

Keeping Him: A childhood friends-to-lovers romance

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KEEPING HIM

Bishop Brothers, #4

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"So if you're gonna break my heart, just break it.

And if you're gonna take your shot, then take it.

If you made up your mind, then make it.

If you ever loved me,

have mercy."

—*Mercy*, Brett Young

To our readers

Thank you for loving our words and stories as much as we do. We couldn't do this without you and we are forever grateful. We hope Jackson's book is everything you expect and more!

Prologue

Kiera, 15 years old

"Truth or dare?"

"Neither," Jackson responds, groaning as he kicks up dirt with his boot. We're sitting on hay bales we stole from the Bishop's barn and put them close to the firepit to keep warm. It's mid-January, and now that it's night, the temps have dropped. It's been our private hiding spot since we were thirteen. It's on a piece of Jackson's family's ranch, and we hang out here when we want to get away from everyone or secretly drink a bottle of his dad's whiskey.

"You know the rules, Jackson," I remind him, poking his shoulder as hard as I can. He doesn't even flinch, though. His body's made of steel. "You *have* to play."

"Says who? That's a game twelve-year-old's play when they want to get their dicks wet."

"Ew!" I shove my shoulder into his, laughing. "Stop being gross and just pick one."

"*Fine.*" He pinches his lips together and moves them side to side as if he's actually pondering the question. But I already know his answer. Jackson picks the same option every time. "Dare."

Even when I want to get the truth out of him. But I've found a work-around.

"Alright. I *dare* you to tell me who your secret crush is." I smile boldly, knowing he's going to make a fuss about it.

"I said dare, Kiera." He groans again, placing his hands behind his head and locking his fingers around his neck.

"Yeah, and I'm daring you to tell me. So spill it," I declare. "You know what happens if you don't..." I taunt.

"You actually leave me the hell alone?" he teases.

"You know I'm not going to tell anyone. Plus, Tanner already told me you have a crush on someone, so don't even pretend you don't."

"When were you talking to him?" He grunts and rolls his eyes, obviously annoyed. Tanner's his best friend, so if Jackson has a crush on a girl, he'd know.

"He stopped me in the hall because he had a sub and skipped," I explain, but by the redness covering his neck and cheeks, I can see he's not happy about it. "He asked if I was going to the stupid Valentine's dance in a few weeks."

Jackson snorts, leaning down and picking up the nearly empty bottle of Crown Royal Reserve. It's his dad's top-notch whiskey, and if we're caught with it, he'll whip us both into next week.

I watch his throat move as he takes a long drink. Jackson loves drinking, and though I hate the taste of it, I like having these moments with him.

"All the chicks at school are annoying."

"Hey!" I swat his arm.

"All the *hot* chicks," he adds with a smirk.

Now I'm the one snorting and rolling my eyes. "That didn't stop you from making out with Bunny Vanderbilt last semester." I call him out. Bunny's one of my friends, and her real name is Barbara, but since she'll jump on anything breathing with a penis, she's been panned the appropriate nickname. "Or Rosa Michels," I add. She's another friend of mine.

As a matter of fact, he's made out with *most* of my friends.

Jackson snickers as if he's reminiscing about his moments with them. Ugh. I really hate him sometimes.

"Who haven't you made out with?"

"You can't ask twice," he deflects.

"Well, you didn't answer my first question," I remind him, taking the Crown Royal bottle from his grip. He's already had way too much.

"I don't have *crushes*, Kiera. I'm not a seven-year-old boy who thinks girls have cooties."

Groaning, I roll my eyes so hard I'm quite sure they're permanently stuck in the back of my head. "So you didn't crush on Bunny or Rosa?"

He shrugs, staring intently at the flames of the fire. "They were decent enough for a few minutes. Nothing to think twice about."

Oh my God. I think I might puke.

Nope. I *am* going to puke.

Turning away, I kneel over the hay bale and empty my stomach over the small patch of grass that isn't dead. Jackson's hand rests on my back, rubbing soothing circles as I dry heave until everything has been purged from my stomach.

"Damn," Jackson howls. "You've gotta learn to hold your liquor."

I turn around and wipe my mouth with my sleeve. "You're such an ass."

"What?" He raises up both hands. "I'm just sayin'. I've had way more than you, and I barely feel it."

"That's because you're a bottomless pit. You're like some weird breed." I situate myself back on the

hay, feeling my face flush with embarrassment. Although it's not the first time he's seen me vomit, it's not something I like to make a habit of.

No wonder he makes out with all the girls in school except me.

Jackson makes a fist and punches himself in the gut, roaring loudly into the dark night sky. "Invincible, baby!"

"You are not invincible, Jackson Bishop! You're going to seriously get hurt one of these days," I tell him. "Drinking and being stupid are going to eventually catch up with you."

"Stop being a fish!" He pushes my shoulder. "Always going with the flow is boring."

"I am not a fish!" I pout, pushing him back.

"You so are! That's why you care about that stupid dance. All your friends are going, so, of course, you're going too."

"Me wanting to hang out with friends doesn't make me a fish. Gah! I don't even know why I hang out with you."

"Because I'm the coolest person you know, and you know I'm right." He flashes his infamous Jackson Bishop smirk at me, and like always, it turns me to mushy goo. *Damn him!* Why does he have to be charming and arrogant at the same time?

"You wish," I fire back, though the smile I'm failing to hide gives me away. "And if I'm a fish, then you're a seagull. Always squawking and getting into mischief. Sounds just like you."

His head falls back as a crack of laughter escapes his throat while he smacks his thigh over and over. "Oh, Kiera." He's still laughing as though I just said the funniest thing in the world. "This is why I like you. I never know what random shit will come out of that sassy mouth of yours."

He has no idea what those words just did to my heart. The blood in my chest pumps so hard and fast, and my heart is racing as I eagerly wait for whatever else he has to say.

"That's why you *like* me?" I repeat as if I'm offended. I'm determined to finally get to the bottom of this. Jackson's many things, and one thing is for sure—he's confusing as hell. We've known each other since we were in diapers, and as we grew older, we bonded over our love of horses. It seemed inevitable, considering our parents are good friends, but the relationship I share with Jackson has always been different compared to the other Bishop brothers. Jackson has a twin brother, John, and though he can be fun to hang out with, we don't have much in common. They might be identical in looks, but their personalities are as different as they come.

"Like you enough to hang out with you," he taunts with a lazy smile. "You're like a less annoying sister."

Thud.

My heart just jumped and fell flat into a million broken pieces.

"And considering Courtney is an annoying little twerp I can't stand most of the time, you're a breath of fresh air—*mostly*."

"Wow..." I say with fake happiness. "I'm not sure if that's a compliment or not."

"Oh stop being so dramatic. We used to take baths together, and I already know what your chest looks like, so why would I bother trying to look at it now?"

"Jackson Bishop!" I scold, standing and smacking him right across the head. "What's wrong with you?"

He grabs my wrist when I try to hit him again and pulls me forward until I'm forced to sit on his lap. I start laughing when he does even though I'm trying to be mad at him.

"You gonna stop smackin' me?" he whispers in my ear, making my body shiver and my heart beat faster.

My breath hitches, and suddenly, I feel like I can't breathe. Jackson's arm is wrapped around my waist as his hand stays locked on my wrist, holding me securely. His erection is evident in his tight jeans as it pushes into my ass. I try to swallow, but the razor blades lodged in my throat make it impossible.

"Kiera?" he prompts. "I'll release you if you promise to stop hitting me."

I finally find my voice and steady my breathing. "Why?" I look over my shoulder to scowl at him. "Afraid you'll get beat up by a girl?"

"In your wet dreams, Kiera Young!" The next thing I know, I'm flipped to my back on the ground and Jackson is towering over me, pinning my arms above my head. "I'd like to see you try, sweetheart, but you'll be painfully sorry. I could take you down with my pinky while fighting a hangover."

I narrow my eyes at him, trying to wiggle my arms out of his grip. Dammit. He really is too strong for his own good. If I didn't know he was raised on a ranch, I'd find it quite freakish.

"I could take you down with one hit while tipsy," I shoot back, ready to prove him just how right I am, and after that whole sister comment, I'm not even sorry for what I'm about to do.

He barks out a loud laugh, obviously not buying my threat. "Show me whatcha got, *fishy*."

