



Angle of Pursuit

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Jamie Bennett

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Aubin had a plan...
and this wasn't it.

Never, not once in a million years, did Aubin Frazier think that she would end up like this: single again, rejected by her family and friends, and totally broke. Seriously? How had those things happened to a woman who was, let's face it, renowned for being the best? For getting ahead? For winning?

Now she's living in a mostly unfurnished condo that she can't afford and her teenage neighbor, Parker, becomes her best—and only—friend. The other unit in their complex belongs to Robby Baines, the pro-football player. He's extremely cute and charming, of course, but Aubin's not interested in any of that. Even if she was, Robby has a line of women following after him, young, beautiful women who are just starting off their perfect lives. The line leads right into his bedroom and he's not looking for anything more from them.

Aubin can see that he leads a charmed existence, so why would Robby want to get involved with a loser like she is? Funny, but it does seem that he wants to be friends. He seems to want to be a big, strong, steady fixture in her life and in Parker's—and it also seems that they both need him there.

If Robby can get past her defenses, Aubin might have a chance at a different kind of a win. He'll just need to find the best angle...

Chapter 1

“Awesome! We’re done.” She smiled and closed her laptop, as pleased as if we’d just completed some online shopping and gotten a great deal on shoes. She certainly didn’t look like she had any understanding that my life was totally over: all my plans were pulverized and my hopes for the future now rotted in ruins. My reputation had been tattered, my finances sunk underwater, my happiness vaporized, et cetera, et cetera.

It was...what was the word? Catastrophic. Apocalyptic. But how did this girl react?

“Awesome!” she repeated, and stood up from her chair and glanced at the door, ready to move on to the next project.

I still sat, my butt glued to the vinyl cushion. It was done? She’d just said so, but could that be right? No, it wasn’t possible, and I shook my head. I didn’t give up on things. I didn’t throw in the towel and quit! Not too long ago, I had been successful in every venture I attempted—and now, another failure? Again? No.

“I don’t accept this.”

The paralegal, or legal secretary, or whoever my attorney had fobbed me off on, stared across the table in confusion. “Um...” She glanced around this sterile little cubicle of a conference room like she sought guidance. Like there might be a poster with bullet points for how to deal with a troublesome client hanging next to the one with the pride of lions and an inspirational message about group dynamics. “Um, are you experiencing regrets or something?” she hazarded.

Yes, I was. “Regrets or something” was exactly what I was feeling right now.

“I think lots of people get like this after a divorce,” she said, nodding sagely. What did she know about that? She looked like she was about fourteen, not nearly old enough to understand “regrets or something.” And her ring finger was

empty, just like mine now was. Only the hint of a white circle remained as evidence that once, I had been married. Once, I'd been part of a couple, a team, two people pulling together.

"Yours was so easy, though," she comforted me. "There were no problems at all! No shared assets, no children, nothing. You have a fresh start and you're still young. Young-ish," she revised. She squinted her eyes as she checked my face—for wrinkles, maybe? For age spots or sagging?

My hand rose and I swear, I might have slapped her, but I used it to smooth my hair—my thick, shiny, mahogany-brown hair without even one grey strand. I stood also and stalked across the institutional carpet. "You're blocking my exit," I informed her, and she leaped to the side. I walked out of the building, out from under their bad fluorescent overhead lighting and onto the wet asphalt of the parking lot under a grey sky instead.

Maybe my divorce had been easy, with no problems at all, but it had still taken a long time to finalize. It was early spring and the snow was melting—it was almost a year since Billy and I had said our vows. Now, instead of celebrating our first anniversary together, I was leaving the family law office alone. I looked at the clouds, lost in thought, and then started to head toward my car. At that moment, another driver raced in front of me, smashing through a puddle that exploded with dirty water.

It exploded onto me, all over me, saturating my coat and my shoes, spraying my face and my hair. I stood there dripping in the parking lot of my divorce attorney's building, needing to get into a car that I could no longer afford, to drive back to a condo that was mine only through the generosity of the man who thought I'd tried to ruin his life. I looked again at the gathering clouds. I wasn't religious, but was this some type of smiting thing?

"I'm sorry," I told the sky. "Ok? I'm sorry! I would take it back if I could. I'll be better!"

"Um, Aubin? Excuse me, Aubin Frazier?"

I spun around and there was that paralegal or legal assistant or whatever she was, the girl with skin like porcelain who thought I was an old hag. “What?”

“You left your purse in our conference room.” She held it out and I took it as her eyes tracked over me and the muddy water dripping from my person. “Have an awesome day!” she offered, and raced back into the building.

Awesome. Yeah, it was the perfect description of this situation. I drove the expensive car to the condo that I scrimped to keep, and I got into the shower to wash off the mud and the printer toner-odor of the attorney’s office. I stayed in there for a while but I didn’t feel any better, and when I turned off the water, the empty hours rose up before me. My days had always been so full with work, volunteer projects, going out with friends, exercise, shopping, and making plans to do more of those things. Oh, and there had been my husband, too. I’d also spent time with him.

But almost all of that had fallen by the wayside. The money for entertainment and shopping was gone and all of my friends were mad at me, anyway. My husband was also gone, having moved to Oklahoma for a better job that paid enough to start him off solidly in his new life. He’d meet a new wife, too...

Exercise. I could still exercise. Better yet, I could dance, because of all the things I’d excelled at, I was best at that. No one had been able to take their eyes off me when I’d had on my uniform and ran out on the field as the captain of the Wonderwomen squad, the professional cheerleaders for the Woodsmen football team. I wanted to feel that again, the adulation and the exhilaration.

I turned on my little speakers and cued up the music on my phone. This was a routine we’d done in my last season before I retired. We’d called it “Cobra” because of the way we’d rolled our hips, undulating like snakes. I loved to watch the videos of us all performing this and I could still do it. I could! I could still do this, all of it.

As I danced, I forgot everything that had happened, not just today but for the last few months. I imagined myself wearing

the iconic orange halter top of the Wonderwomen cheerleader uniform, my hair perfectly curled, my makeup impeccable. I could almost hear the other girls dancing behind me, where they'd always been since I was at the front and center of the group. I listened to the crowd screaming their appreciation, their yells even louder than the music coming from the speakers and their feet thumping on the stadium—

No, that noise was someone pounding on my door, and I was actually alone in my living room with wet hair and wearing a giant, old Woodsmen Football sweatshirt instead of the tight, orange halter top. I sighed and pressed pause on the music to see what fresh hell awaited on my front porch because lately, there hadn't been a lot of pleasant surprises.

This time it was a kid, a teenager. I'd seen him before in the parking lot, so I stepped back from the peephole and swung open the door. "Yes?" I asked him.

"Will you turn down that fucking music?"

My mouth fell open. Who was he to talk to me like that? He didn't even look old enough to drive but he was definitely old enough to feel comfortable swearing, because he kept right on doing it.

"I'm playing a really important level and I can't even focus because you have that fucking oldies shit at top volume," he announced.

"Oldies?" I sputtered. "That song was popular—"

"Before I was born," he informed me. "Turn it down!"

I waited for my clapback, which was going to come to me soon. Now it was my turn to tell off this oversized child, to put him in his place so he knew that he could never speak to a woman like that. He particularly couldn't talk that way to a beautiful and desirable woman, as I was. No stupid teenager and no grown man, either, could swear at me and tell me what to do! I was Aubin Frazier, damn it!

"Oh. Oh, shit! I didn't mean to make you cry," he told me.

I wasn't. Was I? I rubbed my knuckles over my face and they came away wet with tears, and when I opened my mouth to

give him an earful, the only thing that emerged was a sob.

His eyes got huge. "I'm sorry," he stuttered.

And all I could do now was shake my head and turn away. I went to my kitchen and buried my face in a towel. Everyone knew that crying was for weaklings and the only thing it accomplished was ruining your makeup, but here I was behaving like an infant, like a woman who couldn't control herself.

"Uh, lady?" a voice asked from behind me. The teenager had invited himself in. "I'm sorry. I really am. You can play that bad music, I don't care."

I remembered that I wasn't even wearing any makeup to ruin with these useless tears. I cried harder.

"Am I supposed to call somebody? Do you have to breathe into a bag? Should you slap someone who's hysterical, or is that only a thing people did in the olden days before you guys knew about medicine and stuff?"

"Shut up," I managed to tell him, and then took a big, long, shaky breath before I tried talking again. "It was a new song!"

"*That's* why you're crying? I thought you felt threatened by me." He flexed his two skinny arms a little but no muscle showed under his sleeves.

I went to the sink and poured myself a large glass of water, which I swallowed in three big gulps.

"You must be able to chug beer."

"What?" I looked over at the teenager. He was staring at me and nodding like he was impressed.

"You can really take down a lot of liquid. Can you do shots?" he asked.

"Yes. And yes, I can chug beers." I had been able to in college, anyway, back before I got a little more sophisticated. It felt like that had been in a different eon.

"How do you do it?"

“I mean, you just relax your throat and...why are you in my house?” I asked him.

“I didn’t know what to do,” he explained. “I followed you because I felt bad. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“You didn’t. You called me old, which hurt my feelings, but I was crying because my divorce was finalized today,” I heard myself explain to him. And why I had bothered to do that? No idea.

“That fucking sucks,” he commiserated. “My parents aren’t divorced but my mom’s dead. Have you seen that sad sack of shit I live with? He’s my dad. I just ignore him.” He waited. “Aren’t you going to tell me not to do that, that I should appreciate the parent I have left or something?”

“My dad is also a sad sack. I didn’t talk to him for three years when I went away to college.”

He nodded, impressed again. “I was wondering what happened to the guy who used to live here with you. Was that your husband? The one you divorced?”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “He got a new job in Oklahoma and moved away. He was an assistant trainer on the Woodsmen team staff but he’s the head trainer for the Rustlers now.”

“He makes the football players lift weights?” He tried out another flex.

“You know,” I said impatiently. “Billy is a certified athletic trainer. He can help with their strength training but he does a lot more. He works with the guys to prevent injuries and he directs their rehab.”

“For drugs?”

“No,” I bit out again. “Rehab when they’re hurt. He tapes them, stretches with them...I don’t know why I’m talking about his job.” Was I defending him? He’d left me.

“Does he make good money?”

“He does fine.” Better than what I had made at my last job while we were married, which was negative money. “Why do you care?”

“I want to earn a shitload. I want to retire early.”

A short, sharp bark of laughter burst from my mouth, startling both of us. “You’re young to be considering retirement,” I pointed out.

“My dad is old and he’s still working. I don’t want to be like that,” he explained, and I wondered what he considered old. Forty? Fifty? “I plan to be on a beach with a lot of girls and beer.”

“Would you be chugging it?” I asked. “You seem to care a lot about drinking.”

He shrugged. “I don’t care too much about anything.”

Good Lord, I wished I felt that way. “What’s your name?”

“Parker.”

“Aubin,” I told him, and offered my hand. He must have been working out the correct way to shake, because first he limply grasped my fingers, then he attempted to squeeze the blood out of them, and lastly he returned to holding them as if he was afraid of human contact. “It’s nice to meet you,” I commented when that process was over.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “I didn’t know your name, but I see you all the time. I’m home a lot.”

“What about school?”

“I’m homeschooled. I do online shit.”

“Why?” I asked, but he shrugged. “Why don’t you—” But I broke off, interrupted by a deafening noise. It sounded like someone had just switched on a large power tool and it was coming through my walls. My hands went to cover my ears, that was how loud it was, and the empty water glass on my countertop vibrated with it. “What is that?” I asked Parker, and when he couldn’t hear me, I repeated it in a way that strained my throat.

“Sounds like Robby Baines again,” he told me, his voice also raised. It cracked a little. “He’s our neighbor. Do you know about him?”

“Do you think I’ve been living under a rock?”

He only stared at me. “What?”

I rolled my eyes and nodded an exaggerated assent. “Yes, yes of course I know who Robby Baines is. He’s a football player,” I said, enunciating loudly and carefully. “He’s plays for the Woodsmen, the Pride of the Peninsulas, on the D-line.”

“The what?”

Now I stared at him. He’d heard me, he just didn’t know anything about football. “You know how when the quarterback gets the ball, some really big guys on the other team figure out the best angle to run him down and pummel him into the turf? That’s Robby Baines’ job.”

“How do you know that?”

But I didn’t answer, because I was listening again to the noisy machine. “What is he doing? What makes that sound? He’s, like, four or five units down from here and it still makes that much racket?”

Parker shrugged. “It just started yesterday when you weren’t here.”

“You watch when I come and go?”

“There’s nothing else to do,” he answered. He hadn’t said that in a volume much above a mumble, but I’d read his lips. “I don’t know what it is, but it’s relentless,” he told me in a louder tone. “It’s worse than your old—your music,” he finished, and I saw him shoot me a glance to check if I’d noticed the insult.

I had. “Did you also trot your butt over there to tell him to turn it the F off?” I asked, and now his eyes widened.

“Are you kidding me? Have you seen that guy? His arms... his chest...” He shook his head. “He could break me in half. I wouldn’t even say hello to him. I bet he weighs double what I do.”

From the look of things, it was probably more like triple. At least. If Parker tipped the scales at a hundred pounds, I would have been surprised—but he was also tall, standing close to

the nine inches over five feet that I did. Skinny ankles emerged from beneath the hems of his jeans and bony wrists protruded from his hoodie sleeves, as if maybe this height was a new thing that no one had prepared clothes for. Or, if his dad really was like mine, no one had noticed that he was walking around like an idiot, wearing stuff that didn't fit anymore. I remembered that my old dance teacher had been the one to inform my extant parent that I needed a bra. He hadn't seen that for himself and I'd been too embarrassed to tell him.

The din continued and I stared at the wall. "How long did this go on yesterday?" I yelled.

"Couple hours," he shouted back, holding up three fingers to specify how many. "Then he left his house with another big guy."

I knew that many of the defensive starters had stayed here in northern Michigan instead of leaving for the offseason. Most of the Woodsmen jetted to warmer climates during the winter to train, but those guys had stayed to work out together. They were generally friends, and a couple of them had settled down with local girls who didn't want to move away from our area. The reason I knew this was because my sister was one of the local girls who had settled down with one of those defensive players. She wasn't here at the moment, though, because her husband had surprised her with a trip to about a million different cool places as a delayed honeymoon. They planned to be gone for weeks, galivanting.

But apparently Robby Baines wasn't taking any time off to galivant. No, he was in Michigan, running what sounded like...a giant rock polishing machine? Or an indoor power washer? He had all the money he could ever need to jaunt around the world, and he had chosen to remain here in the cold mud of spring, when the rutted landscape was still grey but there was no snow to cover it, when everyone was unhappy because they were alone and poor, when everything was the absolute worst, ever, in the history of humanity. He had chosen to stay in order to torture his neighbors with...the world's largest vacuum?

The noise didn't stop; in fact, it seemed to get louder. It sounded like maybe he was drilling down through the floor of his condo into the core of the planet. It felt like it was drilling down into my brain.

"We don't have to take this nonsense," I announced to Parker.

"Huh?"

"I'm going to tell him to turn off his riding mower, or whatever he has running in his condo," I said. "Just because he's young, famous, and rich, and I'm poor and old—I don't have to take this. I don't have to take anything, from anybody!"

"What did you say?"

I shook my head and started for the door, and when I looked over my shoulder, he had trotted along behind me. At least it was quieter outside, but my ears still seemed to buzz with echoes of Robby Baines' equipment, whatever it was.

"Come on," I told Parker, and he loped along with loose limbs and feet that looked four sizes too large to attach to his skinny ankles. We walked up Robby Baines' steps, the source of the commotion, and I pounded on the door.

The noise stopped and I heard thudding footsteps approach instead. Suddenly, I got a little afraid, but I swallowed and did what I'd done my whole life: I pretended. It had worked for at least twenty-nine of my thirty years and although it had failed me lately, it was all I had to fall back on.

So I pretended that I wasn't scared, I pretended that I was in charge, I pretended that I was still young and beautiful and that I still had the world at my feet. When Baines opened the door, I looked down my nose at him, except that I looked way, way up at him because he was extremely tall.

"Fuck," I heard Parker breathe out behind me, and I understood that feeling.

Robby Baines was shirtless and wearing only a pair of shorts, shorts so small that they might have been called a Speedo. He presented an overwhelmingly large vision of muscle, skin, and

tattoos. I blinked, Parker swore again, and I retreated onto the step below. It only made Baines look larger.

Not that he needed help with size.

“Hi.” His voice rumbled out like scary thunder, too, but when I forced my eyes up from the vast expanse of masculinity and near-nudity, I saw a pleasant expression on his face. Almost a smile. “What do you guys need? You selling something?”

“No,” I said, and then my brain synapses reconnected and I remembered why we had come to his door. “Parker and I want to know what you’re doing in there to make so much noise.”

“Actually, bro, I’m good with it,” the teenager said from behind me. “Doesn’t bother me at all.”

I turned and scowled at him. Traitor.

“Can you really hear me through the walls?” Robby Baines asked. “I thought nobody would be around during the day.”

“There are definitely people here,” I noted. “Parker does online school.” And my life was a gaping crevasse of uselessness, so I was around, too. “What is that? What’s making that racket?” I leaned to look past him into the townhouse, but his big body filled every inch of the door’s opening.

“Is there a time you’re not here?” Baines asked both of us, then focused on me. “You work, right?”

“I work nights, so I go in late,” I told him, and Parker added that he never left this fucking place. “I guess there’s no good time for you to run your... cement mixer? Jet engine? What are you doing in there?”

He didn’t fill in that blank. “Too loud,” he said, “got it. See you guys around.” He nodded and the door closed.

Parker was apparently done with me also, because he headed back to his own condo after giving me a slight wave. I was alone again. I went out for a run instead of dancing more and when I returned, I had to shower for a third time. Actually, I didn’t *have* to, but I still had some standards to maintain, and going to any job while dripping with sweat was something I

just couldn't allow. Then I went out to my car in the waning daylight in order to get myself to work.

Hours later, I pulled back into the parking lot of my townhouse building. I was tired and itchy, and ready to take my fourth shower of the day. My previous jobs before this one had never been so dirty, so dirty and so unattractive. Some of my former careers had also been physical and hard, but they also had a lot of standards and rules about my appearance. I'd had to dress for success. Like, for example, in college I'd been a waitress at a bar near the campus. The manager had handed me a cutoff t-shirt that rode up my ribcage when I lifted my tray or leaned over to serve drinks. He'd advised me to work it; my tips depended on how high that shirt had risen, and I'd sliced off a few more inches of it with scissors. I hadn't needed to worry about my electric bill after I'd done that.

When I'd been a cheerleader, we'd had our Woodsmen Wonderwomen uniforms, of course. They had also shown off our bodies to their best advantage. Later, my ex-best friend Jess and I had started an all-natural cosmetics business and we'd been perfectly styled, office-chic at all times.

I looked down at my old leggings with the hole in the knee and the same giant sweatshirt I'd worn earlier in the day. Actually, I guessed that I was still dressing for my job. I sighed, and—

“Hi.”

“Good Lord!” I threw my purse and tote bag into the air in fright, but it was only Robby Baines. He was sitting on the open tailgate of his truck and I had a brief thought about whether that piece of metal would support his weight.

“You? What are you doing out here?” I asked him. It was damp and very cold during these sad hours after the bars closed but before the sun rose, and I was personally ready to be under a roof and in a bed.

“I just got home,” he said. “The stars are pretty tonight.”

I tilted back my head to see. Yeah, I guessed that they were, and they were very visible because it was a new moon. I stared at the points of light, so far away but the exact same

pieces of rock, dust, and fire that Billy was looking at in Oklahoma. I wondered if he was out with a new woman already, if he already had a girlfriend.

“Was that a sigh or a yawn?”

I looked over at Robby Baines. “A yawn,” I lied. “It’s late. Where were you that was still open at this hour on a Monday?”

“I was at a party. What about you?”

“I told you earlier today that I work nights,” I stated.

“Today?” He squinted at me. “Do I know you?”

He didn’t remember me? I was Aubin Frazier! I was...no. I was nothing, not anymore. I thought of how I’d pounded on his door in my old clothes with my hair a wet mess and no makeup on my pale features. “No, you don’t know me,” I answered. “I’m Aubin. I came to your house this afternoon to tell you to turn off your machinery.”

“Oh yeah, right.” He did seem to recall it now.

“What was that, anyway? What made that noise?”

“Did I know you from somewhere else, too?” he asked. Now he was really staring, and there was enough light from the floods on the buildings to get a glimpse of my withered face.

“I used to be a cheerleader,” I admitted. It might have been difficult to discern that now, but it was true. “I was on the Wonderwomen squad when you got drafted by the Woodsmen and came into the football league. I cheered for you.”

“Huh.” He looked at me again, at my hair pulled back into a knot, at the greyish leggings that used to be black, at the sweatshirt under the old ski coat. “I guess that might be true.”

“Of course it’s true! Who would lie about that?”

“You’d be surprised,” he told me. “I hear from a lot of girls that they’re Wonderwomen cheerleaders, and there’s no way that the team is so big.”

“It’s a very select group,” I said loftily, and he looked me over again, doubt clear on his face.

“I guess it is, maybe,” he said, and even more skepticism bled into his voice. It made me furious.

“What?” I challenged him, stomping closer. Was I not even walking the same anymore? Before, I had sashayed. “Don’t you believe me?”

“I don’t really care that much,” he said.

“Well, I do! I care a lot,” I informed him. “I was a cheerleader and I was even the captain of the squad. That means I was on the fifty yard-line every time we went out on the field. I led them, all those girls, and they followed me and looked up to me. I did the same thing in college because I was the captain of that dance team, too. We went to a national competition in Florida and we came in third and we would have won, except Stacie di Motta yanked at her leotard when it went up her butt after I’d told her a thousand times just to leave it alone if that happened on stage, and then Pansy’s technique in her pencil turns was so bad...”

Robby sat there watching me and I stopped talking about our experience in Orlando. That competition had been held almost ten years before. Was I really still angry that Stacie always got wedgies and that Pansy had only been on the team because her grandmother had been such a big donor to the university’s performing arts department? I sounded like an old, resentful fool.

“You know, I was a dance major because I got a scholarship for that, but I was a business minor. It’s not like I’m stupid,” I told him. “I had a lot of plans for my life after college.”

“Yeah? Like what?” He scooted over slightly and held out his hand, gesturing to the remaining quarter of space left on the tailgate. I jumped up to put my own butt on it, and the thing held. I found myself talking extensively about what I’d done post-graduation, about returning to northern Michigan and selling medical devices, but then leaving that to do marketing for a startup, and then developing my own idea for an organic cosmetics firm that I’d founded with my best friend, Jess. My ex-best friend.

“It was a great concept and I still believe in the long-term potential, but in the current environment, I had to pivot to a nearer-term opportunity,” I informed him. I pushed back some strands of hair that the wind had loosened out of the messy bun I’d made. I never, ever would have ventured out with my hair like this before. And after going for a run and taking my third shower, I still hadn’t bothered to put on makeup.

He was looking at me and not answering. What was his deal? “Suppliers weren’t able to scale and we dealt with component shortages,” I said. “You know.”

“So it didn’t work,” he said. “None of those other jobs panned out, either?”

“They panned fine!” I protested.

“Then why aren’t you still doing any of them?”

“Who says I’m not?”

He pointed at the tote bag I’d dropped when he’d startled me. “That’s all crap for cleaning. My mom did that, too. What are you doing, office buildings? The night shift sucks.”

It did. I didn’t bother to answer.

“Are you the one who’s married to our old trainer? We called him Papa.”

“His real name is William Papakonstantinou, and we used to be together. We’re divorced.” There it was, the ugly truth, but Robby Baines only nodded, unsurprised. “We were married for less than a year,” I mentioned. “We separated months ago.”

“Huh,” he commented.

“It wasn’t Billy’s fault,” I told this football player. “He was all set to be hitched for life. He meant the vows when he said them.” I’d believed them at the time as well, but it had turned out that I was a liar. “The separation, the divorce, everything was totally my fault. I’m completely to blame, not him.”

“Yep, I get it.”

I turned my to look at him. “You do? What do you think that you get?”

“I’m mostly the dick, myself. When I’m with women, they get pissed because I’m the dick,” he explained. “So I do get it.”

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m the dick,” I agreed.

“It’s easier that way.” A pair of headlights flashed across us as someone turned into the parking lot. “Good. Here she is.” He stood up off the tailgate and the truck bed bounced on its springs. We both watched a white car speed toward us and stop. A woman quickly got out, a young, blonde woman.

“Robby?” she called.

“Yep,” he answered her. “See you, Auburn,” he said to me.

“Aubin,” I spat out, but I didn’t think he’d heard, because he’d already locked lips with the blonde woman. They’d locked tongues, too, and he was also pawing at her butt. “Why don’t you take that inside?” I called loudly. “This is a public space.”

They did move towards the townhouses, but I didn’t think it was because they’d heard my complaints. And why did I care, anyway, if they had sex in the parking lot? I could, too. If I wanted to, I could have sex right on the ground, right here on this wet, dirty pavement. Surely there would be some man, somewhere, who would still be willing to sleep with me.

I watched a rectangle of light appear and disappear in the distance as Robby Baines and the unknown blonde opened the door to his house and went in. Sighing, I slid off the back of his truck. Tomorrow I could come up with someone who wanted to have sex in the parking lot. I’d tackle that right after I solved the problems of the town that hated me, my terrible job, the car I couldn’t afford, my loneliness, and the loss of my youth.

I picked up the bag of cleaning supplies and went toward the building. I could probably get all that worked out.

Sure I could.

Chapter 2

It was inevitable. I'd known that this meeting was coming, and really, I'd thought I was ready for it. I'd even rehearsed for it in front of my bathroom mirror, but there was no comparison between practicing by myself and actually experiencing all the emotions ricocheting through me at this moment, with it really happening. There was anger and bitterness, but the strongest feeling I had was shame. I was so ashamed.

The woman currently staring me down was also in the midst of an emotional storm. Jess drew in a breath through her nose, which pinched shut as her lips narrowed to a thin line. This was the mean-librarian face that she knew she got, the expression we'd all teased her about. She'd tried to stop doing it, but it always came out when she was really upset about something. Like how at this moment, she was really upset about seeing me, her former best friend, in front of the shelves of tampons at the drugstore. We'd both been reaching for a box when our eyes had met.

"Aubin," she said icily and no librarian, even the meanest, had ever sounded that angry and hateful.

"Hi," I acknowledged. It was still my name, no matter how many other aspects of my life had changed. One of those aspects was that Jess was no longer my best friend and she certainly wasn't my business partner. Our cosmetics enterprise had gone down in flames right about the time that our seven-year friendship had.

But no matter how she felt about me now, I still liked her, and I wished a lot that we could be at least cordial again. So I tried. "How are you?" I asked cautiously. "How are you doing?"

"Me? I'm great," she said. The words sounded shrill and I swallowed and tried again to prepare myself for what I thought was coming shortly. It did: "I'm great because I'm not the one who ruined everything and lied about it, too. I'm not a cheap, dishonest, trashy slut like you are!"

Her voice had gone from shrill to shriek and the rest of the drugstore had gotten very quiet. I put down the tampons and nodded at her. "I'm glad you're doing well," I said, my own voice thin. "Good, I'm glad." I turned on my heel and left, not looking to either side but only straight ahead.

It had been tempting fate to go there instead of driving to a place where no one I knew would shop, but it was the closest to my house and I'd really needed tampons. I stopped at a gas station and got a few out of the machine in the ladies' bathroom instead and then I went home, back to my condo to hide.

Bushes separated the townhouse units in our building, rows of high evergreen plants edging all the paths that led to our front doors. The bushes between my house and Parker's had gotten a little thin, though. That was why I could see him sitting on his front steps as I turned up my own walkway.

"You have a nice car," he said, and I stopped to talk.

"Thanks. I got it when I started my business." It had been part of the look, after all. I had needed a way to get to our meetings that demonstrated to potential investors that Jess and I were already a success. The red BMW was supposed to have been a symbol of that, but now I wasn't sure what it showed about me.

"I'm going to have a nice car," he mentioned. "When I can drive, I will. Only two more years."

I sat down on my own steps. "Why aren't you doing school right now? I thought you were online."

"Yeah, sometimes. That noise started up the minute you left."

"Really?" I tried to look through the bushes past Parker's house, but those were thick and lush and I couldn't see all the way to Robby Baines' place.

"It stopped when you pulled into the parking lot. Where'd you go?"

"Do you really care? How bored are you?" I asked him back.

“Pretty fucking bored,” he sighed. “It sucks to be stuck in there.”

“Why don’t you go to regular school?” I asked.

“That didn’t work,” Parker answered briefly. “What are you doing now?”

The possibilities were endless, weren’t they? I could sit on the bed or lie on it. I could stare at the ceiling or at the place where the TV used to be on the wall. “I don’t know,” I said. “I won’t play my music, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I hear you thumping along to it, too.”

“I certainly don’t thump when I dance!” I told him heatedly. “That’s very insulting.”

“That’s what you’re doing? What, like ballet? Waltzing? I don’t know the names of old—I mean, I don’t know the names of *formal* dances.”

“Come over here,” I told him, and he walked around the hedge to join me on my steps. “This is the kind of dance I do.” I showed him a video on my phone of the Woodsmen cheerleaders, with me at the front and smiling directly at the camera.

“Oh, shit,” he marveled. “That’s you at a pro football game? You were on TV?”

“Yeah, that’s me,” I said, the heat from before now morphing into pure anger. “Hard to believe, right? Like, what happened to me? How did I fall so far? Isn’t that what you’re thinking?”

“What?” He seemed genuinely confused. “Where did you fall? Is it your hip or something?”

“Never mind. No, I don’t have a bad hip.” I took the phone back from him. “And yes, I used to be on the Wonderwomen squad. That’s the kind of dance I do when you hear me listening to music.”

“That’s crazy. You were famous,” he said. “I live next to two famous people. Do you get recognized?”

“Sometimes it still happens because I guess I was pretty well-known. For around here,” I had to qualify. “But yeah, I used to get recognized all the time. Like when we were at bars or parties, everyone knew who I was. We used to go out together, all of us girls on the squad,” I explained. “We never had to pay a cover and we always drank for free because we drew a crowd.” I got more into reminiscing, telling him about some of the fun we’d had together. We sat out on those steps for a long time as I talked. And talked.

After a while, I did notice that Parker looked a little antsy. “Do you have to get back to school?” I asked.

“Uh...”

“If I’m boring you, you could just say so,” I told him.

“Ok, yeah. Yeah, I’m really bored.”

“I can’t believe you just said that!” I gasped. “It was so rude!”

“What the fuck?” he yowled. “You were the one who told me that I could say it!”

“And that’s another thing. Where do you get off swearing at me like that? It’s really bad manners.”

He told me to F myself and then I had a few things tell him in reply to that. We were too involved in arguing to notice that a third person had joined us at the end of my pathway.

“I never talked like that to my mom. You should respect your elders,” Robby Baines announced.

Both Parker and I broke off, and for a moment, I was so shocked that I couldn’t speak.

“Shit. You’re going to make her cry again,” Parker told the Woodsmen player. “She gets real upset about the O-L-D thing.”

“I think she can spell,” Baines told him. He walked closer to join us.

I could also hear. “How dare you?” I demanded of them both, and then I turned specifically on Parker. “I’m not upset, I’m

not upset at all because his remark was just so ridiculous. Obviously, I'm not old enough to be your mother!"

"If you're not upset, then why are you crying?" he asked, and when I checked with my fingertips, I was. Again.

"I thought you had him young," Robby explained. "I thought you were lying about all that career stuff you talked about before."

"That's twice that you've said I was a liar," I pointed out. Yeah, I was, but I hadn't been deceiving him. Not yet. "And I'm not his mother," I continued, flashing an angry look towards Parker. "I don't even know his last name."

"It's Hartshorn," he supplied. "Like the president."

"The president of what?" I asked.

He stared at me again. "Of the United States," he said, and shook his head, like I was the one who was confused.

"You need to spend more time in online school."

"I would, except for the noise," Parker retorted, and we both turned back to look at Robby Baines.

"Sorry about that," he said. "I saw Auburn leave and since I thought you were her kid, I figured that you were gone, too."

"It's *Aubin*, not Auburn. Did you seriously believe that I had a fourteen-year-old? I'm only—twenty-nine," I said, which was not true. I was thirty, an age which was not that far off from what I'd just claimed, but it made a huge difference, didn't it? In your twenties, you still had options. At my real age, those doors were closed.

"My mom had me when she was sixteen," Baines said. "She was a great mother. She taught me not to swear," he continued, and those words were directed at Parker.

"My mom died," Parker answered back. He put on a face which was probably supposed to have been mournful, as if we should have felt sorry for him. "She died when I was a baby, so I grew up motherless and alone. I never knew her."

“Yeah, mine died, too,” Robby said, “when I was nine. I knew her, and then I lost her.”

“This is fun, isn’t it?” I asked them. “Everybody enjoys talking about their dead parents.” I stood up, as if I had somewhere to go or something to do. “You guys should head home now. Goodbye.”

“Parker, want to see what I’m doing in my condo?” Baines suggested as I started to key in my door code.

I stopped. I also wanted to see what loud thing he was doing in there.

“Yeah, sure,” Parker said, and when they walked down my path, I followed along behind.

Parker looked back over his shoulder at me and I mouthed, “What?” Besides being curious about the noise, I also wanted to see Robby Baines’ townhouse. It was the biggest in this block of units and right on the corner. I wondered if he had weird windows that looked out into nowhere and insufficient storage space like I did in my place. When Billy and I had lived together, I’d had to use the closet in the second bedroom and put a clothes rack in there too, in order to accommodate my wardrobe. That had also been the room that Jess and I had used for our business, but I remembered Billy’s mom referring to it as “the nursery” at my wedding to him. He’d been so disappointed when I had filled it with office furniture and shoes rather than a crib and changing table.

“I’m working on a new business idea,” Robby told Parker. “I think I have to diversify.”

“Yeah, diversity is good.”

“He means, he thinks he should be doing something besides just football,” I interpreted. “He’s worried about what will happen after he retires from the game.” A lot of the players thought about that, as I’d heard from my husband. I meant, my ex-husband. They knew that the average guy didn’t spend too many years in the league before he was hurt too badly to keep going, or before someone bigger/stronger/faster came

along to take his place. If they were smart, they had plans for their post-football lives.

“I wouldn’t say that I’m worried,” Robby corrected me. “I was thinking about it, though, and I decided that I didn’t want to be bored. So I’m trying something new.” He opened the door to his townhouse and we trailed inside after him. Parker stopped on a dime and I walked into his back.

Then we both stood there, staring. “What the fuck is this?” Parker asked, and I agreed with both the question and the cursing.

“It’s a doughnut-making operation.” Robby Baines stated that like it was natural and normal. There was also surprise in his voice that we didn’t immediately recognize what he was up to: manufacturing doughnuts in his condo.

“Doughnuts,” I repeated. “You’re running that piece of equipment to make doughnuts?” It was huge, by the way, a big, steel machine with a conveyor belt and what looked like a fryer, a large one. “Is that what I’ve been smelling? I thought it was drifting over from the fast food place down the road.”

“I worked a lot on the venting,” he said. That explained away what appeared to be miles of silver tubing suspended from the ceiling above us. “It really shouldn’t smell in your houses.”

“I kept having so many dreams about dessert and about that book where kids get into a candy factory,” Parker said. “Can I have some?” He pointed at where the dining room was supposed to be. Instead of a table and chairs, it was furnished with stacks of doughnuts on racks and trays.

“Sure, help yourself,” Robby invited, and Parker didn’t need to be invited twice. He moved fast and the doughnuts appeared to go down easy. “The equipment isn’t supposed to be so loud,” he told me. “I’ve been looking at the instruction manuals, but you know how for a waffle iron or a coffee maker, they’re about this thick?” He put his two huge fingers, each of them the size of a corndog, a few fractions of an inch apart. “Well, the instruction manual for the doughnut machine is this thick.” Now he held his two hands, each larger than a

cherry pie, at least six inches apart. “I didn’t realize how technical it would be.”

I walked around the hulking contraption, taking it in from all sides. “Was this really the best place to set up a bakery? In your home? In your condo surrounded by neighbors? In your townhouse that’s specifically zoned non-commercial?”

“I also didn’t realize it would be so big,” he explained. “And honestly, I’m not sure the doughnut business is for me.”

“It could be pretty cool if you did it in a properly sized, properly ventilated, industrial area,” I said, considering. “There’s definitely potential. You could do Woodsmen-themed doughnuts and all kinds of cool and unusual flavors.” I had more ideas, which I reeled off while I examined the set-up. When I looked over at Robby, he was typing them into his phone.

“I’m taking notes in case I do decide to become a doughnut-ter,” he said. “I’ll pay you a consulting fee.”

“Awesome.” I would hold my breath for it, except I’d probably keel over dead before I saw a penny.

“This may not stick,” he warned. “I’ve tried other things, too, but then moved on. Last year, I was into new sports and I went around testing them out.”

“Where’d you go?”

“Skiing in Austria, mountaineering in Nepal, speedskating in the Netherlands. It was summer in South America so I went to Bolivia to surf.”

“Bolivia?” I tried to think of the maps of South America that we’d memorized in Spanish class. “Wait, isn’t Bolivia—”

“Landlocked, yeah. I didn’t think that one through. And my agent was all over me about getting hurt, so I decided to stop sports and do something different.”

“Like this,” I said, and turned back to look at the doughnut machine. “Except now you must see that it’s also an incredibly bad idea to try to run a bakery in a condo, even if

this unit is about double the size of mine and probably has better closets. It's one of the worst ideas I've ever heard."

He didn't seem offended. "I'm beginning to think so. That kid likes it." We both turned to look at Parker, who was taking down doughnuts like an anaconda might. I was pretty sure they had those in Bolivia, even if surfing wasn't a thing there.

"Parker, aren't you going to eat dinner pretty soon?" I asked him.

He swallowed at least one or two whole. "My dad's out of town. I can do whatever the hell I want."

"You should have something other than doughnuts, though," I said. "It's so unhealthy."

"I use all-natural ingredients," Robby said. "Pretty much, except for all the preservatives."

"And fifty pounds of sugar, I'm sure," I added. "Parker, stop eating that crap. You can come to my house for dinner."

"Do you know how to cook?" he asked skeptically.

"Of course I do. I grew up cooking every night, if I wanted to eat."

He still seemed unconvinced. "Where was your mom?"

"Dead," I told him.

"We're back to dead mothers?" Robby asked.

"No, we're not," I answered. "I'm just saying, I know how to cook."

"Great. What time?"

I looked at the Woodsmen player, wondering how he'd become part of the invitation, but Parker stepped into the breach. He looked at his phone and said, "I'll be hungry again in about an hour and a half." He considered. "Let's say an hour and forty minutes. That good for you?"

"Sure," Robby answered, and they both turned to me, expectant.

I held up my hands. “Awesome,” I told them, and then the doughnut-teer picked up a binder so thick that I assumed it had to be about his machine and told us goodbye.

Having two guests for dinner meant I needed to make something out of nothing, because I couldn't remember the last time that I'd gone to the grocery store or had anything delivered. Keeping food in the house brought about the possibility that I would eat it, and there was no reason to sink that low. There was enough edible material to keep me generally sustained and if I got very hungry, I could always chew on ice. I had a feeling that neither Parker or Robby would be interested in that for dinner, however.

“Something out of nothing” wasn't a good meal plan so I had to go out again. After the experience earlier in the tampon aisle, I drove to a faraway grocery store, speeding like a maniac so I'd have time to get back and cook. It still wasn't enough of a window to prepare anything very fancy. Cassoulet, beef wellington, and croissants were out, so if anyone had wanted a flaky piece of bread for dinner he was going to be sorry. I also wasn't going to make any of the other dishes I'd stressed over learning in order to impress Billy's mom, like a repertoire of Greek foods. She'd taken one, tiny bite from each of those efforts and then put her fork down, saying that she was full. She'd managed to swallow the miniscule portions she'd tasted, but not without a visible struggle.

Except for the pastitsio. She'd run to the sink to spit that out and then rinse her mouth, even as Billy told me that he thought it was great, that he'd known I'd tried my best.

Thinking about all that made me depressed and then, as I carried out tonight's meal, it also made me nervous. I put the dish onto the plastic, folding table I'd set up in the dining room, the place that had once held actual furniture. “Dig in,” I prompted, as Parker and Robby stared at the food.

“You made this? Really?” Parker asked me. “It's not from a restaurant?”

“It’s just enchiladas,” I said, trying to decide if his disbelief was flattering or annoying. It’s—oh.” Ok, that was definitely flattering. Both of them had made a grab for the serving spoon and within seconds, had taken enormous quantities of the dinner. In another moment, without even waiting for me to sit down, they were busy emptying their plates.

When Parker’s was devoid of the last speck of food, he said, “See you, Aubin,” got up, and left his dirty dishes behind him. My front door slammed shut.

“His father didn’t give him too many lessons in manners,” I noted, and ate a black bean.

Robby looked at his own plate, which was also empty but didn’t have the licked-clean look that Parker’s did. That was because only one of them had actually licked his dish and utensils. “What was he supposed to do?” he asked me.

“Wait for me to sit, for one thing. Say thank you and clear his plate.” I rolled my eyes. “Manners. Etiquette.”

“He said he didn’t have a mother, so there was no one to teach him,” Robby reasoned.

“I didn’t have one either, but I didn’t blow my nose into my hand at the table. That was revolting.”

“How did you learn, then?” he asked. “You seem to know your way around the etiquette stuff.”

I’d learned the same way I’d done everything else: I’d pretended my way into success. “I knew that stuff was wrong in our family so I watched other families that I knew were right. I acted like I was one of them. I copied them.” I’d watched TV shows and movies, I’d gone over to friends’ houses, I’d kept my eyes open for any clue and then I’d made my behavior match what was better, so I would be better.

“What was wrong with your family?”

“They’re idiots. Why didn’t you learn? You also didn’t know that you should wait for your hostess to pick up her fork first.”

“My mom didn’t know anything, either, to teach me,” he answered.

“What about your dad?”

He spread out his hands, big palms raised to the ceiling.
“Never saw the guy. My mother wasn’t sure of his name.”

“More sad family stories?” I asked, raising my hands back to him.

“Not at all. Why would I be sad about someone I never even thought about?”

“Never?”

“Not too often. I figure, he must have been pretty big, because I got this from somewhere.” He looked down at his massive chest. “He must not have known my mother’s name either, otherwise he would have tried to get some attention for himself or asked for a payout now that I’m playing professional football. He probably doesn’t even recognize me as his son because I look just like my mom. If she’d been six-seven, and a man,” he added.

“I look like my mom, too,” I said. “She was a Woodsmen Dame. The cheerleading squad used to be called the Dames, and the Woodsmen used to have a chipmunk mascot that got chased around by a guy dressed as a hunter with a pretend gun. Different times.” Right at the moment, it was time to move away from dead and absent parents and talk about something else. “What are you going to do now that you think the doughnut-making isn’t working?”

We discussed that for a while and I had a few more ideas for him because I was generally very good at giving people advice. Gradually, I moved the conversation to his personal life rather than his professional one. I asked enough questions to figure out that the cute blonde, the one whom he’d been mauling in the parking lot, wasn’t a permanent fixture, and I also learned that he didn’t seem to seek permanence in his relations with women in general.

That made sense. Why would he? Practically every girl everywhere would have jumped at the chance to be with him, for one night or one hour. For one minute. I considered that,

wondering how quick he would be. A minute might do it for a guy who was worked up, right?

“What are you thinking about?” Robby asked me. “You’re staring at my crotch.”

Yeah, I was. “I was thinking about you and that blonde girl. Did you even know her name?”

“Sara. Tara. Something like that.”

“Are you going to see her again?”

“No.” He looked back at me. “Is that bad manners, too?”

“She knew what she was doing. You usually don’t get a text to meet your true love in a parking lot at two AM. Was it good?”

He still looked at me, but now he smiled. “It wasn’t bad. She was pretty energetic.”

She was young, that was where the energy came from. I leaned back in my chair and I thought that my joints creaked.

“What was her opinion of it?” I asked.

“She also seemed to enjoy herself, but that can be faked pretty easily. Right?”

“Yeah, it definitely can.” I thought of my experiences with pretending my way through orgasms and made a sound of disgust. Ugh.

“What? Does that mean that you’ve faked it?”

“I sure have,” I answered, and decided to tell him the funny side of that rather than the awful one. “A few years ago, I had a boyfriend who wouldn’t come until I did.”

“Sounds considerate.”

“No,” I told him. “It wasn’t considerate, it was stressful. He wanted it to happen too fast and he put so much pressure on me that it was never going to happen at all. ‘Aubin, are you there? Are you there? Are you ready?’” I imitated. “‘Are you close? Are you close? Are you close?’ After a while, I’d just moan a lot so it would end. It was a such a relief to be done.”

Robby Baines laughed. It was deep and low, and seemed to make my water glass vibrate like his doughnut machine had done. “That must have been your worst.”

I thought again about the actual worst times and went for another funny story instead. “No, the worst was when I woke up and found a guy I’d brought home peeing in my kitchen sink.”

“Tall,” Robby commented.

“Sadly, he wasn’t, and he had bad aim. And there were dishes in there,” I added regretfully. “He said he couldn’t find the bathroom, so I helped him find the front door instead and I threw his clothes after him.” More of that low laughter followed my words. “How about you? What was the worst?”

“The first time,” he said definitively. “The girl was so disappointed. She kept saying stuff like, ‘It’s already done?’ and ‘I really expected better.’”

Now I laughed, too. “Have you heard anything like that since, though?”

“No. Now I put in more effort.”

I wondered how that would be.

“You’re looking at my crotch again,” he mentioned, and yeah, I was, but it didn’t seem to bother him. He poked the empty pan on the folding table. “Is it also good manners to help with the dishes?”

I let him know that etiquette in my house demanded it, and he carried every single plate over to the sink, all in one swoop with those big hands. Then he stuck around as I cleaned up, and he kept chatting about women and sex and it was actually pretty amusing. He certainly had a lot of experience, but he wasn’t discussing all those girls in a way that made me mad, the way I’d heard other men talk about their conquests. The way I was sure they’d talked about me.

“Thanks for dinner,” Robby told me as I closed the dishwasher.

“Thanks for coming,” I answered. He nodded and I watched him walk down my path, but as I closed the door, I saw that he made a right turn instead of the left that would have led him home. I stood at the peephole, waiting.

In another moment, I saw him again, this time traveling in the reverse direction toward his own condo. The fish-eye view showed him with his arm around a petite woman and through the door, I could hear her giggling. Her auburn hair flashed briefly in the flood lights on the building.

I went to my bedroom to lie on the mattress and I wondered what she would think about the doughnut machine, or if she would notice it at all. Her mind was probably filled with the prospect of sex with Robby Baines, how it would be and what she would tell her friends afterwards. She probably wouldn't be faking it with a few moans.

After a while, I got up and changed out of the clothes I'd carefully selected earlier, before the two guys had come over for dinner. Neither of them had noticed that I'd been dressed considerably fancier and that I'd taken a long time on my makeup and hair. Now I put on the faded black leggings and the old Woodsmen sweatshirt and then I took a tissue and wiped my eyes and cheeks.

It seemed that while I had been thinking about other things, I'd been crying again. It didn't matter if it ruined my makeup because no one was here to see, and anyway, it was time to go. I got my tote bag of supplies out of the bedroom closet where I kept it, because there was plenty of room now, no shortage of storage space anymore. Billy's stuff was gone and I'd sold a lot—most—of my clothes. Then I went to the parking lot and left for my job.

As I drove, I decided that it was probably better if I didn't do things like having dinners and people over. It just seemed like afterwards, it was much harder to go back to how things were. I thought of seeing Jess at the drugstore and how she'd probably say that I deserved what I got.

Maybe I did deserve it, but it was still hard. I went to the first office building and I didn't think about Robby Baines and the

redhead anymore, and how she wasn't faking it.

Chapter 3

“Good Lord.” I pulled the pillow over my head and when that wasn’t enough, I put the other one from Billy’s side over my head as well. When that still wasn’t enough, I crawled with the pillows clamped in place down to the foot of the bed where my ears would be farthest from the wall.

