

ZADIE KING



Don't Fall  
for a Grump

# Don't Fall for a Grump

Enemies to Lovers Sweet Romantic Comedy

Zadie King

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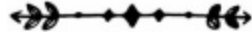
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1



# Bree

I throw another handful of chicken feed across the pen and tell myself that this is not the worst job in the world. No, really. I mean, who doesn't like chickens? But honestly, I didn't have a ton of career options to choose from.

When you move from the Big Apple to a tiny obscure town, you find that there's no great need for corporate sharks. Which is what I was back in the city. Here, I'd be lucky to be a small corporate fish. Or even a tadpole.

But it's not like I suddenly had this epiphany that I can only truly be happy in the countryside. No, no. Far from it. I just needed to get away from the two men who have made my life hell—correction, broken my heart—in a single year. When I phoned Lana and told her what I was doing and why, my older sister didn't quite say "I told you so," but I knew she was thinking it. After the divorce was finalized, she advised that I take some time off, relax, and gather my thoughts. She's a therapist - everything that comes out of her mouth sounds like an inspirational quote from Instagram. If only I had listened.

The move, and the cottage purchase, nearly bled me dry; and so here I am, a



twenty-seven-year-old divorcee with a degree in economics, feeding chickens as part of my housekeeping duties. But that's not nearly the end of it. There are a hundred different kinds of chores around the house; there's cleaning, lots and lots of cleaning. The beds that *must* be stripped and remade every morning, the windows that must be washed. All kinds of work that I have never, ever, done in my life. It sure is a step down from corporate life, but it's a step I'm willing to take to get my head straight.

While Ben Scott is kind and witty, he's also pretty frustrated, due to the fact that he's stuck in a wheelchair for the next six weeks. He's a very active middle-aged guy, and currently my employer. Of course, he has no idea that his housekeeper could run his wood-carving business blindfolded with one hand tied behind her back. I didn't think talking about being blindfolded and tied up would go down too well at the interview. Though now that I've got to know him a bit, I think he might have found it quite amusing.

When I arrived this morning, I wheeled him out onto the porch with a jug of iced-tea, before heading to feed the chickens. He likes being outside. I can't say I blame him. The area surrounding Ben's house is beautiful; full with lush green gardens, and a gorgeous view of the countryside. By all accounts, Ben's an outdoorsy kind of guy. That's how he broke his leg—hiking.

His farm is huge, I have no idea how many acres, but, if you can see it, he probably owns it. Which means my job now involves a lot of trekking back and forth over great distances. With the chickens fed, I leave them to their pecking and clucking and make the great hike back to the French Colonial-style home that Ben renovated with his bare hands. It's quite beautiful. With its polished wooden floors and so many rooms, you would need a map.

After a good twenty-minute jaunt, I finally, and breathlessly, make it up the

porch steps. I'm blaming being in the country for my apparent lack of stamina. The city is all smog and exhaust fumes. My lungs are just not used to clean air.

Yep, that's it. The clean air's to blame. Not the fact that I was so glued to my desk in the city that I had to be surgically removed from it. Nothing at all.

"Bree," Ben calls out from across the porch as I approach the screen door.

"I'll...be...right...with...you," I holler back, panting like I've just run the New York Marathon. Something that's definitely not on the bucket list. I may be slender, but how fit I am on the inside does not reflect on my figure on the outside.

I'm not entirely averse to exercise. My previous job, demanding as it was, just never gave me the time. Or maybe, all that wining and dining with clients had something to do with it. The truth is, I was burning the candle at both ends, and the wick was running low. Like, really, really low. Then, there was the stress accompanying my relationship, which was as far away from a Mills and Boons novel as anyone could imagine. My life was so unbalanced, I was in danger of toppling off the edge of my own little universe. Hence the retreat to the country.

Yanking at the screen door, I enter the huge house and, desperate to quench my thirst, slam my hand hard against the kitchen door, which swings in the opposite direction. To my surprise, the door barely moves two feet before it suddenly stops with a resounding thud, like it's hit something sturdy, before bouncing back toward me with alarming speed.

"Ooww!"

My hands fly to my mouth, and I come to a complete standstill. I don't know what's worse. The fact that my first thought was that the door cried out in pain, or the very speedy realization that someone is clearly standing behind

it, and I've just slammed it into them. I know it's not Ben. He's still on the porch.

For a second, I don't know what to do.

*Well, you can't stand here all day glaring at the darn thing, Bree!*

Sheepishly, I push the door open with the fear and anticipation of discovering whoever I might have seriously damaged behind it. But I quickly find myself even more astonished. My mouth drops open, like one of those corporate fish I mentioned earlier, and all I can do is gawk.

