

ORION RISING

A Blackwater Falls Story

PRELUDE

Tiny red sparks of sunlight in her hair made my lungs contract on the next breath, even seeing her from behind. Unaware of my attention, she dashed across the street in a gap between the vehicles slowly cruising through the town square. I wondered what brought her here, just outside the jewelry store where she used to work. The store was closed and its owner was the subject of an ongoing manhunt. Of course, I couldn't ask her; couldn't let her know I was here, but I watched, transfixed until she rounded the corner out of sight.

Chapter 1

Aden Garrett stared motionless at the fallen leaves outside, prancing in eddies of wind as the teacher's voice droned on at the front of the room. The subtle squeal of the dry erase marker on the whiteboard at the front of the room made her eyelid twitch ever so slightly and she glanced down at the open notebook on her desk. Two lines. She'd written down two whole lines of notes, and short lines at that, in the forty-five minutes she'd sat in this class.

Looking at the whiteboard, and then the old wall clock above it, she realized she'd obviously missed most of the lesson. Again. Groaning inwardly at her own utter lack of concern for her grade, she closed the notebook and, with a long sigh, watched the last few seconds of the school day click by.

Maneuvering her way through the suddenly-animated throng in the hallway, she approached her locker to find that two of the balloons within the bunch so jauntily tethered to the lock this morning had burst, or been burst, and hung listlessly. She knew how they felt.

Though there had been no note or card to indicate who'd tied the balloons to her locker, and festooned it with streamers and a glittering happy birthday sign, she knew who was responsible: her best friend, Cadence Kendall, the loudest of the Kendall Triplets. No one else would have bothered, even if they'd known it was her birthday.

Aden was invisible. Well, not exactly invisible, that wasn't quite right. She was a pariah, infamous, untouchable, unknowable since the events earlier in the year that had stunned the small town of Blackwater Falls, S.C. The series of events that included Aden being kidnapped, twice, by two different assailants over the summer months, and her boyfriend Maddox Dixon also being abducted...Aden drew in a jagged breath and slammed her locker shut on the memories. She wouldn't think about Maddox, back in Virginia, probably back with his ex, Harper. She wouldn't think about her ex-employer, Herman Keith, who'd orchestrated the most hellish summer Aden had known. The Demon was still out there, having never been caught following Aden and Maddox's escape. Still lurking, still watching, still waiting...for her.

"Happy birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you!" Cadence sang loudly from halfway down the hall. "Happy birthday dear Aaaaaaaa-den..." she skipped up to Aden's side, followed by Trey, her boyfriend. "Happy birthday to you!"

"Well, at least you aren't trying to make a big spectacle or anything." Aden shook her head and accepted hugs from them both.

"So, happy birthday." Trey smiled.

"Thanks. You couldn't reign her in a bit, huh?"

"I am reigning. Queen-like, you understand." Cadence waved majestically to other students passing by. "Hey, what happened to your balloons?"

"Dunno." Aden turned to untie the bunch from her locker.

"Probably just got jostled in this hallway all day." Trey shrugged.

"Or, it may have been the work of a diabolically-depressed balloon-hating fiend, right here in our midst." Cadence pronounced dramatically.

"No, this town already has its quota of fiends." Aden frowned. "Here, would you hold these for a minute?"

Cadence took the balloons while Aden took down the glitter-laden birthday sign and the colorful paper streamers.

"You know, I'm keeping this sign." Aden announced. "It will make another appearance at a birthday near you, soon."

"Recycling! I love it." Cadence took the crumpled ball of streamers and led the way toward the exit at the end of the hall, dumping the streamers in a trash can propping open a door as she passed. "But my birthday was just last month, so you'll need to find another victim."

They walked out into a glorious Fall afternoon; the sun was shining through a brilliant blue sky and the playful breeze still kicked up the fallen leaves.

"You're so lucky to have your birthday fall on a Friday." Cadence mused as they walked to Trey's car. "Makes planning your party so much easier."

"I told you I don't want a party." Aden reminded her. Again. "What is there to celebrate?"

"That you've made it through this crazy year. That you've turned into a bad-ass fighter of psychos everywhere. That it's senior year and you –"

"I'm not getting out of this, am I?" Aden asked Trey, by way of interruption.

"Nope." Trey grinned, opening a car door for her before going around and opening the front passenger door for Cadence.

"Getting out of it." Cadence mumbled, disgusted. "Not only are you not getting out of it, but you're going to thank me, I promise."

"Well, I appreciate the sentiment, anyway." Aden looked dubious.

"Oh, just wait." Cadence laughed.

Aden leaned back into the seat as Trey pulled out of the school parking lot.

"So, what's the plan anyway? I don't even know where my own party is being held."

"This is your day. The party is coming to you." Cadence grinned.

"Wait, at my house?" Aden looked stricken. "But my Mom won't –"

"Relax, will 'ya? Janet's been in on the planning from the beginning." Cadence sighed. "Oh ye of little faith."

"My mom's been helping you plan?"

"And your brother." Cadence nodded. "And my Mom, and Trey, and Natalie, and –"

"Good grief! This isn't going to be a big party, is it?"

"Chill. I've got you. You're going to love it." Cadence assured her.

"Be afraid." Trey whispered dramatically over his shoulder. "Be very afraid."

Cadence punched his shoulder.

"So, is it a costume party? I mean Halloween's tomorrow. People might think it's a costume thing."

"No. This is a birthday party. Not a Halloween party. No costumes." Cadence answered emphatically.

"We're too grown up and sophisticated for that."

"Yeah, the costume party is *tomorrow* night." Trey laughed.

"Wait, what?" Aden asked.

"One party at a time." Cadence answered in a sing-song voice. "We need to focus on tonight. This one is all about you."

"Because I just love being the center of attention." Aden frowned at her.

"Shush! No more Negative Nelly from the birthday girl." She wagged a finger at Aden. "We've taken care of everything. All you have to do is go home, shower, change and have a fabulous time tonight."

"Change? Into what?"

Cadence sighed. "You'll see. No more questions."

"I thought we needed to focus on this party?" Aden raised a challenging brow.

"I need to focus. You need to relax." Cadence directed, turned up the music that had been playing softly in the background and began to loudly sing along.

Trey met Aden's exasperated stare in the rear view mirror and laughed.

When they arrived at Aden's house, Trey parked his car to one side and got out.

"So you're staying?" Aden asked, surprised. "Thought you were just dropping me off."

"Apparently there is lots to do." he grinned, shrugging.

"Nope. Zip it!" Cadence interrupted Aden's imminent outburst. "We're on a schedule here people. Get inside."

They were met just inside the door by Janet, Aden's mother.

"Happy birthday!" she grabbed Aden into a hug.

"Thanks, mom." Aden hugged her back. "So you're in on this whole party thing with Cadence?"

"I am." She grinned and gave Cadence a conspiratorial wink. "There are some snacks for the three of you out on the deck. Thought you might like a little break before the party prep gets started."

"Thanks Mrs. Garrett." Trey led the way to the back deck.

Aden's eyes unconsciously scanned the deep woods and the river dropping merrily down the steep bank under the deck as they snacked on apple slices, crackers, and baked brie with pecans. She wondered if she would ever lose the unsettling feeling of being watched. *Maybe when they finally catch The Demon*, she thought to herself. Her eyes jumped to a sudden movement among the trees and she caught her breath; just a squirrel. *Or maybe I'm just broken forever*, she sighed inwardly.

"Aden?? Anybody in there?" Cadence waved a hand in front of Aden's face.

"Sorry. Guess my mind wandered away. What'd I miss?"

"I was saying that you have a date with your shower and the outfit laid across your bed."

"Um, okay. What time does the party start?"

"Don't worry about it. Take your time, the party can't start without you." Aden started to interrupt.

"Nope, shush. Just go shower, relax, and change into the outfit your mom laid out. I'll be in to help with your hair and makeup later."

"Wait, what are you planning to do to my hair?" Aden asked suspiciously.

"It's still really warm out here. I thought we'd put it up."

"So were you planning to ask my opinion, or —"

"Nope. I'm handling all the details. All you have to do is relax and enjoy your evening. Now scoot."

Aden stared dubiously with one brow raised.

"Hello? Time's a-wastin' here." Cadence shooed her through the door.

Aden's mom was on the phone as she paced busily in the kitchen. Aden was alarmed at the sheer volume of food her mother had already laid out on the large center island. *Had they invited the whole town? Crap!* She shook her head, sighing deeply as she made her way to her bedroom.

Laid across her bed was a short halter-necked dress in a deep green with a sheer layer of the same green over the flared skirt. Aden picked it up and held it out in front of her. It was perfect. She wondered if it was Cadence or her mom who'd picked it out. The fact that green was Maddox's favorite color on her flitted through her mind before she pushed the thought away. *You liked wearing green long before you met Maddox Dixon*, she reminded herself.

Aden showered, lingering for a while under the hot spray in an attempt to relax, as Cadence had suggested. She was anxious about the impending party, and everyone's insistence that she socialize more often. *Like I'm just supposed to forget? About Jacob? About The Demon? About Maddox? About Harper?* She sighed, turning her face up into the spray. *Stop it. Now you're just feeling sorry for yourself.*

Turning off the water, she toweled off quickly and donned a deep blue robe before turban-ing her hair in a towel on the top of her head. Swiping at the fogged mirror with a hand towel, she inspected her reflection, critically. It had been a long while since she'd really paid attention to her appearance. The brief summer color she'd been able to carefully acquire was already faded back into the pasty-white, lightly freckled skin tone that refused to tan. She leaned closer to the mirror to inspect a newly-forming zit high on her forehead. *Perfect.* There were also shaded crescents under her eyes, a testament to the

nightmares that regularly kept her awake. Sighing, she turned from the mirror and retrieved her hair dryer from the cabinet under the sink to begin drying and brushing out her long hair. *Maybe I should get a haircut, she mused. Something radical so no one would recognize me. Maybe plastic surgery, a new wardrobe* – her thoughts were interrupted by a loud knock on the door. Aden turned off the hairdryer.

“Hey in there! Let me know when you’re decent and I can come in.” Cadence shouted through the door.

Aden opened it and invited her in before turning the hairdryer back on. “So, come clean, who all did you invite?”

“Just a few of your friends.” Cadence shrugged, taking the dryer and brush from Aden to finish the job.

“My family, your family, Trey’s family, Natalie, Tina and Bunkie, um –”

“Wait, what do you mean when you say you invited everyone’s family? I thought this was just a small group of friends?”

“It is. A small group of the people who care about you.”

“Well who, specifically, do you expect –?”

“Hush!” Cadence interrupted her. “Don’t worry. It’s a party, not a human sacrifice.”

Aden eyed her suspiciously in the mirror, as Cadence stood behind her methodically drying sections of her hair. *She’s hiding something. Look at the mischievous gleam in her eye, the way-too-pleased half-smile...oh my God, what if she invited Maddox? Anxiety rippled through her body. Would she do that? Crap. She **might** do that. She said she’d invited ‘family’ and he IS her step-brother...*

“Am I pulling too hard?” Cadence shut off the dryer. “You look like you’re in pain.”

“No, I’m fine.” Aden’s thoughts raced. *Should I ask her? Would that make her think that I wanted him here? DO I want him here?* She rolled her head on her neck. *Doesn’t matter. He doesn’t want to be here.*

“Well that was incredibly convincing.” Cadence replied, sarcastically. “Will you relax already?”

Aden took a deep breath and nodded. “Sorry. I know you’ve gone to a lot of trouble.”

“I just want you to have fun. Or at least see you smile.” Cadence shrugged, an uncharacteristic frown between her brows. “It’s been a while.”

Aden met her gaze in the mirror, startled by the sudden seriousness from her always-exuberant best friend.

“I smile.” She insisted, defensively.

“Really?” Cadence half-grinned. “Look at your face right now.”

Aden consciously tried to relax the muscles in her face into something resembling a smile. She had to admit to herself that it was awkward to watch.

“Look, I get it.” Cadence hugged her from behind. “The last few months have been hell. For you, for your family and friends, for the other kidnap victims, for the whole damn town.” She sighed. “But especially for you. I know. We all know.”

“No, you really –”

“Stop. I’m not trying to, in any way, trivialize what you’ve been through.” Cadence interrupted, quietly. “But those things are in the past. No amount of brooding and shutting yourself off from everyone is going to change any of the things that have happened so far in your life. The one thing you CAN change is you...and your reactions to the things that are happening right now. In the present.” She held Aden’s gaze in the mirror as she continued. “Aden, if you continue to allow those memories to shadow your present, then they’ve **won**. Kra-J and The Demon; you’re letting them win. They both set out to possess you, for whatever twisted reason, and even though you physically kicked their asses and got away, you’ve never allowed yourself to really be free of them. And that freedom, the emotional freedom, is completely up to you. And Maddox, too, for that matter. It’s your choice of whether or not to move on from all of that. We all know that we can’t do that for you, we can’t make that decision, but we can encourage it. We can do everything in our power to help you find happiness again.”

Aden stared back at her, unmoving. She was right. Aden, herself, had preached that very sentiment immediately after Maddox’s abrupt departure back to Virginia. She’d forced herself to be positive, or at least, she’d forced the appearance of positivity. Inside, she secretly cringed along with her friends and family at the near-lunatic tone her voice and actions elicited from the force of her faked happiness.

“You’re right.” She admitted quietly. “I’ve been trying to hold it all together so tightly, for so long, that I don’t even know...how to feel.”

“So try letting go.” Cadence suggested with a small shrug.

“I’m afraid I’ll fall to pieces.” Aden whispered.

“I’ve got you, though. We’ve all got you. We’ll help you pick up the pieces.” Cadence squeezed her shoulders and let go, picking up the brush again. “Now, let’s get you dressed.”

It was over an hour later when Cadence announced that she was finally finished with Aden’s hair and makeup.

“All that’s left is slipping into your dress and shoes. Oh, and maybe you should practice that smiling thing some more before you go out there. I’m going to go back into your bathroom and spruce myself up a bit.”

Aden nodded and turned back to the mirror above the vanity table in her bedroom. Her mom had kicked them out of Aden’s bathroom as it was the only guest bathroom and she wanted to straighten it up

before the guests began arriving. Inspecting the subtle makeup and simple, loose chignon of her hair, Aden was impressed with Cadence's skills. She felt pretty, for the first time in a very long time.

She slipped on the dress and stepped into the metallic silver sandals Cadence had picked out from Aden's closet. Sitting back at the vanity, she dug through a drawer that contained the meager jewelry pieces that she owned to choose a pair of dangling silver earrings, then sat back for a last, critical look at herself.

The face that stared back was unfamiliar to her. It had been months...three months, to be exact, since she'd really paid attention to her appearance. Since the day Maddox had left Blackwater Falls. The day her life took yet another, inexplicable turn.

She hadn't heard from him at all, at least, not in the normal sense. She still *felt* him occasionally, like the brush of a spider's web across her consciousness. Though he'd eviscerated her heart, apparently some part of him still held on to the ethereal mental connection that they shared; the bizarre and silent communication that allowed them to find each other in the midst of the past summer's chaotic events. Since he'd been gone, the awareness of his thoughts touching hers would be tentative and brief before she would feel him quickly pulling away. He never said a word. After all, what was there to say, really?

Aden sighed and sat up perfectly straight, staring in to the mirror. "He's doing what he should be; going back to school. It's the right thing." She tried a smile. Though she felt genuine love and a heartfelt wish for him to be happy, the smile was not remotely convincing.

She heard voices in the kitchen. Her mother, then Trey, and it sounded like the Dixons, Cadence's parents. Cadence's mom, LeighAnn had married Maddox's dad after he'd divorced Maddox's mom, Kim. It was a weirdly amicable relationship and all three were still very good friends. Aden's pretense of a smile dropped when she thought about Maddox's dad, 'Mayor Max,' in the next room. His presence would be a visual reminder of the absence of his son, as they shared so many traits. Shaking off those thoughts, Aden looked back to the mirror. It seemed more guests were arriving on the Dixons' heels. She heard a teasing voice that she thought was Trey's brother, Kyle, and Trey's easy laugh in response. A small, genuine smile crept up and Aden felt a surge of relief. If she could just keep her thoughts turned to the friends who were here for her, she might actually be able to enjoy her party. She tried the smile again before rising just as there was a knock on her bedroom door.

"Aden? It's Natalie. Can I come in?"

Aden stepped to the door and pulled it open. "Hey there! I haven't seen you for a few days." She hugged Natalie warmly. Natalie was Aden's brother's girlfriend, and had become a good friend over the past several months.

"Wow! You look fantastic. I love your dress." Natalie took a step back to survey Aden's outfit. Aden felt the smile come back, more easily this time.

There was another knock on the doorjamb, but no one visible outside the open door. "Um...Aden?" It was Trey, waiting unseen in the hallway. "Your Mom sent me to come and get you."

"It's okay Trey. Come in." Aden called.

"Sorry, but your mom – um, wow, you look nice – um, your mom asked me to escort you to the living room."

"You mean, she told you to come and drag me out of here?" Aden actually laughed.

"She does look awesome, doesn't she?" Cadence beamed, entering the room behind Trey.

"You did a wonderful job, Cadence." Natalie hugged her in greeting. Turning back to Aden, she frowned, "Not that you're not beautiful every day, I just mean –"

"It's okay. Cadence cleaned me up nicely." Aden smiled. "And speaking of cleaning up nicely, you all look really good, yourselves. Trey, I don't think I've ever seen you in a suit. And Natalie and Cadence are both beautiful, as usual."

"Well, I hate to break up this adoration circle, but seriously Aden, your guests await." Trey beckoned them all to follow him down the short hallway into the large, open living space at the center of the house.

Aden's father had designed the house with an architect's flair for subtle detail. The modern, angular structure was built for entertaining. The house was poised on an outcropping of bedrock with a wall of large glass doors overlooking the protected national forest and river running just beyond and below the back deck that stretched the length of the house. The kitchen, dining, and living room comprised one large, high-ceilinged area spanning the depth of the house. With the large glass doors pushed open to the deck, the room easily accommodated the guests who'd begun to break into smaller conversational groups.

Aden's mother was in the kitchen with LeighAnn Dixon, putting the final touches on a monumental spread of food and beverages that was laid out, buffet style, on the large kitchen island and surrounding counter tops. Mayor Max stood with Sheriff Richey on the back deck. Nearby, one of Cadence's sisters, Grace, sat on a chair with her boyfriend, Greg and they both laughed with another couple, Tina and 'Bunkie.' Inside, grouped on the couches, Aden's brother, Drew, sat with Trey's brother, Kyle and his parents, deep in conversation. Someone had left the kitchen door open, to encourage guests to enter that way instead of through the never-used front door and foyer further down from the driveway, and more guests were arriving as Aden stepped into the kitchen.

"Aden! Happy birthday!" LeighAnn Dixon swept her into a hug. "Don't you look beautiful?"

"Thank you." Aden began. She was going to say more, but the lanky figure coming through the kitchen door stopped her momentarily.

"Hey Aden! Happy Birthday." Billy Ray Payne stepped forward awkwardly. Billy Ray worked at his father's garage, with her brother, Drew, and was cleaner than she'd ever remembered seeing him. His

copper hair was neatly combed and it appeared he'd actually ironed the white button down shirt he wore with a clean pair of navy slacks.

"Thanks, Billy Ray. And thanks for coming, I haven't seen you in a while." Aden stepped forward to hug him at the same moment he held out a hand to shake. After an awkward pause, they both laughed and he embraced her quickly before stepping back, hands clasped behind him.

"I been around." He shrugged. "Just workin', you know."

"Have you seen Beverly lately?" Aden asked. Beverly had been Aden's co-worker at the jewelry store owned by Herman Keith, dubbed The Demon following his kidnapping of Maddox and Aden. Beverly had been infatuated with their boss, Mr. Keith, and hated Aden for his blatant preference of her. Before the kidnapping, Billy Ray and Beverly had gone out to a bar and gotten into some trouble that ended with Mr. Keith bailing them out of jail. *All my relationships are stupidly complicated*, Aden mused silently.

"Oh, no. I'm footloose and fancy free." Billy Ray grinned, with his usual (and annoying, rude, and slightly creepy) head-to-toe perusal.

Aden sighed and held her smile as he seemed to catch himself and jerked his eyes back to meet hers.

"Um, sorry. You look real nice." He shrugged, apologetically.

"Well, thanks. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Well hello, Billy Ray." Janet, Aden's mom, interrupted. "I've got a slice of pumpkin pie over here with your name on it."

Aden flashed her a smile of gratitude before trying to make her escape to the living room. She was stopped by a hand on her shoulder and drawn into a familiar hug.

"Happy birthday, sis!"

"Thanks, Drew. So were you pulled in to the party prep, too?"

"Nah, I volunteered." At Aden's surprise, he continued. "It's not every day that my baby sister turns eighteen."

"Well, thank you. Were mom and Cadence very overbearing?"

"Nope. With everybody who was lending a hand, it was easy."

"I'm flattered that so many people would come out here for a teenager's birthday party."

"Well, you're an adult now. So the adults are probably all here to talk to you about the depressing pressures and crushing disappointments of adulting. Downers, every one of them. I'd stay away, if I were you." The teasing glint in his eye betrayed the monotone seriousness of his demeanor and Aden laughed.

"That laugh looks good on you." Drew said, draping his arm around her shoulders again.

"Feels good, too." Aden admitted.

"Well, I hope there's many more laughs to come for you tonight." Drew kissed the top her head just as Kyle Miller, Trey's brother approached them with arms outstretched.

"Happy birthday, Aden!"

"Thanks Kyle." Drew reluctantly released her so she could accept Kyle's hug.

"It's really nice of you to be here." Aden said, catching her breath from the enthusiasm of his hug.

"Happy to have been invited." He grinned handsomely. "I was going to bring Jet as my 'plus-one,' since you know him from way back, but he had other plans. He wishes you a very happy birthday, though."

"Well, thank him for me when you see him. You'll probably talk to him before I will."

"You should come out on the boat with us again soon. We'll get in a couple more runs before we have to pull her out for the winter."

"That sounds nice."

"I might even invite your crabby brother sometime." Kyle grinned at Drew, still hovering close by.

"Crabby?" Aden laughed, turning a questioning face to Drew.

"He's interpreting my protective oversight of my baby sister as crabbiness." Drew shrugged.

"No worries, bro. I have only the most honorable of intentions where your sister is concerned." Kyle winked at Aden playfully and slipped an arm around her shoulders. "May I escort you to greet my parents as a sign of my good will?"

Aden glanced at Drew, who didn't seem very amused. Before they reached Kyle's parents, his brother Trey appeared to take Aden's free arm.

"Thought you might need some back up." Trey whispered quietly.

"Back up?" Aden was confused.

"Here's the birthday girl!" Mrs. Miller exclaimed happily.

"Happy birthday Aden." Her husband joined in, with a grin identical to both of his sons'.

"Thank you both so much for coming." Aden smiled. The Millers had stepped in to help her on more than one occasion over the last few months and were gracious in their support of her and her family.

"How could we miss it? I can't believe we only officially met you a few months ago. You feel like part of our family." Mrs. Miller gushed.

"I'm honored that you'd feel that way." Aden felt a blush rising in her cheeks.

Cadence arrived with a tray of drinks and a conspiratorial wink for Aden. "Drinks anyone? The champagne glasses are for the 21-and up crowd. Mimosas, I'm told. The tumblers are either sprite and cranberries, or ginger ale and limes."

"There are a few more manly drinks in the kitchen." Drew stated, nodding Mr. Miller and Kyle to follow him.

"I can't believe your mother would be serving alcoholic beverages at a teenaged party, Aden." A new voice piped up loudly from outside the gathered group.

"Patience." Aden forced a smile for Cadence's other, less likeable sister. "How nice of you to come."

"I didn't have a choice." Patience groused rudely. She was flanked by three other girls from her "popular" group at school that Aden recognized in passing. "The parental units insisted I had to put in an appearance here before I could go have some real fun with my real friends."

"Appearance noted." Cadence bristled angrily. "Now leave."

"Oh, happy birthday, Aden." One of the other girls simpered, giggling. "Your party is just epic."

"Epically boring." Patience rolled her eyes in disgust.

"Always a pleasure." Aden smiled icily.

"Can we bounce now?" One of the other girls asked.

"Oh, you can bounce. Hard." Cadence took her sister's arm and headed for the door. Patience's entourage followed.

"Well then. I'm sorry about that." Aden turned back to the Millers.

"No apologies necessary." Mrs. Miller smiled at her.

"I see that Patience can't follow simple instructions. I'm so sorry, Aden." LeighAnn called from the kitchen before following her daughters outside with a thunderous face.

"Never a dull moment." Aden smiled at her guests.

"Have any of you eaten yet?" Aden's mom interrupted, smiling. "Please, everyone come and fill a plate or three."

Trey stood with Aden as everyone else moved toward the kitchen. "You have to wonder what made Patience decide to act like such a bitch all the time," he mused.

"Popularity, I guess. Peer pressure? Her reign of terror started somewhere around 8th grade." Aden shrugged.

“Well, good riddance.” He smiled and raised his glass. “To the unflappable and always classy birthday girl. Cheers.” They clinked glasses as Aden laughed.

“You’d take that right back if you could have read my mind a minute ago.”

“Well, to my knowledge, you’re the only mind-reader here.” He grinned, then gasped before spluttering, “Aden, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring any of that up. I can’t believe I just —”

“Stop, it’s okay.” Aden smiled. “I know what you meant.”

“Please forgive me. I would never do anything to hurt you. I hope you know —”

“I know.” She pulled him into a hug. “Forget about it.”

“Hey! Don’t you have a girlfriend?” Grace’s voice teased, coming closer. Aden released Trey’s big shoulders to smile at Grace and Greg.

“I do, but the birthday girl has been giving out hugs.” Trey shrugged, grinning. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Step aside so I can get my hug.” Grace answered. She embraced Aden warmly, followed by Greg.

“Thanks guys. It’s so good to see you.” Aden smiled.

“You look beautiful Aden. Even with Cadence’s meddling.” Grace teased as Cadence approached them.

“The two of you make a pretty handsome couple, yourselves,” Aden returned.

A raucous bout of male laughter from the kitchen made them all turn.

“I can’t believe Billy Ray’s here.” Grace said quietly.

“He’s alright. He’s not a bad guy, he just needs a little training.” Aden defended him.

“Well good luck to whoever takes that on.” Grace raised an empty glass in salute.

“You need another one.” Cadence announced, speeding over with drinks in each hand. “Aden, I brought this for you.” She handed one of the glasses to Aden, shooting a glance over her shoulder.

“This smells like Vodka.” Aden sniffed closer before handing it back.

“I know. Drink it. You’ll thank me.” Cadence glanced anxiously toward the door. “Hurry up.”

Aden’s eyes followed her glance to see Kim Dixon, Maddox’s mother, entering the kitchen. Aden grabbed the glass from Cadence’s hand, less than half full with orange juice mixed with a liberal splash of vodka and downed it.

“Okay, now this one. It’s club soda with mint. It’ll help disguise the vodka.” Cadence took the empty glass from Aden’s hand and replaced it with a large glass brimming with bubbling water and crushed mint leaves.

“What’s she doing here?” Aden ground out.

“She just got into town, apparently. Found our house was empty and called LeighAnn. When she heard it was your birthday...” Cadence sighed.

Aden’s head was reeling, whether from the vodka, the appearance of Maddox’s mom after so many months, or the way she was holding her breath, staring at the empty doorway.

“Breathe.” Cadence whispered at her side. “It’s okay. Maddox isn’t with her.”

Pain. Aden recognized the vicious stab of naked disappointment for what it was. “Are you sure?”

“I was just outside when she pulled up.” Cadence nodded. “She’s alone.”

“We can run interference, if you want?” Grace offered.

“Yeah, just tell us what you need.” Trey nodded.

“I’m okay, guys.” Aden took a deep breath, willing it to be true. “I was just surprised. But it’s fine. Really.” Taking another deep breath, Aden mustered her best smile to meet ‘The Moms’ gathered in the kitchen. Aden’s mom stood side by side with LeighAnn, greeting Kim, but also blocking her path as Aden approached from behind them. Kim raised her eyes at Aden’s approach and smiled, sadly.

“Happy birthday, Aden. I truly didn’t mean to cause trouble, I just wanted to pass along my fondest wishes.”

“Won’t you please come sit down?” Aden offered, pointing the way. “Mom, would you please bring Kim a drink?” The room had gone quiet and Aden took another deep breath as she turned to lead Kim onto the back deck. Drew and Natalie were sitting at the far end of the deck talking. When they saw Kim and Aden come out, they quietly got up and went inside. “Well, we sure know how to clear a room.” Aden joked.

“Aden...when I heard it was your birthday, I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to let you know how much you’re missed.”

Intense pain. Another deep breath. “How have you been? Are you here on a case?”

“I’ve been okay. And no, I’m just passing through town, between assignments right now.” She hesitated. “And how have you been?”

“I’m doin’ okay, all things considered.” Aden mustered a smile. Just then, Janet bustled out with a drink and a full plate that she set on a table beside Kim.

“Just let me know if you need anything.” Janet smiled at her daughter before slowly reentering the house.

“Sweetie, it’s your birthday, and I don’t want to ruin your party...” Kim sighed heavily.

“Just because Maddox and I aren’t...speaking...doesn’t mean we can’t still be friends.” Aden offered.

“And you and LeighAnn and my mom are kind of like...the Three Musketeers of moms. I don’t want that to change.”

Kim’s eyes teared up as she searched Aden’s face. “You are one of the strongest and kindest women I know.”

Aden was stunned at the compliment, coming from the fiercely independent FBI agent, and she blinked away tears of her own as she hugged – not her ex-boyfriend’s mother – but her friend.

“It looks like you’ve got a full house in there.” Kim smiled.

“It’s all Cadence’s doing. She planned this party.”

“No, they didn’t come here for Cadence.” Kim disagreed softly. “And I’m not going to keep you from your own party.” She stepped toward the door, then turned back, hesitating.

“Well please don’t feel like you have to rush off. Stay for some cake, at least.” Aden chatted to cover the longing she felt, to know what was behind Kim’s hesitation and the intense look in her blazing green eyes. The eyes her son had inherited. Aden knew there was more to Kim’s visit and she was dying to know...but couldn’t bring herself to ask.

“Happy birthday, Aden.” Kim smiled again and strode inside where the other moms were waiting.

Aden watched her go and slowly let out a pent up breath. Turning to lean on the railing and peer into the dark woods beyond the glowing house lights, Aden fought to regain her equilibrium. Closing her eyes, she blocked out the muted strains of conversation from inside the house and concentrated on how she’d felt before Kim’s sudden appearance. She’d felt...happy. Safe. Here, at this moment, she was visible in a way that she hadn’t felt in a long while.

You look beautiful.

Aden opened her eyes and looked around, but she knew the voice hadn’t reached her through her ears. The party had grown in the last few minutes, with another group of friends from her school having arrived. Her mom, Cadence and Trey glanced outside at her, but she waved them off and they kept their distance.

She turned back to the darkness beyond the river. The leaves had mostly fallen from the trees, creating a carpet that would muffle movements when damp, but would amplify them when dry, as now. It was too dark beyond the crescent of light from the house to see anything moving below the scudding clouds across the waxing moon. Aden closed her eyes to listen...then she closed her ears to listen harder.

Nothing.

But she'd felt him. She knew that voice, that touch. Only Maddox could touch her soul.

"Aden? Look who's here." Cadence's voice yanked her back from the darkness. She stood hesitantly just beyond the boundary of the glass door's tracks in the floor.

With a last, brief sigh into the silent darkness, Aden turned and smiled broadly to greet her guests.