"Wait, your thigh is digging into my side." I arch my back, pretending the discomfort is painful, and when he lifts up slightly, I take my shot.

"Sucker!" Lifting my leg, I aim directly between his legs and feel his erection collide with my bony knee. The moment it happens, I instantly regret everything because the look on his face scares the shit out of me. I'm sure he's stopped breathing, and by the way his face goes pale, I'm certain the air was sucked out of his lungs.

"Holy. Fuck." He drops to the ground, holding his groin and spewing out inaudible noises.

Well, at least he's breathing.

"That was a fucking cheap shot, Kiera," he hisses, squeezing his eyes shut as he breathes rapidly in and out.

"To be fair, I did warn you."

"Stop talking before I..." He pauses midsentence to catch his breath.

"Geez. Does it really hurt that bad?"

"Seriously?" He winces, causing me to do the same. "Imagine your tit being twisted off by pliers, then dipped in lava and forced down your throat."

"Jesus." I shiver. "That's mildly disturbing."

Moments pass while Jackson lies in the fetal position, holding his junk and steadying his breathing. Though the flames of the fire have gone down, I'm pretty sure I see Jackson's eyes watering.

"Are you going to be okay? You're making me feel bad here."

"You feel bad?" He glares at me.

"Okay, I'll shut up now."

Jackson finally moves and sits up, so we're facing each other.

"Probably the best thing you've said all night."

Now I'm the one rolling my eyes. "We'll call it even for all the times you've picked on me. That was fifteen years of pent-up revenge," I say matter-of-factly.

"So does that mean you'll get revenge on me again in fifteen years?" He pops a brow, bracing for my response.

I point my finger at him, holding back a laugh at his stupidly cute face. "Don't tempt me."

"Shit, seriously." He groans as he stands and sits down on the hay bale, holding himself. "I'll probably never be able to have kids now."

"Then the world will thank me for not allowing you to reproduce more of *you*." I snicker, standing to sit next to him. "I think you're just milking it now. The pain can't be drawing out this long."

Both of his brows raise instantly. "Let me punch you in the vag and see how you feel in ten minutes."

I giggle, trying to hide the blush that surfaces on my cheeks. "Well, unless a bowling ball is coming out of it, I can confidently say I wouldn't bitch out like you did."

"You're a feisty little firecracker when you drink," he howls. "Can we just make a pact that there'll be no junk or vag kicking from now on? I'd like to feel my dick."

Yeah, I know. With just about every one of my friends.

"Fine," I agree. "No tittie punches either."

He cracks up laughing. "Damn, I was hoping that'd slip through."

"On one condition, though..." I add.

"Huh? You secretly like your titties punched?"

"Jackson!" I'm tempted to punch him in the junk again.

"What? Some chicks dig that!" he exclaims. "Kinky, rough sex is a thing, you know."

How the hell would I know anything about that? I'm a virgin who's barely gone past first base.

Ugh. Maybe I *am* his less annoying little sister.

"You still have to follow through with your dare, or else..."

"You've gotta be kiddin' me. After that junk shot, I shouldn't ever have to play that stupid game again," he protests.

"No way! You said 'dare,' and you know that once you pick one, you *have* to follow through or you face the consequences." I remind him of the rules we made when we were eleven.

"It can't be any worse than what I've already endured, so fuck it." Jackson stands, his dick coming back to life. He reaches behind his neck and pulls off his T-shirt. I gaze down his chest and abs, and though I've seen him shirtless dozens of times, the sight of his chiseled muscles never gets old. Next, he unzips his jeans, and I wait with bated breath for what's coming.

"Hold back your drool," he taunts, looking at me with a devilish grin. Jackson pulls his pants and boxers down to his ankles before quickly kicking them off. I'm certain my heart stops beating completely, and I've now died and gone to heaven.

Jackson's always followed through with his truth or dare to avoid this very consequence, but for some reason, tonight he's determined to actually kill me. *Torturously*.

I pull my lower lip into my mouth and bite down. Jackson stands naked in front of me, his dick getting hard, and he's so close, I could reach out and touch it. Sliding my hands under my legs to keep that very thing from happening, I blink and bring my gaze back up to his mischievous face.

"Ready?" His cocky smile has butterflies twirling around my stomach. He bends his arms and puts his fists into his shoulders, mimicking a pair of wings. He then runs around in circles, flapping his pretend wings as he screams 'bwak-bwak-bwak, I'm a chicken' over and over until I'm bent over laughing so hard, I'm crying.

Jackson looks absolutely ridiculous, but I can't deny how much he makes me laugh on a daily basis. Whether we're screwing around or actually working together, I know it's always going to be a fun time.

"There," Jackson pants, coming to a stop in front of me. "Three minutes of naked humiliation. Happy now?"

I swallow hard, willing myself to keep my eyes above his neck because sneaking a peek lower is far too tempting.

"Mildly," I quip. "Though I've changed my mind."

"On what?" he barks.

"A junk punch isn't enough to get even for all the shit you've done to me."

"Are you kiddin' me? I'm standing naked here. What else do you wanna do to me?"

So damn much. Bad, bad, bad.

I pinch my lips together, flashing an innocent look as I eye the fire behind him. "Gotta get home. Curfew!" I walk out of his reach, moving farther away while he starts to put the pieces together.

"Where are my clothes?" He looks down to where he left them, then searches the rest of the area. "Kiera! Goddammit! Where are they?"

"I decided to bend the rules a little. Felt the consequences were too lenient." I nod my head to the fire that's effectively using his clothes as fuel.

Jackson finally gets the hint and spins around to the large flames. I run faster, putting more distance between us as I look over my shoulder to see whether he's chasing after me.

"You're dead, Kiera Young! DEAD! You know I'm going to get you *so* much worse!" he shouts.

Running, I laugh as loud as I can, knowing he's going to have to walk into his house butt-ass naked. I can only hope Mama Bishop or one of his brothers are still up to add to his misery.

Turning around in his direction, I cup my hands over my mouth and shout back, "Don't worry. Shrinkage is normal in the cold!"

I squeal the moment Jackson comes charging for me. Bolting as fast as I can back to the house, Jackson eventually catches up to me and tackles me to the ground. Our bodies hit the grass with full force, both of us laughing as we catch our breath.

"So, am I still a fish?" I ask, breaking the silence.

"No." He chuckles. "You're a goddamn bull."

"A bull?" I turn toward him with a questioning glare.

"Yeah. A fuckin' savage. Chewed me up and spit me out." He laughs as if he's actually impressed. God, I love the sound of his laughter. He's always looking for a good time, and when he's laughing, I know he's having the time of his life.

"Hmm," I say. "Well, guess that'll teach you—mess with the bull..."

"You get the horns," he finishes for me, rolling his eyes at my proud victory.

"That's right."

I feel Jackson's stare, and when I turn to face him, I catch him looking at my lips, and wonder if this is finally it. I've dreamt of kissing Jackson for as long as I can remember, but instead of making a move, I've watched on the sidelines as he's flirted with and dated all my friends.

"Miss Whitman," he blurts out, taking me by surprise.

"Huh? What about Miss Whitman?" I'm so confused.

"The answer to my dare."

"Your dare? Wait, what? You liar!" I scoff, reminding myself to *not* look at his dick.

"I don't lie, Kiera. You know that."

"You do not have a crush on Miss Whitman, the librarian! She's like fifty!"

"So? She's hot!"

I mimic a gagging noise and lean up on my elbows. "You're a pig."

"You're just jealous," he fires back, and my cheeks instantly burn.

"No, I think you've mistaken my disgust for jealousy. She wears her glasses on the tip of her nose!"

"Yeah, it's sexy as hell." He whistles a catcall.

Leaning over, I shove him. "Stay down in the mud where you belong, *pig*."

"C'mon, you know you wanna join me!" He opens his arms with a mocking smile. "Gotta take off your clothes, though."

I stand, stepping away from him so he can't reach out and grab me.

"In your dreams, playboy!" I continue walking backward, putting much needed space between us.

I'm almost back to my four-wheeler when I hear him yell out once more. "Only the naughty ones!"

Chapter One

Kiera, Present day

I can't believe it's almost time.

As I stare at my wedding dress hanging in my old bedroom, I know this is really happening. I'm finally getting married, and hopefully soon, we'll have kids and the family I've always dreamed of. Trent isn't a perfect man, but he's sweet, kind, and ready to settle down.

The past two years together have been filled with some great memories. Trent travels a lot for work and often works long hours, but it's part of what brought us together. As an equine vet, he'd been my family's vet for years before we started dating. Since I train horses, I saw him frequently, but nothing happened until we ran into each other at a Bishop wedding two springs ago. He asked me to have a drink with him, and sparks instantly flew between us.

Smiling, I think back to those early days of Trent and me dating. They were so easy and effortless. I was smitten by him so fast that I missed the signs of deception, but we were able to work through them to get to this point. Every relationship goes through hardships, and everyone has their flaws, but I'm ready to move on to the next chapter in our lives.

I'm ready.

"I still can't get over how gorgeous your dress is," my matron of honor and best friend, Emily, says

from behind me. The sound of her voice makes me jump since I didn't hear her come in.

"It really is, isn't it?" I beam, glancing at her over my shoulder as she comes to my side. "I could stare at it all day."

"Well tomorrow, everyone's going to be staring at you. You getting butterflies yet?" Emily loops her arm through mine and rests her head on my shoulder. She just married into the Bishop family, which means our friendship has grown even more since college.

"I've had butterflies since the day Trent and I started dating," I admit with a smile.

"Aww..." Emily teases. "I'm so happy for you." Emily turns so we're facing each other; her hands rest on my shoulders. "I want you to have everything you've ever dreamed of and more. You deserve to be happy with Trent," she tells me as if she needs to coach me through this.

"I couldn't have done this without you. After so many decisions and numerous headaches, it's finally here." I chuckle at that last one. "I'm so glad you'll be up there with me."

"I wouldn't miss it for anything in the world, Kiera. You know that." She pulls me in for a hug, and I suck in a deep breath, trying to keep myself together and not cry.

"I love you," I tell her.

"I love you." She pulls back, already tearing up. "You ready to do this? Pastor Montgomery is ready to start, so we need to get lined up."

"Yep." I wipe under my eyes. "Ready as I'll ever be!"

Emily leads us out of my parents' house where my mother has proudly deemed it set up as the wedding party headquarters. Being that we're in west Texas and it's the middle of October, the weather is just perfect for an outside wedding on my parents' ranch. It's not too hot and uncomfortable for us to have the ceremony and reception on top of the hill with one of the best views of the land.

Everyone is huddled together near their trucks, waiting to drive the short path to where the ceremony is being held. Trent spots me and immediately walks toward me with a gorgeous smile on his face. He's tall with brown hair and brown eyes and is the perfect combination of tall, dark, and handsome.

"You look beautiful," he whispers as he cups my face and presses a soft kiss to my lips. My stomach does somersaults every time he says those words because I know how strongly he means them. He makes me feel like the prettiest woman alive by how attentive and sweet he is toward me.

"You're looking mighty handsome yourself. I love this blue color on you," I tell him, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him in for another kiss.

"Think we can tell everyone to do the rehearsal without us and sneak away to one of the barns for a quickie?" He winks, licking his lips as his eyes gaze down at my white, curve-hugging dress.

I laugh at his eagerness but swat his hand away as he tries to cop a feel. "Nice try. We'll show up tomorrow having no idea what we're doing."

"Oh, I will. You walking down the aisle to me is all that needs to happen. The rest we'll figure out."

He grabs my hand and presses a sensual kiss to my knuckles.

"Alright, lovebirds," Emily cuts in with a knowing grin on her face. "Save it for the honeymoon. It's time to get going."

"You're riding up with your best man," I remind Trent. "Then the other groomsmen are riding up with Jackson."

Trent's face hardens when I mention Jackson's name, though that's his typical scowl whenever he hears it. To say the two don't get along would be an understatement. Trent was the Bishops' vet too, so he had to play nice to keep their business, but it's no secret the two have been frenemies ever since we started dating.

"And you're riding with me and your father," Emily says, grabbing my hand out of Trent's and leading me toward her truck.

I turn around to look at him just as he cups his mouth and shouts, "Love you!"

Smiling wide, I mouth, "Love you!" before I'm spun back around and pushed toward the passenger side.

"You're going to make me nauseous," Emily teases, making a gagging noise. "But I'm so damn happy for you guys."

"That means everything, Em. Thank you." I pull her in for a hug and squeeze.

"I'm really happy for *you*. You deserve this more than anyone. I can't wait for you to get pregnant so we can be pregnant together!"

"Wait, what?" I gasp, taking a step back. "You're pregnant?"

"Shh! We haven't told anyone yet."

"Oh my God!" I whisper-shout, giving her another squeeze. "I'm so happy! How'd Evan take the news?" I chuckle. Her husband is also an ER doctor, but he takes life way more seriously than she does, and I always enjoy giving him shit for it.

"He's really excited." She beams. "He's hoping for a boy this time, but I already have a feeling it's another girl." She laughs.

"I hope it's twins!" I chuckle. The Bishops have a history of multiples, which means anyone breeding with a Bishop boy has a chance to have twins or more.

"Oh God, please don't say that. I mean, we'll be happy either way, of course, but I can barely handle Elizabeth and her terrible twos."

I snicker at that because Elizabeth is only eighteen months, but she gives her parents a run for their money with Emily's sassy attitude and Evan's moody behavior.

"Elizabeth is going to have so much fun with a sibling so close in age," I tell her as I open the door and hop in. "When are you announcing it?"

"Probably in a few weeks. I want to get checked out again, and right now is about you, so I don't

want to take any excitement away." I'm about to tell her she's crazy considering Trent proposed to me at her wedding shower, but I know Emily was also behind it. She's been rooting for us since day one.

"That means your baby and River's baby girl will be pretty close in age too!" Rowan was born in June and is only four months old, but I get excited knowing my best friend's kids are going to have cousins close in age. I didn't have much family close by, other than my cousin Addie, which is why the Bishops were an essential part of my life growing up.

"Yep! So many Bishop grandkids." Emily chuckles. "But I'll probably need some help so people don't get suspicious when I'm not drinking anything. I can't say I'm breastfeeding anymore, so I'll need an interference."

"Don't worry. I'm sure I can figure something out." I flash her a wink before shutting the door. My dad hops in the back behind Emily, and once the three of us are buckled, we drive the short distance up the hill.

My bridesmaids are riding together in a couple of other trucks, filling up the flatbeds as they all jump in. Trent's from a large family, and the Bishops have been my family for as long as I can remember, so we ended up with ten bridesmaids and ten groomsmen. Then, of course, Elizabeth is my little flower girl, and she'll be walking down with the ring bearer, Riley, who's three. He's Alex and River Bishop's son, and ever since the two of them have been together, I've grown closer to River, and we've become good friends. Alex is the youngest Bishop brother but, surprisingly, was the first one to get married. River works at the same hospital as Evan and Emily as a pediatric nurse. It's safe to say, everyone knows everyone in this small town.

That also means everyone knows everything about you.

Your secrets, scandals, and drama.

Though it can be stressful at times, I wouldn't have it any other way. I was born and raised here, and I can't wait to raise my own children in Eldorado.

"You nervous, Kiki?" my dad asks, using the childhood nickname he gave me. He places a hand on my shoulder with an encouraging squeeze.

I cover his hand with mine and smile at him. "A little," I admit. "But I'm really excited it's finally here."

"You're gonna be a beautiful bride but, more importantly, a spectacular wife and mother. I'm so proud of you."

"Dad..." I choke up. "You're not supposed to make me cry before the rehearsal!"

Emily laughs with him, and after a few moments, we arrive at the bottom of the hill where we park.

"River and I made you something," Emily tells me while digging around the backseat. "River wanted to incorporate some of her Midwestern wedding traditions, so she made you a rehearsal bouquet with all the ribbons and bows from your bridal shower gifts."

She holds it up, and it's actually really awesome looking. Strings of ribbon hang like vines, and then big, fat bows mimic flowers on top. "That is the coolest thing ever!" I grab it from her and

hold it to my body. "I love it! Thank you!"

"Thank River. It was all her idea! In fact, she made me dig through five trash bags to grab them all after your party." She shivers as if the memory makes her cringe.

I tilt my head back and try to hold myself together. "Y'all gotta stop giving me reasons to cry."

With my dad standing next to me, he holds his arm out and smiles. "Ready, Kiki?"

I loop my arm through his with a bright, cheeky smile. "Ready."

My wedding coordinator, Jessica Hart, flags me down with my mother, and Pastor Montgomery is next to her. Jessica's glowing at five months pregnant and has a huge smile on her face. I met Jessica four years ago when she moved here from Florida to be with Dylan, who works on the Bishop's ranch. She's an event coordinator and was dying to help me with wedding plans as soon as we got engaged. Since we only had six months to get everything together and she did such a great job with Emily's wedding, I was more than happy to have her help.

"Kiera! You look amazing as always." She pulls me in for a hug. "I think everyone's here, so we should get started soon. There's a lot to go over."

"Sounds good to me," I say just as a loud muffler roars behind us. I see Jackson's truck pulling up with a handful of groomsmen in the bed of the truck. They've all more than likely been drinking, which I know is going to piss off Trent.

They jump out and are shoutin' and hollerin' like a bunch of idiots. I spot Trent walking up with his parents and head toward them.

"I thought you were going to talk to him," Trent immediately says in a hushed voice, his jaw clenching with anger. "If you insist on him being in the wedding, he needs to act like a fucking adult."

"Trent..." I whisper. "I will."

"When? You're running out of time," he reminds me.

Inhaling a deep breath, I nod. "I will at dinner, okay? Promise."

Jessica rounds everyone up, and as I look around noticing how many people are here for us today, it makes me want to tear up all over again. We're so blessed to have these people in our lives, supporting Trent's and my relationship. My mother has already handed out handkerchiefs, knowing the majority are criers.

"Mom," I say with a low groan.

"I've been crying all day; I can't help it." She dabs under her eyes, and I feel like an emotional mess right along with her.

"Well, you're going to cry yourself dry if you don't slow down," I tease. "Plus, you're supposed to be in the front row, waiting for Dad and me."

"I know. I'm goin'."

“Alright, let’s get the bridesmaids and groomsmen in order and lined up,” Jessica announces with a notebook in her hand. “Emily and Todd, you’re at the very end.”

Trent’s oldest brother stands next to Em, and the rest of them follow Jessica’s instructions until all twenty of them are lined up correctly. Next, Jessica tells Trent and his parents when they’ll walk down and lead them to the end of the aisle with Pastor Montgomery.

Riley and Elizabeth stand in front of me, both of them getting antsy and tired. My father kneels to their level and distracts them, making my heart soar at how great he is with kids. Since I’m the only child, my parents have been waiting on me for grandchildren.

“When the first couple is about halfway down, the next couple in line will start walking and so on. The matron of honor and best man will be the last ones down before the ushers roll out the aisle runner. Then Riley will walk Elizabeth to where Mrs. Bishop will be waiting in the second row and seat them. Once everyone’s lined up in the front, the music will switch, and that’ll be your cue, Kiera.” Jessica steps closer toward me. “I’ll make sure your train is straight and tell you when to go.” She winks at me.

The butterflies in my stomach are swirling around rapidly, and I know it’s just nerves. The moment I walk down and see Trent waiting for me, it’s all going to finally set in that we’re really getting married.

“Okay, let’s do a first run!” Jessica snaps her fingers and goes to the head of the line. “The orchestra will start playing, and that’ll be the first couple’s cue to go. Take small steps, loop your arms into the guys’, holding the bouquet with your other hand, and remember to smile!”

I chuckle at Jessica’s overexcited tone, but she’s done such a great job, and it’s taken so much stress off my plate. My dad and I stay back as we wait for our turn. From down here, I can’t see the aisle, so I know when I take those steps upward, I’ll see Trent eagerly waiting for me.

“Jackson!” Jessica scowls, grabbing my attention. Oh God. What’d he do now? I peek around Emily and see him causing a scene. My heart races as I think how he must be handling all this right now. I know I shouldn’t worry about how he feels, considering all the opportunities he’s had to confess his own feelings, but I know him well enough to know he’s using whiskey as his normal coping habit.

Honestly, when I was a teenager and dreamed of my wedding day, I always imagined Jackson would be at the end of the aisle waiting for me. I had the whole thing planned out in my mind, but I was young and obviously naïve. I will always care deeply for Jackson, no matter what, but a part of me wonders how my life would’ve turned out had we crossed those boundaries.

“Jackson, straighten up, or I’ll have no choice but to call Mrs. Bishop down here.” Jessica’s threat makes me chuckle because everyone knows Mama Bishop calls the shots ’round here. “And stop licking Faith’s cheek.”

“You got it, ma’am.” Jackson throws her his infamous wink and cheesy grin, but he’s a fool to think it’ll have any effect on her.

“Just go.” She rolls her eyes and motions for him and Mila to walk down.

I knew asking Jackson to be in our wedding party was a risk, but he’s been a part of my entire life, and it didn’t feel right not having him involved. Of course, Trent was against it, but he knew it was important for me to have his support, so he eventually gave in. However, now I’m wondering if it

was the worst idea ever. Jackson barely makes eye contact with me anymore and always has a smartass comment to say about everything I do. I know getting engaged was a shock to him, considering the night Trent proposed he ended up in jail for being his normal idiot self, but as I've been saying to myself since the day Trent and I started dating, Jackson's had his chance. He had fifteen years to express his feelings or ask me out, or hell, make a damn move. I don't think my feelings for him have exactly been a secret, but instead of doing something about it, he dated all my friends instead, making me think I wasn't good enough for him.

I couldn't wait forever, I remind myself when I start getting overwhelmed with emotion. I love Trent so much, and I know he's going to make me happy. He's sophisticated, smart, and has been up front about his feelings for me since day one. Trent loves me, and I love him.

"Okay, Kiera," Jessica says when it's just my father and me standing. "The orchestra will finish playing as soon as everyone's in place and ready. When the 'Wedding March' plays, everyone will stand, and that's when I'll motion for you to walk down."

"Got it." I smile, squeezing my dad's arm tighter. With the fake bouquet in one hand and my other arm looped through my dad's, we make our descent down the aisle. My eyes lock on Trent's, and we hold gazes until we make it to the end.

Pastor Montgomery walks us through the rest of the ceremony. I look around and try to soak this all in, but it all still feels so surreal. In twenty-four hours, I'll officially be Mrs. Trent Laken, and we'll be celebrating our love with our family and closest friends.

"Then I'll announce you as husband and wife, Trent will kiss his bride, and when the orchestra starts playing, you'll walk back down the aisle."

"You'll grab your bouquet first," Jessica reminds me. "That way the photographer can get the first shots of you two as husband and wife." She smiles.

Jessica insists on running through everything one more time. As we all walk down the hill to line back up, I pull on Jackson's arm and tug him toward me.

"Hey!" He stumbles, nearly tripping over his feet. As soon as he sees my face, he straightens and adjusts his shirt. "What?"

"What is wrong with you? How could you show up drunk?" I whisper-hiss, crossing my arms over my chest. Jackson notices the way it pushes my breasts up, and his gaze lingers there. "You better get your shit together. Or don't even bother showin' up tomorrow," I snap, walking away before he can respond.

Thirty minutes later, we're finally done rehearsing and back at my parents' house for the dinner. They set up tables inside and out on the patio to accommodate everyone.

As the night goes on, I've cried at least three times from people giving toasts and saying the sweetest things about Trent and me. It's really starting to sink in. This is my last night as a single girl. Tomorrow, I'll go to bed as a married woman.

"Let's go for a walk," a gravelly voice whispers in my ear from behind me, and I know it's Jackson before I even turn around and face him. He looks defeated as if he realizes everything is about to change. I furrow my brows and try to read his face, but all he offers is a nod toward the door and his hand.

Looking over my shoulder, I see most of our guests are outside sitting around the bonfire and drinking. The sun has set, and the stars and moon are the only sources of light.

“Okay,” I agree, taking his hand.

We walk in silence as Jackson leads me down the path to one of the horse barns. I’ve always felt the electricity between us, and even falling for another man hasn’t stopped that. I honestly don’t think anything will at this point. Jackson has a piece of my heart, whether he wants it or not.

“Where are we goin’?” I ask, breaking the silence that’s fueling my anxiety.

“Almost there,” he says. A few minutes later, we’re rounding the barn on the side that gives us the most privacy. My parents’ house can’t be seen from here because the trees and bushes obstruct the view.

“You’re freaking me out, Jackson,” I tell him when he stares down at the ground. “What is it?”

He finally lifts his head, his lower lip stuck between his teeth, and when I peer in his eyes, I see hunger and agony.

“Are you sure about this, Kiera?”

My eyes nearly pop out of my head. “What? Am I sure about getting married?” I step back, needing the space between us before I do something stupid.

“Are you sure about marrying *him*?”

“Why are you asking me this?” I whisper. “I wouldn’t be doing anything I didn’t want to do, Jackson. You don’t need to baby me.”

He steps forward, closing the gap between us. I swallow at the closeness, needing the space from him, especially when I can smell his scent—a blend of whiskey and mountain spring soap.

“Are you happy?” he whispers. “I just want you to be happy. It’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

Jackson’s confession has tears surfacing, and as much as I try to hold them back, they pour out. This is the side of Jackson he’s only ever reserved for me. His softer, kinder side. The side that shows how much pain he’s in. A pain he won’t let me heal.

Jackson brings his hands to my face and brushes my tears away with the pads of his thumbs. He’s cupping my cheeks so intimately, I almost forget to breathe.

“Answer me,” he demands. “Are you happy?”

My hands wrap around his arms, and my nails dig into his skin as I silently plead for him to stop asking me that question. Jackson leans in and presses his forehead to mine as our breath mingles together.

“Jackson...” I say, trying to gain control of my emotions. “What are you doing?”

He swallows, pausing a moment before leaning back and looking into my eyes as if he’s searching for an answer. “Something I should’ve done a long fuckin’ time ago.”

Without another breath, Jackson brings our mouths together in a heated and desperate kiss. His lips crash to mine, and I don't have enough willpower to push him away. I fist the fabric of his shirt and pull his body against mine until we're molded together. His warm lips taste like whiskey and beer, a dangerous combination, and when he swipes his tongue along my lower lip, I open for him.

Jackson pins me against the barn with his hands and hips, letting me feel his erection straining in his pants. It wouldn't take much for him to lift my dress and feel my arousal, knowing my panties are soaked with desperation and hunger. Moans and gasps echo through the air as over fifteen years of pent-up feelings surface and take over my emotions. This kiss isn't sweet and soft; it's rough and needy, just like him. Jackson's hand slides down to my breast and squeezes it in his palm, and I release the most unladylike moan that only encourages his hand to slide farther down.

Flashes of Trent and me circle in my mind, and I finally realize what I'm doing. What I'm doing to him. It's not right.

This is wrong.

"Jackson, stop..." I press my hands on his chest and push him back. He looks at me questioningly, his lips red and swollen from mine. "I can't do this."

He brushes a hand through his hair before scrubbing both hands down his face. "I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?" I mimic, my brows shooting up in disbelief. "How could you kiss me like that? On the night before my wedding?" My voice grows louder with anger. "What is wrong with you?"

"I-I said sorry. Jesus. You didn't exactly put up a fight," he shoots back at me.

"Well, my head is swirling with a variety of emotions right now. I wasn't thinking straight."

"Really?" He raises a brow. "And what about now?" He crosses his arms over his broad chest. I hate how he looks so damn good right now. And smug.

"I'm seeing clearly for the first time in a decade," I snap. "You're a selfish, egotistical, arrogant asshole," I spit out. "You wait till *now* to kiss me. Only a self-centered person would do that, knowing this should be one of the happiest moments of my life, and you needed to make it all about *you*. You're supposed to be my best friend! Well, you know what, Jackson Bishop? It's too late." I point my finger at him and dig it hard into his chest. "You're too fucking late."

Walking around him, I don't look over my shoulder as I make my way back to my parents' house, and then I wait until I'm alone in the shower to cry out fifteen years' worth of heartache.

Chapter Two Jackson

I fucking hate standing in weddings.

I'm so sick of everyone getting married and forcing me to dress up or walk down the aisle with a smile on my face. The only good thing about attending is the free booze and drunk bridesmaids.

I love my family, but this wedding business is too much sometimes. First, my sister, Courtney, married Drew several years ago, then my youngest brother Alex and River got hitched two years

ago, then Evan and Emily just this past summer, and now Kiera and Dr. Douchebag are getting married too.

Thank God John and Mila decided to elope over the summer, and I didn't get stuck with preparations or cleanup duty. They met earlier last year when Mila came to help him with baby Maize, then fell in love and got engaged last Christmas. She was hired as his nanny, but things heated up between them pretty quickly. We all fell in love with her, and she easily became a part of the family. I'm happy for them but so damn glad they didn't go through all the trouble of planning a wedding. I've seen firsthand how much stress it can cause.

Reaching into my vest for my flask of whiskey, I take a long sip and enjoy the burn as it coats my throat. I hate everyone in this room, and the only way I'm getting through it is if I'm loaded. When Kiera asked me to be in the wedding party, I laughed in her face, but then realized she was being sincere. After smacking me for laughing, I reluctantly agreed. I find it hard to say no to her after all these years of being friends.

Friends.

That's all we've ever been, and I know I'm to blame for that. Kiera made her feelings for me obvious years ago, but I wouldn't let myself act on them.

Instead, I dated and fucked every other girl. Including most of her friends.

Her leaving for college was supposed to be my saving grace. I'd hoped to be able to get over my feelings for her once and for all, but it did nothing to dull the ache I feel every time I think about her.

Kiera has always deserved so much more than me—so much more than I could ever provide her. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt her, and I knew if we crossed the boundaries of friendship, I'd ultimately end up ruining what we had, and our friendship would forever be jeopardized. I needed her too much to risk it, and if that makes me a selfish bastard, then so be it. Having Kiera in my life is a necessity, and whether it's her calling me out on my shit or just sitting around and talking, I wasn't willing to give that up because of how I've always felt about her.

Kissing her last night was long overdue, and I know she felt it just as strongly as I did even if she pushed me away.

But now it's her damn wedding day, and I'm standing in a room with her soon-to-be husband, Trent, and all the other groomsmen that consist of mostly his brothers and cousins. Thankfully, I know most of the bridesmaids, so I won't be alone for long. I'm walking down with my sister-in-law, Mila, and I plan to get as wasted as I can before the end of the I Do's.

"Can we do a few photos before y'all have to head out?" the wedding photographer, Lindsey pops her head in and asks. She's a stunning redhead, and I quickly glance at her left hand for a ring. Empty.

"I'm already dressed, but if you insist, I don't mind undressing for you." I speak up before anyone else has the chance. All heads turn toward me, but the only reaction I'm concerned about is Trent's, especially considering we're not on very good terms. Kiera told me he hired her, and she's a longtime family friend, which I'm pretty sure means former fuck buddy. Though I know he'd deny it if I asked.

Maybe I should ask just to see his jaw clench. It's quite amusing to rile up the tool bag.

"Watch your mouth, Bishop," Trent growls, and I smile in victory before flashing a wink at Lindsey. His face turns red as if he's contemplating on giving me a black eye, though he knows better.

I knew it.

"Let's do some in front of the barn since the ladies are still getting ready," Lindsey interrupts, plastering an awkward smile on her face.

The barn. The same barn I kissed Kiera against last night.

I needed one opportunity to see if she had any lingering feelings for me, and though my timing was shitty, I now know she does. Anyone who kisses another man the night before their wedding isn't as in love as they claim. I know I'm not being fair. I'm just as selfish and self-centered as she says, but it's for a good reason. Kiera isn't the type of girl you hit-it-and-quit-it with. She's the forever type, and I've known that since we were fifteen years old. I've never been able to give her what she needs or deserves, but that doesn't mean I haven't thought about it. Keeping my distance all these years gave me the Guinness World Record for blue balls.

"Okay, if you could all stand in one straight line and face me," Lindsey instructs, waving her finger around. "Trent in the middle and five of you on each side."

I line up as directed, thinking how stupid we all look in these vests. Trent's wearing a tan vest while the rest of us are wearing brown ones. They're paired with dark wash blue jeans and long-sleeve, button-up white shirts underneath. And if that's not country enough, we're all wearing tan cowboy hats.

At least we're not dressed up as penguins, so I can't complain too much. Still, I hate it.

"Alright, everyone look up here. Going to take four shots. Ready?" Lindsey holds her hand up, counting down, and then starts snapping away. She then directs us to make a V shape so Trent's in front, looking like a smug asshole. He deserves to have his face punched in, but I'm really trying to be on my best behavior for Kiera's sake.

"Great. Just a couple more," Lindsey announces. "Just the groomsmen for one shot and then Trent and the best man."

As I walk toward the other guys, I lose my balance and trip on a rock sticking out of the ground. I'm quick to catch myself, but not before Trent blurts out a comment.

"I knew you'd be a drunken mess. Should've never let Kiera invite your ass."

My hands ball into fists, the temptation to push him and put him in his place rising every second I'm forced to be near him.

"You wanna handle this like men, Laken? Or you gonna be a big ole pussy?" I step closer, ready to get in his face before a hand wraps around my wrist to pull me back.

"Walk away, Jackson." Mila's voice is soft but stern. If she wasn't my sister-in-law, I'd jerk my arm out of her grip and maul Trent's ass right here and now. That guy has been pushing me ever since he proposed to Kiera. It's as if he thinks he owns her now and tries to tell her what she can and can't do, and the thought pisses me off to no end. "It's time to head to the ceremony and get lined up," Mila informs me.

"We can take the rest of the shots after," Lindsey blurts out to break the tension.

I turn and face Mila whose arms are crossed over her chest, looking moderately pissed.

"What?" I furrow my brows.

She makes a big show of slapping her arms to her sides and huffing. "Really? You gonna give the groom a bloody nose before the wedding? What're you thinkin'?"

"That he'd look much better in red." I smirk.

"Let's go, alright? Jessica wants us to start heading up, and unless you want to watch her head explode, we better do as she says." Mila starts walking toward the row of trucks parked in the driveway, and I follow, knowing I'm supposed to drive half the groomsmen up there.

Once I'm to my truck, Mila pulls on my arm before I'm able to hop in the driver's seat. "Jackson, wait."

"What?" I turn and look at her, studying her face of concern.

"Give me your flask." She holds her hand out like she's scolding a child.

"Not happening."

"Jackson Joseph Bishop," she blurts out, and I have to do a double take to make sure Mama didn't just walk up. "I know you've been drinkin', so just hand it over."

"Just because you married my brother doesn't give you the right to treat me like a kid. I'm not giving you my flask, so just put your little hand away and leave." Opening the truck door, I hop in and close it behind me before she can get another word out.

When I think she's left, I roll my window down and wait for the groomsmen to hop in the back.

"Kiera's really nervous," Mila says, showing back up. She rests her arms inside the window frame and gives me a look. "So if you're planning on doing anything stupid, just...don't. Okay?"

"What makes you think that?"

She cocks her head and narrows her eyes at me. "Best behavior, Jackson. I mean it."

"So...what, were you voted as my babysitter or something?" It all starts to click since she's the one I'm walking down with and isn't pregnant and emotional. She has no problem warning me.

"I lost a bet," she teases. "No more drinking until after the ceremony. Got it?"

Turning the key and revving the engine, I rest my elbow on the window frame and raise a brow. "No promises." Once the truck bed is full, I take that as my cue to leave. "See ya up there, Peaches."

She rolls her eyes at the new nickname I gave her. She's from Georgia, so it's only fitting, but I say it mostly to get a rise out of her.

I put the truck into reverse and drive up the gravel road that leads to the location of the ceremony.

Dust and pebbles are all I can see in my rearview mirror. Five minutes later, we make it to the bottom of the hill.

Hordes of people flood the place, and I know Kiera well enough to know the massive guest list wasn't her idea. She's always said she wanted something small and intimate with close friends and family only. Kiera doesn't need to show off or pretend she's something she's not, which means this was all Trent's doing, and she probably gave in to make him happy.

Fuck. Another reason I should've punched him.

Grabbing my flask, I take another long swig. As the time approaches, I'm finding the courage I had to watch her get married to another man dissolve.

"Alright, y'all. I need you to line up just like we practiced," Jessica orders. "The ceremony will begin in about ten minutes. So don't run too far."

"Jackson, you clean up nice when you're not rolling around in the hay," my sister, Courtney, teases, giving me a side hug. "You reek of whiskey. Did you shower in it or something? Geez." She wrinkles her nose to emphasize her disapproval.

"Well you reek of baby poop, but you don't hear me complainin'."

"You're so rude!" Courtney swats me with a smile.

"Just doing my big brother duties." I try to give her a noogie like I used to when we were kids, but she's quicker than me and steps out of my reach.

"Do not touch my hair!" She points a threatening finger at me. "It took me two hours, and the last time I spent that much time on my hair was at my own wedding."

"Really? Could've fooled me," I taunt. Riling her up is the distraction I need right now.

"Jackson..." I hear Mila's warning tone behind me.

Oh c'mon.

"Yes?" I turn around too fast, and the world starts spinning.

"Everyone is seated, and it's about to start," she informs me, coming to my side. I look and see Emily lined up with Trent's brother. River and Courtney and everyone else are standing and ready to start as soon as Jessica gives us the go-ahead.

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"Just checkin'. Better not hurl on my dress either," she quips while giving me a death glare as if she actually thinks I would.

"Trust me, I haven't had nearly enough whiskey for that. Check back in a few hours, though." I wink, and she rolls her eyes at me. Speaking of which, I reach for my flask again and take another swig. Then another. I'm gonna need it to get through this.

The orchestra changes songs, and that's when I see Trent escorting his mother up the hill to walk her down the aisle. His father is behind him; they're both looking at their son like he's made of

gold.

"You're crying already?" River teases Emily who's standing behind me. I look over my shoulder, and sure enough, Emily is tearing up.

"I'm just so happy for her. She's waited her whole life for this moment." Emily's words slice right through my heart, and that's when it really hits me.

Fuck. I can't do this.

I can't watch her marry this guy.

The alcohol is rushing through my veins, and I know I'll do something stupid if I see her up there with him. My heart is beating so hard and fast, I can feel it thumping in my chest like it's going to explode any second.

"Kiera and her father are going to come out shortly, so the guests don't see her beforehand," I hear Jessica tell one of the bridesmaids. "Okay, first couple. Once the orchestra transitions to the next song, that'll be your cue to go."

My palms start to sweat, and I feel like I can't breathe. My heartbeat is drumming in my ears now, and I know I can't go through with this. I'm pretty sure I'm having some kind of anxiety attack and will pass out if I don't catch my breath.

"Jackson, stop fidgeting," Mila whispers. "We're walking down in less than two minutes."

"I can't," I hiss, undoing the buttons on my neckline. "I can't do this."

Stepping out of line, I walk toward my truck with Mila in my shadow. As soon as I make it to the gravel, I walk faster to my truck and jump in.

"What are you doing?" Mila asks with urgency and concern. "Are you insane?"

"Tell Kiera I'm sorry. I can't watch her get married." I shut the door and start the engine and back out before she can respond.

Chapter Three Kiera

I can't believe it's almost time.

My heart is racing so fast with nerves and excitement, but I know the moment I see Trent standing at the end of the aisle waiting for me, the anxiety will vanish.

Or so I hope.

I woke up this morning feeling like I could sleep for twenty hours because I was far too excited to get any rest. From the moment we got engaged, we started planning the details of the wedding. The past six months have been consumed by wedding favors, cake flavors, and catering dishes. Now the day is finally here.

I slept over at my parents' house last night in the same bedroom I grew up in, and I'm pretty sure that's part of the reason I couldn't sleep well. I'm used to being in bed with Trent and hearing his cell go off at random times for emergencies. But it was only for one night, and after today, we'll spend every night together.

"Kiki." I hear my dad's voice and three soft knocks on my door. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah, Dad."

He opens it and smiles. "I made breakfast. Your favorite."

"Eggs Benedict with smoked salmon?" I ask.

"Of course! Would I make my Kiki anything else?"

Smiling, I walk toward my dad and wrap my arms around him. "Thanks, Dad. That sounds so good right now." I laugh, knowing I won't have time to eat much throughout the day between getting ready, taking pictures, thanking the guests for coming, and then, of course, the dance.

"You ready for today?" he asks as I walk with him to the kitchen. I'm still in my pajamas, but I know Jessica and Emily will be here shortly to start getting ready.

"I think so...I'm excited. Anxious and nervous, too. But it feels surreal that today is the day," I admit, taking a seat at the table.

Mom comes barging in, rushing to give me a hug. "You're going to break a bone, Mom," I tease, willing her to loosen her grip.

"You're glowing." She kisses my forehead. "I can't believe my baby is getting married and going to have babies of her own soon."

"Mama..." I warn with a grin. "Can we get through the honeymoon first before you start naming my future children?"

"I'll give you through breakfast. That's it." She makes three plates before setting them down in front of us. "Make sure you fill up. I barely ate on my wedding day," she reminds me like she has a handful of times already.

"I will. It smells delicious." I smile at my dad, thankful for these last moments with my parents before the house is jam-packed with the wedding party.

Since the ceremony is on the hill, the bridesmaids are coming here to finish getting ready and help me get dressed. The groomsmen will show up dressed and ready to go, but they'll most likely do some pre-ceremony drinking and take pictures beforehand. But as per tradition, Trent and I won't see each other until I walk down the aisle.

After I get out of the shower, Emily and Jessica come over and start gushing about every little detail. I just want to sit back and soak it all up.

My hairdresser and makeup artist arrive shortly after. I decide to have my hair pulled back in a modest low bun with some loose strands framing my face. The veil is pinned into my bun and drapes down my back.

"Oh my goodness," my mother squeals. "That veil looks stunning on you." She leans in to kiss my cheek.

"Thanks, Mama." I smile sweetly, knowing she's so proud of me. "I already know you're going to be the most beautiful bride in the world."

Her comment makes me laugh, but I thank her anyway.

My makeup artist applies a more natural look, but she gives me red lips and puts a glowing bronzer on my cheeks.

"Now..." Katie says, flicking an eyeshadow brush between her fingers. "Do you trust me?" I want to say yes, but the mischievous grin on her face tells me otherwise.

"I'm not sure..." I tease hesitantly. "Why?"

"Well, I want to do a purple hue for your eyes. It's a great color for green eyes, but I'll blend it nicely with a cream shadow. I promise it'll look elegant with a small pop of color."

"Ooh, I love that idea!" Emily blurts out. "That'd look so pretty with your hair too."

I sigh, knowing I won't win a battle with these two anyway. "Okay, I trust you!" I smile. "Purple is my favorite color anyway, so let's do it!"

Katie finishes my makeup, and soon everyone is freaking out, eagerly waiting for me to put on my dress to complete the whole look.

"Okay, I'm coming out," I announce from the bathroom.

I open the door, lifting my dress slightly to step out and wait for their approvals.

"Wow..."

"Oh my God!"

"Stunning!"

A round of compliments echo throughout the room, and I'm close to tearing up at the way they're all admiring me.

"I can't believe it," I say when I study myself in the full-length mirror. "It's really happening."

Emily wraps her arms around my waist and hugs my back. "You deserve all the happiness in the world, Kiera. I'm so excited for you."

I place my hand over hers and squeeze. "I love you. Thank you again." We smile at each other in the mirror.

"Oh! I need my garter. Would you mind grabbing my purse from my truck?"

"Yeah, absolutely!" She pats my shoulder. "Don't forget your boots," she reminds me.

I head back to the bathroom where I left them and wait for her return. "Here ya go." She hands me my bag. "Want help?"

"No, I got it. Would you mind giving me a minute, though?" I ask, needing a few to myself before it's time to go.

"No problem, babe. Holler if you need me."

Reaching to the bottom, I dig for the garter I stuffed in there last night and pull it out along with a cream envelope I didn't know was inside. I quickly slide the garter over my boot and up my leg to my thigh before I settle it into place.

"What is this?" I mutter to myself. The envelope is sealed, and only my name is written on the front. For a moment, I wonder if Trent slipped it in here before I left yesterday as a surprise.

Once I rip it open and pull out the note, I glance over the handwriting and know it's not from him.

Dear Kiera,

This letter is long overdue, but now that you're engaged, I have no choice but to let you go. I know you've never been mine, but you've been my best friend for as long as I can remember, and it feels like an era is about to end.

When we were just teenagers and Tanner asked you out, and you looked at me before telling him yes, I knew then that you'd always have my heart, no matter what. Tanner had you, but you were always mine. He was the best fit for you—I always knew that—but it didn't make things easier especially seeing you two together all the time. It killed me. I loved you, but he was the better pick for you.

Tanner and I had a history. He was one of my best friends too, but he's always had a better head on his shoulders. Straight-A student, never in trouble, from a family of doctors and therapists, and was already writing his valedictorian speech two years before graduation. Hell, I think he already wrote his college essays before our sophomore year of high school. He was exactly the type of guy you deserved, so I never intervened. I watched on the sidelines as Tanner took you out on dates to dances and special romantic dinners. I helped him plan most of them because I knew all your likes and dislikes. Every gift, every movie suggestion, every birthday card he wrote you—I helped him because you deserved the best.

You still deserve the best, Kiera.

I knew growing up that all I'd amount to is being a rancher. It's all I've known, and I've always been passionate about horses and riding. I love what I do, so I don't regret the choices that led me here, but in my heart, I knew you deserved more than I could ever offer. You deserved to be shown the world, to travel and explore, to live a life without reservations.

A struggling, overworked rancher would never be able to give you that, Kiera. I'm a selfish man; I realize that, but there was always one thing I couldn't be selfish about, and that was you. Even at fifteen years old, I knew that. You'll always be the one that got away, and I'll always be the dumbass who let you.

I want nothing more in life than for you to be happy. Your happiness is all that's ever mattered to me, and if marrying Trent makes you happy, then I'll know I did right by keeping my distance.

I hope you know how much I love you, how much I've always loved you, and that everything I did was always for you, even if it seemed like the opposite at times. I've done a lot of stupid shit and things I'm not proud of. Getting into fights, one-night stands, being arrested, caught stealing, driving without a license—but hurting you will always be my biggest regret. I did most of that stupid shit to numb the pain I felt, and though it's no excuse, I'm still so fucking sorry I ever hurt you. There were times when the disappointment was so evident on your face that I wanted to drink a six-pack of beer and then hit every empty bottle over my head until I passed out. It was the only way to keep you from having feelings or waiting for me, and I hated myself for it.

I know I've rambled a lot and as you can probably guess, I've had a few beers and shots, but it was the

only way I could let myself be vulnerable enough to write this.

It's time to let you go. I need to. You're not mine, but I'll always be yours.

My heart will absolutely shatter watching you marry another man, but I've earned it. You deserve all the happiness, Kiera. Even if I'm not the reason for it.

I was never the right guy for you, but you were always the right girl for me.

I will always love you, Kiera.

—Jackson

Most of the letter is covered in my tears before I even finish reading the last word.

My throat is burning while I try holding back the sobs that are threatening to release.

I can't believe this. I can't believe him.

How? *Why?*

I don't know how to feel. I want to be so mad at him right now. But a part of me—the part that's always been reserved for him—is breaking. I've waited over fifteen years for Jackson, and before that kiss last night, I was certain the feelings weren't mutual.

Some part of me had always wished and wondered while dissecting every little sign. Then he'd have another random girl on his arm, and I figured I imagined it all.

But that kiss.

I'd never been kissed like that before. It was nothing like our first kiss, which was sweet and a little awkward. No, this kiss had every built-up emotion over the past decade poured into it. It was intense and filled with hunger. I've dreamt about his lips and hands on me for as long as I can remember. Even when I tried to stop loving him, dated other guys, fell in love with other people, left for college to get over him—it never worked. I continued to fantasize about how it'd feel to just have Jackson for one night. I knew I'd be risking my heart, but a part of me always believed I'd rather have experienced him once than not at all.

Except after he kissed me against the barn last night, I felt anger. Anger that all those feelings were bubbling to the surface again. Anger that he could still have that effect on me after the way he's treated me. Anger that I didn't stop it sooner but also because I stopped it at all.

My feelings are so fucking messed up that I can't sort them out anymore.

God. How could he do this to me? I don't know when he wrote this letter, but he mentions me being engaged, which means it was within the past six months. How could he say all these beautiful things and say he wants me to be happy, but then drop this bomb the morning of my wedding day?

Just like I said last night, he's a selfish, self-centered, asshole. Why wait until this moment? Doesn't he know he's hurting me now more than ever?

My heart rate pulsates in my wrist as I hold the letter tightly between my fingers. The mixed

feelings and emotions flowing through me have me feeling nauseous.

"Kiera, you okay in there?"

"Just feeling a little queasy. I'll be okay. Be right out."

"What's wrong?" Emily barges in without knocking, and I quickly scramble to fold the letter up.

"Nothin', just needed a few minutes alone. To calm my nerves and all." I keep my eyes locked on hers in hopes she doesn't notice how weird I'm acting.

"What's that?" She reaches for the envelope that has my name written across it. Before she can grab it, I hurry and shove it into my boot.

"What's goin' on?" She folds her arms over her chest and narrows her eyes at me. "You look strange."

"It was just a letter from Trent," I lie, hating that I'm being dishonest to my best friend, but I can't get into this with her right now. Not minutes before we're supposed to leave.

"Aww...that's sweet! Better be all about how damn lucky he is to be marrying you while promising you the world," she teases, smiling wide with pride.

"It was." I choke back a sob as I think about the letter and the truths it held. How am I supposed to do this right now?

"Okay, I need to go meet everyone up the hill. You okay? Want me to stay behind until you have to come up?" Emily asks.

"I'm great! I promise! It's just really starting to settle in, and I'm getting emotional, but I swear I'm ready." Standing up, I grab my handkerchief and dab under my eyes. "You go ahead. Dad and I will be up shortly."

"Okay." Emily smiles, placing her hands on my bare shoulders. "I love you. Enjoy this moment, okay? Everything goes by so fast, but it's all going to be beautiful and perfect."

Her words are music to my ears and just what I needed to hear. "I love you too. Thank you again. I'm so lucky to have you by my side for this."

She pulls me in for a tight hug before releasing me and grabbing her bouquet. "Meet you up there," she says over her shoulder, giving me an encouraging wink.

After taking a few minutes to calm my nerves, I stand and head out of the bathroom.

"Kiki..." My dad's deep voice startles me as he opens my bedroom door. "You look stunning, sweetheart."

"Thank you, Dad." I smile. "It's hard not to feel beautiful in this dress."

"I wasn't talking about the dress." He winks. "You ready for your chariot to take you up? Your groom is waiting." He holds his arm out for me to take.

"I'm ready."

My mother comes in and smiles. She's so damn happy. Inhaling a deep breath, I walk with Dad to his truck and hop in with Mom behind me to stuff my dress inside.

"Meet you up there, baby. I love you." Mom kisses my cheek before shutting the door. She's driving up with my uncle who's going to usher her down the aisle before the wedding party.

Dad starts the truck and drives us there. Butterflies swarm in my stomach, and my nerves are so intense, I hope I can calm down before the "Wedding March" starts playing.

As soon as we park, I see Emily and Trent's brother getting ready to walk down. Riley and Elizabeth are with Jessica, and as soon as she directs them to start, I know that's my cue to get ready.

My dad and Jessica come to my side and help me out. "You look amazing," she tells me, and I smile in return. I'm not sure any words would come out even if I opened my mouth and tried.

Jessica hands me my bouquet, and I grip it tightly, feeling my palms sweat as she fans out my train and brushes her hands along the skirt. The orchestra is still playing, and I know once the next song starts, it'll be my turn.

"You ready for this?" Jessica whispers.

"Yeah, I'm good." I suck in a deep breath.

I link my arm through my dad's and watch as Jessica motions for the orchestra to wrap it up. The "Wedding March" begins, and my heart drops. It's time.

As we make our way toward the front, everyone stands, and as soon as my eyes land on Trent, a wide smile spreads across my face.

He looks so damn handsome, and the nerves start to slowly fade away as he focuses all his attention on me. I try soaking it all in and smile as we walk toward Trent. My attention is glued to him while our guests watch me. My dad clasps my hand that's on his arm, and when I look up at him, and our eyes meet, I can see how proud of me he is.

As I stand next to my dad at the end of the aisle, I lock eyes with Trent again and see a smug expression I don't understand. It's then that I look at the groomsmen lined up and notice Jackson isn't there.

Oh my God.

The kiss. The letter. And now he's not here.

My throat goes dry and tight. *Where the hell is he?*

The pastor speaks as soon as the orchestra finishes, but I don't hear what he says because my mind is spinning out of control. Why would Jackson do this to me? Why would he wait for *this* moment to tell me his true feelings? I can't sort these thoughts out, and when my father speaks up to give me away, my heart thumps so damn hard in my chest as if to protest it all. Deep down, I know this isn't right. My gut instinct over the past few months hits me harder now more than ever. I've ignored a lot of it, hoping the stress of the wedding planning was giving me these doubts, but now I know for sure.

Once I pass my bouquet to Emily, Trent takes my hand and leads me to the front where the pastor

is standing. I start to panic as the realization that *I can't do this* hits me. I can't do this without Jackson here.

John's standing with Maize in his arms, and he's watching me. Our eyes meet, and I give him a questioning look, and as if he knows exactly what I'm silently asking, he shakes his head with a frown and shrugs.

Pastor Montgomery directs the guest to be seated with a smile.

"Welcome to the nuptials of Trent Laken and Kiera Young. It's a gorgeous day for a wedding and an outside ceremony. I can feel the love surrounding this couple, and I have no doubt that even if it was raining out, they'd be up here exchanging their vows. Now, me, on the other hand, I'd be requesting a rather large umbrella."

The guests' laughs echo throughout, but I can barely process his words. I should be thinking about Trent and our future together. Instead, all I'm thinking about is Jackson and how much of a mistake it'd be to marry Trent when I'm not one hundred percent positive this is what I want.

"I'm sorry..." I blurt out over the pastor's words.

"What?" Trent's head snaps toward me. "What's wrong, Kiera?" he whispers.

Blinking, I look at him before releasing his hands, and my arms fall to my sides. "I'm so sorry, Trent. I can't do this." The words roughly come out as I try to hold my composure and not cry. I can't believe what I'm saying right now.

"Kiera, what are you talkin' about?" he firmly asks, leaning in so the guests can't hear our words.

I lick my lips and inhale a deep breath. "I can't marry you."

Before he can respond, I grab ahold of my dress and walk away.

I can feel everyone's gaze on me as I run down the aisle, and it's not until I hit the bottom of the hill that the tears roll down my cheeks at the realization of what I just did.

"Kiera!" I hear Emily yell behind me. "Kiera, wait!"

I look over my shoulder and see a panicked and worried Emily as I rush toward the gravel driveway. She's going to kill me for this; I already know. What I just did is unforgivable, but I couldn't follow through with it without talking to Jackson first.

"Kiera, take my keys," she shouts. Turning to face her, she rushes toward me and hands me a set of keys. "Take Evan's truck. It's over there." She points behind me.

"How'd you know?"

"I knew the second I saw your face in the bathroom, and then when Jackson left...let's just say I had a gut feeling." She flashes a small, sympathetic smile. "I'll take care of everything here. Don't worry." *

***Keeping Him* is a full-length standalone novel that's filled with intense chemistry, slow-burn tension, and plenty of angst! Let Kennedy Fox take you to the South for an explosive hot adventure that'll surely leave your Kindles on fire!**

Jackson Bishop is your typical playboy. Unpredictable, charming, and overly confident.

Growing up in Texas, the ranch life is all he's ever known. Horses and late night partying are his lifestyles, and all the local girls know it too. Riding lessons aren't the only things taught at the stables, and he makes sure clients never leave unsatisfied. Everyone knows Jackson's a wild card, but not everything is as it seems. He may be a womanizer on the surface, but he's hiding deep feelings about the one who's had his heart since he was a teen. Unfortunately, it's not as simple as roping her in and claiming her as his.

Kiera Young is well-known for her sassy nature and outgoing personality. Though she's one of the best horse trainers in the area, she's never been able to tame her best friend and the man she's secretly loved since she was fifteen; Jackson Bishop. She's waited years for him to confess his true feelings but as time goes on, she decides she's done waiting. Kiera finally meets a man who promises to give her the world, and when he pops the question, she says yes; knowing they're both ready to settle down and start a family.

Even if her heart beats for another man.

Jackson's certain he's lost Kiera for good and has no one to blame but himself. However, on the day of her wedding, he can't bring himself to watch the woman he loves walk down the aisle to someone else. Kiera's already having second thoughts and knows she can't get married without his support. It's not until she's at the altar that she realizes she can't let Jackson go and will do whatever it takes to keep him; even if it means running out on her own wedding.

**This is book 4 in the Bishop Brothers series. Each book features a different brother and can be read as a complete standalone. HEA guaranteed!*
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