He's holding his elbow. All six feet and something of him. Nearly as broad as he is tall, the man in the suit stares down at me, rubbing his elbow and still wincing. The deep pools of his eyes are dark brown, and I'm sure that many a woman has drowned in them. They're staring at me now, with an expression I can't really make out. It's like he doesn't really know what to make of me. Or maybe, he's in too much pain to care. His eyes match the color of his unruly hair, which sits just above his collar and topples down a *strong* forehead. Strong, like it lifts weights or something.

As I take in the rest of his face—I'm still more than a little taken aback, and there's a bit of confusion slowly creeping in—I notice the sharply chiseled jaw and wonder how he doesn't cut himself on it while getting dressed.

The shock is gone now, even though I am yet to speak, the confusion has taken over completely...

First comes confusion, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage.

*What the heck are you doing? Seriously, is any man with a pulse in danger when you're around?*

It had been the ease with which I fall for another guy barely five minutes after I get divorced that got me here in the first place. My running—I mean,

moving away—is supposed to be a new beginning. A place where no one knows me, so I can discover who I truly am and what I actually want. Me working on myself for me. I’m so done with trying to be someone I’m not for everybody else. In fact, as soon as the first boxes came off the truck and into my new cottage, situated three miles down the road, I took a vow of celibacy for at least a year. No men. No relationships. No drama.

*Yep. Uh-huh. Then, why am I mentally drooling?*

“I’m so sorry,” I finally blurt, not able to think of anything else more appropriate.

It is clear who this guy is. Ben had been talking about him just the other day. He’d told me that a guy like this would be arriving in a few days. But a few days haven’t passed yet, which is why I’m standing here feeling a little shell-shocked that he’s now standing in the middle of the kitchen *today*. I don’t know how many minutes have passed since I began ogling at him, but he still hasn’t opened his mouth. I’m expecting a sort of normal response, something like, “Hey, no worries. Accidents happen.”

Currently, I’m getting nothing. I try to figure him out, but unlike many other guys I’ve met in the past, he’s giving nothing away. And I mean, nothing. His facial muscles have not moved a single millimeter. Well, apart from the obvious signs of shock and pain.

He suddenly lunges toward me and grabs my arm, yanking me into him. I gasp. A minute ago, he stood there like a waxwork in Madame Tussaud’s. A very cute waxwork, but lifeless nonetheless.

From silence and deadpan to lightening action in naught point three seconds.

Against such super-fast action, my brain does not have the time to tell my feet to move. He may have the speed of Superman, but I didn’t get the memo.

I literally fall forward, my face landing straight into his chest. A very solid chest.

*Hmm, he also smells delicious. Is that a woody scent, maybe mixed with patchouli?*

Absently, I breathe him in, and I swear, I nearly sigh with delight.

Like I have the plague, he pushes me off him, swiftly spinning me to stand beside him. Hey, maybe he is Superman. I wouldn't mind seeing what he looks like in spandex.

*Bree! For goodness sake!*

His solid grip lingers on my arm, like he's taking that extra second to make sure I've got my balance. Which, I'll admit, is necessary. I've just been spun and repositioned in the blink of an eye, and my brain is still trying to catch up with where my body now stands. Ensuring that I'm back on my own two feet and remain there, he finally lets go.

Only then, though my head is still spinning, even if my body looks still, do I realize what he had just done and why.

Behind me, the door flings open again, and with a lot of bashing and crashing, Ben is trying to shove himself through with great difficulty. He hasn't quite mastered the wheelchair yet. If Mr. Suit hadn't pulled me out of the way, I would have been hit by the door, as he had been. Though in truth, it would only have been my butt that would have got any bruising.

I gather myself, feeling a little bewildered at everything that just happened, and how quickly it all transpired. Man meets woman. Woman falls into man. Man says get off me. Woman is flung to the side. Man protects woman's butt in caveman-like fashion.

"Ah, I see you've met Jackson." Ben beams a broad smile at me, before looking at the caveman. Ben's finally made it into the kitchen, even if in

doing so, he's taken a layer of paint off each side of the door frame with the wheels of his new vehicle. "Bree, this is my son, Jackson. Jackson, this is my housekeeper, Bree."

"Well, what an introduction," I declare, smiling broadly up at the caveman. Caveman does not smile back. He does not smile at all.

"Nice to meet you," he mutters, quickly looking away and toward his father.

Ben clearly does not see what I see, and carries on as though his son just threw his arms around me and gave me a bear hug. "Bree's from the city too. Hey, who knows, you two might even have been neighbors when she lived there."

I wait for Jackson to ask whereabouts in the city did I live. It's what normally happens, right? When two people meet, there's this dance that occurs. The first asks a question that they don't really want to know the answer to, and the second replies in kind. Then the second does the same pointless exercise, and then the ice is finally broken. In this case, I'd call it a glacier, but still, I'll wait.

