denny last, a couple of months actually. The time apart was making me nervous to talk to him again. Well, that and Kellan standing a foot away from me. Remembering that Denny was still a good friend to both of us, I relaxed as I greeted him. “Good morning, Denny.”

He laughed, the sound instantly taking me back to the countless lazy afternoons we'd spent together in Ohio. It tightened my heart a little bit. Over or not, I still missed him. "Actually, it's evening here. Did I wake you?"

His accent was thicker now that he was back at home. It was delicious to the ear and I smiled and laughed at his comment, remembering the massive time change between us. "No, Kellan and I are up."

I bit my lip, also remembering that he'd called me *here*, and had asked if I was awake, which meant he figured I'd spent the night, which meant he probably also assumed I'd slept with Kellan, in the figurative sense. And he'd be right, if he thought that. I hated him thinking about it, much like I still hated to think about him with his current girlfriend, a sweet woman named Abby that he'd been with for a while now, longer than Kellan and I had officially been together.

He didn't react to me lumping myself together with the man who'd stolen me away from him, though. Kellan, however, smiled devilishly. "Ah, good. Did I miss it?" Denny asked anxiously.

I furrowed my brow and shook my head. "Miss what?" Kellan repeated my gesture and I shrugged at him.

Denny quickly filled in the blanks for me. "Your first day back to school. Is it today, or did I miss it?"

My mouth dropped open as I understood why he was calling. "Did you call just to wish me good luck on my first day of school?" Tears stung my eyes that he would still be so sweet to me. He shouldn't, not after everything I'd done to him. He should curse my name and vow eternal vengeance on me. But that...just wasn't Denny.

I heard him clear his throat and pictured him running a hand through his piecey, dark hair, a goofy smile on his beautiful face. "Well, yeah, I know how nervous you get about stuff like that." He paused and my throat dried up, amazed and stunned by his level of forgiveness. Kellan narrowed his eyes at my reaction, but didn't say anything. In the silence, Denny asked, "Should I not have called, Kiera? Is this...weird?"

Swallowing repeatedly, I shook my head. “No, no, I’m sorry. Yes, of course you should call me. And no, you didn’t miss it, and yes, I’m a little nervous.” Not liking the tension that had built up, I said all of that really fast.

Kellan crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his head, but Denny laughed. “Oh, okay, good. Well, I just wanted to wish you well, and let you know that I was...thinking about you today.”

He cleared his throat again while I blinked back the tears again. God, he was just too good of a person. Sometimes I thought I was an idiot for ever hurting him. Okay, all the time I thought I was an idiot for hurting him.

“Thank you, Denny...for remembering. That was incredibly sweet of you.” I felt a flush creep over my face as I peeked up at Kellan. He sniffed and quickly looked away. I felt that age-old guilt wash over me. And just when I thought I’d never have to feel guilty again too.

Softly, Denny responded with, “No problem, Kiera. I know that Kellan,” he swallowed after saying his name, “is probably doing a lot to help you out today, so you probably don’t need to hear it from me, but, good luck.”

Not knowing how else to respond, I only whispered, “Thank you, Denny.” Kellan, still not looking at me, took a step away. I immediately grabbed his arm. He paused, but still wouldn’t look back at me.

Denny laughed a little into the receiver. “Uh, and tell your sister sorry for me. I called there first and I’m pretty sure I woke her up.”

Smiling, I laughed. Anna did not like being woken up early in the morning. “Yeah, I’ll be certain to do that.” Kellan’s arm under my fingers turned rigid, but he stayed where he was, staring at the coffee pot like it was the most important thing in the universe. I hated that this was bothering him, but it shouldn’t. Denny and I were nothing anymore, and he knew that.

I soothingly stroked his arm with my thumb as Denny laughed and said, "Well, Abby and I are at a party for work, so I should get going. She'll fillet me if I stay on the phone all night."

Laughing lightly, I told him, "Alright. Tell Abby hi for me, and have fun." After he responded that he would, I turned from Kellan, angling my head away from him. "Hey, thank you so much for remembering, Denny...that means a lot to me." Before he could respond, I added, "I'm so sorry, Denny, about everything."

He sniffed and was quiet a moment, then, "Yeah, I know, Kiera. Have a great day at school. I'll talk to you later, goodbye."

Closing my eyes for a second, I exhaled, "Bye."

Hanging up the phone, I kept my eyes closed as I twisted back to Kellan. When I opened them, he was still staring at the dark coffee resting in the full pot. Although his face was blank, a myriad of emotions were shifting through his eyes. He took another long second, then finally looked back at me.

Smiling encouragingly, I brushed a strand of hair off his forehead. "Hey, you okay?"

He nodded, a smile seamlessly brightening his face, if not his eyes. "Of course, I'm fine. Denny called to wish you luck, that was nice of him." There wasn't a trace of jealousy or sarcasm in his voice, but I heard it anyway.

Sighing, I laced my arms around his neck. "You know that doesn't mean anything, right? You know that I love you, and Denny is nothing more than a friend now, don't you?" I searched his eyes as his smile faltered. "Don't you?"

He started to look towards the pot again and I caught his cheek, making him look at me. His smile returned, perfectly natural. "Yes, I know, Kiera." In a softer voice he added, "I know exactly what you and Denny are."

Not entirely sure what he meant by that, I decided to just take it at face value. Leaning up, I gave him a soft kiss. "Good. Because, although he's important to me, you're more important, and I don't want me talking with him to hurt you."

His eyes widened as he stared down at me, like he really was surprised to hear me say that. It hurt my heart a little that he still didn't understand—I'd chosen him, I loved him. Kissing him again, I whispered, "I know what you're thinking, and you're wrong. You're not second. I could have fled to him, but I went to you. I couldn't live without *you*. I chose *you*. I love *you*."

Swallowing, his eyes searching mine moistened. "It still feels...unreal...I guess. I'm not used to being...loved by someone. I keep waiting to wake up."

Biting my lip, I shook my head. "Well get used to it. I'm not going anywhere, Kellan."

After a leisurely breakfast, Kellan helped me get ready for school. Well, okay, Kellan laid out on his bed and stared while I got dressed. I'd already had to tell him that he couldn't help me in the shower. Firmly pointing at him to stay put on his pillows, I proceeded to slip my bra on under my towel. Kellan shook his head at me, rolling his eyes. "I've seen you naked, you know?"

Flushing as I turned around, I muttered, "I know, but you just staring at me like that is...different."

He snorted and I peeked over my shoulder at him as I slipped on some clean underwear, also under my towel.

Grinning crookedly, he raised an eyebrow. "It's just skin, Kiera." Sitting up and scooting to the edge of the bed, where he could just reach me, he grabbed my knee. His hand started to slide up my leg. "And it's far too beautiful to keep covered up."

Loving the shivers he was sending up my body, but knowing that I couldn't lounge in a bed with him today, unfortunately, I stepped away



and again pointed to his pillows. "I don't need to get you any more riled up than you constantly are, by giving you a peep show."

Expertly slipping on my jeans while still having the towel firmly around my chest, I watched him chuckle and relax back down on his mattress. "Fine," he muttered sullenly. "I'll just remember that the next time you're staring at *my* body."

I paused in pulling my blouse out of my bag and met his eye. Knowing that I actually did stare at him quite a bit, I sighed and let the towel drop to the floor. His smile was glorious as he took in my plain, cream-colored bra and I looked away, embarrassed and a little turned on by his attention.

Quickly counting to five, figuring that was long enough for him to have a decent mental picture for the day, I tossed on my fitted, button-up shirt. Pulling my long hair out of the back, the bulk of it still damp, I rolled my eyes at the heat in his expression while he continued to stare at my covered-up chest. Men.

