

AN
Ivy River
NOVEL

ALL
of me

JENNY BUNTING

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A NOTE FROM JENNY

Thank you so much for reading *All of Me*! I hope you enjoy it.

Please be aware that this book contains sexually explicit situations and coarse language.

As far as triggering themes, this book contains narcissistic and emotional abuse from a romantic partner, gaslighting, food and body shaming, alcoholism, emotional abuse and neglect from a parent, caretaking and death of a loved one to a terminal illness, death of a loved one to a car accident, and sexual assault (unwanted butt grab).

If you are sensitive, please take care of yourself.

She doesn't need me. I am nothing.

No you're not, Commander. Not to her.

THE HANDMAID'S TALE (HULU) SEASON 5,
EPISODE 10 "SAFE"

ONE

WILL

I raise my head from under the hood of my car to look at the main house's porch.

There's a woman, crouching down and waving at Boomer, my boss's dog, through the side window. He's currently losing his shit.

"Hi, big dog! Aren't you ferocious," she coos, and Boomer whines in frustration and then barks again.

Most people retreat from Boomer's scary warnings, but this woman welcomes it.

I leave the hood to my car open as I approach her. Furrowing my brow, I wipe my hands on a towel tucked in my jeans. "Can I help you?"

She turns, and I hold my breath. Bright-blue eyes. A wide, luminous smile. "Hi! Sorry if I made your dog bark."

"It's fine. He barks at everyone."

"Is he friendly?"

I pause. My boss, Paul Tanager, who owns this house, likes people to assume Boomer is a big, threatening German shepherd. His bark is the only scary thing about him, because he'll flop onto his back the second the door opens, demanding belly rubs. "Depends on who's asking."

"Oh." Her smile falls but then beams right up again. "I am *very* friendly."

“I can see that.” She gives me a small smirk, and I return it.

“Is this your house?”

I don’t answer her. “Whatever you’re selling, we’re not interested.”

“Why do you assume I’m selling anything?”

I point to her red suitcase. Paul will let any salesperson talk for many minutes with no intention of buying anything, and I usually step in to stop wasting their time and Paul’s. Sometimes, Paul will buy something he doesn’t need because he feels bad.

“No, not selling anything.” She smiles nervously as I wipe my hands again, although the grease staining my skin will need more than a towel sweep. The woman narrows her eyes and crosses her arms. “Are you a cop?”

I’m technically in law enforcement, but I’m not a cop. Still, I shake my head.

“Bouncer?”

“Former.”

“Ahh.” She wipes her hand through the air like she’s washing a window. “That explains it.”

“What?”

“This authoritative energy.”

Her face falls in seriousness, and my resolve crumbles. I chuckle as she stands in front of me. Boomer’s barks have ceased. He probably got distracted by a toy.

“You *can* laugh.”

She shields her eyes as she walks down the porch steps. As she gets closer, I notice her creamy skin with faint freckles and her lips the color of the tulips Marigold displays in her flower shop. She’s a few inches shorter than me. My mouth dries as I get a whiff of a lemon-vanilla perfume. She’s dressed in a pair of ripped jeans she probably bought that way and a shirt so

thin I can see the outline of her high breasts. Her hair is woven into a braid with little hairs escaping.

Beautiful doesn't begin to describe her.

"What are you doing here, then?"

"I thought someone lived here. I might be wrong."

"Who are you looking for?"

"You never answered my question."

"What's that?"

"Do you live here?"

"Technically, yes." We both look in the direction of my point—to a small apartment I inhabit above the garage.

"Oh, he rented it out." She looks crestfallen.

"He did."

"Is your landlord Paul Tanager by chance?"

"Yes. Who are you?" I cross my arms.

"Bree Tanager. Paul is my dad." A smile with an eyelash flutter crosses her face as she outstretches her hand. "And you are?"

I grumble as I take her hand, delicate and soft against my gruff, callused palm. Avoiding eye contact, I let her hand go. Guilt rattles me for thinking my boss's daughter is attractive. I feel tongue-tied as she waits for my name.

"Will Stone. Sorry, I was just working on my car." I hold up my grimy palms.

"That's fine. I don't mind getting dirty."

My eyebrows shoot up.

Five years ago, I moved to the area since it had always been my goal to be posted close to a national park, so I applied for the transfer every time it became available. Ivy National Park borders Ivy River, a popular outpost for hikers and adventurers alike, and it was exactly what I wanted.

I've been a game warden with the State of California Department of Fish and Wildlife for eleven years, patrolling areas to make sure hunters and fishers follow state regulations. It's a solitary job, usually a remote one, and lots of hours in the car, with the radio and citizens being my only social interaction.

I didn't expect to meet a mentor and a pseudo-father figure in Paul Tanager, my lieutenant warden, when I got transferred to this region. He gave me a place to stay, his friendship, and introduced me to his group of friends, whose sons became my best friends. I owe everything to Paul, and now I'm intrigued by his very attractive daughter.

A daughter he lost touch with.

He always mentioned her in passing, and a wave of sadness always followed. There's exactly one photo of her and Paul together in the living room—she's about eight or so, and she's holding a fish she just caught and sitting in his lap.

Bree is not a little girl anymore, not by a longshot. If I saw her in a bar, I'd find a way to talk to her.

I look away so I don't stare. "He didn't mention you were coming."

"That's because I didn't tell him." Her eyes twinkle as she dips into her back pocket, extracting a wrinkled envelope.

"He wrote me a letter," she says, handing it to me. "I didn't get it right away. It was...delayed."

I stare at the crumpled package. He did it. One night, several months ago, Paul mentioned his daughter, and I saw a tear in the corner of his eye. I told him, "You know, you could write her. If you don't hear from her, at least you got your thoughts out." He nodded once and took a sip of his whiskey, and I never heard about it again.

Now, she's here.

The engine rumbles down our street, and moments later, Paul's white truck rolls in our driveway, right next to my open hood. His eyes bulge as he sees the blonde surprise currently in our front yard.

His jaw hangs as he steps out.

“Dad, hi!” Bree says. She bombards Paul—a man who does not hug—with a big, invasive embrace. Paul stiffens like his daughter’s arms are squeezing him like a boa constrictor.

It doesn’t feel right to watch, but I’m frozen, my throat so thick with emotion it hurts to swallow. I know this means a lot to Paul.

“Brienne?” he asks, like she’s a hologram. Then, he melts into her, kissing her hair, pushing it down. He wraps his meaty arms around her shoulders and blubbers.

I’ve never seen my boss cry. He’s a tough but fair man I respect and will follow to the ends of the earth. This softer side of him disarms me and makes my heart hurt a little bit.

“Yeah, Dad, it’s me. I’m here!” She points to her meager red suitcase on the porch. “I’m sorry to just show up, but I thought it’d be fun to stay the summer. You know, like old times. I hope that’s okay.”

That’s peculiar because it’s early May. Still, Paul doesn’t question it. Instead, he pulls her in, digging his nose into her hair. “Of course it is, Pumpkin.”

Bree grips his back, and Paul squeezes her. It doesn’t feel like they’ve had years apart. He drops his arm around her shoulders as they walk up the stairs.

“Did you meet Boomer?” Paul asks as the barking starts up again.

“We kind of met through the window. His bark is scary.”

“When we open the door, he’ll ask for belly rubs. He’s harmless.”

“So, he is friendly.” Bree gives me a side-eye, and I snicker.

“Oh, yes. Don’t worry about him.”

Bree gives me a long glare as Paul opens the door, and the dog weaves in between her legs, looking up at her like a new friend. She rubs the dog’s neck as his tail wags aggressively,

and then he rolls over, showing his tummy. His tongue hangs out as Bree rubs him down.

“You’re not scary at all,” Bree says loud enough for me to hear, and I turn back to my truck.

I can’t focus on anything until Paul asks me to help him start dinner.

TWO

BREE

“This is your fault! You made me do it!” he shouts, inches from my face. Spittle hits my cheek as I squeeze my eyes tight, and I...

My eyes flash open, and I’m in my childhood summer bedroom in Ivy River, not my San Francisco apartment.

“You’re okay. You’re fine. This was a great idea,” I say, breathing in and out. My heartbeat thunders in my chest. There’s a knock at the door, and I flinch.

“Brienne?” my dad asks from behind the door.

“Come in.” My tone is cheery and fake. My hands clutch the windowsill as he opens the door with an averted gaze. I know it’s strange, me appearing out of nowhere with a tiny suitcase. All grown up. He looks at me like he can’t believe I’m here.

I can’t believe it either.

He hands me a pair of scissors. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” I cradle them in my hands. Dad hadn’t asked why I needed scissors. He grunted and reappeared with them.

While I had gotten ten years older, so had my dad. His middle was softer when I hugged him on his porch, and his light-brown hair has lightened to a stark white. He grew a beard, neat and cropped, tickling my cheek when he kissed me. He still wears his thick, black frames over his crystal-blue eyes.

The eyes he gave me.

“Dinner is almost ready. Will will be there. We cook together most nights.” Dad’s eyelids twitch as he shoves his hands in his pockets.

“That’s fine.”

“You can stay as long as you’d like.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I hug him again, although he stiffens each time I do. “I’ll be gone in July. Renters are moving out of the Palo Alto house, so when they move out, I’ll move in. I’m finally going back to school.”

“Oh, the house. Of course.” His gaze fixates on the ground.

“I’ll be right down,” I say. He nods once, leaving my door ajar. When I hear his steps on the stairs grow fainter and fainter, I take a heaving breath, grab the scissors, and walk into the bathroom.

I open the shears. Another deep breath and I close them over my braid, two inches above my shoulders. My laughter is manic as I slice into my hair like I’m amputating a limb.

My long hair became the bane of my existence, but I could never cut it. I would envy the women I saw with short, cute bobs and always wanted shorter hair. Once, I casually mentioned it to Scott, and he shut me down. ‘*You would look like a man. It’s over if you cut it,*’ he said once, and I never brought it up again.

Now, giddiness courses through me, and I let out a guffaw as I study my work. It’s uneven, but I know from my experience cutting my Barbies’ hair that I should stop, or I’ll have a buzz cut. I was never great at evening hair out.

This is a symbolic act of rebellion, and I’ll go into town and have a local hairstylist fix it properly tomorrow. I wonder if Charmaine still cuts hair.

I hold my detached braid up. It’s the length of my forearm.

“It was nice knowing you.” I hide it in a baggie I brought. Maybe the hairstylist tomorrow will know where to donate it.

The floorboards creak and groan as I walk down to dinner. This house feels the same, tinted by nostalgia. My favorite thing about this house was the arriving. Seeing my parents together at the beginning of summer always gave me a glimmer of hope. As I got older, I know I had imagined their easy camaraderie. My mom always stayed the first week in the apartment over the garage before going back to Palo Alto. For the first time all year, she'd close her work and just be present, smile, laugh, without a care in the world.

For one week a year, we felt like a real family.

Once, I asked why they weren't together. My mother just smiled and explained that she had worked so hard to be a district attorney and couldn't give it up.

"I couldn't do what I wanted to do in Ivy River," she would say when I brought it up over our weekly pizza and ice cream dates, the only quality time I spent with my mother. "That town is too small for you, anyway. You deserve the stars."

We stopped coming when I turned sixteen. My best friend, Sienna, had moved to LA to pursue acting, and it wouldn't have felt the same. My mom offered me a trip to Europe, and I said yes. And again the summer after. I yearned for attention from my mother because there were many times her work felt like her first priority.

Still, I always meant to come back.

Then, she got sick. I left school, though she protested, and we spent quality time together. My dad never reached out, and I wondered what happened. My dad didn't fight for me, didn't sense I would be hurting, about to lose my mother.

When she died, I met Scott.

Scott was charming at first, fawning over me with gifts and travel, candlelight dinners looking over the bay. Going back to school became a pipe dream, and Scott started teasing me about my inheritance, how I didn't need to get an education, that I could invest and be set for life.

The mask of perfection quickly fell, and Scott turned into a stranger who nitpicked, who criticized, who asked me why I acted so crazy all the time. He turned into a man who would oscillate from acting like he hated me to being terrified to lose me, pulling me back from the edge just before I left him.

For years, I thought my dad forgot about me. Then, I found out Scott had been keeping him from me.

The day I found the letter was unremarkable. I was searching for a cord in Scott's side drawer—a place I was forbidden to look. It was mostly full of junk, but buried under it all was my father's letter and a pair of panties that weren't mine.

One innocent search imploded my whole life and my careful plans. All of a sudden, I couldn't be in the same apartment, the same city as Scott. The plan was to leave him in July, when my house became available.

Then, a handwritten letter from my emotionally distant father appeared like a beacon, guiding me back to Ivy River.

I didn't need to stick it out. I didn't need to take Scott's crap for one more day.

Because my father actually loved me, wanted me. I memorized his words.

Dear Bree,

I'm so sorry we lost touch. I didn't know what to say...

I would love for you to come visit Ivy River, just like old times...

I still have your room just the way it was. Just as you remember it...

I love you...

You're my greatest accomplishment.

That day I found it, with tears in my eyes, I held the letter in one hand, the panties in the other, and showed them to Scott.

He called me crazy for searching, for snooping. He asked me why I was so upset, so jealous.

I stayed quiet and never found out why he withheld my mail and slept with a woman who liked lacy thongs. I didn't even ask if it was Julia, his family friend who hung around like a fish smell days after you cooked it.

Scott left for another weekend away from me, and I packed my stuff the first night he was gone. Now, I'm here, anxiety swirling in my gut, under the guise of being here for the summer, hiding things from a father who just now acted like he cared.

The formal sitting room is still full of pristine floral couches and velvet chairs. In summers past, we never sat there, and it appears Dad hasn't since.

The man I met on my dad's front lawn stands when he sees me. Will Stone. He's taller than my dad, with broad shoulders and neat hair the color of ink. He changed into a black shirt that complements his olive skin. Will is attractive, and I felt shoots of electricity when we shook hands.

Guilt wrecks me. I'm supposed to be free from men, and then I feel attracted to the first available one I meet.

Will's lips part when he sees my hair. At least being unhinged will be good male repellent.

"Didn't you..."—he motions to his shoulders—"have a braid?"

"Yes, I did." I touch my blunt tips. "I wanted a change."

Dad careens into the kitchen, wearing an apron that says *Mr. Good Lookin' is Cookin'*. He notices my hair and says, "Did you cut your own hair, for old time's sake?"

A memory of me cutting a chunk of my hair to the scalp hits me, and I giggle. "Yes. Still not great at it."

"I'll call Charmaine."

I grin. Charmaine is a hairdresser who chews green-apple gum and evened out my hair when I cut myself a bald spot at eight-years-old.

'You're a trendsetter,' she told me. She made me laugh so I wouldn't cry.

Dad pulls out his phone, punching numbers tentatively as he peers over his glasses. "Charmaine...hi, it's Paul. Oh, that's great. Listen, my daughter is in town, and she needs a trim. You have a slot tomorrow? Oh, eight-thirty...great."

They chat a few more moments as Will sneaks a glance at me.

"She can fit you in tomorrow at eight-thirty."

"Thanks, appreciate it. Do you need any help?"

"We got it, thanks." Dad whips past us and opens the oven, pulling out a sizzling glass dish.

"So, how long have you been in town, Will?" I ask.

Dad interrupts, "Five long years."

"Whatever, old man." They snicker at each other.

Dad slaps his back like a son. "Will is my protégé. He doesn't sass me. He shows up on time, and he does his work. He closes more cases than the other dimwits combined. He's a good man."

My dad has been a fish and wildlife officer, also known as a game warden, with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife his entire career and was promoted to lieutenant warden the last summer I came to Ivy River. I noticed the black Department of Fish and Wildlife truck Will drove, identical to the one my dad has.

Dad's employee. One more reason I shouldn't think Will is cute.

"I learn from the best," Will says.

"The flattering doesn't stop with this one. He just wants my job. Real bad. Doesn't realize I have no say in it."

"I want your approval."

Dad points to him, and Will blushes. "See what I mean? Total, Grade-A ass kisser."

“Well, I love compliments,” I blurt.

Will’s gaze lands on me, and butterflies flap in my stomach. He motions close to his jaw. “I like the new hair. It suits you.”

I blush. “Thanks. It just needs evening.”

“I can see the vision.” He blushes too and looks away. “When was the last time you were...home?”

The word *home* makes me squirm. “Ten years, I think.”

“That sounds about right,” Dad agrees.

“Are you from around here?” I ask Will, and he shakes his head.

“Ivy River is very different from where I grew up.” He presses his lips together.

Dad whips around with a plate of sliced beef. Is that tri-tip? Saliva pools in my mouth. I can’t recall the last time I had red meat. “What a beauty.”

“Your dad is an excellent griller,” Will says. His tiny smile disappears when I return it.

“Will is a great griller too. I taught him well. Will can cook a filet mignon so good I think he should go on a cooking show. It’s why the ladies love him.”

Will laughs, the sound deep and booming, like he’s laughing with his whole chest. Our eyes catch, but I’m the first to look away this time. So, he’s a player. I can’t mess with that.

I help set the table, and I could cry—green beans with bacon, mashed potatoes, warm bread with butter sitting on a white, ceramic dish. Scott would’ve never allowed food like this. His words play on a loop in my mind: *‘Do you really need to eat that? Eat this instead.’* After a while, it was easier to go along with him than fight.

“Dig in. It’s already getting cold,” my dad says. The men look at me, waiting for me to go first.

“Oh, sorry,” I apologize, taking the green beans. I’m vibrating I’m so excited as I scoop mashed potatoes on my plate. They pass me the sliced tri-tip, and I take two pieces. The rolls pass my hands, and I take one, my hand shaking as I set it on my plate.

“Is everything okay, Brienne?” Dad asks.

I nod. “Everything is fine.”

Inside, I’m so thrilled to eat real food.

“So, what do you plan to do in Ivy River?” Will asks, taking three pieces of meat and sliding them onto his plate.

I smile and shrug my shoulders. “Not sure yet.”

“Well, we have a library and lots of cute shops downtown. It’s not too far from here. Maybe a mile and a half.”

“Awesome,” I say, although all I can think about is getting these mashed potatoes in my mouth. I bounce in my chair as I scoop some into my mouth, and my eyes roll back in my head. They’re creamy, laced with so much butter and flavor. The sweetness of rosemary hits my tongue, and my eyes tear up. I take a bite of a green bean and groan. They’re crisp, but sumptuous. I saw a bite off the meat with my knife and chew it slowly. It’s so juicy and full of flavor I close my eyes to savor it.

I bang my fist on the table because everything is so delicious, and then I hear sniffing, and a giant head settles on my lap.

“Boomer, leave her alone.”

The German shepherd settles on its haunches, a tongue hanging over one side of its mouth. He’s all black, such a handsome boy. His ears stick straight up like antennas. He’s acting cute to get some meat, and it’s working.

“How’d you get a dog, Dad?”

“Happy accident. A couple was moving and couldn’t take him with them, so I adopted him. You don’t need to be afraid of him. He’s just a naughty little love bug. Come here, Boomer.”

The dog loses interest in me and bounds to my dad, who scratches behind his ears. He leans into my dad's touch. "He's a little stinker, but I love him."

"Will made me think he was a meanie." Will flicks an eyebrow at me as he chews and looks down, cutting another piece of meat.

"Will is sometimes too serious for his own good." Dad pats my hand. "I'm glad you're here, Bree."

Between hearing my nickname and the mashed potatoes, I'm on cloud nine. I've gone by Bree my whole life, but lately, I've been Brianne. Scott refused to call me by my nickname. '*It's childish,*' he used to say when I asked him to call me Bree. '*Brianne is much more distinguished.*'

Boomer spins and rests his head on my leg. The breath from his nose creates a wet mark on my jeans.

Dad chuckles and takes another bite of mashed potatoes. "If you give him some, he'll love you forever."

I take a tiny piece and give it to him. Dad says, "Gentle," but the dog comes dangerously close to biting off my fingers. He looks up at me with big, wistful eyes.

"Once, Boomer grabbed a whole rotisserie chicken, and we found him after he was up to his eyeballs in breast meat," Will says through chuckles. He's so handsome when he laughs.

"Oh, I remember that." Dad takes off his glasses to wipe the laughter tears from his cheeks. Their easy chat twists my stomach. I'm jealous, to be honest. No wonder he didn't reach out sooner. He had his surrogate son for the past five years.

I wonder if he would have written the letter sooner if he didn't have Will.

Now, he's talking about the dog with Will like it's just another day, like I'm just a visitor, observing their private inside jokes and friendship. I was never good at double dutch, and just like this conversation, I don't know where to jump in.

Our conversation was never this easy.

“When did you write the letter, Dad?” I ask.

Dad squints and looks at the wire light fixture that hangs over the dining room table. “November, I think.”

Seven months. That’s how long Scott hid the letter from me. My chest tightens as I try to catch my breath.

“Is everything okay, Bree?” Will asks. The timbre of his voice makes my eyes close.

I remember to smile. “Everything is wonderful. I’m so glad I’m here.”

I must look psychotic. My appetite evaporates, and a wave of fatigue washes over me. “I don’t think I’m hungry.”

Standing, I take my plate, but Will brushes his hand against my wrist. “We’ll get it. You’ve had a long day.”

I set my plate down, and Boomer sniffs it, looking for fallen scraps. “I think I’ll go to bed. I’m exhausted.”

“Okay, we’ll wrap the food in case you get hungry later,” Dad says. He stands and opens his arms like he’s done that every day for the last ten years instead of having no contact since before my mother died.

I still walk into his arms because he’s my only parent left.

“I’m glad you’re here.” He kisses my head, and I try not to cry.

“Thanks, Dad.”

I wave at Will, who holds up his hand. “Take care, Bree,” he says. His voice is deep like rich molasses. My stomach twists at his words. The attraction is just an illusion. I shouldn’t pay it any mind.

Maybe I’ll finally listen to my mother.

She was right about men. One weak moment in the thick of grief, and I lost four years to a man who love-bombed me so hard he filled the crater with paranoia and self-doubt.

I’m not a person. I’m just a gaping hole.

Each stair feels like a chore, and reaching the top feels like a milestone. My room is still as cozy as I remember, with its lace curtains and baby-pink bedspread. A squad of stuffed animals still sits in the corner. I grab one, a turtle with a purple shell, and pull it to my chest.

Tomorrow, I'll be more optimistic. This is the right decision. It must be.

If it is right, though, why do I feel so empty?

THREE

WILL

“Well, that went well.” Paul wipes his mouth with a napkin. The dog circles in the corner of the kitchen, making a harrumph when he hits the tile in the kitchen.

“She was...fine.”

“Fine? I don’t know about that. We’ll have to watch her. Did she mention a boyfriend or...?” Paul takes a big gulp of wine. “If it’s a guy, I swear, Will...”

“Not sure. However, here’s your daily reminder that you wouldn’t survive in jail.” I snicker as I take a gulp of water.

“Don’t I know it.” Paul leans forward on his elbows. The most capable man I’ve ever known is at a loss for what to do. I wouldn’t know what to do either.

She seemed nice when she showed up, but her quick unraveling at the table was concerning.

“Will, please tell your friends to not even think about it.”

I chuckle nervously. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, my daughter is very pretty, and she’s new in town.”

Two indisputable facts.

“I don’t want anyone taking advantage of her or thinking she’s an opportunity. No one with a raging hard-on comes near my daughter. Understand?”

“Yes,” I agree and take a bite. When the only available women are either married, taken, or two seconds away from

lighting your car on fire, a new woman in town is a point of interest. My friends are nothing to worry about. Logan respects Paul too much, and my other friend, JR, still talks about his ex-wife, Autumn, who left him before I arrived in town.

I can't say the same for other guys in town, walking chlamydia like Brandon Yeller or Tom Brigham. Those guys see beautiful women and lose all impulse control.

"If you notice her doing anything strange, you'll let me know?"

"Like the hair-cutting?"

"That's just par for the course with my daughter," he says. I wait for more, but he doesn't elaborate.

"I'll do my best, sir. I'll watch out for her."

"I know you will. Also, what's with this *sir* business?"

"You sound serious is all."

He chuckles as his hand clamps on my shoulder. I owe everything to Paul. He provided a life I love on a silver platter. The least I can do is keep an eye on his daughter and avoid thinking of her inappropriately.

"I might call it a night too." Paul tosses the cloth napkin on the table.

"I'll clean up."

"You're a good man." One more hand clamp before Paul stands up, his knees stiff from too much sitting, and walks in the direction of the stairs. Boomer trots after him, his nails clicking on the hardwood.

AFTER WRAPPING the leftovers and cleaning the kitchen, I head back to my apartment over the garage. It's a small space with poor lighting, and the ceiling slants down so I can only stand straight up in the middle, but it works for me. I stopped pretending I would find a new place to live two years ago. Paul refuses to take any rent, but after I insisted on something,

we made a deal. I make a decent donation to an organization that fights ALS every month, and I'm responsible for utilities. It works for us.

Sunlight stretches further into the evening now, and it's not as cold at night, so I grab my book and sit on the deck. I'm making my way through Margaret Atwood's backlist and *The Edible Woman* just came through on an inter-library loan.

The deck faces the main house, and I notice the light on in what would be Bree's room. The window is open too. I can't hear anything, but I still wonder what she's doing.

I lose myself in my book, looking up just to take a sip of water. Some time passes before I hear a scream, and I look up.

An object flies through the open window, shaking a bush with its landing. A figure walks out of the house in a blur of white. It's too small to be Paul.

It's Bree. She searches the bushes and finds the object. She holds it in front of her face and stabs it with her finger. A phone. She chucks it again like it's a football in an end zone after a touchdown, and she picks it up again. She laughs manically.

Before I take a step, her head lifts, and her smile disappears. She's far away, but my chest twists as she stares at me. I wait for her to say something, anything. Bree backs up slowly, her tears evaporated. I hold up my hand, and we stare at each other. Soon, she's inside again, out of my sight.

I push my hand through my hair.

Do I tell Paul about this? Should I say something at all? He won't wake up. His CPAP machine for sleep apnea is loud enough to cover the screaming and sobbing.

After many moments of thought, I decide not to.

Sometimes, protecting someone means keeping their secrets.

I learned that the hard way.

FOUR

BREE

The sunlight wakes me up, making me wince.

I look around, my room full of golden glow. The old-fashioned clock's short hand points to six.

Ten hours of uninterrupted sleep. I don't remember the last time I slept that long. I fell asleep with my arms around Boomer, who joined me last night on my bed. I think I stole his favorite sleeping spot.

It's disorienting finally getting sleep after months of interruptions, of anxiety prying your eyes open. I feel lighter, clearer. Even better that I destroyed my phone last night.

Last night, one text came, and I snapped.

I knew it was coming. He would come home from his weekend with his boys to find me gone and notice turned into our landlord. His meal ticket was gone. A woman he acted like he could bear losing left.

Scott: I miss you, baby. You're overreacting. Come home.

A deep, guttural scream left my mouth after I read the text for a third time.

Then, I had an out-of-body experience, throwing my phone out the window, into a bush in my dad's garden. Hot tears seared my eyes as I went outside to finish the job. I wanted my last tether to Scott gone, broken.

One last throw onto the ground, and my phone was destroyed.

Because of my laser focus, I didn't look for witnesses.

That was when I felt eyes penetrating me.

Will.

I'm not sure how long he was standing there, witnessing my breakdown, but I assume he saw it all. All he did was raise a hand in acknowledgment. Inching away, we stared at each other. When I slipped back into the house, he didn't follow me.

He just let me go.

My dad will hear about this, for sure.

First, I show up with no warning. Then, I cut my hair impulsively and screamed with the frustration of the last four years, hell-bent on destroying an expensive phone. It's the breakdown trifecta.

He's such my dad's pet that he will tattle for sure.

After I dress in my jeans from the day before, my sneakers, and a crop top Scott hated, I grab a white ball cap for good measure. My hair isn't fixed yet.

I jog down the stairs in search of coffee.

Standing in the middle of the kitchen is Will, sipping coffee without a care in the world.

His eyes flick to me when I hit the landing.

"Good morning." His voice is deep and husky, like an expensive scotch. He leans against the kitchen counter, bracing his muscled arm against it. He shaved since last night and his jawline is sharp as glass. He's dressed in his game warden uniform—tan shirt with a tactical vest, green pants, a black belt holding a gun on his right, a taser on his left.

Women probably don't mind getting a citation from him.

"Good morning." I walk to the coffee pot to avoid staring. "How'd you sleep?"

"Great. You?"

“Like a rock.” I take a sip, and my nose twitches. “Is this...Folger’s?”

“Yep.” Will chuckles. “You get used to it.”

The first sip is still heavenly. Men come and go, but coffee is the true love of my life.

We stand quietly, sipping from our steaming mugs.

“My phone slipped out of my fingers,” I blurt.

“After you screamed and wound up like a pitcher for the Giants?”

“Exactly,” I say. “Before I knew it, it was in the bush.”

“And then you spiked it like George Kittle does when he scores a touchdown for the Niners?”

“What is with all the sports analogies?”

“It looked very athletic.” He hums a laugh over his coffee. “If you need a new phone, I have an old one in my apartment. Otherwise, the closest phone store is in Sable Springs.”

“I think I’m going to become that person who doesn’t have a phone.”

“If that’s your prerogative.” His tone is playful, not condescending. “Your dad has a landline.”

“Perfect.”

He presses his lips together, and his gaze dips within me, and I feel vulnerable, exposed. “Your dad wanted me to report any suspicious behavior, so should I tell him about the ‘accidental phone throwing’ or that you’re rejecting technology? Because it’s a little suspect. Aren’t people your age obsessed with it?”

He’s acting like I have braces and a training bra. “Excuse me, I’m twenty-six.”

His eyelashes flutter. “Exactly.”

“How old are you? Forty-five?”

He shakes his head with a smile. “Thirty-three.”

“So much older and mature,” I say under my breath, and I see Will smirk out of the corner of my eye.

He drains the rest of his coffee, rinses it, and puts it in the dishwasher. “Going to work. Try not to do anything drastic while I’m gone.”

I could be a smart-ass, but I just nod and say, “I promise I won’t. Have a good day.”

“You too, Bree.” That voice saying my nickname weakens my knees as he walks to the back door, looking back once before he leaves.

“No boys, no boys,” I say out loud to myself as I fan the heat from my face.

This summer is about new beginnings, healing, and finding myself again. Boys just complicate things, especially a man that beautiful. He’d be a bandage over a gaping cut.

Speaking of cuts, I finish my coffee, grab a banana, and set off to fix my impulsive bob.

“AT LEAST IT WASN’T BANGS,” Charmaine says, tilting my jagged haircut from side to side. “Honey, was this some symbolic chain-breaking from the patriarchy or some other malarky?”

I point my finger in the air like I’m touching an imaginary button. “Some of this, some of that.”

My hairstylist makes a noise and flaps open a black smock to drape over my front.

Charmaine recently went through some rebranding, changing the name of her salon from Char’s Cuts to Do’s and Donuts. It was an idea from her granddaughter, who’s in school for marketing. Before taking me to her station, she took me to the spread of day-old donuts from the Toastin’ Bakery.

She and her business partner, Bernie, watched me shed a single tear after biting into a maple glaze. The sugar went straight to my head, and now I’m buzzing in this chair. Scott

used to liken sugar to cocaine, and while I've never tried cocaine, this sugar makes me feel amped.

I pull a dark piece from under my hair, a part untouched by highlights. "Should I go back to my natural color?"

"Over my dead body," Charmaine says. "You were born to be a blonde. Am I right, ladies?"

Choruses of, "Don't change it," and, "Don't you dare," echo through the beauty salon.

"Oh, sorry, my granddaughter wants me to start saying, 'Donut change it.' You know, for branding or some nonsense." She rests her hands on my shoulders. "Don't worry, dear. We'll fix it."

Charmaine was a fixture of my childhood after my first hair fiasco, and I used to beg for a haircut in the middle of my summers with my dad. The smell of this salon—of cherry lollipops, midline shampoo, and acetone—brings me right back to the first time we met.

Charmaine is a tall woman in her fifties, whose skin is the texture of leather, but she still wears a spiky blonde haircut and spunky blue frames attached to a chain. Her shirt today has a large cat on it, with diamonds on the claws. She still smells faintly of cigarettes and gardenias.

I do like being blonde. "Okay, I'll keep it."

"Thank the Lord. Regina, make Bree Tanager an appointment with me in two weeks. I don't have time today for the highlight treatment you need, dear. This blonde is too cool for your skin tone. We need to warm you up."

"Okay," I say. Scott always wanted me so blonde my hair was almost white. I suspected it was all the porn he watched, but he insisted I looked best if my hair was bleached to the high heavens.

It'll be nice to have more color and dimension to my hair.

Charmaine taps me lovingly. "Come on, let's get you shampooed."

After a thorough shampoo, condition, and rinse, she takes me back to her station, combs me out, and starts snipping away at my hair.

“How long has it been since you’ve been back?”

“Ten years.”

“It’s good to have you here, dear,” Charmaine says, touching my arms and squeezing.

“Thanks. It’s good to be back.” And weird. And confusing. And terrifying.

“I’m sure your dad was happy to see you,” Bernie says. “I was sorry to hear about your mom.”

“Thanks.” I smile since it’s awkward to receive condolences. I am at peace with my mother’s death, especially with how devastating it was toward the end. ALS destroyed her, and one night, I told her it was okay to go. Then, she left me all alone in this world to figure it out. Dad didn’t come to her funeral or reach out. Until now.

“He wrote me a letter,” I say.

The salon stops, and Bernie, Charmaine’s business partner, turns slowly to me. “Paul wrote you a letter?”

I nod, and Charmaine grabs my temples to hold me head still.

“Huh,” Bernie says. “Interesting.”

“I never understood why your parents split up,” Mary says from the pedicure station with a shake of her head. I squirm in my seat, and when I look up at the mirror, catching Charmaine’s gaze, she knows to steer the conversation away.

“So, you’ve got that handsome devil living over your dad’s garage,” Charmaine says, and all the women hum in agreement. “We see him sometimes because the gym is right next door.”

My shoulders lower. Not sure what’s more uncomfortable: discussing my parents’ marriage or the hunk of a man I can’t let myself be attracted to.

“He’s nice.”

“He’s more than *nice*.” Bernie pulls the last curler out of an elderly woman’s hair and grabs her comb.

“He’s *scrumptious*,” Charmaine says as she snips more, tilting my chin to one side.

“I wouldn’t mind if he was the one giving me a citation!” The woman Mary is working on nods once.

“Women don’t mind fines if it comes from a man that fine,” Bernie says, and I snort-laugh against my hand.

“He hangs out with those silly, chronically single men,” a woman with a headful of foil says. “JR won’t accept that Autumn got some good sense and left him, and Logan should be looking for a mother for that poor girl.”

Charmaine leans in and whispers, “That’s your next-door neighbor, Helen. She’s a straight *C U Next Tuesday*.”

I snicker under my breath.

“Will is dating someone! I heard he’s seeing that bartender at Three Rules. Allison, dear girl. Finally caught a break with a good man.”

My stomach drops. He has a girlfriend. Oh well, it’ll save me from myself. I don’t need any distractions from figuring out who I am, getting to know my dad again, and getting my life together.

“They’re just hooking up, Bernie. They’re not *together*,” Charmaine fires back.

Oh no. Well, then, he’s definitely a player.

Charmaine taps me on the shoulder. “A pretty thing like you, prancing in front of his nose. I’m sure Allison will be old news soon enough.”

“I’m not interested.” My proclamation is a little too loud.

“In men, dear, or that one?”

“All of them. I just got out of a bad relationship,” I say. If you call constant gaslighting, manipulation, and coercion a

bad relationship.

“Well, that explains the hair. Hold still, dear.” Charmaine faces my head forward with her fingertips.

“I, for one, am not *shipping* Will and Bree, as the kids call it,” Helen, my supposedly bitchy next-door neighbor, says as another stylist directs her back to the chair next to me. All the women in the salon stare at her before she explains. “My granddaughter taught me it. It means to take hope or interest in a romantic relationship between two characters whether one exists or not.”

They also nod, barely acknowledging her.

The woman looks miffed no one is giving her a gold medal for speaking like youths. She holds out a hand, and I shake it. It’s like shaking a dead fish.

“Helen. I’m your dad’s next-door neighbor. You’re too good for Will anyway. He’s awful.”

I’ll give Will a point if Helen thinks he’s terrible.

“What did he do now, Helen?” Charmaine rolls her eyes so hard they may fall out.

“That dog of Paul’s will not stop coming to our fence and bugging my poor Honey. Honey is nursing and cannot be bothered. Her main focus should be the puppies. I could barely get away to get my hair colored,” Helen says.

“Boomer?” I ask.

“Yes. I caught Boomer again by the fence, and Will was less than pleasant. I gave him a piece of my mind.”

“I’m sure you did, Helen,” Charmaine says. More eye-rolling.

I’m not surprised she pushed Will, an even-keeled, unshakeable man, to unpleasant words. She looks like the kind of woman who eats lemons for fun.

“Helen is trying her hand at breeding doodles,” Charmaine informs me.

“I hate that you call them that.” Helen lets out an exasperated sigh. “Goldendoodles. Just got my first litter a couple weeks ago. They’re all black, and I’m not thrilled. Still, I’m confident they’ll go for a few thousand a pop.”

This conversation makes my skin crawl. Dogs are more than a business transaction or a dollar sign. Boomer waited at the door last night because he could sense my distress. He snuggled with me on my bed until I fell asleep. If Boomer likes Honey, I’m sure she’s a sweetheart and is more than her doggie uterus.

“Okay, ma’am,” Charmaine says, spinning me around. My hair is still wet, but she turns me from side to side. It reaches my chin, and the air-conditioning is cool on my bare neck. She tents her fingers in my hair and shakes the wet strands. “I evened it out and added some texturing to the ends. I also added a slight A-line to the back.”

Metaphorical glitter explodes from my chest as I turn my chin from side to side. It’s the haircut of my dreams, and most importantly, it’s a middle finger to Scott, who always shamed me out of doing it.

“It’s perfect.”

“Do you know how to style hair? Because if you don’t, watch me blow-dry it closely. I don’t want you to go home and sob because you look like Lord Farquaad or that sociopath from *No Country for Old Men* when you wash it next.”

I laugh so hard I snort. “I’ll take any tips I can get.”

“You should take mine. Because I’m damn good.”

“She is,” Bernie agrees, and Helen rolls her eyes again.

“Watch and learn,” Charmaine says as she turns on the blow dryer. When she finishes, I have messy beach waves in a haircut I love. It feels so different but so *me*.

I could cry I love it so much.

“Thank you,” I say after I pay and give Charmaine a huge tip. She hugs me, pulling me in.

She whispers into my ear, “I’m glad you’re home.”

FIVE

WILL

“So, she just showed up on Paul’s doorstep?” my friend JR asks as he helps guide the barbell back to the rack. “Did she drive?”

I shake my head as I sit up. “Took the Megabus to Sacramento and then took another bus to Sable Springs. Then, found Gus through the app and got dropped off.”

Gus is one of three Uber drivers in the area, and he’s the only one who logs in consistently to the app. He’ll tell one of three Navy stories every time you take a ride from him, and he can’t keep straight which one he’s told you.

“Jesus,” my other friend Logan says as he lies down under the bar and positions himself so he can do his set. JR spots, holding his hands under the bar as Logan lowers it to his chest and back up.

I had filled Logan and JR in about Bree on our group text chain when we were figuring out a time to do some after-work weightlifting at Ivalace Gym. I left out how my body tenses when she’s near, how I have to hold my breath to avoid her scent, how our little conversation this morning looped through my head all day.

“She used to hang out with my sister, and she was always kind of strange. What’s Bree like now?” JR asks.

Beautiful. Full of life.

Completely off limits.

“She’s still...strange,” I agree. First, she cut off her hair before dinner, practically sobbed while eating my mashed potatoes, and then destroyed her phone...“accidentally.” Strange is a great word for Bree Tanager.

Another word that describes her...captivating.

“You should let her know Sienna is home,” JR says. “She’ll want to see her.”

JR’s younger sister, Sienna, has been making a name for herself in Los Angeles, working in television and recently dipped her toe in with film, getting small parts here and there. After her character was killed off in the penultimate episode of season two of a prestige drama on FX called *Follow Me*, Sienna announced she was taking a break from acting and moved to Ivy River for a year. There’s been much speculation, but no one is sure on why she’s taking a break, since it seems she was gaining traction, even receiving an Emmy nomination for the first season.

“At least Bree is old enough to drink now. Sienna once got Bree drunk accidentally on some schnapps when they were thirteen. Bree threw up all over our expensive rug. Paul was *pissed*,” JR laughs as he takes a drink of his water.

We move to the mat area to work on our mobility.

“Bree is off limits.” I reach for my toes.

“Done. Paul scares the shit out of me,” JR says.

“Have you dated anyone, at all, in the last six years?” Logan teases.

“Yes, I have. There was that one gal who went on a group adventure...” JR owns the local outdoor store, Ivy River Outfitters, and the adventure business that operates out of it. In the summers, he sets up tours and guided backpacking trips through Ivy National Park, which neighbors Ivy River to the east.

“You saw her once. Come on, man. Autumn left six years ago.”

JR glares at Logan as he says, “Will, I would be more worried about Logan since Mr. February is sluttier than I am. Ever since the calendar...”

I let out a laugh. Logan’s sister Casey got an idea to expand their family business, Henderson Lumber and Supply, to merchandise with the tagline “Where Wood Gets Jacked” and a calendar of all the guys, shirtless, to benefit the survivors of the wildfires that destroyed homes last year. It caught on, and there’s now a gift shop attached to the mill, with Logan’s six-pack displayed front and center.

It haunts him.

“Will, I promise I won’t touch her. And no matter how big of a twat JR is being, I agree with him. Paul is scary.”

“Yeah,” I agree, although he doesn’t frighten me. I respect the hell out of him, and that’s why I can’t like his daughter, can’t flirt with his daughter—like I kinda did this morning.

“What about you, Will? You got the hots for the boss’s daughter?” JR asks.

“What, me? No. Of course not.” I swallow a large lump in my throat.

“Uh-huh.” Logan switches sides to grab the other foot.

“What about Allison?” JR asks. “You still seeing her?”

“Seeing her is a loose term.”

My interaction with Allison includes three late-night phone calls, followed by a quick drive to her place, and hurried sex against a door or a desk. We just use each other, but there’s no romantic spark there.

Lonely people always have a way of finding each other.

I’ve never lived in a small town before Ivy River, and all the cliches about small towns are true here. Everyone caught on incredibly fast that Allison and I had slept together, and the gossip spread quicker than peanut butter on toast. Allison has told me, repeatedly, that she doesn’t want anything serious, but everyone assumes we’ll get married in the fall.

“I think it’s time to end it,” I say.

“Because you want to fuck your boss’s daughter,” JR says.

“Shut up.” I throw my sweaty towel at him, hitting JR in the face. He acts disgusted and throws it back at me.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out.

