

The body at Kade Dennon's feet was utterly still.

Kade sucked in air, his side screaming in pain. Probably a cracked rib. Reaching down, he grabbed the gun that had been knocked from his hand, sliding it back inside the holster on his hip. Turning to the side, he spat a mouthful of blood and swiped an arm across his mouth.

God, he was sick of this shit.



Thirty minutes later he'd checked in to the kind of motel where the clerk hadn't batted an eye at Kade's bloody face and bruised knuckles, wordlessly sliding the cash Kade had handed over into a drawer and dropping a key onto the counter.

Kade stood under the scalding water from the shower, letting it ease the

aches and pains as it sluiced over his skin, relaxing the abused muscles in his chest and arms. He imagined he could still smell the man's sweat tinged with fear as they'd fought in the alley. Blood, grime and other noxious odors from things best left unidentified had hung in the air.

Death rarely came in a pleasant package.

The idea of being clean was a foreign feeling to Kade. The water may have washed away the blood from his hands, but his soul would never be rid of it. The only time he felt redeemed was when-

Kade abruptly cut that thought off. No sense thinking about things he couldn't have.

He didn't turn off the water until it began to run cold.

His numbing agent of choice, vodka, sat on the bedside table. Kade pulled on a pair of jeans over his skin and sat on the bed. He ripped the paper off a plastic cup and filled it with ice and vodka. The headboard was cold against his back as he relaxed against it, staring at the blank television screen.

Three glasses of vodka later and he could no longer keep her image at bay, so he flipped on the television. Midnight had come and gone, but the channels still showed people dancing in revelry from coast to coast, welcoming the New Year. He thought about where he'd been last New Year's Eve and couldn't remember. The places and jobs blended together anymore. New Year's Eve was just another night.

He wondered if he'd still be alive next New Year's Eve, then thought it almost curious that he didn't care overly much one way or the other. Surely he should care, logically speaking.

Blane cared, Kade knew that much, and he was grateful for that. At least one human being on this miserable planet would notice Kade's absence.

He thought of her.

Okay, if he was lucky, maybe two.

The bottle of vodka was over half empty and Kade could no longer remember why he wasn't supposed to let himself think about her. Kathleen. Usually he refused to even say her name

inside his head. It was just...her. Now he let the name reverberate in his mind. He closed his eyes, indulging in the memory of the last time he'd seen her, spoken to her, touched her.

He'd carried the necklace in his pocket for days, trying to decide if he should give it to her or not. It had been a spontaneous decision to buy it, as was taking the ornament from her tree for a copy of the photo. It had been an insane and completely illogical impulse that he should have quelled at once.

Sentimentality. It did nothing but make you vulnerable. And vulnerability was a weakness Kade couldn't afford.

If he concentrated, he could remember the scent of her hair as he'd fastened the necklace, the softness of her skin as his fingers had brushed the back of her neck.

Kade was reaching for the phone before he realized what he was doing. He had to hear her voice. Just once. Then he'd hang up.

It rang several times. Kade rubbed his bleary eyes, swallowing his disappointment. He'd just listen to her voice mail message, then hang up. A recording was better than nothing.

He tried not to think of how pathetic that was.

"Hello?"

Her voice was sleep roughened. He'd woken her. A quick glance at the clock had him silently cursing. It was the middle of the night there. Of course she'd been asleep.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" she asked again.

Kade closed his eyes, savoring the sound in his ear the way one would savor the taste of a good wine on the tongue, letting the reverberations of her voice seep into his consciousness.

"I know you're there. I can hear you breathing," Kathleen continued. Her voice was hushed, as though she was trying to be quiet. "Who is this?"

He should hang up. He really should. God, he was a sick, pathetic bastard, acting like a moonstruck teenager. All he needed to complete the picture was a late night drive by of her apartment.

"I...Kade? Is that you?"

Kade was silent.

"Kade...?" She sounded less sure now and Kade knew she was seconds away from hanging up.

"Yeah." Kade's voice was rougher than he'd realized and he swallowed to clear it. "It's me."

She was quiet for a moment and Kade regretted admitting his identity. No doubt she was wondering why the hell he was calling her at all, much less at this hour.

"Kade."

The way she said his name made Kade's eyes squeeze shut, an ache blooming in his chest.

"How are you?"

She sounded as though she actually cared. Kade tried to dig himself out of his drunken stupor, aware that he hadn't been prepared to carry on a conversation with her.

"Fine. I'm fine," he answered. He wanted to hear her talk again, so he asked the requisite follow-up question. "Um, how are you?"

She sighed softly, a sound that went straight to his groin. "Tired," she admitted. "I haven't been sleeping well."

"Why not?"

“Worry, I guess. I have a hard time turning my brain off.” Her voice was low and quiet. Kade pictured her curled up in bed in the dark, with just his voice in her ear. The fantasy was an intoxicating one.

“What are you worried about?” he asked, trying to stay focused.

“The future, I guess. My job, my life. I worry about Blane...and about you.”

The sound of his brother’s name made guilt rise like nausea, so Kade ignored that part. She worried about him. He concentrated on that.

“Don’t,” he said. “And you shouldn’t worry about the future either. There’s no point to it.”

“Don’t you ever think about the future?”

“No,” he lied. “The future is for people like you.”

“What does that mean? ‘People like me?’”

It seemed obvious to him. “You have a future.”

“And you don’t?”

Kade thought the answer to that was patently apparent, so he didn’t bother replying and took another drink instead.

“You break my heart.”

Her voice was so soft that he nearly didn’t catch what she’d said. When he did, his gut clenched as though someone had shoved a hot knife into him.

“This was a bad idea,” he said roughly. “I’ll catch you later, princess.”

“No! Wait! Please don’t hang up.”

Her request caught Kade off guard, and he was powerless to refuse her.

“Are you still there?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Where are you?”

Kade debated lying, decided he was too tired. “A crappy motel outside of Seattle.”

“That’s a long way from home.”

His laugh was without humor. “Home is ephemeral, princess, just like love, hope and happiness.”

She was quiet. Kade took another drink.

“Have you ever been happy?” she asked.

Kade stared at the muted television, his eyes seeing into the past. “Maybe,” he murmured. “A long time ago.”

Kathleen’s next words were gentle. “When your mom was alive?”

An old heartache burned inside. It had been years since he allowed himself to dwell on the past. Kathleen’s voice, his exhaustion, the pain, it all combined, crumbling his carefully hewn defenses.

“She used to make these cookies for me, every Christmas.” Absently, Kade took another drink, lost in memories. “We never had much money for presents, but she’d scrimp and somehow I’d have a full stocking. Then we’d have Christmas dinner, and always these cookies afterward. They were amazing. Fruit and cranberries with nuts, rolled in cinnamon and sugar. They used to just melt in your mouth.”

He could see her face, if he tried very hard. A fuzzy image, the features indistinct, except for the dark waves of hair falling to her shoulders and the blue eyes, a mirror of his own.

“She’d come home late from work, one or two o’clock in the morning. I’d wait up for her, worried. She worked in a bar, and not that great of one. I’d climb out of bed and she’d half-heartedly scold me for being awake, too tired to really be mad. Then she’d hug me and put me

back to bed. I could smell her perfume on my pajamas, know she was home safe, and then I could sleep.”

It suddenly occurred to Kade that Kathleen was quiet. Too quiet. Maybe he’d put her to sleep with his stupid rambling. He’d yet to meet a woman who would be enthralled with tales from his childhood.

“Still there?” he asked.

“Yeah. I am.” Her voice was thick and she sniffed once.

Shit. She was crying. Nice job, asshole.

“I heard that stupid Christmas carol on the radio,” he said out of nowhere, wanting to change the subject. Where all this maudlin crap had come from, he had no fucking clue. Probably the booze.

“What Christmas carol?”

“That hippo one.” Kade had heard her singing it at The Drop the night he’d played at bodyguard. Normally he avoided all radio stations that saturated the airwaves with sappily sweet holiday dreck starting the day after Halloween. It drove him nuts. The hippo song had caught his attention while flipping stations and he’d stopped to listen, remembering how he’d watched Kathleen work while she’d almost unconsciously sang.

“It’s not stupid,” she protested. “I like it. It’s funny.”

“There are better carols out there,” he said.

“Really? Which one’s your favorite?”

“Do I really seem like the kind of guy who’d have a favorite Christmas carol?”

“There’s got to be one you like,” she persisted. “Humor me.”

Kade heaved a sigh just so she would know what a pain in the ass she was and thought for a moment. “Silent Night.”

“Good choice,” Kathleen said, and to his surprise, she began to sing.

Kade loved her voice, and if he didn’t have a shred of pride, he’d beg her to sing to him all night. With a sigh, he rested his head back and closed his eyes, letting her voice wash over him. She knew more than just the first verse and sang them all.

“You have a New Year’s resolution, princess?” he asked, when she was done.

“Um, yeah, sure,” she answered. He could practically see her pulling herself back together.

“What is it?”

“Honestly?” she asked with a huff of laughter. “You’ll just make fun of me.”

“No, I won’t,” Kade said. “Tell me.”

“You will,” she argued. Kade could hear the smile in her voice and it made his soul a bit lighter.

“Scout’s honor,” he promised.

“Please,” she snorted. “Like I’m going to believe you were a boy scout.”

“Just tell me.”

“Fine, but it’s cliché and girly and you’ll roll your eyes.” She hesitated, then blurted, “I want to lose ten pounds.”

Kade rolled his eyes.

“I knew you’d say that!” Kathleen exclaimed.

“I didn’t say a word!”

“I heard you roll your eyes.”

This time Kade smiled before he could help himself, her indignant tone more endearing than she could possibly know.

“I think you look fantastic,” he said, swallowing the last of his vodka. In his mind’s eye, he was picturing her with that halter top, micro-mini skirt, and come-fuck-me stilettos that figured in too many of his fantasies. His cock stirred in his jeans.

“I’m not searching for compliments,” Kathleen grumbled.

“If you were here, you’d know those aren’t empty words.”

“What do you mean?” Her cautious question made Kade smile again.

“Just thinking about you makes me hard.”

Kade heard her sharp intake of breath. He closed his eyes, imagining her lying in her bed. Was she wearing the virginal white nightgown? Or a little t-shirt and panties?

“What are you wearing?” he asked, unsurprised by the roughness of his voice. His jeans were uncomfortably tight now.

“Pajamas,” she answered, slightly breathless.

“Be specific.”

She hesitated, then said, “A T-shirt. Flannel pants.”

“What color are you wearing?”

“What?”

“I’m imagining you in your bed,” Kade replied. “What color are your panties?”

“Kade, I shouldn’t...let’s not-”

“Close your eyes,” Kade ordered, cutting her off. “It’s the middle of the night. No one’s around. You’re alone. Just my voice.”

She quieted, listening, he hoped.

“Touch your stomach. Under your shirt. Your hand against your skin.” Please God, let her do this. Kade held his breath, waiting. After a moment, he said, “Are you warm?”

“Yes.”

The single word brought a flood of both relief and excitement. For some reason Kade couldn’t fathom, the gods were smiling on him tonight.

“Move your hand up. Touch your breast. Brush your nipple lightly with your fingers until it pebbles under your touch.”

Silence from Kathleen. Kade closed his eyes, imagining her lying in her bed, her hand moving hesitantly under the T-shirt, her breasts growing heavy with arousal.

“Tell me what you feel.” Kade unzipped his jeans, slipping his hand inside to free his straining cock from the denim.

“Soft. Warm.” Her voice was a near whisper.

“Are your nipples hard?”

“Yes.”

“Use both hands. Cradle the phone and push your t-shirt above your breasts. Cup their weight in your palms.”

Kade could hear her breathing now, slight little pants that made him bite back a groan. He fisted his cock in his hand, sliding slowly up and down its length.

“Wet your fingers and tug on your nipples,” he rasped. “Imagine it’s my mouth on you, sucking you.”

Another gasp. His cock twitched at the sound. Kade wet his fingers on the liquid that pearled on the head of his shaft, swirling it around and imagining it was her hand there, doing these things to him, watching him.

“Take your pants off, princess. Push them down your legs until you’re bare.”

Kade could sense her hesitation, and before he could stop himself, "Please," he begged in a hoarse whisper.

He heard the rustle of cloth.

"Okay," Kathleen said.

"Kick off the covers and spread your legs."

"How did you-?"

"I want to see you." As if he didn't know that she had taken her pants off, then lay demurely under the covers with her legs pressed tightly together. Road signs were harder to read than her.

"Close your eyes. Feel the air cooling your skin? I'm there. Watching you. Wanting you."

Her breaths were speeding up again. A good sign.

"Slide your hand down your stomach until it's between your legs. Touch yourself for me."

"I...can't."

"Yes, you can. For me, you can." He pumped his cock. Please oh please, he silently begged. "Slide your fingers into your pussy. Are you wet for me?"

She was quiet so long, he nearly despaired. Then, "Yes."

"Tell me."

"I'm wet. Soft like silk. And hot." Her voice was strained, aroused.

"God, Kathleen," Kade rasped. His hips were thrusting into his fist now, but he tried to slow down, to make it last. "Slide two fingers inside, pump them in and out like it's my cock. Circle your clit. Pretend it's my tongue, licking you, tasting you."

Her breathing was a delicious pant in his ear. Whimpers echoed across the line as she did as she was told. Kade imagined her, legs spread wide on the white sheets, T-shirt shoved above her breasts, exposing them to his gaze, the tips rosy. Her hand was buried in the blonde curls between her thighs, fingers glistening with the evidence of her arousal.

His balls tightened and he gritted his teeth, feeling the orgasm about to explode out of him. Not before her. He didn't want to come before she did.

"My head's between your legs. God, you taste so good," he moaned. "Come for me. I want to feel you pulse against my tongue. My fingers are inside of you. You're so tight, so ready. Come for me."

Her cries of pleasure in his ears were the only catalyst he needed, his orgasm making his hips buck wildly into his hand as a thick stream of hot semen shot from his shaft.

It took several moments before Kade had regained his senses. He opened his eyes.

The seediness of the motel room, of what he'd done and made Kathleen do, hit him with the force of a hammer, robbing him of breath. His hand was coated in sticky fluid, some also on the worn bedspread underneath.

Kathleen was quiet, her breathing slowed back to normal now.

Self-loathing consumed Kade. God, he was such a selfish bastard. He ruined everything he touched, even Kathleen. He'd sullied her innocence, consumed her light to ease the darkness in his soul. How could she even stand to talk to him?

"I, uh, I'd better go," he said roughly.

"What do you mean?" Kade winced at the hurt in her voice. "I thought...did I do something wrong?"

"No, Christ, no. You didn't do anything wrong," Kade hastened to reassure her. Far from it.

"Kade...Kade!"

Kade woke up with a start. The phone was wedged against his ear. His hand around his spent cock, still sticky.

“Are you okay?” Kathleen’s voice in his ear.

“Um, yeah, I’m fine.” What had happened?

“You fell asleep while I was singing,” she continued, oblivious to his confusion. “Then I think you were having a nightmare. It took a few moments to wake you.”

Oh God. It had been a dream. All of it. Kade knew he should feel relieved, but all he felt was bitter disappointment.

“Yeah, well, thanks for the serenade, princess,” he said, his words clipped.

“Oh. Um, okay.” She seemed taken aback at his tone and Kade mentally castigated himself for hurting her.

He tried to temper his words. “Thanks for answering tonight,” he said.

“I’m glad you called,” she replied simply.

“Happy New Year, Kathleen,” he said.

“Happy New Year, Kade.”

He was just about to hang up when he heard her call his name.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“They’re black.”

The line went dead.