Clearing my throat finally brought his eyesight up. Locking gazes with me, he smiled devilishly. "Well now I'm turned on and you can't go. You're just going to have to stay here with me today."

Laughing, I leaned over the bed to kiss him. He seemed to think that was a green light and grabbed my body, pulling me on top of him. Giggling in his mouth while we softly moved against the other, I was grateful that his mood had improved from the conversation earlier this morning. I really didn't like him down about Denny, especially since he had no reason to be. I understood though. I'd hurt him so many times while I'd been with Denny. Both of them really. I had no desire to ever hurt a man again.

As our kiss got more intense, Kellan's body started telling me that he really hadn't been kidding about being in the mood. I reluctantly pulled away from his mouth. "I wish I could stay with you." Frowning, I sulked. "I'm not really looking forward to today."

Sighing, he cupped my cheeks and searched my eyes. "Someday, I'll get you to feel like the confident woman who was prancing around in

her underwear last night, all of the time." Running his hand back through my hair, he added. "You are a beautiful, intelligent woman with a boyfriend who adores you. You have nothing to fear...ever."

Smiling, I blushed and looked away. "Easy for you to say, rock star."

Pulling back, I stood and found my comb. Running it through my locks, I watched him laugh and sit up. "I get nervous."

I gave him a very wry smile as I stopped mid-stroke. Yeah, right. Kellan Kyle was never nervous. Not around people. Not about his body or his looks. He oozed confidence in nearly everything he did.

Tilting his head, he shrugged. "No, it's true. In the beginning, I used to get nervous on stage."

Scrunching my brow, I finished unsnarling my hair. "Let me guess, you picture the crowd naked now?"

Chuckling, he stood up. "Nah, I had to stop doing that...turned me on."

Pushing his chest back as he came up to me, I laughed unintentionally. "You're impossible."

Shaking my head, I rolled my eyes; he only grinned and shrugged. "We all have our weaknesses," he muttered playfully, sneaking around behind me and holding me tight. "You will be great and I'll drive you every day if you want." Chuckling, he added, "Maybe I'll sit in on a class or two."

I laughed at the image of him bored beside me during lectures. "I doubt the professor would like you snoring during class." Chuckling more, he kissed my neck.

Sighing, I rested my wet head on his shoulder and closed my eyes, letting his peaceful scent wash over me. I'd decided to forgo wearing his t-shirt to school, but maybe I could get his scent to leech into my clothes. Keep him with me olfactorily. God, what was I saying about not being consumed by him? I couldn't help it. He was...consuming.

Much sooner than I would have liked, the time was up for me to go to class. As promised, Kellan drove me to school. His smile was peaceful as he leaned back in his seat, one hand draped across my thigh, the other casually holding the wheel straight. He seemed like someone returning to a favorite activity after a long absence. It made me smile that driving me around was such a pleasant experience for him. I'd think most people would get tired of it after a couple of weeks. Not Kellan though, he never complained about all of the various places that I needed to go. It was just one of the many ways he showed his affection. For never having been a boyfriend before, I was constantly surprised at how good he was at it. Then again, Kellan was good at most things he tried...except pool...and, as I'd found out last night, poker.

Smiling at the image of him in black, silky boxers, pizza in hand as he twirled me around the kitchen, I didn't even notice when we finally stopped. I blinked and looked around when he shut off the car.

The University of Washington. Located on the other side of Lake Union from the heart of downtown Seattle, it was a massive campus, more like a small city. Several of the local businesses surrounding it survived solely on the influx of college kids coming into and out of this school every year.

I'd gotten to know this area pretty well after my time here. I wasn't really that nervous about knowing where everything was, although my ethics class was in a building that I'd never had to go into last year, it was more walking into a room full of strangers that tangled my nerves. I was not a big fan of being the focus of people's attention. Which made walking beside Kellan both a blessing and a curse.

It was a blessing, one, because I loved having him around, but mainly because when he was beside me, people tended to look at him. He just had that aura. The face, the hair, the body, the swagger—everything about him made you take notice. And for girls, the notice was usually a long one.

It was a curse because, now that we were together, he was a fountain of affection. Our light hand holds last year were arms around each other's waists now. As he laughed along to some comment my parents had

made last week about him needing to earn a real living, since being in a band was not a viable career for the man their daughter was dating, a lot of eyes flicked from him to settle on me. Much like at the bar, I got the feeling that I was being judged as I walked along, judged if I was worthy to belong to the rock-god. And because Kellan was right about my general lack of confidence, I couldn't help but think that I came up short in their eyes.

Lifting my chin, I forced it from my mind. What did it matter if a bunch of random people didn't think I was worthy of Kellan? Kellan did, and really, what other opinion did I need?

Laughing along with him, I nearly ran right into a small swarm stopped in the hallway.

Kellan pulled me back right before I collided with a man that seemed about seven feet tall. He hovered over Kellan, who was at least a couple of inches over six feet. The dark-haired boy had a huge smile on his face as he pointed at Kellan.

"Hey, aren't you that guy? The singer of that band? The D-Bags?"

Kellan's face relaxed from a cautious expression into a natural smile, and I couldn't help but wonder if he'd thought the guy was going to start a fight with him. There was a time when Kellan didn't care too much about other people's relationships. "Kellan, yeah....I'm a D-Bag." He laughed a little after his comment, amused by his own band's name.

I shook my head at him, but the man and his small group of similarly tall friends crowded around, eager to talk to the semi-famous man they'd stumbled upon. Reaching out, the imposing fan grabbed Kellan's hand and shook it. "You were great at Bumbershoot, man!" Then the group started in on the compliments and questions.

They went on and on until I was afraid I was going to be late if we stayed any longer. Kellan answered all of their questions, and said polite thanks to all of their praises, then expertly released himself from the conversation, waving goodbye as he turned us to walk around the group. By the time he'd successfully disengaged himself, Kellan had been invited to at least three different parties.

Shaking my head as we approached my classroom, I laughed. Looking over at me, he bumped my shoulder with his. "What?"

Tilting my head, I gave him a crooked grin. "Look at you, finally getting some male fans."

Laughing as he opened the door for me, he shook his head. "We've always had male fans, Kiera." Raising an eyebrow, he added, "You just choose to fixate on the female ones."

Brushing past his body as I walked by him, I paused and leaned into his face. "Well, that's because they fixate on you," I whispered, letting my mouth almost touch his.

Biting his lip, I heard him groan a little. "Look at you...becoming a seductress," he whispered.

I blushed and immediately stepped away from him.

I heard his laughter behind me, but didn't turn to look. Soft lips greeted my cheek as his hands rested on my hips. "Have fun," he whispered in my ear.

I wanted to sigh and lean into him again, but female giggling reminded me that I wasn't alone with him in his bedroom. No, I was in front of a classroom, sort of being inappropriate with my boyfriend. Oh well, at least he'd managed to not make me nervous about my entrance.

With my cheeks flaming red from the embarrassment of our private moment being watched, I gave him a soft peck and told him that I would. Then I made a beeline to a seat in the middle, away from the chuckling women watching my man's backside as he waved and left the room.

After a rousing debate on the influence of sexism in early feminist literature, I was feeling right as rain with school again. I knew that would happen. Once I was settled, things were always fine. It was just the process of getting there that frazzled my nerves. After lit was my ethics class. Now that I was comfortable, I was looking forward to this one,

although, I had a feeling I'd be doing a lot a soul searching in it. Ethics and I had crossed paths recently, and I'm not sure that I fell on the right side of the morality line. No, no I'm pretty sure I'd failed miserably. Kellan and I both. Maybe I could do a paper about it? It would probably be cathartic.