None of that worked and it was tough to breathe under the covers, so I sat up. “Parker!” I yelled, and I pounded the wall above my headboard. I left a smudge from my fist on the beautiful shade of white paint that I’d chosen and then used throughout the whole condo interior. Billy had sworn he could tell a difference from the other white color it had been before, and I definitely could see it. It had been perfect.

Now the wall had a black mark on it from my dirty hand, because I’d been too tired to take a shower when I’d gotten home the night before. I’d slept in my eight hundred-thread count sheets with cleaning fluids, dust, sweat, and germs all over myself, but I’d been too exhausted to make it into the bathroom.

At least now, the TV’s volume had decreased in Parker’s condo. “I can hear what you’re watching,” I shouted. “Knock it off.” Silence descended on my bedroom but it was too late for me to go back to sleep. I was wide awake from hitting the wall and disgusted by my own grossness, so I did get up, showered, and threw my sheets into the washing machine.

Then I was clean but still disgruntled and sleepy, and I considered my options for the day. There hadn’t been any doughnut noise for a while and it was still quiet over at Parker’s, so I could have tried to take a nap. But instead, I walked to the window to look outside at the rain. My front window tilted at a strange angle so that my view was directly at the side hedge and through it, I saw Parker sitting on his steps. The muted light that filtered through the grey clouds told me that it was mid-morning, a time when most kids were at school...

I rubbed my eyes and then checked my phone. No, it was Saturday. The weekend was here, which meant I didn't have to go and clean for two whole nights. What would I do with that time? I could throw a huge party like we used to have. Before Billy and I had gotten engaged, bought this condo, and moved in together, I'd lived with my friend Jess and we'd had huge shindigs. I'd also spent a lot of time doing personal care, like spin classes, yoga, hair appointments, and eyebrow and lash work. I'd gone shopping to replenish my wardrobe because I did have an image to maintain, of course. It wasn't just for my business, but also for my personal life—people expected it of me and I did of myself, too.

But I hadn't been totally frivolous and self-absorbed. I'd also volunteered for several local charities, and I'd especially excelled at cold calls for donations. It was a job that other workers had dreaded but I took each one as a personal challenge and felt a thrill of victory no matter what amount I collected. Yeah, I'd been good.

I looked at Parker sitting in the storm and then I yanked open my front door. "Why are you out there?" I called to him.

He immediately got up and came over to my side of the bushes. "I'm waiting for the rain to stop so I can walk to the gas station."

He was waiting for the rain to stop while sitting in the rain? I shook my head. "Ok. Why do you need to go to the gas station?"

"I'm hungry. There's nothing to eat in my house."

I stared at him. His mop of hair was soaking wet and he didn't have an umbrella or a jacket, so his clothes were, too. "Where's your dad?"

"Away on a business trip. I think he's in Copenhagen."

"What the heck is his business? Why is he leaving you alone like this?"

Parker shrugged but said, "I have plenty of money. I have a credit card."

"Then why don't you get food delivered?"

He stared at me. “I don’t want to wait. I’m hungry right now.”

“But you were already waiting...never mind. Go change into dry stuff and I’ll take you to get groceries,” I ordered him. Not too much later, we were in my red car and whipping over the wet streets.

“That was a store,” he pointed out as we passed one.

“I like a different place. It’s farther away.” I glanced over at him. “It doesn’t matter how long it takes because you don’t have anything to do, right?”

“No. Do you?”

I shook my head. Not one thing.

“This morning, when you were pounding on the wall, I was only watching some show. Like a nature show,” he said casually. “That was what the noises were.”

A nature show? Yeah, right. I was perfectly aware of what I’d heard coming from his condo, and it had nothing to do with learning about animals. “I don’t care if you’re watching porn and having fun. I just don’t want to hear it,” I answered, and when I glanced at him again, I saw that he was as bright red as my car and looking hard out the window. “Seriously, it’s not a big deal. I think boys do that all the time.”

“Which boys?”

“All of them? I don’t know. Ask your dad. Or ask another guy, a man who used to do that himself.”

He didn’t answer but he was still all red and wouldn’t look at me, and I was sorry I’d brought it up at all. I certainly didn’t want to discuss my own infrequent and unsatisfactory forays with a vibrator, which was what was left of my sex life now that Billy was no longer in it. Even before, when we were still married, we’d gone for months and months without...and no, I hadn’t found anyone willing to do it with me on the ground in the parking lot as I’d said I was going to. I hadn’t actually looked and I didn’t actually want to be with anyone, not on the pavement or anywhere else.

“You know, sex isn’t anything like what you’re watching,” I mentioned. “It’s different.”

“How?”

“That’s all made-up stuff,” I said.

“Exactly how is it different?” he persisted.

Good Lord. “Like, for example, how people just fall into doing it and then everybody’s um, screaming and satisfied. That’s not always true. Sometimes it’s awkward and sometimes it’s not great. It can be, but it can be...” I stopped. “You know what Robby Baines told me? He said that the first time he did it, the girl was really disappointed. It wasn’t good for her at all.”

“Really?” Now he was extremely interested. “How old was he for his first time?”

“I didn’t ask that. You could, if you wanted. But can’t you talk to your dad about this crap?”

“Is that how you learned? From your mom?”

“No. I learned mostly from my friends. I mean, I got the official story at school, but I watched stuff like you do and other girls gave me information, too. A lot of that was wrong or really dumb. One of my besties told me that a man could die if he didn’t, uh, ejaculate enough. It’s not true,” I assured him. “Don’t worry about that. Your dad doesn’t talk about any of this? When is he around?” I tried to think of when I’d seen the guy.

“He’s at work a lot.”

“What’s his job?”

“Some kind of shitty finance thing,” Parker said vaguely. “He has to travel all the time but he doesn’t have time for us to take a good vacation.”

“And you just sit home, alone? Do you actually go to school?”

“Yeah.”

I wasn't sure what he was responding to. "What's the name of the program that you do?"

"Why the fuck do you care?" he asked me, and actually, I didn't.

"Never mind," I told him. I reached to turn on the radio but then stopped.

"It's ok with me if you want to put on...*classics*," he said carefully.

"You can just say 'oldies.' I'm not going to cry again," I retorted, and I did play a really good song.

When Parker and I turned into the parking lot after our excursion, Robby Baines was right behind us in his truck and pulled up to stop next to my red car. I'd seen him several times in the last few weeks, and yeah, I'd been watching a little. If you sat in a chair—if you took a chair that used to be in your living room and pulled it at an angle in front of your bedroom window, you could watch the pathway that connected all our units. If you sat there long enough, you could see whoever walked on it but not that many people did. Robby, Parker, his dad, and I were the only ones left in our block of condos since one guy had moved to Singapore and another couple had bought their dream house on the lake. I'd been able to hear them through my front door talking about their exciting life changes and I'd given them the finger.

"What are you two doing?" Baines called over to us as I popped the trunk. He also opened his tailgate to unload something from his truck, but I was paying more attention to Parker walking away and leaving me with the grocery bags, mine and his own. I had bought more in that one shopping trip than I had in all the months since Billy had moved out—all those months combined. I'd spent way too much, too. I was working on paying off a large amount of credit card debt and I still had the mortgage on the condo, which was much too expensive, and the payments for the BMW, which was also much too expensive. Everything was much too expensive, including all these groceries.

"Hey!" I barked. "I need help with this."

Parker turned around and did his gawky shuffle back to me, but Robby Baines closed his tailgate and came over, too. “What’d you get?” he asked, peering into the bags. “What are you making? I still think about those enchiladas.”

“Really?” I asked. Liar. He had the resources to buy whatever he wanted to eat at any time. There were much better options available than what I’d been able to produce.

“They were delicious. You cooking something else?”

“Maybe,” I hedged. I watched him pick up nearly all the bags except for a few that he signaled to Parker to carry, and the skinny guy gave it his best. His arms strained but he didn’t voice a word of protest. All that was left was for me to close the trunk and lead the way, and I always did better in the front, directing.

“What’s that stuff in your truck?” I called to Robby over my shoulder.

“The doughnut machine is gone,” he mentioned. I already knew that because I’d watched the disassembled parts get carted down the path by a crew he must have hired, and Parker and I had discussed it a little as we’d sat on our respective steps one sunny afternoon. There were getting to be more of those as summer was approaching.

“I’m storing it while I consider a new venture,” Robby continued. “What do you know about live bait?”

I stopped dead. “For fishing? Are you talking about putting minnow tanks in your condo? Because what I know is that it would be a really, really crappy idea.”

“Live fish?” Parker asked. He put down the bags, huffing. “Really? Can you play with them? Not play with them, but are they like, pets?”

“No, because they’re used to catch bigger fish,” I said. Didn’t he know anything? “Robby, are you setting up a live bait shop in your unit?”

There was a pause that went on much too long before he answered, “Maybe not. What would you guys think if I did that?”

“I would think that you were crazy. I would think that I would need to call the county health inspectors,” I said immediately.

“Would they be fish like in the dentist’s office, those cool colors?” Parker asked.

“No, Parker! They’re bait fish, minnows. And you can’t get attached to things that will be immediately eaten,” I told him.

“You’ve given me food for thought,” Robby announced. “I don’t need to unload my truck right now. And speaking of food, are you making something to eat, uh, Aubin?”

He’d almost forgotten my name again. I gave him a look to acknowledge that before I answered yes, I was making lunch for Parker, who dumped his groceries at his place as Robby came right along behind me into mine. That was good, I supposed, since he was carrying most of the bags. He helped to unload, putting all the food in the wrong places and once Parker showed back up, Robby directed him again to help out.

“Has it been a long time since you went shopping?” The Woodsmen player brushed his hand across a shelf in the small pantry cupboard and it came away covered in dust.

“Let me wipe that first.” Now that I’d been cleaning other people’s spaces, my interest in keeping up my own condo had waned and it showed.

“I can write my name in this,” Parker mentioned, and did. “Parker Macdonald Hartshorn,” he read.

“Robert Spurgeon Baines,” Robby said, and also signed.

“Spurgeon, like the president!”

“You need to actually do your online school,” I told Parker, and handed them supplies to clean their hands and the shelves. While they were engaged in that, I started to sauté green peppers and onions, and then I made cheesesteaks like Billy had loved. He’d grown up outside of Philadelphia and I’d worked and worked to perfect the sandwich he missed.

“This is the best thing I’ve ever eaten,” Parker said as he gulped his down at the plastic dining table. “How many more do you have?”

“Thank you. Finish that one first and drink the milk,” I said. Those toothpick bones of his looked much too brittle to me.

Robby seemed to be making an effort to go slower. He was taking bites and chewing carefully, anyway, while Parker was swallowing his own food in huge chunks. Paradoxically, it was Robby who choked.

Parker wiped his mouth with his sleeve and casually mentioned, “Aubin told me that you suck at sex.”

Robby’s eyes widened and he inhaled suddenly. The breath got caught behind some cheesesteak and didn’t reemerge. He shook his head and tried to cough, then did it again. He hit his chest and shook his head harder, tried to cough more, and his face turned red.

His hands went to his throat.

“Good Lord!” I jumped out of my chair, where I’d been picking at some raw green peppers instead of enjoying a sandwich of my own, and I slapped his big back. “Can you breathe? Are you breathing?” I demanded and he couldn’t speak to answer. I hit him again, this time with my fist, but it was like striking concrete and it made no difference. No, he wasn’t breathing.

I tugged him to his feet and then stood on the chair behind him. “Here we go!” I shouted, just like I’d done before I led the Wonderwomen in our run onto the field at Woodsmen Stadium. I circled my arms around him so I could clasp my fingers into a tight ball and Heimlich him back to life.

But they didn’t reach. He was so broad, my hands wouldn’t meet in the middle to get to the magic spot under his sternum that would force out the obstruction. At this point, his arms were flailing, too, in a silent, dreadful pantomime.

“I’ve got this!” I told him, and jumped down from the chair. I made a fist, cocked my arm back, and hit him as hard as I could below his breastbone. A lump of meat and bread shot out of his mouth and smacked me in the forehead, then rolled under the table.

“Oh, fuck!” Parker said.

“Watch your mouth!” I said, pointing at him. “Get a glass of water.”

Robby eased down into his chair again, his hand back on his throat. This time, though, he could talk through it. “I was choking,” he wheezed.

“We know. Here.” I took the glass from Parker and held it to Robby’s lips, but my hands had started to shake. I spilled it down his shirt as he drank so I passed it over and grabbed a napkin to wipe my forehead instead.

“You saved him, Aubin.”

“You did,” Robby agreed. He also wiped his eyes, which were watering. “Damn. I thought I was a goner.” He looked with disgust at his sandwich. “I thought a cheesesteak had killed me.”

“I can finish that for you,” Parker offered, and slid the plate across the table toward himself.

“Thank you, Aubin. Thank you,” Robby said, and for some reason, I shrugged it off.

“It’s good that you didn’t die of cheesesteak,” I said. “Parker, you’re going to be the one choking next. Could you please chew?”

“I want to find a way to thank you, for real,” Robby said as he was leaving a little while later. I’d told him that no, today he didn’t need to help clean up for etiquette reasons. He needed to go rest and Parker would be glad to help me instead.

“You already thanked me,” I answered.

“No, I want to do something,” he insisted. “I’ll think about it.” I watched from my weird window as he walked slowly home.

“I did all the dishes and I’m so tired,” Parker announced mournfully as he joined me after spending a while in the kitchen. “Why did you use so many? Was it to get back at me for when I said that I never wash my hands after I pee? You were pretty pissed about that.”

“I was repulsed. Go home,” I told him.

“But come back for dinner, right? See you later.” He bounded out the door and over to his own house. I sat in the chair in front of the window and held up my hand to examine it. It was the one that had hit Robby Baines in the chest and my knuckles hurt like they might end up bruised, but it didn’t bother me. What I was really thinking about was that, although I was alone again after having people over, it didn’t feel as bad as it had the first time they’d come for dinner. Now I was thinking I might see them again.

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“Get the hell out of here.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I told him and watched, disgusted, as he brushed potato chip crumbs off the front of his t-shirt and onto the floor. It didn’t matter to him at all but it would bother the woman who got paid to clean this place. It was disgusting how people acted, not taking responsibility for themselves, more like they were dirty animals instead of civilized members of society. I saw it in the offices I cleaned on a nightly basis.

I was disgusted, but I wasn’t surprised by my dad’s behavior because he had never been responsible or civilized. He was an ass and he always had been, but lately, he was an ass who (undeservedly and unexpectedly) had fallen into the best luck of his life: he’d been picked up by a wealthy woman who seemed to want nothing from him but his unappetizing companionship and...

It turned my stomach, but yes. Sex.

“I mean it, Aubin,” he told me. “Why are you here? Why would you stay here? It’s a big world. Plenty of spots for you to live rather than the place where everyone thinks you’re a cheating moron.”

“Again, thanks, Dad!”

“I’m not saying that I think it,” he let me know, which felt almost worse than anything else he’d said, because he obviously did think exactly that. Before everything had happened, I’d been golden in his eyes. I’d been the child who could do no wrong, who was shooting for the stars but was

obviously going to make it up to grab them. I'd constantly pushed him away but he'd never let up on wanting me around, wanting me to be his daughter. He'd been proud that I was.

Now, he offered me a potato chip from his bag, looked at me with what I was sure was pity, and continued his harangue. "I don't get why you stay up here. You know everyone. There's no way to hide from your mistakes as much as you're trying to."

"I could have gone somewhere else after college if I'd wanted to move away," I reminded him. "I came back home because I like northern Michigan."

"You moved home after college because you wanted to be a Woodsmen Wondergirl cheerleader, like your mother," he corrected.

"We're the—they're the Wonderwomen, not Wondergirls."

"That's even worse," he snapped. "You came back here to make your mark and you failed, and now a lot of people hate you."

"Thanks for summing that up."

"So go," he directed me. "Go somewhere else where no one knows how you screwed up, where you can get a decent job so you're not sneaking around at night like a damn bloodsucker." He chuckled a little at this amusing remark.

"I'm not a vampire. I work at night because it's easier," I retorted.

"You work at night so you can hide from everyone." He ate another chip and wiped his fingers on his t-shirt; I was positive that he didn't do his own laundry, so the long, greasy stain wouldn't bother him either. At least he was bored with our discussion of my problems and switched gears but unfortunately, I didn't want to talk about the next topic, either.

"Your sister is back home. Did you see what Bowie posted about their trip?" He took out his phone and started thumbing through pictures of my sister and her husband in various exciting places, grinning and hugging each other, kissing and looking so happy they were both about to burst with it. My

dad looked thrilled about it, too. “She did well for herself, didn’t she? Look at her smile.”

“Yeah, that’s awesome. I love it.” I stood up and stepped over the mess of crunchy crumbs on the ground. “Great to see you, Dad.”

It was funny, I thought as I drove away from the mansion he now shared with his sugar mama. For my whole life, my dad had been pursuing a relationship with me. But I’d known how he’d pushed my mother away with his drinking and whoring around, and it had made me furious and resentful. I’d also been angry at his unfailing belief that I would be somebody important, that I would make it big. It had hung around my neck like a weighted yoke.

Now, that was all flipped upside down. Now, I was the one who texted him to arrange our visits and he’d lost his faith in me, and that should have been a relief. Right? No, it seemed to feel worse than the constant pressure of his expectations.

Whatever the reason, I just felt awful, so I drove and drove until I saw that I was passing by Woodsmen Stadium. The big building still had employees there even in the football offseason and the Wonderwomen were back now, too. The new squad of cheerleaders was being selected and the coaches were already honing the routines with them. I remembered my first season with the team, the year I graduated from college. I’d driven home for the initial tryouts and then back and forth as I progressed through that process, putting a lot of miles on the old hatchback I’d had at the time.

It had always run well, despite the big number on the odometer and the dents from a previous owner. I’d taken good care of that car, washing and waxing it, vacuuming the inside and conditioning all the vinyl. I’d only gotten rid of it to buy this red BMW and actually, I’d been sad to sell it and let it go, but I’d told my friends that of course it was time for an upgrade.

“I was hanging on to that relic for way too long. The memories!” I’d said and smiled, showing that I could laugh at myself and my silly foibles. The reason I’d kept it wasn’t

anything about the expense of a new car, that I couldn't afford to get one.

Actually, yes, it was exactly like that. I couldn't afford this BMW, this beautiful red car that I'd thought would be the first of many expensive vehicles I would own once my company took off and I was really high-rolling. I realized that right now, I was rolling this nice car along at about ten miles per hour, so I hit the accelerator and it carried me smoothly to Whitaker Automotive.

It was a while before I arrived back home and stopped in the parking lot. I got out and waved to Parker, who was sitting on the wall that separated off the dumpsters.

"What the fuck is that?" he called, and hopped over to inspect the situation.

"Parker, if you say that word around me one more time, I swear that I'll hold you down and wash out your dirty mouth with soap," I answered. "And obviously, it's a car."

"You couldn't hold me down," he scoffed, but I made a move toward him and he flinched back. "I was just kidding. Is it antique?"

My new car was two years older than he was. "It's vintage," I told him. "Don't worry, the radio works so I can still play all my songs."

He looked ill at that thought, or maybe his nausea was due to the vintage car I'd traded my BMW for. "What's that color?" he asked next.

"It's called 'Sunset.' It reminds me of Woodsmen Orange," I said. "At least no one will shoot at me during hunting season."

Parker stared. "Huh? Is this like when you fixate on weird shit when your mind starts to go?"

"I'm not senile! Woodsmen Orange, the color of the football team, is also the color that hunters wear so...never mind. What are you doing in the parking lot?"

He had reasons to be there, like an assignment he claimed to have about traffic and his continued interest in pavement, but I was pretty sure he'd been waiting for me. The kid literally had no friends, which made us perfect companions since I'd lost all of mine.

But maybe I was overestimating my importance in his life, because the question he asked me next was, "Have you seen Robby? You know, Robby Baines?"

Yes, I did know that person, and I had seen him the night before when he'd walked past with another blonde. A tall one this time. "Not in a while. Why? Are you looking for him?"

Parker shrugged. "I'm bored and he's always doing something," he answered.

He was always doing women, that was for sure. "Shouldn't you be working on school stuff? What are you in, eighth grade? You're going to high school next year, right? Don't you have to do well to move on?"

"Yeah, I guess. I'm supposed to."

I locked the door to my car with a key instead of an electronic fob and he stared at that, confused. "It's low-tech," I explained. "Are you only guessing that you'll go on to high school because you don't know if you're going to pass eighth grade?"

"I guess."

Ugh. "That's not an answer. You have to be accountable, Parker." That statement was kind of funny coming from me, but he didn't know it. "Let's go. Move." I pointed toward the condos, but instead of inviting him to enter into mine, I walked to his instead and now pointed at that door. "Open it." He shrugged, but he did.

Parker's house was better furnished than my place was; I'd given Billy a lot of our stuff when he'd moved out, and then even more when he'd gone permanently to Oklahoma. I'd even offered to help him carry it all out to the truck he'd rented, but he'd told me (through his lawyer) that he didn't want me on the premises when he was there.

This condo, where Parker lived, had normal furniture like chairs and tables, a big TV on the wall that my bedroom was right on the other side of, and the appropriate amount of appliances (although I checked inside the refrigerator, and it was empty despite our previous trip to the store together). A door led to the main-floor bedroom, so the layout was just like mine. There was evidence that a grown man had been here: on the kitchen counter there was a vitamin bottle and I was sure Parker didn't take those. I'd actually seen his father a few times too, now that I'd been watching. He left early but must have come home late, after I'd already gone to work myself. Parker had said that his office was "in a building, you know" but I'd guessed he must have been in Traverse City. It wasn't exactly a financial mecca, but there were businesses.

I looked around for more clues about his father in the living room and then peeked into the bedroom, too. "What are you doing?" Parker asked. "That's my dad's."

Yes, obviously. But there was only a pile of suits on the floor that must have been meant for the dry cleaner, a suitcase open on the bed, and a photo of a woman on the small nightstand.

"I wanted to see if it's exactly the same size as my condo," I lied, and pointed to the picture. "Who's that?"

He walked past me into the room and picked up the frame. "She's my mom." He held it up to his own face. "My dad thinks I look like her."

I remembered Robby saying that he looked like his mother, too, if she'd been six-seven and a man. If Parker's mom had been a lanky boy who needed a haircut and had a zit on her cheek, with brown eyes instead of the blue ones in the photograph, with a bigger nose and a pointier chin and bushier eyebrows, and just about every other feature different from what was on her face—if all those things were true then yes, they would have been almost identical. Oh, and she wasn't a blonde, but he was.

"I can see it," I lied again, and he seemed to like that. "Where's your school stuff?"

Now he looked wary. "Why?"

“Because I’m going to help you with it,” I said patiently, slowly pronouncing every word. “Someone needs to monitor you.”

“No, they don’t.”

We had an argument about that, one full of swear words on his end and a lot more careful pronunciation on mine. In the end, I decided that I was done talking about it and action was required, so I walked upstairs to his bedroom. There was a large desktop set up with flashing lights inside the case and several big monitors. “Is that what you game on?” I asked, and he nodded sullenly. “Where do you do your schoolwork?”

He pointed at a tablet partway under his bed. His room was a murky dustbowl, by the way, because I’d only seen a cleaning crew going into this townhouse on a monthly basis and they’d come back out pretty quickly. I blew a layer of grey powder and a hairball off the tablet and raised my eyebrows at him.

“I’m not touching that, Aubin. Fuck school,” he had the temerity to say to me.

Later that afternoon, we both heard the roar of Robby’s truck engine as it pulled into the parking lot. “He’s home,” I said casually, and didn’t rush to the window so I could watch him walk to his house. Good Lord, I was desperate for entertainment, wasn’t I? “Weren’t you looking for him before?”

“Yeah.” Parker rubbed his eyes and I felt a little sorry for him. “I wanted to talk to him.”

“You can go—”

He was up and running down my path before the words had completed their journey from my lips to his ears. A moment later, I stood at the side of my window to watch them returning together. Parker was talking but he closed his mouth as he made the turn to my house, and Robby followed behind him. They both walked right in and I noticed that Parker was red in the face. If that flush had been caused by the brief run he’d just done, then we were also implementing a fitness regimen, starting tomorrow.

On the other hand, Robby looked a little pale. Kind of stunned. He managed to say hello to me and get my name right, though.

“Aubin. How are you?”

“I’m fine, thank you. How are you, Robby?”

“Why are you talking like that? Are you reciting lines from a play? Aubin made me read one today,” Parker informed my newest guest.

“That was your assignment,” I reminded him. “And you only read act one. You’re supposed to be through act four by now, so get ready for that tomorrow.”

He groaned. “I’m so tired,” he also told Robby. “She’s fucking killing me.” He opened one eye. “Flunking killing me,” he corrected himself. We’d also talked a lot about language.

“Much better,” I approved. “We were greeting each other in a polite way, not reciting lines from a play. Now I might say, can I offer you something to drink?”

“Yes. Please,” Robby added, so I got him a glass of water (which was all I had to offer) and he gulped it. After Parker lay on the floor and moaned for a while longer about his exhaustion and the cruelty of schoolwork, I told him that he’d done enough so he could play one of his computer games. That made him revive enough to leap up and race out the door again.

As it closed, Robby turned on me. “Did you know why he just ran to meet me?”

“No. He only said he was looking for you,” I answered.

“Did you ever tell him that he could talk to me about sex? That’s what he said, that you told him that he could ask me.”

Had I said that? “Uh, I don’t think so. Maybe I told him to go to a guy if he had questions, but I don’t remember.”

“Thanks a lot,” Robby responded. “Do you want to hear what he has questions about?” Then he said something that I’d

heard of but considered so dirty that I wouldn't repeat the word myself.

"Is that when the girl does that thing with her..." I allowed him to imagine. "And the guy takes his and..." I raised my eyebrows and let him fill in that blank, too. "But someone has to be submerged in..."

He went pale again. "Yep. Yep, that's all correct. Jesus H. Christ! I never thought that word would come out of a kid's mouth."

"I'm glad he didn't ask me about it," I commented. "Oh, now I remember how your name came up. Jerking off."

"Jerking..."

"Yeah, exactly. I think he's not sure it's normal, so I told him to ask a guy. You must be the only one he knows."

"What am I supposed to do?" he asked me.

"Answer him." I went and got some ice to chew on, since I'd made lunch for Parker but skipped it for myself. When I returned, Robby had made himself comfortable on my couch.

"Is there anything to eat?" he asked.

"Help yourself to leftover pasta." I crunched my ice but he got up and went to my kitchen and came back with a bowl.

"Want to watch baseball?" He looked around. "There's no TV."

"We could go to your house," I suggested. I was interested to see what he was up to in there, anyway. It had been a while.

"I'll let Parker know where we are," he said casually, and we walked out together. I wondered if someone might see us and think that I was Robby Baines' latest conquest. Maybe they might, since I'd been eating the ice instead of regular food and with the number of squats I'd been doing, I thought that I was filling out my old leggings pretty well. Maybe tomorrow, I'd do my hair again.

"Have you ever thought of treasure hunting?" he asked me.

“Just in general, or as a business?” I responded. Yeah, this was definitely more entertaining than looking out the window at people passing by.

Chapter 4

“No. No, no, no. I already think it’s a bad idea.” I buried my toes in the cold sand to protect them from the wind and wished that the sun, which was shining, would shine a little stronger.

“You haven’t even heard the whole thing,” Robby told me.

“It was already a no when you said ‘flame thrower.’ Remember that we’re neighbors and our houses are attached.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “It may not have been my best idea.”

“It might have been your worst,” I suggested, and he nodded again.

“It might have been. I’ll keep thinking,” he said.

“I was, too. You didn’t get rid of that doughnut machine yet, did you?”

“You might be surprised to know that there’s only a small market for used doughnut machines,” he answered.

“I’m not surprised at all. Are you going to take a big financial hit on that?” I adjusted my sarong, holding my breath and tying it tighter to narrow my waist.

He grimaced. “It’s not a little hit.”

“More like how you mow down the offensive linemen? That kind of hit?” I suggested and he sighed.

“It’s a lot like that and my accountant is pretty upset.” More sighing, and he looked momentarily disturbed before shrugging and moving on. “Speaking of football, I was working out with some of the guys today and I heard that you know someone on the team. Your sister is married to Bowie, Garrett Bowman,” he announced.

“I’m aware of that since I was at the wedding. I planned the event,” I said.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Was I supposed to give you a comprehensive list of every person of my acquaintance?” I asked him.

“No, but it’s a little weird that you didn’t mention that I work next to your brother-in-law. Don’t you think?”

I shrugged. Maybe it was. “My sister and I aren’t close anymore,” I explained. We hadn’t ever been close.

“I like Bowie. He’s a really good guy, a great teammate, and he’s fun to hang out with. He’s having a party at his cottage.”

“Right, *his* cottage.” I snorted. “I grew up in that place. It’s a little dump.”

“I don’t think it is anymore. Bowie and his dad have been working on it all winter, them and a contractor. They added a second story and—”

“That’s great,” I said. “Sounds amazing. You know, that could have been my cottage. My dad asked me if I wanted it and I said no, and then he didn’t give it to them. They bought it. They’re only taking my leavings.”

He nodded slowly as he looked at me and I thought that he might be wondering if what I’d said was true. Some of it was, like the part about how my dad had offered the decrepit cottage to me, first. He’d taken that offer back, however, and happily accepted my sister’s money instead.

“Their party is to show off the renovation. It’s on the night before Fan Day,” he went on.

Woodsmen Fan Day was a big event in the summer when the stadium was open for all us little locals to meet the famous, important football players. We also got to watch the Wonderwomen perform new dance routines before the beginning of the preseason and I’d never missed that, not since I got old enough to make my way there myself.

“Are you going?” Robby asked.

He meant to my sister’s party to show off her changes to our old house; he probably took as a given my attendance at Fan Day. Everyone around here went to that, but I couldn’t show my face at Woodsmen Stadium. And the party? My sister had

texted when she and her husband Bowie had returned from their amazing trip but I hadn't answered her, so no, I hadn't heard about it. We hadn't spoken in a while.

"I have plans that night," I answered.

"Work?"

"Yeah, probably," I sighed. "Are you going?"

"Sure, me and the guys from the team. It should be fun. They said that they like your sister a lot."

"Everyone does." I stood up from my towel, wondering what else Robby had heard about me from those guys who'd shared that I was his teammate's sister-in-law, but he didn't say anything more about it. Both of us watched Parker in the water instead.

We'd brought him to the beach because I felt strongly that at one point, his skin needed to be exposed to the sun instead of only the lights from his computer screens. Also, he deserved a reward for all the schoolwork he'd been doing. All the work, meaning that from the beginning of the year up until this point, he'd accomplished next to nothing and now he was making it up. He was going to finish eighth grade if it killed both of us.

I'd lured Robby to come along by offering a big cooler full of food, because I knew that Parker would like it better if we went as a trio. There was some major hero worship happening, especially since Robby had been answering a lot of sex questions. I'd seen them sitting on the front steps together and yes, Robby had looked pale at times and at others he was shaking his head in disbelief, but they both let me know that a lot of issues had been cleared up.

One of those issues was how Parker had believed that Robby sucked at sex, based on my description of what happened during his first time. I had only repeated what I'd been told, after all, but Robby had explained it away so that Parker didn't think he was taking tips from some novice. He'd also clarified for me, since I seemed to have bad intel, that it had only been sucky during that specific instance and subsequently he'd made it up to her.

“No one, ever, not one woman has had a word of complaint since,” he’d let me know.

Not to his face, anyway. But I did glance over at his crotch and studied it thoughtfully before moving my gaze to the lake. I also moved our conversation away from my sister and her magical existence.

“I can’t believe that Parker’s been playing out there for so long,” I commented. “He’s going to be blue. There’s no fat on his body.”

“No muscle, either,” Robby noted. “He and I have been talking about working out.”

I untied my sarong, let it flutter to the sand, and adjusted myself into a more flattering stance. They might have been talking about working out, but I had already been doing that a whole lot. I’d been putting in several hours a day since we’d decided on this beach trip, but so far, no one had noticed anything about my physique. It didn’t matter, of course, and when I checked, his eyes were also on the lake.

And anyway, it was too cold to be wearing my bikini. Robby had on a sweatshirt with his trunks and my skin was covered in goosebumps. Lake Michigan never got exactly warm, but this early in the season, I thought there might have been ice floating by and the wind coming off the water was frigid.

“Here.” Robby threw a fleece blanket at me. “You look like a cat we used to have after I tried to give it a bath. It got sprayed by a skunk and with its hair all wet, it was so scrawny and shivery.”

A wet cat? “Thanks a lot.” Now I was sorry that I’d bothered to do all those crunches and squats. I curled into a ball and pulled the blanket around myself.

“Why’d you only wear that see-through thing to cover yourself up?” he asked.

“I don’t know. It was a dumb decision,” I answered. My voice was about as cold as the water.

“Here.” Robby yanked off his sweatshirt and handed it to me. “Go ahead, I’m fine. Plenty of muscle to keep me warm.”

He laughed at my noise of disgust, but good Lord, that was a true fact. He did have a lot of muscle and even under the t-shirt he now wore, anyone could see how attractive it was. That was only a general statement of truth, by the way, and not one that applied to me personally. Obviously, nothing personal would ever go on between us, ever. He had thought I was Parker's mother and I was old enough that I could have been, so I was definitely too old for Robby Baines. I had... what was it, five years on him? More? I wasn't going to look up the exact number but I did remember when he'd come into the league because I'd already been a cheerleader for several seasons, and I also remembered that he'd left college early.

On top of that, I was quite a bit older than the female company I saw coming and going from his condo. There was no question of legality or anything, but he had a type, a young type, and I wasn't that. Not anymore.

"Was that a sigh, or a yawn?"

"A yawn," I lied. "I was up late last night. There was a problem at one of my offices." One of the places I cleaned, I meant, but he got that. "An alarm was going off and I called the night supervisor of the service I work for and she had me stay there until they could figure out what it was. I think she wanted me to stick around in case I'd done something bad so I would get caught on the spot. That woman hates me."

"Why?"

I carefully pulled his sweatshirt over the bun I'd made on the top of my head. In the past, yes, I'd done my hair even for beach days. I'd actually been working on it today as well but Parker had walked right in and asked why I was doing all that bullshit. We'd settled on new words for him to use, ones that expressed his feelings but weren't as offensive. They also didn't make as much sense, but whatever.

"You don't need to do that bullshit to your hair. Robby and I don't look at it," he'd assured me. I'd decided that he was right and grabbed an elastic instead.

Robby was waiting for an answer to his question. "Why does the night supervisor hate me? A while ago, we had an

argument in which I told her that she was bad at her job. I was right about that. She said that I was a too high-maintenance and that I should go work somewhere where I wouldn't ruin my nails. She was right about that, herself." I examined my hands, which looked even worse than they had the summer that I'd been secretly dishwashing for extra money. "She advised the owner of the cleaning business that I should be fired, but he's the dad of a guy I used to be friends with in high school so she didn't get her way."

"Why did you argue with her?"

Ugh. It was such a stupid story. "A man was still in the building when I showed up to clean. He was one of the people who worked there but he hadn't left yet for the day, probably because he's an idiot who couldn't get his tasks done in a timely way," I said. "He started following me around and talking to me, making comments about my body, and I caught him taking a picture of my butt. Then he followed me out to my car and I told him if he took another step, I was going to pepper spray him within an inch of his life." I didn't tell the part about how I hadn't been prepared, that while we were in a darkened hallway before I'd run out, the guy had also grabbed and kissed me and I hadn't been able to stop him. I was too ashamed to say that part.

"Why did you get in trouble about that?"

"Because he called the night supervisor and complained, saying I was rude to customers and acted like I was too good for them, like I was full of myself and snobby. She believed his story instead of mine and told me that the customer is always right. I said that he was only right that I thought I was better, because I was."

"I've never felt threatened," Robby commented. "Not since I hit my growth spurt."

"I've been threatened plenty, ever since I hit mine." I indicated my chest area and although it was beneath the blanket and totally concealed, his eyes fastened there.

"You have great breasts," he commented blandly, just as he might have admired a pretty Petoskey stone.

“I wasn’t aware that you had noticed.” I wasn’t aware that he’d noticed how I looked at all, but maybe it was inevitable. Dogs used their noses to sniff each other’s butts and we humans used our eyes to determine who was worthy of our time and consideration. Although my breasts might have been great, obviously the whole package wasn’t enough to merit any more of Robby Baines’ attention. Which I didn’t want, anyway.

“I’m not ogling you and I’m not the type to follow a woman out to her car and bother her,” he told me. “You ever see that guy again?”

“He hasn’t worked late since that night. Usually the buildings are totally empty.”

“My mom used to get scared when she pulled that shift. I went with her a lot,” he mentioned.

“Didn’t she die when you were nine? You were young to be her protection.”

“More like her companion,” he answered. “I remember that I got tired at school because of us getting back to our apartment so late. I was glad when she switched to day shifts except then I was on my own for snacks and dinner.”

I imagined he would have wanted a lot of snacks, too. That woman must have worked her fingers to the bone to put enough food on the table for him.

“Do you ever want a companion?”

“Are you offering?” I asked back, but rolled my eyes. “You think I could get Parker to come with me? As far as I can tell, he stays up all night gaming, but at least I could force him into doing his homework while I clean. He really is enrolled in online school.”

“Where’s his dad, anyway?” Robby wondered, and we discussed that guy until Parker himself rejoined us from the water. And yes, he was blue.

“Good Lord,” I said. “Did you think about coming in before you had hypothermia?”

He looked blank. “No.”

I gave him the blanket because I didn’t need it anymore. Robby’s sweatshirt was very warm and it had that nice smell that a guy’s clothes always got, the one that made them more fun to wear than your own stuff.

Parker finally stopped shivering and immediately wanted to know if there was anything left to eat. Since there wasn’t, he was ready to go home. Robby made him carry the blankets and towels but he hefted the cooler himself (it was empty, but still heavy). It really was handy to have a strong guy around for stuff like that, stuff you could have done on your own but didn’t mind if he stepped in to handle. Like how Billy had always taken out the trash to the dumpster in the corner of the parking lot.

“I’ll do it. It’s raining,” he’d say, “and your hair looks pretty.” He’d always noticed my appearance.

“Aubin?”

I glanced up and saw a woman standing in the sand, a woman I’d cheered with, Mia. We’d been good friends, too; she’d been a bridesmaid in my wedding. I saw her eyes go to Robby, then to Parker very briefly, then back to the Woodsmen player.

“Robby Baines,” he announced, and stepped forward and put out his big hand. He smiled at her and I watched her have the same reaction as the other girls who had made the walk to his condo for the evening. Her eyes got big, she blushed, then she giggled, just as they did. Pretty soon, she’d be throwing her clothes onto his bedroom floor.

“That’s how you do it?” I heard Parker ask.

“Good to see you, Mia,” I said. I grabbed Parker by the arm and we walked toward Robby’s truck. Then we had to stand there while he continued to work his magic on her and on the friends she was with, some of whom I also recognized. I saw him take out his phone so he was definitely getting their information.

“It’s that easy?” Parker asked me. “It’s that easy to get girls to like you?”

“It is if you’re a starting football player with a base salary that puts more money into his pocket each season than you and I will ever see.”

“Speak for yourself,” he told me. “What’s a base salary?”

While I explained in detail how football players got paid besides what they made for each game, like the bonus clauses in their contracts, the incentives, and finally, the endorsement deals, Robby made his way over. Parker looked a little glazed by that point but it was all good information for him to know.

“It’s really rude to keep your guests waiting,” I mentioned to Robby. “Etiquette.”

He shrugged, unconcerned. “I thought I was the guest. You invited me, didn’t you?”

“We’re standing outside of your truck,” I pointed out, and he unlocked it. Finally.

All the way home, Parker could hardly talk about anything besides Robby’s smooth moves with Mia and the ladies. He also talked about dinner a bit too, because he always had food on his mind, but even that was overshadowed by his appreciation of the way that his hero had handled that brief yet fruitful interaction. Fruitful, because Robby admitted that yes, he would be getting in touch with all five of the women.

“Don’t you think Mia is a little old for you?” I asked, then wondered why I would get involved. Why would I care if I saw her walking down the path to his condo?

“How do you know how old she is? How do you know her?” Robby asked me, but then Parker interrupted with more statements about the impressive accomplishment—five women!—and how he himself would be snagging attention like that too, as soon as he could drive. In a couple of years.

It was annoying enough that when we got to my house and after I made Parker shake off the blankets and towels outside, I told him to quit with the adulation.

“Robby got those women to talk to him because he’s a Woodsmen football player. I told you all about his income, remember?”

“Yeah, the incentives and whatever, but they would have liked him anyway.”

We both turned to Robby as he came back inside after rinsing out the cooler. “What?” he asked us. “What did I miss?”

“We want to find out how you got those women to give you their phone numbers,” I told him. “Parker wants to learn the art of the pick-up.”

“Really? All right, I’m happy to pass along my vast knowledge,” he said, and shook his head. “Jesus H. Christ. Ready, Aubin?”

“You want me to be your test subject?” I asked, hand on my chest. “I’ve heard a lot of lines. You think you have something that would work on me?”

“I’m sure of it,” he said smugly. “You have no idea how many women...” He paused and looked at Parker. “How many women I’ve talked to,” he concluded.

Parker shook his head. “You were going to say, how many women you’ve—”

“Start the show,” I ordered Robby. “Try me.” I sat on a stool at the pass-through window to my kitchen and put on some lip gloss, and then I pretended to check my phone as one might if she were waiting for her friends in a bar.

Across the room, he passed a hand over his short hair, smoothing it. It was a nice medium-brown color, what I might have called golden-brown, if I’d spent any time thinking about it. His beard and moustache were the same color. It went well with his blue eyes, which I might have called denim, because they were dark and maybe a little indigo. I didn’t spend a lot of time pondering his eye color either, but he could have used them to his advantage. His face wasn’t made up of perfect features but he did have the kind of jaw that a lot of women liked, very strong and firm, and he had great cheekbones. All put together, I guessed that maybe he was what many people

would have called attractive. Not handsome, but with a very strong pull. Anyway, none of that would have made a difference to me.

Robby strutted—there really wasn't a better word for it—over to where I was perched, and I glanced up at him, giving him the same look that I gave to all men who thought they could talk to me in a bar. It was the look I used to give them, I meant, back when I went to bars and had the power to attract them.

He smiled at me, just the one side of his mouth curving up. Ok, it was cute. I could give him that. I waited.

“Hi.”

Then he turned to Parker, who applauded.

I was flabbergasted. “‘Hi?’ That’s it? Are you kidding?”

“It works,” he assured Parker, who applauded again.

“No, no, no. It only works because all the women around here know who he is,” I explained, and Robby frowned.

“It’s my personal magnetism,” he announced. “Even before I was a Woodsmen, I still had it. *It* is my magnetism.”

“We understood what you meant, but no. Maybe back before you were a professional football player, you put in more of an effort,” I said, shaking my head. “Because, ‘Hi?’ No. That would never have worked on me.”

He was clearly annoyed at my lack of enthusiasm. “What would you have done?” he asked.

“You mean, what would I have done if I wanted to pick up a guy?” I shook my head again. “I didn’t do that. They came to me, not the other way around.”

“Sure, right,” Robby said sarcastically. “You never went up to someone and asked him out, never in your life.”

“I may have, and if I did, I always got results. I guess it was my personal magnetism.” I thought about how I’d met Billy. I’d seen him at the stadium where I’d still been on the cheer

squad and he'd been working on a player's knee, and I'd made it happen between us. At that point, I'd had the power.

"Let's see it," Robby dared me now. "You try me. Tell me 'hi.'"

"That's all I can say, just the one word like you did? Fine." I jumped up from the chair and offered it to him, then was sorry when he sat and its bamboo legs bent. I strode across the room, took the elastic out of my hair, and shook it out down my back. I'd cut it the year before, after a comment or two from Billy's mom about the inappropriate nature of older women who styled themselves as little girls, but it had grown out a lot since.

I turned my chin and looked at Robby over my shoulder. I stared for a moment too long, smiled, and then slowly looked away. I gave my hair another shake.

"Men can't do that hair stuff," he pointed out. "But I'll give you points. Not bad."

Not bad? I pushed up the sleeves of his sweatshirt. We'd see about "not bad."

I turned to face him, shifting my hips as I swiveled, and then began my walk. I used the same moves that I had as a cheerleader when I'd taken my place at the front of the formation, except that I did them very deliberately and I made eye contact with him for the whole time. I placed each foot carefully to give a subtle rock to my step, I angled my chin so I could look up at him up, and I smiled like I had a secret. Then when I got to his chair, I stood just a little too close, close enough that when I rested my arm on the countertop, my bare skin brushed against his. With my other hand, I carefully rubbed my little finger against my lower lip. There was nothing subtle about that.

"Hi," I said, just as he had. Except I lowered my voice and breathed out the word like it was just between the two of us.

Robby looked at me and I saw his throat move, his Adam's apple jumping. We'd locked eyes and I didn't turn away and I didn't even blink.

“Sorry, bro, she wins,” Parker said, and started a slow clap.
“Shit—I mean, spit, Aubin, that was a great act.”

“Thank you,” I acknowledged, and curtseyed. I turned back to look at Robby, who nodded.

“Congratulations,” he said, and to his credit, he didn’t sound grudging that he’d been beaten so badly. He didn’t sound anything but normal and he looked that way, too, so maybe I hadn’t made the impression that I’d thought I had. He was also normal, unmoved, during dinner. Maybe a little quieter than usual, but he’d said that he’d been working out with other Woodsmen players and Parker had even cajoled him into briefly going for a swim. He might have been tired.

Parker was. He yawned throughout the meal, not covering his mouth, and it only made me more determined to start him on an exercise routine sooner rather than later.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked warily as we cleared the table, and I told him I was calculating how far we were going to run the next day. He groaned but didn’t say no.

After he’d left to go to bed (or to go into his bedroom and play games for the rest of the night), Robby remained in my kitchen as I wiped the countertops. I had decided to make a little more effort to keep things clean, since it was now my career.

“You don’t have a toaster,” he noted.

“That’s true. I don’t eat that.”

“Toast?”

“Toast, bread, bagels, muffins, anything with flour,” I said, and put away my spray bottle. This formula didn’t peel the skin from my fingers, unlike the one I used at the office buildings. That was a chemical compound which seemed to burn through gloves.

“Do you have allergies or something?”

“No. Why?”

“Because I heard about a new kind of toaster that’s fission powered. I was thinking that you might want one, as the thank-you gift for saving my life.”

“First, I think a fission-powered toaster is a threat to my existence and yours since you would definitely be in the blast radius if things went sideways, and second, I told you that you don’t have to think about that again. You said thank you and that was enough.”

“There must be something I can do.”

“You already put the cooler away, and that was really all I needed. We’re even,” I said briskly. “Do you want to hear more about Mia?”

“Who?”

“The woman you met today at the beach,” I reminded him. Good Lord, were his nights so full that he had already forgotten a girl from only a few hours before?

“Oh, yeah. Sure, I guess.”

I told him about my former friend, who was actually a cool person. “We danced together starting when we were in sixth grade. We drifted apart a little in college, but then we were Wonderwomen together and it was so fun,” I said.

“You two didn’t seem friendly,” Robby offered.

“No, we’re not friends now. Not anymore.”

“Why?”

That was the question, wasn’t it? I just didn’t feel like giving him the true answer. “People drift, like I said we already had when we both went to different colleges. That happened to us again.”

“Yeah, I don’t keep up with guys from high school, either.”

“See? It happens.”

“I was at six schools in four years,” he went on. “I don’t even remember their names.”

“Why did you change around like that?” I thought about his athletic career. “Wasn’t that tough with football?”

“Yeah, it sucked. When my mom died, I went to stay with her brother and his girlfriend, and when that didn’t work, I just

kept moving between people in my family, their friends, friends of their friends. I started in California, then I went to Nevada, back to Los Angeles, then Oregon, Washington, then..." He thought. "Arizona in eighth grade and finally Texas. I'd moved a lot with my mom, too, so that was at least seven elementary schools and I know I went to..." He thought again. "Five middle schools, in three different states. I played for all different coaches and different teams the whole time. I didn't get recruited after that and I didn't have the grades for a four-year school, so I started in community college and then I transferred. I entered the draft after my junior year and I was good enough to get picked, but not too high."

I remembered that. The Woodsmen announcers, Herb and Buzz, had claimed that he was a sleeper pick, that our team was going to be very happy they'd managed to snag him. So far in Robby's career, it was true.

"Did you ever go back to finish your degree?" I asked.

"Nah, I'm like Parker. I hated that stuff."

"I don't think it helps him to be isolated and doing it online and I'm sure it didn't help you to go to six different high schools, either," I said.

"It didn't help with football, wrestling, or baseball. I was doing all those back then. Other kids were going to camps and playing on invitational teams that cost a lot, and they had nice equipment. They had their dads around, helping out, yelling shit at their sons or the refs, criticizing. But you know, they were there."

I did know. I had been the one at dance competitions trying to do my own hair, aware that no one was sitting in the audience to cheer for me like they were for the other girls. In fact, they'd been rooting for me to lose so their daughters would win, and that had made me try even more.

Robby shrugged. "It was ok. It ended up great, right? Here I am, doing whatever I want."

"Yeah, but you should be more careful with your money. You shouldn't do stuff like buy a doughnut-making machine or a

nuclear-fission toaster just on a whim, even if you can afford it right now. I think something like twenty percent of professional football players file for bankruptcy after retirement from the Confederation. Not right away, but the big spending, big families, alimony, dumb investments—all that adds up. More like, it subtracts.”

He looked at me for a minute. “You think I’m going to run out of money?”

“How much do you have saved? Where are you investing it? If your career ended tomorrow, do you have enough set aside to support you for the rest of your life and if not, how would you make a living? I hope you’re not really putting your faith in bait fish.”

He stared at me again. “I, uh, better get going.”

“Date night?” I asked, and although I’d meant it to be teasing, it came out a little too angry. I tried to cover that by smiling and adding, “Have fun!”

“Yeah, ok.”

And he was gone, leaving me in his sweatshirt behind him.

Wearing it made me think about...ugh, I shouldn’t have done it, and I knew it. I walked upstairs to the second bedroom, the one that was my former office with Jess and the one that was supposed to have been a nursery, according to Billy’s mom. It never would have been since I wasn’t prepared to be a mother, and anyway, the lack of sex during my marriage would have made it impossible for my husband to become a father.

The room was mostly empty now, except for my old desk still in the corner. I had bought it at a garage sale and then had to figure out a way to get it home, because it was huge. I’d still had my old car in those days, so I’d struggled until I’d managed to tie it to the roof and I’d driven away, super afraid the whole time that I’d see someone I knew while I looked like a such a fool.

Previously, the desk had held everything relating to my business but now, it had things that were more personal. I took the key from the top of the window frame, unlocked the

file drawers, removed the two boxes I stored in there, and then sat on the floor to open them.

They were both full of items that belonged to Billy. The day of our last big fight, when he'd left to go sleep at a friend's house for the night, I'd known that it was over between us for good. I'd understood that he would never, ever come back to me, so I'd walked through our bedroom and bathroom, through the living room and kitchen, carrying a bag. I'd collected stuff, Billy's stuff. I picked up mementos of him so I'd have something when he was gone and I'd packed it all into boxes and stored them in this desk.

Some of what I took out now was silly: half-empty pens, a container of dental floss, a sticky note where he'd jotted down a phone number. I'd taken one of his ties, which he rarely wore except on special occasions. This particular one, with a tiny geometric design, had been what he'd had on at our engagement party. I'd grabbed a handful of the change he left in a basket in his closet, a piece of junk mail with his name and this address on it, one sock whose mate had been eaten by our dryer, a bottle of the cologne he liked, a Woodsmen t-shirt with "Papa" written inside the hem, and piles more.

I opened the cologne

first, and sniffed the familiar aroma. Then I went through piece by piece, thinking of him writing this phone number in his careful handwriting, of how he'd looked in his grey suit with this tie. I let myself wonder what he was doing in Oklahoma right now and who he was doing it with.

That made me think of what other people were doing tonight. I carefully packed everything away, and then I sat at my bedroom window like a sentinel, my eyes on the path. But no one walked on it, not Parker's dad coming home, not Robby going to meet a girl in the parking lot and not him walking her back out when they were done. He usually accompanied them to their cars. It got later and later but I didn't seem to be tired, so I sat there for a long time, just watching and thinking, mostly about missed chances and all the many, many things I wished I could restart and redo. It was just a shame that you couldn't wipe away your mistakes with some kind of extra-

strength cleaning fluid, a formula that could hurt your fingers even through gloves.

Chapter 5

“I know you. Don’t I?” He leaned forward over his desk. “Sorry, but you look so familiar to me. Are you friends with my wife? Or did you babysit my son?” He smiled. “I’m sure we have a connection.”

“I don’t think so,” I answered. “I think today is the first time we’ve met.” This was going to go one of several ways: either he would never remember how he thought that he knew me, or he would remember me as a Woodsmen cheerleader, or...

“Oh, that’s right.” The friendly smile disappeared from his face and a large frown replaced it. “Aubin Frazier. You were married to Bill, Bill Papakonstantinou. We were buddies at the gym,” he explained. “I know all about you.”

Right. I picked up my purse. “Thanks for your time.”

He was looking at his computer screen. “I remember him talking about how you blew up the business you started and screwed over your investors. Funny, I don’t see that here on the résumé that you submitted.”

“No, I thought it best to leave that part off,” I said. “Have an awesome afternoon.”

And that was why I was still cleaning office buildings at night: my dad was right and this area was just too small. It was the first time he’d been right about anything in his entire life and I was sorry that it was happening now, but I couldn’t argue when the truth stared me in the face. More like, when a potential employer stared me in the face and was a heartbeat away from tossing me out of his office.

I’d decided to try to leave behind the vampire lifestyle that my dad had also laughed at and apply for a day job. Actually, I’d applied for six and that had been my first interview, because I’d been flatly rejected at the other places. Either they knew me, because I’d known a lot of people from living here all my life and making a name for myself, or they’d known Billy. Or they knew Jess, my former partner, or her parents, or her sister or her five brothers, or her four uncles or eighteen cousins, or

anyone else in her huge family. Maybe they were acquainted with one of my investors, and they all had friends and relatives who hated me, too.

Jess would have said that I deserved it. Billy would have said that also, and they both would have been right. I got into the car, which I'd parked around the corner so no one would see its vintage ugliness, and drove home.

"There has to be something," Parker said after I got there. He'd followed me inside and headed straight for my refrigerator. "Are you already out of salami? Where did it all go?"

"Do you think I would touch fatty, processed meat? You ate every slice. Enough with the fridge," I told him. "And no, there's no job that I can find that pays as well as cleaning." None where they'd hire me, anyway, and none that I would accept. I had to have something unobtrusive, preferably working from home or at least working alone.

"There's a help-wanted sign at the gas station," he mentioned. "It looks like a good place to be. Lots of candy, good selection of pop. Cigarettes if you're old enough, and you definitely are."

"Are you still walking over there for those nasty burritos? Do you have any idea what's in them?" I demanded. No, he didn't, and the answer was also no to me working in a gas station on a busy road. People might come in, people I knew. The job I'd interviewed for today would have been in a back office doing bookkeeping, with me isolated and alone. Perfect for an outcast.

I looked over at what he was up to now. "Parker, get out of the cupboard. You can't eat right before we go on a run."

"Do we really have to?" He looked absolutely distraught at the idea, but I nodded.

"We really do. You'll feel great afterwards," I assured him. "You'll see." And we did go for that run, but he wasn't happier at all.

Robby was standing next to his truck as we entered the parking lot. “What’s with Parker?” he asked me.

We’d only gone a little way but after we’d turned around, we’d practically sprinted home. I was out of breath and had stopped but Parker had run right past the truck without even pausing. In the distance, I heard his front door slam shut.

I leaned forward, hands on my knees. “He got upset,” I explained when I had enough air to talk. “We had to come out of the neighborhoods and go on the main road and a carful of guys slowed down next to us.”

Robby stared at me. “Why?”

“Why do men usually do things like that? Because I had taken off my shirt and was jogging in my bra and they wanted to discuss it. You know, a really intellectual conversation about the benefits of adjustable straps and levels of support. Parker didn’t enjoy it.”

“What did you do?”

“I ignored them. He started to run so fast I could hardly keep up.” I stood and wiped my forehead with the shirt I’d put back on. “They took off when a woman came up behind them and honked because she wanted to drive faster than harassing speed.”

“Where did they go?”

“You know, I forgot to ask their exact destination. What does it matter?” I peered into the truck bed. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to return the fish tanks.” He held up a hand as I opened my mouth. “Yeah, ok, you were right about that. Want to come?”

I looked down at myself, my sweaty shirt and the running shoes. My hair was in a ponytail that I’d adjusted several times as I ran, so it must have been a mess, too. “Sure,” I said. Why not? Robby wasn’t looking, and what did it matter if I was going to a fish tank supply store?

I'd forgotten that I was going there with a Woodsmen football player. As soon as we stopped at a light, the people in the car next to us (on my side) started to go crazy, pointing and yelling things, taking pictures and videos. I was definitely going to appear in them, although I would only appear as the back of my head.

"You get it too," I noted as he smiled at the family and they went crazy. "You get attention, but I don't think Parker would care so much about this."

"Nah, he liked it. When we went to the grocery store last week, he waved back like he was in a motorcade."

I thought of Parker's misguided understanding of American presidential history. "Well, his last name is 'Hartshorn.'"

"What?" Robby asked. "What does that have to do with anything?"

I only shook my head. Parker was definitely better-versed now in presidents' names than he had been when I'd met him. That was lucky because his finals were next week and his social studies materials (which he had now studied) had focused on our country's past (spoiler: there was no "President Hartshorn.") He had assured me that the online exams would go great because he could get around the anti-cheating protocols, so he didn't have to worry about studying. I'd informed him that no, he was going to study, and I was going to watch him take those tests so that he didn't cheat, either.

"I don't mind when people are waving or whatever," Robby said. "I'm not after their attention, but it doesn't bother me when I get it."

"I used to feel that way. Not that I wanted men to slow down their cars and yell at me, but I didn't mind when I got recognized."

"The recognized you because you were a cheerleader?"

"Was that a question? Yes, I was a cheerleader, I was the captain of the squad. I've already told you that," I said irritably. "And I didn't mind when people would say, 'Oh, I

love watching you,' or 'I wish I could dance like that,' or even when guys would ask me out."

"What were those guys today saying to you?"

"They were giving me tips about running shoes." I took out the elastic in my hair and pulled down his mirror. "Parker said they were the same ones who yelled at him the other day. They're from the crew that's remodeling that restaurant around the corner and they made fun of him when he walked by. He got all red when he told me about it." I yanked back hard on my hair, furious again. It made me so upset to think about him getting scared and running away from them. Why would grown men have done that to a kid? He couldn't help it that his dad was an idiot who didn't buy him appropriately fitting clothes.

Robby didn't answer. We were both kind of brooding as we went the rest of the way to the big store where he'd bought the tanks, but on the way back, he was more talkative. We discussed the last Woodsmen season, for one thing, and also the one that would be starting (unofficially) with Fan Day next month.

"I used to love going to that. I begged for rides to get myself there when I was a kid," I said, glad that Parker wasn't with us to ask if I'd gone in a buggy or by riding a mule.

"You were that interested in football?"

"I was that interested in the Wonderwomen," I corrected. "They were called the Dames back then, though. I used to watch and memorize what they did, and then I'd recreate the routines on our patio. It was the only place big enough to dance in our cottage."

"I wonder how Bowie is going to fit in there," he remarked, referencing my sister's big husband. "He's my size."

"You said they were doing construction on it," I reminded him. They had; I'd driven by and checked it out for myself. "It used to be small and cramped and full of tons of crap, but I bet it's not that way anymore." It wasn't; I'd also gone inside to look around and it was beautiful. A rock had settled in my

stomach as I'd walked through the clean, open spaces with the view to the beautiful little lake. I'd remembered how it had been to grow up in that cottage the way it had been before. "It would have been impossible to live there with all the memories, too," I said out loud.

"Like what? What memories?"

Nothing I intended to discuss right now and I needed to pay more attention to what was coming out of my mouth. "Old stories are so boring," I answered. "Why don't we talk about what you're going to do next, now that you're officially out of the bait business?"

"Tell me more about doughnuts," he said. "Do you have any more thoughts on what I should do with a large, industrial machine that can't go back into my house, because someone told on me to the condo board?"

That hadn't been me, but I did have a few ideas that we discussed all the way home. The Woodsmen team was huge into charitable giving; why not combine his doughnut making operation with that, and also make a profit? I had been thinking about it as I scrubbed bathrooms and vacuumed old carpets as the rest of the world slept.

"Want to come in for an early dinner?" I suggested as we arrived at the townhouses. "I'm going to try to pry Parker away from his computer."

"You're pretty nice to him."

"Me?" I was nice? It was a word I'd rarely heard applied to myself.

"Yep, you are. But no, I can't come over," he went on. "I have plans."

"Oh, sure." Of course he did. He was living the life that other guys his age only dreamed of. I found myself wishing that I had plans, too, something besides work that I could have told him about. "Unfortunately, I can't have dinner with you. What a shame," I would say. "I have..." A date with another guy? A party to attend? Bonding time with all my

girlfriends? A trip to Paris? But why would Robby Baines have cared what I was doing?

“I wish I could come over,” he lamented. But his next words showed why he was sorry: “I love eating at your house. You’re probably making something good.”

“Only T-bone steaks, gratin potatoes, and creamed spinach,” I lied. Steaks were out of my budget. “Why don’t you take your girl out tonight? Go to dinner with her so you can have something good, too. Parker will be happy to eat your steak and also your share of the apple turnovers I’m going to bake.”

“You bake?” He looked even more unhappy and shook his head. “I don’t take anyone to dinner. I don’t want them to get the wrong idea.”

“The idea that you’re interested in more than sex? Yeah, I guess they might, if you talk to them and pick up the check before you bring them home.” I wasn’t disapproving; that was only a statement of fact, and he nodded in agreement. “You may have to pace yourself, though,” I mentioned. “At the rate you’re going, there won’t be any women left in this part of the state for these one-nighters.”

“Summer’s full of tourists,” Robby reminded me. “I won’t spend next winter here again, either, so I won’t need to worry about that.”

“I wasn’t too worried for you, either,” I said, and he laughed and went home. I did too, and looked up how to make apple turnovers.

“What do you keep going to the window?” Parker asked me a few hours later as I finished cooking, but I told him that there was no reason except I was interested in fresh air.

“It’s closed,” he pointed out.

Yeah, it was, and there was really no reason for me to wait in front of it. I returned to the kitchen, spooned up a large helping of dinner for him, and we walked to the table instead. As he ate, I badgered him about studying for a while but he interrupted and told me that he needed a break. Unlike me, he was young.

“This is when you’re supposed to have fun,” he said, and I thought of Robby. Again.

“Fun,” I repeated. “We’ll have more fun tomorrow when we exercise again.”

“No, I’m not doing that.”

“We won’t run near the construction site. Why did you get so upset about what happened today?”

Parker shook his head. “Didn’t you hear what those guys said to you? Or is your hearing...”

“No, I’m not losing my hearing. I just don’t care what people say,” I explained, which was as big a lie as I’d ever told in my entire life. When the men in the car had yelled their humiliating comments, I’d kept going as if I hadn’t noticed and that was really the best course of action I could have taken. You had to act like you didn’t care what people thought, said, or did. You had to pretend that nothing affected you.

That approach had worked for me for years but he kept shaking his head. “They shouldn’t have talked like that to you. Why would you ignore it?” he asked angrily.

“What was I supposed to do, take on a five oversexed men? Why did you run away the other day when they yelled at you about your pants and asked where the flood was?” I asked him back, just as mad.

He stared at me and then he got up and left, not even finishing the fettuccini (not T-bone) that was still on his plate. My door slammed behind him hard enough that I was sure that everyone in this block of condos had heard the sound, if they were home and not out scouting more opportunities with the opposite sex. But even if they were here, they were probably otherwise occupied.

The next morning, I stood at Parker’s door when Robby himself came out to see what was happening. I had been knocking—pounding—with my fist and also yelling some.

“Aubin,” he greeted me. “What’s going on?”

I looked to see if anyone else had emerged with him, but he was alone. “Parker won’t answer because he’s mad at me,” I said. It was very frustrating to argue with a door and I heard that in my voice. “He was mad that I didn’t stand up for myself yesterday when I got heckled and then I mentioned that he hadn’t stood up for himself before, either, and that...” That was wrong. I shouldn’t have said it and made him feel bad.

Robby walked up the steps and stood next to me on the little porch. “Open this,” he said, and the door immediately unlocked and swung to show that Parker had been standing right behind it.

“Hi, Robby.” He ignored my presence even though I told him good morning.

“Let’s go for a run,” Robby suggested.

“I don’t want to,” Parker answered, glaring at me. I didn’t either and said so, glaring right back at him.

“We’ll all go. Come on,” the Woodsmen player told us. “Get back on the horse.”

Parker now looked at me defiantly, daring me, and he changed his tune. “Sure,” he said. “I’m not afraid.”

Neither was I, which I mentioned. So I went to put on an appropriate bra and in a few moments, we were all trotting out of the parking lot together, no one really talking too much except a few muttered complaints from the skinny guy behind me about exercise and old people who were too bossy.

Robby made a left when we got to the street and we kept the pace. I watched the muscles flex in his legs, his big legs. You would have thought he’d be slow and plodding, but I’d looked up a few things about him. For one, I’d checked on his birthdate, and I’d been right: he was five years younger than I was. Another thing I’d seen was his forty-yard dash time, which was a 4.79. For someone his size? He was very fast.

We followed along behind him like baby ducks until we arrived at the next corner, where Parker and I both balked.

“That’s where they’re working on the restaurant remodel. That’s where the construction guys are,” I reminded him.

“I don’t want to go there,” Parker chimed in.

“Come on,” Robby ordered. He didn’t stop moving but he did slow a step so that he was next to us, and he took both of us by our elbows. “We’re turning this way.”

Had I mentioned that he was strong? Even with us dragging our feet and complaining a lot, he kept us going in that direction. We shut up, though, as we got close to the sounds of hammers and big machines. When we actually saw the guys, Parker and I picked up our speed to get past them faster but now Robby held us back.

And he pulled us to a stop right in front of the site. “Hey,” he shouted. He repeated that and gradually, the work came to a halt. Heads in hardhats poked out of windows and several of the guys walked out into the dirt front yard to stare.

“I don’t want to be here,” Parker hissed, and I tugged against the grip on my biceps.

Robby let us go, but only to drape one heavy arm over Parker’s shoulders and the other one across mine. “Everybody get a good look at these two people,” he boomed. “You all see them?”

Several of them nodded. I saw phones raise up, too.

“If anyone fucks with them again, I’ll come find you. I’ll come find you and you’ll deal with me instead.” He paused, looking around. “Does anybody have anything more to say to them? Come do it in front of me, right now.”

I actually saw several of them shake their heads, like, no, they did not want Robby to find them and they did not have anything to say. He sounded so mean and so scary that if I had been them, I would have turned and run. I looked again at the phones...

“They’re recording you,” I whispered.

“Good.” He raised his voice again. “I hope you all get this the first time. I don’t want to have to come back here but if I do, I won’t be nearly as nice as I am today.” He stared around again, turning his head and meeting a lot of eyes, but a lot of the other guys looked down or away.

His arms propelled us in a circle. “We’re done. Let’s go,” he said in his normal voice, totally calm again. He dropped his arms and the three of us broke into a jog. “If you’re hot, you can take your shirt off,” he mentioned to me.

“I’m fine like I am,” I told him. I was a little stunned, though.

“I think that’s going to work,” Parker panted. “I think what you just did is going to work.”

“Yeah, it will,” Robby told him. “I meant what I said. They won’t mess with you guys if they have half a brain in their heads.”

“Robby, they were recording you,” I said again. “It’s going to get lots of play.”

“Good. Then everyone will leave you alone.”

“They’re going to think that we...” How could I say it? “People are going to think that we mean something to you.”

“You do,” he said, glancing over at me. “You two are my friends. No one’s going to fuck with my friends.”

“We’re trying not to swear anymore,” Parker said, but he was grinning so widely that I could have seen his wisdom teeth coming in. “See, Aubin? That’s how you do it.”

Robby stopped. “What do you think would have happened if she had engaged with them? Or if you had, when they made fun of you the other day? I can talk like that because I intimidate them. I’m big, famous, and rich, and I have a lot of big, famous, rich friends. They won’t mess with me but they could with you, a lot. So don’t start crap with people.”

“Got it. First, I need to get like you, big and rich and all that. Do you think you could teach me football?”

“No, you don’t need to be like me. There are so many other things I wish...”

He stopped and we both looked at him.

“If you need someone to come and bash in some heads, then you can call me,” Robby said. “That’s what I’m good at.”

Parker looked slightly confused but nodded, and we all started running again. We went farther than the two of us had the day before but it was a lot more fun. Robby told us stories about the Woodsmen team and the other guys on it and the miles flew under our feet. When we made it back home, he and Parker bumped fists and they both started to head to their respective condos. I had a feeling that Parker was looking for a meal.

But I followed Robby for a few steps more. “Wait,” I called, and he stopped. “I wanted to say thanks. Thanks for doing that.”

“Yeah, sure. I don’t want you guys to get bothered.”

“Well, I really appreciate it. It’s good for Parker to know that you back him up.”

“And you,” he said. “You, too.”

I nodded. It was a nice thought that someone would be around if you needed him. If he didn’t have a game, or he wasn’t in another country learning to surf in the off-season, or if he didn’t have a woman with him, or if there wasn’t something important he had to do instead like returning bait tanks. I knew how men operated and how much backup you could expect. After all, I’d been married to a person who’d sworn that it was forever and now he lived in Oklahoma. I didn’t blame him for it, but it was a fact.

“Now we’re even,” I announced, but Robby shook his head.

“No, we’re not even from you saving me from choking to death. Not yet.”

I shook my head, too. Whatever.

“You know what I was thinking about while we were running?” Robby asked. “Parker needs to dress better.”

“Sure,” I agreed. “He looks like an idiot with his clothes and hair the way they are. If he was in school instead of sitting behind a screen, he’d get some serious crap about it.”

“Why don’t we take him shopping today? We could all go.”

“I don’t have—” I’d almost said that I couldn’t afford it, but I’d stopped myself. Concealing the state of my finances was a long-held habit and I would never say that I was poor, even though Robbie knew the truth or at least he must have guessed at it. After all, I was cleaning office buildings at night instead of jetting off to Paris. “I’m not going to buy him stuff. He has his own parent to do that.”

“His dad gave him a credit card,” he pointed out. “Let’s take him to some stores and let him use it. If it doesn’t work, I have enough to cover a few pairs of pants that reach his ankles.”

I nodded slowly. “Don’t you have other things to do?”

“I’ll do them.”

“Parker’s exams start on Monday. He could study for two hours and then we could head out.” That would also give me time to get ready. If we were going anywhere, then I would probably run into people I knew. I would pretend not to see them, of course, but I would look my best as I did it. And Robby would attract a crowd, even if by some miracle there was no one there who hated me.

He left and I told Parker to hit the shower and hit the books, knowing that the first one would take him all of a minute and the second would need to be monitored. As I took my longer shower and did my beauty prep at the counter of the pass-through to observe the studying, I thought about why Robby would do all this. Why would he stand up for us, why would he want Parker to stop dressing so stupidly?

It was nice; that was what my sister would have called it. She was always seeing “nice” everywhere, just like Robby had said about me. I, however, was aware of the truth. Yes, my sister was a genuinely good person, but most people were not. Most people, if given the opportunity, acted in their own self-interest, but I couldn’t exactly figure out what Robby’s angle was. What was he getting out of this for himself?

As for me, I understood my own actions with Parker perfectly well. I was lonely, unhappy, and deserted. I enjoyed giving direction and having people listen to me, and there was the

teenager next door, aimless and with his ears wide open. He was the perfect project. So, was I nice? No.

Parker stared at me when I finally announced that I was ready. “Why did you do all that bullshit? We’re just going to the mall, right?”

“I felt like dressing up.” I adjusted my skirt. “I don’t really do it too often anymore.”

“Why do you have to do it at all? I get out of the shower and I’m good to go.”

“Speaking of, you need a haircut. I could give you a trim,” I suggested.

“Really?”

“Sure, I’m good at them. I used to cut my dad’s hair.” It was the one time when we’d had to be close, to touch, and I’d never been sure if I hated it or liked it. He must have sat the whole time wondering if he’d end up bald or if a man’s throat could be slit with electric clippers.

Parker thought that maybe it would be ok, as long as I didn’t make him look dumb. “Do you understand how people today like to wear their hair?” he asked suspiciously, and showed me some pictures from what he called the “internet” so I would get it. I took out the scissors and told him to be quiet.

“Wow,” Robby commented when he let himself into my house. I was just finishing up and it had been extremely successful. “Nice look, man.”

Parker was studying himself in a hand mirror. “It’s not bad,” he agreed. He fluffed out the top and then smoothed the sides. “Pretty good.”

“You look really cute,” I told him. “Very good.” I waited to hear something back, something like, “You do too, Aubin,” because of the effort I’d put into myself for the outing. But both of them were still fixated on the haircut, and after they had sufficiently checked themselves out in the mirror and discussed sideburns until I was tapping my foot, we were finally ready to go.

We took the truck, which I enjoyed because it made me feel like I was riding on a parade float rather than in a vehicle made for clowns. Robby's thoughts must have been on that, too. "Why'd you get the orange car?" he asked me as we passed it on our way out.

"It was available," I answered. How many other people wanted a car that color? Yes, the answer was none. It made "Sunset" the economical choice but it was also, unfortunately, the conspicuous choice. People might have recognized the red BMW because it was mine but they stared at this new car just because it was ugly. Very.

Parker did his motorcade waving as we went but I sat behind my sunglasses and didn't pay attention to any of the commotion from other cars as they spotted Robby. When we arrived at the mall, he also put on sunglasses and a baseball cap, too.

"You think that people are going to be fooled? They'll just look right past you now?" I asked him.

"If I move fast, they usually don't form a crowd," he said.

I straightened my skirt again and adjusted my own sunglasses, but once we got into the stores, the focus was a hundred percent on Robby Baines. He and Parker picked out items, which I had veto power over, and amassed a considerable load of clothing. They also amassed a considerable load of fans.

"This is my friend Parker," Robby introduced him to everyone, especially the teenage girls, who giggled just like the older ones did over Robby himself. I shook my head and put another shirt on the pile, and Robby added a pair of sunglasses much like his own. It took a while to leave because he signed a lot of items and talked to people, and all the while Parker stood next to him soaking up the adulation. I saw Robby's phone out, too, so he was not missing this opportunity to meet more women.

"I never liked shopping before," Parker said from the back seat on the way home. He already wore the sunglasses and I'd noticed that many of the items that he'd picked out for himself were also suspiciously like the ones that Robby wore, the

collared shirts he favored and even similar socks. They were, of course, forty sizes smaller.

“Is your dad going to care how much you put on your credit card today?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I never spent so much before,” he said.

“Where is he right now?”

“I think Los Angeles. Maybe Budapest,” he answered.

“Robby, where do you buy your shoes?”

When we got back, he went to his place to unpack his many bags and Robby settled himself on my couch. “There are day games on right now. If you had a TV, we could watch baseball,” he mentioned.

“If I had a TV, we could also not ever watch baseball.” I unstrapped my shoes and he watched me instead as I immediately lost three inches in height.

“Those seem...awful,” he said. “Do your feet hurt?”

“Didn’t they look good?” I asked. He shrugged, and I pretended that meant “yes.” He wasn’t used to seeing me done up, and he still hadn’t said anything about that, either. I waited but his next comment was about Parker again.

“Where the hell is his father? Budapest? Los Angeles?”

Now I shrugged. “Does it matter? He’s not here.”

“It’s illegal. You can’t leave a kid alone.”

“How much supervision did you have growing up with all those different people? Probably as much as I did,” I answered my own question. “No one was driving you to practice, right? No one was going to your games, no one was taking you shopping.”

“I feel like I should break out the violins for myself.”

“And you turned out fine, like you said,” I continued. “So he’ll be fine, too.”

“Why didn’t anyone supervise you?”

“Are we talking about dead parents? Ok, sure.” I rolled my eyes. “My mom got in a car accident when I was ten and that was it for her. My dad is an idiot and he can barely manage himself.”

“And you had your sister. She’s a lot younger, right?”

“Yes,” I hissed. “She’s so much younger. But I didn’t take care of her, if that’s what you’re asking. I mean, yeah, I did some stuff.” I thought back. “I got her food. I did our meals until she was big enough to cook for herself. I got her dressed and whatever, I got us to school. I used to do her hair for gymnastics and it’s so thick and hard to—” I stopped, thinking back. My sister had been small and useless and my dad had been big and useless. I was the only one in our little shack of a home who had been able to get anything done.

“I used to wish for siblings. At some of the places I lived, there were other kids and I used to pretend that they were my brothers and sisters,” Robby said. “But then I’d move.”

“Why didn’t you stay anywhere?”

“I think I must have been a huge pain in the ass. And no one wants another mouth to feed, right?”

“I guess not.” I thought of the “nursery” upstairs, the one that I’d used for my office. I hadn’t wanted another mouth to feed, although Billy definitely did. He’d wanted a big family, lots of kids. There had only been that one scare and then he was gone, anyway.

“Aubin?”

I pulled my eyes away from the stairs. “What?”

“Let’s go to my house and watch baseball.”

“You don’t have other plans?”

“Nah.” He shook his head and stood. “You coming?”

I was probably the only woman who ever went in there without the possibility of sex, I considered. I was probably the only woman who wasn’t even thinking about that at all. I’d seen both grandmothers and their granddaughters checking him out as we’d shopped, but I certainly wasn’t.

But earlier today after he'd yelled at the construction workers, he had said that I was his friend. Since I didn't have those anymore, the words had lit up a funny feeling inside me. What was the word?

Warmth. It just felt good. "I guess I could watch baseball," I conceded, "but I'll need those violins playing for me as I do it."

He laughed and I put on tennis shoes instead of the high, strappy ones to walk down the path with him.

Chapter 6

I looked at the words on the screen. “Hey girl! It’s been a minute. What are u up to this summer?” And there were sun and bikini emojis.

Taken on its own, the text wasn’t a big deal. I myself had sent hundreds of messages exactly like it, just a few words to say hi, maybe asking a question whose answer I didn’t really care about. I’d worked a lot of places, volunteered around, and participated in enough activities to know more people than I could really keep track of. My wedding guestlist had been absolutely enormous.

But now? My phone was really, really quiet. Getting the “hey girl” text was unusual and completely unexpected. My fingers hovered over the letters as I thought about how to respond. The words “screw off” came to mind, as did “too little, too late.” Where had she been when I was floundering? Where had all of my “friends” gone?

That was only my hurt feelings talking. If I looked at the situation rationally, I really couldn’t blame them because I would have joined in the pile-on if I’d witnessed another woman act as I had. I would have agreed that it was so awful, I couldn’t believe it, she was a whore, a witch, a liar. And yes, all those things were true.

“Hey girl! It’s been a minute,” I read again, and I tried not to get excited and hopeful. This text wasn’t a peace offering or an entrée into the life I’d had before. Maybe she’d even sent it to me by mistake. So my answer, when I finally sent one, was only, “Hi.”

Almost immediately, Mia wrote back: “I was so surprised to run into you at the beach the other day!”

Oh, ok. I suddenly understood. This wasn’t about me or our former friendship; this was about how she’d seen me with Robby Baines. Maybe she was interested in why I’d been with him but most likely she was just interested in the man himself. Hadn’t he met up with her yet? It had been a few

weeks but I glanced at my window, thinking. I hadn't seen her walking by on the path to his house. In fact, the path had been unusually unused as of late, but I was often at work and I certainly wasn't monitoring it all the time. I really wasn't.

I looked at the phone and decided to stop playing around. "What do you want?" I typed and this time, there was a long pause before Mia answered me.

"Just to see how you are."

Just to see how I was? Rage, which I usually kept contained below the surface, crested over.

"Wow, thanks! That's so generous of you to text me, to honor me with your concern! After all these months of everyone acting like I had leprosy, it's wonderful that now you care about how I'm doing. And I'm amazing, by the way. Everything's amazing. I have a new boyfriend, a new job, a new car, and new friends. I have a wonderful life which is so much better than my old one! I'm so incredibly happy now that it makes me want to throw up. In fact, I'm going to run to the bathroom and puke, so gtg."

No, I didn't write any of that. I looked at the screen for a moment longer and then the swell of anger receded. And really, it was so much easier to be angry. When that was gone, all I felt was...empty. The other word for it was sad, or lonely. Those were things that I'd worked diligently to avoid, throughout my whole life. I'd never wanted to be my dad, the person who got left, and yet here I was, just as pathetic as he'd always been—except that he'd had two daughters at his side, one who loved him like crazy and the other who could generally tolerate his presence even if she hated him a lot of the time. What did I have? Not even a pet fish in a minnow tank.

It was just one of those days. Parker had been surly and refused to answer the door when I'd knocked to try to get him out for a run. I'd gone alone and forced myself to head too far out so that the way back was fairly miserable. Then, after I pretended to stop worrying about Mia's text and went to work, the bad day turned into one of those nights, too. I got home

more than two hours after I usually did and I was exhausted when I showed up in the parking lot, tired enough that I thought about sleeping in my car instead of forcing my legs to cover the steps to my condo. Instead, I looked across the blacktop and saw Robby sitting on his tailgate looking back at me.

I got out slowly and walked across to him. “Hi.”

“Hi. You’re home late, right?”

I looked up at the sky and closed my eyes for a moment. “Yeah. Yeah, it’s late.”

He patted the place next to himself and I remembered that it could hold both of us. I eased my tired body up and took a deep breath of the clean air. I myself probably smelled like all the horrible chemicals I used to disinfect the offices, those and automotive oil and whatever else coated the surface of the roads. I was filthy, too.

I opened my eyes to look at Robby. “Is she a no-show?” I asked him. As far as I knew, this was much later than his usual time to wait for his lady friends. I supposed they would actually be lady acquaintances, since he didn’t like to converse with them too much.

“What? Oh, yeah, I guess so,” he answered, and I noticed him watching me. “What’s with you? Bad night?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Tell me. I want to know,” he said.

Really? I looked over at him suspiciously. “What guy wants to hear a woman complaining?”

“I asked you, didn’t I? If I didn’t want to hear it, I wouldn’t have asked.”

Maybe that was true. After all, he wasn’t trying to get anything from me, right? I’d had guys want to date me so they could become social media semi-famous, back when I’d been a professional cheerleader and people had cared about what I was doing. But whatever fame I’d had, Robby had it centuple times over. He didn’t need me for sex and he certainly didn’t

need me for money, either. He earned whatever my salary times a billion would be. No, he didn't need me at all.

“Well?”

Where to start? I'd begun my evening with an argument with the night supervisor. She'd called me to claim that the previous day, I'd skipped cleaning one of the offices—but as much as I might have wanted to avoid that one, I hadn't. I'd gone and wiped their toilets and scrubbed the sink in the employee breakroom and dusted all their dumb, faded posters with pictures of faraway places that neither I nor anyone who worked there would ever see in person.

I'd worked hard even though the night security guy who also worked there creeped me out very badly. He liked to hide and jump scare me and the more I told him to stop, the more he did it. And yes, I'd reported that to my supervisor and her answer had been that they'd had a lot of problems with me in a very short time, and she was tired of my complaints. So I'd gone to that building tonight and dealt with him again and had to spend extra time to make up for “missing” it the day before, and that had made me late to the next place and the lateness snowballed as the night wore on.

Then on the way home, I got a flat tire and I was so bad at changing them. I'd been alone on the road and jumping at every noise, and even with the light of the moon and the light of my phone, I'd barely been able to see what I was doing and it had taken forever. I'd had flats before but I'd always had help to deal with them. In fact, the last time it happened, I had called...

Billy. I'd called my husband. I rubbed my eyes and they stung from whatever chemical hadn't come off with the wipes I'd used on my hands. No, Robby didn't want to hear my whining. If I didn't care enough to repeat it, why would he want to listen?

So I shook my head. “It was fine. All good,” I said. “I should just go home.” But I didn't move, and we were quiet for a long while.

“The moon’s so pretty.” His deep voice made me jerk out of the light doze I’d fallen into. “When I was a kid, I used to sit out on nights like this to watch it.”

“You should have been an astronomer, not a football player. Maybe that’s what you can do when you retire.”

“Nah. I couldn’t do that,” he said, shaking his head. “But I love looking up there. I think I must have been ten or so when somebody told me that my mom was in the sky, watching over me. I don’t think they meant it literally, but I latched onto it. I genuinely believed that she was on the moon and wherever I was living, I would go out into the yard, or on the porch, or just stand in the street, and I’d look up and think I might see her.”

“That’s pretty sad.” And I heard my voice get funny as I said it, kind of wobbly.

“Nah,” he repeated. “It was nice for me, because it meant that she was still around and I hadn’t lost her. I thought that someday, I would see her again when I went up there too. I would tell her that. ‘Ma, I’ll come to you. Wait for me.’”

Yes, it was sad. Very sad. My throat tightened up a lot, as if I might cry.

“When I was a kid, I used to get so nervous, like I couldn’t even sit still with it,” he went on. “But when I looked up at the night sky, I always relaxed.” He breathed out a sigh. “I think of her a lot on nights like this. It’s been a long time, but I still do. The moon feels like an old friend, now.”

“I always thought of the moon as lonely. I never considered it like a friend.” I cleared my throat. “But when I was college, I was glad when it was full. I used to keep track of how it waxed and waned. My manager at the bar swore that a full moon brought the crazies out but I had to walk home alone, so I was glad for the light.” I thought back to those nights.

“What?”

I must have made a sound but I hadn’t realized it. “Nothing.” I slid off the tailgate and my knees nearly gave way. “I’m going to bed.”

“I’ll walk you up,” Robby said, and stood. His feet already touched the ground, after all. When we passed under the first floodlight on the side of the building, he reached and brushed off my shoulder. “You’re dirty.”

“It’s from the road.”

“The road? You mean you were on your back on the pavement?”

“Changing a tire. I had trouble with the jack.” I turned toward my house. “It’s a full moon tomorrow,” I mentioned, because I still did watch for that. “It should be pretty to look at.” I slowly walked toward my door but paused. “Weren’t you waiting for a girl? Did you get stood up?”

“No, no girl.”

“Oh. Sorry.” I yawned so hugely that I swayed. “Goodnight, Robby.”

He nodded and I went inside. I made it to the couch, and that was where I slept until morning, when Parker came by knocking and asking (loudly) if I was awake. I hadn’t been, but I was after him yelling my name. Everyone in northern Michigan might have been woken up by that.

I let him in but then sat back down, still tired. The couch had been a bad choice. “You’re talking to me now?” I asked.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Why were you in such a bad mood yesterday?”

He reached down and fiddled with a shoelace, not looking at me. “I got my grades. I got my grades for my exams and my final grades for the year.”

“Let me see.” I held out my palm, then shook it impatiently. “Let me see, right now.” He took his phone from his pocket, unlocked it, and put it in my hand.

I scrolled down quickly, reading the results, and then I looked up at him in amazement. “Parker! You passed! You passed everything, every exam and every class.”

“Barely.”

“It still counts as finishing eighth grade.” I scrolled more. Yes, he’d barely passed everything except for math, in which he’d gotten a solid B even though I was pretty sure that he’d never even looked at an assignment before I’d stepped in. “I can’t believe this. Wow! Congratulations.”

“I thought you’d be pissed at how low they are,” he said. “You’re always talking about how well you did in school.”

“Am I?” That was lame of me. “Yeah, I did do well. I was the salutatorian in high school and they didn’t rank us in college, but I graduated summa cum laude.”

“Are you speaking a language that doesn’t really exist anymore? Mostly people use English nowadays,” he hinted politely.

“Parker, are you seriously suggesting that I was alive when Latin was in use? It’s been a dead language for more than a thousand years.”

He smoothed his hair and took back his phone so he could look at his reflection. “Who’s dead?”

I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter how I did in school. Look at me now, right? I worked my butt off for years to be a cleaning lady.”

I didn’t expect the reaction I got to that comment: anger. He put down the phone and glowered. “What the fuck, Aubin?” he asked me. “Then why the hell did I do all that shit?”

“Don’t talk like that. What shit?”

“Why did I do all that studying?” He looked around my generally empty condo and shook his head at the bracket where the TV had hung on the wall. “Why did I listen to you? You can’t even watch Woodsmen games when they start.”

“What do you know about football? And what else were you doing with your days before I stepped in?”

“I was busy.”

“Liar,” I told him. “I helped you because you can make something better of yourself. Don’t you want that?”

“I’m good the way I am,” he said stubbornly.

“Really? Like, for the rest of your life, when you’re an adult, you’ll keep doing the same things you doing right now,” I stated, and he nodded. “No, no, no. Do you want to be the guy who’s sitting alone in a little room playing video games, or do you want to be the CEO of your own company, making decisions for yourself and succeeding?” I harkened back to some of his earlier comments. “You could be driving a great car and drinking beer on the beach surrounded by beautiful women. That’s what success can bring.”

“You mean, that’s what money can bring.”

“It’s the same thing,” I told him. “Yes, I’m an utter, abject failure. Yes, I started out great and had opportunities, but I burned through them. You can learn from that. I can help so that doesn’t happen to you.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. If anyone knows how to mess things up, it’s me.”

“What did you do?”

“I—I took a bunch of money from people to start a company and it failed.” I needed coffee and I went to the kitchen to make some, and he sat on one of the stools at the pass-through.

“I’ll take a cup. What kind of company?” he asked.

“It was supposed to produce natural cosmetics. My friend Jess and I had the idea for it one day when we were reading the ingredient list on the back of her highlighter.”

“Like, a pen?”

“No, makeup for cheeks,” I explained briefly. “We were always so careful about what we were eating and then we were smearing so much crud onto our faces. It’s not like it’s an original idea, because plenty of people are already doing natural and organic cosmetics. But I thought we could use ingredients from here, from Michigan. We could have made it a Midwestern thing with local supplies...but then it got bigger, like, Jess was reading all about the rain forest and she wanted to go to Brazil, and it spiraled.”

“So it was your friend’s fault that it was a failure. I’ll take a cup,” Parker repeated.

“No, it was my fault,” I corrected him, and ignored the request. “I was the one keeping the books, meaning that I was in charge of the financial side, and I could see how we were blowing through money.” It had been as if we were lighting it up with matches. I closed my eyes briefly, remembering the horrors of the accounting software, and took a large sip of coffee. “Everything was so expensive. Do you know how much it costs to create just a logo?”

He shook his head. I hadn’t, either.

“That was Jess’s responsibility, the creative and visual part, and I know it was all really important but we spent so much. Before we even had anything to sell, before we’d even developed one product, we were already in trouble. It wasn’t just the expenses, either, because it also took longer than we anticipated. Everything was more difficult, ten times more difficult, to learn as I went. I don’t mind hard work and I don’t expect things to be handed to me, but I was overwhelmed. I was trying to make it succeed and at the same time I was trying so hard to make everyone believe that it was already a success.”

“Why?” he asked, and he sounded confused. “Why didn’t you just ask someone to help you, like when I said that there was no way to memorize the presidents and you made up a rap for me?”

“That was good, right?” I asked, and he nodded. “Yeah, well, I didn’t have anyone to ask.”

“I thought you were married.”

That was a good point. “No, Billy didn’t know how bad things were. I couldn’t tell him.”

“Why?” Parker asked again, but it was too complicated to explain.

“Suffice it to say, I messed up really badly,” I told him. “I spent all the money I had and all the money everyone else had given me. I borrowed a lot too and got new credit cards and

maxed them out. Now I'm so far in debt, I don't know if I'll ever get out from under it."

"Shit."

Yes. I didn't bother to correct his language, because that was an accurate way of summing it up. "So that's why I need to have a job that pays ok. And it's also why I don't want to work anywhere that I'll see a lot of people that I know, because they all want to kill me."

"Because you totally fucked them over."

"Parker..."

"Excuse me. Because you totally flucked them over."

"I did. I even lost my dad's money."

"I thought you hated him, like I hate my dad," Parker commented, and I shrugged.

"Still, it's pretty bad to blow your parent's savings. Jess, my partner, came out with a big zero, too. She thought we were going to become millionaires and now she has nothing." I chugged the rest of the coffee and Parker was impressed again by my skill at that, which he let me know.

Then he asked, "Why is she at zero? Why doesn't she have less than nothing, like you? You're in the negative, right? So why didn't that happen to her, too?"

I rubbed my eyes. This was where the lying part came in. "She didn't know about all the debt I'd taken on. No one did. They all thought that I was handling everything." I'd wanted to believe that myself, but it had spiraled so quickly from something I thought I could control to something that was terrifying. It still was; sometimes instead of being able to sleep, I'd have to get up and chew on ice to calm myself down because I was breathing too quickly and it felt like I was going to have a heart attack.

"But if she spent the money, she should have to pay it back," he argued. "Like how you made me pay you back after I got those expensive popsicles and put them in your cart and you didn't notice when I ran them through the scanner."

“That was a sixteen-dollar box of ice cream bars. They should have been diamond-studded to sell for that much.” I rubbed my eyes again. “Yeah, you had to reimburse me because it was your fault for sticking me with your dessert. The failure of the business wasn’t all my fault, but the debt was. It’s all in my name, but it could have been worse. People could have sued us and then they both—I mean, both Jess and Billy could have gotten stuck in an even worse situation.”

“It sucks.”

“That sums it up,” I agreed. “It really sucks. And let’s please talk about something else. What are you going to do now that it’s summer?”

“I don’t do too much no matter when it is. I never do,” he explained. “We used to live in Chicago, though, and that was more fun. I could walk around and take the L, but there’s nothing like that here.”

“No. It’ll be better when you can drive,” I said. “Why did your dad want to move to Michigan, anyway? It’s harder to fly places from our airport and he’s always traveling.”

“He’s from here. He said that he was going to retire but then he kept on working. He’s always working.”

He sounded pretty upset about missing a guy he claimed to hate and I nodded, because I understood that contradiction perfectly. “So let’s think of what you can do until school starts. What kind of job should you get?”

Parker looked blank. “What?”

“A job. The kind of activity that you do to earn money.”

“Why would I need to earn anything? I have a credit card,” he reasoned, and it was difficult to argue with that. As long as his dad didn’t care about the huge amounts he spent (on food and computer crap, and now fashion), then there was no reason for him to have to work. Except that a job might have helped with his well-being and given him a sense of accomplishment, and I thought he could have used a boost with those things. They had never been the reasons that I’d gotten a job, of course. I’d needed the money, plain and simple.

“I started working when I was ten,” I mentioned, and before he could make a comment about how times had changed from the olden days when I’d been making stone tools and learning about how wheels worked, I added, “I used to sweep the dance studio for my neighbor, that was all, but she paid me. I guess that was my first cleaning job besides our house.” I thought back. “By the time I was twelve, though, I was sweeping the studio and babysitting and helping to teach the little kids in the beginner ballet and tap classes, and then when I was your age? I made a ton of money that summer.” I told him more about my work history as I considered the many years I’d spent under someone else’s yoke. It had been exciting to have my own cosmetics business, scary too, but I’d loved being my own boss for the first time.

“Yeah, ok,” Parker said vaguely when I paused for a breath and to get another cup of coffee.

“That was before I started training to become a lion tamer to take my act to Vegas,” I added, watching him.

His eyes were slipping toward the door as he nodded. “Great.”

“Why are you here, Parker?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I was supposed to get you to come to the parking lot. Robby told me to.”

“Seriously? Why didn’t you say something before? We’ve been talking forever.”

“*You* have,” he muttered.

I didn’t take the time to do anything except put on flip flops and pour a different cup of coffee as I followed him out the door. At first, I didn’t see Robby anywhere, but then I noticed his legs hanging out of the bed of his truck. I peeked over the side and saw him lying down, his hand resting over his eyes with his fingers curved toward the sun. The back of his arm, from his wrist up to his big, heavy biceps, was bare. Bare, but scarred. I looked at the faint marks on his skin for a moment before I spoke.

“Robby?” I said softly, and he moved his hand away to open his eyes. “What do you need?” I held out the mug to him. “I

brought coffee.”

“For me?” He sat up. “Thank you.” He tilted back his head and drained it, and from over my shoulder, I could hear Parker’s expressions of respect for his drinking skills. “That’s better.”

“It’s early,” I said.

“Yeah, I’m busy with training camp today. I wanted to do that, first.” He pointed and I turned to look at what he was signaling, and it was my car. My car, with the spare tire gone and a new one in its place.

“You—what did you do?” I asked. I walked over and gently kicked the new tire. “You went and got me a new one and put it on?”

“Were you going to drive on the spare?”

Yes. “Thank you, Robby. Thank you for doing that. I struggled a little when I changed it last night.”

“I could tell from the dirt you were wearing.”

I looked down at myself and noticed that I was still wearing a lot of it. He was looking at me, too, and it made me wish I’d stopped for another moment to put on a bra.

“Ok.” He slid out of the truck bed and headed toward the driver’s side, but paused to give me back my cup. “See you guys later.”

“Yeah, see you later,” I answered, then I walked to the window and he rolled it down. “Why did you do that? Why did you get up early and buy me a tire?”

“I told you. I thought you’d drive around on a spare and last night, I could tell that you were having a hard time.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t easy to change it,” I said, narrowing his words. I wasn’t having a hard time in general; it was only the car that was the problem. “Thank you,” I told him again. “That was a very nice thing to do.” There was that word again: nice. What was the angle here? I couldn’t quite understand it, but it felt the same as when he’d announced to

the construction workers that we were friends. I got the same wriggle of excitement, the same happiness.

“You’re welcome.” Suddenly, he smiled, and I realized that it was because I had been standing there smiling at him.

“Have a good day,” I called, and he waved to both of us as he left. I went to examine my new tire and talked to Parker about car upkeep for a while until he got bored and ran off while I was mid-sentence.

Looking at my car made me think that maybe I would do something “nice” too, like as a payback. I went to the far-away grocery store and gathered up ingredients and I made Parker put his stupid computer to sleep and come over as I tried my hand at baking, something I’d never done too much of. After all, why would you want to make something sweet and delicious, something you might want to eat? It was a trap.

Parker eloped with several of my ugly efforts and I wrapped up a plate of the successful ones to take over to Robby’s house. I listened for a moment as I stood on the porch, not really sure what I was trying to hear except that I really didn’t want to interrupt him if he was already entertaining. It was quiet, though, so I knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

I opened it and my first instinct was to glance around for machinery/fish tanks/other incongruous items in the living room, but it only looked like a basic condo today. Robby was reclined on his couch with ice packs on both knees and another on his head.

Before I noticed what I was doing, I’d put down the plate and had rapidly approached the couch. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” he said. “I’m just getting used to it again, being back at it hard. I get headaches and the cold helps.”

“Why do you get headaches? Are you dehydrated? Is it a lack of sleep? From drinking?”

“I don’t know what the cause is, but I’ve always gotten them. Ever since I was a kid.”

I frowned. “That’s no good. Did you ever talk to a doctor?”

“I’ve talked to trainers.”

He was looking at me and I knew who he meant. He’d talked to a Woodsmen trainer, my husband. My former husband, Billy.

“What’s that?” He gestured to the table, where I’d dropped my baked goods.

“It’s nothing. I baked stuff for, uh, for Parker. He wanted something sweet and I was trying out recipes. And I also guess that I wanted to say thank you for fixing my car. You were right and I would have driven around on the spare, and I know you aren’t supposed to do that.”

He eyed the plate. “Thanks, Aubin.”

“Parker liked them,” I said dismissively. Parker would have liked to eat a shoe, if I’d sprinkled sugar on it.

“Sit down for a minute, ok?” He lay back and put his wrist over his eyes.

“Ok.” I sat in a huge chair, one obviously made for someone of his proportions. My feet touched the ground because I was tall too, but only my tiptoes reached and I felt like a kid again. “How did you get those scars?”

“On my arms? Car accident,” he said briefly, and shifted them from view. “Parker came by while you were baking.”

I had wondered where he’d run off to. “He was weaseling out of chopping the apples.”

“He told me about your business. You know, how it failed.”

“Oh. Yeah, I did know about that.” Awesome. I hadn’t specifically told Parker to keep my sour, sordid story to himself, and I should have known that he’d run to blab to the one friend he had. The traitor. “So?”

“So, I heard about you too, from some of the guys on the team.”

“Some of the guys on the team,” I repeated. My heart, which had been pumping normally, sped up just like it did when I

thought about the load of debt that I was living under. “What were they saying about me?”

I saw him hesitating, like he was formulating an answer. Like it was going to be difficult for him to phrase, and probably difficult for me to hear.

I stopped it by holding up my hand. “You know what? Never mind,” I told him. “I don’t want to know what they said. Why did you even bring it up?”

“I didn’t understand exactly why you were hiding out all the time. I didn’t get why you were working at night, why you’d be doing that job at all. It’s because you’re embarrassed. Is that right? You’re embarrassed to be out in front of people you used to know.”

Embarrassed, humiliated, hurt, ashamed...so ashamed. “Why are you asking me this? What does it matter?”

“Do you know how I did in my sophomore year? How I played?”

I shrugged. “No. I don’t follow college ball. What about it?”

“Look me up,” he said, and smiled a little, but it was a very tight expression, and there were crinkles around his eyes. He was squinting from the pain, I realized.

“Sure, I’ll do that,” I agreed. “I’ll go do that now so you can rest or sleep, whatever you were up to before I came over, and I’ll tell Parker to leave you alone.”

“Yep, ok.” His eyes closed, but then opened again. “Thanks for the stuff you made.”

I paused again when I got to the door. “And this means we’re even. You don’t have to talk about the sandwich thing anymore.”

“Do you mean when I was choking and you saved me? Like we traded my life for a tire?”

I shook my head and let myself out, and I went immediately to my couch where I sat down with my phone to look up Robby Baines’ college career. And there it was:

“Embarrassing,” read one headline, and another said, “Is This What We’re Settling For?!” I read that article and yes, it dated from his sophomore year, when he’d transferred from the community college to play at the huge state university. According to that school’s newspaper, his first few games hadn’t gone well.

“Who is this guy?” the reporter asked, and she went on to say that it appeared that Robert Baines was unprepared and basically unskilled. He was big, sure, but didn’t seem to have the “quick thinking and speedy reaction time” that he would need to succeed in football.

“Looks you were wrong, you witch,” I told my phone.

“What’s that?”

My head popped up. “Parker, when did you get here?” I asked him.

“You were reading and you didn’t hear me come in,” he explained, and opened the refrigerator.

I went back to it. I finished that extremely critical opinion and read two more, a blog post from a football website and another article by a sports writer in a national newspaper. All of them agreed that Robert Baines was struggling mightily, that they were unsure as to why he was in the starting lineup, that he had the size but not the brainpower. He sucked, that was the general idea. He should have headed right back to community college or slunk off into the distance—as long as he was anywhere but on their particular field where he had started poorly and then hadn’t appeared to learn their defensive schemes at all.

I flicked back to the college newspaper and saw a survey asking students to give his performance on the defense a thumbs-up or down, and only one thumb out of eighty-seven pointed to the sky. “All brawn?” questioned the caption under a picture of a younger Robby with his helmet in his hand and staring at the turf, and I gave my phone the finger. Obviously, they were wrong about him, because he’d gone on to be a starting player for the Woodsmen. Obviously, he’d worked

out whatever kinks he'd had when he'd moved to the new college team.

"I saw what you just did," Parker said. "So, I'm not allowed to swear but you can do that to your phone? It's that vocab word."

"Yeah, hypocritical. Whatever." I kept reading, and wow, did the critics change their collective tune. By the end of the season, they were singing his praises like I couldn't believe, saying that he was the heart of the defense, the team was so lucky to have him, he was a natural. But his first few weeks there, it had been a total pile-on. I wondered how that had felt, seeing his name basically equated with "loser" and "mistake." It must have been tough to keep going to practice and it must have been worse to run out on the field in that huge stadium knowing that everyone watching thought he sucked.

Still. He knew that he didn't, right? He knew that he was experiencing growing pains or something, but he didn't need to question that he had the talent to succeed. His coaches had known it, too, because otherwise they wouldn't have wanted him to move from the community college onto their team. They would have yanked him out of the starting lineup and put his butt on the bench, but they hadn't done that because they'd had faith in him.

I understood the point that Robby was trying to make to me. I was sorry that he'd gone through a hard time, but my situation wasn't the same at all. I appreciated him telling me, but no—it wasn't the same. No one had faith in me anymore, not my friends, not my dad, not my husband. I didn't even have it in myself.

But I put on my tennis shoes and my old sweatshirt, because it didn't matter. I had to get to work.

Chapter 7

“It’s a big deal. That’s what I heard.”

“Yeah, it’s a really, really big deal,” I agreed. “It’s huge. For most people around here, Fan Day is like their birthday combined with a second Christmas, except better and without the bother of gift-giving. And no, I’m still not taking you.”

“Aubin, come on!” Parker exploded. “I really want to be there.”

“Order a car and pay a driver with your credit card,” I said. “I’m not going.”

“So I’m just supposed to wander around Woodsmen Stadium by myself?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him to make a friend and hang out with that guy. “Sit at Robby’s table,” I suggested instead. All the players had stations set up for them and Robby, as a starter, would be placed up at the front. “You’ll be like a VIP.”

That momentarily gave him pause and I watched him thinking about it. “You don’t want to do that, too?” he finally asked.

“No, I definitely don’t.”

That set him off again. “Come on, Aubin!”

“What’s up?” Robby came in and set down a bag on my kitchen counter. “I brought dinner.”

“Finally,” Parker told him, so Robby messed up his hair. That led to modified wrestling, which I’d had to modify because the last time they’d done it, I’d ended up with one fewer barstool than I’d had before. I stepped over their bodies and put plates on the plastic table in the dining room.

“I’m going to sit in here and wait,” I told them, and Parker’s incessant hunger ended the battle. He sprang up and took a seat, but he waited for Robby to come to the table also and then for me to serve myself before he piled his plate as high as was gravitationally possible.

“What did you guys do today?” Robby asked us.

“We argued,” Parker answered, and then he explained how ridiculous I was acting about the Woodsmen Fan Day. “She won’t go.”

“Why can’t you get a car?” Robby inquired of him, and that began the arguments about being alone, about being bored, about me, and then we were back to the beginning: Aubin won’t go to Fan Day.

“I won’t,” I informed Robby after Parker had left for the evening, returning to his condo. “I’ll never go back to Woodsmen Stadium.” I glanced over at what he was doing with the leftovers, which was eating them. There wouldn’t be any leftovers. “I’m sure my brother-in-law has told you why, or someone else has.” My sister’s husband Bowie wasn’t a bad person, no matter what I wanted to think about him, but he knew what I’d done and he didn’t approve. He wouldn’t have kept it a secret, and it wasn’t a secret from anyone else, either. Robby had already mentioned that he’d heard things about me.

“I know that you fucked over some investors by taking their money and losing it,” he said now. “How does that relate to Fan Day?”

“You mean, besides me running into all the people there that I screwed over? Well, I also got into a thing with the Wonderwomen, my old cheer team. I was a cheerleader,” I pointed out again, in case he still didn’t believe that. “For a season or so, I was trying to get a coaching or choreo job with them. They pay really well and I have the skills...anyway, they don’t want me around anymore.” I’d tried to ingratiate myself with the coaches and team officials by keeping them up to speed on what the cheerleaders were doing, things that violated the rules from the Woodsmen Family Handbook that they were supposed to follow. It had made the girls on the squad very angry at me, and my efforts hadn’t worked, obviously. I was cleaning office buildings rather than being on the staff there.

“So you fought with them, too?”

“Burned another bridge,” I agreed.

“You don’t have to go near the Wonderwomen,” he started to say, but I cut him off.

“I can’t go near anyone at the stadium because of Billy,” I said. “We got divorced and he was friends with everyone, with the players, the coaches, the staff. I can’t be there.”

“So when you split up, you divided your possessions and he got the Woodsmen?”

“Do you really not know?” I thought that everyone here knew the story. “Didn’t one of your friends from the team tell you?”

Robby looked at me, waiting, and it was funny—since so many people had heard what I’d done, I’d never had to repeat it to anyone before.

“Remember how you said that women get mad at you because you’re the dick?” I began.

He nodded. “You said you are, also.”

“I am,” I said. “I cheated on him. I cheated on my husband.”

Robby nodded again. He didn’t seem surprised, which felt about the same as when my dad talked about my situation and just accepted as fact that I was terrible now, that I was the worst.

“Why’d you do that?” he asked me.

And that was funny, too. There had been a lot of talk about me, and as my ex-friend Jess would have said, I deserved it. But this was the first time anyone had ever asked me why.

“I was trying to save my business,” I answered. That was the most basic reason. “I needed the money.”

“Oh. You were getting paid for sex,” he stated.

“No! I was trying to save my business,” I said, like that made it better. “My dad was working at North Orchard Golf and Country Club as a security guard and he got me a list of the members there. Almost all of them were old, rich guys and I started meeting with them to see if they would invest. And then one of those rich guys...”

I stopped. Why was I bothering to explain? Nothing made it any better. It didn't matter why or how awful it had been, the only thing that was important was the outcome: I had told Billy, he had left, I'd lost the company anyway, and my best friend, and my self-respect, and the list went on.

"You'll hear about it at my sister's party. Isn't that tomorrow night?" I prompted. "Aren't you going? Ask anyone there and you can get a lot of good details."

"No, I don't need to hear more."

Yeah, what I'd said was enough. I faced the sink so I didn't have to look at him and I felt my heart beating with a dizzying speed. It made my vision get funny when that happened and it made my lungs feel too small to get air. I turned off the water and held the edge of the counter in case I got light-headed.

"I can take Parker to Fan Day. We're not supposed to have random people sit at our booths, but I can tell them that he's my brother or cousin or something."

"What?" I let go of the counter with one hand so I could turn to look at him.

"He should go. It's fun for kids, right? There's all kinds of crap for them to do." He started talking about last year's event which had sort of sucked because of renovations at the stadium and a terrible storm, and how they were trying to make up for it this year with a lot of new activities. I just stared at him until he asked me if I wanted to go watch baseball.

"Robby, did you listen to what I said?"

"About your husband? I heard you fine," he answered.

"Did you ever cheat?"

"Yep," he said promptly. "Well, I'm not sure I was ever in a relationship, but the girls seemed to think so, and they didn't like it when I was with someone else, too."

No, I wouldn't have, either. But his loose morals seemed to bode well for continuing the relationship that he and I had, which was pretty much a friendship. We—he, Parker, and I—

spent a lot of time together, when he wasn't doing all the football things he had to accomplish. We had meals together. We watched baseball together, except I didn't actually watch it. Lately we'd been texting, which had started with him getting my number from Parker to ask me what I thought about hot air balloons, to which my answer had been, "Not much."

"Why did those girls think that you were with them?" I asked.

He shrugged. "We'd go out a few times and then they would start posting pictures and messages tagging me, bullshit that I didn't respond to. They'd leave stuff at my apartment, like makeup or clothes or something. I'd put it in a bag and hang it on the front door."

My eyebrows rose. "That's rough."

"They didn't ask me if they could do those things. They were trying to force me into being their boyfriend, and I don't like to be forced."

Who did? I shook my head. "Maybe you're better with one-nighters."

"Maybe you are, too." But then he also shook his head. "I wasn't saying..."

I turned back to the sink. "No, I get what you meant and I agree. I'm never getting married again. Never. I know I shouldn't have done that to Billy. I'm not confused about why he left and yes, I was hurt and whatever, but I don't blame him and I know I deserve it. All of it." And then, I just kept talking. "I did what my dad did to my mother. She left us because he was cheating on her."

"I thought she died."

"She also did that. But she was already gone from our lives when she had the accident," I said. She had been on my mind so much since Billy and I had split, enough that I was dreaming about her sometimes. Now I pushed aside the memories. "Are we talking about dead parents again?" I asked. "Didn't you say something about baseball?"

"Did I?"

I kept talking about that, and I brought up his latest business idea (a lavender farm, and he had never successfully grown a houseplant). We did go watch baseball and we stopped talking about me, which let my heart return to its usual rhythm and my lungs expand back into shape.

The night of my sister's party to show off the renovations that she'd made to our family's cottage, I was at work. The morning after that, Fan Day, I got up early, too, really early, and I drove out to a trail and went on a long, long run. It was so long that I struggled to make it back to my car, actually, and I stayed for out the rest of the day until I went to work. I didn't look at my phone, either, although that part was hard. I didn't follow any of my old friends anymore but a lot of them had public accounts, and all the current Wonderwomen cheerleaders were my sister's friends. They definitely would have posted pictures of the party and they definitely were posting about Fan Day, too. But I didn't look, and I got up early again on the morning after Fan Day and planned to take another long, long run and then head to work.

Robby Baines was sitting on my front steps. I almost tripped over him, actually, as I rushed out of the house before Parker could hear me moving around and come over. I stopped myself from falling by grabbing the door and he held up a hand to wave to me.

"Good morning."

"What are you doing?" I asked. "Why are you sitting here?"

"I thought you would be coming out," he explained.

"Well, since this is the only entrance, that makes sense." I moved past him, squeezing around because the steps weren't wide but he was very large. "I'm going for a run."

"Great." Robby got up too and came along with me.

I glanced at him. "You have the day off," I noted. "Why would you work out when your knees have been bothering you?"

"Nothing's bothering me," he said, shaking his head. "I'm up and I wanted to run."

No, he wanted to get me to talk to him, but I couldn't fathom why...unless someone had told him some terrible things about me and he wanted to find out if they were true. Probably they were, and I didn't want to discuss them so I ran faster.

There was no way I was going to outpace him, not with his strength, speed, and size, and not with how I'd run way too far the day before, too. After a while, I gave up on trying to beat him and slowed down.

He didn't talk and I didn't either, not for at least a mile. Then it was getting so stupid that I had to say something.

"How was it? How was Fan Day?"

"Good," he said. "Parks had fun and he met a lot of people that he might go to high school with in the fall."

"I thought he'd do the online thing again."

"I think I convinced him to try it in person," he said offhandedly.

"What? Isn't that a decision that his father should make?"

"Yep, we talked, too."

I almost tripped. "You talked to Parker's father? When?"

"Watch yourself." He put a hand under my elbow. "I ran into him yesterday, after we got back from the stadium. His name is Anders and he just flew home from Lake Titicaca."

"In Venezuela?"

"It's between Peru and Bolivia," Robby explained. He hadn't removed his hand. "It's one of the places I thought I would surf but it turns out that the lake is famous for not having waves."

"Ok, sure. You talked to Parker's dad?"

"Yeah, Anders is all right. He's old to have a kid so young."

"What does that mean, forty? Fifty?"

"More like eighty, eighty-five."

I stumbled again and Robby kept me up. "Are you serious? He looked more...spry when he walked past on the path to his

condo,” I said. But I hadn’t actually seen him there very often to judge.

“He’s doing ok, I guess. He told me about his business and said he’s always looking for investors.” His eyes briefly moved to me. “I said no.”

“Good answer. Did he happen to tell you why Parker hadn’t been in school? Why was he doing that online thing with zero supervision?”

“He said that Parks had a lot of behavior problems. He was in private school in Chicago and he got kicked out. He got kicked out of a few places.”

“Parker? Our Parker?” I asked incredulously, and my toe caught the sidewalk again.

“We better walk. You’re unsteady on your feet today,” he told me, and slowed us down even more. He took my arm and looped it through his, too. “There you go.”

“It must be my advanced age,” I excused myself, and then shook my head. “I can’t believe that Parker got expelled. He doesn’t seem like that kind of kid.”

“No, not to me, either.” A car slowed and a woman inside yelled to Robby that she loved him. He waved before he spoke again. “That was what I told his dad. I said he listens to everything you say.”

“Most of it,” I revised, “and he listens to you, too.”

“Anders was amazed. He said that they’ve been butting heads for years.”

“He’s not around enough to butt heads with anyone. Parker’s alone all the time. He shouldn’t leave his kid like that,” I said angrily.

“I thought you told me that no one took care of either of us, and we turned out all right.”

That was something up for debate, wasn’t it? Robby seemed fine, but here I was.

“Yeah, Parks had a fun time at Fan Day and I thought it was ok,” he went on, picking up the prior topic. “There was a huge turnout, a lot bigger than last year in the rain. Bowie said that the cheerleaders were on a new stage, big and with a roof.”

“How nice.”

“You didn’t have that?”

“No, but I’m glad you’re now acknowledging that I was actually a Woodsmen cheerleader.”

“I knew you were. You told me,” he said.

“You didn’t believe me,” I reminded him. “You thought I was lying.”

“That was before I watched you move,” Robby answered. “You have this way of walking, like...like you’re dancing.”

“Good Lord. I walk like an idiot?”

“No, it’s graceful. It’s not like your feet are just landing anywhere, but that you’re placing them on purpose. After I watched you for a while, I knew you were telling the truth about being a dancer. Also, I looked you up and it said it on the Wonderwomen site, how you used to be the captain.”

Yeah, they hadn’t yet replaced my picture with a skull and crossbones or bottle of poison.

“Did you ever look me up, too? Did you see the mess I made when I transferred my sophomore year?” he asked.

“I saw that you struggled some for the first few games.”

“For the first half of the season, I was the worst player on the field,” he corrected. “When I walked out with the defense, they would boo. The whole fucking stadium.”

“You showed them. By the end of that year, your team went to the college playoffs and you were the star.”

“You did read about me,” he said.

“The coach couldn’t have thought you were as bad as you’re claiming. Otherwise, why did he keep starting you?”

“He said he saw something in me, that he knew I was better than what I was showing. Down, after down, after down, I was showing that I sucked.”

“Robby, if this is going to be a life-lesson, I don’t want to hear it,” I announced. “I’m glad it got better for you but it was bound to. You have incredible talent and you’re blessed with the size to play, too. Things were going to look up no matter what.”

“No, that’s not true. I had to get help,” he said. “A lot of help.”

“With what?”

We walked for a few steps before he spoke again. “Remember the instruction manual for the doughnut machine?”

“Uh, yeah. Like this.” I held my hands apart, demonstrating the thickness of the binder.

“Right. Before my sophomore season, the playbooks I’d worked with were like this.” He took both my hands and moved them so that my palms were close together. “I went from that to one the size of the doughnut instruction manual. I couldn’t learn it. I would sit there and look at it and my heart would beat so fast that I’d break out in a sweat. I knew that I’d never, ever get it.”

“But you did.”

“Eventually, I got desperate enough that I went to the peer tutoring center and talked to a guy, another student. I told him that I needed help, but if he gave away our plays or if he ever told anyone that I’d even been there, I’d come find him.”

I was sure that threat had worked. I’d seen how the construction workers had responded when Robby had told them the same thing. Parker and I had even run by the job site one day to test them out, and they’d been absolutely silent.

“We ended up as friends,” Robby went on. “He’s a really good guy and I’m going to be a groomsman at his wedding. I didn’t need to say that stuff about coming after him but I was scared shitless. I thought, if they find out what a dumbass I am, I’m done.”

“Why do you think that you’re a dumbass?”

“Because I am.” He put my hand back around his arm, tucking it securely. “I barely graduated from high school and I only made it out because of football. I never would have graduated from college, never. I passed by the skin of my teeth and only because tutors did most of my work for me and because they signed me up for classes where I wouldn’t have to show up to take exams on my own. Learning the playbook for the Woodsmen was even worse. Shilt, the minute I got drafted I started trying to work on it and I still needed to hire people again to get it into my thick head.”

“I don’t like that,” I said. “I don’t like you saying that.”

“I’m saying the truth. It doesn’t bother me too much anymore, but it’s something I always have to deal with.”

“Well, I don’t think you’re a dumbass, and I don’t like that,” I repeated.

“I needed help,” he told me. “I needed a lot of help.”

“I don’t.”

“Bullshilt,” he shot back. “That’s why Parker’s dad is going to hire you.” He put his arm fully around my waist, because I’d almost gone down. “You’re not walking like a dancer today.”

“What did you just say?”

“Anders is going to hire you to watch Parks. I told him that you two are friends, that his son needs supervision to keep improving, and that if he doesn’t hire you, I’ll call the police and report him for neglect.”

“You threatened him, too?”

“It wasn’t a threat. It’s what I’m going to have to do. I don’t want that kid to be alone all the time, watching porn and getting strange ideas about women.”

“He is, right?”

“Yep, he really is. He seems to think that it’s possible to have a kind of harem thing when he gets older, that he’ll be with a different girl every night.”

“Huh. I wonder how he came up with that,” I said, and then squeezed Robby’s arm, which was similar to squeezing a log of wood. Oak, maybe. “Are you joking about all this?”

“Don’t you want to get paid for what you’re already doing? You got him to pass his classes.”

He’d done that because he was smart, and I’d just pushed him along a little.

“You get him to eat things that don’t come prepackaged. You tell him to go to bed and you get him up. You make him exercise.”

“I think he’s a natural runner. If he’s going to a real high school, he should do track and cross country.” I hesitated. “What’s his dad talking about paying me?”

Robby hadn’t worked out all those details, which meant that this probably wouldn’t happen. There was not much of a chance that a salary from Parker’s dad would be enough to keep me in my condo and keep me from being hounded to death by debt collectors, if he even would pay someone to watch his nearly grown kid. I tamped down the excitement I’d felt when Robby had said that crazy stuff and said, “We can run again. I have myself under control.”

“Nah, let’s just walk. You were right about my knees.”

We kept going and we’d made it almost all the way back to the condos when I brought up the party at my family’s cottage. I was so curious about it that I couldn’t keep in my questions any longer. “How was the thing at my sister’s house? Did you go?” I asked in a tone that was supposed to have sounded casual, but did not. It came out as both angry and eager.

“Kind of boring,” Robby answered. “Dry, for one thing.”

“Yeah, my sister is afraid that our dad is going to drink so she won’t let alcohol near him.”

“Huh,” he said, nodding. “I think he was drunk, anyway. But he had a woman tagging after him and keeping him in line.”

“His new girlfriend, Mary. She’s rich and he lives off her,” I explained, and he nodded again. “What else made it boring?”

I asked, and sounded eager again. He talked about the guests, and how they didn't have much to say, and the food, which wasn't as good as other things he'd had.

"Remember when you made ribs?" he asked.

"I remember when you brought eight racks of ribs to my house and asked if I could do something with them, yes."

"Those were delicious," he said. "Bowie and Lissa had some, too, but not the same." He went into more detail about the quality of the food but he did also say that it was good to hang out with his teammates, and that there had been a lot of Wonderwomen cheerleaders there, too. I watched his face as he said that, since the hard line about cheerleaders dating the players had been blurred as of late, but his expression didn't change until he looked back at me and raised his eyebrows.

"What?"

"Nothing." But I still wondered.

"Your name came up," he mentioned. "Your sister asked me if I ever saw you, since we're neighbors, and I said yes."

"That was all you answered? Just 'yes?' That was all?"

He nodded. "That was all I said about you."

"She did invite me," I informed him. "She texted and asked if I would come, but I had to work."

"Ok."

"I probably wouldn't have gone," I said, and then heard myself sigh. "It would have been really weird, right? Everyone there was probably someone that Billy was friends with. He got along with everyone. At our wedding, there were so many Woodsmen and guys from his old team, too. It felt like they were really friends, not just people he'd wanted there to fill his side or something."

I stopped talking, suddenly realizing that Robby himself had not been invited. My husband had known him, of course, but they hadn't been friends like he'd been with some of the other football players. Billy had talked about all of them to me, and I remembered him saying things about Robby Baines. He was

a player—no, not just at football, but with women. I'd already known that before I'd witnessed it for myself. He was friendly but not really close to anyone, not Billy himself and not any of his teammates. But that didn't mean that Robby didn't talk to them and get information, gossip.

We stopped at my steps and I disengaged his arm from around my waist. For the past few days, I'd been thinking a lot about Fan Day and my sister's party, and also I'd been thinking about the conversation I'd had with him when I'd admitted why my marriage had broken up. No, maybe he wasn't best friends with the other guys on the team, but he'd told me that he'd heard about me from them. It had become clear in my mind what they must have said. "You didn't have to ask my sister about me, because you already knew," I announced. "Someone had already told you what I did to Billy, how I'd broken up my marriage."

He nodded. "Yeah, I heard that story."

"Why did you want me to say it myself? Why did you make me admit it like that?"

"I didn't make you. You told me."

"You could have stopped me and said it was information that you already had," I pointed out.

"I guess I could have."

"I guess I could have kept my mouth shut, too." I waited another beat and then said, "You're not a dumbass."

"I heard you say that!" Parker yelled from my living room. "It's hypocritical." He opened the front door. "Do you know how to make pancakes?"

I went inside.



"At least you're not a vampire anymore." My dad laughed, because his joke about me working at night still had that zing of humor for him.

“Now I’ve regressed to being a babysitter,” I agreed. “I’m back to doing the job I had when I was twelve.”

“Probably pays better now,” he noted, and yes, it did. Parker’s dad, Anders, had apparently taken Robby’s threat seriously: fearing that he would have social services knocking on his door, he’d come to me to ask if I wanted to be his son’s “nanny.” He offered to pay me not only more than what I was making cleaning the office buildings, but also to do it under the table to avoid taxes. With the debt I was in, I was happy for any extra penny.

I was also happy to be off the night shift, and I thought it was going to be good for Parker to have me around. So there were many positives to this new line of work. There was also, of course, the fact that most people tried to move ahead in their careers; I was going the other direction.

“Yeah, I think I remember when you used to take care of kids,” my dad said, and maybe that was true. My babysitting money had carried us through more than one emergency with the gas and water bills, emergency car repairs, medical emergencies, et cetera, et cetera. There was always something and there was nothing set aside, no resources to draw on besides what I could come up with myself. “Then you were a waitress after that, weren’t you?” he asked me. He held out his glass, apparently believing that I still was. “Could you get me another?”

“No. Good Lord,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t know why I come over here.”

“It’s not a bad view.”

He didn’t mean himself. His girlfriend Mary’s house was perched on a bluff in Northport overlooking Lake Michigan and it was absolutely gorgeous, like, breathtaking. Right now, the sun was setting on the horizon and it was hard to tear my gaze away.

“I meant to tell you, we went to Las Vegas last weekend,” he mentioned as he poured himself another snort of expensive Scotch. She could afford it.

“Oh? Did you gamble away her fortune?”

“No, we got married.”

I turned my head slowly to look at him. “What? I thought you just said that you and Mary marry? I mean, Mary and you marry, Mary married...what?”

“Yes, Aubin, my girlfriend is now my wife.” He gulped his drink and grinned like a chimp. “My future is secure.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“No, she’s already changed her will.”

He was serious. I stared and then started shaking my head.

“She wanted to make an honest man out of me,” he said, still smiling maniacally.

“It’s going to take more than a trip to Vegas.”

My dad lost the smile. “Just because your marriage was a bust, it doesn’t mean that mine will be,” he said.

“Yes it will be, because you’re a drunk and a serial cheater.”

He dropped his glass, not noticing or caring that it fell onto his wife’s stone patio and shattered. “Don’t talk to me like that! Get off your damn high horse, Aubin Ariella. Do you remember why your own marriage broke up? It was because you’re a cheater, too. You were happy to fuck over your husband and you fucked yourself over as you did it. Now you drive some shit-mobile, you dress like—”

“When have you ever noticed clothes?” I asked angrily. “You would have to let Sissy go to school in rags.” I’d had to step in, visiting secondhand stores to dig through the bargain bins and raiding the lost-and-found barrels in public spaces to keep her dressed (somewhat) appropriately.

But he ignored that statement, like he had ignored the problem at the time, too. “You ruined your damn life,” he told me. “Are you happy now?”

“Happy? Are you seriously asking me that? What about my current situation would make me happy? Being a babysitter

again? Or my crappy car? The fact that I'm single, probably forever? Or maybe that I lost all my old friends?"

He pointed at me. "You did those things to yourself. You had a chance for greatness, and you threw it all away."

"I didn't throw anything away! I was trying so hard and it was like—" The past year had been a constant struggle to get things right again, but it was like digging in wet sand on the shore of Lake Michigan with the waves rolling in. No matter how fast and hard I worked, the hole just kept filling.

How dare he talk to me like this? How dare he, when for my whole life, *he'd* been the one who sucked? "You're going to screw things up with your rich wife," I told him. "You'll ruin this, just like you ruined my mother's life. You're a selfish bastard."

"Takes one to know one," he called after me as I stormed out, and I let him have the last word. What did it matter what he had to say? When had I ever listened to him about anything? I left his temporary wife's house and drove home in my crappy car and I told myself that he was wrong now, again, just like always. And mentally, I put a line through his name on that short list of people who would still speak to me. It was only another burned bridge, after all. What did one more matter?

Chapter 8

I made my hands stay where they were, holding onto my water bottle, and I didn't touch my hair. I didn't play with my sunglasses, either, or the straps of my bra. I didn't look at my phone or even turn my head to glance toward the trailhead. I pretended that I was relaxed and calm, that I was perfectly at ease. Nothing was the matter, nothing at all.

"Hey!" I heard a voice call, and now, slowly, I glanced toward the speaker. She was smiling and waving as she approached, but I kept myself from fidgeting and I waited. She could come to me.

"Aubin, how are you?" Mia asked. She didn't reach for a hug but she was still smiling as if she was actually happy to see me.

"I'm doing awesome," I told her. I also moved my lips into a smile, mimicking hers. "How about you?"

"Good, I'm good," she answered, and added a few more inconsequential things about her job and her life, which I ignored. Then she looked at the trail. "Should we run or walk?"

"I'm fine to run," I said, because I really was. Parker and I had been putting in a lot of miles, every day. I wanted him to be ready because he was definitely going to real high school and I thought he needed to play a sport. It was a way to meet people and to find a place for himself, things that dance and cheer had given to me. Cross country practices began soon, before the official school year did.

Parker had suggested football instead of cross country and had gone with Robby a few times to watch the Woodsmen training camp. After that, he'd decided that maybe it wasn't for him. "They look like they're trying to flecking kill each other," he'd reported, and then grabbed his running shoes.

Now I had on mine. My former friend Mia had texted me, again, and although I was sure that she was only hoping that I could offer some kind of path to Robby Baines, I had agreed to

meet her anyway. She'd suggested drinks or coffee but I thought an outdoor area with more means for escape would be better. No, "escape" was a poor choice of words, because I wasn't going to run away. Maybe I might want to, but I wouldn't do it.

We headed down the TART trail. It was a beautiful summer day and this was a great place to run even if you weren't worried about confrontation with anyone. Mia made the usual comments about how long it had been since she'd worked out and how out of shape she was, but I knew her and she never missed a day in the gym. I said the same, and also that I'd been eating way too much. It felt like the ice was broken a little but I was still very wary.

"So, what's new, Aubin?" she asked casually.

"Do you mean, what's new since the last time we spoke? Yeah, it has been a long, long time." I watched her out of the corner of my eye and saw a flush spread on her cheeks, one that wasn't brought on by the warmth of the July sun or the quick pace I'd set.

"I know it has," she said, and paused for a moment before she continued. "Everything was so weird."

"That's one way to put it," I said grimly, and then I just came out with what I'd been thinking about. "If you wanted to meet to get an apology from me, I'll leave now."

"I don't—"

"I'm aware of everything I did wrong, perfectly aware, but it's over now and I'm moving on."

"Sure," she said. "Ok. I wasn't going to ask you to apologize to me."

We kept running and I could see that despite what she'd claimed, she clearly hadn't missed any workouts lately. I kept quiet as long as I could but then I did need to know. "Why did you want to see me today if it wasn't to get me to say sorry? Was it because of Robby, Robby Baines? I'm not like a booker for him or something. I'm not his pimp," I clarified. "I'm also not going to push you forward with him."

“My God, Aubin! I wasn’t going to ask you to,” Mia snapped at me. “I texted you because it has been a long time since we talked and I felt...I don’t know, maybe I missed you? But I don’t miss you being a bitch.”

“That’s my best quality,” I told her, and for a moment she kept glaring at me, but then she smiled.

“That was what made you fun,” she told me. “All my friends now are so nice. It’s kind of boring.”

“I don’t know, I could go for some boring.”

“How are you?” she asked me again. “I mean really, how are you? Is the divorce final?”

I nodded, remembering that day. “It’s all done. Billy signed the condo over to me and made things very easy. We had no other shared assets, no children, nothing. I have a fresh start and I’m still young. Young-ish.”

“We’re the same age,” she reminded me, and sighed. “Did you hear that Erin’s marrying her boyfriend? Remember how she started dating the guy who runs the Woodsmen video stuff?”

Yes, I remembered, and I’d seen that our friend had gotten engaged.

“I’m the maid of honor,” she continued, “and you want to talk about bitch?”

“You, or her?” I asked.

“At this point? Both of us,” Mia said, and she told me a lot about the wedding details. No, it wasn’t going to be as nice as mine, not by a mile, but it did sound ok.

“Who are the other bridesmaids?” I asked casually, although I already knew the answer because I’d been stalking everyone’s social media to find out.

She named six other girls, all of whom had been friends of mine, too, but she left off one person.

“What about Jess?” I asked. “Isn’t she a bridesmaid? How is she doing?”

“Uh, yeah, she’s in the wedding party and I think she’s doing pretty good. She’s going to fly back for it,” she mentioned.

“Fly back?”

“She’s moving to Minnesota,” Mia explained. “She got a job offer in Minneapolis and she’s really excited about it. She’ll work for, um, a makeup company.” She looked directly down the trail as she said it and I saw her flush more.

“That’s great,” I said.

“Really? I thought you might be mad. After all, she did mess up your own makeup business.”

“I did that,” I answered, but Mia shrugged.

“I mean, both of you were running things, right? Jess isn’t stupid or anything.”

No, she wasn’t. I thought about it as we cut around a family with two strollers and then Mia started talking about the new Wonderwomen routines for the season, and after that, we ran for longer than I expected to.

Later that night, while Parker was still poking around my kitchen and finishing the leftovers from our dinner, I sat quietly with Robby on the couch at his house. He had the ice on his forehead again but he’d told me that he did want me to be there. Maybe no baseball, though. The lights and the noise bothered him, but the entire sport bothered me so it was fine to keep it off.

I studied his face, which had an expression I now could easily identify as “Robby in pain.” “Why won’t you take any medicine? Just over the counter stuff,” I suggested.

“Nah, I try not to depend on that. I used to swallow about a bottle a week and it can’t be good for you.”

But he was wincing again, with that tightness twisting his features. I had a strong suspicion that he wouldn’t have female company tonight—I meant besides me, not while he felt like this, and I considered that a good thing. He needed rest. I had been wanting to talk to him about meeting with Mia, but why would he care about my time with my old

friend? It didn't mean anything, anyway. Yes, it had been really fun to talk to her, almost like we had been current friends and not just in the past tense, but she was probably only curious and/or wanted some information to relate to the rest of the girls in the form of gossip. I might have wanted to do that as well if I were in her shoes and one of our other friends had imploded.

"If not pills, can I get anything else for you?" I asked, but he answered in the negative again. It was impossible to sit there doing nothing while he was in pain, though, so I started to delve into the root cause of the headaches. If we knew that, we could fix them. But no, he swore that he drank enough water, and when I asked him about red wine, he asked me if I knew a lot of people who had that during football practice. Everything else was a "no" or "nah" or ignoring me, as with my questions about tooth and jaw problems.

"Ok, fine. What if the cause is stress?"

"Stress?" he echoed.

"Stress," I agreed. "Maybe that's why you have headaches, because you get worried and anxious."

"Nah, I don't get like that," he told me.

"Yeah, you do. You said that when you were trying to learn the playbook for college, your heart beat really hard and you would sweat. You said that when you were a kid, you would go look at the moon because you were so nervous and that helped you calm down. Those are symptoms of anxiety."

Robby opened his eyes. "Do you remember everything I say? That's just how I am. It doesn't mean anything."

Sure, right. "Sit up a little," I ordered and still holding the ice in place, he listened to me. I climbed behind him to perch on the back of his couch, settling my knees next to each of his shoulders. It was lucky that I'd been dancing my whole life so that I could open my hips so much—he was very wide.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I was reading about this," I explained. "You're annoying with how you won't take medication, so I looked into what

else we could do to treat headaches. I watched some videos, too. Look straight ahead and stop twisting around.”

“You’re rubbing my neck?”

“Shh. This is supposed to help.” I massaged with my thumbs at the base of his skull and then moved my fingers down, and yes, I rubbed his neck. I did that for a while at the points that the various websites had instructed, and then I rubbed his shoulders, too.

“You know, this would be easier if it didn’t feel like I was massaging a block of stone. Did you ever think about getting less in shape?” I asked.

“Mmm,” he answered. It sounded sleepy.

“Is it working?”

“It feels good,” he rumbled, and I smiled at the back of his head. My hands were actually getting tired but I kept it up, working down his spine as far as I could reach and digging into the muscle.

“I know the names of all of these,” I volunteered. “At one point, I started a self-study of human anatomy.”

“I know the names from pulling all of them,” he remarked.

“Does anything hurt right now?”

“Feels good,” he said again, and I paused, thinking that he should just go to bed. His hands took mine and put them back on his neck. “Do it more.”

“Don’t order me,” I instructed, but I did as he asked. After another moment, I paused again to stretch my fingers, which had started to ache. Robby leaned back then and rested his head against my stomach. He looked up at me.

“You don’t have to keep going.”

“I will,” I said. It was funny to have him so close. When we walked together, he would sometimes link our elbows or even sometimes put his heavy arm around me, but this felt a lot more intimate than when we were out on the sidewalk. That might have been why my voice sounded a little husky when I

spoke again. “I just need to rest for a minute. You really are like a chunk of rock.”

“I’ve been told that before in regard to my head,” he agreed, and I frowned.

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

He picked up my hand. “Shoe’s on the other foot,” he mentioned as he started to rub my palm. I let my fingers relax and watched him.

“It seems like that helped you,” I said. He’d lost the squint and the pain-face. “Does your head feel better?”

“It does. Thank you.” He didn’t seem inclined to move, though, and switched to rubbing my right hand. He looked at the calluses there. “From your old job,” he noted, and I nodded. “That wasn’t good.”

“No, I hated it. I didn’t hate the cleaning part,” I clarified. “That was kind of rewarding. Like, I could actually see that I was accomplishing something. Even if that something was gross, it was a visible difference and the offices looked better after I’d been there. But I hated being out at night.”

“I remember.”

“Really? No,” I said, shaking my head. “I didn’t tell you that. I just complained about the smell of the sprays and how they burned my throat and about all the people who never learned to flush.”

“I could tell by how you’d get worried about it,” he said. “You’d talk about being alone in the building, or how no one was on the roads with you so late.”

I didn’t realize that he’d noticed, but it made sense. His mom had been afraid to do that job alone at night, too. “I needed a companion, like you were.”

“You needed not to do it anymore,” he answered.

I stared. “Is that why you talked to Anders about me? Because you were trying to get me a new job with him? I thought it was to help Parker.”

He closed his eyes as if he meant to sleep there. “It just worked out,” he said, but I wasn’t so sure until he added, “I’m the one who suggested starting a sea monkey empire, remember?”

Yes, that had been another recent “business” plan. Maybe he wasn’t calculating career moves for me, after all.

“What would your dream job be?” Robby asked.

“How do you know I don’t have it right now?”

He opened his eyes a little. “Fighting with Parks about his coffee habit is your dream?”

“Maybe not,” I allowed. “But it’s working. He’s down to one cup a day.” I tugged my hand away from his so I could work on his trapezius and deltoid muscles and his eyes closed again. “I used to just imagine myself yelling orders. In a general sense,” I explained. “I’d be wearing something amazing and telling people, ‘Buy! Sell! Get it done! Faster! I’m in charge!’ That was when I was a kid. When I was in college, I got a little more specific. I was interested in marketing so I thought I’d get a job doing that.”

“How many marketing firms are there in this area?”

“Not too many. But I wanted to come back after I graduated.”

“Why?”

That was a good question. For my career, it would have been a lot better not to. I should have gone to a bigger city and made a life somewhere else, but I’d returned to northern Michigan instead. “I like it here,” I said, which was what I’d told my dad, too. He’d encouraged me to try New York, San Francisco, anywhere but where I’d grown up.

I hesitated and then added, “My dad thought it was because I wanted to be a cheerleader, like my mom had been. I told him that he was wrong but maybe that was part of the reason I moved back home. She was a Woodsmen Dame when I was little, and I can remember. I remember her in her uniform and going to games and I thought she was so beautiful and glamorous.” I reached for his lats and he squirmed.

“I’m ticklish.”

I moved my hands. “I won’t touch there, then. My knees are sensitive like that and I had a boyfriend who used to hold me down and tickle me. I hated it.”

“I can’t believe you allowed that.”

“No, I didn’t. I gave him a warning, and when he didn’t stop, I threw his things out of my dorm window. Too bad for him that I was on the second floor above a big awning that he had to try to climb to get his stupid clothes.”

“I remember a story about you throwing things out of your front door, too, when some other guy pissed you off.”

“I have a pretty good arm,” I said, and he puffed out a breath of air as if he was amused.

“I saw you reading the doughnut machine manual before. If you get mad at me and try to throw that, you’ll hurt yourself.”

“We’ll see. Don’t test me,” I warned him, and he opened his eyes again. They were such a nice color of blue, just like a perfect pair of jeans. And then, because he seemed to be feeling better and it was so nice to talk, I told him all about Mia and how I’d seen her that morning, how we’d gossiped and laughed together.

“It was like having her as a friend again,” I said.

“Why wouldn’t she want to be friends with you?”

“Well, she was on the Wonderwomen squad when I was trying to get hired there, and she didn’t appreciate my interference,” I explained. “I was trying to squeeze myself in as a coach or an advisor or something, and she told me to leave them alone, that my time as a cheerleader was done.” That had been hard to hear, but she’d been right. “I cheated people out of their money, too,” I reminded him. “No one enjoys that.” And for months, I had lied about it, pretending that everything was ok, that I was fine, perfect. “Also, you know.”

He looked at me as if he didn’t know.

“How I treated Billy,” I filled in. “People are angry about it. He’s such a good person, so nice and fun. I knew a lot of

people, but he actually had a lot of friends who genuinely liked him. They loved him.”

“He was popular at the stadium,” Robby said. “I remember. But what happened in your marriage doesn’t have anything to do with Mia or anyone else but your husband,” he went on. “Would you get pissed at me if I had a girlfriend and I cheated on her? Would you say we couldn’t be friends anymore?”

“I’d probably tell you that you were a bastard, but I see your point.” It was a totally different situation, but I appreciated what he was trying to do.

“And I didn’t get pissed when I wasted the money on the doughnut machine, did I? It was mine to spend and if I made a mistake and blew it on something dumb, that was up to me.”

“Robby, I hope you’re not saying that you’re dumb.”

“You thought the drone cocktail bar idea was dumb. And you hated the sand art gallery I suggested after we went to the beach again,” he said, and I couldn’t disagree. Those were very bad ideas, maybe not for everyone, but definitely for him.

“You were trying to run a legit business, not rob people,” he went on. “If they lost their money, then that’s how it goes.”

“I sold them on it,” I said. “I went out and convinced people to invest.”

“Unless you knocked them over the heads and pried the bills out of their hands, then you didn’t steal.”

“No, it wasn’t outright theft but I had a responsibility and I messed up. Badly. I told Mia today that I don’t need to apologize, but I feel terrible about it,” I admitted. “I’m so sorry that I screwed up so much and failed everyone. It happened because I’m me.”

“What does that mean?”

“I had a reputation of success. I had always done well in things, in everything,” I said. “I made them think that I’d be successful again and instead, my business was just a joke. I was a joke.” I drew in a breath. “Don’t tell anyone I said that.”

“Who am I going to tell? Parks?”

“Anyone like my brother-in-law, Bowie.”

“He’s kind of pissed at you,” Robby mentioned, “but I don’t think it’s about you taking his money.”

“No, I didn’t get anything out of him. I tried, but he said no. He’s mad about something else. It’s how I treated my sister,” I said, saying the words quickly because they were hard to get out. “He thinks I messed that up, too.” And I had. She had needed me, and I had been too wrapped up with my own self-interest to even notice.

“What did you do to her?” His eyes were open, watching me.

But I was done talking. “I’m leaving now,” I told him, and I wanted to push him off me but I didn’t want his head to start hurting again. He sat up and moved, though, and I went quickly to the door. I thought that maybe he was saying something but I was already through it and going back to my own house, which was empty since the dinner leftovers were gone. Parker had, however, left the dishes in the sink rather than scattered around, and it didn’t look like he’d licked them. I stood in the empty room and rubbed my hand over my body, which seemed to still feel warm where Robby had rested against it.

I was right in what I’d said to Mia: I wasn’t going to apologize to anybody. Yes, I felt bad about what had happened, but Robby was right, too. Everyone had been a grown-up and we’d all made decisions without a gun pointed at our heads. Moping around, hiding, being ashamed—maybe they should have been ashamed for being stupid and trusting some dumb person with no manufacturing or business experience with their money. Maybe Billy should have thought twice before marrying me. Maybe he should have realized that the woman he thought he’d fallen for was actually someone putting on a show, that I’d been pretending all along. Maybe it was his fault as much as it was mine, because he was gullible and...

Nice. Sweet. Caring. I remembered the look on his face when I’d told him what I’d done, how I’d cheated.

“I slept with someone else,” I’d said. I hadn’t been planning to tell him, not ever. I’d thought that it was a secret I’d always keep, that what he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him.

“What?” He’d waited for a moment, like there might have been a punch line. “What?” he’d repeated, and in the moment after he’d asked that again, as I watched his expression morph from confusion to anger to devastation, I had known that it was all over.

I raised my hand now and thumped on the wall. It was time for Parker to get to bed and I had to stop thinking about all this. I realized that I shouldn’t have met with Mia today and acted like I could go back and get a redo. Everyone had seen the truth and I couldn’t pretend any different, not this time.

I sat in the chair at the window, thinking, before I walked upstairs and thumped on the wall again because I knew that he was still playing his stupid computer games. Then, since I couldn’t help myself, I sat on the floor and opened the boxes that held the collection of Billy’s artifacts, pieces of the past from when I’d still been someone successful and someone who was loved.



“I’m just saying, it’s poor planning. Obviously.”

“Obviously, they didn’t schedule the beginning of the academic year around the Woodsmen,” I answered Parker, but then stopped to consider my words. They really should have thought that through better and waited for this first game to be over. School could wait a few days, couldn’t it?

The team was beginning things with a bang this year. Rather than going across the country in their orange charter plane, they had gone all the way across the Atlantic Ocean and were playing in France for their season opener. And Parker was correct: it was really dumb that school was also starting pretty much simultaneously, because just about every kid was going to try to skip to watch the mid-week game that kicked off at nine in the morning, our time. Something similar had happened when I was in high school, when the Woodsmen had

played in games that ended late enough to cause a lot of tardies or absences the next day.

“They used to call it the Woodsmen Flu,” I said. “When kids stayed out because of football, that was what they had.”

“So you’re saying that I—”

“No, you’ll be going to school when there are late games if you’re tired or not,” I let him know, and he scowled and got up from the couch to stalk over to the refrigerator.

Robby had left a few days before, because the players were doing exhibition stuff and also trying to acclimate a little to the time change. Since the night when I’d helped his headache, we hadn’t been hanging out as much. I was very busy, of course, as was he. He wasn’t too busy to have a new string of late-night visitors, though. The evening before he’d left, I’d happened to be sitting in my window and saw him escorting an especially curvy brunette from the parking lot to his condo, his hand on her back. Her giggles permeated the glass in a very annoying manner.

“Did you hear what I said?” Parker asked me, and I hadn’t. He sighed and I could see he was about to make a remark about senility, so I told him to spit it out. “I said, I heard from Robby. He sent pictures of what they were eating and it looks like there’s good food in France.”

“Yeah, you share that opinion with a lot of people.”

“Have you been to Paris?” he asked.

“No. I really wanted to go for my honeymoon, though. I was learning French to be ready for it, but it didn’t work out.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to be able to speak to everyone in their language,” I said, purposefully misunderstanding. He wanted to know why we hadn’t gone to Paris, and it was because it was too expensive. That wasn’t what I’d told people at the time, but the truth was that all the costs for the wedding had gotten completely out of hand. After initially promising to contribute, Billy’s parents had decided not to give us any

money after all because, as they told him, they just couldn't "support the union." It meant that they didn't support me.

I remembered my bridesmaids shooting each other looks about my relationship with his mom and dad but I'd never addressed it with them. "They like you fine," Billy had told me, but I'd shaken my head at him. Clearly, they hadn't liked me, but I'd never been able to understand why. I was smart enough, wasn't I? I was beautiful. I worked hard, I volunteered, I tried to fit into their family. It had never been enough, and as it turned out, they had been absolutely right about me: I was absolutely wrong for their son.

I looked over at Parker. "I bet they'll have an assembly or something so you guys can watch part of the action. And I'll record it for you, if you set it up."

He had a lot to say, mostly the swear words that we were trying to avoid, but I ignored it until he got annoying enough that I had to take action.

"Will u please write to P and tell him that u don't want him to miss school to watch the game," I quickly typed into my phone, and it flew across the ocean like the Woodsmen had.

It was fairly late in Paris, but I knew when Parker got a text from Robby. He turned to me, frowning, and said fine, he would be ok with watching a recording instead of the live game.

"Thanks," I typed next. It had been a while since Robby and I had written back and forth. Since I'd left his house on the night of the neck rub, things had felt strained to me, or maybe "awkward" was a better word. I wasn't exactly sure about why. I'd ended our conversation because I had no more to say about my issues with my sister or with anyone else; his headache was better; he was sitting between my legs and cuddled up with me and it was weird.

Yes, that part had been weird. I had been ready to look past it, though, but then Robby started acting even weirder. He didn't pull away from Parker, but I could feel him pulling away from me, and the women had been walking to his condo nonstop.

So now, I waited to see if he would write again, and what he would say.

“Sure. He needs to go to class and make it a habit. How’s x country practice?”

I read that and answered, and then asked a question about France and told him to send pictures. It felt more normal, if my friendship with my young, hot, football-player neighbor would be considered normal.

It felt good, I admitted to myself. It felt even better when Parker said, “I’m not going to be a dick, ok? I’m going to school, Aubin.”

“I know,” I told him. I messed with his haircut and he didn’t have a fit about that, either. “We should look at your wardrobe choices for your first day. I like that blue shirt on you.” It was his favorite, and almost identical to one that Robby had.

“Yeah, that’s good. You’ll drive me, right?”

“I’ll drive you,” I agreed. “I have a few things to do around that neighborhood, too, so I might be in the area for a while.”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s fine,” he said. He sat down next to me again. “Do you think it’s going to be ok?”

“I think it’s going to be weird at first. It’s been a while since you were on somebody else’s schedule and around that many other people your own age.”

He nodded.

“But yes, I think it’s going to be ok. You know the guys from the team already and you’ll hang out with them.” I looked at my phone. “Oh, Robby just wrote that when he can, he’ll take you to school, too. He may cause problems, though. You know, everyone will see him and you getting out of his truck and it could snarl traffic there.”

“Yeah, that might cause problems.” But Parker was smiling. “I better finish the summer reading book,” he mentioned without any prompting from me, and he walked up to the second bedroom of my condo, where we’d put a chair from his own room that he liked to read in.

“You made his night,” I wrote to Robby, and he said something in return, and it was a lot later in Paris by the time we stopped going back and forth. I felt happier than I had in days when I finally plugged in my phone and went to bed.

Chapter 9

“I don’t think I should do this,” Parker told me. He was watching the mass of cars and people and getting red in the face. “I think I made the wrong choice. Online works better for me.”

“No, this is going to be awesome,” I said with assurance. “You’re going to be great here. The first day of doing something is always hard but you’ll get through it.” We moved forward another inch as the car line approached the high school.

“Did you ever get nervous on your first day of school?”

I tried to think back. If I had, I’d pretended that everything was fine and I must have even convinced myself, because now I didn’t remember feeling anything but totally confident. “Yes, definitely,” I lied. “I was very worried. You know who else was? My little sister on her first day of kindergarten. She was a mess. I could hardly peel her off of my leg.”

“You took her?”

“She’s a lot younger than I am,” I explained with only a little bit of bitterness, “and remember how I said that my dad is useless? I got her registered for school and I took her there, too. I didn’t figure out the busses right away so I had to drive her at first.”

I actually did remember that day, very vividly. My sister and I had an age gap, but not one that meant I was sixteen when she’d started kindergarten. I’d found my dad’s keys and taken the car anyway, figuring that I was just as good as a licensed driver. I was better than he was, for sure, since I wasn’t juiced up on alcohol from the night before. She had mumbled one of her stories all the way to the elementary school, but once we got there, it had hit the fan. I’d had to drag her out of her seat.

“What’s her name?” Parker asked me.

“Lissa. But I call her ‘Sissy,’ because that was what my mom would say. ‘Take care of your sissy, you only have the one.’”

I had to clear my throat because suddenly and unexpectedly, I got very emotional.

“Sissy was really scared?” His voice was so much higher than usual, making him sound a lot younger and reminding me even more of my little sister. I had the urge to get out of this car line and take off with him but instead, I drove forward three more inches.

“She was so scared that she was crying, and she locked onto me. She was already doing gymnastics back then so she was really strong, too. I told her that she was going to be fine and she was. At the end of the day, she said that she loved her teacher and there was a nice girl named Chanel. Now they’re cheerleaders together,” I remembered. “I bet you’ll meet new people and—that’s Hank, right?” I pointed to another skinny guy darting between the cars waiting our turns. “Don’t you two run together?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said eagerly, and opened the window. “Hank! Wait up!” He turned to me. “I’ll see you after practice.”

“I put a snack in your bag. Don’t forget to drink water. Don’t —” He was already getting out but I felt like there was a lot more I needed to say, more advice to give. “Have a great day!” I yelled to his back as he joined his friend. I was still stuck in the car line so I watched him for as long as I could, but he didn’t turn around.

It was afternoon in Paris, and Robby called to ask how the morning had gone. I told him the story of the drop-off, adding, “It was fine, good. I think he’ll be ok.”

“You sound worried about him.”

“No, I’m not at all worried,” I answered. “I mentioned that he saw Hank and they walked in together, right?”

“You did mention that. A few times,” he answered. “He’ll be fine.”

“Yeah. Yes, he will be,” I agreed. “I asked his dad more about why he got kicked out of those schools in Chicago. Three of them, Robby. Parker was expelled from three schools, and all

Anders seemed to know that they weren't the 'right fit.' What does that mean?"

"He told me that Parks was fighting."

"Can you imagine him fighting?"

"I can imagine him getting his ass kicked. I should teach him how to hit," he said speculatively, and I agreed. It was a good skill to have, because you never knew.

"I took boxing and self-defense for years," I said, before I switched back to the prior topic. "I asked Anders, 'Why was he getting in trouble so much?' And he was so vague about it. He'd obviously never talked to Parker about what was wrong or why he had acted that way." I thought more. "Did you have a hard time starting over at all those schools you went to?"

"I had sports and after the age of eleven, I was always the biggest guy in the class, if not the entire place. Nobody gave me a lot of crap." But there was a moment of silence. "I do remember being nervous," he admitted. "I got headaches the night before. Not stress headaches."

"Why would it be so bad if stress was the cause?" I asked him. "If you figure it out, then you can work to find a solution."

"Your neck rub was a solution. Will you do that again without running off afterwards?"

I thought for a moment and then said, "It was because of my sister. I left because I don't like thinking about her and feeling guilty about her." I continued to explain why before he even asked it. "I wasn't a very good big sister. I didn't take good care of her and I got away from home as much as I could. Then, when I left for college, I really left. Like, I didn't call, I didn't text, I didn't visit. She was already driving me crazy, both her and my dad. They always had this weird relationship." I made a disgusted noise with my throat. "They loved each other."

"From what I've heard about dads and their daughters, that sounds normal."

“No, because he’s a dick,” I said shortly, but then sighed. “Yes, it is in most families. I was very, very mad at him and she got mixed up in that, too. She was always defending him and making excuses for the bull stuff he does, and it drove me crazy how she cared about him when he was such a bad parent. He doesn’t deserve it. They’re still really tight like that but now he thinks that I’m useless. The last time I saw him, he called me names and...ok, I’d called him names first, but...” I trailed off. “And also, my sister got involved with a really terrible boyfriend. He hurt her for years, and I never did anything about it. I could have, I’m sure that I could have, but I didn’t. I didn’t know how badly he was mistreating her but I never stopped to wonder about why she seemed scared, why she didn’t spend time with her old friends, why she always put him first.”

“But you didn’t know what he was doing.”

“No, but I should have. That’s another reason my brother-in-law is angry at me,” I explained. “He doesn’t understand why I didn’t help her.” The guilt about that also made my heart beat way, way too hard.

“She seems ok now and she doesn’t act mad at you. At her party, she asked me a lot of questions about you.”

“I thought you said she only asked if you saw me, and you said yes.”

“She also asked me if you were doing better, if you seemed happier, if you were getting out, if you were eating, if you were exercising, if you had friends. I said yes. Like I told you, I said yes. But she did seem worried.”

I was shaking my head at the phone. “I hadn’t quite understood the depth of your conversation together.”

“Well, now you know. Talk to her yourself,” he suggested. “Have Parks call me when he gets home from school.”

“He’ll be home late, because of practice. Shouldn’t you be sleeping the night before the game?”

“Don’t worry about me too, when you’re already so edgy about his first day.”

“I’m not!”

“You’re probably going to get a headache about it,” he said, and I heard him laugh quietly. “Have him call me. He’s fine.”

“I know that,” I retorted, and Robby said sure, and hung up.

It took a lot of pretending to be calm and blasé as I waited next to the school at the end of the day. Parker came out alone and I said, “Hey,” and nothing else.

“Hey,” he answered, and took out his phone. He didn’t share anything, not one detail.

“So, how did it go?” I finally asked, because I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Fine.”

Good Lord. I tapped the wheel with my fingernails, which were growing in now that I wasn’t cleaning at night anymore. “Great,” I said. Except that he was frowning and hunched, and his face was red like it got when he was upset. “I’m glad it was fine.”

“Yeah.”

I looked over again. “Oh, Robby wanted you to call him.”

He dialed immediately.

“Hi,” he said into the phone and in what must have been a response to a question, he answered, “It was all right.” But he didn’t stop there. Details of the day poured out and I listened eagerly. I heard about his advisor who called him “Porter,” his teachers who seemed dumb, his locker that didn’t open right, the confusing layout of the building, and the absence of cross country buddies in any of his classes. He recounted that he thought he was behind in all the subjects, that the girls thought he was an idiot, and how badly the food at lunch sucked. A lot about the food.

“Yeah, I guess I’m used to what Aubin makes,” he agreed, and then listened for a while before he said, “Really?” He laughed a little. “Did you really?” He laughed more.

They talked longer and I lapped up every detail of his end of the conversation. I didn't even have to ask anything myself when they finally hung up because they'd basically covered everything.

"Robby said that at one of the schools he went to, he got lost trying to find a classroom so he just left and walked home," Parker volunteered.

"He did?"

"And he said at another place, they wouldn't let him take more food at lunch because he didn't have enough money or something, but one of the lunch ladies felt sorry for him and gave him all the extras so he wasn't hungry." He regaled me with more details about Robby's educational experience. Robby had told me that his years in the multiple schools were fine, that he only got a little "nervous." The things that Parker was recounting now sounded horrible, and it was no wonder he'd gotten headaches.

But Parker himself seemed a lot better, and I saw that the frown was totally gone from his face. When we got home, he only gave me slight amounts of grief about returning to school the next day and voiced only a little bit of whining about missing the Woodsmen game in the morning, which meant late afternoon in France-time. He even did his homework, mostly without prompting.

The next day, I told him I wouldn't watch the game until his cross country practice was over, but I couldn't wait that long. After I dropped him off at the high school, I raced home like the other parents in the car line to see Robby play. I was interested in all the Woodsmen, of course, and also in my sister who I would see performing if the TV broadcast director ever bothered to point the cameras at the Wonderwomen. But I did want to see him the most. When the game started, I watched carefully and took notes.

Finally, the clock ticked down to zero and I relaxed a little. I shook my hand because it was cramping from gripping the pen pretty hard and then I decided to type out my observations while they were still fresh in my mind. Instead of getting right

up to do that, though, I stayed on the couch and checked my phone for fan videos of the team to catch more glimpses of Robby. They'd go to the locker room to talk together and hear from the coach, then they'd talk to the press, too, and finally, they'd head to the airport. It was a long flight back to Michigan but he would be home soon enough. I could sit in the chair and watch him walk up the pathway.

I smiled as I thought about it.

∞

“Damn.” I shook my head at the TV, Parker's TV on the wall of his living room. Everyone was home in Michigan safe and sound and the first few weeks of school had been ok. Parker had gone to the Woodsmen game tonight, their first one of the season back in the stadium. He got to sit in a box above the field in a seat that Robby had managed to get for him. There had been a seat for me, too, but of course I couldn't go. I'd come here to Parker's condo instead and turned on the big TV, the one on which he watched videos of the computer games he played. The only thing more boring than the games themselves, I'd found, were the videos where you had to stare at someone else playing them.

It was halftime now and I had switched to our local access channel that showed the Wonderwomen cheerleaders' performance rather than the dumb talking heads blathering about football. I had them muted, anyway, although I did care about the football part. Rather than listening to the national broadcast for the game, I had tuned my phone to hear our local guys, Herb and Buzz, and I jotted down some of their comments along with my own notes. They had been the announcers forever and they really knew the team.

I did, too. I cared that the Woodsmen were up and that the defense was playing much better as the new members learned the team's style and schemes. Yes, I hated baseball, but I'd been around football for years, both watching it and doing research on various aspects of the sport to improve my understanding. For example, I'd embarked on a brief study of physics so I could calculate the proper angle, arc, and speed

that our quarterback, Matthews, needed to throw the ball downfield. I could talk pretty knowledgably about strategy, positions, and plays, and I also had my notes from the other games this season to compare how they were doing. Looking back, I could see that in Paris, Robby had been having trouble shedding blocks but that tonight, he'd been pretty much dominating the line of scrimmage. I didn't really need my notes, though. I remembered everything about him.

At the moment, however, my focus was on my former cheerleading squad, and just like Robby had been in the game in France against the Foxhounds, I could see that they were a little off. "It's because of the coaches," I announced to no one at all. Parker had told me that Anders, his dad, was either in Bacau or Baku, so I was alone, stewing about the Wonderwomen all by myself.

The cheer team had two coaches prior to this season, Sam (who was a gymnast and former Woodsmen mascot) and Rylah (a choreographer and former dancer). She had been lured away from the Wonderwomen after the previous season and gone to be the sole head coach of the Dynamos in New Mexico. It was a great career move for her but it sucked for the Wonderwomen, because as strange as she was, she was an excellent teacher, and she and Sam had enjoyed a good balance in their duties. Working alone, though, I had doubts about both of them. Sam needed someone with more of a dance background as an assistant, or as a co-head coach as Rylah had been. And she was going to need someone like him to tamp down her weirdness. I pitied the Dynamo girls facing her alone.

Anyway, the halftime routines weren't as sharp as they had been in years past and I didn't see anything new or exciting in the choreography, either. I particularly watched the captain, Danni, and my sister, Lissa. She had been down and out for a while after having foot surgery but she was clearly back in form now.

"Good job," I told her when they showed a close-up of her grinning on the screen. Sissy looked beautiful. We weren't too similar, because I took after our mom and she was more

like our grandmother, but we'd both gotten same the love of dance and performing. We'd also gotten a work ethic from somewhere and I refused to credit either of our parents with that. Our dad was slothful and shiftless and our mom had been too lazy to bother to take her kids with her when she walked out on him. But I was glad that I'd gotten his height, and I was happy that I had her looks.

The cheerleaders ran off the field waving their poms to the crowd and I sighed. Of course, I was much too old to be on the squad now, but I did miss it. I missed the camaraderie and being with the other girls, and I missed performing on the field as part of the action. And yes, I also missed the attention, but that had ended pretty quickly when I'd retired my iconic orange halter top and now it seemed a lot less important than the other parts of being on the team. When I'd been angling to get myself onto the Wonderwomen staff, it hadn't been only to cover my debts. I really did wish I was a part of it all again.

I watched the second half and to my satisfaction and that of thousands of other fans dressed in orange, the Woodsmen won. It would take a while for Parker and Robby to show up here, though, so I had plenty of time to cook a giant meal, and I went back to my house and did that. I loaded the plastic table with tons of food and towering glasses of water (one for Parker also, although he'd been sitting on his butt instead of playing, because he appreciated having exactly the same things that Robby did).

And despite the fact that Parker had almost certainly been eating his way through all four quarters, he was pretty much as hungry as the guy who'd played in them. There was something satisfying about watching people eat the food you made, I thought, as opposed to them spitting their pastitsio into the sink and then wiping their tongues with a paper towel. Parker talked throughout the meal, giving his impressions of the game, and Robby and I mostly listened. When he wound down, I turned to my other guest, who knew slightly more about it.

“What did you think?”

“I thought we did all right,” Robby allowed. “Tight ends played great today. It’s going to be a battle between them for playing time.”

“I thought the defense was great too,” I commented, and he nodded slightly.

“We were better than in Paris. I picked it up a little.”

“You were amazing,” Parker told him. “It was like, the best football anybody has ever played.”

Robby smiled and messed with his hair, which Parker allowed. “It was good having you in the family lounge waiting for me afterwards,” he said. “I’m glad you had fun.”

After we cleaned up the many, many dishes from the big dinner, Parker went upstairs to the second bedroom, where we’d dragged his mattress and box springs over from his house. He could go back to sleeping at his own place when his dad returned from Azerbaijan or wherever he was at the moment. That left me and Robby together, and he didn’t seem to be in any hurry to leave.

“Don’t you want to go and sleep?” I asked him.

“I have trouble sleeping after I play,” he said. “Or was that you hinting, trying to kick me out?”

“If I want you to leave, I’ll say it,” I told him. And I didn’t want him to go. “We can talk more about the game, if you want. I have some notes.”

“Do you?” His eyebrows rose. “I’d like to see them.”

“They’re messy because I need your laptop to type them up. I’ll have to read them to you.” I got my graphing paper notebook and we sat on my couch.

“That’s messy? It looks like you had it printed,” he said as he leafed through the pages. “Is this all about football?”

“After I stopped cheering, I had more time to watch. I can’t sit there doing nothing,” I said.

“You mean, you can’t sit there and watch without doing something else at the same time. You never let things rest.”

I bristled. “Is that supposed to be insulting?”

“No, it’s pretty inspiring. You’re helping Parks with his English assignment and at the same time you have some spreadsheet open on my computer and you’re typing away on that, and then you’re texting me with thoughts about doughnut production.”

“Yeah, I never liked to sit still,” I admitted. “There was always a lot I wanted to accomplish.”

He nodded. “Go ahead and read these notes to me.”

I did, and we were in the middle of a discussion of a bad call for holding in the third quarter when my phone rang, which scared the crud out of me because it never did that anymore. I leaped off the couch, sure that something was wrong with my sister or maybe even my dad, which did still worry me. Slightly. But the screen showed that this was a call from Danni, the Wonderwomen squad captain.

“Are you going to answer that?” Robby asked, and cautiously, I did.

“Yes?”

“Aubin!” Danni said. “I’m sooo glad you picked up.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked sharply. Surely my sister’s husband would have called me if she—

“Nothing’s wrong,” Danni said. “Well, a lot is wrong. I wanted to talk about the Wonderwomen.”

“Yes?” I asked again, and she went into a speech that lasted for six minutes. I knew, because Robby started the stopwatch on his phone as I nodded and also took notes on what she was saying. Basically, it was what I’d noticed when I’d watched them perform: Coach Sam had brought in choreographers but all the girls were unhappy with the routines, the new dancers that had been chosen for the squad were struggling, the veterans weren’t providing the leadership that she was looking for, and things were falling to crap. She said it with a lot more detail, though, which I jotted down in the graphing paper notebook.

“Yeah, I noticed some of that,” I said when she finally took a breath. I’d noticed all of that and more. “I’m not sure why—”

“I know that you and I haven’t always gotten along,” she told me, and that was very true. Danni had replaced me as team captain when I’d stepped aside and I had resented it. She certainly wasn’t as good of a dancer as I had been, but I could admit that she was talented and yes, she was also very pretty. She did get along with everyone and she’d worked to mend some broken relationships among team members that maybe I hadn’t focused on as much. Or if I had, it was only when I’d told them to clean it up and that their personal problems didn’t interest me. She was more about processing emotion and stupid things like that.

“No, we haven’t always gotten along,” I admitted, which was different for me. Previously, I would have pretended that everything was fine between us, all good. Not that I was afraid of confrontation, but I’d wanted to have Danni at least nominally in my corner so that she could have helped me to get a job with the squad. “My sister likes you, though,” I added, because Sissy had always defended this woman to me in a very annoying way.

“I like her too, sooo much,” Danni agreed, and I had always found the way she said that adverb sooo annoying. That was why, perhaps, my next words came out sharply.

“What do you want?” Robby glanced up at me and I softened it. “Can I do something for you, Danni?”

“I think you can,” she said. “I need your help in getting these routines on track. Coach Sam is in over his head but he already told the team execs that he’s fine on his own, so he won’t let us bring in anyone.”

“Then how would I get involved?”

“You would come to my studio,” she explained. “My mom built one in our basement for me.”

“How special.”

She didn’t notice the sarcasm and breezed right on. “I know, wasn’t that sooo sweet of her? You could come over here and

there's not enough room to have all the girls, so we could do small groups and then I was trying to think of where we could go with space for the squad to be together outside but not attract a lot of attention—”

This time, I did the interrupting. “Danni, hold on. I’m not involved with the Wonderwomen anymore. I’m not coaching or cheering, nothing. I have a job and I don’t have time to do volunteer work for an organization that should be paying people to do it instead. If Coach Sam is too stubborn to ask for help, then I’m not going to swoop in and secretly save his butt out of the kindness of my heart.”

“Would you do it for money?”

My eyes narrowed. “How much?”

She named an amount that was a lot more than I would have expected, since I remembered how much I’d gotten paid as a cheerleader: pennies, practically. “Is that total, for all the sessions?” I asked suspiciously.

“No, for each one.”

Well. That was a lot.

“The Woodsmen upped the captain’s discretionary fund,” she explained, “and I’m going to use it for this.”

“I’m going to have to think about it.”

“You had trouble with the people, with the personal-side stuff of the Wonderwomen captaincy, but you knew how to get us girls to dance, and we never looked better than when you were on the fifty yard-line leading us,” Danni said. “I really hope you can do this for your squad now. Let me know.” She said bye, and that was it.

“Was that a job offer?” Robby asked me.

“How could you tell?”

“Because I’m sitting a foot away from you, and that girl talks like she’s yelling on the field. I have ears. They want you to help out the cheerleaders?”

I had to explain that “they,” as in the Woodsmen team officials, did not want my help, but that Danni saw that the squad needed it. I also told him how much she’d offered to pay me. “It may not sound like much money, since it’s less than one tenth of the cost of the sea monkey farm you were thinking of buying, but it would make a big difference for me,” I admitted.

“How much do you owe? Parks told me that it’s a shilt-ton,” he said.

That little traitor. “It’s not a shilt-ton, but it’s enough. I borrowed to start the business and we put a lot on my credit cards.”

“He said that your partner ran off and left you holding the empty bag.”

“No, she didn’t run. Well, kind of. She stopped speaking to me, and yeah, I have to pay back the money. It’s in my name and she didn’t know how out of control the spending was.”

“You were trying to cover it up,” he said, and it was annoying that he already knew that, too.

I wasn’t going to talk about it anymore. “The cheerleaders do need help. They’ve been terrible so far,” I noted.

“I thought they looked good.”

So he had been looking. I nodded, understanding why. “They’re beautiful and their uniforms are tight,” I said, and that comment might have sounded a little acidic. “They’re strong, powerful women,” I added to mitigate, but then I rolled my eyes. “Their dancing sucks this year. They’re not performing as a team and Sam doesn’t know how to fix it. Neither does the captain, Danni Lalka. She replaced me but she’s struggling.” Even I could hear the gloating happiness in my voice as I said the last part. “Whatever. She called me because at least she recognizes that they suck, and she’s trying to fix it.”

“You going to do it?”

I thought for a moment and realized that I wanted to sooo much. Good Lord! Danni was already rubbing off on me. “I

think I am,” I answered.

“Just keep the bye week free,” he said. “That’s when my friend Dawit is getting married. I’m one of the groomsmen.”

I stared. “Yes? So?”

“I thought we should all go,” he said.

“No, you can’t invite extra people to a wedding!” I said, horrified by the thought. “Parker and I can’t just show up.”

“It’s ok. Dawit told me to bring someone, a plus-one. Parker can stay in the hotel while we’re at the church and the party. I want to drive in Saturday morning and spend the night in Indianapolis. We’ll come home Sunday morning for my meetings that afternoon.”

“You want me to be your wedding date?”

“He told me to bring a plus-one,” he repeated. “I gave them your name so there’s probably a little card thing for you.”

“A place card,” I said automatically. I remembered, to the penny, the printing cost for those at my own wedding. Billy’s mom had wanted to invite thirty or so of her own friends and I’d made a separate calculation of the cost of their place cards, invitations, centerpieces, and meals, but at the time I’d only smiled and pretended that it was fine, I was happy to have those strangers there.

“I’ll head home.” Robby stood up. “See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow,” I echoed, but then shook my head.

“Wait. Do you really want me to come, me and Parker?”

“He’ll be bored in the hotel room but you have him weekends too, right?”

“It’s a little unclear,” I answered. Anders, his dad, hadn’t really set a number of hours but he was going to pay me plenty. I didn’t mind spending my weekends hanging out with Parker, anyway.

“Great.” He yawned. “So don’t do your dance tutoring on that weekend. They’ll have to suck a little while longer without you.” He yawned again and walked toward the door,

but he spoke to me over his shoulder. “I was thinking that you like to dress up. You do that, sometimes.”

I stared after him. “I guess I do.”

“It’s fun for you, right?”

“Is that why you wanted me to come? So I’d have fun?”

He stopped at the door. “I would have more fun, too, if you were there. See you.”

“Uh huh,” I answered, and I stayed seated on the couch looking off into space until Parker came down because he couldn’t find his phone and also seemed to have left his sweatshirt and possibly one shoe at the stadium. As I dealt with those issues, I thought more about having fun with Robby and what that might entail.

Chapter 10

“Now?”

“No.”

There was a pause, but a short one. “Now?” Robby asked again.

“No! And every time you ask me that, I have to stop and it takes more time,” I said.

“Why do you have to stop to say one word?”

I held the curling iron away from my hair. “I’m stopping again at this moment,” I said. “I can feel the minutes slipping past.”

I heard some swearing then but it got fainter as he walked away from the bathroom door. I really was almost done, and I wasn’t going to make him late for his friend’s wedding. I took one more look at myself, did another quick coat of the hair spray that had never let me down in all my days of dance and cheering, and walked into the hotel suite.

“I’m ready,” I announced, but Robby and Parker were now arguing about the minibar, and if the presence of alcohol in it meant that anyone (including minors) could partake.

“I said no. And if you drink anything out of this flecking fridge, I’ll—” Robby broke off as his eyes lit on me. “You’re ready.”

“Holy shilt, Aubin. You’re fancy,” Parker said. “Wow.”

I was fancy, and I was glad I’d held on to this dress. I’d sold most of my nice stuff, including my wedding gown, but I’d kept this back. Maybe I’d had a hope, secret and unacknowledged, that I would need to wear it again. It was my favorite color (peony pink) and it probably wasn’t the best shade for me, with my dark hair and eyes. But it had always seemed to fit just right and it had always made me feel great.

The way Robby was looking at me also felt great. “Wow,” he echoed. Parker seemed impressed, but Robby...there was

definitely something in his expression that I hadn't expected to see there. Something like interest. Was that what it was? I wished I were the same woman that I had been before, because then I would have been sure. I would have been positive that yes, it was interest, because men wanted me. Now, as with everything, it was unclear.

And then it was gone. "How fast can you walk in those shoes?" he asked briskly. "I can probably carry you faster."

"No, you are not carrying me. And no, Parker, nothing in that minibar is for you, alcoholic or not. We brought a cooler of food and drinks, remember?"

He grumbled something about the cooler contents being boring, which meant they were age-appropriate and healthful, so I ignored him and finished checking my purse for the supplies I'd need for this long event. Mints, brush, lipstick—

"Aubin! Do I need to carry you?"

"No, you do not," I told Robby, and after I said goodbye to Parker and gave him several more instructions about homework and his bedtime, we did leave. He walked fast at first but slowed when he saw that, despite my skills in heels, there was no way I was going to be able to keep up without running, and I was just not styled for that today. We made it to the wedding exactly on time, maybe because he was driving a little over the posted Indiana speed limits, but it was fine. He did his groomsmen deal while I waited fairly patiently, and when he came down dressed up himself...

"Oh, good Lord." Had he always been so handsome? What had they done to his beard? He usually kept it short but now it was cut in a way that framed that jaw he had, and the suit that he had put on fit like a glove instead of a jacket and pants. His eyes looked bluer, I thought, and even more...what was the word? Compelling? And his mouth was so...what was the word for that?

Kissable. No, that wasn't what I was looking for, although, in a general sense? Yes, it was true. He was very kissable.

“We’re supposed to seat people,” he said briefly. “I’ll do you, first.” Then he turned his head and the expression on his face got so cold and mean, I quickly spun to see what was there behind me. I watched as another of the groomsmen sprinted out of the church’s vestibule.

“What’s wrong with him?” I asked, concerned. “Is he sick?”

“He was drooling into his collar as he looked at your ass. He didn’t like being caught at it,” Robby said, and took my arm. “Let’s go put that right into a pew.”

“Robby!” I dug in my heels like crampons into the rug as he dragged me off. “You better not try to walk people to their seats so fast. You’ll give them motion sickness or whiplash when they stop.”

“Fine, just you move quickly.”

Since I was in my seat so much earlier than the other invited guests, I had the opportunity to look around and mentally critique the decorations. I also had the opportunity to think about Robby getting mad about another man looking at my butt, which gave me a feeling of supreme satisfaction until I remembered how he’d stood up for me when I was being harassed by the guys in the car when Parker and I had been out for a run. This was only more of the same; he was trying to protect me again, as if I had anything to fear from that tiny groomsman. Robby towered over him and so did I. I could have taken him out, easily—except men were sometimes stronger than they looked.

Robby also towered over the rest of the wedding party when they were all assembled at the front of the church. The bride was about as big as a pin, a petite, dainty type of girl, the kind that had always made me feel like I should be carrying a pitchfork or something. She beamed so happily up at the groom and he was clearly overwhelmed with joy when he said, “I do.” The woman next to me started sniffing and then asked if I had any tissues.

“No, I don’t,” I hissed back. “If you know that you’re overly emotional, you should bring your own.” But she wasn’t the

only one tearing up. Everyone in the church was smiling and crying, so happy for the new couple.

I tried to remember my feelings on my own wedding day. I'd been angry that the florist had been late to decorate the church; I'd been nervous that the cake was not going to turn out as I'd ordered, because I'd made a last-minute detail change regarding the color of the fondant (power white as opposed to pearl white, and I'd thought the baker might mess it up). I'd been concerned about my sister, who was wearing shoes at least five inches high to compensate for her own shortness among my tall bridesmaids. I thought she might trip and hurt herself, but the problem I'd focused on was the scene it would have caused if she went down. It would have made everyone run to help her and the attention would have been pulled from me.

I sat in the pew today at this wedding and suddenly felt so small and petty, so ashamed of myself. I hadn't worried a bit if the bridesmaids had liked the dresses I'd forced on them (they hadn't) or if the guests were enjoying themselves. I'd mostly looked at the experience as a photo op, and the people there as accessories. I'd focused on millions of little details and I hadn't considered one time, not once, if Billy was happy with it all, or if he was actually happy with me. I hadn't thought about my own happiness, either, but now I realized that nothing about any of it had made me smile the way this bride was.

I remembered telling the guests assembled in the hotel ballroom at my reception that it had been the best day of all our lives, which had been a lie—not just for them, but for me, too. For the remainder of the ceremony, I tried to think of my actual best day. When was the last time I'd been really happy? Like nothing bothered me, like everything was wonderful? I couldn't remember when that had been true.

I met up with Robby after the big “husband and wife” pronouncement and the guests had proceeded out of the church and into the sunny afternoon. I fanned myself with my wedding program while I waited for him to come over. He had to go with the rest of the groomsmen to take pictures in a

prettier spot than this parking lot, so our plan had been that I would drive his truck over to the reception.

He took the keys from his pocket. "Take off your shoes when you get in," he instructed, and I automatically told him not to order me as I held out my palm. He didn't immediately put his key ring into it. "I'll walk you over," he said instead. "It's going to be hard for you to climb up to the seat." He put his arm around me and sent a glare around before we headed off.

"You seem upset. What's the matter with you?" he asked me as I carefully stepped over ruts.

"I could ask you the same question. Why do you keep giving everyone death looks?"

"They're staring at you. Maybe you should wear something over that dress." He removed his arm from me and started to take off his jacket.

"No, no, no. You need that for the pictures," I said. "Are they really staring?"

"Worse than when we're at the beach," he replied, which also shocked me. I didn't know that he'd been paying attention.

"Most men aren't as subtle as you," I told him. "I mean, I can see when you're checking out women, but the girls themselves probably don't even know it. Like how you were looking at the third bridesmaid from the right, the blonde? She didn't notice at all."

"I was looking at her because there was a bee in her little flower bunch."

"In her bouquet?"

"It was crawling around and I didn't want her to start screaming about it during the wedding. Dawit and Jane worked a lot on this thing and she would have messed it up."

"They looked so, so happy."

"Was that a sigh or a yawn?"

"A yawn," I lied. "It got a boring and hot in that church. I would recommend better ventilation."

“You always have a lot of recommendations,” he agreed, but he was smiling as he said it. “Now, I recommend to you that you let me pick you up and put you in the seat like I did at the hotel. That dress is too tight.”

“This seat is too high,” I responded, but he did pick me up and plop me down on the hot leather, exactly like you’d heft a child or a bag of groceries.

He hesitated before he shut the door. “You don’t know anyone. Are you going to be ok alone at the reception place?”

“Are you kidding? Do you know how glad I am that no one knows me? The only person who hates me here so far is the woman who I told to stop crying during the ceremony. She was ruining her makeup,” I explained as I took off my right shoe in order to manipulate the pedals.

“Good that you’re making friends.” But he smiled at me again, and I had the urge to touch him. I reached and smoothed down his jacket where he’d been tugging at it.

“That’s better,” I said. “You look very nice.”

“Thank you, Aubin. You do, too.” He hesitated for another moment, then shut the door and waved and I drove off through Indianapolis to the banquet hall.

Good Lord, it was strange. No, not the city or the reception place, but the other guests. They were actually acting worse than the people at home who knew me: they either avoided looking at me or flat-out stared, they whispered behind their hands, they skirted past my table like there was a crocodile-filled moat surrounding it. Had that woman in the church already managed to poison them against me? Just in case, I sought her out and apologized, actually sincerely, for being surly about her tears. She seemed to accept it but then scurried off and I was left alone again.

Finally, the bride and groom arrived, and that meant the photography was over and Robby got there, too. I was thrilled to see him and said so.

“Thanks,” he answered, and looked smug until I explained why.

“Everyone here is crazy and rude,” I stated. “Look! See there?” He swiveled to catch what I was indicating, but the woman who’d been pointing at us took off for the ladies’ room. “What’s wrong with them? It’s not just because of you being a football player, because they were acting like this before you came.”

He scratched his cheek. “What do you think about my beard like this? I’ve always kept it up myself, but the best man is a barber and he gave us all trims. I like it.”

“Yes, I really like it, too.” He looked kind of devastating, if I gave it any thought at all—and if I did, I would only be thinking of him in a purely abstract, non-attracted way. “But what is the deal here?”

“I made a comment or two.”

I stared at him. “A comment about my company or my husband? Telling them what I did?”

“No one cares about any of that,” he dismissed me. “I mean, I warned them.” He stopped and cleared his throat. “As I seated people, I said something like, if any man looks at you, he’s going to deal with me.”

“You said something like that?”

“Yes. I used those exact words. And also, I said that the women had better be nice to you, if they knew what was good for them. I wouldn’t ever hurt a woman, but I may have suggested that I would take it out on their husbands. I guess that got around.”

“Robby!” I exploded. “You threatened the wedding guests? Why would you do that?”

“I didn’t want you to get harassed,” he explained.

“Now everyone is acting like I’m Medusa!”

“I remember her.” He waved his hand around his head. “Snake hair.”

“She was a Gorgon who turned people to stone if they looked at her. That’s how everyone has been treating me so far.” But actually, it was a relief to know that it was because of him; I’d

thought that somehow, my reputation of awfulness had preceded me. “Listen,” I told him, “there’s no need to talk to people like that. I don’t think that anyone here, all these guests dressed up at a nice wedding, would make comments like the guys remodeling the restaurant who wanted to suck my melon tits.”

“That’s what those motherfuckers in the car said to you?”

“Too loud!” I whisper-yelled, but fortunately at that moment, the maid of honor was calling through a microphone for everyone to please take their seats for dinner.

At least the other people at our table, the groomsmen and their wives and girlfriends, were nice. So was Robby, after I jabbed him fairly hard with my high heel under the table. He frowned at me but smiled in a pleasant way at everyone else, and by utilizing all the social graces I’d ever picked up in my life, we managed to hold a semi-normal conversation with them.

The dinner was fine, certainly not the quality of food I’d selected for my wedding, but honestly? The guests seemed to be enjoying it more. At least, they seemed to be enjoying themselves more in general, and so were the bride and groom. They had their first dance, a totally non-choreographed affair in which she tripped over the hem of her dress and he laughed so hard that he wiped his eyes on his tie, but they clearly loved it. They clearly loved each other.

“Want to?” Robby stood and offered me his hand.

“I’ll always dance,” I agreed, and put my fingers into his palm. He led me to the parquet floor where the DJ, the bride’s brother, was playing great music. All the songs were the “oldies” that Parker despised, and right now it was a slow one that I loved.

Defensive players were usually a nimble bunch. Not like a dainty gazelles or something, but all those guys could move fast on their feet and balance their weight. It didn’t surprise me that Robby could dance, especially since he was such a ladies man. This thing of pulling me close, of holding me against his broad chest, his strong arm circled around me?

Sure, I could understand how it would be a real draw to a lot of women. They would totally fall for it.

I snuggled closer. This hall had great AC, so it was fine to be pressed up against his body.

“You’re taller in those shoes,” he commented. “They’re damn sharp, too.”

“Mmhmm,” I murmured. I closed my eyes. “I love them and you were right, I also love to get dressed up. Thanks for bringing me as your plus-one.”

“You’re welcome.”

“And now we’re even,” I mentioned.

“Even?”

“You did me a favor by inviting me. I got the chance to take a little vacation and wear this dress again,” I explained. “Now you don’t have to talk about the cheesesteak.”

“You did me a favor by coming with me,” he corrected. “I still owe you for saving my life when I choked on the sandwich and now I’m more in debt to you, not less.”

“Hmph,” I disagreed, but he held me even closer and I didn’t have the urge to argue.

“Dawit was puking before the ceremony,” he said, and the rumble of his laugh went through me. “I thought it was because he didn’t want to get married, but another guy told me that most grooms get like that.”

“It’s a huge step. Anybody might get anxious and get a headache or something.” I looked up at him through my eyelashes.

“I wouldn’t get a headache if I got married.”

I tried to picture that happening—not the headache, which was very easy to imagine, but Robby at the front of a church, getting hitched. “Would you?” I asked doubtfully. “Would you settle down like this? It’s pretty antithetical to your current lifestyle.”

“I could do it.” He sounded so annoyed that I looked up again.

“I’m not,” I said. “Not ever, not again. It obviously doesn’t work for me.”

“It seems to work for your sister and Bowie. It works for our receiver, Kellen Karma. It works for the QB, it works for Jory Morin on the offensive line, it’s working for the guy next to me, John Hatcher. It works for Ray Bishop and—”

“Ok, yeah,” I interrupted him. “It also doesn’t work for a lot of people. It didn’t for my parents and it didn’t for me.”

“Why?”

“Because my mom was weak and my dad was a drunk and a cheater,” I said, directing my answer to their failed relationship instead of my own. “I caught him at it.”

“You? You caught your own father, cheating?”

“Is this a good topic for a happy wedding?” I asked, because why would I want to get into the memories? Seeing my father like that with my mom would have been awful, but it was even worse that I’d found him with a stranger. They were naked in the bed that he was supposed to have shared with his wife, except that more often than not, one of them was out on the lumpy couch in the living room.

“Why did you get married at all?” Robby asked.

“Also not a good topic,” I said firmly. “Let’s gossip instead. You know what I think? The bride is pregnant.”

“Really? Where’d you get that idea?”

“She’s not getting pours from the same bottle as everyone else,” I explained. “I’ve been watching. And she’s wearing really low heels even though she’s the same height as a squirrel, probably so she won’t fall and endanger the baby. And the empire gown.”

“The what?” he asked.

That moved us into talking about dress styles for a while, but then he said, “You don’t miss too much.”

“I like to keep track of things,” I admitted.

“If you don’t want to get married, would you ever want a baby?”

And I laughed. “Me? Are you serious?”

“I’ve been watching, too. Look at you and Parks,” Robby offered.

“I’m his *nanny*, not his mother!”

“You’re more of a mother to him than anything he’s probably ever had before in his life.” He was nodding when I looked up at him again. “I remember having a mom and she did the things that you do for him. She looked out for me, she made things better. She loved me like you love Parks.”

“Love him? I hardly know him. Speaking of hardly knowing people, which of the bridesmaids are you interested in for tonight? Those girls are usually ready to party with the groomsmen. There are a few pretty ones besides the one with the bee in her bouquet, although that would be a good line to start with when you hit on her. Especially if you combine it with your famous ‘hi’ move.”

Just for a moment, we looked at each other. “Come on, Aubin,” he started to argue, but a fast song started and I broke away from his arms. It was better if we just danced. I wasn’t sure why I’d even started talking about him and the bridesmaids: Parker was sleeping on the pull-out couch in his suite and it would have been totally inappropriate for Robby to be with a woman tonight, totally gross.

We danced for a while before he sat down, then I kept going until I saw him rise abruptly from the table with an expression like thunder on his face. I’d been watching him even while I was on the dance floor and now I rushed over, my feet moving before my mind had planned it out.

I skidded as I reached him and bumped against his chest. “What’s wrong? Why do you look like that?”

“Parks has been calling but I didn’t hear it. He’s sending messages—”

I had grabbed my purse and was checking my own messages. His dad, something about his dad. “Anders is sick? The

police called?”

Robby had his hand over one ear and was walking swiftly away from the table. “Parks?” he asked into his phone. “What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong?” I echoed as I followed behind him, trotting to keep up. “What’s wrong?”

We stopped outside the doors to the reception hall in the twilight of the September evening, and Robby crouched slightly, as if that would help him hear or understand better. “Slow down,” he said, and listened again. “Aubin and I are coming. Keep calm and we’ll be there soon.”

We were already moving toward the parking lot and the moment he hung up, I called Parker myself.

“Aubin, I think he might be dead,” he answered the phone.

“What?”

He talked faster and faster as he told me a story of someone calling him, a police officer asking if he was a relative of Anders Hartshorn, if he was able to come to Chicago.

“I thought he was in Dubai. That was what he said, right?” Parker asked. “Dubai? Or was it Denmark?”

“I thought Djibouti,” I said, but his dad’s travel plans always seemed to be confused and nebulous. “Are you sure they said he was in Chicago? Take a breath, focus, and then type out everything you know.” Robby lifted me into the truck and then ran around the other side. “Send me the number of the person who called you, too.”

We went much, much faster than the posted speeds but by the time we got back to the hotel, I had the situation figured out. Kind of, anyway, and it was all pretty bad. Yes, it seemed that Parker’s dad had passed away. The officer I spoke to was unable or unwilling to say that over the phone to a non-relative, but I understood. And yes, for some reason, Anders Hartshorn had been in Chicago when we’d believed that he was out of the country. Now, someone needed to take charge of this situation, to figure out funeral arrangements, to find his

will and talk to the executor, and most importantly, to take care of Parker.

He stood up when we walked into the suite, bright red in the face and with eyes to match from crying. All I could think to do was to hug him, and he let me. He even put his head on my shoulder and then I felt him shaking.

“Parker, I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m so sorry about your dad.”

He jerked away. “What am I going to do? Where am I going to go? Do I have to live alone? Will they let me, the police and whoever? I don’t have relatives. Like, I don’t have anyone,” he said, and I watched him swallow down a sob.

“You’ll come live with me,” I said, because that was obvious. “We’ll straighten this all out and you’ll live with me.”

“For how long?”

“Until you’re eighteen, until you’re thirty?” I hazarded. “Until you’re ready to be on your own. I mean, if you really don’t have relatives or family friends or anyone else you’d rather go with, then you have to live with me. I’ll get guardianship or if I need to adopt you, I’ll do that.”

Tears spilled down his flushed cheeks. “You will?”

“I won’t let you be alone,” I told him. “I won’t do that. You’re with me.” He hugged me again, and I realized that I was crying, too, ruining all my wedding makeup. I didn’t care.

There was a lot of logistical stuff to figure out, and instead of the three of us running to the truck to drive to Illinois, I made both of them sit down and we mapped out a plan. I thought that Robby should stay here at his friend’s reception and anyway, he had to be back up north by tomorrow for the Woodsmen. They would not accept the death of a friend’s father as a reason for him to miss practices and meetings, and I had a feeling that our trip to Chicago might take a while. So he and I decided that he would get a flight home after the wedding, but Parker and I would take the giant truck and leave just as soon as I got changed out of my nice pink dress and into easier shoes, too.

Robby acquiesced to the plan but he didn't like it, because he wanted to come with us. "I can help," he argued with me through the bathroom door as I put on jeans.

"You can't come. I know exactly how the team would react to that and it wouldn't be fair to run out on your friend, either. You have to go back to the reception." I pulled my hair into a ponytail and opened the door.

Robby loomed there, frowning. "It's a big city and you'll be alone."

"Are you suggesting that I can't take care of us?"

"I think you could take care of anything, but I don't like it," he growled. Then he reached into his suit pocket and took out his wallet. He removed a thick stack of cash and also a credit card, and held them out to me.

"What is this?"

"You're going to stay the night there. I don't want the two of you in some shifty hotel."

"You mean what I could afford myself," I snipped, and he nodded.

"You'll need to be somewhere safe and you'll have to pay for parking and meals. Knowing him, a lot of meals. At least I can help you that way."

I hesitated, but I took it. "Thank you."

He started to say something else, but Parker couldn't wait any longer. "Aubin, can we go? Maybe it's a mistake. We need to get there to fix it."

"Parks, I don't think it's a mistake," Robby told him. "I think this is going to be a hard trip, but Aubin's with you and I'm here, too. Whatever you guys need, let me know and I'll get it for you." He hugged Parker, and that made me cry again. It was a very sad parting and the drive to Chicago was miserable.

And then it got worse.

“What?” Robby shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“It was a lie!” I said sharply and also a little too loudly, so I glanced at the stairs. Parker was asleep, or he was supposed to be, in my second bedroom. We’d arrived home about an hour before and even though we had stayed in a nice hotel thanks to Robby’s credit card, neither of us had been sleeping much. “It was a lie,” I repeated more quietly, “all of it, except for the part that Anders is dead, which is very true.” Parker had believed up until the last moment that maybe, just maybe, there had been a mistake, that his dad hadn’t even been in Chicago—because he wasn’t supposed to be. I would never forget the look on his face when the truth finally sunk in. It was just like my sister’s expression when we’d found out about our mom, and Billy’s when he’d found out about me.

Robby sat on the remaining barstool and squinted in the same way that he did when he had a headache. “Anders didn’t have an investment business?” he asked, and I shook my head. “What about all the international travel?”

“No. There was no business and I think he was only going to Chicago when he claimed to be in Singapore and Tasmania and Lake Titicaca, all those places.”

“And there’s no money,” he said slowly. “There’s nothing there for Parker.”

“I went through everything, and the only money I came across was in a savings account. It had a dollar and thirty-four cents in it.”

“Jesus H. Christ.”

“Parker broke into his dad’s phone and I found the name of a motel that seemed to match a key that the police had taken from, uh, the body,” I said. It felt disrespectful to talk about Anders Hartshorn that way, but after all the things I’d learned about him? He deserved more than just disrespect for leaving his son in this mess. “We drove out there, way out to a neighborhood that I didn’t like at all. Parker recognized some of the stuff in the room from their former apartment in Chicago and he also pointed out his dad’s clothes. There was

a gross refrigerator full of processed food and I think Anders was living in that horrible place.”

“He was living in a motel room? That’s where he’s been going when he was telling Parks that he was flying all over the world?”

“It looks like it. He certainly wasn’t in Denmark or Djibouti this weekend.”

Robby looked very angry, and I felt the same way. It had been terrible to talk to the police and for Parker to hear the definitive answer, that yes, his dad was gone; then we’d driven to that cheap motel and found even more horrible things. “It was piled with crap. Parker said they had a nice apartment in Chicago before they moved, and he thought his dad had sold it because of his problems in school. I asked him what those problems were and he said he just never had any friends and his dad wanted him to change around a lot. I think the story of Parker getting expelled was also bull. Maybe Anders wasn’t paying the bills and then he wanted to come hide up here, or he wanted to get his son away from what he was doing,” I said. “His ‘business’ was still in Chicago. He was running it out of the motel room and it looks like it was all a scam.”

“How do you know?”

“It wasn’t hard to see what he was up to once Parker got the laptop unlocked. Anders was just cheating people, calling them about prizes and gift cards and tricking them into giving him money, all kinds of bull. I found spreadsheets where he kept track of it all and even scripts he used, telling them how to make their deposits. There was also a big stack of bills because he owes so much. I looked at a statement with the credit card charges from our shopping trip to the mall,” I told Robby. “That account has gone into collections.”

“So he was leaving Parker with nothing. When he went away this last time, he left his son with a credit card that doesn’t work and went off to Chicago to steal other people’s money.”

“He left Parker with less than nothing,” I corrected. “The motel’s manager showed up when we were there and he said that Anders owed him a few weeks rent and if we didn’t pay,

he was going to throw all the stuff into the street. I said to go ahead and do that. There was nothing that Parker could have wanted, needed, or used.”

“Nothing,” Robby repeated. “Less than nothing.”

I nodded. “Parker thought that his dad had bought their condo here but I couldn’t find any documentation of that. I looked up the leasing company that handles these units and it turns out that I know one of the girls in their office. I made her admit that Anders had actually rented their place and he was behind on those payments, too. They were starting eviction proceedings. And the name that he put on the lease wasn’t ‘Anders Hartshorn,’ either. He was hiding.”

“Jesus H. Christ,” Robby said again. He also glanced up at the ceiling, toward the second bedroom. “How upset is Parker?”

“I mean, they weren’t very close, but can you imagine? He just found out that his father is a total lie.” I knew how that felt. Like me, Parker had never seemed to trust his dad, but having the stark truth about your parent slap you in the face made you feel like were standing on a Jenga tower. Like what you’d thought was somewhat solid was actually a mess of unstable, tumbling little blocks.

I sighed and stopped viciously scrubbing the stove, and I went to sit on my couch where I could lean against the cushion. It had been three awful, terrible, horrible days and I was glad to be back here. Robby had tried to help from afar but it was so overwhelming. Parker was dealing with everything and I’d been doing my best to get him through it, while also trying to handle basic logistical stuff and to figure out the mess of lies.

It had been a relief to hear Robby’s voice on the phone when we’d managed to talk, and it had been even better to see him waiting as I drove the now-dusty truck into the parking lot when we returned. He’d been busy, too, not just with football. He’d been talking to lawyers about custody of Parker, and he started to tell me about that now. It was even more overwhelming.

He stopped. “That’s all stuff for tomorrow,” he said. “You should go to bed now and we’ll deal with it more after you

sleep.”

I nodded again, but then—

“Do you want to stay a little while?” I asked. “I just want to sit, but I wouldn’t mind if you were here, too, with us.” With me. “You probably need to get back to your own bed.”

“No, I can stay.” He sat next to me. “I was thinking about you all the time that you were gone.”

“Really?” I started to yawn but hid it. I didn’t want him to go.

“You didn’t even hesitate,” Robby said.

“Hmm?”

“When Parks was worried about where he was going to live, you didn’t hesitate when you said that he would be with you. It didn’t even seem like it was a question.”

“He doesn’t have any relatives and I can’t imagine leaving him with a so-called friend of his lying father.”

“Did his dad ever pay you?”

I shook my head. Anders was going to, he’d said, when he got back from his trip. I hadn’t seen a penny of his money and now I knew there wasn’t anything to look at. “I’ll have to get another job. Anything, at this point. I have to get over the fear of seeing people.” There was no choice, now, no way to hide like some dumb shrinking violet. “I could apply for assistance and help from the state. I got it for my family before and I could do it again. There’s no way I can afford his groceries but there are food pantries,” I said. I knew where they were, since I’d used them plenty as we’d grown up.

“Your sister is married to a millionaire. So’s your dad.”

“I’d rather beg than ask either of them for anything.” Anger was waking me back up.

“Well, then, you have me.”

“I’m not asking—”

“No, I’m telling you,” Robby said. “This isn’t you, going it alone. It’s you and me. We’re both adopting Parker.”

“What? No, I don’t even think they would allow—”

“I have three lawyers working on it right now, and with what I’m paying them per hour, they should be able to figure it the fluck out. We’re both adopting Parker,” he repeated. “It’s all of us.”

I didn’t think he understood what he was saying to me. Maybe he was too young to comprehend the vast parameters of the job he would be taking on; his current lifestyle didn’t have anything that was much related to permanence, either. “You’re aware that he’s only fourteen,” I said. “It’s a long time until he’s a legal adult, and then, responsibilities for a kid don’t end —”

“You know what I’m very aware of?” Robby asked me pretty loudly. “I’m aware of what happens when no one takes on those responsibilities for a kid. I won’t let him live like I did.” He took a breath and his voice lowered. “I was thinking about it the whole time you were gone. I was sorry that I’d let you leave without me and I thought, ‘That won’t happen again.’ You’re stepping up for him and I am, too.”

I nodded. Robby had suffered without parents, I understood that. It was just hard to make promises to someone, unfair to make them believe in you. I had done that to Billy, of course, but then he’d left...maybe that was what Robby was thinking. Just as I had looked at his life and had doubts, he knew about me and might have wondered the same things.

“I won’t let him down,” I announced. “I won’t let Parker down.”

“I know. I won’t, either.”

We stared at each other and I wondered if his heart beat as hard as mine was.

Chapter 11

“That was awful,” I announced to the group. Their faces swiveled to the Wonderwomen cheerleader captain, and she stepped in.

“What Aubin means,” Danni said soothingly, “is that—”

“Do you want to hear why it was awful?” I asked the assembled dancers, and a few of them shrugged slightly. I was going to tell them if they wanted to hear it or not, and I was right about the criticisms and corrections I proceeded to give them. The list was long. “I’ve watched most of you girls dance before this year and we all know that you’re better than this,” I concluded. “Last season’s squad was the most talented I’ve ever seen on the field, including all the time that I was team captain, and you guys could be just as good.”

“Really?” Danni asked me. “You really think that?”

“Yes, absolutely,” I said, but shook my head as I looked over the rest of the cheerleaders. “In each of your performances so far, I’ve seen your skill, training, and natural-born ability. But what I also saw was that you didn’t always use those things. Why?” I asked them. “You only get one shot at this. Soon enough, you’ll hand in your orange halter top and it will be over. Why not give everything now? What are you waiting for?”

There was silence in the room. This was the fourth group that I’d worked with, and I was tired of playing around. I was tired in general.

“Well?” I barked out at them. “Are you going to dance like you mean it? Are you going to show me why you were chosen to be on the field at Woodsmen Stadium?”

Heads started to nod. “I’m ready to go,” Chanel told me, and several other women called out that they were, too.

“Then let’s do it,” I said sternly, and Danni nodded. She took her place in my former spot, front and center, and I cued the music.

They kicked butt. When they took the final pose, we all knew how good it had been, and they started jumping up and down and screaming. I felt my face move from a frown into a huge smile because this was exactly what I'd been looking for. We ran through two other routines and they performed just as well.

"It was the changes you made," Danni said as the other women filed out of her mom's studio. "Just the little changes in the choreography totally fixed everything!"

She was always dramatic. "Sure," I agreed. Danni continued to talk but I watched a few of the cheerleaders speaking together as one stretched out her leg and foot. That girl was my sister, and when she was done, she walked over to where I was standing. Despite the injury she'd had surgery on, I noticed that she wasn't limping.

"Hi, Aubin," Sissy said. Her voice was a little higher than normal, like it always was when she got nervous. When she'd given her maid of honor speech at my wedding, it had sounded like she'd taken a few hits of helium. "How are you doing? The routines look great."

She was trying to fix her hair, too, like I was going to criticize it. I realized that I had been about to say something regarding the importance of looking your best for rehearsals, and I told myself to shut up about that. "Yeah, they look better," I agreed instead. "Everyone picked up the energy level today."

"Because you made us," she said.

She was always looking for the best in what I did. "Danni could have done it except she's worried about being mean. I've never had that problem."

My sister's cheeks flushed. "I know," she said, "and we needed it. Coach Sam's freaking out."

I had heard. He was never the best communicator to start with, as in, his critiques were usually about a dancer getting her head out of her butt and she had to figure out what to make of that. The former coach, Rylah, also had a tendency to say things that didn't make much sense but she did know dance, and between the two of them, they had managed things pretty

well. According to the three groups of cheerleaders that I'd already worked with, nothing was being managed well now. Practices were a mess and the mood in the locker room was foul.

"Since I've worked with the whole team, everyone can make the choreo changes in practice and on the field this weekend," I said. "Danni will tell Sam that she was the one who tweaked the dances, although really, it would have been better to totally throw out the last one instead of fixing it. It's just awkward."

Sissy started to tell me about the genesis of that particular routine, but I was in a hurry and she picked up on it. "Are you hungry? Do you want to go have dinner? Bowie is still at the stadium and I thought, I don't know, maybe we could talk more," she suggested.

I knew that her husband Bowie was at the stadium because that was where Robby was, too. "I can't."

"Oh." She looked totally crestfallen. "Ok."

"I can't because I have to get home," I explained. "Parker is there alone and I have to supervise his homework."

"Parker?"

"It's a long story," I answered. It was, because it had been a long few weeks. We'd gotten the, uh, body here to have the funeral (which was attended by only a trio of people, two of whom were super ticked off at the deceased and the third who was both confused and sad). Parker had gone back to school after only a very short break, a decision which I'd agonized over. I remembered being in class after my mom had left us and then had the car accident which took her life; I'd floated between activities and tried to think clearly, and I'd sat at my desk and managed not to cry.

I also remembered that school and dance had given me some kind of pattern, some kind of normalcy when almost every other aspect of my life had gone totally haywire. At least it wasn't like that for Parker because I was there to help him, unlike my own dad who had disappeared into a bar and seemed to stay there for weeks. Either Robby or I had been at

the table at dinner, to pick him up, to bring him to school, to watch over his homework—except for tonight, when Robby had a late practice and I had committed to doing these sessions with the Wonderwomen. So I had to get home.

“I’d love to hear,” my sister said. “I mean, I’d love to know what’s going on with you, Aubin. We haven’t talked in a while.”

I nodded as I checked my phone. There were no messages from Parker, which could have been good or bad. He’d been very needy lately, which made sense given all that had happened. He was texting a lot, like even during his classes, but the teachers had been understanding. Maybe he was getting over that a little, or maybe something terrible was happening and I needed to get to him immediately.

I looked over at my little sister’s hopeful face. “Do you want to come back to my condo? I’m going there right now.”

“Yes!” she said. “Yes, I really want to.” She practically glowed.

Sissy had always wanted to be involved in whatever I was doing, I thought as I got the orange car moving fast toward home despite the whining and sputtering from its engine. From the time that she was a little, tiny girl, she’d watched and tried to imitate me. It was how she’d ended up in dance and then cheerleading, for example. But as much as she’d tried to copy, we’d always been so different. She was always concerned about people, a lot more than I ever had been—like how she watched over our dad in that annoying way because she loved him so much, and how she was annoyed right back at me for not doing and feeling the same.

I sent a few casual texts to Parker as I went but he didn’t answer. I was worried enough that by the time I made it home, I got out of my car and ran inside without waiting for Sissy. She always drove too slow, anyway.

“Parker? Parker!” I called when I threw open the door, but he was just sitting on the couch reading a book for his English class and he looked over, slightly startled by my entrance.

“What’s up?” he asked casually, and I had a hard time not running to hug him again. We’d been doing the hugging thing a lot, as much as he would let me, actually. I’d never been a very hands-on person, not even with my husband, but I wanted to reassure Parker that I was there. I was physically present, and not going anywhere else.

He had put down his book and was staring at me. “Why are you all red?”

“Am I?” I was also panting from anxiety. “I was...working out. I had a great workout.”

“Ok,” he said, still looking at me. “That’s good.”

“Great,” I repeated. He was fine, so there was no need to worry. “How was school today?”

As usual, he didn’t have much to answer, but I figured I might get more information later when Robby came over. He’d been stopping in frequently, even more than he had before, and totally making himself at home. Now as I tried to go into the kitchen, I tripped on a pair of his size-sixteen shoes because a lot of his things had migrated to my place. I righted myself on the counter and quizzed Parker about what he’d had for dinner out of what I’d left for him, and as I did, my sister knocked softly and then entered through the door that I’d forgotten to close all the way after my Olympic-speed dash.

“Hi,” she told Parker, and he stood up, confused.

“Are you Sissy?” he asked her, and now she looked confused, too.

“How do you know that?” she responded.

“Aubin described you really well,” he said. “And she has a picture of you in the desk in my room.”

“Parker, what are you doing in those drawers?” I demanded.

“How did you find the key I hid?”

“The one on top of the window? That was a hiding place?” he asked incredulously. “Maybe in the olden days, before—”

“If you suggest that I lived in a time before keys existed, I’m going to use one to lock you in your room until next Tuesday,”

I informed him. But it was so great to be fighting like this! He hadn't said anything about my age since before we'd left for the wedding and he'd asked if I got a special rate at the hotel.

My sister just stared back and forth between us. "Who—" she started to ask, and then said, "What?"

"Sissy, this is Parker," I told her. "He's my new son."

Now she couldn't even form a complete word. Her lips moved, but no sound came out.

"So, I guess I'm your nephew," he said, and held out his hand in the way we had practiced. "Parker Hartshorn. But I'll be Parker Frazier-Baines soon, so maybe just remember that."

"Do you really want to change your name to mine? Mine and Robby's?" I asked him, and then I did hug him.

"Aubin, are you crying?" Sissy asked incredulously. "You'll ruin your makeup!"

"I think I forgot to put it on," I told her, and I heard her gasp. Yes, that would have been unusual in my prior existence.

"He's your son?" she asked me, and we started to explain it all, starting with the moment months before when Parker had knocked on my door (due to the "loud music from a previous century").

In the middle of our story, Robby walked right in and threw his bag onto the floor with a big thump. I was always so glad to hear it land, especially in that spot.

"Thank you for not putting it on the kitchen counter," I told him after I said hello, and he smiled.

"You asked me if I remembered where that bag had been, and I do. You were right that I don't want my food touching those places. Speaking of, what's for dinner?" His eyes went to Parker and my sister. "Hey, Parks. How was your math test? Hi, Lissa."

"Lissa?" I asked.

“More people are calling me that now, instead of Sissy,” she said, but she looked dazed again. “Robby Baines? What’s going on here?”

It all involved more explanations, with Parker and I talking over each other again and Robby’s deep voice throwing in even more information—but I thought that eventually, she understood. It got sad, too, because Parker welled up when he talked about his dad and my sister hugged him.

“I’m your aunt, then,” she told him, her voice choked. “So you’ll have me, too. We’re going to have the best Thanksgiving ever!” She talked very excitedly about holidays and various future plans for the summer when Parker could go over to swim at her house (which was, of course, my former cottage). But he didn’t know that, so he got excited too and it was actually kind of cute how the two of them got along. Sissy was more of an age to be an older sibling to him, not an aunt, but he needed people. And if she said that they would hang out, that she would get him into Wonderwomen rehearsals and teach him how to do a handspring, then she would. She was the kind of person who stuck to what she said, which was something I’d always admired about my sister. I remembered her the year before, with all the terrible things that had happened with her ex-boyfriend and a foot injury that wouldn’t heal, and how she’d kept on chugging through.

“What are you thinking about?” Robby asked me. He was rapidly eating the plate of food (a large plate; more like a platter) that I’d kept warm for him in the oven. I’d marked it with a message for Parker saying that one was for Robby and that his own three dinners were separate.

“Just...nothing.” Just that my sister was a good person, a nice one. I was glad that was true and sorry she’d spent her life trying to imitate me, when I wasn’t.

“This is delicious,” he told me, and swallowed another large mouthful before he glanced over at Sissy again. “How did she end up coming over?”

“I worked with her group of Wonderwomen tonight. She wanted to talk, I guess.”

“Then I’ll take Parks—”

“No, no, no,” I said quickly. “I don’t want his routine to get disrupted.” And also, I could tell that my sister had more questions for me about my new living arrangement, probably more about Robby, and definitely more about our stupid dad. I hadn’t spoken to him since our argument on his temp-wife’s patio, when he’d called me selfish and I’d said that his marriage wouldn’t last. I just didn’t have the energy to start defending myself about any of it.

Pretty soon, though, she seemed to realize that if Robby was home, her husband would be getting back to their place as well. They were still in the love-all-the-time phase of marriage; I’d seen friends go through that too, a period of time in which they were crazy to be together just like when they’d first started dating.

I tried to think back and recall if I’d gone through that phase myself, or if Billy had. I didn’t remember being anything but worried when we’d first gotten married, with my company already in the hole and the wedding expenses like another black cloud hovering over me. I’d even woken up with my heart pounding, not able to breathe, on our honeymoon. And my husband? I hadn’t given him much thought, but I didn’t remember him as very happy, either. He hadn’t been very interested in sex after the wedding, I did recall that, but I’d been too stressed to even pretend to want to do it, either. I hadn’t asked about his reasons.

My sister did get me to promise that we would meet again sometime soon, very soon, when Parker was in school and I wasn’t working. “What are you doing right now, anyway?” she asked and that was a good question, just not one I was willing to answer.

“I have a lot of irons in the fire,” I said. “Talk to you soon.” I went to my bedroom to watch and make sure she made it out to her car, a new one that her new husband must have bought. It was very nice.

When I came back into the living room, Parker and Robby were having a discussion about homework. Namely, Parker didn't want to do it, but I stepped in and enforcement occurred. As I'd said, I'd never had a problem with making people mad at me—in fact, it happened a lot.

With Parker settled in his bedroom and reading his book again, it left me and Robby together. Alone. We hadn't been, not very much, since Parker and I had driven in from Chicago. I was working and full-time parenting, and for him, the football season was just so busy. He was doing something almost constantly—practices were just the beginning, because they also had meetings, lifting sessions, time with the trainers, film study, and more, and more. It was exhausting for me to watch, and I'd never really been much of a slacker myself. In college, I'd always had one job that I had admitted to and then another that I'd kept a secret from my friends, like being a maid, or dishwashing, or something that they would have wrinkled their (often surgically corrected) noses at.

But now Robby was sitting on my couch with his forehead in his hand, and my immediate thought was that he had another headache. I could fix that.

“Don't worry, it will go away soon,” I said, and climbed to sit behind him. “Here.” He jumped when I touched his neck but then I could feel him relax.

“Jesus H. Christ, that feels good,” he told me. “I don't have a headache, though. No, don't stop.” He put my hands back onto his shoulders. “I was just thinking about me getting all over Parks for not doing his homework. I honestly don't believe that I opened a single book for the entire time I was in school. Ever.”

“Did you need tutors?” I asked casually.

“Maybe. It seemed like it would get to the point where a teacher or principal would realize that I had a problem, and then I'd be at a different school in a different town.”

“What do you think the problem was?” I asked, just as casually, but then I gripped his shoulders. “The words ‘dumb,’ ‘stupid,’ or ‘thick’ better not come into this conversation.”

He laughed softly. “I had trouble applying myself?” he suggested.

“No. No, no, that’s not it.”

“Oh, you’ve got me figured out?”

“I do,” I told him. This part of him was clear and obvious. “You didn’t get good basics down. It’s like trying to play in a football game before you know how to line up. Like trying to read before you know all the letters.” I was pretty sure that he’d tried to do exactly that. “Then, with you moving around all the time, it was impossible to keep up. Maybe now you should go backwards.”

“You mean, I should study the alphabet?”

I pinched his triceps. “No, not study the alphabet, but read other things besides the doughnut machine manual. Get used to that, first, and then we’ll work on your degree.”

He turned, twisting to stare at me. “What?”

“Face forward, please,” I said briskly. “I think it would be a good idea for you to finish college. You can do it, I’m positive that you can.” He didn’t need a bachelor’s degree for success, but he needed it for his own confidence. “You’re totally capable and I know it,” I said. I wanted him to know it, too.

Robby didn’t answer for a while, so I just kept rubbing his back in silence, thinking it might lull him into compliance. Finally he sat up a little straighter and spoke. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good. Because, of course, I would be here if you needed me. I would be happy to bully you into doing your work just like I do to Parker.”

He laughed again, and I was glad. “I’m sure you would,” he told me. “You don’t have a problem with that at all.”

“No, I’m comfortable in that role.”

“What about going to my game this weekend? Would you be comfortable with that?” Robby twisted again. “I got two tickets for you and Parks to sit in the stands.”

I was already shaking my head. “I can’t go.”

“Don’t you want to see the Wonderwomen do their stuff in person?” he asked. “It will be the first time they’ll try the changes you made, right?”

Yes.

“And otherwise, Parks will have to be there by himself. I know you haven’t been wanting to leave him alone.”

No. No, I hadn’t.

“And maybe you might want to see me, too,” he said. “I would like that.”

“I do watch you,” I said. “Every game, I always watch you.”

“It would be different if you were there.”

I thought about going to dance competitions and the subdued, polite claps I’d received at the end of my performances. The other girls’ moms would jump up and scream their heads off when their daughters were done—but this was different. Robby already had a whole stadium cheering for him.

“I can’t,” I said, and he nodded and turned back around. “It’s not about you,” I told him.

“Yeah, it’s all about you.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, my voice sharp.

“Maybe you were used to being the star but you’re not, not anymore.”

“I know that! You don’t have to tell me how far I’ve fallen!”

“I’m telling you that everybody has setbacks, and—”

“Setbacks?” I asked, and snorted. “I think the utter destruction of my life was a little more than that.”

“Yeah, well, now you have new stuff. A new life. What the fruck difference does it make how things were before?”

“It makes a difference to me! It makes a difference to the people I screwed over. Do you know how hard it was for me to walk in front of those cheerleaders in Danni’s basement?” I asked. “At the stadium, there will be thousands of people who

feel just like those Wonderwomen, that I'm a joke and a fraud. Why would I put myself in that position? That part of my life is done," I said. "I'm going to watch you on TV, and Parker will be ok on his own for a little while."

We were quiet and I kept massaging, mostly hoping that it would make him sleepy and not want to discuss this anymore. But he did say, "I've flucked up in front of everyone at the stadium, in front of everyone watching TV in northern Michigan, in front of everyone watching in the United States. Now people in France, too, and all over Europe."

"It's not the same. Missing a block isn't equal to ruining someone's life."

I watched him nod. "That's what the real problem is. You talk about your company and the investors, your friend Jess, or problems you had with the Wonderwomen team, but it's about Bill."

"It's everything, but it's a lot about him."

"Do you miss him?"

I thought about the nights that I lay in bed, wishing that someone were next to me. I thought of the idea of having someone behind you, of someone to depend on. "I do miss him," I said. "He's such a nice person, such a good—"

"Would it make you feel better if I tell you something about him?"

My hands stopped moving on Robby's shoulders. "What do you mean?"

"If you knew something that he did, something that wasn't nice and good, would that make you feel better about your divorce?" He turned again. I sat on the high arm of my couch so we were eye to eye, looking at each other. "I'm not saying that it would balance out, but he wasn't perfect, either."

Anger, hot as lava, replaced the blood in my veins. It erupted through my mouth as I answered Robby. "There is nothing that my husband could have done that compares to what I did to him! How could you suggest that? I humiliated him, I broke his trust!"

“Yeah, you cheated.”

“Yeah, I did.” My voice dropped. “I cheated on him and blew up our marriage but I was trying to do something good. I was trying to fix our finances and fix our lives.”

It sounded so ridiculous and histrionic. I kept talking, kept explaining. “It wasn’t like I hooked up with a guy in a bar for cash or I was standing on a street corner. I talked to one of the men on the board of North Orchard Country Club after my dad got his contact information. He wanted me to meet him at his house one evening to discuss investing in my company, or maybe even buying it. I was desperate to get out from under the debt and I remember as I drove there, I was thinking that I’d do anything.” I drew a breath and tried to calm the beating of my heart.

“Aubin, you don’t have to—”

“When I walked in, he was wearing a robe, a silk robe like that old, gross Playboy guy. I’d prepared a big presentation, a speech and graphs and spreadsheets, pictures and testimonials. But the whole time I talked, he kept leaning forward and touching my knee and the robe would fall open and I could see that he was naked underneath it.”

“You kept sitting there with him doing that? Why didn’t you leave?”

I had asked myself that so many times. “I said that I was going, that it was obvious that we had different ideas about what ‘business’ meant. I stood up and he grabbed my hand. He offered me a hundred thousand dollars if I would have sex with him.” I paused. “Did you hear me? He offered me that much. I think I was shocked for a minute and I just stared at him. He got up too and kissed me, and his lips were wet and slippery and...” I stopped talking, remembering the revulsion. “I said no. No, no, no, so he upped it. Two hundred thousand. Two hundred thousand dollars. It would have wiped out all my debt on everything. It would have been enough money to make our company something amazing. It would have changed my life. And what did I care? It was just

sex. It was nothing.” I put my hand on my chest over where my heart pounded.

Robby was still looking at me, his face so close to mine. I wanted him to hear this, like I was going to punish him with it as I did to myself.

“I said that I needed the money first. He had a few thousand in cash in a drawer in his office. He held it up to show me and then I just thought, good Lord. Good Lord, I’m a prostitute. I thought about Billy and what would happen if he found out and then I thought about my sister. For our whole lives, she’d copied me and tried to do what I did. Would I have wanted her to act like this? But it was just sex. Right? How many times had I faked liking it, had I faked wanting someone? It wouldn’t have meant anything.”

He nodded slightly. “So you did it.”

“I was trying to convince myself that it would be just that once and then all my problems would have been solved. It wasn’t like I hadn’t lied before or kept things from people. I was good at that, at fooling them.”

But I shook my head. Tricking my friend and partner Jess, lying about my business to Billy and to everyone else, had been grinding me to dust. “I hadn’t been sleeping because I kept waking up with my heart racing and sometimes during the day, I’d have to pull over my car or go sit in the corner of my office and put my head between my knees because I couldn’t even breathe. I knew that I was just about to ruin everything, that I was just about to lose it all. I would look at the numbers in red in my accounting spreadsheets and it was like they were flashing, like I could see them when I closed my eyes. I was going down and I was going to take so many people with me.”

“Aubin.”

I hadn’t realized that I’d closed my eyes now, but I opened them and looked again at Robby.

“Maybe you shouldn’t say all this.”

“I don’t care anymore,” I told him, which was a lie that didn’t even sound halfway believable to my own ears. “It happened. There’s no going back now, right? He said he had a safe upstairs with more cash in it, so we went to the bedroom that he shared with his wife. Her clothes were hanging in a big closet and they had pictures of their grandchildren on the dresser. He dropped the robe and I told him no, I needed to have the money first, but he started yanking on my shirt and I thought of the promises I’d made at my wedding, that big dress I’d worn when I’d sworn to be faithful to Billy, and I... no, no, no. I said no again, no, I couldn’t.”

Robby’s dark eyebrows scrunched together. “So you didn’t ___”

“He had already told me that he worked out a lot, like I cared. But he was stronger than I thought,” I explained. “He held me down. And I hadn’t brought my purse from the living room so I didn’t have my pepper spray, and I didn’t have it ready anyway because I hadn’t thought it was necessary for a business meeting. Then I just thought, there’s no reason to fight it. I’ll just let it happen and then I’ll get the money. It’s better not to fight because you could get really hurt and you’d lose anyway. Someone could put you in the hospital and then you couldn’t dance, and maybe you would lose your scholarship.”

“What—”

I shook my head. Why was I bringing that up? It had been years ago, way back in college when I’d been a waitress in the bar and walked home alone, but I didn’t even think about it anymore. “He wanted me to like it. He kept saying I had to, so I did. I acted it out, just like I’d done with my old boyfriend, faking it, and I made myself pretend it was fine, all good. Afterwards, I wanted to leave, just run, but I told him to give me what was in the safe.” I sighed. “He had lied, of course, and there was no safe. He said that he’d have the rest of my money in a few days, but I wouldn’t go without something more so he wrote me a check for another ten thousand. I don’t remember how I got home. I found myself

there and I sat in the car because I couldn't move for a while. It was a full moon that night."

Robby was very quiet, just watching me.

"The next day, he left for Naples and I didn't say anything, I didn't do anything. The check bounced and I still didn't do anything. I couldn't even think about it and a few weeks later, he had a heart attack and died. Then I told Billy."

"You told him that story? You said exactly what you just said to me?"

"I told him that I cheated on him for money and that I didn't get paid anyway. And he left. He left, and I don't blame him at all." My last words had been almost a whisper because I was suddenly so exhausted. I'd started telling that story to punish Robby for...what? All I'd done was humiliate myself. Again.

"I better go to bed." I swung my legs around to get off this couch but he took my wrist.

"Aubin, wait."

I pulled it away. "No matter what you heard about my husband, it isn't this bad, right? I don't want to hear it, anyway. I don't ever want to talk about this again, not any of it, because I'm over it. It's done and I'm fine now."

"Aubin—"

"No." I walked into my room, to the bed I'd shared with the husband I'd betrayed, and I hoped that I would be able to sleep. But I thought it more likely that I'd stay awake and watch the moon tonight, like I had when I'd sat in the parking lot in my red BMW after everything had happened in that old man's bedroom. I'd sat staring at the sky, gripping the hundreds in my fist, and wondering what amount would ever be enough to make me ok again.

Chapter 12

“He’s totally ready,” I said to no one, except the woman in front of me turned around and nodded. She was the mom of one of the other runners and she seemed to understand why I was talking to myself. “I’m sure your son will do great, too,” I told her, and now she smiled at me. I was going to cheer for him and for all the other boys on the team, of course, but I was gearing up to scream my head off for Paker himself. I had already done that at the starting line where I’d stood in another group of parents, none of whom I knew (which I counted as a good thing).

“We’re both fine, all good,” I announced out loud. But Parker had been very nervous. There had already been several varsity-level cross country meets, but the junior varsity wasn’t getting nearly as much competition so this was the first time he was running for his school.

“I’ve never done this,” he’d said the night before. We had all been eating together, a little later than normal to accommodate Robby’s schedule. I knew he’d rushed home from the stadium and maybe missed time with a trainer to be with us. “I’ve never played sports, ever. I have no idea what I’m doing.” He’d looked at both of us helplessly.

“This is why you practice,” Robby responded. “Your body learns how it’s supposed to react, and you’ll go out on the course and do that.”

“What if I don’t?”

“I remember my first high school game,” Robby had said. He shook his head. “I was at a small school that hardly ever had a winning record. They really sucked. I was the biggest guy on the team, probably the biggest guy in the whole county. I knew that they were going to depend on me but I also knew that I didn’t know how to play very well at all.”

I’d watched his fingers go to his temples, as if he was remembering the headache he’d had.

“What did you do?” Parker asked.

“I tried the best that I could. I wasn’t very good, but it turned out that I wasn’t very bad, either. Afterwards, the coach said he appreciated the work I put in. He said that to him, strong effort was as good as a win. It was a great day.”

Parker had nodded and after dinner, when he had gone upstairs, I turned to Robby. “Was the story about your coach true? He really said that effort was as good as a win?”

“Hell no, he didn’t say that,” he answered. “We lost by thirty points and the coach chewed my ass out in front of the whole team. It was one of the worst days of my football life.”

“I appreciate how you adapted it for the situation,” I’d said, smiling. I’d been doing that a lot—smiling and laughing, pretending to be carefree—because since I’d told Robby my sob story, he’d been acting strangely. He wasn’t a guy who broadcast his emotions, but now he was being even more secretive than when he’d had the meeting about investing in Teflon-coated pool toys and hadn’t wanted to tell me about it. He was looking at his phone and turning it so that we couldn’t see, he was doing stuff on his laptop and shutting it abruptly when we walked in, he was getting calls and going outside where we couldn’t hear them.

I’d asked if he was starting a new business venture and he’d said no, and then he’d taken off for his own condo. It was making me concerned that I was the cause of this behavior in him; he was worried about me because of what I’d said, although he didn’t need to be because that was all over and I was totally good, fine.

So I was trying to make up for my blathering with feigned happiness because I was sorry that I’d foisted that information onto him. Obviously, he hadn’t wanted to hear it. Who would have wanted to listen to a story like that? I knew that I should have kept my mouth shut and thinking back to that night, I couldn’t really understand why I hadn’t. It wasn’t my style to overshare but I’d gone on endlessly and now I was embarrassed about that, too. I added it to the mental list of things I shouldn’t have done.

Now, I looked through the crowd of parents waiting next to the cross country course, wondering if Robby would come. He'd told Parker that he wouldn't be able to make it but then he'd admitted me that he was going to try to get out of something so he could be here. Nothing yet, though. Instead, I locked eyes with a different mom who informed me that we would see the runners soon and not to worry. I wasn't worried at all but I politely said thank you and under my breath, I mumbled that she should mind her own business. Why would I be worried over a high school JV meet? He and I had run further than this before and of course he could do it today. Parker would be fine.

When a bunch of the other spectators at the starting line had moved to this position on the course, I had followed along. They seemed to know where they were going and I had no idea what was happening here—this was a totally new thing for me. As I watched now, a group of boys rounded a bend in the dirt road and I stood on my tiptoes to look for Parker. He wasn't among them. Then a few more trickled past, then more. Where was he?

“Did I miss it? Did I miss him?” I heard a familiar voice call out, and I turned around. Everyone else did, too, and jaws dropped. I elbowed my way back to Robby.

“He hasn't shown up yet. I'm thinking he may be injured on the course somewhere and we should go look for him,” I explained. I had been just about to do that.

“No, he's not injured.”

“Robby, I'm a little worried,” I said, and I heard my voice get higher, just like my sister's.

“I can tell. It's ok, though.” He put his arm around me, like he did sometimes when we took walks together because he thought that men in cars were going to say nasty crap. I turned now to check if anyone was looking at my butt, which had ticked him off so much at his friend's wedding. But no, the other fans were all just staring at him in shock, surprised enough to see a Woodsmen in their midst that more runners were passing and they forgot to cheer. I turned and leaned my

back against his chest and he rested his forearms on my stomach. Unlike me, he wasn't wearing one of his sweatshirts to protect himself from the whipping wind. I ran my fingertips lightly over the old scars on his skin.

"There he is!" Robby said, and just as when he played football, he got exactly to the spot he needed to be, moving us to the edge of the course where we could see Parker passing. I yelled for him so loudly that I hurt my own ears but above that, I could hear Robby bellowing encouragement. Parker briefly turned his head to look over as he ran.

"He's doing great. You're doing great! Go, Parks, go!" Robby yelled after him, and then he started to run himself, like he was going to keep up with the racers.

"No, no, you can't do that!" I knew it was against the rules, because another mom had stopped me when I'd run along with them at the starting line. "Come on, let's get to the next spot to watch," I urged, and grabbed his hand. We went that way instead, and we did see Parker pass by again. He looked like he was moving faster, now; a smaller group of runners was ahead of him when he appeared, and both Robby and I yelled like maniacs. I had years of cheerleading under my belt and it seemed to come to him naturally.

When Parker crossed the finish line, I was jumping up and down and Robby waved his arms wildly, but I couldn't scream anymore because my throat had tightened with emotion. I'd counted the number of finishers before him and he was eighth. I held up eight fingers as I leaped around.

"That was only his first race," I told Robby breathlessly when I could talk again. "I think by the next one, he might win. I think he'll win! Good Lord, he's lying on the ground! Is he hurt? Let's go check on him."

"No," he answered, and put his arm around me again. "We can't be over there. He's tired, not hurt. He has to cool down and talk to his coach, hang out with his teammates. He wouldn't appreciate us showing up and falling all over him."

I did want to do that, I realized. I wanted to run to him and pick him up and hug him, I wanted to tell him how proud I

was of him, and what a good job he'd done. "Ok," I agreed, but unwillingly. "Do you think he'll care if I make a big deal of it later? I already prepped a huge dinner and baked a pie."

"I think he'll be very happy about that. I like it a lot when I come home after games and you make it special. You act like you're proud of me, too."

"I am," I said. "I'm very proud." My throat tightened again and I swallowed. "I wish I'd been there when you were younger, his age, because I would have cheered for you, too."

"That would have been nice." His arm pulled me closer. "How'd you get all that cooking and baking done today? Didn't you go to work?"

My latest job was a point of contention between us. I'd taken the opening at the nearby gas station, mostly because it had hours that I could fit in around Parker's schedule. I was back to working a lot of days but also a lot of nights, going in after he went to bed. Robby didn't like this in the least and it was a feeling he'd expressed to me many, many times. He wanted to give me money, to pay me like Parker's dad Anders had promised to do. Unlike Anders, I knew that Robby would follow through, but I was a grown woman and I could take care of myself and I could take care of Parker, too.

Because I wouldn't accept payments outright, Robby was doing other things for us: buying hundreds of dollars of groceries and having them delivered, disappearing with my car to fill it up and get it serviced, and secreting piles of cash in unexpected places around my condo. I couldn't refuse the food or pour the gas out of my car, but I drew the line at taking the money, so I collected it and left it on his kitchen counter. We'd been handing back and forth the same hundred dollar bills for about a week now.

"I did go to work today," I answered, "but I got up pretty early to get things done." Four AM, but I'd been quiet so that Parker could get enough rest before his first big meet. I was tired but as happy as I'd ever been when I'd competed myself. Actually, I didn't remember being very happy after my dance competitions. When I hadn't won, I'd been furious, and when

I had, all I'd ever done was think about the mistakes I'd made and how I'd have to perform better the next time. Right now I just felt so proud, I was about to burst with it.

Since Robby's head was above all the others, he could see things before I could. "Parks is coming over here. Don't flip your shilt," he warned. "This is the first meet in a long string of them, so pace yourself."

"You're telling me that?" I asked incredulously. "Do you know how many times I've competed? I was always known for being totally cool and...Parker!" I threw my arms around him as I yelled his name. "I'm so, so proud of you! You were amazing. I've never been so happy in my entire life."

"Aubin, I didn't win," he said. "Can you make her..."

Robby gently pulled me free. "Yep, you're totally cool," he muttered.

"I don't care what place you got. That was wonderful. Outstanding!"

"Aubin, don't cry," Parker said.

"I'm not. Crying only ruins your makeup." I had to put my fingers in the corners of my eyes and clear my throat a few times. "Did you get a trophy? A plaque or something?"

"For eighth place? I think I might get a weird-colored ribbon later."

"We're going to hang it on the refrigerator. No! We'll make a special stand. With lights!"

Parker turned to Robby. "Can you..."

"We're going." He put his palm on my shoulder to move us away from the crowd. "Parks, you can ride with me while Aubin calms down."

"I'm already calm," I informed them, and I didn't hug Parker again or even try to hold his hand as we walked to the parking lot. Later, after the big dinner at which I was still totally normal and cool, Parker let me kiss his cheek and then went up to bed. I sat down with Robby on the couch. It had been a long day but I felt exhilarated.

“He was so good,” I commented. “So, so good.”

“So good that you’re going to make a lighted ribbon shrine?”

“Maybe that was over the top. We could just hang it on the fridge.”

“Maybe that’s better,” Robby agreed. “You said you did a lot of dance meets, right? I remember you told me once that you went to one where a girl got her underwear stuck up her butt so your team lost.”

“I told you that? It was a million years ago,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t know why I was talking about it still. Yes, I went to hundreds of dance competitions, for years.”

“I bet you collected a lot of hardware.”

“I guess I did,” I said, thinking back.

“What did you do with it? Did you have a shrine?”

“No, definitely not. I used to throw it away,” I said. “We would do the awards ceremony and then I’d find a garbage can before I drove home.” I remembered shoving the trophies in as hard as I could, furious with myself. “As we were watching Parker today, I was thinking about how I would finish one performance and all I would remember about it were the times I’d messed up. I was always trying to get better.”

“That’s a good attitude.”

“No, it wasn’t, not for me. I never enjoyed it. I threw away the trophies and medals and everything else because I thought they were meaningless, that they were rewarding me for something that wasn’t good enough. I was already on to the next thing, to trying to win again, but I was never satisfied. I knew I needed to be perfect because I saw dance as my ticket out of here, dance and good grades.” But then, I’d come right back to where I’d started, and here I still was.

“Like me and football,” Robby said. “I knew that I had to get better, no matter the circumstances, because it was the only thing I had.”

“You have a lot more than that,” I told him. “It’s pretty quiet at night at the station so I’ve been working on something.” I

reached beneath the couch.

“Is that my laptop?”

“It is, and Parker figured out the code so I could open it on my own. All zeros.”

“Easy to remember,” Robby noted. “I would have given it to you again, if you’d asked. Have you been looking at my stuff on it?”

I would have, if he had been my boyfriend or husband, because I’d always kept close tabs on those guys. “No, even though I know you’re being sneaky about something, I never opened anything except what I was doing. I only took it without asking because I wanted to surprise you,” I explained. I opened several spreadsheets and a few documents, too. “You know, a lot of athletes get into trouble starting restaurants and bars.”

“You’ve mentioned that,” he said, and I might have. A few times.

“Well, they’re not all bad ideas,” I told him. “My sister worked at a bakery up here that’s extremely successful. The co-owner is married to a former Woodsmen player, and I talked to her—”

“How did you do that?” he asked me.

“I was persistent,” I said. That was how I’d gotten everything in my life, by getting smacked in the face and then coming back for more. “Anyway, I talked to Tatum for a while and she was very helpful, and I worked on my own, too. I created a plan for your doughnut machine. You could open a bakery and coffee shop.”

He looked at everything I’d prepared, slowly moving page by page, and I pointed to things and talked as he did. I had scouted locations while Parker was at practice, I had figured out the best sources for ingredients, I had worked on menu items and labor issues, I had a cost breakdown of everything.

“But as I learned the hard way, you can end up with a lot more expenses than you bargained for,” I said. “And I understand that you won’t want to take advice from me, with my track

record. You should definitely run all this past your lawyer and accountant and anyone else.”

“This is a lot more than I thought of when I bought the damn thing.”

I held my finger up in front of his face. “Don’t you dare say one word, not one single word about being too stupid to think of it by yourself. Do you know how I learned to do this? Because I already messed it all up, horribly messed it up. I did it for you so you won’t have to be wrong the first time.”

Robby took my finger, folded it down, then held my hand. “Thank you.”

I pulled away from his grasp and sat up straight. “You’re welcome. It’s just something to think about besides the bullet-proof pool toys.”

“If you could prevent them from breaking, they would fly off the shelves. Anyone who has owned a pool gets tired of patching vinyl or throwing them away,” he argued. It was the same thing he’d said before about this bad idea, except now I caught something different.

“When have you owned a pool?” I asked.

“I currently do, at my house in Florida. That’s where I usually am during the off-season, except that this year I stuck around in Michigan.”

It felt like I’d been kicked in the stomach. “You live in Florida?” I asked slowly. “You have a house?”

“My condo here is a rental,” he said, angling his head towards it. “You’re the only owner in our block.”