Instead, I get radio silence. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. There's no ice-breaking here, not a crack, not a splinter, not even a chip.

I begin to feel wholly uncomfortable as a chilly breeze dances over my skin. I have never met the man, so I can't say for sure if he's usually this *chatty*, or if it's just me. In either case, I need to be in warmer climates. Like, outside. Strangely enough, my thirst has also disappeared. It's time I make myself scarce.

"OK," I say, more cheerily than necessary. Maybe I'm just trying to make a point. "Well, I'll be getting on. I'm sure I have a blade of grass to polish."

Ben chuckles. There's no reaction from caveman. Three steps later, I'm

through the door, leaving the father and son to it.

2





# Jackson

The taxi pulls away and drives back down the long lane that leads up to my father's house. The house I grew up in. The house I'm standing in front of with a feeling of dread, and hunger, strangely. I know I'm not getting them confused. The dread has been sitting in my stomach since I decided to make this trip. The hunger's only just arrived.

I take a moment before I go in. It's like I'm readying myself for some important business meeting. It's not that I don't want to see Dad. In fact, I usually love coming down for a visit. But this isn't really a visit, is it? It's more like a prison sentence. I moved out of this small community for a reason. A very good and justified reason. Now, I'm back in the last place I want to be. I already feel claustrophobic, *every eye in town* on me. I haven't even been into town yet. But, what choice do I really have?

I know Dad's as frustrated as I am. Ben Scott is not a man who likes to sit on his hide for more than five minutes. But for the next six weeks, he's just going to have to get used to it. That active lifestyle he loves so much is going to have to take a hiatus until his broken leg heals.

When he phoned me with the news of his accident, I heard the reticence in his voice.

“I’m so sorry, son. I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t have to.”

“It’s OK,” I had replied. We both knew it was not OK at all.

“It’s not OK. I’m asking too much of you. If there were anyone else...”

“Dad, it’s fine. Really. It’s not ideal, but you will go throwing yourself off the side of mountains.”

Dad had chuckled then. “It could have been worse. I could’ve been skiing.”

“Yeah, and knowing you, you’d have ended up in a full-body cast,” I had replied with a smile.

His regret was not that he needed my help, Dad has never been an overly proud man. It was more the knowledge that he knew he was asking me to do something I would hate. And he wasn’t wrong.

We’ve always had a great relationship. When mom died, I was only six. I know now, that he had been suffering far more than me, and yet, he had always suppressed his feelings to make sure I was OK. When he remarried, it was to a sweet woman named Lizzy, who loved him unconditionally. That’s when my brother, Daniel came along. Sadly, Lizzy died of cancer four years ago. Dad hasn’t had the greatest of times, but he’s never let any of it overwhelm him. He’s a man who grabs life by the throat and demands the most that he can get out of it.

After Lizzy died, he drowned himself in work, and to keep himself further occupied, discovered a newfound love of the great outdoors. I know he’s had a few love interests since, but nothing serious. I often wonder if it’s because he doesn’t want to get too attached, so he doesn’t have to cope with another loss. I suppose losing two women that he deeply loved in one lifetime is enough for anyone.

It's his active lifestyle that has brought me back to this crappy town. His business has grown over the years and he has a lot on his plate. Due his skill and other-worldly attention to detail, his woodwork pieces are in great demand all over the country. He can take any piece of wood and transform it into art.

Which is why I'm now here, because, with him stuck in a wheelchair for the next several weeks, he can't do it on his own. Before I left to make my fortune in the city, I helped him run the business, so I know how all the tools work. I can't craft the kind of art that he does, but I'll sure be able to help with most of the heavy lifting. Daniel has been great, but he has a demanding job of his own, and just doesn't have the time Dad needs.

Grabbing my suitcase, I walk up the front steps. I grab the spare key from under the mat and let myself in. You could never leave your key under the mat in the city. If you do, you'll come home to find someone has relieved you of your possessions, light fixtures, the lot.

"Hey honey, I'm home," I call out.

It's a little joke between me and Dad.

But all I get is silence, and the hum of the aircon. Dropping the suitcase in the grand hallway, I move through the house to look for him, but can't find him anywhere. Maybe he's out. I have arrived a couple of days earlier than I said I would. He told me not to rush, but I could hear a little anxiety in his voice. Dad doesn't like to keep his customers waiting, and I know he's already behind. The truck was in the driveway, and he can't drive with his leg. If he is out, he'll have someone else driving him. Maybe that new housekeeper he mentioned.

My stomach growls.

Yeah, OK. I could eat.