Walking into the brick-and-mortar building, just as much a piece of art as a functional structure, my eyes swung across someone I hadn't seen in a while, someone I really wasn't all that interested in seeing again. Hovering by the front doors, I watched a familiar redhead with tight, bouncy curls talking to a couple of her friends. I recognized all three—Candy, and her two chatty spy-friends. They'd each bugged me about Kellan before. Candy the most, since she was the one that found sleeping with him an enjoyable pastime.

Well, that diversion was shut to her now, and she'd just have to get her kicks somewhere else. A small smile on my face, I watched as they laughingly trailed down the hall a few paces in front of me. I sighed when they all walked into the classroom that I also needed to walk into. I'd had a class with Candy before, last spring actually, when Kellan and I had finally gotten together for good. Guess I had another class with her. And, of course, this would be the class I had every day. And an ethics class to boot. Joy. I bet the universe was laughing its head off at the irony.

Shaking my head and rolling my eyes, I walked into the room amidst a small flurry of butterflies in my belly. They settled quickly once the people already seated looked up, then looked back down. Well, all but three looked back down. Candy and her friends continued to stare as I made my way to a section nowhere near them. I felt the eyes on my back as I sat down and grabbed a notebook, doodling like a mad woman.

I waited to feel the presence of Candy moving to sit beside me. When I finally felt a body approaching, I cringed and peeked up. It was only some strait-laced guy, though. He gave me a look that said, *Good, she doesn't seem like a talker, maybe I'll be able to hear if I sit next to her*, then sat down beside me. I resumed my drawing, glad that at least Kellan's ex-fling wasn't going to disrupt my learning.

No, she left me completely alone...all the way until after class.

Mentally going over the teacher's explanation on the difference between ethics and morals, I didn't notice her approaching at first. I didn't notice her until she and her friends had me sort of surrounded. Looking between the three walking out of the class beside me, I sighed softly and prayed that Kellan was waiting for me by his car, and not right outside the front doors.

Sidling up close to my side, Candy tilted her head at me. "So, rumor has it that you and Kellan Kyle are a thing now. Like, a real thing."

Peeking over at her, I considered stopping and extending my hand in a formal introduction, since we'd never, ever had one. I didn't though, only shrugged and muttered, "Yep."

She scoffed, her clone-like friends around her giggling. "So it doesn't bother you that he's a whore."

Stopping in my tracks, I glared over at her and wondered if I could slap a girl in the middle of school and not get in trouble. This was college, right? Wasn't it all about the freedom of expression? "He is *not* a whore. Don't ever call him that again." I felt the heat in my tone and was a little proud of myself that my voice wasn't shaking at all.

She put her hands on her hips, her friends moving to stand behind her, like backup singers or something. "Huh, I guess you're right." She leaned in, an eyebrow raised. "Whores get paid. He does it for the fun of it."

I literally had to grab my jeans to not deck her. Seriously? Deciding getting arrested for assault wasn't a good way to start the school year, I stormed off down the hall. She, of course, followed me.

"What? Can't handle the truth? I just wanted you to be aware that he still gets it on with every girl he can." She laughed, dryly. "It's not like being with you has miraculously turned him into a good boy now. Men are what they are, and Kellan is a sex addict."

Tears of anger stinging my eyes, I twisted to face her. "You don't know anything about him. You don't know anything he's been through."

Leaning into her, I raised my own eyebrow. "I know you've slept with him, but don't confuse sex for intimacy." Irritated that I'd let her get to me, knowing full well that she was just trying to rile me up, I jerked open the front doors. Luckily, Kellan was not there.

Right on my heels, she snapped back, "Hey, I'm doing you a favor. You think he's changed, you think he's suddenly a faithful, one-woman man now? A tiger doesn't change his spots!"

Groaning as I dashed down the steps, I tossed over my shoulder, "A tiger doesn't even have spots. Get your metaphors straight."

Prissily she marched beside me. "Whatever, my point is, Tina here," she jerked her thumb at the blonde striding next to her, "saw him after a show on the Square just last week." Smirking, she yanked on my elbow to hold me in place. "He was shirtless and about get it on with some skank."

Tina nodded her agreement, adding, "And in a storage closet too...how romantic."

Glaring between the two of them, I felt ice pour through my body. He had several shows during the week that weren't at Pete's bar. He got home really late after those shows, because he had to help clean up their stuff. He could have... I shook my head. No, not after everything...he wouldn't do that to me. A nagging voice in my head added, "*Right, just like you wouldn't do that to Denny?*"

Ignoring that voice, I narrowed my eyes at the gossipers. "You didn't see what you think you saw. I trust him." With that, I jerked my arm away and sauntered off.

Light laughter followed me, along with, "You know, him having your name across his heart doesn't mean he's not loaning out other parts of his body!"

My mouth dropped open as I looked back at her. Not many people knew about Kellan's tattoo. He was much more reluctant to strip off his shirt at shows now, like he didn't want the world to see his hidden art. It meant a lot to me that he felt that way. It was private, between the two of



us. How did this group of girls know about it? Had Tina really seen him half naked? I didn't want to believe it, but my mind vividly pictured him undressed, panting with desire, with some harlot fan attached to his mouth. Then I pictured him closing the storage room door and doing all sorts of unseemly things to her.

I felt my stomach rising as I gaped at them. They only chuckled at me, Tina giving me a fake, apologetic smile while Candy shrugged. "Dogs are dogs, Kiera," she said, smiling sweetly.

I bit my lip and forced myself to walk away from them, and not run. They were lying...they had to be.

When I got out to the parking lot, I spotted Kellan's shiny black Chevelle right away. I also spotted him and instantly understood why he hadn't greeted me outside of class on my first day of school. He was surrounded by a group of about five girls. He was casually leaning against his car as he talked to them. They giggled, tittering like thirteen-year-olds as he spoke. Even from the distance between us, I could see the small, amused smile on his face. After my meeting with Candy, it boiled my blood.

My hands in permanent fists, I strutted over to him. I tried to calm myself down, but instead I seemed to get angrier with each step. Where had they seen that damn tattoo? Where was he exposing himself? Was I being naïve in thinking that what we have is so monumental that he'd never stray from it? Was he still being a whore?

Laughing at something one of the hussies said, Kellan turned his head and spotted me. His small smile brightened at seeing me approach, then dimmed when he noticed the scowl on my face. The tittering girls didn't back off at all, and I had to elbow my way through them to get to him.

"Let's go," I bit out, not really in the mood to be around his fans for another second longer.

He nodded, his brow furrowed as he opened the passenger's door. After shutting it behind me, I heard him say to his adoring entourage, "I'm sorry, but I have to go. It was nice meeting you all." There were

whines and groans of disappointment as he walked over to his side of the car. I rolled my eyes.

Kellan watched me curiously as he started the car, the roar of the engine matching my foul mood. Cocking an eyebrow, he put the car in reverse. One eye on me, the other carefully tracked the girls, so he didn't run them over as they watched us pull away. "You want to tell me what happened that's got you all ticked off?"

Gritting my jaw, I glared at the floosies staring after him. Most turned away from my eye line, a couple glared back. "Not really," I muttered under my breath.

Sighing, he put his hand on my thigh. I instantly wondered where else that hand had been recently. "Will you anyway?" I looked back at him, trying to keep my expression and my mood even. He frowned before turning onto the road. "You're the one that said we should talk things out...and you look like you need to talk something out."

Grunting, and wishing I'd never said that to him, I crossed my arms over my chest. "I have another class with Candy this year. She made sure to say hello afterwards."

I watched him carefully as he studied the road he was driving along. He narrowed his eyes and tilted his head; it was an adorable expression of confusion. "Candy...?"

I rolled my eyes that her name didn't immediately register with him. Well, when your little black book was as about as thick as the local yellow pages, I suppose it took a while to mentally filter through it.

A second later, as I was sighing, recognition flared in his eyes and he peeked over at me. "Oh, right...Candy." Twisting his lips, he shrugged. "What...did she say?"

Full on glaring at him, I tightened my hands across my chest. If I didn't, I was sure I'd smack him. "She just mentioned a show that you had last week. You played in Pioneer Square, right?"

He looked up, accessing his memory, or was he accessing the creative part of the brain that made up rapid-fire lies. Looking up and to the left meant one, looking up and to the right meant the other. I could just never remember which one was which. "Yeah, yeah we did." He tilted his head to me. "Was she there? She didn't say hello." He added that last part quickly, as if he was reassuring me that he hadn't seen her.

I narrowed my eyes even more as I studied him. Had I just had sex last night with a man that was having sex with a bunch of other people too? God, it made me sick just to think about it. "No, a friend of hers saw you there...in the back."

I said that suspiciously and he looked at me funny before shifting his attention back to driving. Shrugging, he said, "Huh, well, okay." Peeking over at me, he raised an eyebrow. "Why is one of her friends seeing me making you look like you sucked on a lemon?"

Exhaling in a tightly controlled way, I resisted the urge to smack the crap out of him. "Because she says she saw you doing things...with someone who was not me."

His eyes widened as he stared at me, then he jerked the car over to the side of the road. I had to hold onto the door he moved over so fast. With the car slightly on the curb, he slammed it into park, and shifted to face me.

His expression deadly serious, he held my eye; I could feel mine stinging as my fears bubbled up to the surface. "I am not doing anything with anyone who is not you. Whatever she said was a lie, Kiera."

I lifted my chin, but I could feel the tear building, swelling until it rolled down my cheek. "She knew about the tattoo, Kellan."

He cupped my cheek, brushing the moisture off my skin. "Then she saw it somewhere else or someone told her about it, because I'm not fooling around with anyone." Unbuckling his seatbelt and scooting closer to me, he rested his head against mine. "I'm only fooling around with you. I'm only getting naked with you. I'm only having sex with you, Kiera." Pulling back, he met my eye. "I chose *you*. I love *you*. I'm not interested in anyone else, okay?"

I nodded, feeling more tears slide down my cheeks. I felt the truth in his words, words that were similar to the words of comfort and reassurance that I often gave to him. I hated that one conniving, jealous bitch had made me doubt him. If she hadn't had such a good point I wouldn't have, but Kellan had a long, sordid history of poor decisions when it came to women. I didn't always feel special enough to stop that cycle of behavior.

He leaned in to tenderly kiss me and I felt myself relaxing as he poured his heart into his soft touch. Tasting the salt of my tears between us, I tried to let the doubt go. We'd gone through so much. I'd seen a side of him, a vulnerability, that I was positive no other girl had seen before. I was certain that I had his heart, and surely he wouldn't risk losing his heart over some stupid ache his body might be feeling. Not when he could satisfy that ache with me. Not when I would take him into my bed every night, and the brand new bed that he'd just purchased for me the other day, too.

As our kiss picked up heat, our bodies inching closer as our breaths increased, I wanted to remind him what I could be to him, and I wanted him to remind me exactly what we had together—a bond that no eager fan could break. Knowing that I had a couple of hours before work, and an empty apartment, I dragged my lips up to his ear. "Show me that you want me, Kellan. Take me home."

He had the car back in drive and flying down the road a microsecond later.

# Chapter 5

## A Dream

It never failed to surprise me how quickly Kellan Kyle could turn my mood around. One minute I could be positive that I'd made a mistake and we would never work out, and the next I'd be languidly rising out of bed with him, a dopey, satisfied smile on my face and thoughts that everything in the world was right and good.

I felt that way now as I gave him one last peck before heading to my bathroom to get ready for work. Pulling out my curling iron, I made room for it on the small counter that my sister's beauty products seemed to multiply on. I listened to Kellan humming in my bedroom. It was a comforting sound and my dopey smile widened in the mirror.

Shaking my head at my frazzled I-just-had-sex hair, I yanked a brush through my waves. Kellan just had a way about him. He could ruin everything, or he could make everything perfect. Candy was just trying to interfere with that because she was the jealousy harpy that I was trying not to be. I'd heard her brag to students about being with a rock star before. While I sometimes wished he wasn't, she adored the fact that he was sort of famous around here. She wanted more of that fame. I was pretty sure she'd date him just to attach her name to him. It made me sick that some people were so obsessed with their fifteen minutes. For me, his fame only complicated things. It'd be so much simpler if no one knew who he was.

Finished with freshening up my makeup and taming my locks into a functional-but-cute ponytail, I headed back to my room. Kellan had made himself comfortable on the Queen-sized mattress that took up most of my tiny bedroom. Propped up on my pillows, he was happily rubbing his sock-covered feet together. Once again fully dressed, he was reading one of my romance novels with a small, amused grin on his face.

Glancing at the cover, which featured some bronze, buff man holding a scantily clad woman to his bare chest, I shook my head at Kellan. "What are you doing?"

Not looking up at me, his smile widened. "I'm reading your porn."

Smacking his foot as I walked by, I scoffed, "That's not porn...it's romance."

Snorting, Kellan looked up at me. "Really?" Glancing down at the book, he started reading a passage from it. *"She gasped in his mouth when his erection slid against her. He groaned when her desire coated him. They were both so ready to be together, guilt and remorse free...finally. Her legs wrapped around him as her hips rocked him into place. As he felt the tip of himself press against her entrance, he heard her groan, 'I want you buried in me, I want to be consumed by you.'"*

I flushed red all over, remembering the part that he was reading. It was a pretty hot scene, and usually did turn me on a bit. And the way he read it was so sensual... Embarrassed that he was sort of right, I snatched the book away from him, tucking it into a dresser drawer. I was pretty certain the next time I read it I would hear Kellan's sultry voice in my head. It made me ache just thinking about it.

Kellan gave me a sly smile. "See...porn." He leaned forward. "And hot porn too." He pointed to where I'd tucked the book away. "I wouldn't mind trying that thing on page—"

I cut him off, my cheeks hot to the touch as I yanked on his arm, pulling him to his feet. "Get your shoes on, it's time to go."

He laughed at me as he steadied himself. "Yeah, all right...maybe next time then."

Walking into Pete's with Kellan a little while later, I was greeted by a bubbly Kate. Since Jenny had the night off, she was my partner in crime for the evening. "Hi guys!"

“Hi, Kate.” I smiled at the bouncy woman and attempted to extricate myself from my boyfriend so I could go put my purse away. Just as our fingertips separated, Kellan grabbed my waist, pulling me back into his hips.

“I’ll have my usual,” he growled in my ear.

I bit my lip as his voice sent shivers down my spine. Twisting to give him a dirty look, I shook my head. “I know what you like, Kellan.”

He grinned devilishly, his hand slipping around to slink inside the back pocket of my jeans. “Yes...you certainly do.”

Realizing how suggestive what I’d said was, I pushed him away from me. He had such a dirty mind sometimes. Well, most of the time actually. He laughed at the color in my face, then kissed my cheek. “You’re so adorable.” Leaning in he whispered, “Have I mentioned how much that turns me on?”

Laughing as I untangled myself from him, I murmured, “What doesn’t, Kellan?”

Smiling, he shrugged one shoulder and walked back to his table. I sighed, watching his back pockets walk away from me. Kate beside me sighed too. I turned to look at her as she dreamily said, “God he’s got great hair. He always looks like he just got out of bed.” Meeting my eye, she frowned. “How does he do that?”

Biting my lip, hoping my face wasn’t beet red, I shrugged. I couldn’t exactly tell her that he was currently rocking an amazing head of sex-hair because he’d just had sex. That was a little too much information to give my co-worker. Shrugging, she shook her head and handed me a fistful of lollipops from the pocket of her apron. “Here, Pete had these made to give out to the customers.”

Unwrapping a red label with “Pete’s Bar” clearly written across it, she popped one in her mouth. “I keep forgetting to give them out though.” She smiled around the stick in her mouth. “They’re apple flavored.”

I smiled and thanked her, then went to put my stuff away. Once I was back on the floor, I unwrapped one too and stuck it in my mouth. God, I love apple flavor. It's so much better than actual apples.

Rita had Kellan's beer ready before I even got to the bar to pick it up. Staring across the room at Kellan, she sullenly handed it to me. "Here...this is for sweet cheeks."

Snatching it from her, I murmured, "Thanks," and rolled my eyes as I walked away. It was so irritating to have my guy mentally undressed over and over again. And people think men are the hornier bunch. I was beginning to doubt that.

Pulling the sucker out as I approached where Kellan was alone at his table, I handed him his drink. "Here you go...your usual."

He smiled at me as he took the beer from my hand. Then his other reached up and grabbed the hand holding my sucker. Closing his fingers over mine, he brought the treat to his lips and closed his mouth around it. Not breaking eye contact, he sucked on my lollipop for a moment, then let it go. It was horribly erotic and I heard a few groans from a nearby table of girls watching him. Wanting to lean down and taste the apple on his tongue, I instead decided to stick up for my rights.

Shoving his shoulder back, I frowned. "Eww, Kellan. That's mine."

Nothing about his mouth on or near anything of mine actually grossed me out, but it was the principle of the thing. You don't suck another person's sucker uninvited. Smiling, like he knew I'd let his lips go anywhere, he tilted his head at me. "What? I can put my mouth on your—"

I covered up that mouth, taking a quick peek at the girls at the table next to him, subtly leaning over in their seats to hear him speak. "Kellan!" I hissed under my breath.

Removing my hand from his lips, he continued undaunted. "...but I can't enjoy your sucker?"

Shaking my head at him, I felt a smile creep into my mouth. He was giving me a slight frown and puppy dog eyes. And damn if it wasn't



hopelessly attractive. Giving up, I shoved the sucker in his mouth. Those eyes had earned it. He smiled around the stick and I sighed in annoyance. "You could at least ask first."

Removing it, his lips curving over the edge of the ball seductively, he raised an eyebrow. "I didn't think I had to ask to suck on your...candy."

I frowned genuinely. "Don't say candy." After the afternoon I'd had, I really didn't want to ever hear that word again.

The smirk fell off his face as he understood my expression. "Sorry," he whispered.

Shaking my head, I leaned down and pressed my lips to his; the apple was as marvelous as I'd thought it would be. "It's alright." Ignoring the disgruntled noises from the table of women to my left, I softly kissed him again. "Just ask next time, sucker thief."

He was grinning and thoroughly enjoying his sweet treat as I walked away.

Not too much later, as I was relaying my day at school to Kate, minus the Candy-fiasco of course, the doors burst open. Startled, I looked over to see Matt stepping through them. His face was beaming as he immediately looked back to the guys' table. Seeing Kellan, his smile got even bigger and he practically bounded to the table.

Not used to seeing the shy man so exuberant, I looked back at Kate. She shrugged. We both twisted back to the front doors when we heard it open again. Griffin stepped through this time, with Evan right behind him. Both men were glowing as brightly as Matt had been.

They both darted to follow Matt, who was approaching Kellan, telling him something with an excited expression. Kellan frowned and looked over at the rest of the guys coming towards him. Scrunching my brows, I tried to figure out what was going on.

"What's up, Kiera?" Kate asked me, pointing to where Matt, Griffin and Evan were seated around Kellan, leaning into him as they all talked to him at once. Kellan's expression was one of shock as he looked

between all of them. He occasionally asked questions when one of them paused long enough for him to do so.

“I have no idea,” I murmured, stepping away from her to find out.

Kellan’s eyes snapped up to me when I was almost within ear shot. I paused when he leaned back and ran a hand over his mouth. His eyes looked worried, really worried. It made my feet feel like lead, made me afraid to go any closer to him. I’d thought it was good news by the look on the guys’ faces, but Kellan didn’t seem like he’d just heard good news. He seemed like they’d just told him life as he knew it was ending.

Excited, they all patted his shoulder. They were trying to get him to smile, but Kellan shook his head and murmured something to them, his gaze still locked on mine. Eventually they all turned to look at me. I actually took a step back as each of their eyes met mine. Evan’s was sympathetic; that scared me. Matt’s was appraising; that concerned me. Griffin’s was irritated; that...was really nothing new.

Kellan leaning forward brought all of their attentions back to him. He started talking, low and intensely, and I couldn’t make it out. The guys were instantly shaking their heads and throwing their hands about, irritated. I’d never seen the group fight before and I had the horrid feeling they were somehow fighting about me.

Someone nearby called out to me, asking for something, but I couldn’t move to respond to them. Something big was happening. Something that Kellan wasn’t excited about but the rest of the group was. Something that seemed to involve me. Ice poured through my body as I tried in vain to snap the puzzle pieces together.

Griffin suddenly shouting, “Oh, come on, Kellan! Fuck!” made me flinch. Kellan raised a calming hand to Griffin and quietly said something, shaking his head. Griffin shook his, crossing his arms over his chest. Griffin scowled back at Kellan while Matt hung his head, disappointed. Evan clapped Kellan on the shoulder and leaned in to tell him something. Evan’s hand swung back to me and Kellan’s eyes followed the movement.

Feeling my heart increase about ten times faster, I watched Kellan sigh and scrub his face with his hands. Slumping back in his chair, he finally shook his head and looked at his friends. Nodding, he said something, then slowly stood up.

His eyes met mine and he sighed again. I felt like my heart was going to explode as I watched him excuse himself and start to walk towards me. I nearly wanted to run away as I felt that tension from his table follow him up the aisle way to me. Maybe it was all in my head, but the bar seemed deathly quiet. Kellan and I had a history of making scenes in this bar. I wasn't sure if that was what was going to happen, but the rest of the patrons seemed to think so as they eagerly waited for us to meet up.

His head down, Kellan stepped in front of me. I held my breath. "Can I...talk to you," he looked up, his expression tight, "outside."

I nodded woodenly, wanting to do anything but go outside with him. I couldn't move my feet, but he grabbed my hand and started dragging me away. The action prompted the muscles in my body to involuntarily respond, and I followed him out of the double doors.

A flurry of whispers started right before the doors shut. Then all of the sound from the bar was cut off. Kellan dropped my hand and ran his back through his hair. Looking around the lot, he seemed to be focusing on anything that wasn't me. I felt tears in my eyes as fear roiled in my stomach.

"Kellan?" I whispered, my voice shaky.

He finally looked at me when he heard my tone. Sighing, he cupped my cheek. "I need to tell you something, and I don't know where to start." He bit his lip as my heart thudded against my chest.

"Just tell me, because you're really starting to scare me."

He swallowed and looked down, his hand dropping to my arm. "Matt has been doing a lot over the summer for the band." He looked up at me and shrugged. "Lining up more gigs, scoring that equipment so we can work on soundproofing Evan's place, getting us that spot at Bumbershoot..."

I nodded. None of this was news to me. My heart on hold, I waited for the part that was. Stepping up close, Kellan began stroking my arm. "A band that he's been trying to get in with saw us at Bumbershoot. They were...impressed and..." He sighed, his other hand coming up to wrap around my fingers. "They want us to join them on their tour," he whispered.

I blinked and pulled away from him, his face torn in the moonlight. "You got invited to join a tour? An actual band tour?"

Nodding, he shrugged. "It's a pretty decently sized one, about six other bands are already on it, from what Matt says. We'd be a...last minute addition, bottom of the lineup, but on it, at least."

Amazed and overwhelmed with pride, I threw my arms around him. "Oh my God, Kellan! That's amazing!"

He sighed as I hugged him tight and I pulled back to look at him. He wouldn't look at me and the brief joy I'd felt faded. Cupping his cheek, I stroked his skin with my thumb. "You're not excited about this..." Feeling my heart leaden, I began to understand. "Because of me, right?"

Meeting my gaze, he shrugged. "It's a six month tour, Kiera...coast to coast." I bit my lip. My eyes started stinging as I considered just what that meant for us. He'd be leaving, for quite a while.

Forcing a smile, even though I wanted to feel as melancholy as he did, I shook my head. "It's okay. Six months isn't so long. And you'd have breaks, right? I'd still get to see you?"

He nodded and looked down. "I don't have to go, Kiera." Looking back up at me, he shook his head. "I can tell the guys no."

My mouth dropped open as I realized what the band had been fighting about. He'd told them no in the bar, because he didn't want to leave me. Tilting my head, I searched his face. "This is your dream, Kellan, and this could be it for you. This could be your moment, your chance. Isn't this what you want?"

He shrugged, looking over my shoulder to the bar. "I'm fine with my life the way it is. Playing at Pete's," he looked back at me, "being with you."

Running my hand back through his hair, I pressed our bodies together. "But you know you're too talented to keep doing that forever, Kellan. Even though I'd like to keep you to myself, I know that I can't hide you away from the world." He looked at the ground and I sunk down to meet his eyes. "And it's not just your dream, Kellan." I glanced back at the bar and he followed my gaze. "You know how much this means to them." Looking back at him, I shrugged. "You can't say no because of me."

"I know." He sighed. "They're the only reason I'm even talking to you about this right now." Shaking his head, he added, "But, Kiera...you have another year of school, you can't come with me. I don't want to leave you..."

I shook my head, cutting him off. "Not because of me, Kellan." Feeling tears sting my eyes again, I swallowed hard. I was going to miss him so much, but I couldn't keep him from this. I couldn't be that person...again. "I won't keep another man from his dream," I whispered.

He pulled me in tight, clasping me to him like I was going to vanish. I felt like sobbing but I knew that I couldn't, not when I could feel him shaking in my arms. Concerned, I whispered in his ear, "You're scared, Kellan...why? You never get scared."

He shook his head. "That's not true. I'm scared all the time." I pulled back to look at him with furrowed brows and he swallowed. "I remember, Kiera." I furrowed my brows even more and he shook his head. "I remember when Denny left you...what it did to you." His eyes searching mine, he whispered, "I remember how we got together."

Heat pricked me as what he was saying sunk in. He thought if he left, I'd cheat. I'd be so lonely and pathetic without out him that I'd reach out to the next available man and do...exactly what I'd done to Denny. Knowing I couldn't hate him for his fear, but feeling the anger anyway, I pushed him back from me. "You won't leave me because when Denny left..."

"I know you don't like being alone," he murmured.

Anger stirring my belly, I spat out, "I'm not going to freak out because you're gone and cheat on you. I'm not... I wouldn't..." I stammered with something that didn't sound childish. "Why would you think I would do that to you?"

"Because I was there...when Denny thought the exact same thing, when he thought you'd never cheat on him either." He sighed and tried to wrap me in his embrace again but I kept him at arm's length.

I tried to raise my chin, but I felt it quivering as my emotions ran rampant. "That's not fair. I've grown, Kellan. And you and I were a completely different situation. You can't throw that in my face."

Looking apologetic, he shook his head. "I know, I do know that. And I know you've grown, Kiera, but still..." Closing his eyes, he looked away.

Open-mouthed, I could only shake my head at him. "Are you always going to wonder about me?" I whispered. Twisting my lips, I wished we had the sort of relationship where we could smile and congratulate the other, wishing them well, knowing that nothing bad would happen. We didn't have that though. We had doubt and fear, even though I sometimes tried to naively pretend that we didn't.

Peeking up at me, he raised his eyebrows. "Just like you wonder about me? Just earlier today you thought I was cheating on you. You won't worry when I'm gone? I mean, if I go on the road for months...with Griffin...it wouldn't cross your mind?"

My eyes narrowed as I considered just what kind of trouble he could get into with *that* D-bag. "Well now it will." I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at him until he turned away. He sighed, looking out over the parking lot. I sighed as well, my posture relaxing as my residual anger faded. I couldn't be angry with him for wondering about something that I often wondered about too. "I guess we'll just have to try and...trust each other."

When he solemnly nodded, his gaze dropping to our feet, I looked around at where we were—outside, alone. A second wave of understanding hit me. Cupping his cheek, I brought his gaze back up to mine. “Did you tell me this out here because you thought I would break down?”

Nodding, he whispered, “I remember that night that Denny told you he was leaving. I remember holding you while you cried...for him. I saw you when his plane left. You were devastated, like a part of you had left with him. I don’t want to hurt you like that, Kiera.”

His eyes saddened as he looked over mine...over my completely dry ones. Kissing him softly, I rested my forehead against his. “Are you upset that I’m...not more upset. Was this a test?”

Sighing, he shook his head. “I wouldn’t test you, Kiera, but I did think you’d...at least cry, maybe beg a little.”

He tried to turn away again, but I held him in front of me. “I will. Trust me, when you actually leave, I will be a blubbing wreck. But I meant what I said, Kellan. I’ve grown. A lot has happened since Denny left me that first time. I’ve done some maturing.” Remembering how I was back then, I shook my head. “I was so scared to be alone.” I shrugged my shoulder as he watched me. “I still don’t like it, but I’m more secure now, I think. Mistakes in the past have aged me some.”

He cracked a small smile. “Ah, the wizened twenty-two year old.”

My smile was a small one as well, but some of the earlier tension evaporated in it. “Kellan, you may have a lot more experience, but don’t act like you’re not the exact same age I am. I’ve seen your driver’s license.”

Grinning crookedly, he raised an eyebrow. “The real one?”

Shaking my head at him, I cupped both his cheeks. “Do you think I loved Denny more, because it bothered me so much when he first told me he was leaving?”

Shrugging, his smile turned sad. “Can you blame me for thinking that?”

Enfolding my arms around him, I laid my head on his shoulder. "No, I guess not." We were silent a moment, rocking slightly as we held each other. I waited a moment longer, peace and a bit of sadness creeping into me. "I didn't love him more than I love you, Kellan." Pulling back, I met his eye. "I love you more. I love you enough to let you go and live your dream." I tilted my head and shrugged. "Don't you see...? I love you more."

He smiled softly and I brushed some hair off of his forehead. Running the backs of my fingers down his cheek, I whispered, "And, yes, I will miss you, more than you could possibly imagine, but I know that you have to do this, Kellan. And you know it, too."

Stubbornly, he shook his head. "No, I know that I have to be with you. Everything else is just...details."

I smiled and kissed him. Against his lips I murmured, "This isn't just your dream though, remember." Sighing, I pointed back to the bar, to the other people his decision involved. "There's Evan and Griffin, and Matt...he's worked so hard for this."

He watched my fingers then sighed, "I know..."

Lacing my arms around his neck, I tilted my head at him. "And that's why you'll do this. It's their dream too, and you can't take it away from them...for me, for us."

Leaning his head against mine, he closed his eyes. "I know." We rested against each other for an aching long time, then Kellan pulled back. "I guess I should go tell Matt the good news," he said, a little sullenly.

I nodded, biting my lip and fighting the tears starting to sting. I'd always suspected this would happen one day, just not necessarily today. "When does the tour start?"

Looking down, he quietly said, "First part of November."

Now I looked down, too. "Oh."



November. It was the end of September...that wasn't all that far away, just around a month really. We were silent a moment longer, processing our impending separation, then Kellan grabbed my hand. Squeezing it as he placed a light kiss on my lips, he nodded over at the bar doors. I took a deep inhale and nodded back. A part of me didn't want to go back through those doors. It felt like everything I knew would change once I stepped over the threshold. That was a ridiculous feeling of course—everything had already changed.

Pulling on my hand, Kellan led me through the doors. Curious bar patrons eyed us as we entered, maybe to see if I was red and splotchy...maybe to see if Kellan had a black eye. Since we both looked the same, although much more melancholy than before, they soon shifted back to their own conversations.

Sighing, Kellan led us back to his table. The guys were all still there, waiting for him, waiting for his answer. Since Kellan was the front man for the band, they pretty much couldn't do anything without him. They could certainly try and replace him, head out on their own with another singer, but it wouldn't be the same without Kellan's talent. I couldn't even picture the D-bags without their head D-bag. And I knew that most of the guys felt that way as well. Evan especially would rather hang it up than quit on Kellan. So they sat, and waited for him to tell them if their dream was a go or not.

Arms crossed over his chest, Griffin glared at me. I felt like Yoko walking up to their table, clutching my man's hand. Matt watched me respectfully, but his face was full of disappointment; he wanted this so bad. Evan was the only one that looked a little lost, too. I knew he wanted the success—what rock star member wouldn't want to hit it big—but his heart was anchored in Seattle. Jenny. He'd be torn from her just as surely as Kellan was being torn from me. He smiled sympathetically at me as I stepped to the edge of the threesome.

Kellan cleared his throat and ran a hand through his hair and all of their eyes shifted back to him. Exhaling in a long, controlled way, he took a moment to gather himself, then locked eyes with Matt. "I'm in," was all he told him.

Matt jumped up from beside the table as a chorus of excitement erupted from the guys. Throwing an arm around Kellan's shoulder, the blond's slim face was ear-to-ear smiles. "This is gonna be great, Kell. You'll see." He nodded enthusiastically as Evan and Griffin stood and swarmed around Kellan.

After that there was playful shoving and elbow ribbing. Evan grabbed Kellan's head and ruffled his hair as he laughed. Griffin stepped in-between Kellan and I, jarring us loose as he slugged him in the shoulder. As all of them animatedly talked about their upcoming adventure, I found myself forced back a few steps, watching them from a distance.

Kellan looked back at me for a split-second, but his attention was quickly diverted back to one of the guys. Sighing, I twisted and left them to their moment of glory. I had to go back to work anyway.

As I meandered over to a couple that had just sat down, I listened to the band in the back corner. Their laughter was loud, their voices gleeful. Several regulars asked me what was going on and I morosely told them.

"They're going on tour. They're going to spread their talent over the nation and some record label is going to notice and sign them up. After that, they'll be played on the radio every five minutes, headline a solo tour in every major city in the world, and be swarmed by people non-stop. They'll be booked on every talk show, play at every award show, and Kellan will end up on every magazine's "Hottest Guys" list. After that, he'll receive invitations from groupies and celebrities alike. Eventually he'll give in to an A-list starlet and they'll be the talk of every tabloid in creation. And I'll be here...pouring you your drink and reminiscing about the rock star that I used to date."

Well, okay, I may have only told the customers that very first sentence, but the rest of the speech echoed in my head on a never-ending loop. Kellan and I could try and trust each other, sure, but that only meant he wouldn't sneak around behind my back. There were no guarantees that he'd stay with me once he was exposed to...well, literally, everyone.

All of the customers had an excited reaction to the news, several walking over to the guys' table to slap them on the back in congratulations, or in the girls' cases, to give them appreciative hugs. Surprisingly, the only

person who seemed as un-thrilled over this development as me was Rita. She sulked as much as I did as I approached the bar to get yet another round that someone had bought for the foursome.

Her collagen-injected lips puckered into as much of a scowl as she could make as she arranged their shots. "I can't believe he's leaving," she murmured over the noise in the bar. Glancing up at me, she narrowed her eyes. "Aren't you going to stop this? Put your foot down?"

Looking back at Kellan smiling and shaking Sam's hand, finally looking happy about the idea of singing across the country, I sighed and shook my head. "No, he deserves this. I'm not going to try and keep him from fulfilling a dream."

Rita reached across the bar and smacked me on the shoulder. I glared back at her as she adjusted the deeply plunging neckline of her altered Pete's shirt. "Then you're an idiot." She pointed over to Kellan and the guys and crassly verbalized every fear I had. "He's going to get famous after this little stint. Then he's going to realize that he's famous, and gorgeous, and can screw just about any woman in the world. You think he's going to stay with an ordinary nobody after that?"

Harshly grabbing my tray of shots, a good quarter of the drinks splashing over the edge, I raised my chin to her. With a confidence that I wasn't sure I really felt, I shook my head. "You don't know Kellan, not like I do. He's not like that. He's not interested in the fame, in the power, or in the women." Lowering my chin, I shrugged. "He's interested in me."

Rita folded her arms across her chest and smirked at me. "Right. And he wouldn't dare cheat on you, because he's such a...moral guy."

She eyed me up and down and I flushed all over. By the tone in her voice I knew what she was referring to when she questioned his morality. The affair Kellan and I'd had was never openly admitted by anyone who knew, but with the public fights Kellan and I had shared, followed by Kellan's beating—that we still claimed was a mugging—most people had put the pieces together. Especially after Denny had fled the country.

Not wanting to talk about my life with Rita anymore, since Kellan had once been immoral with her too, I muttered, "You don't know him," and stormed off to their table.

After another couple of free rounds, the guys finally had to leave for a show at another bar. Kellan lingered after the other guys exited to a spattering of cheers and whistles. Before he left, Griffin paused at the door, exclaiming, "Thank you all, my loyal subjects. And don't worry, I won't ever forget you when I'm famous, I'll only refuse to acknowledge your existence!"

Most of the bar laughed at that, maybe thinking he was joking. Knowing Griffin probably meant it wholeheartedly, I rolled my eyes and shook my head. Jackass. Someday I was going to have to stage an intervention for Anna. She could do so much better. Well, she certainly couldn't do any worse.

Also rolling his eyes and shaking his head, Kellan strolled up to where I was standing beside a recently emptied table. Giving me a crooked grin, he nodded at where Griffin had disappeared to. "What do you think will do him in first? Drugs, money, or women?"

Smiling, I slung my arms around his waist and raised an eyebrow. "I'm pretty sure it will be a combination of all three."

Kellan chuckled and looped his arms around my waist. As he leaned down to kiss me, I found myself inadvertently spouting, "And what about you? What will be your downfall?"

He paused before our lips touched. He started to frown, then smiled. "You think I'll have one?"

Embarrassed that I'd asked, I shook my head, then shrugged. "It has occurred to me that you're on the path to fame and fame brings certain...hazards with it." Sighing, knowing now wasn't really the time to have this conversation, I stared up at him. "You'll be surrounded by so much...temptation." I bit my lip. "And I've seen 'Behind the Music.' I know what gets offered to rock stars."

He narrowed his eyes but then laughed. "Wait, 'Behind the Music?' You really have already mapped out my career, haven't you?" Smiling devilishly, he ducked down and looked me in the eye. "So what it is? Booze? Gambling? Buying too many yachts?"

I twisted my lip at his comment and smacked his chest. "No, for you, it's women." Sighing, I shook my head. "Always women."

The smile on his face faded as he looked over mine. "You have to trust me, Kiera." His smile returned a little but it was laced with sadness. "Just like I have to trust you." The sudden seriousness in his face instantly shifted to an impish grin and the air of heartache around us lifted. "I know I'll never find anything out there that will top you, but really, it is quite possible that you may lose interest in me once I've sold out and hit the bottle. Maybe you'll decide you can do better...start dating one of the Jonas Brothers or something."

Laughing, even though my stomach hurt a little at our conversation, I smacked his chest again. Leaning up to kiss him, I muttered, "Never. You're mine, washed up or not."

Chuckling against my lips, he murmured, "Good, because none of that is going to happen." Pulling back, he raised an eyebrow. "It's just a six month tour with a bunch of other bands, most of which are small and unsigned...just like us. And when we're all crammed together in a smelly bus, I'll be wishing that I was back at home with you." Leaning in, he rested his head against mine. "And when the six months is up, that's exactly where you'll find me...in bed with you."

I nodded against him as tears stung my eyes. "I hope so," I whispered.

"I know so," he whispered back, his voice just as wistful as mine. Then his lips crashed down to me and my hands came up to possessively tangle into his hair, holding him against me. Kissing much more aggressively than we usually did in public, I let the feeling of being watched evaporate from me and concentrated only on his touch. He was mine, I was his. This didn't have to be a life altering event if we didn't let it be. It could just be a brief separation while he did something amazing that most people would never get the chance to do. We would both stay

faithful to the other and then we'd be back together and all the happier for it.

After that...well, I'd tackle that hurdle once it was upon me.

**\*\*\* End of Sample\*\*\***

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## From the same author on Feedbooks

Conversion (2009)

\*\*PREVIEW COPY ONLY - TO BE PUBLISHED IN 2013\*\*

.  
Emma is happy. She's got a promising career in front of her, great friends, and a pretty amazing family. But her social life has been a little lacking lately. That's when fate stepped in, and crashed her into a tall, dark and handsome man. Sure, he has his secrets...don't we all, and, yeah, maybe his secrets are a little more unusual than most - like he's a partial vampire who can walk around during the day, but also enjoys a little plasma nightcap now and again - but to Emma, he's single, successful, and an extraordinary gentleman. That makes up for a lot. Of course, his condition is a bit more serious than he first lets on, and living a life with him will require some sacrifices that most just aren't willing to make. Will she? Is love enough to compensate for a life that will never be anywhere near the realm of normalcy? But then again...what's normal anyway?

Thoughtless (2009)

\*\*PREVIEW COPY ONLY - PUBLISHED BY GALLERY BOOKS, AN IMPRINT OF SIMON & SCHUSTER\*\*

.  
For almost two years now, Kiera's boyfriend, Denny, has been everything she's ever wanted: loving, tender and endlessly devoted to her. When they head off to a new city to start their lives together, Denny at his dream job and Kiera at a top-notch university, everything seems perfect. Then an unforeseen obligation forces the happy couple apart. Feeling lonely, confused, and in need of comfort, Kiera turns to an unexpected source - a local rock star named Kellan Kyle. At first, he's purely a friend that she can lean on, but as her loneliness grows, so does their relationship. And then one night everything changes...and none of them will ever be the same.  
SKoW Award winner 2010 - Best M-Rated

Conversion Book Two: Bloodlines (2010)

\*\*PREVIEW COPY ONLY - TO BE PUBLISHED IN 2013\*\*

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Emma has admittedly made some bad decisions in her life, but she was positive that being with Teren Adams wasn't one of them. He was everything she'd ever wanted in a man – kind, caring, loyal, loving, and on occasion, a hopeless romantic. True, he was also a vampire, or partially so, and had recently joined the ranks of the undead, but to Emma, that was inconsequential. She was his, he was hers, and she could not wait to be his bride, to mother his children, and to stay by his side for as long as her mortal life would allow her to. At least...that was the plan.

Conversion Book Three: *'Til Death (2010)*

\*\*PREVIEW COPY ONLY - TO BE PUBLISHED IN 2013\*\*

Emma was content with her life. She didn't want anything to change. Two kids, an amazing husband, and one incredible family, her life had become everything she ever hoped it would be. But there is a downside to having everything that you've ever wanted, a downside that Teren and Emma couldn't possibly have been prepared for. When you have everything that you want...then you also have everything to lose.

*It's All Relative (2010)*

\*\*PREVIEW COPY ONLY - TO BE PUBLISHED IN 2014\*\*

The club was packed, the music was loud, and the alcohol was flowing. Jessie couldn't keep her eyes off of the exotic man drinking by himself across the room. Kai couldn't keep his gaze from the buxom brunette laughing with her friends at the bar. Fate pulled them together, giving them a night that neither one would soon forget. But then, you know what they say about fate. While their one night of bliss was perfect, neither Jessie nor Kai could have imagined what would be in store for them the next time they met, when fate again crossed their paths. As they both soon discovered, sometimes life places obstacles in the way that are insurmountable...even for soul mates.

SKoW Award winner 2011 - Most Creative Plot

*Collision Course (2010)*

\*\*PREVIEW COPY ONLY – AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT SELECT ONLINE RETAILERS\*\*



.  
Lucas had it all – popularity, a devoted girlfriend, a brotherly best friend, and a loving mother who would do anything for him. His life was right on course to be a successful and fulfilling one, until the crash changed everything. It happened late one night during a sudden downpour. That evening, three young lives were lost and one life was left irrevocably altered. As the lone survivor, Lucas finds himself surrounded by swirling gossip of reckless drunkenness from the small town he used to warmly call home. Amid his own guilt and self-hatred, Lucas struggles to find hope, find peace, and maybe, even find love again.

SKoW Award winner 2010 - Best Het, Most Memorable

SKoW Award winner 2011 - Best Tragedy

Not a Chance (2011)

\*\*PREVIEW COPY ONLY – TO BE PUBLISHED 2014\*\*

.  
At first glance, he seemed like a straight-laced, never told a lie in his life, good guy. Just goes to show - first impressions can be dead wrong.

Makayla should have listened to her instincts. She never should have accepted a date with him, she never should have continued seeing him, and she definitely shouldn't have started falling for him.

Image credit: luigi diamanti/FreeDigitalPhotos.net

[www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/view\\_photog.php?photogid=879](http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/view_photog.php?photogid=879)

Conversion: The Next Generation (2012)

\*\*PREVIEW COPY ONLY - TO BE PUBLISHED IN 2014\*\*

.  
Nika and Julian Adams have a lot of secrets. But that's to be expected when you're a "little bit" vampire. When you're a supernatural being that is emotionally bonded to your twin, fitting in can be a little challenging. But these sixteen-year-old siblings are determined to find their place in the world...even if it kills them.

.  
Cover photography by BJWOK & Digitalart

Reckless - Chapter One & Two (2013)

**\*\*CHAPTER ONE AND TWO PREVIEW ONLY. FULL COPY  
BEING PUBLISHED MARCH 5TH, 2013\*\***

In the long-awaited conclusion to the Thoughtless trilogy, Kellan's band hits it big and he and Kiera find themselves pushed to their limits...can love survive when life gets reckless?

When Kellan's band gains stardom, Kiera and Kellan's relationship is put to the ultimate test. Can their love for each other withstand the constant pressure of superstardom? The friendships they've formed, the new family they've found, and the history they've forged will all play a part in helping them navigate the turbulent waters of the band's exploding popularity. A greedy executive hell-bent on success, a declining pop star looking for an edge, and a media circus that twists lies into truths are just some of the obstacles the lovers will have to overcome if they are going to remain together. Fame comes with a price—but will it cost Kiera and Kellan everything?



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