I nodded, my mind racing. He lived somewhere else, so this place was only a temporary stop. It made total sense and it didn’t matter to me, not at all. “I do own this unit,” I agreed. “But I’m selling.”

“What?” Robby asked me. He sat up straight, too. “When did you decide that?”

“I shouldn’t keep working so hard to hold on to it,” I said. “The mortgage payments are too high and I have Parker’s

future to think about. Right now, I'm deciding where we'll go."

"*We* have Parker's future to think about," he corrected.

"Well, I'm going to be consulting my own attorney about the adoption," I said. Why hadn't I done that before? I was trusting some man to act in my best interests? Was I crazy?

"Your own attorney? I thought we were adopting him, together. That would mean us living together, not the two of you taking off. I've had that life, Aubin. It's not any good for kids."

"I understand that!" I said. "I'm not going to start dragging him around the country like an idiot. Only terrible people, awful, uncaring people, would make a child live a life like you had. I mean, when I think about it, I want to find them and make them suffer. Out of all those homes you were in, couldn't there have been one set of people who were decent? Why were they all so despicable?"

Robby had gone from looking pretty mad to very surprised. "I've always believed that I had a run of bad luck. You've thought about that a lot, about me being in all those places?"

"I've thought about it some," I said dismissively. "I found the names of a few of the people you lived with, but I'm sure I could do more damage to them if you could give me a comprehensive list."

"Aubin—"

"As for me and Parker, yes, we are going to move," I interrupted him. "It doesn't make sense to stay here. Why should I keep paying for a place where I only have bad memories? It's dumb. We can go to a new city and I'll get a better job," I went on, warming to the idea as I spoke. "I know that it would be hard to get work as an American abroad, but —"

Now Robby did the interrupting. "What are you talking about? Where are you planning to go?"

"I'll have to find a place with a strong cross country program, because Parker will need that level of competition," I mused.

“Somewhere with good weather, somewhere safe, somewhere with excellent schools. Somewhere with low taxes, with friendly people, with lots of lakes. It would be great if it were somewhere that Parker could walk and use public transit to get around because I know he misses that here. I would also like —”

“There’s no place that has all those things.” I could see that he was mad again, because he got an expression that would have scared someone who didn’t know him better. It made me scowl right back at him, though, instead of feeling cowed.

“We’re not staying here,” I announced. “No, no, no.”

“No, you’re not. Neither is Parks,” he said. “That’s what I’ve been sneaky about and that’s what’s on my laptop, the stuff you didn’t look at. We’re both going to adopt him, which means we’ll all have to live in the same place.”

“What are you talking about?” Then I understood, and I shook my head angrily. “We can’t move to Florida for part of the year and come back to Michigan for the season like you do. How would he go to school? It doesn’t make sense.”

“I’m buying up here. That’s where we’ll live, together.” He nodded at me. “Like a family.”

“Like a family,” I echoed.

“Permanently,” he said. “Maybe we would vacation at the Florida place, but this is where we’ll come home to. When he’s grown up, he can always come back to be with us in our house. It will be like your sister was talking about, you know, how she said she wanted to have Thanksgiving dinner, Christmas all together. That’s what we’ll do.”

I was watching him as he spoke and I didn’t think that he meant to show me so much. What was the name for that emotion I saw in his face?

Longing. It was what I remembered feeling when I would see other girls with their moms at my dance competitions, congratulating them over their silly fifth-place medal when I was busy stuffing my big trophy into the trash. I thought of the three of us living together, of Parker coming home from

school, of eating dinner in the same chairs we always sat in, of hanging stockings at Christmas, of everything that a family might do.

We weren't a family. We were only a collection of weird people, but I looked at Robby again, at the longing I still saw in him, and good Lord. I felt it too...

No, no, no. This was impossible.

"Do you know what that would entail, us living together?" I asked. "Your lifestyle would have to change."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that the parade of women would have to stop. You couldn't have a different girl over every night like you do now, trotting them in and out from the parking lot while they simper and giggle and you..." I trailed off. "What?"

"Have you been watching me?" he asked.

"No." I blinked. "It's just hard to miss, at times. I can't avoid it as much as I would like to."

"I wouldn't have women over, not with you and Parks in the house," he told me. "Since you haven't been watching, you haven't seen how no one has been walking to my condo lately. Not since before Dawit's wedding."

"No, I hadn't noticed." Yes, I had. I'd thought that the reduced number of guests might have related to the amount of time he was spending here with us. In other words, there weren't enough hours in the day for it.

"I'm here all the time," Robby said, reading my thoughts. "Living together wouldn't be very different from how we are now, except we'd be able to have a bigger fridge for Parks."

That was true. "It would cut down on the grocery deliveries if we had more square footage to keep things cold," I agreed. "And if we had a pantry. Like a whole room for food."

"He would probably sleep in there," Robby commented, and I nodded. "We'd all have more space." My eyes went to those size sixteen tennis shoes in my kitchen, the ones I tripped over

no matter where I moved them. “And you couldn’t work at that gas station anymore.”

“What? Why not?” I demanded.

“Because it will be too far for you to drive there. We’re going to buy a house miles away, so you’ll have to work somewhere else with better hours.”

“We can’t live too far from where we’re standing right now, because then Parker might have to change schools,” I said, ignoring the fact that I myself had just alluded to moving to another country. “Robby, when you say ‘we’re going to buy a house?’ We’re not. If I sell this place, whatever I clear will have to go towards paying off my debts.”

“I have plenty of money and I’m not wasting any more of what I make buying kites for a delivery service.”

“How would that have worked?” I wondered again. I still couldn’t understand it.

“I’m not going to mess around with any of that dumb shilt anymore,” he told me, “and I have enough to float us.”

But then, it would be his house. At least by living here in this condo, I owned something. I had property in my own name, and if I sold it and rented a new apartment, then that would be in my name again. If I could ever rent somewhere new with my credit the way it was.

“I’ll have to think about it,” I said, and again, I ignored my previous statements about how I was going to drop everything and move. “It’s a big decision to make and I’m not only making it for myself. Parker’s life is in this, too.”

“I know. That’s why it’s the best way to go.”

We argued a little more but didn’t decide anything for sure, except that we agreed that we wouldn’t tell Parker about our discussion. I already knew exactly what his reaction would be to the idea of us all living together because wherever Robby went, he wanted to follow. But what would he do if we were all in the same house and then Robby got interested in something new, like how he’d replaced trying crazy sports with starting crazy businesses? I knew he cared about Parker

—it was obvious. But I also knew how things went with guys, so I was aware that it was a bad idea to depend on that affection in the long-term.

Another day passed and I sat yawning behind the register at the gas station and considered the pros and cons of us living together, just as I had the night before for hours in my bed. There were a lot of possible plusses: I was sure that whatever house Robby picked would be nice and it would be bigger and fancier than my current condo. Parker could have a room that wasn't just a glorified closet, which he would enjoy. It would also get me out of the place that held so many terrible memories. I thought of how I'd picked up the bits and pieces that Billy had left behind. It would be good to get away from that, wouldn't it? I could physically close the door on the past.

I'd also be moving the child that I was now responsible for, Parker, into an unstable environment. Nothing there would belong to me, since I wouldn't have any financial stake. It meant that Robby could decide to sell, to move strangers in, to have women over every night, and I had no control at all over any of it. How often had I preached to my sister about getting her name on the title, the lease, the mortgage, the marriage certificate?

I sighed. One image ran through my mind over and over: Robby inviting girls into the house that I lived in, too. He'd said that he wouldn't do that, and it was true that lately I hadn't seen the usual parade down the path to his condo. But why would he change his lifestyle? Why should he have to? He had things just the way he wanted them, didn't he?

I thought of the longing on his face when he'd talked about spending holidays in one place, of Parker always being able to call it home. I wanted that for both of them. It made me furious to think of Parker's dad dropping him into a new town where he knew not one soul, then forcing him to attend to school alone on the computer. It made me equally furious to think of Robby as a kid, carrying his suitcase and shuffling between apartments and houses, between towns and states. He'd never known where he'd be next. No wonder he'd been anxious and gotten headaches.

I sighed again, because this was exactly what I'd been doing since Robby and I had talked: I'd been going around and around, not making any decision. That wasn't like me, either. Before, I'd always seen an obvious path, either to a routine I wanted to perfect, a job I wanted to be hired for, or a guy I wanted to attain. Choices had always been clear to me in my previous life, but since things had started going bad, nothing had been very straightforward or obvious.

I heard the jingle of the bell as someone came into the station but I didn't even glance over. Most people only needed the bathroom or were interested in browsing among the drinks and snacks. When silence fell, though, without the squeak of the door that led to the restrooms or the rattle of a bag of chips, I looked up.

"Oh." It really was the worst possible scenario. "Jess."

"Aubin?" My former best friend sounded confused, but she must have heard that I was here. That must have been why she'd come, in order to see for herself how far I'd fallen. Her face quickly morphed into the mean-librarian expression I knew well, because that was how she always looked at me now.

"It's me, Aubin," I agreed, and straightened up. "Are you getting gas? Which pump? How much?"

"I want forty dollars on pump four," she said. "And I want a receipt, because apparently I can't trust the employees here." She slapped her credit card against the reader.

I glanced out the window as I waited for the transaction to approve, rather than looking her in the face. At pump four, I saw a medium-sized truck parked, a rented moving van.

"Mia said that you're going to Minneapolis," I noted, then looked at my screen. "It's saying that the card is declined."

"What? No, it isn't." She jammed the chip into the machine instead. "Yes, I am moving, unfortunately for me. I have to leave my family and friends because I was involved in a failed business venture with a sociopath who cheated everyone."

That would be me. “Mia said you were really excited about your new job.”

“Why is Mia talking about me to you?” Jess demanded.

“I asked how you were doing. I was really glad when she said that you were happy.”

She finally met my eyes. “Yeah, I am. Now I have a great career and a really great apartment. I’m primed for success and you’re here working in a gas station.”

“Sucks to be me,” I answered. “The chip on your card isn’t working, either. Try sliding it.”

“Aren’t you totally embarrassed and humiliated?” she asked. “Aren’t you so ashamed? How do you walk around and show your face?”

“Good Lord!” I burst out. “It’s not like I killed someone.”

“You cheated on your husband,” she reminded me. “You figuratively drove a knife into him. You ruined me, too.”

Ever since I’d realized that our business was doomed and that I was going down with it, I’d been telling myself that I’d destroyed her life. But seeing Jess here, wearing her cute jeans and diamond studs like the ones that I had sold, seeing her moving truck packed with the possessions she still owned to fill an apartment that she could afford, I got angry. Not at myself, not this time.

“Is your life really ruined, Jess? Are you thousands and thousands of dollars in debt? Did your husband leave you, does everyone think that you’re a jerk and a liar, is your family so disappointed that they look at you with pity? Have you realized that everything you thought about yourself was a lie, that you’re not actually competent, or intelligent, or a winner? Is that all true about you like it is for me?”

She stared at me, but now she didn’t speak.

“I didn’t mean for our business to go down in flames,” I told her. “I was working as hard as I could to make it a success.”

“You knew that we were in trouble and you never told me,” she started, but I’d heard it before.

“You never asked! You let me be in charge of the finances, remember? You didn’t want to deal with them because you said they were confusing. You let me negotiate buying the supplies, because you didn’t like to be mean to people. You wanted me to take the lead in dealing with investors, because you couldn’t remember the sales pitch and you were afraid they would ask you hard questions. I incorporated our business under my name, just mine, because it all freaked you out.”

“You make it sound like I didn’t do anything!”

“No, you did things. You did the fun parts, like trying out samples, like designing the packaging, like creating our logo. You worked hard on everything you wanted to and I was doing all the crap that wasn’t fun at all. When everything hit the fan, I was the one the investors remembered, because I’d been the one in the meetings with them and taking possession of their checks. I was the one who the suppliers threatened to sue, because I had signed my name on the contracts. My name, alone, was on the business loan. I was in charge of it all and I saw it slipping away, and I tried and tried to get us through.”

She was blinking rapidly.

“I know that I lied to you, that you trusted me and I let you down,” I told her. “I let everyone down, like all the people who gave us money. Like my husband. I understand what I did to him, and do you know why I get it so well? Because that was what my father did to my mother, and it made her leave us. I told Billy and he looked just the same as when my mom found out about my dad. I know I drove a knife into him, Jess. I’m so sorry about that and I’m so sorry about everything.”

“Why did you tell him about the other guy?” she asked. “I never understood why you did that. Everything else was going to come out, but you didn’t have a problem with lying. Why did you admit your affair to Billy?”

“Your card has been declined,” I answered. “Do you have another one?”

She had turned red. “There’s nothing wrong with that card.”

I grabbed my bag from under the counter and took out my wallet. “This tank is on me. But it won’t get that truck all the way to Minneapolis.”

Jess nodded slightly. She turned and walked to the door and then swiveled stiffly. “Thanks for the gas,” she said.

“You’re welcome. Good luck to you,” I answered.

“Thanks,” she said again. “Uh, you too. I don’t think you’ll be working here forever, ok? And I wish it had turned out better. I wish we were still friends.”

“But we can’t be.”

She shook her head. “No. Bye.”

I put money from my wallet into the register as I watched her fill up, and then she slowly pulled away. I wished that we were friends, too, but I felt a little better about her now than I had before.

Chapter 13

I stopped the car and stared. Was this right? I looked at my phone again, checking both the address that Robby had sent and that the map had gotten the correct street. Yes, this was it. I frowned. Really?

I'd been around the Woodsmen team for a lot of years, and I'd watched them all on social media for longer than that. I'd seen them showing off their cars (Rolls Royces, Ferraris, McLarens, et cetera). I'd seen their jewelry (large and many karats) and I'd seen their houses, or what some might have called palaces. Mansions, definitely.

No, they didn't all flaunt their wealth like that, but it was pretty common throughout the league. But this place? No one would have called it a mansion, and there was no flaunting going on here. I turned off my car and got out, still looking at the small, grey bungalow with the stone around the foundation. It was a cute house, I would say that. It was a trillion times nicer than the place I'd grown up in, I could see just by looking at the outside. Now that it was fall, the plants weren't blooming and the leaves were off the trees, but it didn't feature a dead lawn and overgrown bushes like our old cottage. Cute, for sure, and very well-kept.

It just wasn't what I would have pictured when I thought of a house for Robby. His current condo was all sleek and new, modern and shiny. This was—ok, I would say it again. It was cute. It had a brick chimney and windows with lots of panes. It had a front porch with a swing and a big tree in the front yard which probably was nice and shady in the summer. It sat on this quiet street in between two other cute houses, one all brick and the other painted a dark green. A school bus was currently stopping at the end of the street and dropping off a passel of kids who started racing down the sidewalk to their own homes.

I walked slowly on the stone path that led to the porch and as I did, the front door opened. It was a cute one, too, with an arch

at the top. A guy walked out and when he saw me, he did a double take.

“Aubin? You’re the one coming to look at this listing?”

Crap. I knew him, of course, since I knew flecking everyone in this town. “Hi, Marsh. Yes, I was supposed to meet someone here to see this house.” Robby hadn’t given me the name of the real estate agent, but I had gone to school with Marshall and dated his big brother for a little while.

“Aubin Frazier, wow,” he said, and he gave me a huge once-over. Yes, I’d dated his brother and not him, but Marshall had always been interested. He still seemed to be, no matter that I wasn’t the same girl I’d been back then. I tried to remember if I’d put on makeup before I’d gone to work that morning at the gas station. If I had, I certainly hadn’t reapplied it since.

“Wow,” he said, and stared straight at my breasts. “My dad set up the appointment and he didn’t give me your name.”

“It’s me.”

“It’s been a while,” he said. “You’re divorced now, right?”

“Yes. For a few months,” I agreed. “Can I come in to see it, or what?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, snapping out of the leer at my chest. “Right.”

“Leave the door open,” I directed. “Someone else is meeting me here.”

“Right, yeah.” Another quick ogle at my boobs and then he got down to business. “So this is a four-bedroom, two-and-a-half bath home, built in 1934. The current owner redid the kitchen and all the major systems a few years ago but it still has the original hardwood, original tile in the powder room, very high ceilings for a home of this era, full pantry, lots of charm. It comes in a little under twenty-five hundred square feet. Bigger than it looks from the outside,” he said. As I turned back around after surveying the living room and fireplace, I caught his eyes on my butt. “Come on into the dining room,” Marshall invited.

“You first,” I suggested, and he talked about the appliances while his gaze was forward. He showed me the rest of the rooms, too, which were all nicely sized and yes, with the original hardwood and yes, cute. It wasn’t until we got to the basement that he decided to go for it.

“So, Aubin, why’d you get divorced?” he asked me after he displayed the new water heater.

“I bet you already know.”

He shrugged slightly but also smiled. “You didn’t last too long. Didn’t you step out on my brother, too?”

“No. I found him in a compromising position in his back seat with his friend Cohen, and I decided that he was interested in something that I wasn’t able to provide.” That was totally true, and I hadn’t ever said a word about it until now. It didn’t have to be a secret anymore, since I’d heard that my former boyfriend was living happily with his husband in Detroit.

But Marshall laughed loudly, like I’d made a funny joke. “Yeah, right. He told me the truth about you, how you were back then.”

“And how was that?”

He stepped closer and I automatically reached in my bag for the pink canister of pepper spray. “It’s the reason that you cheated on your husband. You’re insatiable.”

“I’m a slut. Is that what you’re saying?”

“I don’t look down on that,” he said reassuringly.

“Oh, good,” I answered. “Because I was so very worried about your opinion, the guy who got drunk at school and puked on himself at a pep rally.”

He was momentarily disconcerted but then picked right back up. “My girlfriend and I are taking a break right now.”

“I totally believe you. She’s probably completely aware that you’re telling other women that story.”

“Did you see the big bed upstairs?” he asked me. “King-sized.”

“Marshall? I wouldn’t sleep with you in high school and I’m not going to sleep with you in someone else’s bed now, either. You’re disgusting and I’ve always hated you.”

He grinned, the idiot. “Sure you do. What will it take? Want me to buy you dinner first?”

“Screw you.”

“Exactly. Damn, Aubin, you’re even hotter when you get mad.”

“What the fuck did you just say to her?”

Good Lord. The other person had arrived to see the house.

“Robby Baines?” Marshall asked. “You—are—Robby—”

“I asked you a question,” Robby said to him, with the expression of cold death on his face. “What did you say to Aubin?” But Marshall could only stare with bulging eyes. “Who the fuck are you?”

“He’s your real estate agent,” I explained, “and he said I was hot and he thought I would want to have sex with him.”

Robby turned on the guy with so much fury that I stepped between them. “Let me show you the house,” I suggested. “Marshall, you better run.”

He did, pounding up the stairs to the first floor. I heard that pretty arched door slam behind him.

“Come see the house,” I said again. “It’s nice.”

For a moment, though, Robby was so mad that he couldn’t move. “If I hadn’t shown up, what would you have done?” he finally asked me.

“Pepper sprayed him. I had it uncapped in my purse,” I said, and opened it to display what I meant. “I don’t think I would have had to use it, though. I’ve known Marshall since high school and he’s always tried to get me to go out with him. Now, he heard how I cheated on Billy, so he thinks that I’m up for—”

He turned and walked up the stairs while I was midsentence. Eyebrows raised at his rudeness, I followed and went to the

front porch while he showed himself around. I was seated on the swing when he came back out, and he eyed it, then the ceiling. He chose to place himself on the brick railing instead.

“You were right,” he said. “It’s nice.”

I decided he was offering an olive branch, so I responded in kind. “I like it, but I was surprised that you did. It’s not like your condo. It’s a lot smaller than the place your friend John Hatcher bought, or that Matteo Sutton.”

He nodded. “Too small?”

“I don’t know why you’d need anything bigger,” I heard myself say, and that was kind of funny. When I’d imagined my future, my dreams had always included a much larger, fancier house. Something with a long, curved staircase when you walked in, high ceilings so I could hang huge chandeliers, a kitchen as big as my old cottage, and closets...

“Well, closets might be a problem,” I said. “You have a substantial wardrobe and you keep taking Parker shopping.” They were pretty funny about it, actually, how the two of them discussed clothes. They’d also been going to get their hair cut together, not by me anymore, and Robby had kept up the beard trims, too. He looked extremely handsome.

“I was also thinking about the closets. I looked in the attic and we could expand up there, if we needed to. So besides that issue, you like it?” He looked hard at me.

“Yes. Yes, I really do, but it’s more important that *you* do, and it’s not the style of your condo at all.”

He nodded and glanced back and forth across the porch. “I lived in a house like this when I was eleven, with my mom’s cousin. It wasn’t this color and it didn’t have a chimney. Different windows, too, and a different door. It was smaller.” He smiled slightly and shrugged. “Maybe it wasn’t much like this one, after all. The real estate agent sent me a bunch of listings and when I looked at them, this house gave me the same feeling. I liked it right away.” He stood. “But now I’m going to have to fire that company and find out where that guy lives.”

“No, don’t do that.”

“Yep, I’m doing exactly that,” Robby told me and looked really angry all over again as he scowled at the yard. He swiveled abruptly to face me. “If you like this house, then I’ll buy it. I’ll buy it and the three of us will live here.”

“Again, it’s more important if *you* like it,” I stressed. “It will be *your* house.”

“Ours. Our house.”

I shook my head. “No, because—”

“Want to go eat? We can get takeout for Parks so you don’t have to cook something later. Are you hungry?” He shook his head. “You’ll never say you are, but I am. Let’s go.”

It had been a while since I’d visited a restaurant, since I preferred not to put myself into an enclosed space with so many potential haters. I was still driving out of town for supplies when Robby wasn’t getting things delivered, but I took a moment to consider the invitation. Then I said, “I’ll go with you.” He waited until I was in my car, watching in his rearview mirror until I pulled out behind him.

As usual, people gawked at him as we walked into the restaurant, but he seemed less comfortable with it than he usually did. He didn’t ever act like he wanted to be best friends, but he was at least outwardly genial, and he never said no when people wanted a picture or autograph. But now he put his arm around me pretty tightly, and I could feel that he was holding himself stiffly, angrily.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing,” he growled, staring around at the other patrons.

“Why are you acting like this?”

“Do you know them? Do you know anybody here?”

“Probably.” I shrugged. “They’re not going to come up and accost me or anything, not with you looking like that.”

“Good.”

I followed the hostess to a table and Robby followed close behind me. Then he looked around again, meeting a lot of eyes, before he focused on the menu.

“Don’t make yourself so mad that you can’t eat,” I advised.

“I can always eat.” But he looked up from the menu and glared at me. “You need to start telling more people about what that old guy did.”

“What?” I glanced around before I whispered, “The one I slept with?”

“That’s not what happened. You told me that you didn’t want to, but he kept going. You didn’t fight him physically because you didn’t want to get hurt. Hurt more than what he was already doing.”

“I made a choice to go up to his bedroom, I told him I would take money for sex. Which is what I did.” I noticed what he was doing to the menu: mangling it beyond recognition. I removed it from his hands, tugging it free when he didn’t immediately relinquish the plastic-coated paper. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“Fine.”

So we sat silently for a while, until after I asked the server for a bowl of soup, no crackers, and more water, please, and Robby ordered half the items listed on the menu he’d destroyed.

“Let’s talk about your house instead,” I suggested, but once again, he stiffened with anger.

“It’s our house. Ours, for the three of us.”

“Robby—”

“Would you say that Parker doesn’t live with you, that it’s not his condo, too? He doesn’t pay anything, does he?”

“He’s a child,” I said. “I’m not.”

He guzzled a glass of water in two huge swallows, and I thought that Parker would have been impressed with his drinking skills. “I don’t want to talk about this, either.”

“Fine, we’ll sit in silence,” I said, and we did, all through the rest of the meal. I certainly wasn’t going to give in first, and he looked like he was about to explode with anger. My thoughts kept going back to what he had just said about the time I’d cheated on Billy. He wasn’t totally wrong, but he wasn’t right—I had made a choice that night and it hadn’t turned out like I’d wanted, but I was definitely in charge now. I was in control, I was not at anyone’s mercy.

“Aubin.”

“What?”

“Are you going to eat anything?” Robby asked. He pointed at the bowl in front of me, which was still full. “It’s not good?”

“It’s fine.” I felt a little sick, actually.

“Want some of this?” There were a few scraps left on the plate he offered, but I shook my head.

“No, thanks,” I answered. We sat quietly again.

Then Robby spoke again, and he said something awful: “You should move, move the hell away.”

My head jerked up and I stared at him. “What? What did you just say?”

“You should move to another state or another country, like you were talking about,” he told me, and I nodded.

“I knew it. You can’t take off and run because of the Woodsmen, so you’re trying to get me to go, instead.”

“No, I can’t leave because my job is here, but this is frucking ridiculous,” he said loudly. “It’s not right for you to have to walk around this place with men who think they can take advantage of you, and I can’t be with you all the time.”

“You don’t have to make up excuses. I get it, ok? You don’t want me to move into that cute, perfect house with you, and I wasn’t ever really going to do it. You go there, I’ll go somewhere else, and everybody will be happy.” Not exactly happy, though. I didn’t feel the surge of vindication that I usually got when proven right, either. I seemed to feel even more sick than before.

“What are you talking about?”

“You just admitted that you don’t want me to live with you, and believe me, I knew it was coming.” I got my purse off the back of my chair. “I’ll see you around.”

I heard Robby swearing softly behind me and I was aware that we were putting on a performance for the other restaurant guests as I walked out. I heard him call my name, too, but I knew that he had to get back to the stadium for a meeting. I didn’t plan to see him around, either.

“You never let me eat this anymore.” Parker bit into the burger and closed his eyes in happiness. Now that cross country was over for the season, he’d been running with some of the guys from the team and I’d waited in the high school parking lot for them, stewing. Then I’d let him pick anything he wanted from a drive-through menu because I felt bad that earlier I’d forgotten to get takeout for him from the restaurant. “Delicious,” he declared. When he was finished chewing another bite, he checked his phone and then asked, “Where’s Robby?”

“I don’t know.” That had sounded a little bitter, so I adjusted my tone. “I guess at his place or at the stadium.” The words “I don’t care” had also almost come off my tongue, but I did, of course. I was furious. Why go through the farce that today had been? Why had he wanted me to walk through the grey house, to let myself picture how we’d be happy there? Why had he wanted me to imagine a life together and then invited me to a restaurant in order to announce that he thought I should move away?

“Aubin?”

I looked across the plastic table at Parker. I was only having a cup of ice, but I was still keeping him company while he ate. I gave him a big lie of a smile and fished out a large piece to crunch on. “How was your history quiz?” I asked, and I kept the subject on school until Robby himself walked right into my condo. I heard two big thumps as he kicked off those giant shoes and they hit the wall. I had already decided that in the grey house, we were going to have an extra-wide shoe tray

with a metal sheet behind it so that he wouldn't make marks on the fresh paint I would apply. I had already picked out the color for that paint, too.

Why had I jumped into thinking such stupid things? I knew better. I took another piece of ice and ground it between my teeth, furious at myself, furious at the real estate agent for thinking that I was a whore, and furious at Robby for pretending that he cared.

I heard him messing with his bag and then another thudding sound as he dropped it. In the next moment, he was stalking over to where we were seated. Parker held up the wrapper from his burger.

"Look!" he crowed. "Look what Aubin got. She caved, finally."

"Hi, Parks. Guess what? We're moving." Robby slapped a folder of papers onto the table.

"What?" Parker asked him, and I jumped up.

"What? You can't move anywhere with him! What are you talking about?"

"We're all moving." Robby shoved the papers over to me. "I figured you blocked me because you weren't answering my texts, so they had to print out everything for you to sign instead of doing it on your phone."

"What?" I asked again, and opened the file folder. I recognized these documents; they were the same real estate transaction forms that I'd completed when Billy and I had bought this condo. There was Robby's signature above his name, and there was a blank line, too. Under it was another name: Aubin Ariella Frazier. I looked up at him, not understanding.

"What do you mean?" Parker was asking, and I heard both panic and confusion in his voice. "We have to leave?"

"Parks, it's ok. We're only moving a few miles from here, to a house for the three of us. Look." Robby took out his phone, and while they were going through about a million pictures, I was staring at the same paper from the folder that he'd brought

home, at the same black line with my name typed neatly beneath it, waiting for my signature.

“Do you need a pen?” he asked.

“Can we go right now and look at it?” Parker asked at the same time. “When do we move?” He took it completely in stride, like of course Robby and I would live together, with him. They discussed when that would happen—soon—while I continued to stare at the white paper so hard that the little black letters started to hop around on it like fleas. We’d had them for a while in our cottage after a family of squirrels had lived in the roof above the porch.

Robby’s hand invaded my field of vision. He tapped his index finger on the blank line. “Before we move, Aubin has to sign.”

“You know I can’t pay for it,” I said, and he nodded. “Why are you doing this?”

“You said that I was trying to get you to run away,” he reminded me. “I’m not. This is what I want. The three of us should be together.”

The three of us, together. I looked back down at the paper. Why? What was the angle here? There had to be something that I was missing.

Parker ran and got a pen. He took my hand and placed it in my palm. “Sign, Aubin. What are you waiting for? This will be perfect. Please sign.” His eyes pleaded with me, too.

“Is this because of the cheesesteak?”

Robby blinked at my question. “What?”

“You wanted to give me an atomic toaster to repay me for when you choked, and I said no to that. Then I tried to tell you that the tire you put on my car was payback enough, and then that going to the wedding was a favor to me, but you didn’t believe it. You still think that you owe me.”

Robby paused and then he nodded. “Yep. I want to pay you back for saving my life. I want to make us even.”

“If I sign this paper, I’ll be the co-owner of the house,” I stated, and he nodded. “If I am, then you won’t worry about being in my debt anymore.”

“Exactly. I won’t even mention the cheesesteak again.” He picked up my hand and moved it to the blank line. “Sign.”

I hesitated for another second, and then I did.



“I don’t know why I have to do this.”

“Because Bowie and I are having our first Thanksgiving dinner at our new house, and if you and Dad get into a fight, you’ll make everybody so uncomfortable,” my sister explained. “You should talk to him now and straighten out the problems between you. You both have some soul-searching to do.”

“Sissy, that’s not going to happen. Do you really think Dad is capable of straightening out our problems?” Personally, I doubted that he had a soul to search, and he’d never try to understand my feelings because he didn’t think that I had any, either. “He’s not going to change or do anything differently. He has the emotional depth of a shower pan.” I knew a lot about those, since the inspector that I’d hired had found a leak in the pan in the upstairs bathroom of our new house. It was one item in a list of problems that had to be taken care of before we moved in. Because of Robby’s schedule, I was the point person for all real estate/construction issues, and I was learning a lot. More than I ever wanted to about shower pans, maybe, but it was interesting.

My sister looked very stubborn. “You still have to come meet him,” she announced. “He might surprise you.” She had insisted that I had to have coffee with her and our father today, insisted and then arrived at my condo to pick me up when I’d said that I wasn’t sure I could make it. I hadn’t been there, but I’d told her where I was: Robby’s place, which I was helping him to pack up and clean out. By “helping,” I meant that I was doing most of it, but that was ok. I’d always liked to be

busy and working hard gave me less time to stress about the fact that we were moving in together.

Me, Robby, and Parker: roommates. It couldn't have been weirder.

Sissy thought so, too. She kept looking around at the neat stack of labeled boxes lined up against the wall and at the giant, messy pile in the middle of the floor that I'd labeled with a sign saying, "Throw This Out, Robert Spurgeon Baines."

"Maybe we could also talk about your move," she suggested.

"There's nothing to discuss." There was actually so, so much, but my baby sister wasn't going to be the one to hear about my fears. For example, how would I handle it when Robby met someone, for real? I believed that he would, because he was a good guy and he deserved it. If he ever opened himself up to something lasting and permanent, something more than just sex, a line of women would form at the front door.

How would I deal with Robby having a girlfriend, and what if that girlfriend became a wife? What if he wanted more kids? What would happen to Parker and me?

That was in our future, but good Lord, there were nearer-term problems as well. How would I deal with watching him walk around shirtless, with hearing the shower and knowing that he was in there naked? I went now to his kitchen and used a glass I hadn't packed yet to drink some cold water. I needed to cool myself down.

"I know you thought I was crazy when I married Bowie," Sissy continued, and yes, I'd had my doubts about their decision. "I understand how a person on the outside looking in can't really get all the intricacies of someone else's situation. But..."

"Parker needs us," I told her. "That's the reason. He grew up with a dad who was as big of an idiot as ours is, and he has nothing. If we didn't adopt him, he'd be in foster care or shuffled around like, uh, some other people were." I wasn't

sure if Robby would want his personal story discussed, so I stopped myself from furiously commenting on it.

“No, I understand why you’d adopt Parker. It makes total sense to me,” she said, and it would because my sister had a big, big heart. I’d always considered it to be one of her failings, but I could have been wrong about that. “I just don’t understand why Robby Baines is involved. Or why you all have to live together.”

“He wants to be part of Parker’s life, too,” I answered, but she frowned.

“I only know *of* him,” she started to say, and I knew what she was referring to.

“I’m aware of what you think his shortcomings are,” I told her. “I know that he’s young and that his main interest in life has been chasing women. He has terrible business ideas, too, in case you didn’t hear that, and there was a definite possibility that he could have run through all the money that he’s made, because he used to be really bad at handling it. I’m not saying it was his fault, though, because he had no experience at all with budgeting or keeping track of his finances. You and I both did, because we had to take care of Dad, but Robby never even had anyone as crappy as that in his life. After his mom died, he was totally alone.”

I had forgotten that I wasn’t going to share those personal details, but I was on a roll. “And why shouldn’t he be with ton of women? Everybody’s willing and winds up happy about it. You should see the expressions on their faces when they leave his house! It’s like, bliss.”

“How do you know that?” Sissy asked sharply.

“Um, I can see them sometimes, through my window. They have to walk right past my condo,” I said, and quickly moved on. “I’m just telling you not to judge him. And by the way, he hasn’t had anyone over lately. Not for a while, actually, because he knows that Parker is watching and imitating him.” Robby had gone to a big Halloween party, a great opportunity for meeting more women, but he hadn’t even brought someone

home that night. He'd actually been back here by nine o'clock and gone with me to pick up Parker from a friend's house.

"But you two are going to own a home together?" she continued. "It doesn't seem like something you would do."

Now I understood what she was looking for. My sister wanted me to be the same woman I always had been, the person who made sensible decisions, who got things done, who ruthlessly dealt with life and everything in it, who came out on top. "I don't even know who I am anymore," I heard myself say. "I'm not the woman that Billy thought I was and I've always known that I'm not the daughter that Dad wanted. Now I'm not even pretending."

"Aubin!" She looked shocked. "You've been the apple of Dad's eye since the day you were born!"

"No, I was just a symbol or something. I was what our family could have been but I knew, deep, deep down, that I wasn't perfect or a savior or even good enough for him. I always understood that. It turned out that I wasn't good enough for Billy, either," I added. "When my business fell apart and he left me, I felt like everyone got to see the truth. It was like that dream when I'm naked on Woodsmen Field."

"I have that dream, too. Sometimes I'm wearing pants but I forgot to put on the halter top." Sissy was trying to wipe her eyes before I saw, but she was crying. "I always thought you were so confident. I always admired you so much."

"I know. It was hard to live up to what you thought of me." I sighed, remembering. "You made that big speech at my wedding about how amazing I was."

"You are! You had a downturn," she said, phrasing it carefully, "but now you can start back up."

I shook my head. "I won't ever be that woman again and Dad knows it. He used to beam with pride when he saw me and now he only looks at me with pity. Pity and disappointment."

"What has he ever done?" she demanded. "What has he accomplished except getting a whole lot of DUIs and losing every job he ever got? And mostly, *I* got those jobs for him!"

She shook her head. “I love him but I don’t have blinders on or anything. Moving away from home gave me a lot more perspective. I was always aware of the pressure he put on you and how you hated it, and I’m sorry that I—”

“Don’t apologize to me,” I told her. “You have nothing to be sorry for. You had it so bad, Sissy. Our mom left and you were so little, with only him to love you.”

“No, that’s not true,” she told me. “I’ve been thinking a lot about how we grew up because Bowie keeps talking about having kids. He doesn’t have sisters, so he’s watching me do my hair to learn how in case we have a girl.”

It was exactly something her husband would do, except that I bet he was also watching her because he couldn’t ever seem to keep his eyes off her.

“He wanted to know if Dad used to do my hair when I was little. I said no, Aubin did, and then I started remembering all the other things you did for me, too. I didn’t just magically learn how to read—you taught me. You taught me everything. Before you left for college, you even showed me how to use tampons.”

I remembered that, too. She had been a few years away from needing them and had freaked out.

“I always used to believe that I raised myself, but that wasn’t correct. You did,” she said.

“I was a terrible mom to you,” I admitted. “I was resentful and angry, and every chance I got, I took off and left you. I’m sorry.”

“You were a kid!” Sissy answered. “Mom died when you were ten years old. Can you imagine Parker trying to take care of a little sister and also running a household? I know you did that until I took over, and I know how hard it was—and I didn’t have anyone younger than me to watch over like you did. I don’t blame you for anything and I’m not angry. I don’t need you to apologize either, because as far as I’m concerned, you don’t have anything to be sorry for.” And then she hugged me and I felt her crying.

Our dad saw her red eyes when we finally showed up, very late, to meet him at the coffee shop. He turned on me, furious. “What the hell did you do to your little sister?”

“You’re noticing someone besides yourself? Are you feeling ok, Dad?” I responded.

“Let’s not start off like that,” Sissy intervened. “I got emotional because I was remembering how much I owe to Aubin,” she started to explain, and she got very tearful all over again. “I really do,” she said in a sniffly way, but then straightened up. “I’m fine, all good. She didn’t make me cry.”

I was staring at him. “Dad, are you wearing an ascot?”

“Mary got it for me,” he said gruffly. He eyed me back, frowning. “You look different, yourself.”

I glanced down at what I was wearing: one of Robby’s sweatshirts, jeans, and hiking boots. Then I felt my hair: pony tail. I was pretty sure I hadn’t put on makeup that morning because Parker and I had been running late (literally, we’d gone for a run together), but I had showered for sure before we’d raced off to school.

“You can just say that I look bad,” I let my dad know. “Ugly, old, fat, whatever. I don’t care.”

“Aubin, you’re always beautiful,” my sister piped up immediately, but she was conditioned to believe that.

“That wasn’t what I meant,” my dad said, scowling. “Something’s different, but I don’t know what it is.”

“I’m probably dirty. I was packing up Robby’s closet and he has so much clothing, I don’t think he ever gets to the back wall. It was like archeology,” I said.

“Robby? Who’s that?”

I glanced at my sister, but she shook her head slightly. She hadn’t told him anything, and my dad, not a football fan in the least, would never recognize the famous name. “Robby is Robert Baines,” I explained. “He’s going to be my roommate because I’m selling my condo.” Parker and I had been staying in Robby’s place for the showings. The real estate agent (not

the one Robby had been using before, since he'd fired that company without any physical harm to its employees) was semi-confident that I would get the asking price.

"I thought you'd find a new man pretty quick," my dad said, nodding.

"Robby is my roommate and that's all. And what are you trying to say?" I asked him.

"He's giving you a compliment," my sister interpreted. "Right, Dad?" She glared at him until he nodded.

"Tell me about this boy you're taking care of," he said, moving right on. "Peter, is that right?"

"Parker. And I'm adopting him, so you'll be a grandpa."

"Good Lord," my dad muttered. "I hope no one thinks I'm going to take him fishing or do any of that crap."

"No, our expectations for you are extremely low," I assured him, and he said it was a good thing.

We didn't solve our problems, and no, we didn't soul-search. But it was a good cup of coffee, and he didn't make fun of my latest job or mention that I was a failure. He let me ridicule his ascot for a while, and then he didn't have a fit when my sister and I talked cheerleading and football, and all in all? It was ok.

As I was leaving, I thought that I'd probably see them both again pretty soon, and that I wouldn't mind it.

"Aubin," my dad called, and I turned back around. "You look different because you look happy." My sister nodded in agreement.

Maybe I was.

Chapter 14

“I think I’m dying.”

I wiped my forehead with my sleeve. It was really Robby’s sleeve, because I was wearing his shirt. “You’re not dying. You’re using different muscles from the ones in your legs that you’ve built up with running, so you’re tired. You’re also hungry.” I was tired and hungry myself and I knew I sounded ticked because of it. “Parker, it’s not so bad,” I told him, but I hated moving as much as he did. It was always a little unsettling—and this particular move was particularly messing with me. This was *our* house, Robby kept saying. Ours, where we were going to live together, forever.

“I don’t remember dealing with this much when my dad and I came from Chicago,” he continued to complain. “Why does Robby have so many clothes?”

“Remember what I told you about football players and their signing bonuses?” I took a breath to explain it again, and that got him up and off the floor, running toward his new bedroom. It was mostly empty of furniture right now, but it was going to get filled soon. We had brought some things ourselves but the large truck that Robby had paid for would arrive here any minute to deliver the rest of it. I’d been supervising, which I was always good at, but also packing, carrying, and unpacking for the whole day while Parker had been at school and Robby had been at the stadium.

I wiped my forehead again. Out of all of us, I had the fewest number of boxes. I had already given most of the furniture to my ex-husband and then I’d sold everything I could. I had practically nothing to my name except for this house, the house that I was sharing with Robby.

Good Lord. I walked back to the kitchen, which I’d been cleaning in preparation for putting away our dishes and gear, but then I sat down on the floor for a moment and tried to breathe normally. I was fine, all good. If it didn’t work, I would take Parker and we would move to Paris. They had to have cross country there, right?

I heard clicks and a thump as the pretty front door opened and closed. “Pizza,” a deep voice called, and Parker skidded down the stairs to meet him and the food. “Hi,” Robby told me as he joined me in the kitchen. I got off the floor and smiled in a way that was meant to be normal, but he frowned back. “You all right?”

“I’m fine. Good,” I assured him. “I set up a picnic area.” I’d piled boxes to create a table and chairs, and Parker had already placed himself there and was devouring slices. Before too long, though, the movers arrived and I was running around directing everyone again, getting our beds set up, finding Parker’s toothbrush (because yes, he did need to use it even when we were moving), and taking a dog that had wandered inside during the general confusion back to her own house. After they apologized, her owners were as friendly as their pet and invited us all over anytime, and that was before they even knew that their new neighbor was a Woodsmen player.

By the time I finally got Parker to stop setting up his dumb computer and had the house mostly under control, it was late. I was wandering upstairs but the light was still on in Robby’s room and the door was cracked open, too. I picked up a box I’d hidden in the hall closet so that it wouldn’t get hurt before I walked down the hall and tapped lightly on his door with my foot.

“Come in.”

Robby was seated on the big bed that the movers had struggled with, surrounded by mountains of packing materials and stuff. He looked tired and maybe overwhelmed, which was how I was trying not to feel myself.

“How’s the rest of the house?” he asked.

“A lot like this,” I admitted. I’d done the most in Parker’s room so that he would be comfortable, and I knew that Robby had been working in the kitchen so that looked slightly better. But not by much.

“Is your bed all ready? Do you have somewhere to sleep?”

“I’m fine.” I wasn’t. I was feeling the same way as when I woke up at night, crushed by so much worry that it didn’t let my lungs fill.

“You didn’t have much,” he noted. “Your condo was pretty empty already, but I didn’t see where your desk went.”

“I sold it a few days ago.” I didn’t want the reminder of my old business anymore, I’d decided. I’d also gone through the boxes I’d kept in its drawers for one last time, separating the trash from the things that I thought were worth keeping. I’d packed those into a padded envelope and sent it to William Papakonstantinou at the address of the Rustlers’ stadium in Oklahoma because I didn’t know where he lived. “Hi Billy. I’m moving and found this stuff of yours,” I’d written on a note that I’d enclosed beneath the sticky seal. “I hope you’re doing well, and you won’t hear from me again.”

I looked around at the mess in this bedroom. “I’ll work in here tomorrow,” I told Robby. “Don’t worry. It will be a lot better by the time you get back from the stadium and when you come home from the away game this weekend, it will be transformed.”

“I’m not worried,” he answered. “I’m...” He trailed off, looking around, and then he suddenly smiled at me. “It’s a good house, right? It’s going to be good for all of us to live here.”

“I think so,” I said cautiously, and remembered to breathe. He patted the bed and I sat on it just as cautiously, putting the small box between us.

He looked relieved to see it. “This is an important one,” he told me.

“I opened it when I found it in your closet at the condo, but when I saw what was inside, I taped it back up. Is this your mom’s stuff?”

Robby nodded and peeled back the tape. “This is her jewelry box,” he explained as he took it out. “She had me so young, it’s all kind of teenage girl taste, I guess. Beads and fake gemstones.” He opened the lid and picked up a necklace that

spelled “Rita” in fancy script, dotted in what I guessed were glass emeralds. He touched the delicate letters with his big finger. “I remember her wearing this.” He showed me more pieces, like her second-favorite earrings.

“Which ones were her favorites?” I asked, carefully looking through the assortment.

“She was buried in them. I picked them out for her to wear.” He was taking something else out of the box, so he didn’t see me put my fingers into the corners of my eyes to press back the emotion that welled up there.

“This is an essay she wrote in high school. She saved it, because she got such a good grade,” he said as he passed me the stapled papers.

“Tina Baines,” I read, and flipped through the pages. “She was smart. That’s where you get it, then.”

“Right.”

Well, he would see it soon enough. I had already contacted his former school about him completing his degree and I was positive that he was capable.

Robby had taken out a set of keys that jingled in his palm. “I probably should have given these back. When I was supposed to move, a neighbor came over, an older lady. After the funeral, she helped me pick out things to keep before I left for good. She must not have noticed that I took the keys to the car and the apartment, but these were always really important to my mom so I thought I’d better. I remember it so clearly. I remember choosing every one of these things and putting them in my bag.”

Just one bag? Then I’d been right in how I’d imagined a smaller version of Robby. I’d pictured him carrying a single suitcase and wearing the same lost, confused expression that Parker had at his dad’s funeral.

He selected a gold band from the velveteen slot in the jewelry box. “I think this is the only thing she owned that was real gold, my grandma’s wedding ring. My mom always wore it.”

He picked up my hand and slipped it onto my ring finger. “It fits you, too.”

“It’s beautiful.” I started to slide it off but Robby rested his palm over mine.

“You should keep it. Then I can see it all the time.”

“Oh. Are you sure?” It was so important to him...but he nodded. “Well, after the season, you could get a chain and wear it around your neck, instead,” I suggested. I looked into the box, at all the little treasures that he had collected to remember his mother. “I did this, too,” I said. “First, I watched my mom pack up. She was running around our house with a bag and stuffing things in, clothes and makeup and shoes. She never said a word about what she was doing but I still understood that she was leaving for good. She took off her wedding ring and put it on the dresser, and later, my dad threw it into Laurel Lake. We could have sold it but he never had an ounce of self-preservation.”

Carefully, I closed Robby’s box and smoothed the tape. I would get something nicer to store his mother’s possessions in, and maybe, when the house wasn’t in such chaos, he would want to look through them again to find some things we could frame or display, like Parker’s cross country ribbon. It was already up on the new fridge, next to his latest math test. Ninety-five percent, thank you very much.

But my mind was still on my own mother. “When the car peeled out and she was gone, Sissy was crying and I tried to help her. Our dad was passed out on the couch and I knew he wouldn’t do anything. Then I got a box and walked around the cottage like my mom had done, gathering up more of her stuff. I was telling myself that I would keep it for her, but I really knew that I was keeping it for myself. Dad threw away everything else when he came to and figured out what had happened, but I hid my box above the ceiling in my room. He never found it and last year, I gave it all to my sister. She wore our mom’s old cheerleading uniform on Halloween and she looked so cute in it.”

Robby was still holding my hand. “Maybe we shouldn’t talk about dead parents anymore,” he suggested, and I realized that I was close to crying.

I tried to shake it off. “Maybe not. I made a smoothie for Parker before he went to bed. Want the rest? I can get it for you.”

He leaned forward instead of answering, and I had an almost dizzying impression that he was going to...kiss me? But he only rested his forehead against mine. Then he picked me up and pulled me across the bed, until I was sitting in his lap.

“What are you doing?” I asked in alarm.

“I don’t know.” He settled me between his legs and leaned against a pile of pillows, tugging me along with him so that I was now lying on his chest beneath the weight of his big arms. I didn’t know what he was doing either, but I found that I liked it a whole lot.

“This is so crazy,” I heard myself say.

“What?”

So many parts of it were crazy. Robby Baines, who escorted girls back to their cars after sex instead of being close to them for the night, was cuddling me, the one woman he didn’t want to sleep with. There was also the fact that I wasn’t a cuddler, either. I could count on my hand the number of times I’d wanted to be held or even hugged, and those times didn’t involve guys. I only wanted to hug Parker or my sister.

But I chose to tell him the other reason it was odd. “I never even let my husband see me like this,” I said.

“Like what? What do you mean?”

“Like unkempt,” I explained. “Like gross. Before he woke up in the morning, I’d quietly take a shower, do my hair, put on makeup, and get back into bed. I knew when he’d be home and I would arrange going to the gym or taking runs so that he wouldn’t see me sweaty, either.”

“What? Women do that?”

“Yeah, I always have and I have friends who do, too.” But they didn’t take it to the same level, I realized when I thought about his question. They didn’t act like that with long-term boyfriends or husbands. They seemed to quit the show after a while, and plenty of my friends had never pretended at all. My sister probably wouldn’t have even thought about it.

“I don’t get it,” he said.

I tried to explain. “It seemed necessary. Billy thought of me like that, like I was perfect. I knew I wasn’t but I felt like I had to keep it up.”

“He wasn’t perfect either. Who the hell is?”

“I know that. I didn’t expect it of him,” I snipped back. But even as I spoke, I wiggled a little closer to Robby’s body. “It’s just weird.” A lot of this was, but again, I felt ok with it. We sat quietly just like that, until he broke the silence.

“Will you do something for me?”

“What?” I asked cautiously. I twisted the ring on my finger, surprised at how well it fit there.

“Will you please find a different job so that you’re not working at night? I don’t want to be in some city far away from here and you’re like a sitting duck behind that register.”

“I’m not exactly a sitting duck,” I huffed. But I didn’t like the night shifts either. “I will look for something different. I have been, actually.”

“Good.” His hand rubbed my back. “I’ve never liked you getting in so late. I used to wait for your light.”

“What?”

“When you came home after cleaning the office buildings, you’d turn on the light in your living room. I don’t know why, but the windows in my old condo all faced out in weird directions and I could see it. That night you had to change your tire, the light never came on. I went down to the parking lot and I was sitting there thinking about going to look for you when you finally came home.”

“You—” I stopped. “You were waiting for me? You were watching to make sure that I got there safely?”

“I was waiting,” he agreed, and adjusted his arms around me.

His words felt like another kind of hug. I rubbed my palm along his forearm, looking at the scars on the inside of his wrist. “Thank you, Robby. Thank you for doing that.”

He was quiet but I felt him breathe in heavily, and then expel the air. “Those marks aren’t from a car accident.”

I knew that. They were too even, too numerous, and too carefully placed.

“It was the third place I lived,” he said. “The guy didn’t like me.”

“I do,” I said. I picked up my head to look at him, and I put my palm against his cheek instead. “I do, so much.”

The door to the bedroom opened further, and Parker walked in. “Hey,” he told us, and didn’t appear to notice anything at all strange about the major snuggle that was happening. I lay back down, feeling slightly dizzy.

“What’s up, Parks?” Robby asked, and his own voice was very even and calm.

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“New places are hard sometimes,” Robby agreed, and I thought that he would know after his roving childhood. “Aubin’s anxious, too.”

Parker sat on the bed. “Really?” he asked me, and I paused but then nodded, rubbing my cheek against soft t-shirt and hard chest.

“I am. This is a strange situation for me.” Especially the particular physical position I was in at the moment, but it still seemed ok. It was definitely easier to breathe now and I’d felt my heart slowing down to keep pace with the steady thump of Robby’s beneath my ear. He had been watching for me, I thought, keeping an eye out to make sure that I was all right. I rubbed my cheek against him again, this time just because I wanted to.

“It’s weird but it’s good,” Parker told me. “It’s good for us to be together, like a family.”

He let me take his hand as Robby told him, “We are.”

It did feel that way. When they both fell asleep, I got up carefully and tucked them in. I flipped the switch on the wall and watched them for another moment in the moonlight before I went upstairs to my own room.

Later that week, Robby left for his away game and Parker and I worked like dogs to get the house together. It was looking pretty good and at least the TV was functioning by the time of the Woodsmen start on Saturday afternoon. We sat together on Robby’s couch, which was at least three feet too long for its new place in this living room, to watch together on the screen that I’d propped up against some boxes. It wasn’t perfect, but we were ok.

“Ice?” I offered and held out my cup, and he rolled his eyes.

“I can’t stand the sound of you chewing on that. Why don’t you get real food for a snack?”

“I do. Sometimes,” I said.

“You didn’t have lunch, either. I think it’s weird how you eat,” he told me, and I hadn’t realized that he’d been noticing. Robby had stopped bringing women to his old condo months before to set a good example and maybe that was something I should have considered about myself.

“I think I’ll cut up an apple for a snack,” I suggested. “Want one?” He did, with peanut butter, and also a yogurt, and also a sandwich. We settled in for a second time as the Woodsmen jogged onto the field.

“He’s playing great,” Parker was saying in the fourth quarter, and that was when Robby took the hit. It was after the whistle and late, and it was too high, and there was an immediate flag, and I had grabbed Parker’s arm without realizing it.

“He’s fine,” I announced, but it didn’t sound believable even to my own ears. “He’ll get up.” We sat silently as the dumb TV director chose to replay the moment, then replay it again. Parker didn’t pull away from my grip and we stayed frozen

and staring as Robby went down, then from a different angle, then back to the first in super slow motion, until finally the camera cut away to the idiots in the booth.

We had them muted in order to listen to the local announcers, Herb and Buzz, playing on my phone. Both of us turned to stare at that screen instead as they continued to speak about Robby.

“That was a cheap shot, unnecessary roughness for sure, which is what we would expect from our opponents today,” Buzz told us angrily. They didn’t pretend to be impartial. “That was an...ok, folks, here’s the good news. Baines is sitting up.”

Parker and I simultaneously swiveled our heads again, this time toward the TV as the camera showed Robby rising slowly from the field with the help of some of his equally large teammates, one of whom was my brother-in-law. He sat on a cart and they drove him off toward the locker room.

“We have to go,” Parker said urgently, and also stood up. “We should go to Robby right now.”

I consulted my phone. “They’re about eight hundred miles from us,” I said. “That’s a long way.” I looked more.

“If he needs us, how will we get there?” Parker asked, but I already had a plan.

“The quickest flight would arrive tomorrow afternoon so we’ll have to drive.” He started for the door but I said no. “We should wait to hear from Robby or the team before we leave.”

My phone rang then, but it was my sister calling to tell me that she was sure he was ok. “Are you worried?” she asked.

“I’ve seen him take worse hits than that and he was good to go in the next practice,” I answered heartily. I closed my fingers around the gold ring and rubbed over its smooth surface.

“Is Parker sitting next to you? Is he right there, listening?”

“Exactly,” I told her.

“I’ll call you if I hear anything from Bowie, ok?”

We sat in silence, watching the Woodsmen win and then listening to the postgame show with Herb and Buzz, waiting and hoping to get news from any source. As I was deciding that we should head to the car and they were wrapping up and saying they needed to head back to Michigan, we heard from Robbie himself. When my phone rang again and showed his name, both Parker and I dove for it.

He got there first. He'd grown at least two inches in height since we'd met and his arms had also lengthened; thanks to my exercise regimen, he was also a lot stronger. So I had only myself to blame as he batted my hands away.

"Robby?" he asked, his voice high and tremulous. "Robby? Are you ok?"

"Put him on speaker! Right now!" I barked, so I heard half of the answer.

"—fine," the deep voice told us. "Don't worry, Parks."

"Robby?" I demanded, and my voice sounded just as anxious as Parker's had. "Are you really ok? What happened?"

"I knew you two would be upset," he answered. "I took a little hit and they want me to stay the night instead of flying home with the team."

"We're coming," Parker announced.

"No, you're not. You'd never make it here before I was ready to go."

We would if I drove all night.

"Don't even think about driving all night," Robby said, and I frowned at the phone. "I really am fine. I'm at the hospital —"

"The hospital?" Parker yelped, his voice even higher.

I knew the protocol. "Who's the trainer there with you?" I asked him.

There was a short silence, and then Robby said, "Raul."

I knew him because he'd worked with my husband. He definitely hated me, but he was a good trainer. "Put him on.

Please.”

We heard Robby sigh. “Fine,” he said. Then we heard a muffled conversation between him and someone else.

Another voice asked, “Hello?”

“Raul, this is Aubin Frazier. I need to hear from you that Robby is ok.”

“*You’re* asking for honesty?” Sarcasm dripped from his words, and Parker and I heard something very angry and dirty come out of Robby’s mouth. There was a short silence. “Yes. Yes, he’s here for observation only and in my opinion, he’ll be fine to travel home tomorrow morning,” the trainer said, his tone clipped.

Robby got on again but he had to talk to a doctor so he hung up after only another moment, and I turned to Parker.

“See?” I asked cheerfully. “He’s fine.”

“I think that other guy was lying,” he answered me. “That Raul sounded like a dick.”

“He is, but I know that my ex-husband really valued his opinion, so I think we can trust him. If I didn’t, you and I would be in the car heading south and west right now.”

Parker didn’t look appeased; he only looked worried. He went to his room and I heard the door slam, but after a while, he came back to the living room where I was still fretting but doing it more usefully by scrubbing each individual window pane.

“Hank said some people are going over to his house,” he said, and something about the way he spoke made me look up at him sharply.

“Like, a party?”

“It’s not the same as when you were a teenager,” he said, and I heard the “patient with the elderly” tone now.

“Really? How is it different? Don’t wayward youths still drink sarsaparilla and smoke reefer?”

“What are those things? What’s a wayward youth?”

“Parker, parties are exactly the same,” I stated. “His parents are away, right? And you’re going over there with girls, and Hank’s big brother is going to buy you beer, and somebody says they can get weed, and everybody’s sending secret messages about it.”

“No!” he protested, but then slumped slightly. “He has a big sister.”

“You can’t go.”

“Aubin! I thought you wanted me to make friends!”

“I do, but you’re fourteen—”

“I’ll be fifteen in February,” he interrupted.

“No,” I told him again, and we kept arguing. Rather, he kept arguing and I cleaned so angrily that I might have broken some of the glass in the window. Finally, I cut him off.

“No, and that’s it. No. You can have your friends over here tomorrow where I will not allow them to drink or smoke or have sex in somebody’s bed.”

He stared at me, flabbergasted. Maybe that hadn’t been part of the plan.

I wanted him to understand my reasoning. “Parks—”

“Don’t call me that! Robby calls me that, and if he was here, he’d let me go because he’s not some old witch who wants me to be as lonely and friendless as she is. And you’re poor, too, and your car is stupid and ugly. And that’s the fucking truth!”

We stared at each other, and then he stomped up the stairs and slammed the door to his room. I stood there for a moment seething, and then I went back to the windows. We had already finished with Robby’s room so next I cleaned and organized the living room and kitchen until they were perfect, and by that point a couple of hours had passed. It was around dinner now and I’d worked off my anger. I figured that Parker had spent enough time stewing to take the edge of his, too, and he was also probably hungry, so I went upstairs and knocked on his door.

“Parker? Can we talk?” No answer, but I kept talking. “I’m sorry, but I can’t let you go to that party. I know you think I’ve always been a social outcast but I did have friends at one point, and I remember all the trouble we got into. I can’t let you do the same things.” More silence. “You know why?” I asked the door. “I don’t want you get into trouble or get hurt because I care about you so much. It’s because I want to protect you from everything.” There was no answer again, absolutely no sound at all, as if he wasn’t even there. Good Lord.

“Parker?” I called loudly, and opened the door. Yes, he was gone, but he’d left the window ajar so that the curtains I’d hung to make the room seem homey were billowing in the chilly fall wind. I ran over and opened it fully to peer out, and he wasn’t lying in broken pieces on the lawn below. I could see how he’d climbed down using a trellis (now detached from the house) and then jumping into a bush (it was partially crushed). But he had been successful in his escape, because there was no sign of him at all.

And if he thought I was going to stand for it, he had another thing coming. It didn’t take too long to get Hank’s last name off the cross country roster and then to find the address of the party. I got into my ugly orange car and drove there, and I may not have used any gas to do it. My burning anger probably fueled the engine.

If it was a party, it was small or they were being more careful than my friends and I ever had been. There was no one on the lawn in front of Hank’s house or wandering in the road and I couldn’t hear any music. No matter, I was here to bust it up.

“Parker!” I yelled at the top of my voice, and I walloped the door with my fist. “Open this! Open it right now, in the name of the law! I have a warrant for search and seizure!”

I wasn’t sure exactly what was coming out of my mouth, but that worked. The boy I recognized as Hank did open the door and his eyes were huge and bleary as he stared at me.

“You’re a cop?” he asked.

“Where’s Parker?” I barked back, and I walked right in. This party definitely sucked; only a few boys sat around and there was not a female presence at all. There was no smell of pot, either, but there were liquor bottles out on the kitchen table.

“He’s in my room,” Hank volunteered and pointed with a hand that shook. He looked scared enough to wet his pants and I was glad.

Parker was sprawled across the bed, face up. “Good Lord!” I ran to him but he was breathing and he even raised his head when I knelt beside him.

“What’re you doing here?” he slurred.

“I’m bringing your butt home and you’re grounded for the rest of your life. You won’t see your computer again. Your phone is mine for eternity! You’ll never leave the house, you’ll never leave your room!”

“Oh, shilt,” he breathed.

First, I broke up the “party” by telling them that yes, I was the police, and yes, I would be telling their parents. Then we left Hank sniffing behind us and I dragged Parker to the car. All the muscle building and healthy meals had made him heavy and I was panting and even more enraged by the time we got there.

“I’m sorry, Aubin,” he mumbled as I buckled him in. “I was learning how to do shots.”

“How much did you drink?”

He had to think about that as I got into the driver’s side, but fortunately, the answer was that it hadn’t been a terrible amount. It was enough that he was going to be sorry in the morning, though, and I was glad about that.

“Are you going to tell Robby?” he asked me as we sped towards home.

“He’s going to wonder why you’re locked in your room for the next five years,” I answered. “Yes, I’m telling Robby. You climbed out your window and got drunk! He’s going to be furious at you.”

“Fluck,” he muttered. “I didn’t mean to do this. No girls came, anyway. Shots taste like poison.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing. You could have drunk so much that you threw up, and your dumb friends left you alone, lying on your back so you would have choked on it.”

“Choked on puke?”

“You have no idea!” I seethed. “You could have fallen off that trellis and broken your neck. You could have gotten kidnapped as you ran to his house!” Probably not, since this was a very safe place, but my mind brimmed with terrible possibilities.

“I did fall off the trellis,” he said. “I hurt my ankle.”

“You could have broken it so that you’d never be able to run again!” I said angrily. “Did you really fall? Are you ok? How bad is it hurt?”

He was all right, but still drunk. I made him take a cold shower, drink a gallon or so of water, and then sit with me to watch cheerleading routines on TV. It was only the beginning of his punishment.

Time and the dinner I cooked did sober him up, to the point that I felt he could go to bed alone. I walked him up there and made a large show of nailing boards across his window, making holes in the trim that he was going to have to repair himself.

“You don’t have to do that. I’m not going to climb out again,” he said. He winced and held his head at the noise as I swung the hammer hard again. “I’m sorry.”

I knew that he was, but I couldn’t give in and tell him that that I’d done much worse when I’d been in high school. “I’m glad you’re sorry about it now, but it doesn’t erase your actions.”

“I know.” He rubbed his head. “Were you worried about me?”

“Yes! Yes, I was so worried,” I said, and sat down on the bed next to him. “I almost puked myself when I saw that you were gone.”

“Don’t talk about puking anymore,” he mumbled, and I pulled the garbage can closer, just in case.

“Parker, I didn’t let you go to that party because I know what can happen at those things.” Then I told him what I’d said earlier in the evening when I’d pounded on his bedroom door. “I want to keep you from getting hurt, from anything ever hurting you, because I’m your mom. I love you.”

Parker got red, because he was trying not to cry. “I love you, too,” he said back. I hugged him very hard, glad that he was home and safe, that his ankle was fine and that he was mine. My son.

Eventually, I let go and told him that he needed to sleep it off. I walked to the door and turned out the light, but again, I stayed for a moment to watch him.

“Am I still going to be grounded?” he asked.

Oh, the answer to that was a major yes.

Chapter 15

Mia wiped her eyes. She was laughing so hard that she was actually crying as we sat waiting for our lunch to arrive. “Wait, tell me again about how you lied and yelled that you were the police,” she said.

“I wasn’t trying to lie. The words about being there in the name the law just kind of came out of my mouth,” I explained. It felt good to laugh about the incident with Parker now, when before it had made me so worried and upset. Although I’d relaxed about it, he was still punished and was very, very apologetic. And my anger had been nothing when compared to Robby’s when he got home and heard the story from Parker himself.

“I don’t know how I came up with the stuff about taking his phone and computer and grounding him,” I continued. “I certainly never got punished like that for anything I did in high school.”

“I remember,” Mia said, shaking her head. “You could get away with murder and no one cared. We were all so jealous. But you listened to my parents give it to me enough times to have memorized a speech or two.”

That was true. I’d often heard them ream her out for something that both of us had done and if she’d been jealous of me, I’d felt jealous of that. I never got punished because no one was interested in what I was doing; I could have run off to Paris and I doubted that my own dad would have ever noticed. I was glad that Parker was living a life where he would get in trouble, just like Mia had.

“So he’s really your son,” she said, and I nodded.

“I’m really adopting him,” I answered. “I love him.”

I watched Mia’s eyes fill with tears again, but it wasn’t from laughter. She held up a paper napkin to catch the moisture before it ruined her makeup. “God! Here I go,” she told me shakily. “I’m having some kind of baby crisis. Every time I see one, or I see a pregnant woman, or even when somebody

talks about their kids, I start crying. I know that Erin is going to start a family right away,” she said, referencing our friend (well, my former friend) who’d recently gotten married. “I think that was the main reason she said yes to him, just to get his sperm.”

“You could have a baby without the bother of a husband,” I pointed out. “There are plenty of ways to get sperm.”

“I know, but I don’t want only some little swimmers.” She dabbed again. “You knew my mom and dad. You saw how they were kind of nuts,” she said, and I nodded. “But they loved each other and they loved us a lot, and that’s also what I want. Two parents and three kids who fight over who gets the car and who ate the last popsicle.”

I thought about that. “It would be nice if Parker had siblings,” I heard myself say. “Robby told me that he always wanted them for himself.” Then I realized how that had sounded. “Robby and I aren’t having kids,” I quickly added.

“Speaking of sperm, he must have some powerful ones.”

“I bet he does,” I agreed, “but they haven’t been anywhere near my eggs.”

“Why not?” Mia asked me. “I don’t know how you could even keep your hands off him.”

My fears from before we’d moved in together about the distraction of Robby half-naked in the house, of him showering and me picturing it—all those things had happened. He’d been home when I’d left, getting ready to go and stay at the Wequetong Inn with the Woodsmen tonight before the game tomorrow. I’d heard the water turn on, and I’d stood at the front door and imagined...

“We have a balance,” I said. “We own our house and we’re raising Parker together, and that’s all.” But as she continued to talk about children, babies, eggs, and sperm, I thought about things. It really would be nice for Parker to have siblings. I imagined myself pregnant, because that was the way he would get brothers and sisters. That was the only way unless Robby

met some other woman and had kids with her. He could, of course. No woman would say no to him.

Blistering anger filled me. I would kill her! I had to chew on ice, not to fill my stomach this time but to cool my rage, and while I was crunching and listening to Mia's list of baby names (girls and boys) I thought about how I was reacting to the idea of him with someone else, and I thought about his sperm. I wanted it. I wanted it all for myself.

Lunch arrived, salads with dressing on the side that Mia wouldn't actually eat. I would, though. I'd been making more of an effort to act like food wasn't my sworn enemy and I found that I did feel better, more full and energetic, after I had consumed something other than ice. I even used the little cup of ranch and it was delicious.

Coming to this restaurant had been Mia's suggestion when she'd texted and asked if I wanted to hang out again. It was easier to say yes than to explain that I couldn't because I was a coward, and it had turned out ok. We had even seen a few people that we both knew as we'd walked into this place, but I'd kept my nose in the air and used my old defense, pretending, to act like I didn't care. And again, I'd found something surprising. It turned out that it was true: I didn't actually care very much after all. I hadn't killed anyone, and we'd all made choices. Yes, I was sorry, and yes, I was still embarrassed, but it hadn't killed me, either.

After affirming with me that her makeup really was ok, Mia wanted to discuss a rumor she'd heard, that I might be joining the Woodsmen Wonderwomen staff as an assistant to Coach Sam. And yes, that might have been in my future. Danni had confessed to him that I'd been helping out the team—I'd known that she wouldn't be able to keep it a secret and lie. He'd called me, blustering and angry, and I'd told him to cut the crap.

"You need someone, Sam," I'd announced. "You're missing Coach Rylah's presence and it shows. Danni paid me to fix things but the Woodsmen team should have someone on the real payroll instead." He'd continued to rage and swear, but then a day later, he'd called again and we'd had a real

discussion about the possibility of us working together. A job as a Wonderwomen coach meant, of course, being back at the stadium, and I hadn't been sure I was ready to return to the building that represented the pinnacle of my success. So I would miss out on the opportunity because I thought I was too good for it? Or because I wasn't that woman anymore? I frowned at the lettuce on my plate.

We talked about the Wonderwomen for a while, and Mia appeared to have changed her position of the season before when she'd believed that I needed to stay away from the team. "If they offer you a job, you should take it," she counseled. "So many former cheerleaders would love to have that opportunity."

I found myself nodding. "I'm not sure I'll get an offer, but if I do, I will take it."

There was a lot to say about that and about Mia's job, but she really was baby crazy. Soon enough, she moved the conversation back around to kids, having them, wanting them, and her empty life without them. It wasn't, I told her, and she had to wipe her eyes. "Do you really not want a family?" she asked me.

"I have a family," I answered. "Not like you described, but it's good. I never imagined myself having kids before. I had a scare when I was married and I..." I'd temporarily lost my mind. "But I wasn't pregnant. My cycle was very messed up because of the stress I was under."

"Oh," Mia said sympathetically. "I remember Bill's mom talking about your office and calling it the nursery. Was he so disappointed that you weren't?"

He hadn't been, no. He hadn't been because when I'd realized how late my period was, I'd known that the only real possibility was that the father was not my husband. I'd known that it had to have been the man who had run off to Florida to escape from any repercussions from me after our one time together, the time when I'd changed my mind and said no, but he'd said yes. I'd thought that things couldn't have been worse, but when I'd believed that I might be carrying that

horrible old man's child, I'd lost it. I'd started saying all kinds of things to Billy, including that I hated his family, that I knew that he didn't really love me, and that I might have been pregnant. Given the fact that we hadn't had sex in months, he was immediately aware of the implications of a baby. And then I'd admitted it straight out and told him that I'd slept with someone else for money to save my company.

"Billy and I weren't meant to be together. It's better for both of us that we divorced, that it was quick and pretty easy," I answered. "I'm not sorry I married him, but I'm glad that it's over."

"You're in a good place about it," she said, but she got a funny look on her face. "You probably don't care about him now, right?"

"Mia, did you hear something about Billy? Tell me," I urged. "I want to know."

She nodded and put one of her pretty nails against her lip to nibble on it. "You know how Erin's husband does the video stuff for the Woodsmen? Well, he kept in touch with Bill and Erin told me that..." She nibbled for a moment without speaking, and then announced, "He's getting married again."

"Oh." Oh. I couldn't say that I was surprised, because that was the life he'd wanted, just not with me (for obvious reasons). "That's great for him."

"Even though you've moved on too, it must be so upsetting." She looked distressed. "I'm sorry I told you. I only wanted to because I was afraid that you would hear..." She nibbled harder.

"I'm fine, all good," I said automatically. "He must have met someone pretty quickly."

She made a face. "Remember how his mom was such a raging bitch to you? I guess it was because they wanted him to marry someone else."

"It must be Sophia. They were together all through college."

"Yeah, that's her." Mia played with the lettuce on her plate. "Do you really want to hear this stuff about your ex? I'll shut

up if you don't, but Erin told me more. Bill wasn't the guy we all thought he was."

Robby had said the same thing to me, asking if I might feel better to know that Billy wasn't wonderful or perfect. "Tell me," I ordered, and she did.

"He was keeping up with that old girlfriend the whole time that you were together," she said in a rush. "Even when you were married, they were still talking, and at least one time they met up to...you know."

"He was cheating on me? Are you sure?"

"That's what Erin's husband said." She nodded, then shook her head. "I guess it was pretty common knowledge among his friends. I think even his parents knew."

I sat there and tried to absorb that information. "He was cheating on me," I stated, and Mia looked even more distressed. She nibbled all her nails. "There's something more?"

"I just heard they're having a baby." Her eyes filled with tears again. "Erin said that Bill started telling people yesterday that he'll be a dad. I'm sorry, Aubin."

The lunch ended pretty quickly after that. I just wanted to leave and get away, get out of there. I drove home and all I could think about was when I'd told Billy what I had done. I remembered the look on his face, like I'd thrown cold water on him, like I'd broken his heart. It had been terrible and I'd felt lower than dirt, and the whole time, he had been talking to his former girlfriend? He'd met up with her? He'd actually slept with her while he was married to me?

I let myself in through the pretty front door and then leaned back against it. "That liar. That bastard liar," I said into the quiet. I had been punishing myself for months because I'd hurt him. Along with the confusion and guilt about everything else that had happened, I'd thought that it had been what my ex-friend Jess had said, that it was like I'd stabbed him with a knife. But he'd been sneaking around and lying, too? And then he'd had the nerve to tell everyone that he was the

wounded party? At least they couldn't think that anymore. They would think we were both awful, and I was fine with that because I was done.

"I'm done," I told the empty room. I was still sorry that I'd been a terrible businesswoman, I was sorry I hadn't reached out for help with the mess I'd made and that I hadn't told Jess, I was sorry I'd married someone who I'd only pretended to love, I was sorry that I'd gone to that house to meet with that man and I was sorry I hadn't called the police afterwards to report him, because I had changed my mind and he hadn't stopped. I was sorry for so much, but I was done hiding. "I'm done," I said again. I was ready to move on.

Robby walked out of the kitchen carrying his gear bag to take to the team hotel for the night. "Aubin. Did you say something? What was that?"

"Do you want to have sex with me?"

There was a pause in which we stared at each other. "What was that?" he said again.

"You heard me."

There was another long pause, long enough that I thought he would say no and I started to have wild ideas about getting Parker and running away to France. But then he moved fast through the living room, covering the floor in huge strides until we were only inches apart.

"Yes," he told me. "Yes, I do. I want to have sex with you. Right now."

That was what I wanted, too. I grabbed his shirt and yanked it over his head, and good Lord. There was so much Robby. He pressed me back against the door and kissed me, holding my arms over my head with one hand and with the other, reaching beneath my sweater.

"Too much stuff," he muttered, and then clothes were flying—that sweater, then my shirt underneath, my boots, my jeans, my socks. He tossed aside my bra and then my thong, and I was naked and he kissed me again. This time I rubbed against

his bare chest, and when he broke away to rip off his own clothes, all my body rubbed against his. All of it.

“Aubin,” he said, and kissed my neck, moving his lips and teeth so that I shivered and then shook. As he did, his palms went beneath my breasts and I moaned, tilting my body toward him. He slid his hands across my skin and went down on his knees, and then he put one of my legs over his shoulder, and then the other one, and he pinned me there.

“Oh...” I breathed as I looked down my stomach and Robby put his mouth between my thighs. If he hadn’t been holding me up with his hands, I would have dissolved onto the floor with the feeling of his tongue and how he was moving it, licking and fluttering. There was no doubt about why those women had left his condo looking so satisfied, not when he could do that to my clit—

“Oh, oh—” I came before I knew what was happening to me, arching off the door and squeezing my thighs together to hold him there so he would keep doing that and never stop. But Robby had already picked me up and we were walking back to his bedroom with me cradled against his chest. I was sloppy kissing his neck and jaw and trying to bite his ear, and at the same time I was telling him to hurry because I needed him.

“I didn’t think you wanted me,” I heard him say. “I didn’t think you’d say yes.”

“Yes,” I told him. “Yes.” And he lay me on his bed and I held out my arms.

But he slid next to me instead of on top and then he kept touching me, brushing his fingers across my skin and stopping to massage or suckle with his mouth, and all the time telling me things.

“Your skin was so soft when I touched your arms, or when you wore that pink dress, I touched your back,” he murmured. “I wondered if it would be even softer here.” He rubbed his cheek against my breast, and then stopped to lick my nipple. “Or here,” he said, stroking over my stomach. “You don’t smile very often. I wondered if you would when you came.”

“Did I? Robby!” I gasped, because his fingers, which had been drifting across my thighs, had moved higher.

“You did,” he confirmed. “Really goofy.”

“Let’s see how you look when you come,” I suggested, and pushed him so that he rolled onto his back. I straddled his hips and looked down at him. He took my breasts again, playing with my nipples, and I pressed myself against his touch. But then I remembered my mission, so I kissed his body, too, seeking the places that made him moan softly, then louder, and shiver, and finally start rocking up against me. That was when I took him in my mouth. I watched his face as his features contorted in pleasure, and I could see that he was almost ready. He was so close.

That was when he opened his eyes. “I don’t have any condoms,” he panted. “I didn’t buy any more because I’m not going to—Aubin, wait,” he pleaded as I pulled back with my cheeks and sucked harder.

I let go after carefully working my mouth to his tip and making him moan again, and I positioned myself above him. “We could give Parker a sibling.”

“What?” His eyes opened wide. “Are you serious?”

“Would you? Would you do that with me?”

Robby sat up and kissed me, and he took my hips in his huge hands and moved me down until he filled me so, so deeply. We both froze like that, me caught in an overwhelming surge of pleasure, and him watching, smiling. He rolled me onto my back and pumped his hips.

“Don’t fake it,” he said. “Tell me what you want.”

“Touch me here,” I begged, and put his hand back to my clit. “More, more—oh, Robby—”

I wasn’t faking it. Maybe I smiled as I came again, but he didn’t. When he surged one last time into my body, he just looked...what was the word? Amazed. I hugged him hard to me, wrapping him in my arms and legs and burying my face into his neck against where his pulse pounded. I couldn’t let him get away; I couldn’t ever let him go.

But Robby did move a little to look down at me again, and I realized what I had done.

Good Lord.

“Stop thinking whatever you’re thinking,” he told me. “You can’t already be regretting this. I’m still inside you.”

“Robby. I can’t believe we just...”

“Why can’t you believe it? I’ve been imagining it for months.”

I stared up at him. “You have? With me?”

“With you, all the time. Remember when we went to the beach together, last spring? You did that thing of pretending to pick me up, saying ‘hi’ to me. I wanted to push you up against the wall and—”

“Way back then, you were thinking that about me? But I was such a hag. I still don’t even do my hair all the time, or wear cute things, nothing like I used to. And I’m so much older than you. You’ve been wanting me?”

“You’re beautiful but I don’t even care about that because you’re so—Aubin. You’re you.””

“Am I? What does that mean?”

“It means that you’re perfect for me,” he said, “and it’s five years difference. If I was the one who was thirty, you wouldn’t even think about it.”

“I’m twenty—” I started to object, but then gave in. “Ok, yeah, I’m thirty.”

“Can you doubt that I want you?” He moved his hips and massaged against me, and I gasped and clutched his arms.

“Are you seriously ready to go again?” I asked.

“I’m seriously getting there. Can you say hi to me like you did before?”

“Hi,” I breathed huskily, and looked him in the eyes.

“Jesus H. Christ.” He really was ready, and so was I. We stayed in bed until he had to rush to his truck to get to the hotel

and meet his team, but then he stopped in the middle of the street, got out, and ran up the driveway to kiss me one more time. My neighbors, the ones with the nice dog, were out cleaning up sticks from their yard. They waved and clapped and I went back into the house and leaned against the front door again. I started laughing, which was also something I didn't do a lot. It was so crazy! It was so good.

"Where's Robby?" Parker asked me later.

"Hmm? He's staying at the Wequetong Inn with the team tonight. The game's tomorrow, you know that." I spun to the refrigerator and took out the butter. Why not use butter? Wouldn't that taste wonderful?

"Aubin, what the freck song are you singing? Why are you singing at all?" he asked. "You didn't fall and hit your head or something, did you? The leaves on the sidewalk are pretty slippery."

"No, I didn't fall." I smiled as I patted his cheek.

Parker was just staring at me. "Are you happy or something?"

"I am. I'm so happy," I said.

"Are you crying now?"

"It's because this is all so great. I didn't think that I would ever be happy again. I don't know if I ever really was, but now I have you and Robby. I feel like life couldn't be any better."

Maybe it could be, though. I put my hand over my stomach. What if I had Robby's baby? Parker was so amazing and we could have more kids like him. Two, or three, or four. Five or six. I was up for it.

"I'm going to do some homework," he said, still eyeing me warily. "I have a lot more time on my hands now that I don't have a phone or computer."

"Only three more weeks of grounding!" I said cheerfully, and danced over to the sink. I checked my phone and saw that my sister had texted because we were planning to have her and Bowie over on Sunday, the Woodsmen day off this week. She

was asking about the rumor that I was going to coach the Wonderwomen and she was pretty excited about that, but she also said that she had some news to share with me in person.

“She’s pregnant,” I announced to no one, and I smiled. What if we had kids at the same time? They could be friends, right? I stopped and stared at my reflection in the window above the sink. What was happening to me? I was seriously thinking about getting pregnant with Robby, Robby Baines, the guy who was too young and would never settle down with just one woman?

“That’s exactly right,” I told myself. “That’s exactly what I’m thinking.”

The phone rang on the countertop and I saw Robby’s name on it, and Parker wasn’t here to grab it first. But Robby didn’t usually have his phone when he stayed at the hotel the night before their home games, because the coach wanted them to be together as a team and focus, and only in emergencies—

“Hello? What’s wrong? Robby?”

“Did you find out today? Is that why you wanted to sleep with me?”

“What?” I asked confusedly.

“I just heard that your husband is having a baby, that he’s getting married and they’re having a baby. Did you know that? Did you hear that, too?”

“I—yeah, I did, but—”

He swore, a lot. “I knew it. I knew there had to be a reason.”

“A reason that I wanted to sleep with you?” I asked. “There were so many—”

“You wanted to get pregnant to show him up. He’s who you’re still worried about, even after he treated you like sh!t. I tried to tell you before that he was with someone else and you didn’t want to hear it.”

“I know and I don’t—”

“I gotta go.” The call ended, and when I tried to get him back, when I texted again and again, there was no answer.

Did he seriously doubt that I’d wanted him? Every woman did. He couldn’t really believe that I was still in love with my ex-husband. I stared at myself again in the window and I recognized the look on my face: it was the same one that Robby probably had right now. Like I was lost.

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“Aubin, come on!” Parker exploded.

“No,” I told him. “No, I’m not going. I’ll drive you and drop you off, but I’m not going to the game.”

“You’re seriously not going to watch Robby play in person? What’s wrong with you?”

He wouldn’t want me there, I almost said to Parker. He thought I’d used him as a tool for revenge, that I was getting back at my ex. He didn’t understand, and if he came into the family lounge when he was done playing and saw me, it would be a scene. I didn’t want to make his life or Parker’s more complicated. “I don’t want to go to the stadium,” I said simply. “I’ll drop you off and then I’ll watch the game here.”

“You’re just worried that people are going to look at you and say stupid shilt,” he announced. “Why do you care?”

“I don’t,” I answered, and that was absolutely true. I didn’t care what anybody thought, except for him and Robby. Also my sister, probably her husband, Mia, and maybe even my dad. Strangers, acquaintances, the former “friends” who had dropped me? They could eat shilt.

“I don’t get this,” he said angrily. “I don’t get any of this!”

He didn’t speak to me as I drove him to the stadium, not answering when I asked if he was set with money for snacks, if he had his phone and if it was charged (it never was). The last thing I said as I pulled up to drop him was, “Go to the family lounge after the game and Robby will—”

The car door closed in my face. “Robby will be happy to see you,” I finished. “Have fun,” I told the door, and I inched my

way back through the traffic and out of the huge campus of Woodsmen Stadium. I wanted to get home fast so I pushed the car hard, although from the noises it made, it didn't enjoy that decision. And I called Robby again when I got there, although he hadn't answered any of my previous calls or responded to any of the other ways I'd tried to contact him, either.

"I'm sorry," I said immediately after the sound of the beep. "I'm so sorry that I hurt your feelings, but what you think isn't true. I didn't want to sleep with you because I heard about my ex-husband's new life. That's not right! I need to talk to you and explain it." My voice shook. "Please, Robby. Please believe me. After the game, we can get it straight between us."

Then I hung up, again. There wasn't much chance that he would hear any of that before he took the field tonight and I had a feeling that he hadn't been looking at his phone at all. I had almost called my sister to have her husband relay a message, but we weren't fourteen years old. Robby and I would talk about this, and I'd explain the truth to him. It was pretty obvious to me what that truth was.

So I sat down in front of the TV that we'd managed to hang on the wall and I turned on the pregame with Herb and Buzz, but my mind wasn't on it—I even forgot to get my notebook to record my observations and stats. It would be ok, I told myself. He was hurt because he didn't understand. He didn't see the difference between what we had done and when he'd slept with those women who'd come to his condo. That had only been fun and orgasms, but this was more.

The Woodsmen offense walked out onto the turf and I tried to think of what words I could use to get him to see. He had to.

Despite how Robby was feeling about me, it seemed like his focus was totally on the game and he was doing great. I had finally remembered to take notes, but they were all just single words like "amazing" and "wow" and then, for some reason, I just wrote his name a few times, "Robby, Robby, Robby." I watched the screen so intently when he was on it that my eyes started to hurt but I saw every move he made, every time he

turned his head, every flex of his fingers. I was watching just that hard when I saw him go down.

It didn't seem that bad to me—it certainly wasn't like the hit in the game before, the dirty, late hit that had sent him to the hospital for observation. But then Robby didn't get up. I found myself standing at the TV screen, right in front and touching his image with my fingertips. A minute passed and they switched to commercial and I still stood there, waiting.

My phone rang and it was Parker calling. "Aubin," he said. I knew his seat was in the middle of the stadium but it was so quiet in the background. "Aubin, he's still down."

"I'm coming." Hearing him woke me up and I was already running to my car. "They're going to bring out the cart and put him on it, then they'll take him to the hospital. You walk down towards the family lounge and I'll meet you there."

"They're getting a board. Is it his back? Is he paralyzed? Aubin, are you coming?"

My car was roaring down the road and we didn't live too far from the stadium. "I'll be there, Parks, I'm on my way!" I gave him more instructions and had him to repeat them to me so I was sure that he understood, and we stayed on the phone until we lost the signal as he descended into the stadium.

I had always been a pretty speedy driver, but I'd never gone as fast as I did that night. I arrived at Woodsmen Stadium and wasn't sure how I'd actually gotten there, because I hadn't noticed landmarks passing or even stop signs or red lights. I whipped the car down the long drive, skidded to a stop on the grass closest to where the players exited, and left the door open as I exited.

"You can't park there—holy shit!"

I was already racing toward the building when I heard the Woodsmen guard yell in fear. And as I glanced over my shoulder, I saw that my car, which must not have liked the trip over here at warp speed, was now smoking heavily. Then orange light lit up the darkness behind me, and I also heard the guy yell for help.

I didn't care that my car appeared to be on fire. I also didn't care that the the guard yelled at me to stop, because I was doing another Olympic-speed run. Parker was right where I'd asked him to be: holding the door open so that I could get inside. I could see that he was also holding himself together, but not by much.

"Did you see an ambulance leave?" I asked, and he shook his head, his face red. "Then he's still here in the training rooms. Come on." I grabbed his hand and he let me keep holding it as we ran together.

Woodsmen Stadium was kind of a maze, but I knew my way around. We hurried down one hall and through the players' area to get to Robby, and we were almost there when we ran into—directly hurtled into—another Woodsmen security guard, the head of the department.

"Aubin?" Lyle asked me. "Aubin Frazier? What are you doing back here?"

"Robby needs us," I told him, then raised my voice to a yell. "Keep going, Parks, run and I'll stall him!"

"I can't keep going! I don't know where we are!" Parker yelled back.

"We're going to find Robby and you'll have to shoot me to stop me!" I wildly informed Lyle.

"Aubin, you know I don't carry a gun. Baines was tracking Parker on his phone and asked me to come find him," Lyle answered. "Go on, he's waiting for you."

I didn't stop to think about the implications of what the security guard had just said: if Robby was doing things like tracking Parker on his phone, then he was doing ok. We took off again and raced around another corner, where I shoved through a group of people I recognized as medical personnel from the team—

And there was Robby. He was still wearing his uniform except for his helmet, and he was lying on a backboard up on a table. "Oh, fluck!" Parker yelled, and both of us froze in the

doorway. Then we kind of tripped across the room, falling forward until we were at his side.

I could have been an example of strength and fortitude for Parker. He could have looked at me and seen a role model of coolness and clear thinking—and in the past, I would have been that woman. I would have examined this situation dispassionately and then determined that, since they hadn't rushed Robby to the hospital, since he wasn't strapped to the backboard, he was probably ok. He had been hurt, but there was no reason to worry.

No, I wasn't that woman anymore, and I was glad of that. "Robby," I sobbed, and fell on his chest, and I heard Parker also sniffing and both of us hugged him, and I was kissing him, and also telling him that I loved him.

"You do?" he asked me, and I kissed all over his face as I dripped tears down from my cheeks onto his.

"I love you but you didn't understand that because I didn't say it. I love you, and I always will," I bawled. "That's why I want you, only you. There's no other reason for anything except that I love you so much. Do you believe me?"

"Aubin." He wiped my cheeks. "Baby."

"You have to come with us because we need you." I put my arm around Parker in a belated attempt to comfort him. "We're taking Robby Baines home now," I announced to the room, which turned out not to be very accurate.

"Come here," Robby said to me, and I leaned over him until I could kiss him, this time on the lips. "I love you. I love you too, Parks." I heard Parker answering that he loved Robby and he loved me, and of course I said back that I loved him, so that word was getting tossed around a lot. I kept on sniffing, and kissing Robby, and hugging our son, and telling the medical people from the Woodsmen that we were going back to the grey house where we all lived together and that we were going to have babies there, too.

"We are?" Parker asked. "When?"

“Whenever they come, we’ll be glad. Aubin and I are getting married first,” Robby told him, and I said yes we were, tomorrow, which also was not accurate.

The orange car never left the stadium after that night, but Robby did. He went to the hospital again but then he came home with us, and we did get married, and we did live happily together in that grey house—with babies, too. And I wasn’t the same woman anymore, but that was ok. It was even better, because I loved Paker, and I loved Robby, and I loved the woman that I became.

Epilogue

“Aubin?”

“I’m right here,” I told my sister. I leaned over and wiped a washcloth across her forehead. “Do you want another ice chip?”

“Did you call them again?” she asked. Her hand held mine so tightly that I didn’t think I’d be able to bend my fingers after she let go, but I didn’t mind.

“I called them and they’re coming as fast as they can,” I assured her. “They already left the gym and Robby’s driving.” He had to, he’d said, because when my brother-in-law had heard that Sissy had gone into labor a few weeks early, he had almost fainted. Bowie was in no shape to get behind the wheel and get them here to the hospital.

“I’m sorry you had to miss your trip. Again.” Her eyes filled with tears. “Aubin!”

“I’m right here,” I said. “Breathe, Sissy.” I set a pattern and she followed it, and her grip relaxed a little. “I can go to Paris anytime.”

“But you keep missing it!” Tears spilled down her cheeks and I wiped at them. It was true that our vacation to Europe had a bad habit of getting postponed. We’d planned to go for our honeymoon, the three of us flying to France after Parker finished his freshman year. I’d picked back up my study of French and worked alongside him and Robby, who had decided that he would try to finish his degree—and he did, because of his natural intelligence. He had as much of that as he had personal magnetism, which he just about brimmed with.

But that summer, my sister had been about to have a baby; and then I’d found out that I was pregnant, too, with our second (Parks was the first, of course). So the trip was delayed, but no one was sorry because we had Sissy’s daughter, and then we also had one of our own. She looked a lot like me, except with her dad’s blue eyes. Parker took to wearing a baby

carrier and bringing her wherever he went, and they were still almost inseparable. It turned out that he loved babies, which was lucky in our house. I wasn't sure how he was going to handle college without his little sister, and his little brother, and also...

We had another one on the way, although we hadn't mentioned it quite yet. I always teased Sissy about her ever-increasing family, but—

“Aubin!”

Good Lord, my hand. “Bowie will be here soon,” I told her. “And I don't care about Paris, not at all.” Traveling with our brood was not the easiest, and the idea of subjecting a plane full of strangers to us...well, maybe in a few years. For now, we were happy to be living in the grey house or at Robby's old place in Florida near the ocean (we drove there in our RV). It looked like the two youngest would turn into swimmers, as much as Parker encouraged them towards land sports as he took them running in the heavy-duty stroller. He had been recruited by a bunch of cross country programs in major colleges, and he would have a large Baines cheering section at every meet.

“Lissa!” my brother-in-law bellowed as he charged into the hospital room, and she really lost it when she saw her husband. I took a moment to tag out, but I'd be close if she needed me. I always was.

“How is she doing?” Robby asked me in the hallway. He was still wearing his clothes from the gym and looked so handsome that I involuntarily paused, stunned.

“She'll be great,” I told him when I recovered.

“How are you?”

I showed him my mangled hand, and he took it and held it a lot more gently than my sister had.

“I remember you in labor,” he said. “I wish I didn't.” He glanced worriedly down at my tummy, which was just starting to round. After all the injuries he'd had in football and utterly dismissed, Robby got very, very upset about anything

happening to the rest of us, including and especially when I had our kids. He swore that he didn't get headaches when I started contractions, and he was the one giving the massages.

"I'll be great, too," I said.

"You always are." He opened up his arms then, and I happily snuggled in. "Are you worried?"

I nodded. She was my little sister; of course I was.

"I know," he said, and kissed my hair. "She can't take it when you're in here, either. She paces and mutters to herself."

"No one told Dad, right?" I asked. Yes, Sissy and I worried about each other, but our father turned into a sloppy puddle of fear when we were producing his grandchildren. Even with his wife's support (and with some snorts in the parking lot), he could hardly hold it together.

"Nah, I won't say anything until after the babies arrive," he assured me. "We'll keep it to ourselves."

We mostly did that, anyway. Yes, we had friends that we saw and went out with, and Robby had gotten very into grilling, but mostly? We were happy to be just the five of us. Six, soon. I was busy with the kids, of course, and part-time coaching with the Wonderwomen, and with our bakery. The doughnut machine was getting a lot of use these days. That business was definitely an option for Robby to take over full-time, but there were so many things that he could do after football retirement. With him so smart and capable, I felt like the world was his oyster. It was ours, and I had a lot of ideas.

"I can tell that you're planning something," my husband told me, and pulled me closer. Maybe it was almost indecent to be so snuggled in the middle of the maternity ward, but it was ok with me. "When aren't you planning something?"

It was true, because when you had so many people behind you, it was easy to dream big. I smiled up at Robby. He was my biggest and best dream—better than any life I could have pretended for myself.

My brother-in-law's head emerged from the delivery room, and he looked anxious. "Aubin? Lissa needs you." I nodded

and pulled away, but my husband held my hand.

“Don’t do too much,” he warned.

“She’ll be doing all the work,” I assured him, and he gently tugged me back to kiss me.

“I’ll be here,” he said, and he always was. We were all here for each other, and that made everything...what was the word?

Awesome.

About the Author

Jamie Bennett (that's me!) is the author of a lot of super-great books, including [a bunch about football](#) and [Lissa and Bowie's story](#), too. You would really like them. In fact, you should probably read them right now, immediately.

Seriously. Go find them [on Amazon](#).

You can reach me via [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#) @jamiebennettbooks (and join the Rocinante group for extra updates).

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