I walk into the kitchen and stop for a moment. I don't know why exactly, maybe because there's something a little different about it. Maybe things are not where they used to be? No. That's not it. I'm scanning the room when I finally get it. It's clean. That's the difference. Dad's messy and Daniel, being ten years younger than me at nineteen, is hardly tidy either. But the room is spotless.

Suddenly, I feel a hard crack against my elbow, and an electric shock shoots up my arm. It's excruciatingly painful.

"Owww," I cry out, gritting my teeth and grabbing hold of my elbow. As if holding an injured part of yourself ever makes any difference.

I have never understood why they call that part of the body, the funny bone. When it gets hit, there's nothing funny about it. The door that just slammed into my elbow, rebounds and closes again, and my attention is pulled between the shooting pain and the door.

For a second, nothing happens. I'm waiting for the door to open, because clearly, there's someone behind it. That, or Dad has a poltergeist. I'm about to open the door myself to see who it is, when it opens slowly, and I find myself more than a little surprised. She's clearly terrified and utterly astounded at the sight of me, but I dismiss her expression. I'm too busy being gob-smacked at her appearance.

She's wearing oversized denim dungarees; one strap over her shoulder, the other hanging down over her hip. Under the dungarees, a thin strapped vest clings to her slender body. The red hair that she has tied up in a messy knot on her head, looks like it's natural. I haven't seen a natural red-head for years. It shows off a long, slender neck, as well as the dips and crevices of her shoulders. Her breast is heaving as though she'd been running, and the thin layer of sweat makes her skin glisten. Maybe it was the running, or

maybe she's breathless because she's terrified of finding me here in the kitchen.

*Don't move a muscle.*

She is beautiful, there's no doubt about it, but I've spent a lot of years maintaining a distant and contained disposition when in the presence of beautiful women. My ex-wife was a beautiful woman, and look how that turned out. I'm still trying to figure out who she is, and what she's doing in Dad's house, when the realization hits me.

*Is this the housekeeper?*

When Dad had mentioned he'd hired someone to help, I'd imagined a plump, middle-aged woman in sensible shoes. Not in any pockets of my imagination, did I picture a woman like this. I feel the tension growing as we both stand there, simply staring at each other. I'm on the verge of speaking when she suddenly blurts, "I'm so sorry."

There's no reason for her to be sorry, not unless she has X-ray vision and hit me with the door on purpose. She couldn't possibly have known I was in here.

I'm about to respond, when I see the door move again. She's about to suffer the same fate I did unless she moves out of the way, which she won't, because she doesn't have eyes in the back of her head.

I grab hold of her arm and yank her out of the way. Only, instead of merely stepping forward, she falls straight into me. Instantly, a soft musky aroma floats up to meet me, and without any warning, my gut twists.

*Hell no!*

I shove her off me and end up spinning her around. I don't let go of her straight away, since I'm really not sure whether she can find balance yet. She

seems fine, so I let go, and turn toward the door, trying to ignore the twisting sensation that still remains in my stomach. And I know it's not the hunger.

Dad comes crashing through the door, and I have to hide a smile at his bullish demeanor. He struggles to enter, and when he finally does, he looks up at me, then glances toward Bree, who's currently standing way too close to me. She hasn't moved since I saved her butt—literally. Then he glances back at me. I can see the glint in his eye, but I ignore it. Already, the match-making cogs have begun turning in his head; I can almost hear them. But there's not a sliver of chance between me and this woman, as stunning as she is. There's not a sliver of chance between me and any woman ever again. I'm done with women.

“Ah, I see you've met my son Jackson,” Dad says, far too enthusiastically for my liking. Then he looks back at me. “Jackson, this is my housekeeper, Bree.”

*I know what you're doing, Dad. It won't work.*

“Well, what an introduction,” Bree says.

She sounds as breathless as she looked a few moments before, and I still wonder what she was doing before entering the kitchen. She's looking up at me, waiting for some sort of reaction, but after Dad's obvious attempt, I'm retreating more than usual. Maybe, if I hadn't been wholly suspicious of Dad's intentions, I might have been more polite, even smiled. But now, not only do I not want to give him the hope, I don't want Bree to get any ideas either.

“Nice to meet you,” I mumble.

I mean, I have to say something, right? My reticence does not dissuade Dad, and stubborn as a mule, he tries again.

“Bree's from the city too. Hey, who knows, you might even have been

neighbors.”

*In New York, Dad. Really?*

There’s seven and a half million people crammed into that concrete jungle and somehow, this woman and I might have been neighbors? *Oh, come on.*

There’s no point even entertaining the idea. I’m sure the same ridiculous thought is likely going through her head, and I’m not about to make an idiot of myself by asking. The sooner this little match-making soiree is over, the better. So, I simply stay silent. It’s the best way out.

An aching long moment passes. I mean, painstakingly long. