

After No

It has been a full three minutes since Luke stormed out of the apartment Susan and I share. I'd expected Susan to be at my bedroom door within seconds of the door slamming, wanting to know if I was alright.

Clearly, she's used all her restraint to keep from bursting in. I've had a few minutes to cry. Now, Susan is here. The knock is light and gentle, as is her voice, "Kelsey, are you alright in there?"

"Yeah," I lift my head from my pillow and call back. "I'm fine."

There is a moment of silence, then, "Do you want to talk?"

I'm not sure. Part of me desperately wants to talk, wants feedback on what I've done. The other part is afraid of what she'll think. I want more time to convince myself I've done the right thing.

"Come on in," I say.

After Luke left, I had resigned myself to lying on my stomach in full tear mode. Now, I roll over and sit up in time to watch Susan wheel herself to my bedside. I can't quite bring myself to meet her gaze, so I look at my hands resting in my lap.

"You guys had a fight?"

I nod.

"Is it OK to ask what about?"

Not looking up, I say, "He asked me to marry him."

I am still too chicken to look at Susan, but her voice is laced with incredulity when she speaks. "And how is this the subject of a fight?"

I look up. She is doing her best to not look judgmental, but she isn't very good at it. She will take Luke's side; I can tell. I figure I should at least mount an argument. "I said I thought we should wait."

"I agree," she says after a few seconds. "No need to rush into marriage. Long engagements are good."

I grit my teeth. She is baiting me. "I said we should wait to even talk about getting married. Wait until things settle down."

"So you told him no?"

I shake my head. "It's not no." I insist. "It's a let's wait for a bit and not make rash decisions."

She gives me her "stop bullshitting me" look. "Kelsey, you can pretend all you want that you didn't say no, but you did. Why did you say no? Don't you love him?"

Now this is ridiculous. How can Susan, of all people, ask me that? I look her in the eyes, pleading my case. "Of course I love him. I love him more than anything."

"Then why do you have to wait to even broach the subject?"

"Because we can't do this now, just because I've been marked. We should do it because we want to, because we decided to, not because we're afraid of what the future may hold."

She stares at me a moment, clearly formulating counterarguments. "So, if you hadn't been marked, and Luke had asked you the exact same question tonight, what would you have said?"

Dammit. I should have told her I didn't want to talk. I hate her counterarguments. "But I am marked."

"If you weren't?" she persists.

"Then I would have said yes."

She throws me a look of complete disgust. “Kelse,” she says. “This is crazy. You love Luke; he loves you and he wants to marry you. Yet, you’re letting the marking ruin your life.”

Part of me wants to say being marked ruined her life. Yet, that would be cruel, and probably even untrue. She’s managed to recover, to accept, come to terms with her fate, better than even I have. “Fine, call it crazy,” I say. “But, I want Luke to ask me to marry him when he wants to, not because he feels compelled to by the situation.”

“And what makes you think this has anything to do with the marking?” she asks bluntly, as if I am the biggest idiot in the world for thinking it did.

“That’s all he talked about today. How the marking must be upsetting, how he was going to be there for me, and then, bam, will you marry me? Luke can be impulsive, sometimes. I just want to make sure he’s thought this through.”

She wheels backward a bit, shaking her head. “Kelsey, it’s not your right to second guess Luke’s motives and base your decision on something you’ve imagined. You should give Luke the answer to the question he asked, regardless of what else is going on.”

“I can’t pretend this other stuff isn’t happening,” I say, turning my back on Susan and scooting toward the other side of the bed, away from her. “I don’t want him to regret this, Susan. Because if he changes his mind later, I’ll be devastated. I’d rather take a little heat on the front end than on the back end, OK?”

I hear her take a deep breath and know I’ve touched a nerve. There’s the sound of her rubber wheels as they rolls across the wood floors. She is coming around to this side of the bed. I swallow, then face her.

“I understand where you’re coming from, Kelsey,” she says softly. “You know I understand better than anyone. But, I think you need to understand where Luke is coming from. He loves

you, and if he was that upset by you saying no tonight, maybe it's because he *has* thought about this immensely. Maybe you're crushing him, devastating him, by not saying yes."

Her words burn, mainly because I worry they are true. I saw that I'd hurt him, tonight. I've been trying to rationalize it away, to convince myself that it will be OK. But I'm not sure. I'm not sure if I didn't make the biggest mistake of my life by not falling into Luke's arms and saying yes.

The problem is, I feel like saying yes would have been an even bigger mistake, that somehow I would regret that more. That not getting more time would haunt me. "I'm sorry I can't explain it right to you or to him, Susan," I say, just barely holding back the tears. "I just need things to be more settled before I can give him an answer."

She nods, then bites her lower lip. We are both silent for a moment. I hear the TV from the apartment next door.

"Hey," Susan says, smiling. "We can give this a rest for right now. How about we have some ice cream?"

I laugh. Only Susan would want ice cream now. "Sure," I say. We have to go to the corner store to get it. Susan and I have found that we overindulge if we keep any ice cream in the freezer. I stand and walk toward my closet to grab a pair of shoes.

"I can go by myself," she says, as I am opening the closet door. "I think it might do you some good to take a minute and think."

She plans to leave me, let her words seep in. I'm not sure I want to be alone, but I'm afraid if I insist on going with her, she'll bring up Luke again. "OK," I say, shutting the closet door. I walk to Susan, whose halfway between me and the bedroom door, bend down and hug her. "You're a great friend."

“Yeah, I know,” she says, with a cockiness only she could get away with. She pats my back and wheels herself out, calling, “I’ll be back in a few.”

With both her and Luke both gone, it hits me that they are like two peas from the same pod. They are both self assured, cocky, friendly and outgoing. Much more so than me. And they both occupy the spaces closest to my heart. It’s funny how you can surround yourself with people so alike and not realize it until much later.

I wish I could do what Susan and Luke want and say yes. Part of me wants to, but I can’t. If something were to go wrong with the surgery, I wouldn’t want Luke to feel he had to stand by me because he’d made this commitment. Or worse, I wouldn’t want him to realize he couldn’t stand by me, even though he had promised. I want everything resolved so that when he commits to me, he knows what he is getting, and he can assess whether or not he wants it.