“Got to meet Paul and Bree at the Riverfront,” I say.

JR smacks Logan in the arm. “He’s in a hurry. Do you see that, Logan?”

“Sure do.”

“It’s nothing,” I feign, and they both scoff at me.

There’s absolutely nothing going on with Bree and me. I plan to keep it that way.

It doesn’t stop the guys from giving me shit as I leave.

Maybe they see through my bullshit more than I do.

BREE

After my haircut, I wander around downtown. I stop at the library to sign up for a library card and check out a couple books I've heard about but never read. I grab lunch at a small salad-and-sandwich place called Blaine's Café, sitting by myself and reading one of my books. Sometimes, I feel eyes on me, and I look up and smile.

I tell myself they are admiring my hair.

As I walk after lunch, I check my hair in the windows. It's short and flirty and fun.

Scott would hate it.

He would hate everything about this small town. Makes me love it even more.

Ivy River is bigger and smaller than I remember. The town still feels the same as I walk, although new businesses have replaced some of the old ones I remember. The buildings have the same brick facades and arches from the original builds. This town caters to national park visitors who want rustic charm, a place full of small-town coziness. Sable Springs is where the rich folks stay because it has all the amenities they're used to from home.

I've always loved that Ivy River is the polar opposite of the Bay Area, where I grew up. It is like a different world.

Childhood memories come rushing back as I walk the wide streets. I remember riding bikes into town to get ice cream at The Inside Scoop or see the latest movie at the Rialto with my

summer best friend, Sienna. Nostalgia hits me hard as I walk by its entrance, untouched by revitalization.

On the scorching days, we would go to the river and use the rope swing to catapult us in, with flailing legs and arms. The first dip was always the coldest, and we would scream from the shock. We even tried to find buried treasure one summer, just to find old, moth-eaten baseball cards.

Even the most beautiful monuments in Paris or Barcelona never compared to the carefree summers in Ivy River, but my mother always said that Ivy River is exciting for a little while, but I would get restless.

'You're not a small-town girl, Bree. You have too much to give,' she used to say as we drove into the city to see a play at the Orpheum or an opera at the War Memorial Opera House. Ivy River didn't compare to what I could find in the bay, and I guess that's why I liked it.

Still, I don't regret spending those last summers with my mother. She was diagnosed with ALS the summer after I graduated from high school, and it was like my gut knew I needed to spend time with her. After she passed away, I always intended to come back and visit, even for a week or two, but Scott got in my head, and I didn't. Time stretched without reaching out to my dad, and then four years passed without a word. The letter Scott hid made me realize he hadn't forgotten me.

Without a phone to distract me, my thoughts loop to Scott, wondering what he's doing, if he's on his way here, if he'll just move on like I was a fever dream. Then, I think about Will. I'm not sure if it was in my own head, but I felt drawn to him, longing to inch closer.

I'm too raw, too damaged. Scott tore me down to a skeleton of a person, and I'm just now finding myself. Feeling like me again.

Getting involved would just halt all progress, and I refuse to let it.

Still, I can't wait for them to get home.

I had no idea when that would happen, so I walked back to the house around two-thirty and have been hanging out with Boomer since then. We went on a walk, although Boomer pulled, looking longingly at the yard where I assumed he sees Honey. I watched a movie. I tried to read, but my eyes would drift to the window, watching for my dad or Will to come home.

When I hear the truck rumbling into the driveway, I scramble from my watch spot at the window, and Boomer jumps from his bed, barking and ready for battle.

Once the dog realizes it's his favorite human's truck, he whines and wags his tail, staring at the doorknob.

My dad opens the door, and the dog leans into him, his tail banging against the wall. After the dog weaves through his legs, Dad looks up at me with a smile.

"Hi, Bree. How was your day?"

"Great," I say, standing up and spinning, pointing to my hair. "So, what do you think?"

"It's...short."

"Yep." I can't help but beam. "I love it."

"Good. Charmaine did a nice job. I texted you about dinner. Did you get it?"

I bite my lip. Will was true to his word and didn't mention my phone incident. Also, my dad has my number? "My phone's not working. What did it say?"

"I wanted you to defrost the chicken. Never mind. I guess we're going out. Let me change my shirt."

He walks to his bedroom, and I wait, slipping a bookmark I found between the pages of my library book. Boomer and I are playing tug, and eventually, Boomer just wants to be dragged as I pull him while he lies on his side, holding onto the rope for dear life. Dad watches us as I drag him.

"He loves to do that."

Boomer lets out a huff when I release the toy.

Standing, slightly out of breath, I set my hands on my hips. “Where are we going?”

“Let’s go to Riverfront.” He scratches the dog before heading out first, and I practically bounce as I follow him to the car. When I was a kid, we used to go to the Riverfront all the time, usually going my first night. It kicked off the summer for me, and I looked forward to the first visit every year. My mom usually came, and their easy conversation with laughter always made me happy. She looked a lot more alive than any night at the opera.

It’s a quick drive, maybe three miles, to a shaded parking lot and a dark wood building built over the bank of the Ivy River.

“Looks exactly the same,” I say as we pull up. Trees hang low over the restaurant’s deck. The river’s rushing waters are soothing and bring me right back to being a kid.

“That’s why I like it. It didn’t change,” Dad says as we get out.

We’re seated quickly at a table on the porch. I peer over the side, watching the swirls of gray and white water tripping over the rocks.

“Did you have a good first day?” Dad asks.

“Yeah, I would say so.”

“Glad you came?” he asks.

“Absolutely.”

“Good.” My dad doesn’t look at the menu. He probably has it memorized. I open mine because it’s been a while.

Out of habit, I look at the salads first, but my gaze wanders to the sandwiches and the burgers. My first meal of the summer was always their classic cheeseburger and crinkle fries with a cherry Coke. My mom usually didn’t let me have stuff like that, but she always let it go when I was in Ivy River. If I ate a burger in front of Scott, I would hear about it for three days.

“I know what I want.” I feel like I’m getting away with murder. I have the haircut of my dreams, I’m about to eat red meat for the second day in a row... This is the best. I take a deep breath, the sounds of the river drumming up all sorts of memories.

Dad motions for the server to come over, and they chat, making it obvious that Dad is a regular.

“Tawni, you remember my daughter, Bree.” Tawni turns to me, and I instantly remember her. She’s probably in her late forties now, with fine lines along her kind eyes and her dark hair tinged with gray gathered in a hot-pink scrunchie. She used to give me extra cherries in my Coke.

“Bree Tanager, look at you. All grown up. You turned into such a pretty thing. My word,” Tawni says.

“Thanks.” I blush because I’m still not used to compliments about my appearance. It was rough growing up with features I hadn’t quite grown into and all lanky limbs. Thankfully, I grew into them. However, my ears have always flared, and Scott would flick them when he wanted a rise out of me.

We order, and Tawni walks away. My dad and I sit in silence, looking around at nature and just enjoying the moment.

“I met your next-door neighbor today at Do’s and Donuts. Helen?”

“That *C U Next Tuesday*?” I let out a laugh, my dad smirking with pink cheeks.

“Charmaine called her that.”

“You wonder where I got that phrase from?” He giggles more, and it makes me laugh harder.

“She did seem kind of awful.”

“She *is*,” he says with a laugh. “She’s always yelling at Boomer to stay away from Honey. Will had to step in the other day because we were yelling so much. She finally backed down.”

Will. I blush as I squirm in my seat. “Where is Will tonight?”

“I texted him. Let him know we’re here. He got off on time, so he’s at the gym with his buddies.”

“Oh,” I say. “It makes sense he works out, because he’s... fit.”

I shrink into my seat. Yes, I looked and assessed. His shoulders are very, very nice.

“Will’s in great shape. Not like your old pop.” He slaps his stomach, and I smile.

We sit in silence again, a huge question bouncing around in my head. *Why did you send that letter? Why didn’t you come see us when Mom was dying? Would you care if I told you about Scott?*

“Dad, I’m sorry I just showed up without calling. That was rude of me.”

“It’s not a problem. I was surprised, that’s all.” He gives a tight smile, and then says, “So, tell me about you. What’s going on? Do you have a job? Where were you living?”

A rush of anxiety washes over me. What do I tell him first? Do I tell him about my crappy boyfriend who found fault in everything I did but never took blame for anything? Or do I talk about my soul-sucking restaurant job where the chef yelled at me every other night? Or do I talk about how I cried myself to sleep silently so Scott couldn’t hear?

“I’m finally going back to school,” I say. “In September.”

“Stanford?” he asks.

I nod. I went one year before my mom became too sick. I always meant to go back, but I froze every time I tried to re-apply. Scott always teased me, and I know why. His dad mentioned once that Scott had applied to Stanford and was rejected.

I was finally going back, finishing my degree, to make something of myself.

“That’s a fine school. I’m glad you’re going back. You always talked about it when you were a kid.”

“I did,” I say with a soft smile. Most kids would want to go away for school, but not me. I loved that it was so close to my home in Palo Alto. I loved that my mom went there. It just made sense.

“When will the house be ready?”

“July.”

“And why did you rent it out?”

Scott.

Will’s appearance at the gate to the deck saves me, and I let out a breath. He scans the tables before he locates us. He’s sweaty, and I should be grossed out by it.

Should.

I’m not prepared for the glisten, for the defined biceps out of a shirt with the sleeves cut. Averting my gaze, I stare at the river.

“Bree,” he says, the timbre of his voice thrumming through me.

“Hi,” I say. Will presses his lips into a thin line. He doesn’t comment on my hair. Maybe he doesn’t notice it.

“We already ordered, but I can grab Tawni.”

“Sure.” He sits down, and Tawni swings back around, getting his order. He orders the chicken, veggies, and a side of rice—the type of meal Scott would order for me.

“Bree met our lovely next-door neighbor today at the hair salon.”

Will chuckles and keeps his eyes trained on my dad. “What did she say?”

“She said you were rude,” I laugh. “Something about Boomer sniffing around Honey, the golden retriever.”

“Our boy is head over heels in love with that dog,” Dad says, already more animated now that Will is here. Will laughs

too, still not looking at me.

“So what if they’re friends? I think it’s cute. Boomer has a girlfriend,” Will says.

“It’s a forbidden romance!” There’s too much animation in my voice because Dad and Will stare at me now. Coughing into my hand, I say, “How was work?”

They both answer, “Fine,” as Tawni brings the drinks.

It feels like I’m intruding on their special time, although Dad invited me to dinner first, without Will. They talk shop as I barely listen, smiling every few sentences to appear engaged. They pretend like I’m not here as they chat away. When our drinks come, I slurp down my soda, the sugar coating my teeth and the carbonation bubbling in my stomach.

I expect this behavior from my dad, but Will’s completely different than how he was this morning. This morning, Will was funny and charming, bantering with me over coffee and acting genuinely interested that I was here. Now, he’s treating me like the third wheel, someone to be ignored.

“I want to make dinner for you two tomorrow night. After work,” I interrupt.

Finally, they both look at me.

“That’s nice of you, Pumpkin. Can you cook?”

“I cook all the time.” Because if I didn’t, Scott would insist we go out, and I’d pay. “Any requests?”

“Surprise me,” Dad says.

“Anything but fish,” Will says.

Oh, it will be fish.

“Perfect. I’ll have dinner ready...say seven-thirty?”

“Great,” Dad says. Will says nothing.

After more moments of awkward silence, Tawni and a food runner emerge from the sliding glass door with our meals on white plates. In between bites, I sneak glances at Will, who chatters with my dad about sports and their jobs. I can half-

follow the different cases they discuss, all violations of Fish and Wildlife code, from hunting violations to fishing license checks.

The high from the day has crashed to a deep low.

Maybe my dad didn't mean what he said in his letter to me.

Maybe coming to Ivy River was a mistake.

SEVEN

WILL

Taylor Swift blares from the kitchen.

After dropping my backpack, I find Bree, convulsing more than dancing around the kitchen island. I lean against the wall because the show is dynamic and amusing.

Without seeing me, she spins, grabs an empty pot, flips it, and takes a wooden spoon to the bottom, banging it three times before it goes into the chorus. She's singing off-key and shakes at the same time Taylor tells you to *shake it off*.

I can't help but smirk as she dances around the kitchen to the boombox set on a chair by the fridge. She's wearing black joggers and a T-shirt crop top, and I shouldn't be looking. It was hard enough to sit so close to her at Riverfront after the gym, when I resolved to keep my distance.

Now, I'm watching joy pour out of her as she cooks and dances, blissfully unaware that I'm her audience. Her eyes snap open, and she stops immediately, leaning against the island, slightly out of breath.

"Please, don't stop. Your dancing was very entertaining."

"I wouldn't say I dance. It's more a flail." Tiny hairs stick out around her head, and it's pretty damn cute.

"If you call that flailing, you should see me dance."

"How much of that did you see?"

"Well," I say, walking around the island to the fridge to grab a sparkling water, "I saw you on percussion."

“Oh, that.” Bree sets her hands on her hips and grimaces.

“It was cute.” Her cheeks flush as she turns back to the sink.

Dammit, why did I call her cute?

Bree twists the boombox knob so Taylor’s song is more of an accent than overpowering. “This song, man. It does something to me. My ex didn’t like Taylor Swift, so it’s nice to blast it.”

It’s the first time she mentions some ex, but I already hate the guy. How could he resist her bouncing around the kitchen in those pants? Did he not like her being adorable?

I point to the boombox. “You found this relic? Did you know how to use it?”

She rolls her eyes in annoyance. Victory. “Yes, Will, I know how to open a CD and use a boombox. I may be young, but I’m not stupid.”

“Never said you were.” I take a sip. “Where’d you find the CD? Is your father a Swiftie and I didn’t know it?”

“No. Turns out, the library has CDs and DVDs. Who knew? I squealed in the library.”

“I’m sure you did.” I chuckle as I picture the battle-axe, Ms. Vaughn, startled at Bree’s fangirl shriek in the media room.

“I also found a copy of *Bringing Up Baby* so I watched that this afternoon with Boomer. He was very interested in the leopard.”

I can’t help but chuckle at the image. Boomer probably pressed his nose to the TV screen whenever the leopard came on. “Wow, this town is turning you into a geriatric.”

“I’m really digging being analog. It’s fun,” she says. “I like to think I’m an old soul.”

Our chuckles fade as we stand near each other. I don’t want to leave. But I should.

“I really like when we do this,” Bree says.

“Do what?”

“Talk, joke around,” she says. “You were weird last night.”

I definitely was. After the talk with the guys at the gym and seeing her new, short hair and round behind in those joggers, I needed to talk about fishing limits to calm myself down. I shouldn't wear athletic shorts around her, for sure.

But it's the talking to her that gets me in trouble. She's so fun and easy to talk to that I flirt with her without meaning to.

Like tonight.

“Sorry about that. I had a rough day at work, and I was tired.” *And I was trying to keep my distance.*

“It's okay. Was today a better day at work?” she asks.

“It was pretty good. Only caught one person over-fishing. It's refreshing.”

“Good,” she says, nodding and smiling. A guilty look spreads over her face. “Speaking of fish...”

“What?”

“I kinda made salmon.”

I groan but grit my teeth as I say, “That's fine.”

“I'm sorry. You were cold last night, and I was feeling feisty this morning...”

“No, it's okay.” I'll try not to gag when she brings it out.

“Is it really? Are you sure? I know it was a terrible thing to do...”

I chuckle. “Bree, it's fine. No one is going to die. I'll eat it.”

“Great,” she says with a smile. “Dinner will be ready in ten.”

“I'll let your dad know.”

Turning on my heel, I hear, “Hey, Will?”

“Yeah?”

“What kind of stuff does my dad like?” Bree asks. She bounces on her feet, wiping her hands on a towel.

“What do you mean?”

“I just want to connect with him, you know?” She looks down, and I notice that feeling. My father and I always felt like we were speaking two different languages. I spent my childhood trying to get him to notice me. I went about it in the worst ways possible and succeeded. Alex did it the correct way, and he still died.

However, Paul is a good man. He wants to be involved. It’s why I’m glad he wrote that letter. My parents have no idea where I am, if I’m even alive, but an apology letter would be nice.

Bree’s wide eyes plead with me for a scrap of knowledge, an in. All I do is nod.

“I’ll figure something out.”

“Thanks, Will. You’re a good man.” Her expression is earnest as I nod once.

“You’re welcome.” I turn up the volume on the boombox, keeping her gaze. “Commence flailing.”

“Oh, I will,” she says as she grabs a wooden spoon to use as a microphone. She sings, slightly off-key, about wishing a partner would come back. She sings to me, and I stand there a little too long, watching her. Her hands shoot forward with the words as I chuckle at her antics.

“Flail with me.”

I shake my head. “Absolutely not.”

“You don’t like joy?”

“I don’t like dancing.”

“Suit yourself.” She mouths the words into the wooden spoon, closing her eyes, swaying her hips, raising a hand to the air.

She’s not for you, I tell myself. Whatever made her want to start over is the exact reason I shouldn’t let myself go there. I

won't be a good anything to her.

My parents sure didn't model a healthy, loving marriage.

My dad was a shitty father.

It's not in me to give her what she deserves.

She deserves everything.

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, Paul and I sit in the dining room as Bree rushes in and out of the kitchen, placing covered dishes on the hot pads on the table. When she's finally done, she flops down onto her chair. Boomer lifts his head, on alert.

"Eat up!" she shouts. Boomer stands and sniffs her. "Not you," she says, scratching the dog's ears.

"Did you have a good day, Bree?" Paul asks.

"It was great."

"Are you getting a phone again anytime soon?"

Bree must've told him. She juts out her lip. "No, I'm kinda enjoying not having one. Touching grass is good for me."

Paul grunts as he passes me the main dish. His nose wrinkles. "Is this salmon?"

"Yep," she says, flicking an eyebrow. Paul looks at me and then at Bree before he shoves some salad into his mouth.

"It's fine, Paul." I hold my breath as I take a filet out of the pan, setting it on my plate.

"It's a really good recipe..."

My hands ball into fists as I stare at the pink flesh covered in blackened seasoning. My nemesis.

"I promise it won't be too fishy." She's lucky she's pretty.

"I always thought it was weird that he likes to fish and catch salmon, but he won't eat it," Paul says.

"That is strange," Bree says as she rests her chin on her hands. "Come on."

I cut off the tiniest piece and bring it to my lips, trying not to gag. Once it hits my teeth, lots of flavor hits my palette, and I can't taste the fishy smell. It's not bad. I can eat it.

I cut off another piece. The second bite goes down easier than the first. The fish has a velvety texture as it flakes in my mouth. "It's fine."

"See?" she asks.

"You just worked a miracle," Paul says. "I never thought I'd see the day Will ate fish willingly."

"It's good," I say, taking a bigger bite than before. We eat some more, and Bree recounts her day, how she went to the library again, and grabbed coffee at Toastin', and how she walked Boomer. The conversation stops and starts, eventually leading to Paul and me discussing work and our cases in front of Bree.

Bree eats quietly as she listens, but I'm not sure how much she's following. We did this last night, talking shop and yammering on about things she has no context for. Paul is her dad. If anything, I should be the third wheel.

I know so little about Bree, but I can connect them on one thing. Paul insists we watch movies older than I am constantly. I've seen more John Wayne westerns than I can count. It's a recent thing where Paul became a cinephile, and by proxy, I became one as well.

I'm not sure if this is the truth, but I say it. "So, Paul, did you know Bree loves old movies?"

Paul looks at me and then at her. "Really?"

"They don't make them like they used to," she says, like she's in a nursing home. I laugh behind my napkin as she continues. "I watched *Bringing Up Baby* today. Also picked up *All About Eve*. It's been a while."

"Those are classics. Have you watched any John Wayne?"

I groan, and Bree's head whips to me. I point to Paul. "Don't get him started. It's an obsession."

"I haven't see any. Can we watch one tonight?" Bree asks.

Paul lights up and smiles huge. “Of course. Will you be joining us, Will?”

I shake my head. “I want to finish a book I’m reading. But thanks, though.”

Bree mouths, “Thank you,” and I nod.

AFTER WE FINISH, I clear the table with the full intention of doing all the dishes. Instead, I find Bree, scrubbing a pan, already at the sink.

“Let me get those,” I say.

“No, it’s okay. I really like doing dishes. You could hit the Taylor Swift, though.”

“Okay.” I switch on the boombox, and Taylor’s voice drifts out.

“Sorry about the salmon again,” she says.

“It’s fine. It was good.”

“Are you just saying that?” she asks. “I feel bad now that you helped me with my dad. I’m so petty. I’m sorry. It’s all my fault.”

“It’s nothing. I enjoyed it.”

“Okay, good.” She blushes and bites her lip. That mouth will be my undoing.

I wonder if that ex-boyfriend made her feel like any mistake was the end of the world. She looks at me like she doesn’t believe that it’s fine, that I wasn’t deeply offended, that I won’t bring it up again when she least expects it.

My dad did that. Held onto all my mistakes just to parade them in front of me when I was feeling a little good about myself.

I focus on a spot on the tile. “I forgot to tell you, JR told me his little sister, Sienna, is in town. Said you hung out with her some summers?”

“Sienna?!” Bree shouts, dropping the pan in excitement, creating a loud clang. Boomer starts barking in the other room. “I haven’t seen her in forever.”

“You should call her.” After I scrawl her number onto a sticky note, I hold it out. “Here. Since you don’t have a phone.”

“Thank you.” She grabs the piece of paper and raises her arms slightly, a move I know all too well. “I feel like we should hug.”

What I wouldn’t give to hug her. “No, thanks. I’m good. Not much of a hugger.”

“You don’t hug or dance? No fun.” Her arms fall in disappointment as she turns back to her washing. “Sorry. I respect your boundaries.”

I want to tell her that I can’t take her in my arms because I won’t be able to stop. It’s because I respect her dad too much that I can’t hug her.

It’s not her. It’s one hundred percent me.

EIGHT

BREE

I took my sweet time sipping coffee this morning.

First, I tried to lean casually against the counter in case Will waltzed in, looking for coffee. Then, I would casually walk by the picture window, eating a banana, to catch any movement from the apartment above the garage.

After my third cup, I give up since the yoga class I agreed to meet Sienna at starts in thirty minutes and I should get going, and I hit the bathroom.

The birds chirp, and the sun shines bright on my dad's street. I turn to look at Will's apartment, his black Fish and Wildlife truck still parked next to his black sedan.

I wonder if he's waiting for me to leave.

He didn't mention if it was his day off, but it very well could be.

Oh well.

I walk down my dad's street, noticing different lawn ornaments, potted plants, and beds of flowers in his neighbors' lawns. The mountains are in the distance, dotted with evergreen trees, the sky accented with puffy clouds. Sunshine is already making me feel better, even if my soul is heavy.

I'm just bored. That's why I'm obsessed with Will. My phone was my number one distraction, and without it, I'm twitchy, looking for anything to avoid my thoughts.

I pass by the courthouse with its adjoining park, the old gazebo recently painted a gleaming white. I should take my

book and sit amongst nature, looking up to watch people. If I'm nosy about other people, that could keep me occupied.

I find a small unit with a sign out front: *Wildflower Yoga and Movement*. I see people inside, unrolling their mats and chatting with friends. When Sienna suggested yoga, I could've burst out of my skin. Yoga was my lifeline in San Francisco, a luxury I afforded myself. When I was in yoga, nothing else mattered. My mind cleared, and I centered myself, flowing through the movements while others did the same.

Yoga is the one thing I would love to stay from my old life.

I open Wildflower's door to a woman with deep skin and black braids piled on top of her head. A septum piercing glitters from under her nose.

"Hello," she greets me. "How can I help you?"

"Hi, my name is Bree Tanager. I'm new to the studio. I signed up online last night."

"Welcome, Bree! Do you need a towel and a mat?"

"Yes, please." I grab my credit card that's tucked in my leggings.

She waves it away. "The towel and mat are on us. We'll just need you to sign this waiver."

The owner barely slides a clipboard toward me before I hear a squeal.

"Brienne Elise Tanager," a voice says from behind me.

"Oh my God, hi!" I say as Sienna Armitage bulldozes me, crushing me with a huge hug.

"I'm so glad you called me!"

"Me too. This is so wild!" When she pulls away, I want to burst out into tears. Hollywood hasn't changed her, and I'm so glad.

Sienna was a fixture of my summers in Ivy River.

The first time we saw each other, I was six, visiting my dad for the summer for the first time as my mom reluctantly

left me with Paul. A big ball of energy with wiry red hair, Sienna forced me to be daring. It was her idea to approach the group of boys, one of whom would be my first kiss at twelve. She was the one I swam with in the river until our teeth chattered and our skin was blue.

It was always clear Sienna was destined for big things outside of Ivy River. We frequently wrote plays and performed them for our parents, and I played the sidekick character, while she was the star. I didn't mind because Sienna had star power, even then.

"How are you?" Sienna asks. She places her hands on her hips.

"Good. Just staying with my dad." I leave out a huge chunk of the story, and a nervous smile crosses my lips. "What about you?"

"Just taking a break from acting. Figuring out what my next move will be."

I press my lips together before I say, "Wow, you're a big star now."

Sienna turns her lip down. "You are so sweet, but I'm far from it. Come." She grabs my hand and pulls me to a purple mat in the middle of the glossy, hardwood floor. "I'm set up here."

I unroll my mat and straighten it.

"You'll really like this one. Beats any class I took in LA."

"Wow, that's great."

The woman from the front desk floats to the front of the class.

"Hello, everyone, this is eight-thirty Power Vinyasa..."

AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER, my mind is clear as I lie on my back, my palms upward. The calming spa music wafts over me, and I breathe in and out. A hand grabs mine, and I know it's Sienna's. Life is so funny sometimes. I thought I had

lost her forever, whether it was to a lack of communication or to stardom.

It feels like no time has passed.

“Turn onto your favorite side,” Tiffany says, her voice like butter.

I turn to my left into the fetal position and sit up. Crossing my legs, I bring my hands to my heart center, my eyes still closed.

“The light within me recognizes and validates the light within you. Namaste.”

“Namaste,” we repeat, and I feel invincible.

After Tiffany runs through basic announcements, Sienna turns to me. “Do you drink coffee?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Let’s go get some right now. On me.”

“Sure. That would be great.”

“Glad you said yes, or I would’ve kidnapped you. It’s been too long.”

“It has.”

She rolls up her mat, and I do the same. After I return my stuff to Tiffany, we walk by Sienna’s car and drop her stuff off. I expect something fancy, but it’s a modest, older sedan. Then, we’re walking side by side, like we did when we were twelve.

“Town still looks the same, doesn’t it?” Sienna says. “LA is so different. It feels like a foreign planet most of the time. Especially the more you get into the acting world. They are not normal.”

“I bet.”

“Are you just here for the summer?” Sienna wraps her arm around my waist and leans into me.

“Yep. Just visiting my dad. It’s been too long. My mom’s house will become available in July. I’m finally finishing my college degree.”

“Good for you! Stanford?”

I nod as we cross the quiet street with no cars for blocks.

“You don’t look excited,” she notices.

“I am...excited. It’s just...scary.”

“I get that.” Sienna opens the glass door to the coffee shop, the bell dinging. There are a few people sitting in the corner, a newspaper propped in front of their faces. Not a phone in sight. It’s refreshing, actually.

The menu is simple, stark-white marks on a black chalkboard. My stomach growls. The banana was not enough.

I must be staring at the pile of glistening pastries, because Sienna nudges me.

“The almond croissants are amazing. And their drinks are pretty good too.”

Scott’s voice has gotten fainter, less insistent. I’m eating food. Real food.

It feels so damn good.

“Okay.” I approach the barista, a nice-looking kid with a ring in his lip. “One almond croissant and a non-fat latte.”

“You got it. Do you want the pastry warmed up?”

I almost crumble to the floor. “Yes, that would be lovely.”

“You got it.” He turns to the counter as I turn to Sienna.

Sienna orders, and we find a small pub table outside. The breeze feels cold on my sweat-soaked skin, but the sun more than makes up for it. I close my eyes, just feeling the moment.

“You’re being one with nature?” Sienna asks as she sets down two white ceramic mugs. She disappears back inside and returns with our croissants, beautifully plated on white china.

The air feels crisp on my skin. “It’s just so...fresh.”

“Mountain air. Sure beats smog. Cheers,” Sienna says, holding up her croissant, and we touch them and both take a deep bite. The flakiness melts in my mouth as the almond

filling coats my tongue. I moan and lick the crumbs from my lips.

“These are better than sex.” Sienna wipes her mouth and takes a sip of her latte.

“Seriously,” I say. “A man hasn’t given me an orgasm in too long.”

“I feel that. The last couple guys I’ve been with thought the G-spot was enough. Not this chick.”

“Not this chick either.” We both laugh, and it feels so good.

We’re quiet as we eat more and sip our coffees. I’ve had so much caffeine I’m vibrating, but it feels good to be out and about.

“I’m glad Will mentioned you were in town.”

“Oh, Will.” Sienna smiles. She holds her coffee to her lips and wiggles, like it’s delicious. “He’s way too hot. And he doesn’t really know it, so it’s even hotter.”

“Seriously.” My cheeks heat, and I blame the coffee and the caffeine.

Sienna brings her coffee away from her lips. “Are you interested?”

“Absolutely not,” I say. My acting skills are terrible, but Sienna doesn’t pick up on it.

“That’s too bad. He has this whole mysterious vibe. I’m ninety-nine percent sure he hasn’t killed anyone. We thought something was up with him for a long time, then he started hooking up with Allison.”

Allison’s name makes me flinch. “The ladies at Do’s and Donuts told me about them.”

“Allison is nice enough, but there are a couple single ladies who have been awful to her since the rumors started. They’re just jealous. Allison doesn’t care.”

I am jealous of her now. I’ve chatted with Will a few times, and it’s made me giddy. I’m not sure what sleeping him

would be like. I wonder if he can make a woman come. The glint in his eye and quiet swagger tells me he absolutely knows where the clitoris is.

Something dawns on Sienna, and she straightens.

“Hey, we should go out tonight.”

“Sure.” Scott hated bringing me out, because men approached me no matter how much of a *fuck-off* demeanor I put off. He was so suspicious I was trying to cheat on him every second of every day, and then I found underwear that wasn’t mine.

“I don’t really have going-out clothes,” I say.

“I have some great dresses,” Sienna says. “We’re about the same size. Come on over before. I’ll text you the address.”

I bite my lip. “I don’t have a cell phone right now.”

“You don’t? That’s amazing. I love it,” she says. “I can’t tell you how many times I want to delete Instagram and TikTok, but it feels like sponsored content is the only real money I make these days. The streamers don’t pay shit. How has it been? Has it been magical, not being bombarded by images that make you feel bad about yourself?”

“It’s been really great.” Great that my ex can’t text me thirty times in a row, or I can’t see our mutual friends taking his side, acting like I was the problem. The crazy one.

I need a night out to forget about everything. To drink cocktails and have fun. Think about anything but Will.

Sienna borrows a pen from the barista and writes down her address on a napkin. She hands it to me. “This feels so vintage. I love it. Be there at eight? We can get ready together. I have a couple options that would look great on you.”

“Perfect.”

NINE

WILL

“Thank you for picking me up. I didn’t know it was that far.” Bree fidgets in my passenger seat.

“It’s no problem. Sienna’s house is tough to find anyway—for reasons.”

I tried to avoid Bree, and now her intoxicating scent fills my truck.

Earlier today, I confined myself to my apartment, eating jerky and protein bars instead of wandering over to Paul’s kitchen, where most of my food is. The less I’m around Bree, the better, and she’s everywhere. When I finally thought it was safe to leave, I found her clear across town, walking, like the town wasn’t her destination.

She’s wearing those damn joggers again, encapsulating her butt perfectly, and I contemplated driving by, but I could imagine Paul yelling at me. So, I rolled up next to her like a kidnapper, telling her to get in. Now, I’m taking her the remaining two miles to Price, a quiet winding road where large mansions sit on acres of land. My focus stays on the road, no matter how distracting her scent is.

“So, what are you doing tonight with Sienna?” I ask casually. I picture mud masks, snacks, maybe some nineties rom-coms.

“We’re going out in town. Three Rules?”

I keep my grumble low. Three Rules is a saloon in town, owned by Rich, a man so obsessed with *Roadhouse* that he remodeled an abandoned warehouse to be an identical replica

of the bar in the film. He even had a photo shoot back in the nineties at Glamour Shots at the mall in Sable Springs to hang it next to a plaque with the main character's three rules. The framed picture is ridiculous—Rich hugging himself in a tight black tee, with the fluffiest of mullets. Allison bartends there, and I haven't been back since the last time we slept together—a week before Bree showed up on her dad's doorstep.

“Do you go there?” Bree asks.

“Sometimes, that place is full of guys looking to get laid or start a fight.”

“Perfect,” she says, looking out the window.

My skin burns hot, thinking of Bree taking a guy home. “Don't get involved with any of the guys there.”

“Why not?”

“They're all losers.” My arm stays rigid and straight, gripping the steering wheel like I want to break it.

“I'll be the judge of that. It would be refreshing to have a guy be up front about his loser-ness.”

“Why go after a loser?” I break my resolve and look at her. Damn, she's pretty.

She quirks her eyebrow. “Don't you ever fuck for fun?”

Adjusting in my seat, I glare at her before I focus on the road. We stop at a stop sign at a T-intersection. I let a Ford go before I proceed. It is one thing, Bree being quirky and fun, but it's another thing to discuss anything remotely sexual with her. This might make me lose every ounce of restraint I have.

“I'm not going to talk about that with you.”

“Why not?” Her voice drops low, and I clear my throat. We arrive at the gate for Sienna's house, and I punch in the code after Bree reads it off from a piece of paper. The gate creaks open, too slowly for this conversation, and I roll in over the dirt road to the concrete slab to the right of the large, brick house.

“Be safe,” I say.

“Yes, Daddy,” she says defiantly, stepping down.

Fuck.

I watch her walk to the front door and light up when it opens. As soon as Bree disappears inside, I open the group text between myself, Logan, and JR.

Me: Three Rules tonight?

“I NEVER THOUGHT I’d see the day you’d suggest Three Rules,” JR says, holding up his beer.

“Me too. I couldn’t believe it. It all worked out since Mom was available to hang out with Lily,” Logan adds.

“You’re welcome.” I clink my club soda with lime with their alcohol. Since I don’t drink, I picked them up. If JR walks home drunk, he sometimes doesn’t make it home, falling asleep by the river or in the gazebo outside the courthouse.

Three Rules isn’t as rowdy tonight as it can get, and I’m thankful. It’s full of locals, quiet and subdued. The band doesn’t go on for another half hour, so we snagged a good table at the corner of the dance floor. The lights shine in our eyes as the strobe light circulates against the hardwood.

“Allison is giving you eyes, man,” JR says, punching me in the shoulder.

I glance at the bar where Allison stands, staring me down.

She looks good tonight in a low-cut black bustier, but any desire I have focuses now on the one person I can’t have. Ever since Bree swept into my life, I’ve lost my common sense.

“Are you going to go over there?” Logan asks.

I mark the condensation on my glass. It doesn’t feel right anymore. “Nah.”

“Goddammit,” JR says, sitting back.

“What?” Logan and I ask in unison as our eyes go to the entrance.

There, standing and looking around, is Sienna and Bree.

My heart leaps to my throat at the sight of my boss’s daughter.

Bree looks good enough to eat.

Not just eat. Savor.

Her short blonde hair is in tousled waves, like she’s spent hours making love. She’s wearing a tight and short red dress that stops mid-thigh, showing off shapely thighs and calves. Soft cleavage flirts with the neckline of her dress, and I bite my lip. She turns slightly to talk to Sienna, and I have to look away. If I can’t handle her butt in joggers, I’m a goner with her ass in that dress.

“Damn, that’s Bree? I did not see that coming. She is *hot*.” JR whistles.

“Don’t think about it,” I say with a finger point. Blood pumps hard through my veins as I settle in my seat. JR and Logan are good men, but still, I’m about to punch both of them if they make one more comment about her. “Paul said that she’s off limits. You can’t touch her.”

JR flicks his eyebrow at me. “Are you saying that to us or to yourself?”

I throw a straw at him.

“Did you see what your sister’s wearing?” Logan asks.

“No, oh my God. Why the hell does she insist on dressing like that?” JR asks. Sienna’s black dress has a cut-out across her stomach, showing more than it’s covering. “She’s getting too comfortable here. Do I have to call the paparazzi on her? If Brandon or Tom show up and hit on her, I’m going to jail. Again.”

“Sit down, cowboy.” Logan pushes him down by the shoulder. “Your sister does look good, though.”

JR's jaw grinds as he slowly swivels his head toward Logan. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Logan's cheeks immediately redden. "You know your sister looks good."

JR's face squishes as he waggles his tongue. "Why did you phrase it like that? I'm going to spew chunks all over you."

"Gentlemen, enough." My hands slice through the air like I'm their referee.

We watch the ladies find a tall table. Sienna leave Bree as she walks to the bar to order some drinks.

"Make sure no one approaches Bree. I'm going to the bar." I knock on the table.

"That might be hard to do with her looking like *that*," JR says. Rolling my eyes, I walk toward Sienna at the bar.

"Hey," I say to her.

"Hey. I see you're here with my idiot brother and the bigger idiot friend."

"Yep. Why did you and Bree come here? Why not Spirit and Bone?"

"Maybe we're looking for more than drinks." Sienna pulls out a tube of lipstick and a mirror. My blood boils.

"Why is your skin red, Will?"

"No reason. You know what, I'll help with your fun for tonight. Allison, I'll get Sienna's order."

Allison smiles hesitantly. "You got it, Will."

She drops two pink drinks in front of Sienna, and Sienna smiles and turns with them in her hands and her pocketbook in her armpit. "Thanks, Will. Pleasure doing business with you."

Bree lights up when Sienna walks toward her with the drinks I just bought. She looks past Sienna's shoulder to me as my chin bobs. Her expression is confused, but she nods once.

Turning, I see Allison there, her hands on the strings of her apron.

“How are you?” she asks.

“Good, how are you?”

“I’m fine. Why haven’t you texted me back?”

I cough against my hand. I’ve been meaning to text her back, but I couldn’t think of the right thing to say. This thing between us has run its course, and I’ve been procrastinating. “Sorry about that.”

Allison contemplates my apology with a tilt of her head. “Do you want to come over tonight? I have those divine chocolate truffles I know you like...”

I knock my fist on the bar top and look up. “I’ll take a rain check.”

Her mouth drops in disappointment. “Okay. Well, maybe tomorrow night?”

I pause a beat too long, and Allison studies my face.

I fold my arms on the bar top. “Look, we had fun—lots of fun—but it might be best to end this.”

Allison’s eyes flame at me, and I stand tall. “Are you sure it’s not because of the hot blonde that now lives with you?”

“Positive,” I say. “She’s off limits. Paul said so.”

“And you are *such a good man*,” Allison says, setting a receipt in front of me. I sign the slip, giving her a forty percent tip and slide it toward her. I walk back to my friends as I steal a glance at Bree. Her shoulders already appear looser, freer.

People fill in, but I still watch Bree through the cracks in the crowd. No one has bothered them as they drink and dance by their table. We chat about our usual stuff—our plans for the summer, when we’ll go camping next. Logan tells us a story about Lily petting a possum, thinking it was a cat. The entire time, my focus winds back to Bree, making sure she’s safe.

The band filters in, and after a painfully long sound check, the music starts. My friends have already gotten another round of beers and replaced my club soda.

“I miss tourists,” JR says, although he only flirts with them, never taking one home. Logan doesn’t talk about getting women; he just does.

Sienna pulls Bree to the open floor, both holding drinks as they dance to the music. Bree’s movements are more seductive than the performance I saw in the kitchen the other night. She sways her hips, laughing hysterically as she body rolls. They drape arms over each other’s shoulders innocently, but I see at least three men who are mesmerized by the two women innocently dancing with each other.

My hands ball into fists as I sit here, powerless.

I see two men pointing casually in their direction, discussing something. When they look up, I curse silently to myself. It’s Brandon Yeller and Tom Brigham, the two biggest womanizers in Ivy River. I’ve heard story after story from everyone, including the nineteen-year-old girl Brandon got pregnant and who is now raising the baby on her own because Brandon wouldn’t step up. Tom is not much better, cheating on his long-term girlfriend constantly when he goes to Vegas.

Both men are watching Sienna and Bree like lions stalk antelope. How dare they think they can even breathe the same air as her.

My body lifts off the seat as I watch the situation. Rage I thought I had controlled bubbles to the surface, ready to explode. I’ve worked so hard to temper this part of my personality, the unfortunate inheritance from my dad, but Bree brings it out of me.

“Is Will going to fight someone tonight?” JR asks, rubbing his hands together.

“Finally.” Logan sips his beer. “I knew he had it in him.”

“Shut up,” I snap, and they lean back, taking a sip of their drinks.

Bree disappears down the hallway, probably to the bathroom, and I don’t see anyone following her. Brandon and Tom stay planted as Sienna walks back to her table to check her phone.

“I’m going to hit the bathroom,” I say as I stand up.

“Sure you are,” Logan says. I ignore it as I walk toward the hallway Bree just disappeared into.

TEN

BREE

“I can’t believe the guys came.” Sienna shakes her head over the table. Unbothered, I suck down my third Sex on the Beach. All my problems have floated away, like a balloon released at a parade. I no longer taste the alcohol, but it’s zipping straight to my head, making me woozy.

We danced our hearts out, with open arms. I haven’t felt this *alive* in years. The last time I danced like this was the wedding I crashed with my ex-friend Carly—the night I met Scott and my life took a sharp left.

Sienna loaned me a tight, bodycon dress—an article of clothing I would have never worn over the past four years. Men are staring, and it makes my skin crawl, since I spent so many years hiding my figure to avoid a fight.

Scott chose me because I turned heads. Then, he punished me for that very thing.

I noticed Will’s searing gaze ten minutes ago and rolled my body a little more, trailing my fingers up my torso and sticking my hands in my hair. I never made it obvious I was doing it for him, but I would catch him with a flick of my eyes. Every time, his lips pressed together in a line, his jaw tight.

“Will is staring at you,” Sienna whispers.

Let him report back to my dad that I’m not sad. Let him go crazy that he can’t control me. “Let him stare,” I slur.

“To letting them stare,” Sienna says, raising her glass.

We take another drink, and my straw vibrates against the ice. “I’m out of *alcohol*,” I shout a little too loud in Sienna’s face.

“Oh no, that’s a problem.” We collapse in laughter on each other.

Allison sets another coral-pink drink in front of Sienna. She’s the woman Will is sleeping with. Even in my alcohol haze, I know I shouldn’t ask, shouldn’t let on that I know or how much I want to ask her if he’s good in bed or not.

I hug her, and she tentatively hugs me back. “Thank you,” I say into her ear.

When I let her go, she points behind us. “Compliments of the two gentlemen over there.”

A guy standing next to his friend raises his beer to us, his face shielded by a ball cap.

“This town is so nice!” I yell. Allison smiles but stares at me before walking away.

“What was that?” I yell-whisper to Sienna.

“She might be jealous of you—since Will can’t stop looking at you,” Sienna says.

“She’s jealous of me?” There’s a long list, a page front and back, of reasons why I shouldn’t date him. So what if he’s staring at me? He can’t date me either. I’m jealous of *her*. I wish I could have no-strings-attached sex with that piece of fine man right there.

“You’re *hot*, and you’re living with Will now.”

“He barely talks to me.”

“He’s here with his friends—because *you’re* here.”

“Are either of them available?” I ask, although I’m not interested. Deflect, deflect, deflect.

“Logan and JR? First off, I would kill you if you dated my brother. Logan is another story—a whole ‘nother story.” Sienna takes a long pull of her drink.

Logan and JR are attractive, for sure, but they're not Will. Everything about him is sexy, mysterious. Our chemistry crackles whenever we're close. It must be because I can't have him.

I glance at his table again, my drunk brain negotiating with itself. He could be hiding a dark side, like Scott did. All men say one thing and do another.

I hold up my new drink. "Our outing is not about catching a man's attention. This is about female friendship. This is about passing the Bechdel test!" I yell, wrapping my arm around Sienna's neck. "I missed you so much. But I've been following your career, and I'm *so* proud of you." Now, I'm crying. She hugs me tightly as she pets my hair.

"You're too pretty to drunk cry." She releases me, and I wipe my tears as she rubs my arms. "Go to the bathroom and fix your makeup."

"Oh no." There's black on my fingers from swiping at my eyes. "I'll be right back."

After I adjust my dress so it covers everything, I walk toward neon sign advertising bathrooms. Under those fluorescent lights, I feel a hand on my arm.

"Will, I don't have time for this."

He leans closer, and the air vibrates between us. "I want you to be careful."

"I am. God. I've been covering my drink all night." I pantomime holding my hand over a drink to avoid any drugs being slipped in.

"There are guys looking at you. Like they have plans."

"Ooh, plans." I wave my hands. "Maybe I have plans of my own."

I rip my hand out of his grasp and glare at him.

"This is not you," he says.

I let out a chortle. Will has known me for a week and thinks he knows me. He doesn't know the half of it. How I

wake up every day wondering how I ended up in Ivy River, a toddler finger-painting of a person. How my spirit has been decimated and how I'm fighting tooth and nail to rebuild it.

How dare him think he knows me.

I spin around, charging him. I press my chest against his, and his breath hitches. For a fraction of a moment, I wonder if he's hard. I wonder if I pushed my pelvis against his, if I would feel his length through his pants.

"Stop acting like you know me. You don't know the half of it."

"I want to," he says.

"Oh, you do?" I try to leave but find myself whirling around. Hot tears collect in my eyes as I take a deep breath. "There's only mess in here. You think you see this"—I sweep my hand up and down my body—"and you want to know, but inside, I don't know who I am. I'm not even sure I like who I am. Who lets a guy treat her the way I was treated for four years? There's something missing. Do they teach that in college? How to function?"

Will's face is stoic as he listens to me rant.

"Yeah, I see it in your eyes. You don't want to know. And you don't get to tell me what to do."

I stomp toward the bathroom, closing the door to lean against it.

Fuck him for thinking he knows me or can tell me what to do. Fuck him for flirting with me and then pulling back.

Fuck him for acting like he cares.

WILL ISN'T WAITING for me in the hallway when I leave the bathroom. When I reach our table, Sienna offers her hand to pull me onto the dance floor. Will doesn't matter. The male gaze doesn't matter. My problems don't exist in this moment.

It's just me and my best friend, having the time of our lives.

We jump around, and I turn, leaning into Sienna, shimmying against her. The two men who bought us drinks still stare, and I make eyes with the taller one wearing the ball cap. I crook my finger to him, and he hands his friend his drink, walking toward me.

“Hi,” he says.

“Hi.” Out of the corner of my eye, I see Sienna slinking away.

“I saw you dancing here. Are you new in town or just visiting?”

I lean in, my mouth close to his neck. “Does it matter?”

He grumbles, and I pull him by the shirt, deeper into the belly of the dance floor.

His hands grip my hips immediately as we dance to the band. He spins me, and I catch eyes with Will. Will practically hovers over his seat, ready to pounce.

That motivates me to rest my arms over this man’s shoulders and sway further. The song ends, and we keep dancing as I feel hands drift closer and closer to my butt. I wiggle out of his grasp, but his hands are determined.

One hand squeezes my ass, and I feel the man’s erection against my stomach. Bile rises in my throat, and this is no longer fun.

I press my hands into his chest and try to push, but he’s too strong, too determined.

“Just a little kiss?” he asks, and I brace for impact, but the wind shifts, and he’s gone from in front of me.

“What the fuck?” he asks.

My head whips to Will, livid with anger. His jaw grinds, his tan skin flushes, and his eyes burn like campfire embers. He gives the man a warning glare. There’s a split second where I think the man will back down, but instead, he puffs his chest and presses it against Will’s. He has a couple inches on him, and I wonder if I just caused my first bar fight.

“Hey, guys, it’s not worth—” I say, grabbing for the man, but his arm flinches, his elbow knocking my cheek. A bright, hot pow radiates through my head as I fly back, my butt hitting the hardwood floor.

Stars swirl in my vision as a wave of nausea hits me.

Fire ignites in Will. In slow motion, his fist rears back to punch the man, laying him flat on his back. He squirms, covering his eye, crying out in pain.

Will’s gaze stays focused on me.

“Are you okay?” He steps over the man he just laid out and offers his forearm. When he pulls me up, our lips stop inches from each other’s, and my eyelashes flutter as tingles flow through my body. Once I’m steady on my feet, Will releases me, creating distance, and I wish he would’ve stayed closer.

Bargoers circle us. I’m not sure if they’re ready to brawl or they just want to watch. A towering figure with a big belly covered in a white T-shirt walks into the circle, red-faced with anger.

“Brandon, get the fuck out,” he says to the man still writhing on the floor.

“What about him? He punched me.” Brandon sits up, his hand covering one side of his face.

“I watched you get handsy with Paul Tanager’s daughter, and you knocked her down. If Will didn’t punch you, I would’ve punched you myself. Get out.”

At the mention of my dad’s name, Brandon stands up, his face red and concerned. Will and Brandon stare at each other, and the crowd tenses in case it starts all over again. Instead, Brandon walks with his head hung low to the exit.

“I’m sorry, Rich.” Will shakes his hand.

“We’re good.” They look each other in the eye and shake hands.

“Let’s get you home.” Will turns toward me, and his hand touches my lower back tentatively.

“Okay,” I say, the hazy buzz evaporating with the pain on my cheek. Logan and JR flank Will.

“That was a fantastic punch,” JR says.

“I need to take Bree home.”

“Don’t worry about us. We’ll get a ride,” Logan says. “We’ll keep an eye out for Brandon while you get to your car.”

Will’s hand grips my hip tightly, like I’m his. “Are you okay to walk?”

Do I lie to keep his hands on me? “No, I’m fine. I can walk.”

Sienna runs up to me and pulls me into a hug. “I am so sorry. Tom started talking to me, and I...”

“It’s fine. Everything’s fine.” I pull her in for another hug. She assures me she’s fine to get home, so we say our goodbyes. Through tears, I promise to dry clean the dress, and she tells me to keep it.

Will grabs my hand to pull me out, and it feels so natural, like we’ve been doing it for years. The lights whirl around me as we walk out, my steps faulty because of the alcohol. Nausea hits me again, and I can’t find a curb fast enough. Cool air hits my neck because Will is holding my hair back as I heave most of the contents of my stomach into a planter between two trucks.

I’ve made good on the promise that I’m a mess.

When I finally stop, I stand straight, just for the gravel to make me unsteady on my feet. I cling to him as he holds me upright. He says nothing, but his presence is comforting. When we reach Will’s truck, he opens my door and offers a hand. I take it, gripping it a little too tight. Through the window, I notice him flex the hand that touched mine as he circles the hood.

It was also the fist he used to punch Brandon out.

We don’t talk as we make a left out of the parking lot. The silence crawls over my skin.

“I’m sorry about that guy. It was my fault. I....”

“No, it wasn’t,” he says. Will’s jaw grinds in the moonlight. “Brandon grabbed your ass and...”

“I was too flirty. I was too...”

“Doesn’t matter. Brandon shouldn’t have done that.” Will tenses more, his hand gripping the steering wheel.

“I should’ve been more aware.”

Will pulls to the shoulder and cuts the engine. He turns, resting his arm on the back of my seat. “Stop blaming yourself. It’s not your fault you look the way you do. Some men can’t take the hint when a woman is not into it and not push himself on her like a predator.”

“What way do I look?”

I want to hear him call me pretty. It’s demented, I know, getting groped and then asking another man to tell me how pretty I am.

Without a word, he starts his car again, pulling back onto the road.

“Will you get in trouble?”

“Probably not. The sheriff has some dirt on Brandon, so he knows not to make a stink. There are at least three guys who want to murder him in the woods because of how he treated their sisters.”

“Oh.” I guess small towns have assholes too.

“Do you lay people out often?” I ask.

“Nope. Not since high school,” Will says.

“Why’d you do it, then?”

Will pauses, and I think he didn’t hear me. As I open my mouth to speak again, he says, “Your father asked me to protect you.”

He turns onto my dad’s street, the only light on the road from Will’s truck. Will’s focus has been on the road the entire time. No stolen glances. No lingering sweeps of his eyes to

look at me in this dress. Maybe he's not interested in me. Maybe he has allegiance to my dad and nothing else.

Makes my life easier. Not sure why I want to cry over it.

"Is your hand okay? I saw you flex it after you helped me in. Do you think you broke—"

"It's nothing." He flicks his wrist, and I notice his knuckles, red and tinged with purple.

"Looks like we both need ice."

"I'll get you some. Follow me." The car ride has made me woozier, and so I'm thankful Will offers support. This connection is in my head.

The house is dark as we unlock the back door. Boomer barks as an alarm but stops once he smells it's us. The dog nuzzles into my hand like everything will be alright. Will pets him too, and the dog makes happy noises.

My cheek pulses and aches as Will pulls out a chair. He gets out a clean towel and loads it with ice from the freezer. It clicks as he hands me the bundle.

"Here you go," Will says. I hold it to my face, the coldness a shock to my skin. Once it settles, I look up.

"You should ice your hand."

"I'm fine."

"Seriously. You hit him hard. Let me see it." Will holds out his hand, his fingers trembling. His knuckles are bruising, and making a fist makes him wince. He says nothing as he makes his own bundle, resting it on top of his hand.

"Look at us. Aren't we a sight."

He presses his finger to his lips—his full, delicious lips. "Paul's probably sleeping."

Boomer leans into me, and I scratch behind his ears. Will and I sit here, without words. We don't need to fill the silence.

I used to think rapid butterfly wings in my belly were the ultimate sign of attraction. In the beginning, Scott made me

feel so uneasy when I was around him, and I barreled forward, although it should've been a red flag. This calm sense, like a slow beach wave, is much nicer.

Will doesn't make me feel anxious. Instead, I feel safe. Maybe he has this effect on everyone, and I'm not special. He's just that kind of guy.

When his gaze rolls over me, I smile, and he smiles too. He closes his lips and stands up.

"I should go back to my apartment. Are you good?"

"I'm fine." My stomach still twists, and I want him to stay, but I have to let him go.

"Goodnight, Bree. Sleep tight."

He scratches Boomer on the ears so good the dog groans. He disappears out the back door, the curtain fluttering after it's closed. Boomer sits at the door, looking back at me.

"Boomer, what happened? You saw that happen, right? Am I crazy?" I whisper, and Boomer whimpers in response.

ELEVEN

BREE

The next morning, I wake up with a deepening purple bruise on my right cheek. Will wasn't in the kitchen that morning or the mornings after that. I spend my hours, pouring over our interaction over the ice. Was it something, or was I just hoping it was something? I've asked Boomer again, but he tilts his head and is no help.

I clean. I rearrange. I visit the library every day, checking out books and old movies, mostly to watch with my dad. We're in a Hitchcock binge right now. We watched *North by Northwest* and *Rear Window*, and we have *The Birds* scheduled for tonight. I barely miss my phone, and there are some slight adjustments to exist in this world.

Ivy River makes it easy to live without it.

When the bruise faded to a light-green sheen, I caught an afternoon matinee of a rom-com and bought the biggest tub of popcorn with layered butter. I was the only one in the theater, and I sat in the direct middle, laughed a little too loud, and cried when the couple finally admitted their feelings and kissed.

Besides our dinners together, Will has kept his distance. I'm not sure if he gave up coffee or gets it super early, but he's never in the kitchen when I mosey down, looking for it. It's a tally for the *Bree*, *it's all in your head. He doesn't like you that way. He likes your dad more* column.

He keeps his distance, and it's probably for the best.

In my abject boredom, I've become a frequent patron of Wildflower Yoga and Movement. After the Three Rules incident, I rocked my bruise to Wildflower more than once, and after the first round of stares, people don't care anymore. I really like the owner, Tiffany. She's got calm energy—something I absolutely don't have.

I'm rolling up my yoga mat for my second class of the day as she drifts toward me.

“Great class, Tiffany. It was so good.”

“Thanks,” she says. “You've been here twice a day for the past week, yes?”

I nod, my stomach knotting. I may need to change my schedule if she's getting suspicious. “Yoga just makes me feel good.”

“I get that feeling,” she says and then pauses. “Did you take yoga...”

She's searching for the right phrase: Before? Where you came from? I smile and say, “Yes, I went a lot in San Francisco.”

Tiffany brightens. “I'm partnering with a yoga studio in Sable Springs to provide teacher training. It's two hundred hours, and I was wondering if you ever thought about teaching yoga. Everyone likes you here, and your practice is stunning to watch.”

Compliments make me squirm, so my mouth crooks awkwardly. I hope it looks like a smile. “Thank you, but I'm not in Ivy River for a super long time. Only until my house in Palo Alto is available.”

Tiffany tries to smile, but her shoulders still slump. Over the past week, I've noticed a heaviness to her. I stand up and tilt my head. “What's going on?”

Her lips part like she's unsure if she should say something. “My mom is sick. Really sick. I'm not sure what to do since it's just me and one other teacher...”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I say, touching her arm. “You know, I took care of my mother when she was sick. It’s a lot. I quit college and everything...”

“You did?”

I nod, touching her forearm. “You know, I can help if you need an extra pair of hands for how long I’ll be here. I don’t have much going on right now.”

Tears well in her eyes. “You would do that?”

“Absolutely. I can do admin or anything you need.”

“That would be great. I can pay you...”

I flip my hand down. “Give me a free membership, and we’ll call it good.”

Her mouth spreads wide, and she hugs me. “Deal.”

“Deal.” We discuss times, and I agree to work a couple hours the next day, while the eight-thirty class is happening, so she can run home and help her mother with her meds. When I took care of my mother, I did it all myself with my limited nineteen-year-old skill set. With Tiffany, I’m happy to offer support wherever I can. It’s so lonely being a caretaker to a parent that’s deteriorating.

My walk home after yoga is always so peaceful as I drink in the pine-tinged air, listen to the birds, feel the sun on my skin. I float home today, feeling light within.

My serenity comes crashing down when I see Helen, the neighbor from hell, standing on our front lawn.

“Your stupid dog!” she yells as Will stands calmly, his arms folded.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

Helen’s gaze sears me when she turns and points inside. “Your dog knocked up my dog!”

“What?” My eyes bulge.

Will turns to me. “Apparently, Boomer snuck over, and now we have six puppies on our hands.”

“Potential buyers stopped by today to look at goldendoodle puppies—NOT golden shepherds. Nobody pays for golden shepherds.”

My forehead creases with confusion. “How do you know?”

Helen lets out a tiny scream and stomps next door. We stand there awkwardly, in silence, and she doesn’t return right away.

“Is she coming back?” I ask.

“No idea.”

Then, Helen reappears with a ball of black fur. The puppy shivers in her arms.

I’ve seen goldendoodle puppies here and there on social media, and that is not one. It looks like a mutt. A cute, adorable, who-cares-if-you’re-not-a-purebred mutt.

“You couldn’t guess earlier?” I ask. That infuriates Helen more, and a chuckle leaves Will’s mouth. When I turn, his gaze grabs mine, like *Can you believe this woman?*

Her teeth grit together. “No. Sometimes goldendoodles come out black. I should’ve questioned it when the whole litter came out that way. It was only after a customer came to look at a puppy and questioned it, and we put two and two together.”

I hold out my hands, and Helen gives me the puppy. The ball of fur relaxes in my arms, and I try not to melt into the grass.

“You will make it right. I lost fifteen hundred dollars in a stud fee because your dog couldn’t keep it in his pants.”

If I didn’t have a pile of fluff in my hands, I might rage with arms over my head. Will stays calm, his arms folded casually in front of his chest.

I can’t help but blurt, “You’re welcome, because Boomer’s stud fee was free.”

Helen screams, and Will slices the air with his hand. “Enough. We are sorry this happened, but there’s no need to

get upset. We will figure this out.”

The little puppy shifts in my arms, placing a paw on my heart. Well, that settles it.

“We’ll take the puppies!” I shout. “They’re old enough, right?”

Will’s head swivels to me, his jaw firm.

“We’ll find good homes for them, and you don’t have to worry about a thing!” I say.

Helen stays quiet, and I brace for another rant. She looks at me and the puppy in my hands.

Helen breathes in and out, invisible fire streaming out of her nostrils. My heart stops as I wait for her response.

“You will take care of all the vet expenses, shots, everything,” she says.

“One hundred percent,” I say. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Will staring at me.

“They’re almost twelve weeks. Next Tuesday. You will come and get them. All six.”

“Done,” I say brightly.

Helen considers me because she no longer has a reason to be mad. She stalks toward me, and I think she’ll rip the dog out of my hands, but she takes the little body carefully. She pounds her feet as she walks next door to her house.

Will’s jaw tenses.

“What?” I ask.

“Six. Puppies.”

“Yes. Do you want her to get rid of them herself? Have them take their chances in a shelter or worse?”

“No, but...”

“It’s settled. We will take responsibility for them. Don’t worry about the expense. I have savings.” The rental property money hit my account two days ago, and I have more than enough to cover it.

“Your dad isn’t going to be happy,” Will says.

“Well, he should’ve thought of that before letting Boomer raw dog the neighbor’s dog.” He snickers behind me as I walk inside. My father stands by the window facing the front lawn, holding some papers in front of him.

“What was that about?”

“Boomer *is* the father,” I say in the style of Maury Povich. On cue, the dog walks into the front room, panting. I scratch his ears.

“What?” my dad asks.

“Helen says Boomer fathered the recent litter of puppies. She has golden shepherds instead of goldendoodles. She can’t sell them.”

Dad looks at Will and then at me. “Are golden shepherds a thing?”

I shake my head as Will says, “I don’t think so.”

“We’re going to find the puppies homes. And we’re cutting off Boomer’s balls.”

Boomer yelps as he runs in the other room.

“What?”

I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and twist the cap. “We’re taking the puppies. And you’re calling Dr. Thatcher.”

“The hell I am. And when did I agree to puppies?”

“It’s already done. I’ll take care of them and pay for everything,” I say. “We can’t keep finding homes for six-plus puppies every six months because Boomer and Honey are in love.”

“Dogs can’t be in love!” Dad yells.

“Yes, they can. Have you seen Boomer look longingly next door? Honey is his soulmate.” I wave my hands. “I’m sorry. I’m a puddle of love today. I just saw the new rom-com at the Rialto, and I can’t stop thinking about it. It’s really good.”

Will chuckles behind his hand.

“Paul, it’s a good idea. You don’t want to pay doggie child support all over this town,” Will says, and a loud guffaw leaves my lips. Why is he funny too?

“Fine. I’ll call Dr. Thatcher. And I’m not taking care of no goddamn puppies.”

“I’ll do it! I’ll take care of everything!”

“I’ll help,” Will says. My mouth parts as I look at him. It’s for the puppies. It’s not because he wants me or anything.

“Oh, and I got a job!”

Both men turn toward me. I know my timing is awful.

“Tiffany at Wildflower needs some additional help. I said I would come in for a couple hours here and there. It’ll be good for me.”

Dad’s eyebrow raises. I clasp my hands behind my back like I used to do when I was ten and smile sweetly.

“You can handle a job and puppies?”

“Sure. It’s puppies. How hard can it be?” Will is full-on smirking as he watches our exchange. I plead the best I can with my eyes.

Dad considers it and then nods once. “Will, take Bree to the store in Sable Springs. You two will be responsible for the puppies. I’ll take care of Boomer’s neutering.”

“Thank you so much.” I wrap my dad in a big hug. “This will be such a fun family project.”

Boomer makes happy noises as he visits each person for head pats. Paul crouches in front of the dog, whose tongue is hanging out the side like a smug babymaker.

“Don’t get too excited about this, buddy. You’re getting your balls chopped off soon. I’m so sorry.”

TWELVE

WILL

Don't look at her. Think about old men bowling.

This is how I'm prepping myself to drive Bree the twelve miles to Sable Springs, the town one over from Ivy River. The only pet store for miles, Pals with Paws, is there, owned by Gary and Frank Oswald-Reynolds, two of the nicest guys I've ever met. I called ahead and spoke with Gary, who told me he would start putting some items together as a "puppy starter kit."

Getting the puppy stuff will be easy. Being in a car with Bree for forty minutes round-trip will be impossible.

Ever since the night at Three Rules, I've avoided her. There was no overtime left in the budget with Fish and Wildlife, so I've been working out twice a day—weights in the morning with Logan and JR and then a long run at night, sometimes eight miles. If I have the day off, I leave early, usually going on an all-day hike and grabbing dinner on my way back, just to avoid Bree and her heavenly scent and the temptation that grows more dire with each interaction.

Seeing her negotiate with Helen in that bra and leggings set...I was fighting for my life. When she turned from the fridge after a cold breeze pebbled her nipples, I looked away a half second too late, and I concealed a hard-on.

It's more than her nipples or that ass that could be used as a lethal weapon. It's her heart. She offered to take in six puppies so she could be sure they'd go to good homes. She convinced her dad to get Boomer fixed—something I've been

suggesting for months. She offered to help Tiffany at the yoga studio because she saw her going through a similar situation with her mom. It takes a special person to be that caring, that giving. It's foreign to me because I grew up in the opposite environment.

Everything was transactional.

She's hilarious, even when she's drunk. She pushes my buttons, and I want to push her against a wall. It's a shame that the perfect woman showed up, and for so many reasons, I can't do anything.

Even now, as she explodes from the side door, Bree looks flawlessly sexy in a plain tank top and cut-offs, showing long, toned legs.

Don't look at her. Think about your friends riding ostriches.

"You got a list?" I ask. Bree holds up a piece of paper.

"Absolutely. Let's go." She climbs into my commuter sedan and buckles her seatbelt. I can't help but sneak a peek.

Her hair is messy the way I like, and she smells like the most delicious lemon bar.

This will be a long car ride.

"I don't think I've ever been to Sable Springs before," Bree says as I back out of our driveway and onto the main road.

"It's slightly bigger than Ivy River. It has more chain stores and restaurants. Some visitors to the park stay there for that very reason."

"Do they have Starbucks?"

"I think so."

"Oh, what I wouldn't do for a vanilla latte from there. Don't get me wrong, Toastin' is great, but..."

I don't love paying seven bucks for coffee, but I hear myself saying, "Sure, we can grab one."

“Really?” She brightens and makes little bounces in her seat. Add cuteness to her lethal-and-deadly list.

“Sure.” I take a right onto a winding road west to Sable Springs.

We’re quiet for a little bit, and then Bree says, “Do you want to talk about the night at Three Rules?”

“It was nothing,” I lie, focusing on the road.

“I never said thank you. I forgot that I get cocky and defiant when I’m drunk.”

“Yeah, you definitely were.” My mind drifts to how riled up she made me when she told me off. How I wanted to hold her when she told me she was a mess.

“Have you seen Brandon since?”

“Nah. Brandon is keeping his distance. He knows that if he messes with me, he messes with your dad, and no one wants that.”

“Oh good,” she says.

“You mentioned being a mess, and I—”

She brushes her hand across the air. “Don’t worry about it. I was drunk.”

“Well, if you ever wanted to talk about it, I’m here.”

“Really?” she asks, pulling back her head. “It’s a lot.”

“Try me.” I break my rule and look at her.

“I had this boyfriend.” She pauses, and her breath rattles as she inhales. “He wasn’t nice to me. Made me feel crazy for wanting normal, common decency. He kept my dad’s letter from me. And he was cheating on me—even though he would get crazy jealous and petty, always assuming I was cheating on *him*.”

My hand grips the steering wheel so hard my knuckles blanch. “Is he dangerous?”

She shakes her head. “No. He never hit me. Just made me feel like nothing.”

“You’re not nothing,” tumbles out of my mouth.

Her cheeks flush as she rubs her tongue along her lips. “Are you avoiding me?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. While I’ve been able to hide in plain sight from everyone I love, I can’t hide from her. She sees right through me. “I’ve been busy.”

“Yeah, okay.” She rests her elbow on the window.

We’re quiet as I drive, the houses morphing into open land and grass the color of gold with a few trees dotting the landscape. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch her. Those eyes. The plumpness of her blushing, full lips. This is why I try not to look at her. I get so mesmerized I lose myself.

When she turns her head, I snap mine back, focusing on the road.

If we’re telling the truth, I might as well start now. I don’t want her to feel like she’s losing her mind or that I’m anything like her ex. It’s time to be honest.

“Okay, fine. I’ve been avoiding you.”

“Why?”

I cough against my hand and keep my head straight. One more cough and I squeeze the steering wheel so tight my hand aches.

“I’m attracted to you,” I say. “And I shouldn’t be.”

Her voice is quiet when she says, “I’m attracted to you too.”

It’s taking everything in me not to pull this car over behind a tree and take her lips in mine and see what happens. However, I keep driving, eyes focused, dick barely under control.

“It won’t work. We can’t do anything. Your dad is my boss, and I respect him too much. It sounds like you just got out of something, and it will be best for us to keep our distance.”

“I appreciate you being honest with me. I thought I was going crazy.”

“You aren’t crazy. I was, in fact, avoiding you.”

She turns, and her eyes glisten. She’s looking at me long enough that I turn as well.

“Thank you.” She turns away, resting her chin on her hand again. “So what do we do now?”

“We get all the puppy stuff and prepare for no sleep. One puppy is a monster. Six of them is a monster fest.”

“It’ll be an adventure. Boomer will be excited. He’ll be a great single father.”

I chuckle as I drive. Admitting I wanted her should’ve made me relieved, but knowing she’s attracted to me too complicates things. But we can’t be with each other. There’s too much at stake.

“I don’t do relationships,” I say.

“I figured.”

“It’s best we don’t get involved.”

“I agree,” she says with melancholy in her voice. “Friends?”

“Sure,” I say. “I’m a good friend.”

“So, friends have coffee together.” She points at the Starbucks coming up, so I pull into their parking lot and am almost sideswiped by a small compact car.

Still excited, Bree jumps in her seat and claps.

“I’m buying,” she says.

“No, you’re not.”

“Friends let friends buy each other coffee.” Bree opens the door to the store and holds it for me.

I chuckle and say, “Fine.”

We can be friends. I can restrain myself.

I think.

THIRTEEN

BREE

The puppies roll around over each other, yipping and pacing in the little den I set up for them in the living room. They're the cutest things, but my chest tightens with how much work they will be. I'm prepared, though. Over the last week, I've made sure to sleep in and take extra naps because I anticipate little sleep the next few days as I find them homes.

Scott used to keep me up way too late, refusing to let arguments go until they were resolved, sometimes stretching into the wee hours of the morning. My body will remember the sleep deprivation, but at least it'll be for a good reason this time.

It'll be worth it for the puppies.

We got Boomer neutered three days ago, and he's still wearing the cone of shame. He doesn't seem to mind it but doesn't have the spatial awareness, bumping into furniture and our legs constantly. He's knocked over a plant and a vase so far, but we have a few more days left with the cone. Without telling Dad or Will, I've given him little breaks here and there, my eyes glued to him in case he licks or chews his stitches.

He sits next to me, looking at his offspring through his lampshade.

"You make some cute puppies." I scratch his back, and the dog looks up at me. I try not to laugh because Boomer looks so goofy.

"We're home," a deep voice says from the living room entrance.

“Oh, hi, Will,” I say as he saunters close to me. My breath shortens, but I shake it off. It’s because I am now caring for six puppies, not because my dad’s employee has admitted he is attracted to me. He’s not avoiding me anymore, but it’s still awkward. How should I act around a man I want in a biblical way? The dirty fantasies coursing through my dreams, both during the day and night, are laughable. They’re constant.

“Wow. This is a lot.” He stands next to me, our connection pulling me in. To avoid it, I take a tiny side-step.

“We can do this. It’s manageable.”

“What are your plans to get them adopted out?”

“I contacted the German shepherd rescue in Sable Springs. They were so helpful. Said they would step in if I had trouble, but they don’t have any available fosters right now. So, we’re it.”

“We can do it. I’m sure of it.”

His vote of confidence fills me with warmth. “It’s a little overwhelming.”

“I get that.” Without warning, Will wraps his arm around my shoulders, trying to be friendly, but with us, it’s anything but. I swivel out of his grasp, giving him a warning glare. He receives the message, nodding once. My brain wars because, while I want his arm around me, it’s not a good idea for him to touch me at all.

“They need temporary names. To identify them.”

“I agree. And the names need a theme.”

“Absolutely.” We stand there, thinking, as the puppies pile over each other, some rolling onto their back, letting the others chew on their faces.

“How many boys and how many girls?”

“There are three of each.”

“Okay,” he says, settling his chin on his fist. He studies them, and when we catch eyes, we laugh.

“Look at us, taking this way too seriously.” Without thinking, I touch his bicep quickly. It’s unbelievably hard. Will gives me a tight smile in response. First, I dunk and weave, and then I touch him. *Great job, Bree.*

“Boomer, what do you think?” Will asks, and the dog lifts his cone to look at him. The dog’s tongue hangs out to the side.

My forbidden crush snaps his fingers. “You like baked goods. What about that?”

“That’s perfect! I love food names for dogs.” I step into the pen. The puppies immediately swarm my feet, jumping for attention. I pick up the first one.

“Did you put pink and blue bows on them?”

I nod, bracing for some snarky remark, but Will just laughs. “Perfect. Cute.”

“You have to tell the boy and girl dogs apart.” Blushing, I hold the ball of fluff to my chest. “Let’s call her Coco.”

“Cute.” Will studies me with soft eyes, a hint of a smile on his lips.

“What about that one? He’s my favorite.” Will points to a boy dog who jumps, just to topple over on his back. I put down Coco and pick Will’s goofy favorite up. This dog tries to bite at my hoop earring.

“We should name him Brownie. Those are your favorite,” I suggest.

“I love a good brownie.”

“Molasses.” I point to the one observing from an apex in the gate. “Because he’s slow to play with others because he’s so observant.”

Will chuckles as he holds his biceps. There’s a magnetic energy between us that is palpable, strong. I know little about him, but the more I spend time with Will, the more I like. The more I’m drawn to him.

We continue to name the puppies—Ginger for the classiest puppy and the runt of the litter, Maple for the mellow one, and Chip for the daredevil who’s going to be a handful.

“I hope you like the puppy names,” I say as I sit down, letting the puppies swarm. They climb over me, licking my face, stepping on my bladder, and scraping my arms with their sharp claws. I giggle and squirm. Through the fur, I look up at Will, whose expression hasn’t changed.

“The names are perfect.” His gaze stays trained on me as I continue to roll around with the puppies, certain I’m rolling in urine. I don’t care, though.

If you can’t get on the floor with puppies you promised to find homes for, what’s the point?

“What the hell is going on?” Dad says as he takes off his glasses, standing over the puppy playpen. I freeze as a dog sits on my face.

“Bree is living out every dog lover’s fantasy,” Will says.

“We named them,” I say, sitting up and pointing to each one, and Will helps me out when I can’t remember.

“That works. We’re not keeping any of them, so don’t get too attached,” Dad says, walking away.

“That’s going to be tough to do!” I yell in a high-pitched dog-exclusive voice, ruffling Chip’s fur because he’s alternating between biting my nose and licking it.

Will just watches, arms crossed. If I can’t get kisses from him, second best is from a puppy.

I finally stand up, the puppies whining at my feet. Stepping over the barrier, I fumble slightly, and Will’s strong hands grab my forearm.

“Careful,” he says. He snakes his arm around my back, pulling me up. My chest rubs against his, and his breath is hot on my forehead. Sparks fly in every direction.

“I’m just drunk from puppy love, I guess,” I lie.

The puppies lose interest in my absence and start playing with each other, making yipping noises and cute barks.

“You’re good for doing this,” Will says, knocking me as we stand side-by-side.

“Well, I didn’t want them to be homeless or something worse. It’ll give me something to do.”

“Still, it’s really cool.” Our glances lock, and I’m the first to look away, rubbing my lips together. We watch the puppies as they climb over each other, and I take a deep breath.

I can do this.

I can find homes for six puppies.

I can be friendly with Will and not sleep with him.

I think.

FOURTEEN

WILL

One morning, at four-thirty, I sneak into the dark main house to get some coffee since I'm meeting Logan and JR at five at the gym to work out. Since Bree's been ordering high-end coffee online and because we're "just friends" now, she insists I drink it. It sure beats the Folgers, which you'll have to pry from Paul's cold, dead hands, and I haven't replaced my stash I cleaned out when I was avoiding her.

I go to the kitchen simply for the good coffee.

It's not because she sometimes joins me. It's not because there's a zero percent chance she'll knock at my door for a coffee chat.

As the coffee gurgles and sputters, I peek into the living room. All the puppies are asleep in a heap, and a blonde head sticks out from under a blue blanket.

The puppies have lived with us for three days, and Paul hasn't mentioned the noise. I suspect his machine drowns out any puppy whining. However, Bree looks more and more exhausted with each passing day, navy-blue circles darkening under her eyes. It settles me to see her finally asleep.

Leaning against the sink, I take the first delicious sip and close my eyes. When I open them, I see Bree yawning through the steam, stretching her arms overhead.

"I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No, no. I was awake with my eyes closed. Plus, I can't miss a coffee chat." She yawns again, and I match hers, my mouth stretching wide. She nods when I point to the coffee, so

I pour her a cup, offering my half and half. She shoos it away, drinking it straight.

My eyes glaze over her body, and that's a mistake. She's wearing a small bra thingy with buttons and thin spaghetti straps. Her stomach is completely bare while her sleep shorts are teeny-tiny, sitting low on her hips. I wish she would wear sleep shirts, like an elderly man in a Charles Dickens novel. It's not fair to me to see this much skin. Sometimes, it physically pains me to look away.

Also sometimes, she catches me staring—like now.

“What are you looking at?” she asks with a smirk. My eyes dart to the ceiling as I take a sip.

“So, puppy yoga,” I say, changing the subject. She had mentioned it yesterday morning over our coffee chat.

Bree lights up. “Yes, I heard about a couple studios who do it in Montreal and Toronto. It looks like a great way for the community to meet the puppies. Find potential adopters.”

“I think it's a great idea,” I say.

“Will you come?”

I shake my head violently and point to my hamstrings. “Me and yoga? Nope. These will snap in half if I try. I might be working too.”

“No, puppy yoga is not about getting a good workout. It's the anticipation that a puppy might approach you and then lie on you. I've been dying to go to one and figured why not bring it to Ivy River? I asked Tiffany, and she's into it. We're thinking next Sunday.”

I rarely have a weekend day off, but I do have that day off. “Did you check the calendar?”

“Maybe.” A breath of a smile crosses her lips. “In a way, you're their father.”

I laugh out loud, causing one of the puppies to stir. We both watch the heap in terror. If one wakes up, they all do, and then it's chaos. When they settle, we both exhale.

“How is potty training going?”

Bree buzzes her lips with an exhale. “We only had four accidents yesterday—a record. They’re all at sixty-five percent there. Except one.”

“Who’s the straggler?”

“Chip. He’s a rebel.”

I laugh against my coffee cup as I drain it. “I’m meeting the guys at the gym. Gotta run.”

“Ask your friends if they’ll come to puppy yoga! We need as many bodies as possible.”

I laugh out loud, thinking about Logan and JR in a yoga class. “I’ll mention it to them.”

“Good.” Bree takes a deep breath and stares into her coffee. “I think I’ll need at least ten cups today.”

I pause. Bree is dead on her feet. She’s staring off into space, and her skin is puffy from lack of sleep. It would be a nice thing to do. No other reason. “Why don’t you sleep in the apartment tonight? We can take shifts with the puppies.”

She waves her hand. “Oh no, you work, and I don’t. It makes the most sense for me to watch the puppies.”

“Don’t you work at the yoga studio?”

“That’s doesn’t count.”

I hold my hands out. “I’ll watch the puppies tonight. You get some sleep. My apartment is quiet and removed. You can sleep there.”

“I can sleep in my room and be close if you need some help...”

This house echoes, so I shake my head. “My apartment will be better.”

“Are you sure?” Bree whines, and I chuckle because it’s so endearing.

“Yes, positive. It’ll be no problem.”

“Thank you,” Bree says, holding out her arms. “I know you’re not into hugs, but I really want to hug you.”

My brain short-circuits, and against my better judgment, I nod. She wraps her arms around my waist, and her contact feels warm and right. My arms embrace her back, and I drop my nose to her head, inhaling the lemon-vanilla in her hair. She fits into my arms like a lost puzzle piece, and I don’t want to let her go.

Her pressing her body against mine is the best I’m gonna get.

Just friends. Just friends.

Our admittance of our mutual attraction to each other has hung over our heads since that day we went and got puppy supplies. Sometimes, she’ll touch my hand as she passes me, or I’ll brush up against her in the hallway when we pass. Our little touches are flirting with disaster, but we can’t stop. I don’t think either of us want to.

She pulls away and takes a gulp of coffee like a truck driver.

I finish my cup, rinse it, and set it in the dishwasher. I turn around and say, “Have a good day, Bree.”

“You too. Thanks again. I drool on pillows. I hope you’re ready.”

“I could only be so lucky.” I leave her standing in the kitchen, holding her coffee cup.

“YOU’RE JUST FRIENDS?” Logan asks as we slide weights onto our barbells. It’s leg day, so we’re starting with heavy deadlifts.

“Yep,” I say. “Just friends.”

“No man and woman can be just friends. *When Harry Met Sally* was correct. You’re so lying if you tell me you don’t want to sleep with her,” JR says as he tests his bar, lifting it

three or so inches off the ground, and drops it. The plates thud against the rubber mat.

“Well, I...” We haven’t started our sets yet, and I’m already sweating.

“I knew it. When Autumn and I were friends...”

“Here we go.” Logan rolls his eyes.

“It’s relevant, okay,” JR says as he backhands Logan on the shoulder. “After we decided we didn’t hate each other at middle school graduation, I was friends with Autumn for *two years*. For two years, we had a crush on each other and didn’t say anything. Then, our friends dared us to kiss, and it was all over.”

“We know we’re attracted to each other,” I say.

Weights drop. Logan and JR look at each other, and I do my first set of warm-up deadlifts and then loosen my weight belt. “What?”

“You admitted it, out loud?”

“Yeah, I believe in always being honest. We can’t be together, and we both understand that.”

“Because of her dad?” Logan asks. His eyes roll violently.

“It’s not a good time. I don’t date. She just got out of something very, very serious and wants to be single.”

They both shake their heads. Then, I add, “So, Bree has a puppy yoga class at Wildflower Yoga on Sunday and wants us all to come...”

“Oh my God.” JR takes the hat off his head and runs his fingers through his too-long brown hair.

“What? It’ll be good to get as many participants as possible. Build hype. We want to find homes for these puppies. Bree is not going to last much longer with the lack of sleep she’s getting. I’m letting her sleep in my apartment tonight.”

JR’s and Logan’s heads turn slowly toward one another with mouths agape.

“Are you going? To puppy yoga?”

“Yeah. I have the day off. I want to support her.”

They give each other the same look as I sit down on the bench.

“You’re not only going to yoga,” JR says, touching one of his fingers like he’s counting, “but you’re going to *puppy* yoga. And you’re *willingly* taking a nighttime shift watching the puppies so she can sleep in your bed? Lie to us again that you’re not falling in love with her.”

I laugh nervously. “I like her. I can do nice things for her. We’re friends.”

“Here we go again,” Logan says. “This ‘friends’ bullshit.”

“Not you too,” I say.

“Sleeping with women casually is one thing, William,” Logan says. I grimace at my full name. “But you’re doing boyfriend shit.”

“I am not. It’s friend shit. Seriously, you don’t need to worry about me.”

“I’m not worried about you. Logan and I have discussed this, and we don’t think you’re going to last with a woman like that under your roof,” JR says with a point. “And we both know you’re going to crack soon.”

“We were all there when she came in with that skintight red number, bro. You’re so dead. So dead,” Logan adds.

I shake my head. “I can control myself. I can.”

Both glare at me.

“Shut up and do your set,” I say as I point to the bar.

They both shake their heads at me, and I wipe my face with a towel.

My friendship with Bree is not a problem. There’s no tension. We have acknowledged we have an attraction we cannot act on. There’s no risk to us.

However, the way my friends are giving me the side-eye and doubting me gives me pause.

Still, I know I can do it.

There will be absolutely nothing going on with Bree and me because I won't allow it.

FIFTEEN

BREE

“This is the most people I’ve had signed up ever,” Tiffany says. The door keeps opening, and people keep coming, scanning the studio for puppies. Charmaine and Bernie closed Do’s and Donuts in honor of puppy yoga to volunteer. When I told them about it at my highlight appointment, they started crying.

“Do you think more than one of them will come and swarm me? Because that is my dream,” Bernie said, and then they immediately volunteered. I haven’t checked on them in the last five minutes, but I imagine they’re in the playpen, rolling around with the puppies. I have to admit I do this multiple times daily.

Will’s friend, Logan, walks in with a girl about twelve years old, who has his light-brown hair and green eyes.

“Hi, where are the puppies?” the little girl asks. Logan smiles in embarrassment as he puts his hands on her shoulders.

“Logan and Lily Henderson, here for puppy yoga,” he grumbles the words out with exasperation.

Tiffany checks them off the list and asks him to sign waivers for both of them.

“Thank you for coming! I really appreciate it,” I say to Logan. I don’t know him that well, but he seems like a good man. Any guy who is a single dad and does it full-time wins all the gold stars in my book. My dad is struggling to be my only parent, and I’m twenty-six.

“Will asked me and then mentioned it around *her*.” Logan points straight down over Lily’s head.

I smile, thinking about how much support Will has given me with the puppies. Although, in hindsight, it was a harebrained idea. We switch off nights, and I sleep like a corpse in his sheets. His scent of pine clings to his pillows, and it’s like he’s sleeping next to me when I drift off.

Lily gives her dad a snarl. “I want a dog so bad, but Dad says no. I told him I’m old enough. I just turned twelve.”

“Dogs are a lot of work, and I can just see that I’ll be picking up its sh—crap, and feeding it, and walking it and stuff. German shepherds are no joke.”

I’ve done some research on the breeds and talked to the rescue about them. They gave me some pointers on what to look out for with potential adopters. I took so many notes. German shepherds and German shepherd mixes need lots of physical and mental stimulation. These dogs will not be happy hanging out at home all the time, and I know this firsthand. I want all of Boomer’s love puppies to find loving homes, but I also want them to be the right fit.

Lily looks at her dad like he’s a buzzkill.

“Your dad is right, Lily. German shepherds are a lot of work. They look cute right now, but they require a lot of mental and physical stimulation. They’re a commitment.”

Lily rolls her eyes, and Logan pushes her into the studio after I give them mats and towels.

Sienna walks in and immediately circles the counter to take me in for a big hug.

“I didn’t know you would be here. I thought you had to do a self-tape.”

She waves it off, but I know the self-tape is for a role she really wants. “I wouldn’t miss puppy yoga for anything. Plus, ten dollars? Are you kidding me? They would charge fifty in LA.” Sienna’s smile evaporates when she scans the room.

“What?” I look over my shoulder.

“Oh, Logan is here.”

“Yes, with his daughter. What? Why that look on your face?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. We just—nothing.” She flips her hand down.

“You’ll forget soon enough because...*puppies*.” I hand her a rolled-up mat and towel.

“Perfect. I’m ready.” Sienna walks into the studio, taking the farthest place from Logan and Lily. I shake my head and check the time. One more minute.

“Is Will coming?” Tiffany asks.

I bite my lip and shrug. Will had a last-minute lead on a poaching suspect, so he had to work today when he originally had it off.

As the clock ticks to five, the door flies open, and there’s Will. He’s dressed in a white T-shirt and black basketball shorts, a nervous expression on his face.

“Am I on time? Did I make it?” he asks. Why am I about to cry?

“You made it,” I say, trying to be chill, but I can’t. He made it.

“I couldn’t miss puppy yoga.”

“No, you couldn’t.” If we were more than what we are, I would jump in his arms and kiss him. Instead, I hand him his towel and mat, and we give each other small smiles as he walks to an open space near the front.

Tiffany and I walk to the front of the studio, and all eyes look at us, pleading for us to release the puppies. I step forward to give the introductions.

“Hello and welcome everyone to Wildflower Yoga. Now, I know why all of you are here. It’s for the experience to do yoga and possibly be licked and climbed over by puppies,” I say. There are small claps and bright smiles. Will watches me intently. “I just wanted everyone to know that these puppies

are available for adoption. They all have a clean bill of health, and they are a mixed breed of golden retriever and German shepherd. Please see me after if you are interested in a puppy.

“When we let out the puppies, we ask to let them come to you. They may climb on you or jump on you. We do ask that you be careful if they are on your body while you do the movements. Also be aware of if they are under you, because puppies are like that.

“Without further ado...” I look to Charmaine and Bernie, who wait at the door, and nod once. “Please welcome Coco, Brownie, Molasses, Ginger, Maple, and Chip to Wildflower Yoga.”

The door to the office completely opens, and everyone watches with gasps. We kind of hoped for an explosion of puppies, but one saunters out, sniffing the ground, and the others follow. Soon, the giggles and playful barks start as Tiffany takes the yogis through a basic flow.

Will has told me he’s not flexible, from all the weight training and hours in his truck, patrolling his region. However, he seems to be doing okay, lifting his leg on par with others in the class. One person is supine on their back, refusing to do any moves, hoping their stomach looks comfy enough for a ball of fur.

Two puppies immediately swarm Lily as she’s in downward dog, and she giggles and shakes her face as they lick her and playfully bark in her face. She gives up and just sits as one climbs into her lap and drops its cute chin on her thigh.

“Dad...” Lily whines, and Logan stands to mountain pose with his hands at his sides.

“Goddamn it, I knew this would happen,” he says after raising his arms to the sky and bringing them down to his heart.

I shrug, although I had a feeling he might leave with one of my puppies. Other participants are serious about getting a

workout in, while some spend the whole class coaxing puppies.

Besides Lily, the puppies home in on Will because they recognize his scent, and I joke that they see him as their papa. At one point, Coco, Maple, and Molasses are all over his back. Coco places a paw on each ass cheek to do her best impersonation of Ariel on her rock, and I've never been more jealous of a dog.

Tiffany leans in as I watch and says, "This was genius."

"Yeah, well, I want them to get adopted."

The puppies finally leave Will alone for another victim. I walk by him, and he grabs my ankle as I walk by. The sensation is so overpowering my foot jerks inches from Will's face. I tsk my finger at him as I walk by, and he smirks up at me.

Logan sees this exchange and shakes his head. First, he's getting a dog and now this.

The class is shorter than our usual since this could get out of hand quickly. After an unproductive Savasana session (lying face up is not relaxing when a puppy climbs on you), we ask everyone to sit up to give our closing remarks.

"Thank you for coming to Puppy Yoga. If you are interested in a puppy, please see me up front. We do have pictures of the puppies and a basic application you must fill out for us to consider you. Namaste," I say.

I walk to the front, and a group of the twenty-four people in class follow, including Logan, Lily, and Charmaine. I can't help but tear up, seeing Charmaine fill out an application. She told me while putting my foil in that she lost her furry friend, Shaggy, last year and has been waiting for the right time to get a new dog. She looks up from the clipboard, and we catch gazes.

I rub her arm because I know it's hard.

"I can't believe this. I'm signing up for a dog," Logan says, pressing the pen to the paper. Lily bounces next to him.

“I can’t wait to take Brownie home,” Lily says. “Can we change the name?”

Before I can answer, Logan says, “That’s if we get the dog. We haven’t been approved yet.”

I pretend like there’s uncertainty. From what Will has told me, Logan would grumble at first, but it will be a classic case of “Dad and the Dog He Didn’t Want” cuddling and spending lots of time together. Logan is a runner, and Brownie seems like the perfect companion for that.

As everyone filters out, and I have a stack of applications to go through, Tiffany squeezes me and looks up, seeing Will standing there, waiting for his turn. The puppies have been rounded up, and Charmaine and Bernie are currently talking in high-pitched voices about how good of boys and girls they are.

“So, it looks like it was a smash. I have to admit, having puppies all over me was really, really great.” He covers his heart. Will’s dark hair and even darker eyes, mixed with his calm but strong demeanor, nail me every time. We said we’re just friends, and even though it doesn’t feel romantic, it doesn’t feel platonic either.

“I’m glad you could make it.”

“I’ll make it every time for you. See you at home?”

“Yes,” I say. “I think Dad is making pot roast.”

“Great.” Will walks through the door and looks back once with a serene glance and a nuanced head nod. I smile back, and then he’s gone.

“You sure you two aren’t boyfriend-girlfriend?” Tiffany asks.

“Shut up.” Turning, I see Charmaine and Bernie, each with a puppy in their arms.

“We won’t breathe a word of this to anyone,” Charmaine says. “However, that man wants you.”

I roll my eyes. “Let’s get these puppies back to my house.”

SIXTEEN

WILL

“Smells good,” I say to Paul, who stands over a crock pot. He turns with a large wooden spoon in his hands and a thermometer in the other.

“How was work? I’ve been buried in reports today. Stop working so hard.”

“I finally made an arrest in the Redmond poaching case, so you’ll get another one tomorrow.” I grab the pitcher of iced tea from the refrigerator. “Looks like there was lots of interest in the puppies today at puppy yoga.”

“Yeah? That’s good.”

“Bree’s going through the applications soon, and hopefully, all of them will get adopted.”

“If she’s anything like her mother, she won’t fail.” His lip quivers as he stirs the juice.

Once in a while, he’ll bring up Holly, and his eyes will grow misty, or he’ll cough and quickly dart to a new subject.

We both have people we miss. People we feel guilt over.

“You’ve been getting along with Bree pretty well, it looks like.”

Paul’s gaze is blank, non-accusatory. Still, I feel exposed. “Yes. She’s an awesome person.”

“I agree.” Paul spins and rests his hands on the lip of the counter. “You getting...close?”

“Close, sir?”

“Son, for the billionth time, call me Paul. Sir makes me feel like a dictator.”

“Sorry,” I say. “Yes, we’re getting close. As friends.”

“Good,” he says. He ponders for a moment. “What do you like about her?”

My throat closes. How do you explain Bree? She’s quirky and funny, and while I know there have been hard times in her life, it didn’t steal her light. My dark times have haunted me, but not her. She picked up her entire life because she got a letter. It didn’t feel brave when I left my life. It felt like running away.

She’s fearless. Bold. Unapologetically herself.

Warm and open.

The most stunning woman I’ve ever met.

“She’s wonderful, sir—I mean, Paul.”

She’s more than wonderful. She’s crawled inside my heart, and I’ve been trying to evict her from there, but I can’t.

I can’t let go. I’ve tried. The temptation gnaws at my insides every time I’m close to her. I’ve restrained myself flawlessly, but it’s becoming more and more difficult. Seeing her every day is going to break me. Sooner or later.

Paul sets his hands on his hips. “I want to get to know her as an adult. She lived a whole life without me. She took care of Holly completely on her own.”

There’s more there, but I don’t ask. Instead, I clap my hand on his shoulder as he takes his glasses off to pinch the bridge of his nose. We hug it out, and when he pulls away, he snuffles and adjusts his glasses again.

“Paul, isn’t tomorrow your day off? Go on a coffee date with Bree. Ask her about Taylor Swift.”

“Is that a singer?” Paul asks.

I shake my head because Bree’s rants about Taylor Swift are burned into my brain. It’s out of my mouth before I could stop it. “Taylor Swift is the music industry.”

“Oh,” he says, like I just told him I want to try scuba diving.

“You can do it. Ask her.”

“I will. It’s just—” He pauses, and his voice rattles with emotion. “My daughter has been here for over a month, and you two got along so well, so fast. It just looked easy, is all. I wonder why I have such a hard time with it. I love her so much, Will.”

“I know you do, Paul.”

Guilt racks my stomach. Am I the reason Paul can’t get close to Bree? She’s here to spend time with him, after all. Am I jeopardizing his time with her?

Charmaine’s minivan screeches into our driveway, and then the barking starts.

Boomer lifts his head from his nap by the cabinet and then lowers it. Bree explodes into the kitchen with six bouncing puppies each going different directions on red leashes.

“Honey, I’m home.”

Paul turns with his mouth slightly open. She stops, looking at me first and then at her dad.

“What’s going on?”

Paul folds his hands in front of him. “Will and I were just talking. I was wondering if you would accompany me to coffee tomorrow. At Toastin’? Get one of those pastries you love?”

Bree’s focus immediately goes to the pulsing pack of puppies, but I wave a hand away. “I’ll do some admin work tomorrow morning and watch them while you go out. Don’t worry about them.”

Bree drops the leashes and walks across the kitchen, almost tripping over Coco and Brownie, to hug her dad. He straightens to a statue and then brings his hands to her upper back.

“Prepare for your life to be changed. You shall have the cronut. It’s a magical combo of a croissant and donut.”

Paul lets her go first. “I can’t wait. I’m going to wash these hands. If you could set the table...”

“Consider it done,” Bree says. Paul leaves the kitchen, although the sink is right there, leaving Bree and I alone in the kitchen.

“Did you suggest this?” Bree nudges me with her elbow.

“No, it was all your dad. He wants to get to know you.”

“Ooh, you’re giving my dad tips,” Bree jokes and then softens. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I say. We’re leaning close, both of our backsides against the counter. The little furry monsters are milling around, enjoying too much freedom. We giggle as we watch them, and we stop when our gazes align. The urge to kiss her keeps getting stronger.

I collect the leashes, and once I corral the puppies, I point to the living room. “I’ll take them in there.”

“Thank you,” Bree says again. She squeezes my arm, and her lips part. Her touch is electric, sending currents up my skin. Bree is a hot stove I keep touching.

I look back, and Bree’s standing there, her hands clasped in front of her. Each day, her beauty disarms me a little bit more. When I’m around her, I feel powerless.

It’s best to do nothing.

However, if I do nothing, she might become a regret I can never recover from.

SEVENTEEN

BREE

We walk into Toastin' Bakery, and my dad's eyes bulge.

“Do they have just regular coffee?”

“Of course. I can even get you an Americano.”

“Does that mean it's made in the USA?” A puzzled look covers his face.

I giggle. “No, Dad, it's espresso and water. It's good. Strong.”

He grumbles, “Sure, I'll try it.”

I giggle as we approach the counter and order Americanos and two cronuts, and I ask for them to be warmed. After I order, Dad guides me behind him so he can open his wallet to pay.

“Thank you, Dad.”

“Don't mention it, Pumpkin.”

We take the tiny table in the corner, where the windows overlook Goldchild Street. The shop is half full, with some students and a lady in the corner, reading a book while she sips a latte. Every time I come, I study the art, all cartoons of pastries with happy faces, holding different coffee treats. My favorite is the piece of French Toast with whipped cream in a pompadour hairstyle, holding a blended coffee drink.

“I should come and read here sometimes—after the puppies are adopted of course,” I say. While they have

completely ruined my sleep and personal life for a little bit, I'll miss the little buggers.

"How is the puppy adoption going?" Dad asks, lacing his fingers in front of him.

"Great! I looked through the applications last night, and it looks like I have candidates for all the puppies. I was going to contact my top families today and ask to see their homes."

"Why would you do that?"

I pause and take a deep breath. For years, I was questioned for my actions, and I grew to be defensive by the tiniest of questions. My dad is curious, that's all.

"I want to make sure it's a good fit. I do want to find the puppies homes, but it's important to me that the puppy will be in a good environment. That's all."

"That makes sense." Dad shifts in his seat, stiff but squirming. "I've been impressed with how you've handled the puppies. You and Will, actually. You and Will are getting close, aren't you?"

I rub my lips together. "He's been a good friend."

"He's a good man. Best damn warden I've ever had." His hands fidget. "I'm not sure what you were escaping from..."

"I'm not escaping from anything." I smile to mask the half truth. "I just needed a change. I needed to get out of the city."

"What did you do for work?"

Breathe in and breathe out.

"I was a fine-dining server for eight years. Time to get out and finally go back to school."

"I bet some Stanford students would kill for a house like your mother had."

I smile. My mother inherited a fourteen-hundred-square-foot Spanish-style home in the affluent San Francisco suburb, three miles from the Stanford campus. When she died, I used to visit each room daily, looking for some reminder of her. Now, a young family lives there, paying me an obscene

amount of rent each month through the property management company.

“Good. That’s good. That house is probably worth seven hundred thousand dollars now, huh?”

Try two million. “Yeah, maybe slightly more.”

“Your mother really took care of you, didn’t she?” Paul asks. His face is expressionless as his chin tilts downward, his gaze focused on the table.

“She did, yes.”

The barista calling my name breaks the tension. When I return with our drinks and cronuts, my dad’s eyes enlarge. It’s puffy and glistening with glaze, sitting on the white china like a piece of heaven.

“Oh my God,” he says.

I hold my cronut up. “Cheers.”

He touches his cronut to mine, and we both take a huge bite, the pastry’s squish dissolving on our tongues. We both giggle as we cover our mouths.

“That should be a crime.”

“Right? It’s so good.” We both take hearty second bites, and I wash some down with my iced Americano.

We eat in silence. There are so many things to say that I don’t know where to start or how to approach it.

“Mom talked about you a lot. At the beginning.”

There’s a twinkle in my dad’s blue eyes. “Really?”

I nod. “I always thought you’d show up at some point. Call. I kept waiting. Maybe I should’ve called...”

“No,” Dad says, wiping the crumbs away from his hands. “Your mom called me. When she was diagnosed.”

“She did?” I wipe my mouth with a napkin so I don’t cry. Dad just nods. “What did she say?”

“She told me about her diagnosis and asked me not to come, no matter how bad it got. She didn’t want me to see her

like that. Holly was so strong. You got that from her...”

A tear slips down my cheek. This whole time, I didn’t think he cared that my mother was dying. Instead, he was honoring her wishes.

“I took it as keeping away completely. That was my mistake, Pumpkin. I wanted to give you time with your mom without me shoving my way in. Holly knew she was going to die. She told me that she was at peace with it, but she worried about you. She wanted me to step in when she was gone. I should’ve checked in while it was going on, to see if you were okay. I should have been more upfront with you on why I kept my distance. It shouldn’t have turned into ten years of silence. That was my fault.”

A cold sweat covers my forehead, and my heart rattles against my ribs. It all makes sense now. Why he stayed away.

I cover my heart with my hands. “I’m sorry it took me so long to get your letter, I...”

Then, the air changes behind me. Ice runs through my veins as I smell a distinct cologne with overwhelming notes of patchouli. I only know one person who wears it, because I bought it for him for every Christmas.

Please no, I think as I turn.

Blond hair. Translucent irises. Deceiving smile.

“Bree, I found you. I really found you.”

“Scott.” A lump the size of California lodges in my throat. My breath becomes shallow, and I freeze in my seat.

“You cut your hair. It’s...*different*.” He touches the ends that reach just below my jaw. His fingers touch my skin briefly, and nausea climbs my throat.

I know he hates everything about my look. I’m wearing a “Henderson Lumber and Supply...Where Wood Gets Jacked” hat and a white tank top. I can see the judgment in his eyes... *‘You look like a little boy, and I’m not a creep. Go change.’*

“Bree, who is this?” Dad studies him.

“Scott Selvin,” he says, sticking his hand out to my father with a charming look of deceit. “You must be Paul Tanager. It’s an honor to meet you, sir.”

Dad looks at me as he takes my ex-boyfriend’s hand and shakes it. Nothing comes out of my mouth. Words freeze in my brain. Scott pulls a chair over and sits down like we invited him.

Smile, lock eyes, act happy to see him. Walk on eggshells that hide razor blades inside. “Scott, what a surprise.”

“You did not make it easy to find you. Goodness.” Scott shakes his head, his mega-watt smile plastered on like a doll’s. “Seems like you started a whole new life.”

“That was kind of the point.” I pull back my shoulders. He keeps his cool when other people are watching. His image is more important than anything else.

“I’m so glad I found you. I just have something to get off my chest. I want you to hear it from me.”

“Oh!” *Dial down the cheer. It sounds fake.* Breathing in and out, it slows my heart rate marginally. “What is it?”

He looks at my dad and then at me. “I can’t tell you here.”

I stand firm, folding the bill of my ball cap. The recalibration in Scott’s mind is visible, since I’m not playing into his twisted games. I fell head over heels for him quickly, moved in with him after two months, thought I’d marry him.

It went from constant romance to him pouring bleach all over the gifts he’d gotten me for our four-year anniversary because I didn’t act grateful enough—a fancy designer bag (when he owed me rent) and lingerie that made me feel dirty.

That night, I found the letter and the underwear, and I broke.

I was done.

Now he’s here, in front of me.

I knew he’d come eventually.

Scott smiles to cover the anger he can't express. "I've tried calling and emailing, but I haven't heard back."

"Oh, her phone's broken," Dad offers. I flash him a glare, and he swallows. He sees the wideness in my eyes. "Scott, it's been nice to meet you, but I'm spending time with my daughter. Alone."

My dad stares him down, and Scott stands up slowly from his chair. Scott respects men a lot more than he respects women, so he nods. I brace for a passive-aggressive comment, but he lingers, studying me.

"I'm staying in Sable Springs at the Cotillion. I won't leave until you talk to me. I'll stay as long as it takes."

"Scott, are you stalking my daughter?"

He chuckles and gives my dad his fakest smile. "No, sir. Your daughter just up and left me while I was away with my friends. I just want closure."

"You don't deserve anything from my daughter," Dad says, standing up to meet Scott.

"Dad, Dad, it's fine." I wedge myself between them. My dad might punch my ex in this delightful bakery, and I'm not sure I want that. "I did leave unexpectedly. I'll call you, Scott." I turn to my dad. "Dad, it's fine."

I hold my breath as Scott hovers, studying my dad and me. I don't release air until he backs up.

"Call me. Please."

"I will."

Scott backs out of the bakery, his eyes focused on me. When he finally leaves, I slump in my chair.

"Bree, are you in some kind of trouble? You can be honest with me."

"No."

My dad squeezes his hands into fists. "Did he hit you? I will track him down..."

“He never touched me that way.” Instead, we had circular fights that never ended. Scott always wanted to be my priority, but I was never his. When I started doing yoga too much, he would whine and give me the silent treatment. When I thought out loud about reaching out to my dad, Scott dismissed it, even with a letter from him hiding in a side table.

He won't give up. If I don't see him tonight, he'll be a tumor in my life I can't remove.

“Dad, I need to see him.”

“No, absolutely not.”

“I have to go, or he'll never leave. I'll cut it off, once and for all.”

Dad knocks the table. “Then, take Will with you. That's the only way I'll let you go.”

Maybe it would be a good idea for Will to go. To show Scott what it really means to care about me. To have my back.

“Okay, I'll take Will.”

“Good,” Paul says. “Now, where were we? I won't let him ruin our coffee date.”

“Absolutely not.” I smile, but my thoughts stay on Scott. Dread prickles my skin. One more time, and then I will never speak with him again. I will be firm. I will be clear. There will be no negotiation.

I can do this.

“So, Will mentioned you like Taylor Swift?”

I guffaw with a huge grin. “*Like* is an understatement.”

“Can you tell me about her?” Paul asks. “Why you like her?”

“Dad, do you really want to get into it? We could be here for a while.”

“I've got all time in the world.” He gives a soft smile.

So, I begin a thesis statement I've been crafting in my mind for years. As I talk about her, all my worries about

seeing Scott for the last time float away, and my dad listens attentively, like I hung the moon.

EIGHTEEN

WILL

The *Welcome to Sable Springs* sign whips by us as we drive into the dotted lights accenting dusk on the town closest to Ivy River. Bree squirms in the passenger seat, wearing a sundress that's currently killing me.

The neckline cuts across her breasts, revealing a hint of cleavage, and flares out over her ass, my favorite physical part of her, making me wish for things I shouldn't.

When she came out of the main house, wearing gold sandals and that pink dress, air whooshed out of my lungs.

I feel like an asshole because I'm driving my boss's daughter to meet her boyfriend, and all I can think about is flipping that sundress up to bury my head between her thighs.

No matter how many times I rub my face or shake my head, the fantasy remains.

Bree's breath has been audible this entire ride, and her fidgeting tells me she's nervous. We're meeting Scott at a restaurant called the Sable Rose, which attaches to his hotel, the Cotillion. The Cotillion is a small boutique hotel that is the fanciest in the area. Usually, people exploring the national park with a private tour guide stay there, venturing out in brand-new, name-brand gear. JR has picked up his fair share of clients from there.

The hotel is white and three stories, a refurbished Victorian with a sunroom converted to an eight-table, American, fine-dining restaurant. Folks from our town sometimes go there for

big wedding anniversaries, treating it as a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

We find street parking a block over, and Bree has grown paler, swallowing sips of air. Paul told me that Scott wasn't dangerous, but I need to know if I'll just be trading verbal sparring or fists.

"Bree, before we go in, is he dangerous?"

"No," she whispers.

"Then, what is his deal? Are you afraid of him?"

Her mouth parts, and her voice croaks.

"I'm pretty sure Scott is a narcissist," she says.

"Okay," I say, a little unsure.

"After my mom died, I was so sad. I took a break from work, and the general manager told me to come back when I was ready. My friend Carly kept badgering me to come out, so we ended up at this hotel in the city, at the bar. After a couple cocktails, we saw folks walking into a private space. We decided to crash it, and it was a wedding reception. Scott's dad was the groom. It was his third wedding. His sixty-year-old dad was marrying a twenty-nine-year-old. Scott knew we had snuck in, but he said he'd keep it our secret. We talked all night, and it was the first time I didn't think about my mom for five minutes. I went home with him, thought it would be a one-night stand, but he called me the next night, and then we were inseparable.

"It felt like a fairy tale at first. He showered me with affection, presents, distraction. I craved it. I was sad and lonely, and he made me feel the opposite. Scott was thirty-five when I met him, never married, and I felt special, you know. Right away, he was telling me, 'I see myself marrying you. You are unlike any other woman. I think I'm falling in love with you.' Blah, blah, blah. I was twenty-two.

"Then, he started making little comments. He didn't like my hair down; he liked braids. He didn't want me wearing revealing clothing. He made fun of my job, said being a server was a teenage job, although I was making more than I would

have at an entry-level office job. When we were out and about, he'd make fun of me every time I asked to pet a dog, said I made it weird for the owners. He started making me think that Carly hated me, that she was making my life miserable. I stopped talking to her because he had gotten so in my head. Carly was just really bad at answering text messages, and she'd always been like that.

“He wanted to move in together, in San Francisco. I commuted to the restaurant so I could justify it, although I had my mother's house in Palo Alto. Scott said he was working, but I caught him in so many lies. He would lie about working, just to be home all day, playing video games.

“However, Scott excelled at keeping up appearances. He had everyone fooled. If I brought up anything to his people, they would say things like, ‘Scott warned us that you get a little paranoid sometimes.’ He would ignore me for days if I pointed out his way of thinking, that nothing was ever his fault. That was what he was doing when I left, ignoring me after I refused to move to a bigger apartment in a different area, because I was already paying for everything, and he still owed me over a thousand dollars for his portion of the rent.

“It got worse and worse. It was like I was in a pot of water, and someone was gradually raising the heat, and I didn't realize it was boiling. I was crying several times a week. I wasn't crazy, but he was making me feel crazy. I had to leave.”

Bree is stoic as she tells this story, stone-faced and devoid of emotion. She's so strong, so fearless. Scott is an asshole and didn't know what a gem he had. How special Bree is. She deserves all the praise, all the admiration. Instead, she got a man-child who treated her like a bank account.

“Bree, how do we get rid of this guy?”

“I don't know. I honestly thought he would give up if I wasn't reachable. I told myself I would worry about it if he showed up. Well, he did, and if he's motivated to find me here, he won't give up. He'll keep coming around and around.”

I cover her hand with mine briefly, and our touch feels like fifty hot daggers shooting up my arm. Like that night outside

Three Rules, I flex my fingers, but it does nothing to clear the sensation.

“Why do you do that?” She points to my hand.

“What? It’s nothing. I wrote a lot of citations today.”

What a bold-faced lie.

We sit in thought as the clock ticks toward seven, when we agreed to meet him.

“You’re in this with me. You’re with me,” I comfort her, and then her eyes flash as an idea dawns on her.

“How about you pretend to be my boyfriend?”

Blood drains from my face. My body won’t know the difference between real and fake when it comes to her. Even touching her hand in comfort gives me unfair hope. Every time I try to stay away from her, she pulls me back, unable to release me. I want her, in every sense of the word. Acting like her boyfriend will tip the scales, and I might do something I would regret.

Like kiss her.

“No, we can just talk some sense into him. Make this amicable.”

“There’s no amicable with him. He’s the pettiest person I’ve ever met. He won’t be his full Gila monster self if you’re present, but get ready for lots of teeth-gritting. I know you won’t, but please don’t punch him. No matter how much you want to. He will sue you. He’s done it before.”

My fists clench. “Noted.”

We sit with the engine off, watching the clock. When the clock strikes seven, we begrudgingly get out of the car, walking toward the entrance to the restaurant.

The restaurant space is small, so I peg him immediately. He stands up when he sees us, his eyebrows collapsing in confusion at me, walking by his ex’s side.

He’s shorter than I am, by four inches or so, blond hair in a neat haircut, and he’s wearing a black suit. A woman is with

him, dark-haired and tan-skinned, pretty. They chose one side of the table.

Bree holds her breath as I hold the door open for her. As she passes me, I lean in, close enough to be dangerous. “Just breathe.”

She nods and lets out a long breath, and when she sees the woman Scott is with, she freezes.

“That’s his childhood best friend. Oh my God.”

She tries to turn to leave, but I catch her.

“Just follow my lead,” I say, grabbing her hand. She grips it, and my heart pounds as we walk in like a couple. It’s not hard to pretend.

Scott’s eyebrows collapse as he stands up, leaning in first to give Bree a hug. I wanted to block him, throw myself in between them. Him touching her, after all he put her through, disgusts me.

“I didn’t expect you to bring a date,” Scott says.

“Me either,” Bree says. “Julia.”

Scott’s date stands with her hands clasped in front of her.

I shoot my hand out. “Will Stone, Bree’s boyfriend.” That came out a little too easily. Scott crushes my hand in his, giving me a deathly stare, and I return it. He needs to know that I know he’s a piece of shit.

“I see he uses your cute nickname.” Scott scoffs as he and his date sit down. An empty drink sits in front of Scott, a thin layer of watered-down bourbon. His date’s wine looks untouched.

Scott barely looks at his date. His stare is reserved for Bree. Bree rolls her lips as I pull the chair out for her and push it in. When I sit down next to her, I rest my arm on the back of her chair. Scott’s hands fold together on the table, staring at the lone votive candle on the white tablecloth.

“Are you two dating? Is that the news?” Bree flicks her finger between the two of them.

“Well, we want to wait to discuss it until you get drinks.”

He brought his new girlfriend to Sable Springs to show her off to Bree? What is wrong with him?

“Scott, you really came here to tell me that you’re dating Julia? After you told me I shouldn’t be worried about her, that she’s just your friend?” There’s venom in her tone.

“Hey, why are you getting emotional? We’re having a nice, catch-up meal. Don’t ruin it.”

I grit my teeth and open my mouth to speak, but Bree stops me, covering my hand. She’s got this.

“When did it start? Before or after I moved out?”

“Brienne, let’s have some wine first. We’re fine dining. Or have you forgotten ‘your career’”—Scott makes air quotations with his fingers—“and your manners?”

He admonishes her like a child, and I must sit there while the most incredible woman I’ve ever met gets treated like nothing. I want to lunge across the table, take this man by the shirt, and rattle some sense into him. He looks like a man with a legal team on retainer, ready to strike if someone accidentally spills something on him.

Scott orders wine for the table, and I ask for club soda with lime.

“You an alcoholic?” Scott asks after the server leaves. “Only alcoholics order club soda with lime.”

I fake chuckle and decide that if Scott likes me, he’s less likely to punch me. “Let’s just say it’s best if I don’t drink.”

“Interesting. Not sure Brienne could function with a sober boyfriend.”

“I’m functioning well. He’s a great DD.” Bree cradles my cheek, and it feels like a comfort that I lean into her hand, kissing her palm. It’s soft against my lips, and I want to cover more of her body with them, showing her that she deserves to be worshiped, exactly as she is. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Julia’s eyes zone out, staring at an invisible spot on the tablecloth.

After the server drops off the glasses, the bottle, and my drink, we all silently study the menu. Bree slams the menu shut and takes a huge gulp of wine. Her eyes plead with me, like she's asking permission to unleash fury on him, and I nod once.

Her head whips to Scott. "We're not staying for dinner."

"What?" Scott's face twists in confusion. The server approaches our table, and I hold up a hand. He retreats and disappears through a door.

"We're done, Scott. You seem very happy with Julia." Bree turns to her. "You won, Jules. Be with Scott. Keep him far away from Ivy River please."

"There you go, acting crazy again. I told you she's crazy. Look at her," Scott says to Julia, who doesn't look convinced. "I did so much for you, and you're making up these fantasies in your head."

The anger boils in Scott, his pale skin flushing. Julia stiffens next to him, playing with the cloth napkin in her lap.

Bree leans in and lowers her voice. Scott leans in to listen. "You are the worst person I've ever met. You isolated me. You belittled me. You gaslit me. *You hid my dad's letter.*"

Scott opens his mouth, but I grab his wrist lightly and shake my head with authority. He swallows his rebuttal and focuses on her.

"Fuck you, Scott. Leave me alone. Forever."

She stands up and motions toward me. "Oh, by the way, my boyfriend is an *officer*. And he makes me come more than you ever did."

I know why Bree brought up my officer status. It seems that's the only authority Scott respects. However, the second part of the lie, me making her come, would be true if I lost all sense. Bree would be begging me to stop the orgasms, because I would not rest without making up for Scott's complete ineptitude in the bedroom.

Bree deserves a man who loves that she eats cookies and her short hair. That she worked in fine dining because that meant she knew how to handle people. How much joy Taylor Swift gives her. She deserves a man who will eat her out every day and give her toe-curling orgasms.

I press my hand possessively into her lower back, making sure Scott sees where my hand is. I lean in, my lips against the shell of her ear. “Let’s get out of here, baby. You deserve an orgasm for putting up with this.”

NINETEEN

BREE

My hands shake as we leave the restaurant, and Will's palm widens on my back. The adrenaline coursed through my veins as I said just a fraction of what I've wanted to say to Scott over the years. I said things I never felt comfortable saying because it created hours of fights that stretched into the night. Here, I could leave.

I feel invincible. I feel strong.

All because the most perfect man I have ever met supported me, lifted me up, let me fight my own battles.

His one flaw, though, was his false promise of an orgasm. It wasn't fair.

We're settled in the truck when Julia runs out of the restaurant, scanning the tiny parking lot. Julia was Scott's friend from childhood. Their families spent summers together in Washington, where Scott's mother grew up. Julia came in and out of our relationship like a fungus. Scott told me I was paranoid, that I was delusional. Julia was like a sister to him.

Now, she's paraded around like a pawn. I don't hate her. I feel sorry for her.

Julia sees me, so I step out of the truck. Will steps out too, his hands in his pockets.

"Bree, I want to apologize. Scott told me you were broken up in March..."

Julia and I overlapped, but it doesn't matter. Scott is the enemy, not this woman.

I take her hands in mine. “Please be careful, Julia.”

“He was so sweet in the beginning, and now... It’s all so confusing. He says you were so controlling and made his life a living hell, and then you just left him with the apartment he couldn’t afford and a bunch of bills to pay...”

Nodding, I turn to leave and grab for the door. “Just remember, he dragged you here to rub you in my face. What kind of person does that, Julia? Scott always spoke so highly of you. I know you’re a smart woman. Just be careful.”

I turn again, but she shouts, “Bree!”

“If you need to talk, send me an email.” I rattle off my email address, and she repeats it back to me. “Get out before it goes too far. Before he sinks his hooks in you.”

I climb into the car, and Will starts the engine. “You ready?”

“Yes.”

Will drives off, leaving Julia standing on the small patch of grass, her arms folded. We’re quiet until we hit the end of Main Street, turning left to go home.

“Are you okay?” Will asks.

“Strangely yes.” A chortle leaves my lips, and then I hysterically laugh, doubling over the seatbelt. Tears crowd my eyes as my laughter multiplies, and I’m gasping for air. “He brought a woman to make me jealous. I brought a guy to make him jealous. We’re so toxic. I can’t handle it.”

I wipe tears from my eyes and cough. Leaning my head against the headrest feels good.

“You know what sounds good?”

“What?” A slight smirk curves Will’s lips.

“Cookies.”

“Cookies are an excellent idea.” Will catches a quick glance at me and then looks at the road.

“Is Butter and Love still open? That’s the cookie place in Sable Springs, right?”

“I think so. They just switched to summer hours.”

“Perfect,” I say as he turns around, heading to Butter and Love, a place I meant to make a pilgrimage to. Telling off my ex-boyfriend felt like a hero’s journey. I deserve a cookie bounty. Especially since Will dangled the promise of an orgasm in front of me, just to snatch it away.

WILL BACKS his truck in and shuts it off, the tailgate facing the river. We’re the only car parked along the bank, the rustling trees and running river keeping us company. I grab our white bag while he lowers the tailgate, spreading out a blanket and shaping old sweatshirts into pillows. On the way here, Will said I wasn’t a true local until I sat at the river, deep in thought.

I don’t want to think tonight. I just want to be with Will, without the world crashing in. All my worries rush away with the water. It’s just me, cookies, and the guy I have a massive, never-ending crush on.

“I’m so excited to try all of these,” I say, spreading a napkin and then unloading our stash. I grabbed us two cartons of milk and hand one to Will.

“I don’t think I’ve had milk since I was a kid.”

“It’s the best with cookies, hands down,” I say after taking the first delicious sip. The creaminess coats my mouth so the first bite will be heavenly.

I dip my hand in and pull out a chunky chocolate chip cookie, breaking it in half, offering it to Will.

“We’ll start with a classic.”

We both take a bite, and my eyes fall closed, savoring the buttery texture of the cookie, the velvety smoothness of the melty chocolate chips.

“This beats drinking any day,” I say.

“Yes, I agree.”

“Have you ever drank?”

Will grumbles against his hand. “In high school. I didn’t see the point unless I blacked out.”

“When did you stop?”

Will pauses again, his jaw tightening. I think he’s not going to answer me, until he says, “Fifteen years ago.” Then, he hangs his head, taking another small bite of his cookie.

I put on my cheeriest voice. “Alcohol is overrated, anyway. You’re smart. Cookies on the other hand...” I replace my piece of cookie with another one, a plump snickerdoodle, and break off a piece for him.

“I’m most excited about this one.” The bite is sinful, the sugar and cinnamon perfectly complementing each other, the cookie melting in my mouth. After I swallow, I say without thinking, “Snickerdoodles are my favorite. They’re better than sex.”

Will chuckles and takes a bite. “Maybe if you’re having sex with *that* guy we just saw. Did he ever make you come?”

When I blush, heat covers my chest and neck, and I’m sure I’m crimson right now. A day hasn’t gone by where I haven’t wondered what sex with Will would be like. My fantasies have gotten vivid, including him bending me over and taking me as he whispers naughty things in my ear.

Him posturing toward my ex will make them worse.

We can’t get together. He works for my dad, and lives just feet from us, and I’ve got mental shit to work through. He might have stuff he’s hiding. I know surface-level things about him, but I don’t know his backstory. He’s a devilishly good-looking enigma.

“Real good move, mentioning the orgasm.” I try to laugh it off.

“I had to stick it to him somehow.”

“It’s too bad, you know.”

“What?” He smirks after taking a piece.

“That I’ll never know how good you are at it.”

“It’s a shame. Because I’m *very* good at it.”

Oh my gosh, I’m getting hot. I wave my hands under my armpits. Will just chuckles.

“So...cookies...” I change the subject before my entire chest is covered in a rash. “I love them. So much.”

“Cookies. What can I say about cookies? They’re pretty good. I never think to get one just because. Won’t turn one down, though.”

“I have time to make up for. Before Ivy River, it had been four years. Makes the cookies that much more delicious. We used to get these protein cookies, and they are not created equal.” The lines between cookies and sex blur, because this tension between Will and me is delicious but also infuriating.

I pull out a white chocolate macadamia nut and split it again, taking another bite. I breathe in wrong, and crumb particles hit me at the back of my throat. I struggle-chew and Will lets out a deep laugh, watching me fight for my life as I cough.

He swats at my back, and I laugh because it startles me, making the coughs more frantic.

When it’s finally down the hatch, and I’ve drank some milk, I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and take a huge gasp of air. “Wow. Almost died there.”

“You’re how old?”

“Shut up,” I say, pushing him with my forearm as our feet dangle from the tailgate. “Just trying to lower my sex appeal.”

“You’re really, really bad at it.”

“What?”

“Being less sexy.”

“Oh, shut up.” I nudge him again like a kid at recess.

“Really. You know what else you’re bad at? Being unfun to be around.”

“Oh, really? Even when I get you into bar fights?”

“Even then. You just need to work on your surliness. Because this”—he uses his hand to motion to all of me, from my feet to my head—“is too delightful.”

“Well, you...you know what you need to work on?” I ask.

“Please.” He flicks his fingers toward him. “Bring it.”

“You need to be less kissable.” I blush.

Will flicks one of his amazing, thick eyebrows. “Less kissable?”

“You’re just...wonderful.” The tone morphs immediately, and he watches me a beat too long, and he breaks another piece of cookie off and pops it into his mouth.

A vision of the puppies climbing all over my dad flashes before me, and I giggle to myself. “I wonder how Dad’s handling the kids.”

“I bet he’s reading to them from a storybook. You know he has a bunch left over from when you were a kid?”

That was my favorite part of the summer, besides hanging out with Sienna. I loved our nightly stories, where I would tuck myself into the crook of his arm, and he would read until my eyelashes fluttered closed. I asked for stories, even when I turned into a teenager. I craved that closeness with him.

That time meant so much to me, and I could cry, thinking about the piles of books he kept, just in case.

“He kept them?” I ask.

“We were going through his house last summer, and he said not to touch them—in case he has grandchildren one day.”

We sit in silence as we look forward over to the river. I split another cookie, a still-warm chocolate turtle, as we listen to the crickets in the distance. I drain my milk and roll up the top of the bag with our uneaten cookie pieces for later.

As we sit in silence, our legs dangling from the truck, I close my eyes, thinking of the years I lost. How much time I tried to make my broken relationship work when he didn't love me, not really.

Scott just wanted to control me. Long-dormant anger bubbles to the surface, his reappearance fuel for my fire. How long he kept me from this town, this river. My father. This new friend I want to kiss so badly.

“Scott made me think my dad just forgot about me. He didn't. He *wrote* me. And Scott hid the letter. He *hid* it. If I felt like I was going crazy, that I was worth less than, I wouldn't leave. Scott knew that.”

“I'm glad you found it.” Will quiets and then says, “I convinced your dad to write that letter.”

I turn, my mouth agape. “You did?”

Will nods. “He kept talking about you and mentioning you. When we found your storybooks, I casually mentioned that he should write you a letter. It's not as intrusive as a phone call. It's more personal. I wasn't sure if he sent it. Then, you showed up.”

“I did,” I say.

Every time I think I can't be more attracted to Will, he pulls something like this.

He tucks a piece of hair behind my ear, his thumb skating over my jaw as he cradles the back of my neck.

I swallow and inch forward. His breath makes my skin tingle as I lean into him. We stop, inches from each other, making eye contact to stop this.

“You really need to work on being less kissable too.”

My gaze flickers against his. I gasp after I hold a breath.

It's full moments before he leans in, seizing my mouth.

When our lips touch, it's not fireworks. It's a nuclear bomb. His thumb presses firmer as we sink into this kiss, like a warm bath.

This kiss feels so natural as our lips move in tandem. His lips are soft against the graze of his stubble, and he nips at my bottom lip. We giggle as we sink deeper.

Our tongues flirt with each other as we hold each other's faces, and it's brief, but when we pull away, we're breathless. We're forehead to forehead, savoring it. My eyes close because it's all too much, and I remind myself to swallow.

It's Will. I should've expected nothing less.

"We should get going," Will suggests instead of another kiss.

"Sure," I say as he hops down first and offers a hand. I take it and grab our bag full of half-eaten cookies. He opens my car door and offers a hand again, and after I climb in, he squeezes my palm before he lets go.

We're quiet on the way home. Will focuses on the road, barely looking over at me. When we pull into my dad's driveway, I notice the living room lamps glowing from the windows.

"He's probably still awake," Will says. He stands in front of me, and I wonder if he'll kiss me again. I want him to so badly. The first kiss did nothing to squelch my thirst for him.

"That was probably a one-time thing." The air rattles as he exhales through his nose.

Disappointment clouds me, but I nod. "I understand."

"This could get messy," he says. "Too messy."

I swallow down my emotions. If I speak, words will tumble faster than I can control them.

He kisses my cheek slowly, letting his lips graze against my skin. "Goodnight, Bree."

"Goodnight." I walk away, hoping he'll run after me, but he stands there, on my father's lawn, watching me walk up the steps to the porch. I sneak one last glance before I walk in, locking the door behind me.

The soft glow of the lamp draws me in to my dad sitting on the couch, overlooking a sleeping pile of puppies. He closes the book he's reading, and I see another book sitting next to him. It's my old copy of *Anne of Green Gables*. One summer, we read the first four books at bedtime, and he didn't know I sped ahead, desperate to know if Anne chose Gilbert.

I'm jealous of Anne. She held all the power.

"Were you reading *Anne* to the puppies?" I sit close to him after moving my favorite book.

"Maybe. Really terrified them. Rachel Lynne reminded them of their original owner."

Smirking, I plop down next to him and wrap my arm around his shoulders. Dad takes off his glasses and leans into me. "Did you take care of that ex-boyfriend of yours?"

"Yeah, I think so." *And I kissed Will.*

"I feel better when Will is with you."

"I do too. He's a good man." *Too good.*

"He is. I'm glad he was there," Dad says. "Can you check on Boomer? I haven't seen him in a few."

"Sure," I say, walking to the back door by the kitchen. There's a doggie door so he can come and go as he pleases.

"Boomer, buddy, where are you?" Whistling, I open the back door and scan our backyard to the back fence. Whistling again, I see a dark figure next to a blur of white in Helen's backyard. I call Boomer, and there's rustling by the bush that borders the fence. It's just a chain-link fence, and my face breaks into a huge grin.

In the distance, I hear, "Honey, come in, my sweet girl!"

Boomer trots toward me, a tongue hanging out to his side, panting. He climbs onto the porch, like it's any other day, nuzzling into me.

"Were you visiting Honey?" I ask in a high voice. "Are you in love?"

The dog leans to me, content and in a state of sublime as I rub behind his ears.

“You just can’t stay away from her, can you?” He confirms it by leaning into me harder, and I have to brace my knees so I don’t fall over.

I’m not sure if dogs have love like us, but I know the feeling of wanting something you really can’t have—or may not have available to you to begin with.

Boomer can’t stay away, and I wonder why Will can so easily.

TWENTY

BREE

The puppies are adopted, one by one.

First to go was Coco. Charmaine wrote me a two-page letter on what that dog means to her, and I am a sucker for a good letter. Once I made my choices, she was the first person I called. She cried silently on the phone when I told her. She came by within the hour and hugged me tightly when I opened the door.

“I’ll take good care of her.”

I cried.

Brownie was the second to go, going home with Logan Henderson and his daughter, Lily. He grumbled when I called him, and he said he would come by that afternoon. His daughter burst out of the car as I was waiting with Brownie in my arms. That puppy pressed his face into Lily’s chest like he had found his person. It made my heart grow three sizes.

Molasses, Ginger, and Chip went to loving families, all who had experience with working-breed dogs. The litter dwindled one by one until there was one left.

All that was left was Maple—the one I fell in love with, against my better judgment.

I kept telling myself I wasn’t staying here, but if I was, I would keep her. After my dad found me at the table, crying over applications for Maple, feeling like no family would be good enough, he put his hand on mine.

“I think it would be good for Boomer to have one of his children with him. What do you think?”

I nodded through tears, and that was it.

Boomer was thrilled to have his daughter to play with, and Maple snuggled against him when they slept, being the little spoon. I would catch them taking afternoon snoozes on the rug, right in front of the light from the window, and it was the first time I wished I had my phone to take a thousand pictures of them.

My dad took enough pictures for both of us. One day, I walked into my room to see a stack of photos of the dogs on my bureau.

I did catch Boomer sneaking out to see Honey occasionally, but I didn't say anything to my dad. It's sweet, and it isn't hurting anyone.

BETWEEN MAPLE, working at the yoga studio, visiting Charmaine and Bernie at the salon, and watching movies with my dad, thoughts of Will only creep in sometimes.

Since that kiss over cookies, Will has kept his distance and only really comes around when my dad is present for insurance. Every day, I look forward to dinner so I can see him, talk to him. Every time he comes through our kitchen door, my breath catches, and my heart thumps. Every morning, I hold my coffee until it's cold, hoping he'll want to have one last coffee chat.

That kiss still lingers. It has woven itself into my lips, and if I close my eyes, I can remember every touch, every taste, every detail. I'm sure I'll be old and senile one day, but I'll never forget that kiss.

No matter what happens.

Will rarely visits the main house before five p.m. anymore, so it's a shock to see him in the living room at nine a.m. I treated myself and slept in on this Friday, because I have a

completely open day with no work. Just reading, a walk with the dogs, and a leisurely bubble bath planned.

“Hi, Bree,” Dad says, looking between Will and me.

“Hi,” I say. “Is something going on?”

Dad clears his throat. “There’s a woman who lives up the hill that everyone in Ivy River helps. Her name is Veronica Kramer, but you will call her Mrs. Kramer. Once a week, someone from the network brings her groceries and sees if she needs any help. Will, I know you’re off today. And Bree, you also have a free day, so can you help me out?” He holds up a piece of paper. “She just faxed her shopping list to me, and I thought you two could take care of it for me. She wants to meet you, Bree. And Will, I know she has some pictures she needs hung.”

“How long will it take?” I ask. I don’t mind if it’s just the morning.

“You should be done by noon.”

“We’ll get right on it, sir.” Will nods once and turns to leave. After grabbing the list, I scurry after him, walking to his truck. He gets in, and I do too, the radio set to a country station playing the latest hits. We’re alone, and while I try not to, a huge goofy grin crosses my lips. I’ve never been a fan of grocery shopping, but this is the equivalent of going to Paris. I’ll be with Will.

“Mrs. Kramer seems like a big deal.”

“She is a big deal,” Will says matter-of-factly. “Just ask her.”

I giggle, and Will turns to me with a smile.

“That makes me feel good.”

“What?” He turns the wheel to head toward town.

“I don’t know. This. It feels like...before.”

Will quickly changes the subject. “Mrs. Kramer is this eccentric woman who refuses to come into town. Your dad, and Logan’s and JR’s dads take turns getting her groceries and

other stuff she needs. Thatch Kramer, her husband, used to work for Henderson and passed away last year. Worked until the day he died.”

Will turns down an alley to the parking lot at the back of the grocery store.

“Let’s get this over with,” Will says before he exits his truck, and I exit too. He can’t look at me as we walk into the store’s back entrance.

The store is clean and bright, dressed in warm golds and chestnuts with chalk signs with white lettering and red accents. It’s bigger than I expected—about the size of a Trader Joe’s in my old neighborhood in San Francisco. Taking in my surroundings, I lose Will, who is walking briskly into the produce section.

I grab a cart and join him.

“What do we need first?” I say, looking over his shoulder. He steps away, toward the apples.

“Three non-bruised Gala apples,” he says. I nod and grab a plastic bag, licking my fingers to rub it open. When I look up, Will looks away quickly. Inspecting each one, I find three perfect apples and slip them in and tie it off.

“Non-brown Romaine lettuce,” he reads off again, and I find a perfect head, also slipping it into a bag.

Will continues to rattle off items as I collect, inspecting every item to deliver the most perfect produce and groceries to a woman I’ve never met. Every time I get close to Will to read the list, he steps away, creating loads of space, like I’m contagious with a flesh-eating virus.

“Look, I get it. I’m too sexy,” I joke as I grab a jar of tomato sauce and place it in the cart. Not even a smirk.

Will grabs three boxes of angel hair pasta and sticks them in the cart.

“Can’t we joke?”

“It’s not a good idea,” he says. I wonder if he thinks about the kiss as much as I do.

We veer to the next aisle and pick up various baking items, like cake mix and chocolate chips. Will seems hellbent on finishing this shopping trip as quickly as possible, with little interaction from me. Our hands accidentally brush, and he rips his hand away like I'm an electric fence.

Our night at the river was perfect, and now it feels like we're Day Two Will and Bree.

"Sorry," I say, anxiety creeping into my shoulders.

"Don't worry about it." He scans the list and looks over the basket. "You don't have to say sorry to me."

"Okay," I say, although a sorry tries to claw its way up my throat for saying sorry too much.

Will nods once. "I think we're done."

"Okay," I say as we walk to the front and get in the lone cashier's line. She's an older woman, probably the same age as my dad, wearing a *Grange Family Neighborhood Market* blue smock. She looks familiar, but I can't place her.

When we approach with our overloaded cart, she looks at Will and then at me. Her face melts with an, "Ooh."

"Oh, darling, I would know you anywhere. Brianne Tanager?" she asks.

"Yes, that's me." I hold out my hand, but she walks around the partition and envelops me in a hug like a cozy blanket on a rainy day. I lean in, squeezing her tight. She feels so familiar.

When she pushes me away, she registers my confusion.

"Janice Grange. You probably don't remember me, but I babysat you when you were a little bitty thing. Whenever your dad had to work, we would play dolls and drink pretend tea."

Her kind eyes and pleasant words tinge the bliss of those summers.

"Oh my gosh!" I hug her again. "How are you?"

"I'm great. How are you?" She walks behind the barrier to start scanning the groceries. I turn to Will, his jaw flexing.

“I’m great,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Oh, aren’t you two so cute together! Will, you should take her on a date.”

“No!” we both protest at the same time.

“He’s not my type,” I lie. Will flashes me a glare, like he’s offended.

“She’s...short.”

Janice scans the pasta and the pasta sauce. “Are you going up to Mrs. Kramer’s today?”

“Yes,” I say.

“She’ll love to meet you. Get ready to stay a little bit. I visited her the other day, and I stayed three hours.” Janice studies me. “I have to say, you turned into quite the stunner. Isn’t she beautiful, Will?”

My head snaps to Will to see any reaction. He says, “Yes, ma’am,” barely audibly, and my heart beats faster.

“All done!” Will pays, and I load the bags into our cart. Janice gives me another hug. “I’m so glad you’re back in town. Come and see me. I’m usually working at the market at this time.”

“Perfect, thank you! Nice to see you.”

When we leave, Will speeds up, creating enough distance to look like he’s not with me.

“Why are you moving so fast?” I ask, jogging to catch up.

“It’s nothing.”

“Just talk to me.”

“I shouldn’t.” His gaze bores into me, and he flinches slightly, like he’ll kiss me again.

Then, we load the groceries and climb into the truck.

We drive to Mrs. Kramer’s house a few miles away, without a word.

TWENTY-ONE

WILL

My perfect plan is crumbling. All because Mrs. Kramer needed groceries.

Time away from Bree hasn't diminished my attraction to her at all. She looks so mesmerizing with her head resting on her hand. I've been avoiding breathing through my nose so her lemon-vanilla scent doesn't hit me. It'll take me back to the night we ate cookies while overlooking Ivy River and how I took her lips in mine.

It'll remind me of the best kiss I've ever had.

I can't risk another touch, another slip-up. I respect her dad too much. She'll leave, going back to school, starting over in her hometown.

I'm just another guy messing up the trajectory of her life.

She's better off without me.

The trip up the mountain is quiet. We carefully drive on narrow roads until we reach Mrs. Kramer's house, hidden behind thin trees and a small knoll. The sky is gray with bloated clouds as we get out, Bree pulling out two bags and sliding the handles onto her shoulders. She heads to the porch first, and I follow, staring at the roof so I don't look at her ass.

Lord help me.

She knocks at the door, and Mrs. Kramer, a tiny but terrifying woman, opens the door.

"William, nice to see you. You, dear, must be Brianne Tanager. Come on in."

“Call me Bree,” she says, walking past the threshold.

“Paul has told me so much about you,” Mrs. Kramer says, taking Bree in for a hug.

Jealousy blooms in my chest. I wish I could hug her.

I point to the kitchen, and Bree follows, past the brown and gold of the living room stuck in the seventies to the kitchen with original counters and appliances.

“Put that there, dear,” Mrs. Kramer says to Bree, who starts unloading the groceries. She points to a cabinet here, a drawer there, as she oversees us as we put her food in the right spots. Once the cloth bags have been folded and the receipt handed to Mrs. Kramer, she looks at both of us.

“What about some coffee and cookies? I just made a fresh batch of snickerdoodles.”

Cookies. Snickerdoodles. The night I kissed Bree hits me like a home invasion. I shake my head and say, “We have to get going—”

“We would love that. Snickerdoodles are my favorite,” Bree says. She gives me a quick look. I wonder if she thinks about that night as much as I do.

“How do you take your coffee, dear?” Mrs. Kramer asks, placing her wrinkly hand on Bree’s arm.

“Black, please.”

“Oh, you’re easy, just like Will. Please sit.”

We walk to the couch, and there’s only a chair and loveseat now. She used to have this monstrosity of a couch, with seating enough for eight people at least. It used to take up the full living room.

“Mrs. Kramer, did you get rid of your couch?” I ask.

“Yes, that hideous thing? It swallowed up all my space. Got rid of it. There’s enough space for the two of you on the loveseat.”

I gulp down my nervousness as Bree walks to the loveseat and sinks down, the lack of density to the cushions causes her

to sink like Alice in Wonderland. She laughs, and it's like sunshine injected into my veins.

"Come sit on this, Will. I feel like I'm five with the way I sink into it."

"No, I'm good. I'll stand."

"Don't be silly. Come sit. You can sit next to me."

Crossing my arms, I weigh my options. If I do sit, I'll be torturing myself, being so close to her. If I don't sit, it'll look strange. Gripping the loveseat chair, I sink in, and it tilts me sideways, my hand landing on her knee.

It's a nice knee.

"I'm sorry," I say, straightening in my seat. I grip the arm so I don't sink anywhere near her.

"No problem." She laughs again, and I breathe in her heavenly scent by accident. Dammit.

"Look like you like me a little," Bree jokes.

A chortle leaves my mouth. I more than like her. That's the problem.

"Here we are," Mrs. Kramer says, setting down two mugs of coffee with steam swirling from the liquid. At least the coffee will distract me from any hard-on I'm dangerously close to having.

"So, tell me, what brought you back into town, Bree?"

Thunder claps in the distance, startling us. Bree jumps, but the cushion is so squishy it sends her into me. Her body contacting mine scares me more than the thunder, and I spill my coffee over my shirt.

"Damn it. Sorry, Mrs. Kramer."

"That's okay. Are you hurt, dear?"

"No, I'm good," I say. Bree wiggles to reach her side of the couch, but the cushion is hard to maneuver. She stands up and sits as close to the other couch arm as she can.

“I’ve just been home, visiting my dad. I’m going back to school in September.”

“It’s been some time since you’ve been back, hasn’t it?”

There’s pink in her cheeks as she raises her mug. “Yes, it has.”

“Are you having a good time?”

Bree looks at me for a second, and Mrs. Kramer clocks it.

The old woman slouches in her chair, studying us. She presses her finger to her lips. Her gaze makes me fidget in my seat.

“Oh, the snickerdoodles.” She stands up and walks to the kitchen and returns with a plate piled high. The cinnamon hits my nose as they’re set in front of us. Bree bites her lip, and she makes me wish I was the one biting it. It’s unfair to have lips that full and the color of fresh strawberries so close to my mouth. Especially, when I know how spectacular they are when they’re pressed to mine.

“Go ahead,” I say, offering for her to go first so we don’t accidentally brush fingers. Bree lurches forward to grab one. She bites into the flaky treat, closing her eyes. Her tongue catches falling crumbs, and I need to look away.

This is torture.

Mrs. Kramer continues to study us. Bree moans next to me, and my cock twitches involuntarily. Mrs. Kramer watches me cross my legs to squelch it.

I bite into the cookie and hold back a moan. The cinnamon and sugar perfectly complement the buttery flavor and flaky texture of the cookie.

“Will, you have a crumb...”

I hesitate, and she sweeps her thumb against my skin to wipe it away. It creates a path of scorch along my skin where she touched me.

Is she trying to drive me mad?

“Do you have a boyfriend, Brianne? A girl as pretty as you must have one...”

“No, I’m single.”

“Will, you’re not seeing anyone, are you?”

Shaking my head again, I can see where this is going.

Mrs. Kramer leans forward and touches Bree’s knee. “That one right there...is a catch.”

Blood rushes to my face. “Mrs. Kramer...”

“What? You *are*. Brianne, he’s far too modest. I mean, look at him.”

“He is very handsome,” Bree agrees. Her eyes flick to me, and I see a tiny smirk at the corner of her mouth.

“See, she thinks you’re very handsome. Oh, he’s adorable. Look how red he’s getting.”

“Mrs. Kramer,” I warn.

“It is adorable. He’s not great with compliments.”

A chuckle leaves my lips because this is the opposite of funny.

“All I’m saying is you two might think about going on a date,” Mrs. Kramer says.

“No, I don’t think so,” I spit out, checking my watch. “Mrs. Kramer, thank you for the coffee and cookies, but we should get going...”

“Oh,” Bree says, standing up as well. “Thank you so much for the coffee and cookies. It was lovely to meet you.”

“Yes, you too, dear.” Mrs. Kramer stays seated as we leave, me a few steps in front of Bree.

We open the door to a downpour. Buckets of water drop from the eaves of Mrs. Kramer’s overhang.

“Maybe we hang out a little more?” I suggest, and Bree nods.

“Oh good, because I almost forgot. I have a picture I need hung. If you’ll come this way...” Mrs. Kramer disappears down the hallway, and Bree and I share a small, knowing smile.

I’m sure the storm will stop soon.

THE STORM DOESN’T STOP. It gets worse. Paul called me and asked where we were.

“We’re still at Mrs. Kramer’s,” I say over the static. Mrs. Kramer is currently showing Bree her clown statue collection. I’ve seen it once, and it was enough for nightmares.

“Oh, good. I just heard from Jerry that a tree fell over the mountain road, and there’s been a five-car accident because of it. I doubt you guys will be able to get out of there anytime soon. Plus, the weather’s just ugly out there.”

I peer out the window to see the rain pelting the porch relentlessly.

“How are the dogs?” I ask.

“Oh, Boomer’s hiding, and Maple is unfazed. She thinks it’s a hide-and-seek game. Tell Bree they’re fine, though. I know she worries.”

“I will,” I say as Bree reappears, traumatized from her visit to the clown room.

I end the call and slip my phone into my pocket. “That was your dad. There was an accident on the road because of a down tree. He doesn’t think we’ll be able to get down the mountain tonight.”

Mrs. Kramer lights up. “You two can stay the night. I have a bed for you two...”

“No, we can’t impose,” I object instantly as Bree snickers, and then her face goes white.

“Is the one bed you have in the clown room?” she asks. She swallows audibly.

“Oh, yes. You two will have more than enough room. It’s a queen, and you’re not that big, my dear. It’s a shame I got rid of my couch. Someone could’ve taken that. But you two are adults and don’t have romantic feelings for each other—allegedly...” Mrs. Kramer walks into the kitchen and retrieves her sweating iced tea. “You’ll be fine.”

Bree and I shoot looks at each other. Us...together in one bed? That can’t happen. I can barely contain myself when she’s in the same car as me. In the same bed, so close to her as she sleeps, I will slip up. I know it.

“I can take the floor. Out here,” I say.

Bree leans in, and I don’t hold my breath fast enough. The lemon-vanilla scent hits the back of my nostrils, and I’m losing myself again. “You will not let me be alone in that clown room.”

“Okay. I’ll sleep on the floor in the clown room.”

Mrs. Kramer ducks into the kitchen and then peeks her head out. “How are you two at chopping?”

As we prepare dinner, I keep checking the road alerts, and it’s just getting worse. There’s a back-up for five miles because of the down tree and accident, and that road is murder to turn around on. It’s causing a compounding mess, and we won’t be going anywhere anytime soon.

Instead, Bree and I work side-by-side, chopping vegetables for Mrs. Kramer’s homemade chicken noodle soup. Mrs. Kramer is our anchor of conversation, telling us stories about her late husband, and her grandkids who live in Texas, and how she might move—she hasn’t decided yet. I fix a creaking floorboard, and I get soaked checking her gutters for any clogs. Bree brings down Mrs. Kramer’s collection of old movies, helping her sort them between which ones to donate and which ones to keep.

When the soup has simmered for an hour, we sit around her table, eating crusty bread and her delicious soup. We listen to more stories, and I’m watching the clock tick closer and

closer to bedtime, when I'll be alone with Bree in the clown room.

When I might lose my mind.

TWENTY-TWO

BREE

“Okay, extra blankets are in the closet,” Mrs. Kramer tells me. I try to focus on her and not the toddler-sized clown doll sitting in the corner.

Mrs. Kramer’s voice grows louder. “Will, are you sure you’ll be okay on the floor?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” All I see are Will’s bare feet from behind the bed. We layered a couple fluffy blankets on top of each other to create a makeshift mattress, but you could still feel the concrete floor under the carpet. Mrs. Kramer found an old, clean pajama set from her dead husband, and I have to say, Will looked very handsome in it. The color of the sky, the shirt was a button-down with navy piping with long pants that hang off him nicely.

“I look like I was in the war,” he said with a straight face, holding up his arms. I giggled—until I received my night clothes.

“Oh good, it fits.” She smiles at me as the nightgown flows behind me. She gave me a tissue-thin, pale-pink nightgown with lace across the shoulders and cutting across my chest. The polyester makes my skin itch.

Will hasn’t seen me in it yet, and I’m grateful. I plan to climb under the covers immediately because this house’s air conditioning is set at Arctic levels, and Will might see my nipples.

It would be too disappointing if he sees them and does nothing.

“Thank you so much for your hospitality. We appreciate it.”

“It’s no problem, dear. It’s been a joy having company tonight. Get some sleep, and hopefully the roads clear tomorrow. Goodnight, Will.”

“Goodnight, Mrs. Kramer,” Will shouts from his floor bed.

She closes the door, turns off the light, and it’s silent. I crawl into bed, flipping the covers onto me so they’re to my neck. Shifting to my side, I see Will shifting on the ground, punching the pillow and dropping his head down. The house groans, and through the shadows, I see the outline of a clown head.

“The clown doll is staring at me.”

For a second, I think he’s asleep. Then he says, “I’m scared of it too.”

“What if one comes alive? My money’s on the life-like one in the corner.”

“I personally think it’s the monkey in clown makeup riding the unicycle.”

“Where is that...oh my God, that is frightening.” I throw the covers over my head. “Do you think that’s taxidermy, Will?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.” Will turns and groans. I peek out from under the covers and then pop my head over the bed. He flinches.

“Hey. Are you comfortable?”

“Never been more comfortable. Ever,” he sarcastically says.

“You know you can come into the bed, right?”

He groans again and shifts under his blanket. “That’s not a good idea.”

“I will keep my hands to myself.”

“I won’t.”

My core tightens at the possibility, and I squeeze my thighs together. My fingers flirt with the edge of my nightgown, but I stop myself. “What’s so wrong about that?”

A pause fills this room, then he whispers, “You know why.”

I huff out a breath and turn to my side. A dirty idea flows through my brain, and I shake it off, but it becomes too alluring, too tempting.

“I keep thinking about that dinner with Scott and Julia.”

“Why?” His head is turned toward the wall.

“What you said...when you left.”

He grumbles.

“How you promised an orgasm I never got.”

I lie on my back and look at the ceiling, bending my legs. The hand I stopped before goes farther, flipping the front of my nightgown up. I feel the warm skin of my belly as the tips of my fingers flirt with my panties. A soft sigh leaves my mouth as I slip them under the band.

“What are you doing, Bree?” His voice, so deep and rich, makes me wetter, and I dip my hand, cupping myself. “Bree?” He’s pleading now.

“I guess I’ll do it myself.” My fingers flirt with my clit, and a “Mmm” leaves my lips.

He shifts onto his side. “You’re killing me.”

“You’re killing *me*.” I slip one finger into my pussy, the sound of my slickness overcoming the thick covers. My sigh is earnest, and vibrations of anger come from Will.

“What are you doing?” Will asks.

“Fingering myself.”

“Fuck.” There’s a pause. I think he won’t engage, and then he asks, “How wet are you?”

“Sopping,” I say, dragging the wetness to my sensitive bud so tense with desire that the first tap speeds me closer to the

edge. Another soft moan, and I rub myself slowly, and it builds. I want to draw this out, really torture him, but it's too much, having him in this room, even if he isn't touching me. His words will have to be good enough.

My legs shake, and I pull my hand away to avoid coming too soon. I want to savor this. I want Will to know what he does to me. Then, I dip my finger in again.

“I wish it was your hands on me.”

It happens faster than I can process.

The bed shakes, and then Will is pressed against my back, turning my head, capturing my mouth. We are feral, his fingers gripping my chin as his tongue licks mine, our kisses full of moans. I roll on top of him, and his hands take a fistful of ass as I straddle him, kissing him harder. His erection is hard and long against me as I grind against him. My hands hold his cheeks as we use each other for air. The nightgown billows around us as he rolls me off of him.

“Turn,” he demands. When my back is to his chest, he pulls me to him. His big palm takes my breast, and he flicks the bud of my nipple as he kisses my neck, nibbles my earlobe.

“Open your legs,” he whispers in my ear, his breathy words tickling me.

I scissor them open so he can slide his hand in, warm against my mound as he curls it in. His other hand plays with my nipple as my head tilts back, all the sensations feeling so good. I pant in his ear as the sensations take me over.

“Christ,” he says as he dips one finger inside me and then two. I'm so open for him as I grind against his palm, the friction delicious and infuriating.

“So impatient,” he says as he rubs me slowly. It's so achingly slow, but it feels so good I mewl, biting my lip.

“Is this what you had in mind?” he asks. “What do you need?”

“Focus on my clit,” I whisper as his hand travels up, his middle finger pressing deliciously in the spot I crave. I buck against his hand.

His lips dance against my jawline. “Take what you need, Bree. Use my hand.”

His words tumble me over the edge as it crescendos to a peak, and I’m writhing against him. As he dips his other hand into my nightgown to feel my bare breast, I come unglued, jerking against his hand, feeling my pussy pulse around his fingers as they slide in and out. My mouth stretches in delicious pleasure as his finger flicks my bottom lip. When I settle, he holds me against him, his lips still teasing my earlobe. It was hot and wild, how he jumped in when he knew I wanted him to, saying all the right things, and his hands moved like they were mine.

I reach behind me so I can touch him, but he wriggles out of my grasp.

“I don’t need it,” he says.

His erection pressing against me tells me otherwise.

“Are you sure?”

“I’ll be fine. I just—” Then, he squeezes me, and his breath slows. “This is enough. More than enough.”

I know what he’s saying. This might be our one lapse in judgment. How this one orgasm will be it, a fulfillment of a promise.

Still, Will doesn’t return to the floor.

We fall asleep like this, spooning like a couple in love, not two people who’ve been trying—and failing—to stay away from each other.

It almost feels like Will wishes he could let himself go.

I wish he would.

We would be so great together.

TWENTY-THREE

WILL

Bree is in my arms when I wake up, the sunlight shining through the window. Her smell, the softness of her body under my hands...it overwhelms me. I crossed a boundary I had set for myself last night.

I got her off, only after I touched her everywhere I wanted—her breasts, her pussy, her ass. Then I spooned her, all night long, hugging her waist like she was a comfort. My sleep was fantastic because I got to hold her all night.

When I pull away, she stirs, cocooning more into herself, slipping her hands under the pillow, facing me. I sit up, resting my chin on my hands.

What am I going to do? My self-restraint around Bree was already weak, but this opens a whole new world for us. I would've loved nothing more than to feel her small hand around my cock, sink into her wet heat, and taste her, for real.

Instead, I stopped it.

Hands travel up my thigh. "What are you thinking about?" Bree asks.

"What we did last night."

Her hand stops. "Oh. Do you regret it?" My hesitation is a beat too long. She pulls her hand away. "You regret it."

Turning to look at her, I say, "Do you regret it?"

There's a tiny shake to her head. "It felt good. You made me feel good."

“Good.” I stand up, grabbing for my phone and tapping to see alerts for the road conditions. “Looks like the road is clear, and we can get down the mountain.”

Bree sits up and then flinches, grabbing her chest. “Those damn clowns.”

I chuckle since a portrait of a clown with a creepy smile and tilting head is directly across from her. “This room.”

“This fucking room,” she says. She stands, and the nightgown drops around her. I can see the outline of her body through the sheerness of the dress—the undercurve of her perfect breasts, her round behind curving to toned thighs. Bree catches me looking and walks to her clothes, which are neatly folded on a chair. Turning, she pulls the nightgown over her head, and my dick hardens, seeing the split in her ass through her even-sheerer underwear. She reaches for her bra, and I see the outline of one breast, and I swallow.

I keep eye contact as she turns, showing me her chest—perfect with small, pink nipples, budded—as she slowly loops her arms through her straps. When she clasps her bra, I still don’t look away as she pulls her shorts and tank top on.

A knock at the door causes me to jump.

“Rise and shine, sleepy heads! I made waffles!” Mrs. Kramer says.

We both laugh, her interruption breaking the tension.

“I should get dressed,” I say, walking close—too close to her—grabbing for my own pants and shirt.

“I saw you looking at me.” She pats my butt and slips out with a smirk on her lips.

WHEN WE GET HOME, Paul is working on his front lawn while Maple and Boomer supervise from tethered leashes. The puppy freaks when she sees Bree, and Bree runs toward the jumping and barking puppy.

“Oh, I missed you too,” she says, ruffling the puppy’s ears and landing kisses on the top of its head.

“Glad you made it home,” Paul says, reaching for a handshake, grasping the very hand that got his daughter off last night.

“We slept in the clown room. I slept on the floor.” For the first half hour anyway.

“That room gives me nightmares. Glad you survived and the doll didn’t come to life.”

“I didn’t think we would make it.” Bree locks eyes with me, and I tear them away.

“I forgot to tell you two, I’m leaving tomorrow for camping. We’ll be gone for one night. It’s all Steve’s wife will let him go for before they leave for the cruise. Remember the party tomorrow.”

Damn, I forgot all about it. Bree lifts an eyebrow, and we lock eyes again.

“You going to Charlie Point?” It’s a spot on the north side of the state park that neighbors some rapids.

“Yes, we’re old creatures of habit,” Paul says with a chuckle. “I’m sure you’ll be able to hold down the fort.”

“Of course,” Bree says, now holding her puppy. Boomer circles her feet. “We’ll make sure Boomer stays out of trouble.”

“Good, because Helen came over again today with an attitude. Supposedly, there’s a hole under the fence.”

Bree bites her lip, and I wonder if she knew.

“I’ll make sure the fence is secure, sir,” I say.

“Good. I know I can count on you.” His pat on my shoulder makes me feel like shit.

Paul walks inside with the dogs. We wait for the door to close before we turn toward each other.

“Did you know that Boomer was visiting Honey?” I ask her.

She gives a guilty smile. “I knew a little.”

Her mischievousness arouses me, but I act mad. “What, Bree? Helen is this close to suing us!”

“Helen is harmless.” Bree flips a hand down while holding the puppy, bouncing like she’s a baby. The puppy is trying to play-bite at her face.

“What did you see?”

She huffs out a breath. “I saw Boomer coming back from a visit, happy as can be. I just thought it was sweet. How he just went for it, regardless of the consequences.”

“He’s a dog. He doesn’t feel the consequences like we do.”

“Well, it’s still romantic that he ignores the obstacles. He just wants to be with the one he wants.”

Our eyes lock, and the undercurrent is strong.

“I have to get ready for yoga.” She turns, and I stand there, watching her climb the stairs.

I stand on the front lawn, frozen. A dog is more fearless than I am.

TWENTY-FOUR

BREE

My dad leaves with a kiss on the cheek and forty dollars on the counter. “You know, in case you want to get pizza or cookies or something,” he says, like I’m fifteen and he’s leaving me alone for the first time. When the door closes, I let out a heave of breath.

One night alone with the dogs and a man, in an apartment mere feet away, who is so hot and cold it makes my head spin.

After a powerful, promised orgasm, he’s kept his distance like he did before. Every time we get close, he pulls away. I know he wants me, and the obstacles are more and more innocuous. My dad loves him. It’s not about Paul Tanager. It’s Will.

There’s something in Will that’s holding him back, and it’s infuriating.

For my night alone, I head to the library as my first stop. I’m in the mood for a light, fluffy romance, so I have a Christina Lauren book in one hand and an Emily Henry book in the other. Turning, I see a man in his early thirties standing in front of me. Glasses, short brown hair...overall, a nice-looking man. His presence doesn’t hit me with instant attraction, but his easy smile gives me non-serial-killer vibes, which is always a plus when a man is staring at you.

“Hi,” he says. “I’m Cole Banks. I’ve seen you around town, and I’ve been working up the courage to say hi.”

“Well, hi! I’m Bree Tanager.” I shift the Emily Henry book under my armpit to shake his hand. His hand is damp, but

when he pulls it away, he immediately shoves them both in his pockets.

“Yeah, I know.” He smiles shyly, and it’s kind of cute.

“Are you a reader?” I ask.

He nods. “Mostly sci-fi and a thriller once in a while.”

“Thrillers are great. I haven’t gotten that much into sci-fi.”

The conversation stalls, and I smile as he hovers.

“Listen, I know you just met me, but I was wondering what you were doing this weekend.”

“Oh, um…” Absolutely nothing. There’s no reason to be unavailable tonight. Save me a trip to the store. Will sure as hell isn’t going to seize this golden opportunity, so why not give a nice, sci-fi-loving guy a chance? “I’m free, actually. Tonight. If you are. I’m not looking for a relationship, though.”

“That’s fine. How about we go out? Do you drink alcohol?”

I giggle at the formality. “I do drink alcohol.”

“Have you gone to Spirit and Bone, a couple blocks over? They make a great martini, if you’re into those. They do great burgers too.”

I don’t really like martinis, but I do like burgers. “Sure. I’ll meet you there. What time?”

“Tonight, at eight?”

“Sure.” He pulls out his phone and offers it to me. I wave it away. “I don’t actually have a phone.”

He squints like I just told him I’m an alien.

“So just call my dad’s landline if you can’t make it. Paul Tanager? I think he’s in the phone book. Do they still do phone books?”

Cole chuckles. “I don’t know. I think so. I won’t stand you up. I promise.”

How refreshing—a man who does what he says.
“Wonderful.”

I walk back to the house with my books, and I barely reach my front lawn before the dogs start barking, and Will is waiting, sitting on his top step, reading a book. He sees me and stands up, descending the stairs.

“Hi,” I say brightly, walking up my porch steps. I don’t linger for Will. It’s best if I pretend like he’s nobody.

“Hey, your dad left this morning, right?”

I nod, although I know my dad said something to Will before he left. The difference between standing in front of Cole and Will is startling. With Will, my body hums and remembers the fireworks, the cuddling, the sweet nothings against my ear that night at Mrs. Kramer’s. I wish it remembered the day of silence, how he avoided me, how he refuses to acknowledge he wants me as much as I want him. I’m tired of the games, tired of the indifference.

I’m done.

“I was wondering if you wanted to hang out tonight,” he says. “We can watch a movie or just...talk.”

I hold my breath because I want that more than anything else. Still, I promised a very nice man I would have a drink with him. “I would love to, but I can’t. I kind of have a date... tonight.”

Will’s smile falls, and it sticks a knife in my gut.

No, no, no. He deserves this disappointment.

“His name is Cole, and he was very nice and asked me if I wanted to get a drink. I figured there wasn’t any harm because...you know.”

We’re not together.

“Oh,” Will says. “I know Cole. He’s...fine.”

“Good,” I say, although fine pales in comparison to the spectacular man that stands in front of me. There’s awkwardness thick in the air. Saying, “*I wish it was you,*”

beats a dead horse. My orgasm, how slippery his fingers were from me, is proof enough that I want him, that anytime he wanted to, all he had to do was ask.

It's just...he doesn't want to.

"Well, I better play with the dogs if I'm going to be gone tonight," I say.

"Where are you going?"

"Spirit and Bone. At eight."

"I'll drive you."

"No." I hold up my hand. "It would be weird."

"Weird?" He looks like I just asked him to solve a calculus equation.

"You know, after...everything."

"Sure." He turns but then stops, hesitates. Holding my breath, I wait for him to say something, anything.

Don't go on that date.

Be with me. I want you. Let me make you come all night long.

Instead, he walks up his stairwell, crushing my heart.

I don't remember trudging up the stairs or closing the door. Boomer and Maple are waiting for me, licking my face as I love on them. Petting them makes me feel better, but there's a hole that Will carved out of my chest when he kissed me, when he gave me a taste of how good it could be.

Doesn't matter. I only pay attention to people who run toward me as much as I run toward them.

TWENTY-FIVE

WILL

I could punch a fucking wall.

Around seven-forty-five, I watched Bree leave her house, her hair messy in the way I like, reminding me of waking up in the clown room after she bucked against my hand and we cuddled the entire night.

I bite my fist when I see her outfit. She's wearing a low-cut white shirt that disappears into a fluttery, mint skirt that riles me up, and I have to rip myself away from the window.

Why is she looking that good for Cole?

Logan, JR, and I know Cole from around town. He's a young, socially awkward attorney who works for his dad, handling the mundane legal battles of Ivy River. I haven't heard anything nefarious about him, and he comes off as meek and mild-mannered. But I have to hand it to him that he asked Bree out the first chance he got, while I've stalled.

I have so much respect for him for doing that.

My buzzing phone breaks me out of my thoughts. When I see the name flash on the screen, I answer.

"What's up, JR?"

"I heard some gossip," my friend says on the other end. "I'm currently at Spirit and Bone, and Cole Banks is sitting at the bar with a single white rose, and I overheard he's waiting to meet Bree. Your Bree."

"She's not my Bree," I say, although she feels like she is.

“Numb Nuts, what the fuck are you doing?” JR asks, his voice reaching the next octave. “You’re going to lose to Cole? He rented the Rialto to show that weird deep-cut documentary about UFO sightings and invited a conspiracy theorist to give a talk afterward. That dude is a nerd.”

“Who cares what he likes?” I ask. “Nerds can make excellent partners.”

JR scoffs. “You are so stupid.”

“I can’t date her!” My voice comes out stronger than I anticipate. “Her dad...”

“Who cares about her dad? Do you want her?”

More than you’ll ever know. “Yes.”

“Then, get your tush into this bar and steal her away from him.”

“That’s rude,” I say. “Are you there alone?”

“Yeah, Logan couldn’t come out. Daddy stuff.”

“Don’t say it like that. Gross,” I say.

“You know what to do,” JR says, and the phone line goes dead.

I bite my lip and look at my black screen. “Fuck,” I say as I grab my keys and wallet and storm out of my apartment.

SPIRIT AND BONE tries to be Ivy River’s classiest bar, with small bistro tables and walls accented with cheap art the owners buy at flea markets, but it’s not. They still do typical bar food, which makes it confusing. It’s closer to JR’s apartment, so he goes more than we do, and he’s friends with all the bartenders.

JR’s eyes bug when he sees me.

“Hey, man,” he says, grabbing my hand and pulling me in for a bro hug. “Take a seat.”

“Club soda with lime?” the bartender asks, pointing a finger.

“Sure, thanks.” I rest my elbows on the shiny mahogany, scanning the bar for Bree and Cole.

JR takes a sip of his beer and points. “They’re on the terrace.”

I face forward, trying to appear uninterested, but all I want to do is break up that date, take her home, and make her come again and again until she’s exhausted from pleasure.

Lord knows Cole can’t find the clit.

The bartender sets down my standard drink, and I sip, the crispness of the bubbles scratching my throat.

“What are you going to do? Go out there and throw her over your shoulder like a caveman?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Too bad you don’t drink. Sober people are too rational.”

Cupping my hands together, I weigh my options. I’m here. It makes sense to politely interrupt and then figure out my next course of action on the spot. Or I can stay close—unless Cole tries something.

I doubt he will, but Cole was brave enough to ask her out. Maybe he’s also going to try for a kiss. I bet he’d be respectful about it.

Not me. I want to push her against a wall and crush her mouth with mine.

“So, when I realized I liked Autumn...”

I roll my eyes. “Really? Autumn, again?”

“This story about her is relevant, okay.” JR holds his hands out. “I didn’t think. I just went for it.”

“You think I should just go for it.”

“Absolutely,” JR says. “You are wound way too tight, my friend. I don’t know how you do it...be this *calm*...and *logical*.”

“Bree is nothing but risk.” Risk that her dad will hate me. Risk that I’ll hurt her with my history. Risk that this carefully

curated life will come crashing down just because I was so attracted to a blonde so goddamn beautiful when she comes.

“Exactly. Live a little. You’re thirty-fricking-three years old. Do something.”

Do something.

I take one more sip, straighten my spine, and drop a ten on the bar top.

“Are you leaving?” JR asks.

I shake my head. “Nope.”

“Attaboy.” He slaps my back so hard I lurch forward. As I walk to the back, rolling my shoulders, JR whoops and hollers.

TWENTY-SIX

BREE

“So, I reach this new level, and the monsters are coming at me, right...” Cole sweeps his arms wide, and I rest my chin on my hand. He’s detailing how he beat a video game right before he came here, and my mind drifts to that amazing burger I wolfed down to get any scrap of dopamine from this date.

Cole seems nice, and he’ll make a girl very happy one day. I’m just...bored. No matter how many ways I think about it, there’s not a chance I’ll sleep with Cole tonight.

Act interested, I tell myself, trying to smile.

A figure at the entrance to the terrace distracts me, and once I realize it’s Will, I straighten in my seat.

Now there’s a man I would fuck if he gave me a finger crook.

Cole continues to prattle, his voice raising in excitement as he gets to the game’s conclusion.

Will’s eyes scan the patio until they find me, and he swallows, his lips parting.

“What?” Cole asks, stopping his story with his fingers folded.

“Hold that thought. I need to use the ladies’ room.” I hold up a finger before I slide out of my seat. Will disappears inside, and I follow him to a partially obscured corridor that leads to what I assume is an employee office.

Will’s hand at my waist guides my back against a wall. He’s caging me, leaning so close his breath mingles with mine.

“What are you doing?” I remind myself to swallow.

He presses his thumb into my bottom lip, causing my mouth to gape and gasp.

“I’m on a date,” I barely protest.

“Ssh.” And then he replaces his thumb with his mouth.

The kiss is strong from the start, his head tilting to the side so he can consume me, our lips moving together as my hands thread into his hair as he presses his body against mine, so flush I can feel his hardness against my stomach. I can’t breathe. He’s stealing my air. Moaning into his lips, we kiss and kiss, and I let him overtake me.

He’s the first to pull away, his breath heavy as he swallows and presses his forehead to mine.

“I’m on a date,” I protest again, although my resolve is weak. He runs his thumb down my cheek to my chin, tilting me to look at him. His intensity, the way he holds my waist, makes it hard to breathe as our bodies mold together.

“I shouldn’t have let you go on this date. Come home with me,” he says, his voice husky and low. He kisses my neck, and a flutter of sound comes from me. I tear myself away, wiping my mouth as I leave passion behind for a nice time.

When I look back, Will leans against the wall, a hand on his hip. His gaze pleads with me to take him up on his offer.

Before I return to the terrace, I run my fingers through my hair and step out. Cole smiles as I sit down.

“You were gone a long time. Everything okay?”

Will appears in the doorway, stepping out, turning his head from one side to the other. Those lips I just devoured press into a whistle as he leans against the brick façade.

“Are you okay?” Cole asks again.

Smile, Bree, smile. “Perfect!” I sound like an overenthusiastic cheerleader.

Will folds his arms, and his biceps bulge. He’s not playing fair.

“What the...” Cole looks behind him and sees Will, who deliberately avoids his eye contact. Cole’s body language deflates as I smile, and it probably looks awkwardly fake.

“Are you involved with him?” Cole hikes his thumb behind him.

My shoulders slump. “It’s complicated.”

Cole pulls the cloth napkin off his lap. “I don’t get involved in complicated.”

“I’m so sorry.” I grab for my purse and pull out a couple twenties. He takes it when offered. “You’ll make a great boyfriend one day,” I say as I grab my purse.

Cole nods once. “I know.”

Although Will’s head is bowed, I see his smirk. He looks up from under his thick eyebrows when I approach. Then he stands, his gaze searing my insides.

“Take me home.”

WILL’S door is barely closed before I’m pressed against a wall again with his mouth on my skin. He kisses my cheek, my neck, my collarbone, drawing gasps as the next spot is more alive than the next. I pull my top over my head, and he peppers the swell of my breasts, covered by thin lace, before he picks me up by my bottom.

This is all I ever wanted from him, this lack of control and inhibition.

All this lust wipes my mind of any coherent thought as my core screams.

He shoves my bra cup down, thumbing my nipple as he leaves a trail of wet along the slope of my neck. Then, his tongue invades my mouth as his cock presses against my clit, teasing it, driving me to agony.

“I won’t be gentle.”

“Good.”

“The skirt stays on.”

He carries me farther into his apartment, to the bed I stayed in while he watched the puppies, a place I had many fantasies about a moment like this. We're savage over each other as Will lets go, kissing me all over. He unclasps my bra and looks at my freed breasts like they're gold before he squeezes them together, running one hand under my skirt, feeling my damp panties.

They're off, and I feel the cool air against my dampness, my legs spreading. For him.

He covers my body with his and kisses my neck, my shoulder, my breast.

His whisper is hot against my ear. “Please, Bree, ride my face.”

My core clenches, and I nod, a breath caught in my throat. He rolls off me, lying close to his headboard. I face it as I sink down slowly—I don't want to smother him. His hands on my thighs bring me the rest of the way. His mouth hovers over my clit, and I let out a moan so loud he giggles against my center, creating a delicious vibration.

“Oh my God,” I eek out as his tongue swirls around my pussy and finds the underside of my swollen clit again, flick after flick driving me over the edge. He focuses, his tongue working that tiny bead as I begin a slow ride, dictating the tempo. Will's fingers dig into my flesh, and that drives me closer.

As I get close, my panting speeds, and he presses me down more onto his mouth, making my orgasm more and more inevitable. I take my time, rolling my hips as his tongue alternates between fucking me and licking my clit. When he closes his mouth over it and sucks, I tumble over the edge, the tremors unbearable as I shudder against him, my fingers aching from digging into the headboard.

He sits up, and I slide down him, my bare pussy on the bulge of his pants as he growls, taking my lips with his. I taste myself on his tongue as I grind against his cock.

I feel like we're in for a long night.

"I knew you'd be my downfall," he says as he lifts me with his forearm and drops me down on my back. I look up at him, my skirt still around my waist, now flipped up. His bulge is right there, causing saliva to pool in my mouth. I reach for it and bite my lip. I know he loves it.

He reaches in his side table and pulls out a box of condoms as I watch him unzip, revealing his black boxer briefs and then lowering them. His cock bobs once it's released. It's long and swollen, a truly beautiful sight. I widen my legs, ready for him.

Once he rolls the condom on, he grips my neck to pull me up, and I straddle him again.

"Take a deep breath," he says. I do as he says, taking a deep gulp of air as I sink down, little by little. He fills me with a delicious stretch, and he groans as we join, as we are one.

His groans stoke blazes in my belly as I roll my hips. Will's cock satiates me as I bob up and down. My hands tangle in his dark hair as I lean over him. My breasts dangle in Will's face, and he takes the opportunity, popping a nipple into his mouth.

When another orgasm builds, I sit straight, my hands on his thighs, hips popping up and down, bouncing on his cock, and I can feel it growing in me, stretching me, filling me.

My head drops back with pleasure as he runs a hand down my sternum, between my breasts, to my waist, and his thumb presses against my clit, causing me to explode again.

"That's it, baby. Get there."

The orgasm washes over me, and before I can recover, I'm flipped onto my back, his cock temporarily falling out of me, but then he's right back in. Will captures a wrist over my head as he pounds into me, my cries louder and louder. My hand is on his ass, feeling him pulse into me.

He groans into my neck as he gets closer, closer, and then I bite his neck gently, but he cries out. He pulls back to look at

me before he flips me onto all fours, his hand on my neck for leverage. He flips my skirt, grips it, and enters me.

His thrusts, his groans, become frantic, untamed, as he takes what he needs, and I'm panting as he drives into me. When he comes, he lets out a guttural sound, flopping on top of me, his cock still in me as he kisses my spine and then presses his face against it.

He collapses, and I snuggle next to him, spent, my arm draped over his stomach.

My fingers twirl into his minimal black chest hair, and I reach for a kiss. He pushes the hair from my face to kiss my forehead.

We say nothing because this changes everything.

In the early hours, I slip from his bed slowly.

I have plans to hike with Sienna early the next day, and it's best I leave now. His arms are warm and heavy, too easy to get lost in. Before I leave, I watch Will's eyelashes flutter, his full lips slightly parted.

I take a quick glance around his bureau. My fingers trace the frame over a black-and-white photo of him, I assume as a teenager, with another boy, slightly older, looking over the ocean. I look back, wondering what secrets he's keeping from me.

Maybe they are secrets he's keeping from everyone.

I know this is a one-time thing. It's why I savored it, burned it into my memory.

I linger, watching his eyelashes flutter, the gentle whooshes of breath from his full lips.

When I'm back in Palo Alto, when I'm with some new guy who's nice, I'll think about the man with the black hair who made my body feel this electric.

TWENTY-SEVEN

BREE

“Bree, earth to Bree!” Sienna snaps her fingers, and I shake out of my daydream. Instead of being with Will, him moving in and out of me, I’m on a trail in Ivy National Park with my friend. She suggested a four-mile hike to the waterfalls and maybe a swim in the watering hole before seven. It’s gotten busier since Memorial Day, and the days have gotten hotter.

The walk has been beautiful, full of nature and trees. We’ve bounced between all sorts of topics, including her agent’s desperate attempts to get her out of her break and how she caught her brother naked when she visited his apartment. As she talks about bleaching her eyeballs, my mind drifts to the night before. How the moonlight hued the ridges of Will’s muscles, how the curve of his backside looked moving over me.

Then, I lose moments and can’t follow the conversation.

“You’ve been super spacy today.”

“So sorry, what were we talking about?”

“Nothing that important. What’s going on with you?”

“I’m a little tired, but other than that, nothing.”

And by nothing, I mean two-and-a-half orgasms for me, two for him. I paid him back for the night in the clown room.

Sienna studies my face before walking ahead of me. Her shoes crunch branches and leaves. “I know that look.”

“What look?”

She stops and takes a few steps to me. “You got laid.”

“Nooooo, what makes you say that?” My voice comes out high-pitched, and I wince.

“You lying ho. Who is it?” Sienna’s eyes widen. I shield my face from her so she can’t see this shit-eating grin. I eek out a response, and she punches me in the shoulder. “Are you boinking Will?”

“No comment,” I say, and Sienna runs toward a big boulder, climbs on top of it, and shoots her arms over her head.

“That’s my girl!” She whoops with her spinning fist. “I knew it would happen since that night at Three Rules. I just *knew* it.”

My face hurts from my grinning. “Shut up.”

“I knew he couldn’t resist you, you harlot. Tell me, was it good?”

I nod so violently my head might fall off. My cheeks buzz with the memory. All I can do is give a thumbs up with a pursed bottom lip.

“I knew it.” Sienna snaps her fingers. “These small-town boys. They know what’s up. Not the super-slick LA boys who never had to develop a sack strategy because they’re so hot. There was a guy I slept with once who was obnoxiously beautiful. I should’ve known. He was a malfunctioning robot in bed. Just...” Sienna mimics convulsing that looks like thrusting.

I wheeze, bending over. I begin hyperventilating because I’m laughing so hard.

“Couldn’t find the clit if I gave him a detailed treasure map. Will looks like he took copious notes in sex ed. Maybe did some research on his own.”

Blushing, I nod rhythmically, remembering how many times he found it.

“Damn it, you’re so lucky.” Sienna sits down on the boulder, dejected. “I need to get laid.”

“What about Logan?”

Sienna pretend-barfs, her cheeks bulging as she runs behind a tree. “How dare you put that bad juju out in the universe. Logan is...” She sticks out her tongue.

“I think he’s handsome,” I say. Logan’s eyes are a disorienting blue...so captivating. And while I’ve never been into beards, his is well-trimmed and full, perfect for a lady who likes that. He’s also tall, broad, and a lumberjack. No wonder women toss him bedroom eyes everywhere he goes.

“He is... We just, well...” She waves her hand around.

“Spill it. I told.”

“I know, and thank you for that. Truly.” She presses her hand to her chest. “JR and Logan have been friends, like, forever, and I had a tiny crush—like, miniscule, could-fit-on-a-pinhead-small crush—on him when I was, like, fourteen.”

“Okay.” I join her on the boulder and fold my legs, resting my feet on a crevice.

“He rejected me. Told me it would never happen because he didn’t see me like that.”

“So you vowed to hate him forever?”

“Correct.”

I do the math. Logan would’ve been nineteen when Sienna was fourteen. “Sienna, you know you were walking jailbait, right?”

“You with your logic. Does this mean you’ll stay now?”

“I want to finish school.”

“Oh, yeah. Fancy Stanford.” Sienna jumps from the rock to the dirt path. “What were you going to school for?”

I hesitate. “I want to be a lawyer. Like my mom.”

“That’s a lot of school. You could go to Chico State. I think there’s a law school in Chico too. It is an hour away, though.”

I let out a laugh. “My mom would roll over in her grave.”

“Fine, be uppity,” she says. “Well, in the meantime, have some fun. Are you going public with Will at the party tonight?”

I shake my head a vehement no. Logan’s parents are having a joint retirement / bon voyage party tonight at Idlewild, a swanky farm-to-fork restaurant, and we’ve all been invited. I snuck a peek at the household calendar my dad and Will have, and Will should be off in time to go to the party tonight. While we’ll be in the same room after the night we had, I have zero expectations for any attention tonight.

“I think it was a one-time thing.”

“Did he say that?”

“No. It’s just the vibe I got.”

“Goddamn it, you’re probably right. That man. Level-headed to a fault.”

“I know. It’s infuriating.”

“I know your clothes would fall off if he gave you that chin nod.”

“Absolutely. I hate myself. I *should* be single.”

Sienna pulls me to her in a side-hug. “You can be single and bone Will.”

“No matter how good it was, no matter how strong the orgasms, it can’t happen again.”

“Stop rubbing it in. Gosh.”

“Has Will ever had a girlfriend that you know of?” Might as well dig a spike straight into my heart.

“Nope. He’s been single since he came to Ivy River. You know men don’t get gossip at near the level I require, but the murmur around town is he doesn’t date.”

My stomach drops as I follow her up a tiny incline, dotted with rocks for traction.

“Bree, you might be special. Who knows?”

“Yeah, who knows?” We switch to other topics, but I question if I’ve made a huge mistake. Because now that I know how good we are together, I’d do it again. If I got an inkling from him, I’d been ready and willing, with open legs and a stupidly open heart.

“BREE, ARE YOU ALMOST READY?” Dad asks from the other side of my door.

“Yes, give me two seconds!” I shout back, turning each direction in my full-length mirror. I styled my chin-length hair into beachy waves, paired it with delicate circle earrings, a white, eyelet sundress and cognac sandals. I think I look pretty, but all I really care about is if Will’s eyes glaze over me.

If you want to ruin a man, wear a sundress.

I spray on the lemon-vanilla perfume I know Will likes, and I nod to myself once as I heave out a breath and leave my room. Will is looking down as I descend the stairs and when he looks up, his lips part, and his throat moves with a swallow.

Mission accomplished.

Dad smiles and claps his hands once. “You look beautiful, Pumpkin. Doesn’t she look nice, Will?”

“Yes, sir,” he says, playing with his hands.

“Let’s get going.” Dad leads the way to his truck, and Will and I walk side-by-side. Will’s hands fist at his sides. I sneak a peek at his short-sleeved shirt, the top three buttons loose to show the chest I ran my hands over last night, and I swallow.

This might be tough.

It’s a short ride to the restaurant, but secrets hang in the air. Dad is oblivious to our silence as he talks about the quick camping trip, how they stayed up until three a.m., and how a raccoon snuck into the campsite and stole some Cheetos.

When we arrive, Will offers a hand so I can climb out of my dad’s truck, and his thumb brushes over my knuckles a

little too long after I step onto the gravel. It's not fair, but I smile in gratitude. We walk in together, and I squeeze my arms together as a shield.

We're just two neighbors who carpooled together. No promises. No future.

The crowd is already lively when we enter. A large yellow banner saying *Bon Voyage, Steve and Irene* hangs on one wall, and there are picture frames of them in a different stages of life. I love the family photo of Steve and Irene with their kids, Logan and Casey, while Lily stands in front of her grandmother.

Sienna squeals when she sees me, even though we just spent three hours together that morning. She's wearing a bright-pink suit with no undershirt and white stilettos, and I feel underdressed. After pulling me away from my dad and Will, Sienna leans in close, like we're conspiring.

"Bree, you look good enough to eat. Has Will eaten you tonight?"

"No, nothing. Not even a drop."

Will got home minutes before we were supposed to leave, so we weren't able to discuss last night.

Maybe we won't discuss it at all.

It was a night of sex. A one-night stand with a man I have to see again. Nothing more.

"He's looking at you like he wants to find a room. Just FYI, there are decent locks on the bathrooms."

Rolling my eyes, I hug her. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." She smacks my butt as I walk away, laughing under my breath.

I feel Will's gaze on me as I mingle, saying hi and exchanging pleasantries. Tiffany, my boss, stands by the alcohol assortment with her husband, Tony. Her shoulders are heavier with each passing day. I've been getting updates on her mom, and it sounds like she's deteriorating quickly,

becoming more and more reliant on Tiffany. Tiffany brightens when she sees me, and we embrace each other.

“How are you doing?” I ask.

“As good as can be expected. Last night was rough. I needed this.” She lifts the glass of wine in her hand. “Thank you so much for taking over more work at the studio.”

“You’re more than welcome.” In the couple weeks I’ve been helping, I revamped her client database and made countless calls to existing members to check in, see how they were liking the studio. I reorganized the supply closet and went through applications for new teachers. The whole time, I felt a pang in my gut that I wouldn’t be working for Tiffany long-term. It’s the first time I’ve worked for a business I believe in, that restores me instead of depleting me.

“It’s getting harder,” Tiffany says, her voice thick with emotion. I know it’s more than the studio. Without a word, I hug her, and she cries softly on my shoulder as her husband rubs her back.

“Well, your brother is in town now. That’s good.” Tiffany’s brother, Lamar, came in from LA to help.

“Yes, it is,” she says, wiping her nose. “He’s been a big help, actually. I feel so guilty being here, though. I should spend all the time I can with her. Who knows how much time she has left.”

“I get it.” I grab for her hand. I remember when my mom got worse, needing around-the-clock care I couldn’t give her, and how I used to cry in the car for leaving, just so I could have a moment to have a quick break for my crumbling mental health. Going out with my friends used to not be worth it because the guilt I felt trumped any fun I might have. “You need a break too.”

She nods, tears slipping from her cheeks.

“Thank you so much, Bree, for what you’ve done with the studio. It’s been helpful,” Tony says.

Tiffany grabs my hands. “I want to formally give you a job. Pay you an actual salary.”

“No, that’s not necessary.” I wave it off.

“No, it is. I feel terrible that you do all this work when really you should be my office manager. Officially.”

I shake my head. “You already give me a free membership.”

“You need to be paid. You’re worth it. I won’t take no for an answer.”

“I’m leaving in July.”

“Is it selfish of me to ask you to stay?”

I hold her hands in mine as my lips press together. “I can’t promise anything.”

“I’ll take it.” She hugs me again and then pulls away. “I think there’s someone who wants to talk to you.”

We both look at Will, who stands on the other side of the room, holding a clear drink, sneaking glances at me.

“Take care of yourself,” I say as I hug her and Tony one last time. After pouring myself a glass of red wine, I cross the room to stand next to Will. I need something to hold, but I want to be clear, focused.

This wine is just a prop.

My stomach flips standing so close to him, hearing his breath, noticing how he stiffens with my proximity. I wonder if he can smell my perfume and if he’s thought about last night, how it felt to be together.

“How are you?” His voice is gruff and makes my core clench more.

“Good.”

“You look pretty.”

I blush, looking down, because he noticed. “Thank you. I hoped you’d like this dress.”

“I’d like it better on my floor.”

I grin stupidly as folks mill by, saying hello to both of us. My dad is talking to Steve and Joe, JR’s dad, in the corner, so

we're safe. My wine-less hand hangs between us, and then I feel a flutter as Will touches his fingers to mine, tangles them, and I close my eyes to let his touch wash over me.

“You ran away this morning.”

I remind myself to breathe. “Yeah, I thought it would be best if I left. Since it can't happen again, right?”

“Right.”

I hear his shuddered breath as our hands brush more.

TWENTY-EIGHT

WILL

That sundress.

All day long at work, I pep-talked myself. *You will not touch Bree tonight. You will keep your hands to yourself.*

Then, she descended the staircase wearing that white dress, and my dick hardened to granite.

One night with her did nothing to satiate my lust for her. I thought I could sustain myself on the fantasy, the memory of our night together, enough to squelch it. However, less than twenty-four hours has passed, and my need has grown stronger, and I feel like if I don't touch her, I'll go insane.

Still, I tormented myself, watching her float from one conversation to the next, holding an untouched glass of wine, looking like a piece of chocolate cake in that dress. I sipped my club soda, always looking for her short blonde hair—hair I want to fist in my hand.

Bree found me, and our hands entwined. That destroyed my last shred of self-restraint.

I need her again—and now. Never mind the publicness of it or making good decisions.

I want to make some bad ones.

“Bree?”

“Yeah?”

“Follow me.”

She flicks an eyebrow as I leave her side, walking in the direction of the bathrooms. When I look back, she's trailing me with a curious look etched in her eyebrows.

I open the door to the men's bathroom, a room with two stalls and two urinals. I check the final stall, and I hear a click. When I look back, her arm is behind her back.

"So, I locked us in."

I shove my hands in my pockets. "I heard that."

"So, what are you going to do, Stone?"

In three steps, I cross the length of the bathroom to engulf her. I kiss her like she's water and I'm dying of thirst. Tongues twist, and our lips open and close as we make out like two teenagers. She unbuckles my belt, unbuttons my pants, and dips her hand in, encasing my hardness. My mouth stretches against hers, because her hand feels so good, stroking me in my briefs.

Her hands run over my ass as she pushes my pants and boxer briefs down. We maneuver over to a stall, and I slam the door behind me, pants around my thighs. She lets go of my cock so I can pick her up, one sandal flying off her foot as I slide the strap of her dress down and kiss all around her breast, taking her nipple in my mouth. Her giggles mix with moans as I devour her, swirling my mouth around her, pushing the other cup down so she is exposed to me.

"You are so goddamn beautiful," I say as I kiss her ear, her throat, her collarbone. Her bottom sits on my forearm as I reach into my back pocket for my wallet, and she breathes into my ear. "I'm on the pill and got tested after I broke up with Scott. It was negative. I want to feel you in me. No barriers."

Fire booms in the pit of me. I won't last long if I use nothing, but fucking her bare would be a dream come true.

"I had a physical last month. I'm negative too. I haven't slept with anyone but you since."

"Fuck me raw, then," she breathes into my ear. Groaning, I take her mouth again, and we're both panting for air as I tear her panties from her.

Gripping the back of her neck, I sink into her, feeling everything—her wetness, how soft and tight she is. Her mouth parts, a tiny cry at the back of her throat, but our eyes connect, her face shuddering with pleasure.

“I will never get enough of this,” I say as I slowly withdraw and push back in, her moan matching my thrust. With nothing between us, feeling all of her, I try to hold myself back so I don’t lose control. Another long, slow thrust in and out, and her mouth parts further. I will let myself lose every modicum of self-control soon, but for now, the anguish is fucking beautiful.

“Oh, yes,” she says when I pick up speed, plunging into her, feeling everything. She’s perfectly still against the wall of the stall as I plow into her, shoving deeper, feeling another level I didn’t know possible. It feels so good, but I take breaks, kissing her neck, kissing her breasts—making sure she’s taken care of.

“I’m so close,” she says, and I slip my hand between us to feel her clit, plump and taut against my finger.

That does it. I fuck her hard as she cries into my shirt, muffling the sounds I long to hear. Taking a little bit of her hair, I tug gently so we can look at each other. Then, I come unglued, unloading everything I have into her as she cries out too.

When our orgasms slow, I take one long, hard kiss and set her down. She rearranges her skirt, and I scoop up her torn panties. Bree covers her mouth with a laugh.

“You really did a number on them.”

“There’s no saving them.”

She re-covers her breasts and then raises onto her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. “Thanks for...”—she waves all around her—“this. It was a nice surprise.” She walks past me, and I pat her butt.

“Just...nice?” I ask as I circle her waist from behind, nuzzling into her neck.

“More than nice.”

“Good.” I kiss her neck, and she giggles.

“I guess I’ll just be at this party without panties, like a trollop.” She turns around, reaching to kiss me.

I give a long, drawn-out liplock, and she sighs against them. I wet a paper towel and wipe her as she leans against my chest. I whisper, “You’re my trollop.”

“Oh. That’s kind of fucked up but sweet.” She smiles and kisses me, long and slow. “I’ll go first. You follow a little bit after.”

She unlocks the door and checks first before leaving. Bracing my hands, I lean down over the sink, thinking. Long breaths in, long breaths out. I tuck her torn panties into my pocket and pat it.

My mind whirls with visions of Bree, impaled on my cock, moaning against my neck. I’m reckless with her, pulling her into a public restroom because I couldn’t handle her in a white dress.

I could be writing my own death wish, but I don’t care.

Staying away from Bree Tanager is a fate worse than death.

TWENTY-NINE

BREE

“There you are.” My dad stands in front of me, all smiles. My heart stops, thinking he can tell what I just did in the bathroom with his employee.

“Hi, Dad!” I link my arm with his, pulling him away from the bathroom so he doesn’t see Will leaving.

“My friends and their wives want to talk to you.” Dad ushers me to Steve and Joe. Steve is a lot taller than Joe, with sun-weathered skin and thinning white hair. He has a nice, quiet presence, while Joe is a bundle of extrovert, his face erupting in smiles that I’m approaching them. Irene, Steve’s wife, and Diane, Joe’s wife, stand side-by-side, holding matching glasses of white wine.

“Bree, it’s so nice to see you again.” Joe takes me into a bear hug. He always gave good ones. “How are you, kiddo? She was a bonus daughter at our house those summers. Sienna and you were thick as thieves.”

“We loved having you.” Diane squeezes me in a way that makes me miss my own mother.

I laugh, remembering the late mornings I would explode into their kitchen, looking for Sienna to get into mischief.

“Congratulations on your retirement and the trip!” I say to Steve and Irene as I take turns hugging them.

“Thank you! This cruise is on my bucket list.” Irene’s soft brown eyes shimmer.

“I’m just excited not to work anymore,” Steve jokes.

“How long are you staying, Bree?” Diane asks.

“July,” I answer. The thought of leaving carves out a hole in my heart.

“Bree technically lives in Palo Alto and owns a house there. Holly inherited it from her parents and gave it to Bree. My daughter is going back to school. Stanford.” Dad smiles at me, and it warms my insides.

“It’s so special that you get to live at that house while you go to school,” Irene says.

I nod. “Mom would’ve wanted it that way. It just took a little bit to get there.”

A major detour when I followed my heart, and my heart was dead wrong.

“That house and school meant a lot to Holly,” Dad adds. “Her mother would be proud.”

“Palo Alto is really, really nice,” Steve adds.

“I don’t know. Ivy River is pretty great.”

Everyone looks at me, wondering why a rural town three hours from a major airport would be “pretty great.” I shrug and say, “This town is charming and is full of great people. Only boring people are bored, right?”

The group chuckles and takes drinks of their beverages while I still hold my full glass of wine. Taking a page from Will’s book, I set it down. Why not enjoy this party sober? Why not avoid blurting out that I just had sex in the bathroom with Will?

“Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen,” a deep voice I would know anywhere thrums next to me, and I hold my breath. Out of the corner of my eye, Will stands there, a quick flick of his gaze, and I’m feeling warmth crawl up and down my spine.

“There’s the golden boy! How are you?” Steve says, shaking Will’s hand. Will also shakes Joe’s hand and smiles at me in acknowledgment. He gives a polite hug to Irene and Diane.

“Congratulations. Retirement and a big trip? Exciting,” Will says. Our gazes latch, and he rolls his lips before he looks away.

Dad clamps Will on the shoulder. “Isn’t he nice? So polite.”

“He is! Are you still seeing Allison, Will?” Diane asks.

“No.”

“Oh, good, because our niece, Cassidy, just moved to town and doesn’t know anyone. I was wondering if you’d be interested in being set up,” Diane says. “Like a date.”

Don’t look at him. Don’t look at him.

Will laughs and blushes. “Thank you for thinking of me, but I’m kind of seeing someone new.”

Don’t blush. Don’t blush.

“That’s great, Will. Who’s the lucky lady?”

“We’re keeping it private. For now.”

“Maybe you’ll finally get married like us old farts,” Steve says.

Will says nothing, and I want to explode.

“Excuse me. I think I need some air.” I put one foot in front of the other to get me to a door, any door. The heat hits me like a sledgehammer when I walk outside, the sun about to set amongst the trees. My sandals slip against the gravel as I walk to the edge of the parking lot. Steps sound behind me, and I know who it is.

“Will?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Seeing someone?” I spin and try to contain a smile.

His steps grow closer. “Well, yeah.”

I see a child’s bracelet in the dirt, and it’s a good thing to focus on instead of the man who could break my heart into a million pieces. “Who is it?”

“You know.”

A smile breaks through on my face.

“You know I’m leaving.”

“I know.” He steps closer. “It’s just that...I think about you all the time. However much time I get will have to be good enough.”

I could cry. “Really?”

“Really.” He pulls me into a grove of trees, shielded by redwood trunks bigger than our bodies. He holds my hands, his thumbs rubbing against my skin. “I don’t think we should tell your dad. Since we’ll just...have the time we have together before you leave.”

His hand caresses my cheek, and I lean into it. “Keep it a secret?”

“Yes. It’ll just be us.”

I stand on my tippy-toes to kiss him. When I pull away, he leans his forehead into mine, his lips parted to breathe.

“Come to me tonight,” he says.

I nod against his forehead and close my eyes.

THIRTY

BREE

“Where are we going?” I follow Will on a trail through Ivy National Park, following a path opposite to the one I hiked with Sienna. According to Will, locals only know about this spot, and it’s top secret, never to be shared with tourists.

Yesterday after yoga, I found one daisy and a note on my pillow, asking me on a hike, with a singular W beside a heart. While he was working, I slipped a note under his door, agreeing.

Ever since our tryst in the bathroom, we’ve traded off on who visits whom, each of us risking exposure by my dad or a German shepherd. I’ve fallen asleep in the apartment a few times to wake up in the early morning, sneaking out so my dad isn’t sipping coffee as I go through the side door.

It’s been a week of sneaking around, stealing moments, and mind-blowing sex in the dark corners of the night.

A date in the middle of the day feels naughty.

Our favorite.

So, we sneak away to be amongst the trees with the gentle trickling of Ivy River to our north. The sun glints through the leaves, and I feel light and happy. We’re in search of his favorite open space, a place he goes to think and reflect.

I want to know him, all of him, and seeing his special spot feels like I’m being let in, slowly but surely.

Will adjusts a full backpack on his shoulders, his biceps bulging as he grips the straps. “You’ll see. It’s beautiful.” He

looks back at me like he means me too. “I’ve never brought anyone here, but I wanted to share it with you.”

He walks off the well-worn path, through a thicket of bushes, and we’re in a meadow, spring grass high and bumblebees buzzing from flower to flower. There’s a curtain of cloudless baby-blue sky overhead. It’s cool today, not too hot, with a breeze picking up tendrils of my hair.

“This is wonderful,” I say, running in the center of the grass, twirling like I’m in a musical.

He laughs as he shucks the backpack and unzips it, pulling out a buffalo-checked blanket. “I figured we could have a picnic.”

I clap my hands because I love picnics, and I’ve hoped for another one since our last one with cookies by the river. I peck him on the lips, and then he kisses me on the forehead as he unloads his stash. There are grapes, cheese, crackers, and chocolate-covered raisins. He pulls out a half bottle of white wine and a plastic glass.

“All yours, Bree.” Will unwraps the wine’s foil and pulls out a corkscrew, popping the cork. He pours the pale-yellow liquid and hands it to me. It’s cold and crisp, fruity on my tongue.

“What do you have to drink?”

He pulls out a sweating sparkling water, and we cheers, then take long sips.

After setting my wine to the side, I lie down, my hands under my head. “This is heaven.”

“It really is.”

“So, Will.”

“Yes, Bree.”

I lean against my open palm. “So, we’ve been sleeping together for a little bit.”

“Yes, that is happening.”

“And I don’t know a lot about you.”

His fingers dance across my arm, running his fingernails against my skin, creating little shivers. “What do you want to know?”

“Where do your parents live?” I blurt.

Will presses his lips together. “Orange County.”

“They’re both still around?”

“As far as I know.”

“Do you go back often?”

Will swallows and looks off into the trees. “Not really.”

“Do they come here?”

He shakes his head, and I sit up, trying to see his face. Is that pain? Anger?

“I don’t talk to my parents. We had a breaking point when I was eighteen, and I haven’t talked to them since.”

I want to ask. I want to know. Pain etches in his expression as he plucks a piece of grass. “I was kind of a screw-up when I was younger.”

“You? Will Stone was a bad boy? Hot.”

“Trust me, there was nothing sexy about it.”

“That’s for me to decide.”

Will laughs that deep chuckle from his throat, and it strains my heart. “Lots of drinking. Lots of fighting. Bad grades. When your dad thinks you’re a piece of shit...well, sometimes you want to live up to expectations.”

I hug him as we sit there. How anyone could think that of this kind, honorable man is baffling. “You turned it around, though. Look at you now.”

“Believe me, it took a lot of therapy and deep work to get here.”

“Ooh, therapy. You’re getting me all hot and bothered.” I take a sip of wine.

He just laughs, drinking his sparkling water.

“How’d you end up living with my dad?”

“Oh.” Will brightens and grabs my hand, lacing our fingers together. “I wanted to be close to a national park. I knew the state officers sometimes helped out the federal ones in the parks, so I saw this opening, and I applied. Your dad hired me and invited me out to lunch to meet. We went to Blaine’s. I got a chance to walk around, and while it’s not customary for game wardens to live so closely to each other, I mentioned that I thought this town was great, and he offered me the apartment over the garage. That was that. We just hit it off, and he introduced me to his friends and his friends’ kids, and now I have a whole life here.”

Guilt claws at my stomach. “And I could ruin everything.”

“Maybe. It’ll feel good, though.” His thick eyebrows wiggle at me as he kisses my cheek. His lips trail down to mine, his breath sweet.

He pulls me down so I’m lying on him. He smooths down my hair and kisses my head as we look up at the sky. There’s a puffy cloud we watch as it stretches from one tree line to another.

Will’s arm bends, his hand under his head. On the inside of his left bicep is a black bear, roaring. Its detail is intricate, and while it looks older, it’s still delicate and fine-tuned. I trace the outline of it with my finger, and then boop the bear on the nose.

There’s that laugh I love so much, mixing with his words. “What are you doing?”

“Booping your bear.”

“You can do that later.”

“Maybe.” I give him a sly smile.

“Tease.” He squeezes me tight, and I stick out my tongue and make a sound. He pauses and says, “It’s for my brother.”

“Oh?”

“He...died. When I was seventeen.”

“Wow, I’m so sorry. That’s awful.” I bite my lip. “How old was he?”

His jaw clenches. “Nineteen. Just finished his freshman year at college.”

“That’s so sad.”

“We used to hike and camp all the time. It was our escape from our parents. When we were out in the forest, we were just Alex and Will, you know.

“We saw a bear once. It stood up in front of us, and we were frozen, so scared. It finished its warning and turned and ran away. We were so relieved. It became my favorite story about him. We joked about who would have outrun whom if the bear had started chasing us.”

I wonder if Alex’s death caused Will to leave, to never talk to his parents again. “It sounds like you were close.”

“Our dad didn’t make it easy.” Will pops a grape into his mouth and looks over at me. “We should get going.”

This is maybe why he’s guarded. Losing his brother must’ve been difficult.

“Is that a picture of you and Alex? In your apartment?”

Will nods. “For some reason, it’s the only photo I have. We weren’t *take-pictures* kinds of guys. I regret it.”

I bite my lip. “Do you want to get a photo? Of us?”

One corner of his mouth curls. “Sure. That would be nice.”

He sets up his phone in a crevice of a tree and sets the timer. He runs to me as it counts down, picking me up like a bride. I reach my arms overhead in joy.

After the phone takes the photo, he lets me down and runs back to check, giving me a confirmation nod. “It’s perfect.”

“Good. I want a copy so I can frame it and look at it while I study. Oh, studying. How I don’t miss you.”

Will pauses and stares at the ground. “Do you want to go back to school?”

“Of course,” I say a little too quickly. “That’s always been the plan.”

“It just seems like you don’t want to. Alex... I... Never mind.”

“What about Alex?”

“It’s nothing.” He waves it off. “You just don’t seem excited, is all. Plenty of people don’t go to college and are just fine. If it’s not for you...”

I feel my mother over my shoulder, watching this interaction. Of course I want to finish school. It’s been the dream since I was a kid, sitting at the table with my mother, pretending to read my picture books like my mother’s case files. My mother made an impact and changed lives. What have I done that’s been impactful? I dated a loser guy. I worked in fine dining because it was comfortable. I escaped to this small town and got involved with another man who might leave me even more heartbroken.

School is my only lifeline.

“Thank you for your concern,” I say. “And thank you for opening up to me.”

Will doesn’t respond. He just hugs me. I straddle him, hugging him close as he kisses my ear, my hair, my jaw.

For a sliver of a fraction of a moment, this feels like it has a future.

Like I’m not leaving.

Like our relationship wouldn’t devastate his relationship with my dad.

Like Will doesn’t want this to be casual either.

THIRTY-ONE

WILL

“Dina gave you the whole back room?” I ask, looking around the spacious room kept under lock and key most of the time at Spirit and Bone Pub. Dina is a childfree, unmarried woman in her fifties who prefers to spend her time in two places—her property on the outskirts of town or the bar. She’s blunt and has zero tolerance for bullshit. It takes a lot to earn her trust and, thus, earn the back room.

Logan must’ve buttered up Dina for months to get the back room for his birthday.

Logan sets his hands on his hips. “I deserve it. Lily hasn’t been taking my parents leaving well. Lots of crying.”

“Is she home alone?”

He shakes his head. “Diane is staying with her, although I’m concerned what state the kitchen will be in when I get home. Especially with the dog.”

“Baking?”

Logan nods. “Diane waved a recipe in my face when I got there.”

“Maybe Lily will be old enough to stay on her own soon. Twelve is acceptable to stay home, right? No one will call CPS on you.”

“I think when they’re twelve, you can be gone for a couple hours, but Lily’s scared if I take a shower at night. All because that twat Brooklyn showed the girls *Scream* at a slumber party. They’re twelve, for fuck’s sake. Those girls are making fun of

her now, and I want to make their lives a living hell, but I, an adult man, cannot.”

“Rock and hard place.”

“Seriously.”

“Who all is coming?” I ask.

“JR, of course, a few guys from the mill, Bree Tanager...”

“You invited Bree?”

“Bree’s nice. Why not?” Logan tilts his head, investigating my expression. “You like her, don’t you?”

“No,” I flat-out lie. It’s more than like. I’m falling for her, no matter how much I try not to. She’s leaving. This will be over in a matter of days.

“Paul is going to murder you,” Logan says. “Have you done anything with her?”

I flinch, and Logan covers his mouth. “You did not.”

I pump the air with my hand. “Shush, it’s a secret.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“A couple weeks,” I say.

“You haven’t said anything to Paul yet? You’re dead, bro. Dead.”

JR wanders in, looking around the room. “Nice. Did you sleep with Dina to get this?”

Logan shakes his head. “But you know who’s sleeping with someone he shouldn’t be?”

It dawns on JR immediately, and he covers his mouth and then smacks me. “You’re sleeping with Bree?”

My eyes close, and I nod. “I am. But it’s a secret.”

“You’re trying to avoid your own murder. Got it.” JR mimes zippering his lips shut. “Fort Knox.”

“JR asked me if he could invite a woman to this.”

“What?” I turn to JR, whose cheeks flush as he pushes me.

“Maisie. She works at the outdoor store in Sable Springs.” JR flaps his hands at us. “Don’t make a big deal out of it.”

“It is a big deal. First woman in...”

“Six years,” JR says.

“Sienna caught him looking at Autumn’s Instagram again,” Logan says. My eyebrows scrunch at him, so he answers my expression. “She texts me when JR goes to the dark side.”

“She has this new boyfriend. Mitch. I got replaced by a *Mitch*.”

“JR, dude. You got to stop doing that.”

“I’m going on a date tonight, aren’t I?” JR asks. We all quiet. It’s best not to push JR too hard about Autumn. It’s a sore subject, for sure, because he’s mentioned that he fucked up, and that was why he lost her.

“What do you guys want from the bar? I’m buying,” I say.

JR asks for a beer, and Logan asks for Johnny Walker on the rocks.

Dina is behind the bar today, and she grumbles when I thank her for the back room. After ordering, I glance at the door for Bree. I’m chatting with a local who hangs out at the bar, Fitz, when the air changes. I know she’s there.

She’s wearing those frayed jean shorts she knows I like with a red top—her color. Her vibrancy for life makes her glow, and my mind goes directly to the pits of hell when I think about her, everything I want to do to her, how I want to make her moan.

She smiles when she sees me and scans the room suspiciously as she walks next to me.

“Fancy meeting you here,” she says.

“Hi, how are you?” It’s taking everything in me not to grab her face and kiss her right now.

“Good.” Dina walks over and clocks our connection immediately.

“Will, who is your girlfriend?”

“She’s not my girlfriend. This is Bree Tanager, Paul’s daughter.”

“Sure.” She turns to Bree and holds out a hand. “Dina Montgomery. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Bree shakes her hand and orders a vodka soda. Dina’s gaze flicks between us before turning to make Bree’s drink.

“Are we that obvious?” Bree asks.

“I think so.”

“The important thing is my dad hasn’t figured it out,” she whispers.

“Exactly,” I say. “The guys know. Logan and JR.”

“Did you tell them or...”

“They guessed.”

“Oh.” Her voice is small as Dina swings back around with her drink.

“Put it on my tab,” I say. Dina nods, and Bree slowly brings the straw to her lips, nudging it in with her tongue.

“Stop it.” I try to stifle a smile.

“Stop what?” Her eyes are innocent. Then, she does it again, her tongue soft on the straw, and she sips her drink. “It tastes so good.”

“Christ.” I walk away, and she follows me with her giggles.

We walk to the back room, and Bree’s phone dings in her hand. “Sienna’s on her way right now.”

“Happy birthday to you.” I slap Logan on the chest.

“I guess I need to start heavily drinking.” Logan takes his drink from me and takes a hearty gulp.

JR slings his arm around Logan’s shoulders. “Be nice.”

“I’m always nice,” Logan says, and Bree giggles to my side. She’s probably heard some stories about Logan and

Sienna's public fights. Logan lifts an eyebrow. "Something funny, Tanager?"

"I've heard stories about you. From Sienna."

"You're kicked out." Logan points to the door, and without thinking, I grab her hip and pull her to me. My hand is in a not-so-friendly spot, flirting with the top of her ass, and Logan stands down. Bree leans into me with her whole body, her amazing breasts grazing my shirt. I grumble in this new state, touching Bree so close to prying eyes and tongues known to wag. This town loves to speculate about me, and now I'm giving them fodder. Juicy stuff that might get back to Paul. With that thought, I drop my arm, and Bree notices before JR slides in next to her.

"I invited her. Like you suggested."

Bree wiggles away from me to talk to him. "What did she say?"

"Yes!"

Bree jumps and claps, taking JR into a hug.

"You talked about Maisie?" I ask.

Bree nods. "JR came to yoga, and we chatted about her after class. I suggested he go for it."

"I'm really nervous." JR rubs his hands together. A small woman with dark hair appears in the doorway, looking around. Her dark eyes light up when she sees JR.

"I'm so glad you could come..."

JR envelops Maisie in a hug, swaying with her. There's a nice smile on her face. That's a good sign.

More people filter in: Orson and Russell, from Henderson Lumber and Supply, and one of their married friends, Tyler, with his wife, Amelia. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Bree mingle and talk to her, using big hands and sweeping motions.

I want her to look over at me so that even if we're not together in this setting, she knows I'm hers, that all I'm

thinking about is her.

Sienna walks in with outstretched arms. “Where’s the birthday boy?”

“Shoot me now.” Logan’s face drains of color. Sienna walks to Logan and splays her fingers like she’s a showman.

I chuckle behind my hand because Sienna and Logan together is hysterical, if you like watching trainwrecks. They squabble and take cheap shots when they’re together. Whenever she’s home, there’s some family gathering with all the dads, and when Sienna and Logan have to be in the same room together, they can’t not fight, but they try.

Logan creates a blockage for Sienna to the rest of the back room. “What are you doing at my party? Not enough attention on the ‘gram today?”

Sienna folds her arms with a stink eye. “I’m here to celebrate the day the world got worse—when you were born, asshole.”

“Oh, you call me an asshole at my own gathering.” Logan crosses his arms.

“If the shoe fits. And it fits, Low-GON.” Sienna scratches her face with her middle finger. Bree and I snicker at the same time and laugh harder when we catch gazes.

“I’m here to hang with my friend.” She hooks an arm around Bree’s neck. “Spirit and Bone is a public place.”

“Not the back room,” he says. Logan is an even-keeled, sullen guy, but seeing him worked up about Sienna makes me laugh.

“I need some alcohol for this. Come on, Bree. I have a man to see about a drink.” Sienna beckons Bree, and as she passes me, we glance at each other a little too long.

“Should we start planning your funeral now?” Logan asks me.

“Maybe.” I adjust my collar and cough against my hand. I’m getting deeper and deeper, and it’s scaring the shit out of me.

The scarier thing is, I don't want to stop it. I don't want her to leave.

THIRTY-TWO

BREE

“So, JR and Logan know. About us,” I tell Sienna while we wait for my second drink, her first.

“That’s good, right?” Sienna asks. “You don’t have to sneak around with them.”

“I think so.”

“Definitely.”

“I’m feeling kinda weird about not telling my dad.” The more time that passes, the more my skin prickles around him, the secret hanging over my head. He never said anything to me about staying away from Will, but I get the sense he told Will to stay away from me. It’s why he held out so long when our collision was inevitable.

Old insecurities creep up too. Scott used to isolate me, infrequently bringing me around his friends. We dated for four years, but I didn’t meet his parents until we had been dating for three years. When I met them, their smiles were fake and plastic, eyeing me like they’ve heard stories about me.

Does Will really not talk to his parents, or is that a lie?

Is this just sex, or is it something more?

To me it is. It morphed that night of the going-away party, and now we sneak around, capturing moments, behind my dad’s back. He makes me feel alive, and he makes me feel comfort. He’s the best man I’ve ever known, besides my dad. The date of my tenants’ move-out is looming, creeping closer,

and I don't know what I want. If I stay, will Will want to continue? Or are we ending it?

"Do you know anything about his family?" I ask. "Once, I asked him, and he said he doesn't talk to them."

Sienna purses her lips. Sienna ponders for a moment. "The thing with Will is I feel like I know him, but I don't *know* him. I have no idea if he has parents or siblings or where he's from. And you know guys. JR and Logan probably don't know either. Men rarely get the good details, stuff women want to know. Maybe it's traumatic."

Traumatic is a definite option. When we were in the meadow, he told me some stuff about his parents, his brother's death. I don't know how it happened, though. Nineteen is young to die, so it must've been rough for his family. It would make sense that it will take time for him to open up—if he opens up at all.

We're casual, so it's best to keep it surface-level. Still, I yearn to know more, to crack him open, to heal what I can.

I don't think it's possible, though. "It's going to be tough. To leave here."

I drop my head to the bar top in between my folded arms. Sienna rubs my back.

"I'm just going to say it. Do you want to be a lawyer?"

"I think so? Yes, yes, I want that." I smile to sell it, but Sienna can see through my lies.

A woman needs more than a husband and children. She needs her own money, her own identity, my mom used to say whenever I brought a new boyfriend home.

The dirt was still fresh over her grave when I gave everything up to date Scott, to bend myself to what he wanted.

If I stayed in Ivy River, it would partly be because of a guy. I can't stay for a man who doesn't open himself up to me, who just wants us casual, when it feels anything but. Ivy River is a place I go to relax, to unwind, to slow down. It's not where you go to chase your dreams.

Sienna covers my hand with hers. “You are beautiful and intelligent and quite literally the best human I know. Do you want to date Will? Like, for real?”

Yes, yes, I do. It just feels...impossible. Scary.

“Looks like you have things to figure out, friend. Let’s get back to the party.”

Will watches me out of the corner of his eye when I return to the back room. Our secret trysts are wonderful—spectacular, even. We decided on casual, but it’s spinning out of control, and it’s tough to breathe, to think around him.

My fingers run down his forearm, and his fingers clasp around mine.

“Do you want to get some air?” he asks. I nod, and we exit out the back door, an emergency exit propped open for air to circulate. The sun sets over the parking lot, casting a golden hue over the blacktop and bouncing off the shine of the cars. Crossing my arms, I look down at my sandals.

“I’m leaving in July.”

“I know.”

“What’s going to happen?”

“I don’t know.”

Ask me to stay. Tell me you want me to stay.

My shoulders hunch as I cocoon myself in my arms. “I know we’re just sleeping together, and you’re not a relationship guy, and I know I don’t want one, but with you...” My breath shortens, and I lean over.

“Hey, hey...” He pulls me in, and I smell his pine-and-spice cologne, pressing my face into the softness of his shirt. Will lands a kiss on top of my head and smooths my hair away from my face. He burrows into my shoulder, and I let out a laugh as he kisses a part of my neck that’s ticklish.

He takes my head in his hands so I look at him. “You’re important to me. You know that, right? We don’t have to figure everything out right now.”

“Right.” He looks around and then takes me in a deep kiss, our lips moving with fevered heat. It calms the voice for now. The one that questions if this is going anywhere or if I’ll be left with a shattered heart. An ending where the new dream turns into a new nightmare and I end up worse than before.

THIRTY-THREE

WILL

I drive us home in silence.

Our conversation at Spirit and Bone confused me. I thought all she wanted was fun, some good sex and orgasms. Does she want more from me? I have nothing to offer her. She's going back to school—a prestigious one at that. She has money.

I'm just some guy. No matter how successful I am, no matter how structured my life is, I will never be good enough for her.

I won't be a good husband because my dad was an awful one. Having children scares the shit out of me because I'm one-half a prick who should've gotten sterilized the second he turned eighteen.

At least with an expiration date, I know the chance of hurting her is low. If we date for months, years...if we get married and have children, I'll be terrible at it. And I will hurt her a lot more than I would by letting her go chase her dreams and find a guy who can give her everything, a lot more than I can.

She's still here, and I will savor every second she's in Ivy River.

In the shadows of the night, I give Bree a long goodnight kiss. When our foreheads touch—our ritual—Bree whispers, “Come in with me?”

I look at the house. “Is your dad up, do you think?”

“The house is dark.”

I kiss her forehead and say, “Sure, let’s go.”

We giggle as we walk to the kitchen door, grabbing a few kisses before she unlocks the door. There’s a faint light we don’t recognize, emanating from the hallway.

We tumble in on Paul, standing in the middle of the kitchen, in a robe and with a cup of brown liquid in his hand. Boomer and Maple sit next to him with disapproving looks on their snouts.

“Bree. Will.”

“Hi, Dad,” Bree says.

“Do you have something to tell me?” He peers over his glasses at us, and we swallow, looking at each other. My heart pounds so loud I’m sure Paul can hear it.

The dogs tilt their heads as we look guilty as hell, standing in the kitchen.

Paul shoves his hand in the pocket of his robe. “Can you tell me why Helen next door came to me, screaming, because she caught Honey and Boomer together in her doghouse, snuggling, and she found that offensive—although it would have been the most precious thing to witness, and I wish she had gotten a picture?”

Bree’s mouth turns down. “Boomer has been visiting Honey some nights. I caught him once.”

“Brienne Elise Tanager!” Paul shouts.

“I’m sorry, okay! I thought it was sweet. Boomer risking it all for love! That’s cute, right?”

“No, it’s not. That woman has been a nightmare neighbor, and she’s almost cooled down about the puppies. Now, she’s going to be even more pissed at me because my dog is making her dog feel things.”

“What?”

Paul wipes his hand down his face. “Bree, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want their relationship to end, okay? They love each other. They had puppies together. Boomer’s fixed now, so what’s the big deal? Helen doesn’t love Honey! I never see Honey on walks or getting to have any fun. She’s just a breeding machine for Helen, and that’s not fair. I wanted Honey to have a sliver of happiness, and Boomer is such a good boy...”

Boomer approaches Bree, and she kneels to ruffle the fur around his jowls. “You just love her, don’t you?”

“Will, why are you in my kitchen right now?”

I swallow, but the golf ball in my throat stays. I cough. “I was just walking Bree to the door, sir. Make sure she got in safe.”

I hold my breath until Paul nods, accepting the lie. “I called Larry to come out and check the fence again. I don’t know how they’ve been having their rendezvous.”

“Sounds good,” I say. “I’ll make sure a temporary barrier is put up in the meantime.”

“And you!” Dad points to Boomer. “You’re making my life harder. Stop it.”

The dog tilts his head.

“Bree, I’m going to wish you a good night. I need to talk to Will.”

Bree looks back at me, her eyes pleading. “Okay. Goodnight, Dad. Will. Come on, Maple.”

The puppy trots after Bree.

I can barely breathe as Paul sits me down. It’s an eternity, waiting for him to speak across the table from me. Does he know? Can he sense what Bree and I were about to do?

And if I admitted I’ve been sleeping with his daughter, how upset will he be?

“What’s up?” I ask, wringing my hands.

“You know I love you like a son, right?” Paul swirls his bourbon.

“Yes.”

“And you can come to me for advice. About anything.”

“Yes, I’ve always felt that way, sir.”

We sit as Paul sips, and I squirm. Moments tick by before he says, “You’re a good man. I hope you know that.”

No, I’m not. I’m sneaking around with his daughter behind his back. My heart booms in my chest while we sit here.

“I appreciate that, sir.”

Paul stares me down and then purses his bottom lip. He stands up and slaps me on the back. “For some reason, I don’t think you believe that.”

He leaves me at the kitchen table, dumbfounded.

I don’t think he knows, which makes the “good man” comment heart-breaking.

I don’t feel like a good man. Far from it.

THIRTY-FOUR

BREE

I did it, Bree. I left him. Thank you for all your support. I greatly appreciate it. Xo, Julia.

I shake my fists in excitement. Julia, Scott's childhood friend and new (now former) girlfriend, and I have been exchanging emails. She shared the lies he told her. I shared the eerily similar things he told me. The last email she sent me was about a week ago as she arranged a place to stay since he had weaseled his way into her apartment, and Julia's brother, Hugh, is acting as the bouncer to get him out.

I'm so proud of you. We should get dinner or something when I'm back in the Bay Area, I write back. I finish the email and exit out, just to see the bolded email I've been avoiding for a week.

Aaron Mankin, By the Bay Property Management

I'm not sure why my heart pounds as I click on it, facing the inevitable.

The tenants moved out, and we finished our final inspection. Everything looks good. It's been a pleasure working for you. If you wish to rent this property again, please do not hesitate to contact us.

I knew this was coming. I can move back to Palo Alto. Why do I feel like my body is being pricked by a thousand needles?

My dad stops in the doorway and puts his hands in his pockets.

“You look like you’re about to throw up. Are you okay, Pumpkin?”

“Yeah.” I click the shutdown button and try to smile. “The property management company emailed me. Said the house is ready.”

My dad nods. “When are you planning on heading out?”

“I don’t know. I, um... All of Mom’s stuff is in a storage unit. I should go and get it out. All that stuff’s been sitting there for four years. I have no idea what’s in it.”

Dad hesitates and continues to massage the bridge of his nose. “You can always stay here. Until school starts.”

“Really?” I light up. That’s at least one more month with Will—to figure out if this is something...or nothing.

“Of course. I just want you to know this is always your home too, and you’re welcome here. Anytime.”

I stand up to hug him, and he pats my arm like he’s trying to make our embrace end. I kiss him on his head and plop back down in my chair.

“It’s been a blessing having you here this past month and a half. I thought I lost you.”

A tear slips down my cheek. “We found each other again.”

“Well,” my dad grumbles and coughs against his hand. His gaze rises. “Oh, Will? Here to take Bree to the fair?”

“Yes, sir,” he says. When I look back, he deliberately doesn’t look at me.

“I’m grateful that you’re taking Bree, son. Boomer is not a fan of fireworks, and the puppy is a wildcard.”

Last night, Will mentioned he had never gone to the Ivy River Fourth of July Carnival, and I bullied him into going. He reluctantly agreed and then peppered my face with kisses until I was pulled under again.

The Fourth of July Carnival was the highlight of my childhood summers—booths full of funnel cake and candied apples, a dance at an outdoor pavilion, sparkly fireworks

against dusk. Sienna and I used to stand on the border of the dance floor as gawky teenagers, wondering if one of the nervous, sweaty boys would ask us to dance. The town usually hired a band to sing the patriotic classics. We used to snicker when they played “Party in the USA” because you haven’t lived until a gruff man in his mid-sixties sings Miley Cyrus.

The excitement masked my unease this past week about the future, my present, and Will.

“Does Tina still have a booth with the candied apples?” I ask.

“Of course,” Dad says. I pump a fist, and Will smiles in our secret way, like he finds me cute. Like we’re in this together, even if we’re keeping this a secret.

“Let’s get going to this carnival.”

“Have fun!” Dad yells at us as we leave. Once we’re out of sight from the kitchen window, Will loops his arm around my waist and kisses me sweetly.

“I’ve been wanting to do that all day.”

Once we’re strapped in, it bursts out. “Julia left Scott. Her brother is throwing him out on the street. I would pay to see that.”

Will chuckles. “That’s great. I’m glad she got away from him. She looked like a hostage at that dinner.”

“Totally. We put on quite the show.”

“We did. Though, can I tell you a secret?”

“Sure.”

“It wasn’t fake for me.”

“Oh, really.” I smirk. “Maybe it wasn’t fake for me either.”

“We were so silly.”

“The silliest of geese.” We’re stopped at one of the few stop signs downtown, so I honk his nose. Anything to avoid thinking about this ending.

It's a short drive to the festivities, and Will pulls into the dirt patch where parking is, an attendant directing us on where to park. My departure has always loomed, but it's here, and I don't want to ruin it by saying anything. The town has come together to celebrate, and it feels so nice to have something to distract me. There's red, white, and blue banners and bunting decorating the outdoor space, and I clap my hands in delight. Nostalgia is so welcome right now.

The smell of the carnival is the same. The sounds are the same. Closing my eyes, I take in this moment. Even if I feel so uncertain, so uneasy, this night will be perfect, as they were in my childhood. I will be carefree tonight, even if all my cares weigh on me like boulders.

Spinning, I'm caught off guard by how handsome he is. Will's soft eyes focus on me. The ones that tell me I'm not alone in my feelings. Maybe he's right there with me.

I'm two steps ahead of him as we approach the entrance with other families arriving for the fun. The band plays in the distance, already deep into a rendition of Lee Greenwood's "Proud to be an American." The energy pulses through the crowd as we pass vendors talking with potential customers and reach the food stands.

"Do you want anything?" I ask when we reach the candied apple stand, and I step behind a man in line.

"No, I'm good," Will says. "It's amusing to watch this. You're like a cracked-out toddler."

I roll my eyes. "You love this."

He doesn't flinch at my comment. "Love what?"

"My exuberance. For candied apples."

"It is endearing." He smiles and crosses his arms. Asking him about any sort of love toward me is asking for trouble. I'm leaving. I should be glad he won't make this harder than it already is.

The line shortens, and I get more and more excited. Every time I look to my side, Will studies me, his arms folded. It makes me smile every time.

After I pay, I'm handed a glistening candied apple, and I lick my lips, determining the perfect course of action.

"You're doing that on purpose," Will says.

"Not on purpose." I bite into it, the coating hitting my nose. Will beats me to it, wiping it off with his thumb. He scans the crowd for spies.

"Wiping my nose is a dead giveaway that you're fucking me."

"Keep your voice down."

"Do you want a bite?" I hold up the candied apple between us, one bite missing.

"No, thanks. I'm good."

"Your loss." I bite into it, inches from his face, and walk away, making sure to sway my hips in my frayed denim shorts.

"That's not working," he shouts.

"What?"

He takes two giant steps to be beside me and leans in. "If you don't stop flirting with me, I'm going to make you come so hard..."

A small voice yelling out my name makes me throw my candied apple, and I grab it, barely, the candy coating covering my hands.

Lily gives me a shy wave, and I grin wide. I take her in for a big hug with my free arm. We've hung out a couple times when Logan had no one else to watch her. I mentioned *Anne of Green Gables* was my favorite book, and she whispered, "It's my favorite too." Then, I found out she hadn't seen the CBC adaptation with Megan Follows, something my mom showed me when I was a little girl. Then, Lily found out I hadn't seen the Netflix adaptation, *Anne with an E*, so we worked our way through that.

"You got a candied apple? I thought you were an adult," Lily says point blank, and Logan stifles a chuckle.

"You're never too old to do the things you enjoy."

My eyes swing to Sienna. I try to communicate, *Why are you walking with Logan and Lily?* with my eyes. And her eyes tell me, *I'll tell you later.*

“Dad, can I have a candied apple?” Lily pouts, her mouth stretching over a full set of braces.

“Not if you want to spend the next two weeks seeing Dr. Colson,” he says. “How about a churro?”

“A churro is an excellent choice,” I add.

“Okay, fine.”

“Tell you what. When you get your braces off, you and I will go for candied apples. My treat,” I promise.

Lily’s mouth stretches over the hunks of metal glued to her teeth.

“Really?”

“Really. I promise,” I say, holding out a pinkie. The pre-teen hooks her pinkie with mine.

“Does that mean you’re staying?” Sienna asks while she nudges me in the ribs. “You can move here and live happily ever after with you know whom. And hang out with me all the time. College is overrated.”

“Don’t movies and TV shoot...not here?”

“True. You’ll just have to marry Will to have something to do while I’m on a job.”

I pull Sienna away as Logan and Lily occupy Will. She jerks her arm away from my grasp. “Dang, who knew natural nails could be so sharp.”

“It’s still a secret.”

“Oh.” Sienna’s face falls. “He’s just acting different.”

“He is?”

“Totally. He can’t stop looking over here.” Sienna flutters her fingers at Will, who’s staring, and he looks away.

“He hasn’t said anything. Do you think Will wants me to stay?”

Sienna shrugs one shoulder. “I don’t know. I’m not Will.”

“My house is ready. I got an email from the property management company.”

“Well, I think you need a good old-fashioned road trip to Palo Alto to clear out that storage unit, find a realtor, and call it a day. I’ll be your getaway car,” Sienna says. “You can’t get decent Pho in this place anyway.”

“Did you forget I’m going back to school?”

“Oh that. Can’t you withdraw?”

“Sienna!” I say. “I want to go back to school.”

She points to my face. “When you mentioned school, it looked like you were talking about a root canal.”

I chew my lip. “I’m not going to sell my mother’s house.”

“But I know you secretly want to. It’s been a hot second since I’ve been to Palo Alto. I can drive you there, and you can show me around your hometown when you’re ready. You know mine—intimately.”

I chuckle and grab her for a hug. “Love you.”

“Love you,” she repeats as she peels away. “I have to go see a man about some kettle corn.”

“Enjoy!” I shout over. Will leaves the conversation with Logan, inching closer to me.

“What were you talking about?”

You. Our relationship. How unsure I am that you would be happy if I stayed.

“There’s a hot guy by the bar. Sienna thinks I should approach him.”

“Ah.” Will scans the crowd and pats my butt without witnesses. It jolts my core, feeling his touch when I shouldn’t.

He winks before he leaves me, standing there, wondering what’s going on in that gorgeous but infuriating mind of his.

THIRTY-FIVE

WILL

Bree and I mill around the carnival, watching the rigged games and the children in the petting zoo. A goat almost head-butted a toddler, and we looked at each other, our mouths balloons of inappropriate giggles. Her hand sways next to mine, and I want to grab it. Tell the world she's mine, that we're together.

But we're not. Not really.

The night fades to twilight as the lights from the concession carts flicker on, glowing against the navy blue of the sky. Crowds migrate to the open field where blankets and chairs sit, ready for the show. It's not for another fifteen minutes, and Logan's family promised us a spot, so we're in no rush.

This feels like a date, while it's not.

The pavilion is loud and kicking, with more and more couples filling in the dance floor to the cover songs that our local band, Four Guys and a Goat, play. While Bree was in the bathroom, I talked to the lead singer, Ned, between sets. I thought my request was outlandish, but he quickly obliged.

"We covered Taylor Swift for a divorce party. I got you." He nodded like we were combat buddies, and I smirked when I left his side. Now, across the dance floor, Ned nods once and approaches the microphone.

"Ivy River, I don't know if you know this about us, but we...four middle-aged guys...love us some Taylor Swift."

The crowd cheers as he holds the guitar above his head. "So, when a certain young man personally requests one of her

songs, I say, ‘Hell yes.’ She is Miss Americana after all. This goes out to Bree Tanager. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you ‘Mine.’”

The opening chords of “Mine” done in a bluegrass style start, and Bree turns to me with a gaped mouth.

“You did this?”

I nod, offering my hand. “Dance with me.”

“I thought you didn’t like her.”

“Now when I hear her name or music, I think about you. Come on.”

We walk to the dance floor, and it’s a mid-tempo song, but I wrap my arm around her waist, holding her other hand.

“People will talk,” Bree whispers.

“It’s okay. Promise. Are you having fun tonight?” I ask.

“Yeah, I’m having a great time. Pal. Friend.”

“My dear, dear friend. Who I don’t want to sleep with.”

“Ew,” she says.

“That’s not what you said last night.”

She slaps me on the chest as we move in tiny circles, and she exhales, pressing her body to mine. Her cheek presses into my jaw as I pull her closer, our chests touching.

“You’re not holding me like a friend.”

“You caught me there.” I look around before I sneak a kiss on her forehead.

I don’t want to let her go.

It’s crazy to ask her to stay. Ivy River has always been a summer vacation spot, never a home, for her. I’m happy here, but will she be? She grew up in a bustling city, and Ivy River is sleepy and slow, surrounded by more nature than people.

What I feel about her, what I want from her, is unfair. I don’t deserve it.

Is she in love with me? No, she can't be. She just got out of a toxic, long-term relationship. We've snuck around, without a discussion of telling her dad. This was meant to be short and hot and fun, but it turned into something more for me.

"You know, I always wanted to dance with a boy at this. Sienna and I used to talk about it all the time. We would see girls a little older than us with boyfriends, just having the best time, looking so in love. So, this is fun."

When the song is over, Bree curtsies awkwardly. "Thank you for the dance and the song request."

I hook my arm around her. "You're welcome. Let's go see some fireworks. Joe has set up the perfect spot."

We walk to the field and weave between blankets and chairs to find our group.

Joe and Diane's spot is large, a big woven blanket spread out with coolers and stadium chairs. Logan and Lily are already sitting next to each other while Sienna sits on the corner of the blanket, looking uncomfortable. Bree joins her, sitting and whispering instantly.

I keep my distance, sitting at Logan's side.

Joe joins me, discussing sports and fishing, since his two best friends are either on a cruise or home with neurotic pups. Every so often, I glance over to Bree, the air playing with her hair, and I wish I could sit next to her, claim her as mine for the whole world.

The first firework explodes, and out of the corner of my eye, Bree stands up and hunches as she moves, plopping down next to me.

"What are you doing?" I whisper.

"I wanted to watch the fireworks with you. Is that okay?"

"It's fine." I grip my hands together so I don't grab for one of hers. We sit quietly as the sky sparkles with white and gold, red and green, pink and purple. The light shines in her blue eyes, and my heart feels three sizes too big.

If things were different, I would pull her into my arms, my hand resting on her hip. I would've danced with her like I couldn't wait to get her home later. We would watch these fireworks as lovers, not as friends.

"They're beautiful," I say, looking at her eyes instead of the sky.

"Agreed. I just love fireworks. I also love that they only come around once a year so you can look forward to them. They're special because they don't come around as often."

I guess you can say the same thing about love. It's special because it's rare. I've fallen in love with her. Wholly and completely. However, the thing about love, true love, is you have to let it go. You want the other person to be happy more than you want happiness for yourself.

We sit side-by-side, and I want to hold her so badly, but I stop myself. There's a war going on in my thoughts. The battle between my heart and my past creeping up, reminding me why I hold back. Why I can't give my all.

"Tonight was a fun night. Also, it's a miracle you didn't get a call," Bree says in the car on the way home. "What kinds of calls do you get on Fourth of July?"

"Last year, we got a call that a bear was breaking into someone's house because they didn't like the fireworks. Just like Boomer," I say with a chuckle.

Bree yawns, stretching her arms overhead. "I'm sure the dogs are stoned out of their minds."

I grab her hand over the console, and we hold hands until we're close to the dimly lit house. There are muffled sounds of neighborhood fireworks outside, but no large booms or explosions.

We walk into the kitchen, and we're not greeted by the dogs. That's a good sign.

Bree takes off her purse slung around her shoulders and dumps it on the side table, walking into the kitchen. I follow her, desperate to touch her after keeping my hands to myself.

Without a word, she pulls me up the stairs quietly to avoid waking a sixty-two-year-old man or two dogs. We make it to the top floor without detection, and she pulls me into her room.

I hold her, our foreheads touching. Our breath mingles, and I kiss her sweetly and softly.

“Make love to me,” she asks, and I scoop her up like a princess, kissing her as I walk us over to the bed.

“It would be my pleasure.” After I remove her shirt and bra, kissing her breasts and her collarbone, I unbutton her shorts, dragging them down those legs I love to spread, and I kiss her belly, pulling her underwear to the side to taste her. She sighs, opening herself up to me further as I lick her sweetness, dragging my tongue over her bud as she arches with the sensation. Her moans quicken, and her hips buck as I keep my languid pace. When she comes, I don’t stop until she pulls me by the chin to her face. She kisses me, tasting herself, and I flinch when a drop hits my face.

I wipe my cheek. It looks like tears.

“Is something wrong?” I ask, and she shakes her head, pulling me to her. Her hand snakes between us, encasing her small hand around my cock. I groan against her neck as she pulls off her underwear. When I sink in, we both sigh, and I rock into her, kissing her neck, feeling how good she feels. Her eyes open, and we look at each other as I thrust deeper, kissing her forehead between my moves.

Her hands grip my buttocks, and I feel encouraged, thrusting with more ferocity and urgency. I slam into her, over and over, her hands plastered to my back as her mouth stretches with desire. When I come, I let out a deep groan, and then it’s quiet. It’s over.

I kiss her neck, her chin, her nose, before I pull out, flopping to the side. We’re quiet as I catch my breath, and Bree is staring at the ceiling when she says it.

“I got the email. The house is available.”

“Oh?” It feels like an axe to the heart. “When are you going to go?”

“I don’t know.” When she turns her head, her piercing blue eyes stab my soul.

Stay. Give up school and your paid-off, beloved house to be with me. I’ll tell your dad and face any consequences if it means I get you.

Pressure builds in my jaw and behind my eyes, and they start to water.

I can’t ask her to give up everything. If I stay any longer, I will do that. She’ll resent me, and what if she realizes, one day, I’m just a nothing guy she gave up everything for? That my love for her wasn’t enough to make her happy?

Paul loved Holly so much, but she didn’t stay. Bree is one-half Holly and must not be one hundred percent happy.

I kiss her slowly, savoring it, before I get up to get a warm washcloth so she can clean up. Slowly, I wipe her, kissing her stomach like a bow on a present. We decided never to stay over. It was too easy to get caught that way.

So, I take her naked body in my arms and hold her to me.

“I’ve had the time of my life with you,” she whispers against my forehead.

I didn’t know then.

That was her version of a goodbye.

THIRTY-SIX

BREE

The sobs come when Will leaves, and I hear the squeaking staircase.

My body convulses, and my breath shortens as I use the bathroom and pull clean underwear and pajamas out. My crying leads to hyperventilating as I loop my arms through the holes, pulling them on. When I'm clothed, I curl into the fetal position, crying large sobs.

I wasn't supposed to fall in love with a man so closed off he could walk away from a connection that feels so strong. I want to die. He snuck into my heart like a thief looking for jewels, and he stole mine, no matter how much we said this was nothing.

I pull out my red suitcase from under the bed and flip it open, pulling out my drawers to fill it up. After I search in my desk, I find my personalized stationery I begged my dad for one summer so I could write my mom. I'm glad I saved it because it is special.

I scrawl a message to Will. A tear slips from my eye, bleeding one of the words to a smudge.

I dial Sienna from my room's phone, and she picks up on the second ring.

"I never know if you're a telemarketer."

"You ready to go to Palo Alto tomorrow? Early?"

"Sure," Sienna says. "What happened?"

“Umm...I’ll tell you tomorrow.” My voice hits a high note at the end.

“You got it. I’ll pick you up at six with coffee.”

“Thanks, friend.”

“You got it.” We say our goodbyes and hang up. I sit on my bed as the seconds tick into minutes, softly crying into my hands.

A soft knock shakes my door. “Pumpkin, it’s me.”

Wiping my tears, I plaster on a smile as I walk toward the voice. My dad stands there, his hands in his pockets, his nose twitching. He must’ve heard the sobs. What if he heard my bed squeak?

“I’m sorry, did I wake you?”

“No, I was up. Fireworks.” There’s whistling in the distance from neighbors celebrating the holidays. “Can I come in?”

“Sure.” I open the door wider and walk to my bed, sitting. My dad joins me and knocks his shoulder into mine as he looks behind him to my open, overflowing suitcase. “What’s going on?”

“Dad, I have to go.” My head drops to his shoulder.

He wraps his arm around my shoulders. “When do you leave?”

“Tomorrow. I can’t...can’t stay here.” My voice shakes, so I cough, but my dad recognizes the anguish. Dad knows exactly what to do. He sits with me as I gather myself, staring at the wood grain of my bedroom floor.

“Is there a reason you’re leaving in a rush?” he asks. I pull my head from his shoulder, our eyes locking. My dad is the master of stone faces, so I can’t read if he knows about Will and is just waiting for one of us to admit it.

“I had a lovely time here. It’s just needs to be over.” I mean more than my summer of nostalgia.

“You know, you’re always welcome here. I love you, Pumpkin. Having you here has been such a joy. I wish you could stay here forever.” He kisses my head and then hugs me oh-so tight. He snuffles against me, and I squeeze him too.

“Please visit me in Palo Alto. And I’ll be back. Promise.”

“I would love that.”

“Is it okay if I leave Maple here? She’s so happy with Boomer, and I...”

“It’s fine, Bree. You can take her when you’re ready.”

“Okay.” The tears fall as I lean into him. My heart breaks over and over again.

“Are you sure there’s not another reason?”

Although it’s a lie, I shake my head. “No. It’s time to move on.”

Will

I barely slept and dragged myself through the day. Between patrol and calls, I stopped at two separate gas stations for coffee and snapped at some fishers who gave me attitude about fishing in a restricted area.

Last night felt like goodbye. I replayed our interaction over and over, looking for signs that it wasn’t over, that she wanted more.

That morning, she wasn’t in the kitchen when I came in to get my first cup of coffee. The house felt quiet, too quiet, even if she was asleep. She breathed life into this old house, injected warmth and joy into every space. Maple came to say hello, and I scratched her ears. She leaned into me like she was sad too.

When I finally finish my workday, I walk into the kitchen, and Paul is looking at a bourbon glass at his kitchen table. When he senses me, he looks up, his eyes rimmed with red. The house is still that eerie quiet, and when I look to the front door, the dogs are lying there, waiting.

I grab a sparkling water from the fridge and crack it.

“Bree went back to Palo Alto.” Paul offers nothing else, and I sit down across from him. We sit in silence for a minute or two after I stare off into space.

It is over. I successfully let her go. My heart feels heavy. “She didn’t tell me.”

“Yeah, well...” Paul cleans his glasses with his shirt. “She left in a rush. Wanted me to give you this.”

Paul hands it to me, and my fingers shake as I open it. *I’m going back to Palo Alto. Sienna is driving me. Goodbye, Will. Love, Bree*

My heart drops to the floor.

Paul’s cheeks droop, and his voice is husky. “I miss her already.”

“I do too.”

A small smirk crosses Paul’s lips.

I could tell him right now that I’m in love with her.

Still, the words stay lodged in my throat as my palms sweat and my stomach lurches. It doesn’t make sense to come clean now. She’s already gone.

Paul takes off his glasses. “At least I asked Bree to stay. She knew I wanted her here.”

“You asked her to stay?”

Paul shrugs. “I did. I wasn’t going to make the same mistake I made with Holly. I let her go. Thought she was better off without me. I refuse to live with regret anymore.”

Paul smiles off to the distance.

“Holly would always stay a little bit when she dropped Bree off. Those were my favorite days—when we were a family.” Paul gives a watery smile and sniffles. “I always wanted to ask her to stay. Ask her if she changed her mind. But I was too chicken. At least I asked Bree to stay. She made her own choice.”

My throat dries. Even though he's talking about his own life, it's like he's talking about mine.

“It's rare to find people who get you, you know. Real kindred spirits like that Anne book Bree likes always said. Holly was it for me. But I was a small-town boy, and she was a city girl. Those relationships only work out on Hallmark Christmas movies, that's for sure.”

Paul chuckles to himself. “I've made peace with it, but I will always wonder what could've happened if I had expressed how much she meant to me. At least my daughter and I are in touch again.”

Paul slaps me on the back. “Thank you for convincing me to write her a letter. If you hadn't had that honest chat with me a few months ago, I wouldn't have had that precious time with my daughter. No matter what she decides to do, at least I got to spend time with her. Really get to know her.”

My heart breaks as we talk. Yes, our time together was precious, and I wouldn't want to change anything. Still, it wasn't enough. Even if I spent a lifetime with her, it wouldn't be enough.

My mouth opens to tell him when we both hear a scream.

THIRTY-SEVEN

WILL

We follow the screaming to the backyard, catching Helen, red-faced, hands fisted, looking at the doghouse.

We walk closer as Helen stamps her foot and points with rage. “Your fucking dog. Again.”

Paul leans over the fence while I hop it to go onto Helen’s property. I expect more yelling, but she lets me peer into the doghouse to find Boomer spooning Honey, exasperated with Helen’s antics.

“Again! Why does your dog come onto my property again and again? Paul, I thought you fixed the fence!” Helen screams. The dogs keep their embrace and lower their heads. They look so tired of everything.

The fence is high, but I’ve seen Boomer jump higher for a squeaky ball. A hole in the fence was just more convenient.

“Calm down, Helen. We did fix the fence. Boomer might be jumping over it.”

“Calm down, Helen. *Calm down, Helen,*” Helen mocks. “I let the issue with the puppies go, although it lost me thousands of dollars. I’ve caught your dog here three times. I’m calling Animal Control.” She pulls a giant cell phone from her back pocket.

I hold my hands out. “Listen, Helen...”

“Don’t, ‘Listen, Helen,’ me. I...”

“Helen, enough!” I raise my voice louder than I’ve ever done since high school. My eyes close to collect myself. “Do

you think that if you allowed Honey and Boomer to play together once in a while, they wouldn't sneak around? Maybe Honey's only moment of joy is hanging out with Boomer. Maybe Boomer makes her happy. You treat her like shit, and she doesn't get to be a dog! With Boomer, she gets that. Look at them!"

They perk up, placing their paws in front of them, their mouths open with tongues sticking out. I keep going because their happy responses make me feel like I'm saying what they cannot.

"Maybe Boomer loves Honey and can't stay away from her, no matter how hard he tries. Maybe he wants to be with her, out in the open, playing and being in love, no matter how impossible it is. Maybe he's tired of hiding."

When I look up, Helen and Paul stare at me.

"That's a bit of a stretch, but okay," Helen says. She reaches into the doghouse to pull Boomer out by the collar, and the dog makes himself heavy, so Helen struggles to pull the ninety-pound dog against a textured floor. Honey rests her head on his torso, doing her best to make it more difficult. Helen huffs out a breath, red-faced, and then stands up when the movement tweaks her back.

We drag Boomer all the time, so I'm unconcerned she'll hurt him.

Bree would want me to fight for a dog relationship, so I hold my hands up, poking the bear. "I'll do it. I'll take them for walks and supervise play dates. You wouldn't have to do anything. I can come get Honey so you can stop finding Boomer sneaking over. I mean, he might still sneak over, but why deny your dog love?"

Helen ponders it for a moment, and Paul still looks at me. Guilt must cover my face, but I stay focused on Helen, who has calmed down considerably.

"Boomer, come," I command, and the dog begrudgingly stands up and saunters over to me, sitting in front of me and

looking up. Kneeling, I ruffle his scruff, letting him lick my face.

“You love her, don’t you? You want to be with her?” The dog continues to lick my face because he knows I’m saying it to myself.

I love Bree. I love her zest for life, her jokes, her innocent wonder for the world. I admire her for being brave and starting over. I love her body under my hands and the way I feel when we’re making love, so tender and magical but hot and unforgettable. How I miss her. How this house doesn’t feel the same without her. You don’t really notice something is missing until it arrives with an explosion, disrupting every peaceful part of your life. She cracked me open, and I want to reveal the ugliness inside me so she can see me.

The real me.

I tried like hell to fight it, but I’m done. I want her. Forever and ever.

If I’m not enough, then I’ll become enough.

I’ll wait for her to finish college and law school. Whatever she needs.

I can’t be like Paul, who watched the love of his life move on without her knowing how much he felt for her. I need to offer myself to her, express what’s been in my gut. Let Bree have all the facts.

She needs to know she’s the love of my life.

The greatest man I’ve ever known needs to know how I fought it and fought it, but I fell head over heels in love with his daughter.

“Paul, I have something to tell you.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

WILL

“What do you have to say to me, son?” Paul asks. We’re facing each other at the kitchen table after we calmed Helen down. We dragged Boomer back to the house and fastened the doggy door shut, which is futile because the dog knows how to unlatch it. Boomer knows he’s in trouble, so he’s lying next to his daughter on his plush dog bed, only his butt on it, while Maple’s whole body lies across.

I’ve been stalling for five minutes.

“Um, I...” *Just say it. Say it and get it over with.*

Paul’s unusual smile makes me more nervous as I stare at my hands. “You can spit it out. What is it?”

I take a deep breath. “Your daughter and I have been seeing each other.”

Time stops as Paul’s eyebrows lift halfway to his forehead.

“I kinda fell in love with her.”

“Kinda or did?”

“Did.” I cough because my throat is closing. “I’m in love with your daughter, sir.”

Paul nods and studies his hands, picking at a callus on the heel of his palm. His skin flushes pink, and I brace for the biggest lashing of my life. I expect disownment. I expect admonishment. Any time my dad screamed at me or told me how I disappointed him will pale in comparison to what Paul has in store for me.

“How long has this been going on?”

I swallow, the lump in my throat hard and unforgiving. “Three weeks, give or take.”

“And you didn’t think to come to me, to ask if it was okay to see my daughter romantically?”

I shake my head. “It just happened. We always meant for it to end when she went back to Palo Alto, but...”

“You don’t want it to end.” He takes his glasses off and rubs the bridge of his nose. He’s furious. I can tell. His ears are getting red. “Is that why my daughter left in a rush this morning?”

“Maybe? I don’t know.”

Paul nods and calmly says, “I wish you would’ve told me earlier.”

His tone is low, measured. It’s worse than anything I’ve experienced in my childhood, which was full of screaming, yelling, and constant disappointment. Paul tracks my worry and puts his hand on my shoulder. For a moment, I think he’ll throttle me.

“You can relax, son. I’m not your dad. Take a deep breath.”

I let all the air in my lungs out.

Paul tents his fingers. “I knew.”

My world tilts on its axis. What?

“I knew you and Bree were sneaking around. It was kinda funny to see you two be so bad at it. She would leave every night to see you, and I could always hear when you came over. You two were as subtle as a bear in a campground. You two had quite the goodbye last night.”

“Oh my God.” I cover my face with my hands. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I hoped you would come forward eventually. Still, it was so much fun to watch. I don’t get many kicks nowadays, and

watching you two sneaking around was my own personal soap opera. Better than anything on TV right now, that's for sure."

My head pulses with this information. "So, you're not mad?"

"No, Will. How could I be mad at you? Bree was so sad when she came here, and you...you made her happy. Did your romance start when you went to Mrs. Kramer's?"

Heat centralizes in my cheeks. "Yes. Sort of."

"It was night and day. Actually..." He takes off his glasses again to rub his eyes. "I can't believe I'm about to admit this to you."

"What?"

"I've actually been keeping a secret of my own."

My throat constricts, and my mouth dries. I grip my hands to avoid shaking. I brace, but nothing could've prepared me for it.

"I masterminded this whole thing."

"What, Paul?"

"Like I said, my life is kinda boring. When my daughter showed up, having left that awful boyfriend, and I saw the two of you together, I got an idea. I love you like my own son, and I just got amused, thinking *what if* my daughter and this man I admire and care about started dating, got married, and lived happily ever after? It made me so delighted I couldn't stand it.

"So, I'd do little things. Ask you take groceries to Veronica Kramer. Ask you to drive her places. Suggest you go with her to meet her boyfriend. Schedule a last-minute trip with my friends so you could be alone when I thought it was heating up. If it didn't work, then it's no harm, and you two seemed to enjoy each other's company. I'm thrilled you fell in love with her because that means I'm right. And I love being right."

I'm speechless.

"Something tells me I'm the first person you've told that you're in love with my daughter. She doesn't know it?"

I shake my head.

“Have you told her about your brother? Your family life?”

I study my hands rather than look him in the eye. “She doesn’t know the whole story.”

“Do you want to be with her?”

“Yes.” I mean that with my whole heart. I love her so much, and I’m a dumbass for letting her leave without her knowing how I feel. That I want her. Possibly forever.

“What if I tell her and she still leaves me?”

“You’ll need to tell her. She’ll understand. You took the first step, though, by confessing to me. But I got the last laugh because I’m the Taylor Swift behind all of this.”

“What?”

“She has that song, son. Check out *Midnights*.”

I laugh, collapsing onto the table in relief. Paul laughs too, collapsing on top of me. Our bodies convulse with laughter together.

When I sit up, I wipe the tears from my eyes because I laughed so hard. “I’m so relieved and shocked and nervous, all in one.”

“Congratulations, Will. You finally started really living.”

Bree feels like a once-in-a-lifetime love. I’ll never move on from her. I could try. I could let her go. But I wouldn’t in my heart, not really.

“I need to go. I want to hold my girl.”

Paul stands up and takes me in a two-armed hug, slapping my back. “I know most fathers claim no one is good enough for their daughter, and I’ll stand by that. However, you’re the best I could’ve hoped for. Now go get her.”

THIRTY-NINE

BREE

“Are we going to do this or not?” Sienna asked as we stand outside a closed storage unit in Palo Alto. We stood in front of it for five minutes, and I hadn’t reached for the lock.

Sienna massaged my shoulders like I’m Rocky Balboa. “You can do this. You’re a champion.”

Laughing, I stuck the key into the lock and pull up the door.

Inside was all I have left of my mother. Our apartment in San Francisco wasn’t big enough to bring all of it, so I stuck it in here, dreading the day I would need to go through it. I always secretly hoped it would disappear on its own.

Now, it’s time to face it. I’m terrified of what I’ll find.

The goal for today was simply to move the boxes out of the storage unit back to the house, stop bleeding money to this storage facility, and make cutthroat decisions from there. Really consider if I want to stay in Palo Alto and go to school.

I’m fifty-fifty right now.

“It’s not as bad as I thought. No big furniture. I doubt I’ll break a nail,” Sienna says as she takes a box off the stack closest to her back at the house. I huff out a breath as we start.

We’ve barely talked about Will since we left Ivy River early yesterday. My friend could tell something went wrong between us, and all she asked is if we broke up or not.

All I said was, “Can you break up if you were never really together?”

“Things can end. It doesn’t need to be something official for it to hurt.”

When we arrived at my childhood home, Sienna asked for the grand tour. It was empty since I sold all my furniture when I decided to make it a rental, but I showed her where I hung my One Direction posters and pointed to the spot I wrote letters to her when we were away from one another during the school year.

Sienna distracts me from the flashes of my dad when I told him I was leaving, how he hugged me so tight it stole my air, how my hands shook when I wrote the note to Will. When I asked my dad to give it to him, his eyebrow flicked, like he knew something I didn’t.

Coming back to Palo Alto was the plan all along, hence the right choice. It had to be, or I just messed up everything.

Sienna drove by a cell phone store on the way to a grocery store to pick up dinner. She pointed and said, “You’re getting a phone. Today. I will not correspond with you like we’re two cousins in Jane Austen times. I love my emojis.”

It did feel like time. I would love for Will to have a way to call me.

Hearing his voice would be like chocolate for my heart.

When we got back, I left my new phone on the kitchen counter, untouched. I will have to join the online world again, but not now. Not yet.

I kept the patio furniture there for renters to use, and I breathed out a sigh of relief when I saw it was still there, intact. The gardeners did a beautiful job keeping the roses alive in my mother’s garden, and they’re just like the ones in my dad’s yard. I wonder if my mother left a mark at the house at Ivy River or if it was just a coincidence.

“This is really lovely.” Sienna leans back in her chair. Her own phone lays by her, and it buzzes. She turns it back over and smirks.

“What?” I take a sip of my wine.

She turns the phone to me, and I see Will's name at the top.

Is Bree okay?

The text is simple. It warms me that he asks about me, but it doesn't mean he misses me. That he wants me to stay. That he cares about me.

"What do you want me to tell him? Want me to give him your new phone number?"

I smile sadly and shake my head. "No. I just want a couple days to myself. Just to figure out what I'm going to do. Eventually, though, yes."

Sienna looks around my garden, closing her eyes so the sun can coat her face. "This house is beautiful. I always liked Palo Alto. Knew a guy once who went to Stanford. Visited him a couple times."

"Oh, really?" I ask.

Sienna studies me as she brings her wine to her lips. "You're in love with him, aren't you?"

I don't answer; I take a sip of my wine instead.

She makes an *hmm* sound and tilts her glass slowly.

"Oh." Sienna sets her glass on the table. "There are far worse things in life than to be in love with Will Stone. And if it's worth anything, I think he's in love with you too."

IN A DAY, we've gone through sixteen boxes and condensed them into two. I was ruthless, but I cried over every other item. I let go of her clothes, stuffing them in trash bags to take to Goodwill, and sifted through her books, deciding what can go to the used bookstore and what I want in my own personal library. There were heavy law textbooks that I put in the trash pile since they were out of date. The Margaret Atwood is coming with me.

I wish my mom was alive to give me a pep talk. She could convince me this massive hole in my chest is fleeting, that a

guy I'm in love with was content to let me leave. He never asked me to stay. My mother would make me confident in my decision.

We go for a long lunch at my favorite local café, where I used to study with a cappuccino and croissant. There are tables of students, probably in summer programs, with laptops and dressed in leggings and basketball shorts. Sienna orders a bottle of wine, and we spend hours talking about everything and nothing, eating turkey sandwiches, and splitting a bag of chips between us. The students come and go as we laugh, and she keeps me from crying.

When we return, I finally set up my phone, and Sienna grabs it, typing furiously.

“It's only fitting that your first two phone numbers are mine and Will's,” she says, handing it back to me. “Can I give him yours?”

“Not yet.” I couldn't bear knowing he has my number and isn't calling me, doesn't need to connect the way I feel like I need to.

To distract myself, we begin on two more boxes, the pile dwindling in the living room. When Sienna flips the lid open on hers, she looks up.

“You should go through this one.” Sienna sits up and wipes the dust from her shorts. I crawl over to it and look inside.

It's full of memories.

My eyes water as I hold up picture after picture of my parents together, holding me, a chubby baby with a bald head, happy as can be. They're all saturated and fuzzy, courtesy of the late-nineties photography. Tears slip down my cheeks to see my dad with a full head of dark hair, and my mom, fair and healthy, and me. There are photos of us at different places in Ivy River. There's a shot of my mom and me, walking hand-in-hand on one of Ivy National Park's many trails, being in nature. I take one of the photos of us together, one of my

summers in Ivy River, when I was fourteen, holding it to my chest, wishing I could hug my mom again.

“How special.” Sienna rubs my knee. I show her the picture.

“They look happy. Why did your parents get divorced?” Sienna asks.

I shake my head, licking the salty tears from my lips. “My mom always said they wanted different things. A different life. Mom always said she couldn’t make the impact she wanted in Ivy River. According to my mother, he refused to leave.”

I place all the photos side-by-side, a photo history of my family when it was whole. My mother looks so fresh and happy in those photos, full of life and vibrancy. I want to frame them all, make a collage so I know it existed. My family wasn’t always broken.

“Bree,” Sienna says, handing a letter to me. It’s addressed to my dad. The return address is my mother in Palo Alto. There’s a stamp, but no evidence of processing from the post office. It’s sealed.

“What is it?” Sienna moves next to me. My heart shudders as I slip my finger under the flap.

“I think my mom wrote my dad a letter.”

Three pages of yellow legal paper are folded inside, and when I stretch them out, I see the date. It’s two years before she died, around the time we got her ALS diagnosis. I remember she was still herself for the most part, with the beginning symptoms of that horrible diagnosis creeping in, showing itself. The blue pen is shaky, and all three pages are filled—her signature tiny because she ran out of room.

“Read it out loud,” Sienna encourages, “if you want.”

I clear my throat and begin.

“Paul,

There are many things I want to say to you, but a letter will not do it justice. We ended our marriage seventeen years ago, but I didn’t tell you then, and I’m not sure I’ll send this letter

now. If you get this, just know I probably drank a whole bottle of wine, and I was feeling brave.”

I chuckle amongst the tears. Sienna squeezes me from behind.

“There was a part of me that regretted ending it back then because I had this house and dreams I thought Ivy River couldn’t fulfill. Our marriage wasn’t just good; it was great. At the time I left, I thought greater happiness was possible for me, besides the quiet contentment I felt with you. I chased excitement. I chased passions. But I didn’t really realize, until a doctor told me last week that I was diagnosed with ALS, that you were what I was searching for in the nooks and crannies of the world. Us all together with our daughter, living in Ivy River.

“It’s now that I realize that this house and my career was a burden more than a blessing. It held me back from realizing what I should’ve realized all along. You were my home. I should’ve hung a shingle in Ivy River. You supported me through law school, just for me to leave. Being with you in the early years of Bree’s life are some of the happiest memories of mine. I saw the sadness Bree felt when she left after her summers in Ivy River, and I know she felt its magic. I denied myself that happiness for so long, and now it’s too late. My body will betray me. It will revolt. The regret that’s been eating me has manifested itself...”

I can’t read through the blurriness of my eyes. How this letter pierces my heart and makes it bleed.

My mom never wanted this house or San Francisco. She pushed me to Stanford to solidify that she made the right choice for me. I was living the dream she thought she wanted when Ivy River was the dream all along.

“I can’t read the rest.” I hand it to Sienna, who scans the next two pages.

“It’s more about memories she had with your dad. Just more and more regret. God, this breaks my heart.”

“Mine too,” I say, once I can hiccup back the tears.

“Are you going to give this to your dad?”

“Eventually. I want to read it again. Later,” I say.

“Damn. Well, we need some more wine.”

I laugh through my tear-covered face. “Definitely.”

“I’ll go grab some more. I think we’re out.” She stands and looks down at me. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah, I think so. It’s just a lot.”

“I’m sure of it.”

Sienna kisses me on my hair and leaves, swinging the keys around her finger before closing the door.

I hold the letter in my lap for a while. This whole time, my mother missed my dad. All because of this house, some career that sucked her dry. That she wanted to have purpose, passion. But love was the purpose. She escaped to all corners of the globe and shut herself into her office for hours when she should’ve lived a quiet life in that sleepy town in northern California.

I miss it. Charmaine and Bernie at Do’s and Donuts, my community at the yoga studio. My dog. For two short months, it had felt like home. When I was a kid, I wondered what staying in Ivy River all year long was like. What it looked like in the winter, how they decorated for the holidays. I wondered what their school was like.

This house is a part of me. And maybe I’ll go back to college one day. However, my heart has always called for Ivy River, just like my mom’s did. Its beauty and its nature.

It also has Will.

Will is the first man who’s made me feel alive. I imagine that was the way my dad made my mom feel, why she wrote a letter she never sent.

However, I need more from him. I want him to ask me to stay, to want me half as bad as I want him.

If this is going to be anything, he has to meet me halfway.

I'm not sure If I'll give this letter to my dad. He deserves to know that my mom had regrets, that what he felt was not one-sided. It must've crushed him that my mom chose to leave the marriage, but maybe this will help heal the scar.

I'm lost in thought when I hear the knock at the door.

"Did you forget your keys?" I ask as I get closer to the door. But when I open it, I grab my chest.

Will stands there, and he looks up with a huge smile.

FORTY

BREE

Will stands on my mother's porch, wearing a black T-shirt, distressed jeans, and black boots. He looks effortlessly sexy.

And nervous.

"Hey," he finally says, and my body relaxes.

"Hey."

"Can we go for a walk?"

"Sure." I hold up one finger. "Let me leave a note. Or I can text her! I got a phone."

"You did?" The corner of his mouth curls. "Entering the modern age?"

He breaks my stoicism immediately. "One minute." I text Sienna quickly that I stepped out, and I'll leave a key under the mat. We walk the length of my mother's street before I break the silence.

"What are you doing here?"

Will looks down, and when he looks back up at me, his dark eyes sear my skin. I try to be brave and calm, but my insides careen and pivot so uncomfortably I squirm.

"You left before I could tell you this."

"What?"

We turn and walk to a nearby park, full of trees, a playground, and a large field. There's a small creek that runs

throughout with a stone bridge that we head toward. It's my favorite spot in Palo Alto.

"Is that the bridge?"

"The very one."

I smile because he remembered. Once, after I came to him and we made love slowly and tenderly, his fingers played with mine, and I told him about this bridge. How romantic I thought it was. How, once, I insisted my high school boyfriend and I gaze over the water together to have a moment, and then he broke up with me.

I still love the bridge. I just hope it's not the scene for another heartbreak.

He grabs my hand, and I don't pull away. My heart could burst.

Once we reach the bridge, he faces me, linking both of my hands with his.

"I told your dad. About us."

My stomach twists harder. "And?"

Will laughs. "He knew. The entire time. Said he was the mastermind. All those times he set us up to go do things together...he hoped it would spark."

Laughing, I take my hands away to drop my head into them. "No way."

"Yeah. He was a little mad I didn't tell him earlier, but we got over it quickly. Gave me the address. I got here as fast as I could."

Rubbing my lips together, I look at Will. "Why are you here, Will?"

Will moves toward me like he's going to kiss me, but he leans his forehead against mine instead.

"I love you."

My breath catches in my throat.

“I didn’t share everything with you. It’s because I was too ashamed, too sad. It’s hard to talk about it, you know.”

I take his hands in mine. “Tell me.”

He takes a deep breath, the exhale rattling with nervousness. “I want to tell you everything.”

FORTY-ONE

WILL

We walk to a picnic table, and she holds my hands, bracing for the truth. The truth feels like razor blades against my tongue.

“My childhood was not great. My parents were married, on paper, but they were living different lives. My dad drank a lot and was emotionally abusive. A lot of things didn’t go right in his life, so he saw us as his second chance. Once he realized that my older brother, Alex, was athletic and smart, he latched onto him, while he forgot about me. I didn’t matter to him. It was all about Alex.

“Our father constantly pitted us against each other, made us competitive for no reason. I always knew Alex was the smarter one, the golden boy. I was just the fuck-up. I struggled in school, and I had this rage inside of me, encouraged by my dad. When you’re treated like you’re nothing, you start to believe it. I got in a lot of fights, and I started partying too young. Alex tried to help me. He would pick me up when I was too wasted at parties. He knew how our father was, and he tried to shelter me. Our mother was non-existent, drinking more than our father, spending full days on the couch, watching soap operas and only leaving to get cigarettes and more wine.

“Alex and I loved the outdoors. We went camping together as a family all the time. We would fish and sleep under the stars, and my brother knew I loved it, being out in nature. He kept encouraging me to be outdoors more and would always suggest those as family trips. It really felt like we were close brothers out in nature or on hikes, and that was when we were

the happiest together. That high from doing what I loved never lasted, and when I got home, I was back in my old habits, worse than before.

“Our father always focused on Alex getting into an Ivy League school. It was our father’s dream, not Alex’s, but he fixated on it. Our father made Alex do all these extracurriculars, badgered him to take the most advanced classes. The irony is not lost on me that I ended up in an Ivy, just not the one my dad anticipated.

“When Alex was alone, he would draw—these detailed, intricate portraits. When our dad wasn’t making him study or volunteer, he would draw. He loved it. It was his outlet, and he was so talented. I was jealous he was good at one more thing. I once suggested he go to school for art, but he shook his head. ‘Dad would never let me.’ I would be quiet because I knew it was the truth.

“My brother got accepted to Cornell, a great school, but my dad was mad he didn’t get into Harvard or Yale, because in his head, they were more prestigious. Still, he’d brag to everyone who briefly mentioned Alex that he was so proud of him. He was the perfect son.”

My head drops into my hands, and tears leak from my eyes, but Bree holds my hand.

My heart thuds thinking about the steady link of cause and effect that led me to my rock bottom. The worst moment of my life.

“I’m the reason my brother died.”

Bree grips my hand harder, and I can feel her tense, bracing for what is to come.

“Alex had a rough first year at Cornell. He told me his grades weren’t great, that school was tough. He didn’t have any friends. He declared pre-med to make our dad happy, but he had no interest in being a doctor. He wanted to be creative. He told me all of this because he trusted me. When he came home for summer break, he was so thin, so gaunt. He was different. He stayed in his room most of the time.

“I had come home wasted one night, and my dad caught me. He laid into me, telling me I was nothing, asking me why I couldn’t be more like my brother. I tried to get away, tried to avoid it, but I snapped. I told him everything. How Alex was failing at Cornell, how unhappy he was. I told him about the drawing.”

Tears flow freely now. I try not to think about this night, except in nightmares that have come and gone over the years. But as soon as I think they are gone, another creeps up, and I have to feel it.

All of it.

Bree takes her thumb and wipes away the tear, and when I look up, she’s crying too.

“After I was done revealing all of Alex’s secrets, Dad left me to confront him. I passed out on the couch, going in and out of consciousness. I don’t really remember what happened. I know there was some yelling and slamming doors. I woke up when the front door slammed, and our dad followed him, yelling at him.”

Bree kisses my hand in hers as she rubs it, bringing her hand to my cheek. I take a deep breath, in and out.

“Alex crashed into a guardrail on the PCH near a beach a mile from our house. I don’t know if he did it on purpose or not. I can’t be sure. When I woke up, the most hungover I’d ever been, my dad told me.”

I breathe in and out, thinking about my dad, hurting and in pain, yelling in my face.

“He said, ‘I wish it was you and not your brother. You’re nothing. This is your fault. Your fault.’” Tears slip from my eyes freely now, sitting in front of the woman who hasn’t let go of my hands, doesn’t seem repulsed by what she’s heard. That one slip changed the trajectory of my brother’s life, a man so much better than me. A guy who just needed time to figure it out.

It doesn’t matter that we’re sitting on a bench in public. Once I let the walls down, it was inevitable that I’d feel

everything, let it all go.

Bree deserves it.

“Come here.” Bree takes my head against her chest as she comforts me. She kisses my hair. “I’m so sorry, Will.”

I cry softly, letting out fifteen years of anguish, of grief for my brother. I revealed his secrets, and it caused his death.

“It’s not your fault,” she says.

“I know that now. It took hours and hours of therapy, but I know that now.”

“Did you stop drinking because of that?”

I nod. “I turned eighteen and had my last drink. I didn’t want to be my dad when I grew up. I moved out of my parents’ house the next day, lived with my one good-influence friend’s family until I graduated. His name was Carson. He changed my life. Just like you did.”

I lift my head to look at her. Her crystal-blue eyes are rimmed with red, and I kiss her, slowly and deliberately. When I pull away, our foreheads touch, and I feel at peace.

“You have all of me, Bree. You’ve had it since the second you showed up in Ivy River.” My head turns slightly. “That is, if you will have me. I will wait for you to finish school. We can do long distance...”

She says nothing but kisses me, slow and steady. When we pull away, we have an audience. Between the crying and kissing, we look a sight.

My arms are still around her waist, and her hands are on my chest. I look around casually. “This is nice. I’ve never been to Palo Alto before.”

“Yeah,” she says as she looks around. “But it no longer feels like home.”

“Where’s home?” My heart flutters because I think I know the answer.

“Ivy River. With you.”

“What about school?”

She purses her bottom lip and looks off. “That was my mom’s dream. I don’t want that. I want you, and the yoga studio, and Ivy River. I want to cuddle my dogs and be with you every night. Just because a life is simple doesn’t make it ordinary.”

We touch foreheads like we always do. “Will, take me home.”

FORTY-TWO

BREE

When we arrive home, my dad is waiting for us in the living room with the dogs at his feet. Maple looks at me like I was gone forever as she whines and wiggles, spinning in front of me. Tears leak from my eyes because it feels right. Being here, with my dad, my puppy, my man.

“Well, are you two a couple now, or what?” He claps at us as we come in, holding hands.

“I think so.” Will looks at me for confirmation, and I nod.

After we arrived home from the park, Sienna graciously left, giving me a big hug and telling me she would see me when I got home. Will and I made love on the floor, and afterward, when his hand linked with mine, we discussed us and that we would try this for real. Out in the open. Exclusive and serious.

“Are you going to have your first date now?” Dad asks like he’s a teenage girl discussing a crush with a friend.

“We’ve technically been on a few.” I smile, thinking about the meadow and our first kiss over cookies looking at the river.

“Those don’t count unless you’re courting,” Dad says.

“Maybe you’re right. I’ll get your stuff.” Will kisses my temple before walking outside to get my stuff.

“What’d you bring back?”

“Mostly memories. Got rid of a lot of stuff. It was nice to be back.”

He shoves his hands in his pocket and nods.

The letter sits in my purse, and I had debated whether to give it to him or not. In the end, after discussing it with Will, I think Dad deserves to know that my mom regretted leaving him. That, in a way, me coming back completed a circle she couldn't.

“Dad, can I talk to you? Over there?”

Dad and I walk into the kitchen and sit at the table.

“I found this in Mom's stuff.” I slide the envelope to him. “It was sealed. It looks like she wanted to send it but never did. I'm sorry I opened it.”

Dad hesitates before he opens it, pulling out the letter. Sienna and I only read the first page because it felt like an invasion of privacy to my mom. Still, I sit here because my dad might need me. I can't imagine it would be easy to find out the woman you loved regretted leaving you. That if you both would've said something, reached out just a little, our whole lives would have been different.

His bottom lip sticks out by the end of the first page. A tear slips down his cheek after the second page. By the last page, my dad's glasses are fogged.

He flips the letter, writing side down, and rubs his eyes under his glasses. His hand covers mine, and then I cover his with my other hand.

“Thank you, Brianne.” My full name makes me cry.

We sit there, missing my mother. Holly Davis was a force of nature, a woman who wanted the world and realized a small town was what she wanted too late. I always knew this place was special. My dad knew and never pushed it. He just showed me the magic every summer.

“I'm here now, Dad. I'm moving to Ivy River. Permanently. I'm selling that house in Palo Alto. I'm not going to school.”

“You are?” His bright-blue eyes pierce me as we grip each other.

“Everything I love is here. I can find a job. Maybe start a business.”

“I love you, kiddo.” I stand up and take him in a big hug and then sit down.

“You knew about us the whole time? Will said you orchestrated all of this.”

Dad lets out a belly laugh so strong it flings his head back. “Yes, I did. You two are not subtle.” He pats my hand. “I couldn’t be more thrilled.”

I rub his hand on top of mine. “I think I’m going to marry him, Dad.”

His lips press into a straight smile, and he says nothing.

“I love you,” I say.

“I love you too.” He wipes his eyes again. “Go take that boy on a date. Show the world.”

LATER THAT DAY, I descend the stairs wearing the eyelet white dress that drove Will crazy at the party earlier in the summer. His eyes widen three sizes, and when I step in front of him, he leans in to whisper, “This dress brings back so many memories.”

“I can’t wait for you to take it off later.”

“Oh, I will.” He kisses my forehead and lightly pats my butt before we walk to the door.

“Have a good time,” Dad says over his glasses as he looks up from reading a book while Boomer rests his head on his lap. Maple is on her back, holding a toy between her two front paws as she chews on it.

“Don’t wait up,” I say.

“Oh, I won’t,” Dad says. I blush, even though I’m a grown woman. Still, it’s weird to hold Will’s hand in the front of the house, not caring who sees. We walk to the car, but Helen stands there.

“Oh, hi, Bree. I’m glad you’re back. I wanted to talk to you.”

Oh no. I stand with my shoulders back. “What can I do for you?”

“I’ve been thinking…” Helen’s eyes flicker to Will. “I would love to take you up on the offer to take Honey on walks with Boomer. I don’t always get a chance to walk her, and I think she’ll like it.”

My heart swells, thinking of the walks I’ll get to take and how happy Honey will be to spend time with Boomer. Before I know it, I’m hugging a woman I don’t really like. Her arms stiffen at her sides before she reaches up and pats me on the back.

“I’ll be by tomorrow at eight if that’s okay,” I say. “I’ll take them on a nice, long walk. She’ll be so chill the rest of the day.”

“That’s fine, dear. I’m glad you’re home.”

Helen rips herself away from me before walking next door.

When I turn around, I’m met with Will’s shocked expression.

“That was unexpected.”

“People can change,” I say. Will flinches because he knows that fact all too well. He opens my door first before circling his hood to his door.

“Where are we going?” I bounce in my seat with giddiness.

“I thought dinner at the Riverfront and then a movie at the Rialto. A classic Ivy River first date. They’re playing *Casablanca* tonight.”

“Oh, one of my favorites.”

“I know,” Will says. He laces his fingers with mine over his center console and starts the car, backing out of the driveway, turning in the direction of the restaurant.

We're seated along the railing, and I watch the water cascade over the rocks of the river, the trees swaying in the breeze. It's warm out tonight, but the shade helps.

Tawni approaches our table, a delighted smile on her lips. She points a pen between us.

"Are you two officially a thing now? Your dad told me."

"Yes, we are a thing," Will says.

Her smile grows wider as she takes our orders, and before she leaves the table, she leans in. "Paul and I are very excited about this."

"We are too." Will flashes those chocolate eyes on me, and I melt.

"Does it feel strange? Being out in public? Being the talk of the town?"

Will grabs my hands across the table. "Not really. I thought about us. What we could be. Somehow, I didn't think it was possible."

"I did," I say. He grips my hands harder.

"I'm just excited for the future. Your dad is retiring, so he won't be my boss anymore."

"Seven months," I say—my dad has started his official countdown to retirement. He casually mentioned grandchildren, which I've disputed and told him it will be a while. Still, I think about what our kid will be like, how Will will be a good father because he knows what a bad one looks like, how it feels.

"You make me happy," Will says.

"You make me happy too."

That's all before the drinks come.

We both drink Cokes and enjoy the sounds of nature—Will's happy place. We eat burgers and dunk our French fries in our mutual ketchup bowl. We talk about hikes Will wants to take me on, special places he goes to think, spots he would only go to alone—until I came along.

“I texted JR and Logan about us being official,” Will says.

“How much shit did you get?”

“All of it. They’re happy for us, though.”

“I’m glad.”

“They told me I’ve been a whole different person. They’ve noticed the effect you have on me.”

“Oh?”

A ghost of a smirk forms on Will’s face. “Yeah, they say I’m looser. Less rigid.”

“I like you rigid.” I quirk my brow, and he laughs, deep from his gut.

“They also tell me I laugh more.”

“Because I’m hilarious.”

“You are...and beautiful, and smart, and everything I’ve been looking for. You’re it for me, Bree.”

“Oh?” I act nonchalant, but I’m the opposite.

“Yes,” he says, leaving it at that, back to his mysterious self, holding cards close to his chest. Then, he adds, “I just know it.”

I eat a French fry covered in ketchup and try not to squeal.

After dinner, we drive to downtown, parking behind the Rialto and walking hand-in-hand in public, where people can see. Folks pass us with big grins, nodding and focusing on our connected hands. We’ll be talked about, for sure. How the wayward daughter of Paul Tanager fell for his employee. How the mysterious, enigmatic newcomer fell in love with the girl but fought it for so long.

Our love story is my favorite...because it’s ours.

We watch the movie, and it gets to my favorite scene, when Ilsa sneaks into Rick’s apartment to explain why she never came to the train station. As they embrace onscreen, I lean in and say, “I love you.”

He turns his head, in awe that I've said it back. He kisses me, and I rest my head on his shoulder.

I cry at the end of *Casablanca*, like I always do, and he wipes my tears with his thumbs, kissing me as the lights come up, for anyone to see. He takes me home, pulling me to the apartment above the garage.

As soon as the doors close, his mouth covers my neck and collarbone, slipping a strap down, revealing one of my breasts so he can suck my nipple, stealing the breath from my lungs. It feels different this time, even though we had sex at my mom's house once Sienna left for Ivy River. This time feels so natural, so comfortable, but it burns my core to ash as I ride his hand against his closed door, his dirty words in my ears.

When we're naked and he's hovering over me, pushing into my wet heat, he breathes, "I love you," into my ear, and I moan, "I love you," back. He rolls so I'm on top, and I ride him to my own release, him groaning seconds after with his own. I collapse onto his chest, and he smooths my hair away from my face.

"You have all of me," he says.

"I know."

FORTY-THREE

BREE

“I heard you and that snack are an item,” Charmaine says when I stop into Do’s and Donuts for my highlight appointment.

I roll my eyes as she folds a piece of hair into a foil, but I secretly love how quickly the news has spread about us. A woman even shook my hand in congratulations on the way to the yoga studio last week.

“That’s not the best part, ladies,” Sienna says, her legs hanging over the chair next to me. “Bree is officially the new owner of Wildflower Yoga and Movement.”

The whole hair salon, including the customers in various stages of hair transformations, claps. My cheeks blush at the news.

“You’re a doll for taking that off Tiffany’s hands. I know she was absolutely overwhelmed.”

I grin large. We received an offer within twenty-four hours of the Palo Alto house being on the market. Within a week of being home, I made an offer to Tiffany one day, out of the blue, when I took her for a drink at Spirit and Bone. She started sobbing at the bar, taking my first offer and telling me she prayed for me, because she knew it was becoming too much, but she didn’t want all her hard work to go to waste.

“I need something to do,” I downplay it. “I can’t just be this rich, trust-fund baby.”

“I know that’s right. Between you and the actress over here...” Sienna rolls her eyes at Charmaine, who points a

comb in her direction. “I’m glad you both understand your privilege.”

“I’ve said forever that my career is one hundred percent dumb luck,” Sienna says.

“Shut up, Sienna. You’re wildly talented, and I won’t accept any other explanation for your success.”

“Okay, fine. But luck had a tiny, bitty part in it.”

Charmaine finishes the last foil on my head and takes me to another chair, so Sienna moves to her chair to get a trim. “Time for you, my talented but lucky nepo baby.”

Sienna flaps her hands. “My parents aren’t in the business, Charmaine.”

“Your mother killed it as Marion in *The Music Man* ten years ago, Sienna. Don’t forget your roots.”

“Do you want a tip or not?” Sienna asks.

“Enough, ladies,” I say, swiping my arms through the air. “You two are too much.”

“Also, tell them what happened to your ex,” Sienna says.

I slap my thighs in excitement. Charmaine waves her comb above my head. “Double-Deluxe Douchebag?”

“Yes, that very one. So, I’ve been talking to Julia, his now ex. She told me that Scott got sued by some investors who said he misrepresented his business and didn’t do his due diligence. He’s so broke he has to move back in with his father!”

“Serves him right,” Bernie says.

“I’m so happy for you, baby,” Mary says from the pedicure chair as she waits for a walk-in customer.

“Thanks! Frankly, I’m having the best month.”

Charmaine rubs my arms. “I’m trying to get that good luck off you.”

I look around this shop, my favorite place in Ivy River besides the apartment over the garage. These women know

how to sling shit and take it. The day-old donuts are also a plus.

I should grab one.

I'm contemplating between a maple bar or a cake donut with white icing and Fruity Pebbles when a raven-haired beauty walks in with huge, Audrey-Hepburn sunglasses on her face. She's tall and glides like a swan hired for weddings. Some other women notice, turning slowly, as she slightly smiles at the crowd, removing her glasses. Her outfit of white shorts, a flowy green tank top, and tan sandals looks effortlessly chic.

"Hi, I was wondering if you had time for a fill and a pedicure?" she asks. The crowd parts, and she smiles and waves, being ushered to one of the two pedicure stations, Mary turning on the water in the bowl. The woman climbs into the chair, swinging her expensive gray bag onto the tiny table next to her. There's movement out of the corner of my eye, and I see Sienna's eyes so big in the mirror they might pop out. She mouths, "Oh my god," and pulls out her phone. She locks eyes with me in the mirror and points, and I fumble for the phone in my pocket that I forget about constantly.

Sienna: First off, I'm glad you have a phone now.

Sienna: Second, that's Autumn.

Me: Autumn?

Sienna: JR's ex-wife. WTF is she doing here?

Sienna: She doesn't know who you are. Strike up a convo. Find out why she's here. I need to get out of here before she sees me.

Me: That's so weird.

Me: I'm in.

I casually turn, taking in this woman. Wow, she's pretty. Good for JR.

"Um, hi, I love your bag. It's so pretty!"

She smiles, pulling it into her lap. “Thanks, my boyfriend gave it to me.”

I sneak a peek, and Sienna is freaking out, and Charmaine takes her head and forcibly faces it forward.

“Do you live around here?”

She shakes her head. Gosh, I wish I knew what blush she uses. I bet it’s her natural flush.

“Are you here for the weekend, or are you going to hike the national park?”

“We’re just visiting. I used to live around here,” she whispers, and I roll my chair over to her so she doesn’t have to shout.

“Really?” Sienna might be the actress, but I’m giving the performance of a lifetime.

Autumn nods. “My sister still lives here, and she’s meeting my boyfriend for the first time. He says he has a surprise.”

Oh no. Surprise. Diamond ring. I don’t want to know this information. I don’t want them running into JR.

“Oh, really? I just moved here. Well, my dad lives here. You might know him.”

She knows him, because Paul and Joe, her former father-in-law, are best friends and just saw each other this morning for coffee.

She smiles and says, “Well, who’s your dad?”

“Paul Tanager.” There’s the hammer, and her face goes pale as she swallows.

“Paul Tanager? So, you’re Bree.”

“Yep.” I stick out my hand. “And you are?”

“Autumn Nolan.” She gets paler.

“Nice to meet you. I hope you have a nice time back home in Ivy River.”

“Thank you,” she says quietly, and then she leans in. “Do you know if JR Armitage still lives here?”

“Oh, um...” My heart pounds, and out of the corner of my eye, Sienna darts out, her hair half-trimmed and Charmaine throwing her hands up.

My phone buzzes in my lap.

Sienna: Don't tell her. Meet me at Blaine. Gotta run.

I smile, looking up from my phone. “I'm not sure,” I tell Autumn, even though we just had JR over for dinner last night.

“Oh, okay.” She smiles.

“Bree, I'm ready for you,” Charmaine says.

“It was so nice to meet you,” I say to Autumn.

Her smile is tentative before she says, “You too.”

I stand up and walk to Charmaine's station.

“Tell your friend to come back because I will not put my name on the haircut of a Hollywood actress and having it uneven like that.”

“I promise I will,” I laugh as Charmaine checks my foils.

“LOOK WHO I FOUND,” Sienna says when I walk into Blaine's Cafe, my boyfriend sitting with her, dressed in his uniform, looking hot. My friend's uneven hair is up in a messy bun.

“Hey,” I say, kissing him before sitting down at the table.

“Hey. Figured I'd stick around to see you. Your hair looks cute.”

“Thanks!” I shake my newly touched-up cut.

“Oh God, he even notices new hair? Can you teach an online class on how to be a great boyfriend? I'll fund it.”

Will chuckles and looks down. My shy, humble hunk of a man.

“Charmaine wants you to come back. She doesn't want you looking an uneven mess,” I say, sitting down on Will's lap.

Sienna grimaces at our PDA but leans forward. “I’ll go back. What happened with Autumn? I got him up to speed. What did you tell her?”

“She asked if JR still lives here.” I grimace. “I lied to her, said that I didn’t know if JR still lived here. Will this blow up in my face?”

“No,” Sienna and Will say in unison.

Will wraps his arms around my waist. “It’s probably for the best that neither of them know that the other one is in town.”

“Trust me. It *is* for the best,” Sienna says. “She looks great, though. My idiot brother got worse. She got better.”

“Why did they get divorced?” I ask.

“That’s a story for the next time,” Sienna says.

“I’ll tell you later. I know the CliffsNotes,” Will says.

“Can we do it naked?”

“Of course.”

Sienna pretends to throw up. “You two are so gross. I liked you better when you were hiding.” Sienna rolls her eyes and sips her water, but I can see her smile.

“We are deliriously happy, and we don’t care who knows it.” Then, I blow a raspberry on Will’s neck, and his cheeks blush to the color of the fruit.

“She’s telling the truth,” Will says.

They call Will’s name for his order, so I step off his lap so he can get it. He dives into the sandwich with gusto because he needs to get back on the road. I prop my chin on my hand to watch him, this beautiful man who loves me deeply and treats me like royalty. He is everything I could hope for, and I went through hell to get to him. I’d do it again, knowing he was at the finish line.

“You want to take the dogs on a walk tonight when I get home?” he asks as he polishes off his sandwich. I’ve started daily pack walks with Honey, Boomer, and Maple. You can

tell it's their favorite part of their day. They walk side-by-side, their tails moving in unison. Sometimes, Honey turns and licks Boomer, and then Boomer does the same. It's precious.

"I would love to," I say, kissing him again as Sienna drops off our lunch—a salad for her, a panini for me.

"Great." He smiles as he wipes his hands and stands up. "Give me some love, and I'll have to get back to work."

I take him in a big hug, squeezing him, and he squeezes me back. He peppers my forehead with kisses, and I return them, adding one more than he did.

"Bye, baby," he says as he disappears outside and into his truck parked on the street.

Sienna stabs some lettuce with a cucumber. "You're getting married soon, aren't you?"

"I'd marry him tomorrow if he asked me." He's gone, but I look for him out the window. "You'll always be my best friend, though."

"Damn straight." We smile at each other before we dig in.

EPILOGUE

WILL - SEVEN MONTHS LATER

Deep breaths don't calm my nerves. I hear his steps on the creaking porch, so he's almost here. Paul's been retired a week and has spent the whole day at the river with his friends, fishing and drinking lots of beer. I figured slightly drunk, both from the sun and alcohol, is the best time to ask him.

He saunters in, his skin red and shiny, and he stumbles to the fridge, grabbing a bottle of water.

"Hey, Will, how was work? Because I didn't have to go, hey-yo!" He twists the cap off the bottle of water and sucks down a deep guzzle. Chuckling cuts the tension, but my shoulders are straight, and he notices.

"You look like you're about to tell me something." Paul huffs out a breath and sits down, bending his fingers toward his face. "Lay it on me."

I sit down across from him, my hands shaking.

"Sir, I...I want to ask Bree to marry me. I want your blessing."

He nods, smiling, and looks up at the ceiling. "I thought you'd never ask."

My shoulders lower several inches. "Really?"

"Of course you have my blessing. Come here."

After we both stand, he hugs me, practically stumbling into me from the booze and sun. He rubs my head, ruffling my hair. "When are you going to ask her?"

“As soon as possible.”

“You have a ring?” Paul asks.

The second part of the question makes me more nervous. “We know it’s bad luck, but Bree has mentioned that she wants Holly’s ring. She’s not sure if you have it, though.”

Paul nods and waves his hand. “Follow me.”

Paul walks to the rear of the first floor, where his bedroom suite is. It’s neat and orderly, with minimal dark furniture and a king bed covered in a flannel bedsheet. He opens the top drawer of his bureau, pulling out a brown square box, and my throat closes as he cradles it in his hands. It feels like a lifetime before he speaks.

“I know our marriage didn’t last, but the love didn’t die that day. It didn’t die with her. I will love her forever. I don’t think this ring is cursed.”

He opens it and has a moment, looking down at it. When he turns it so I can see, it hits me in the gut.

This is the ring. A classic round diamond set in a gold band. Holly’s ring on her daughter’s finger feels full circle and utterly perfect.

“Thank you, Paul.” I hug him, and he holds me like I always wished my father would. Like he’s proud of me, that my hard work is all my own. I sniff back the emotion as I hold the box in my hands.

“I will take care of her. I promise.”

“I know you will, son. You’re the best man I could’ve asked for, for my daughter. It just feels so good...to know I was right.”

I chuckle as I swat him in the chest.

“Don’t waste a single moment. Ask her.”

“YOU READY?” Bree asks when I open the apartment door.

“Of course,” I say, although a large boulder is stuck in my throat, and a ring box is in my pocket. I shake my hands as we walk down the stairs together, and she jogs to the back door, grabbing the dogs.

Honey, Boomer, and Maple.

Three months ago, Bree arrived to take Honey for a walk to find Helen flummoxed, holding a towel on her hand because Honey had bitten her. It barely broke the skin, but Bree and I saw this coming, because Honey detested Helen, and it was clear. So, we took ownership of the dog that day, and she’s been nothing but wonderful since.

Helen also moved closer to her grandchildren in Sacramento, so we no longer have the neighbor from hell, and Honey has come alive in our house, finally free of her tyrant owner. I couldn’t be happier that Honey and Boomer got their happily ever after with Maple.

Since Honey moved in, they haven’t left each other’s side. We catch them sleeping on each other, and Honey will get this blissful look, her eyes closed and the corners of her mouth in a small smile—if dogs can smile. Boomer’s just ecstatic he doesn’t have to sneak around anymore. That they can be together, forever and always.

Walking with Bree and our little dog family, being outside, being together, is my favorite part of the day, so I had to include them. Honey and Boomer are one of the many reasons I fell in love with her. And I continue to fall harder every day.

What Bree doesn’t know is I snuck in before she got home from the yoga studio and tied something to Honey’s collar. I’m scared to death she’ll see it before we get to the spot, but any way this happens will be perfect.

We walk, quiet as we usually are, just enjoying the breeze. It’s getting warmer some days, but it’s still February, and we’ve been plagued with some rain. Today is beautiful with the shining sun and a light warmth to the air. It reminds me of the day, one year ago, when she showed up on Paul’s steps, looking for a summer like her childhood ones.

Then, she got me.

We reach the river, taking a small pit-stop so the dogs can smell all the bushes, and as she lets them feel the full extent of the leash freedom, I see my window.

“Baby, what’s that on Honey’s collar?”

“What?” Bree straddles the dog and spins her collar around while she sniffs a patch of weeds. Her eyebrows scrunch until her face stretches.

“Oh no, no, no, no,” she says, tears starting as the dogs sniff around her.

The note on the collar says, *You gave me a happily ever after, so I want to help give you yours...*

I drop to one knee as I take the box out, a move I practiced in the mirror for a half hour before she came to get me to walk the dogs.

“Brienne Elise Tanager, I love you with all that I am. You have all of me, my heart, my body, my soul. Will you be my wife?”

She can’t speak, but she just nods her head violently as I stand up and take her in my arms. “She said yes!” I scream to no one, and Boomer jumps on me in excitement.

“She said yes, Boomer!” I yell as I rub his fur, the dog’s tongue hanging over the side.

“I love you,” she says. “And if you couldn’t tell, my answer is yes. A thousand times over.”

“Good.” I take her shaking left hand and slide her mother’s ring onto her finger. It’s perfect. Once realization reaches her, her mouth twists again. I’m so glad we get to use this special piece of jewelry.

“Your dad gave it to me.”

She jumps at me, and I hold her as she cries softly against my shoulder. “It’s perfect.”

“It is.”

It's hard not to think about those that won't be at our wedding. Holly, her mother. My brother, Alex. I feel like they're here in spirit. That they never left us.

I hold the dogs as we walk back to the house. I have something else in my back pocket.

"Can we walk to town?"

"Okay." She leans into my arm since I'm holding her hand. "Why?"

"I have something to mail."

"You do? Is it..."

I nod, and she coos, standing on her tiptoes to kiss me on the cheek. She knows what it is and said I should do it, while I wanted to let sleeping dogs lie. I don't need to do it. I have a wonderful family—one I found in Ivy River—a career I love, and a woman I've been waiting thirty-four years to find.

What I've learned about healing is that it never ends. All you can hope for is to get a little bit better, every day, until one day, you forget for a little while. Scott and her mother's death are a part of Bree, and my childhood and Alex's death are a part of me. It made us who we are today.

Bree and I were meant to go through hell to find each other. The road was long and arduous, but it had a beautiful light at the end of the tunnel.

This act... I'm not doing this for my parents. I'm doing it for me.

We walk to the post office, stopping in front of the blue mailboxes. I pull the letter out and show it to my new fiancée. She takes it in her hands, closes her eyes, and holds it.

"I put good vibes on it."

"Thank you, baby." I do the same thing, holding it before I drop it into the mailbox.

Bree doesn't ask me what it says, but she knows what the gist of it is. In the end, I decided to keep it short and sweet.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I made something of myself. I'm successful. I found a family who loves me.

I'm getting married to the most beautiful woman in the world.

I'm sixteen years sober. I'm happy.

Just wanted you to know.

YOUR SON, Will.

THE END

WANT MORE?

Want a bonus epilogue of Will and Bree, married, in love, and parents? [Click here!](#)

Loved *All of Me*? Please consider reviewing on Amazon! It helps others find and enjoy this book.

Want more heartfelt, steamy small town vibes? Check out Jenny's complete small town romance series, *The Finch Family*! Available on Amazon in ebook and paperback.

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Jenny Bunting is the author of nine full-length romance novels and five romantic comedy novella titles, all self-published on Amazon. Jenny dabbles in spreadsheets for her day job so she can do this on the side. She loves prestige TV, brunch, walks, petting dogs, and reading all genres, not just romance. Jenny lives with her husband and their German shepherd in the suburbs of Sacramento, California.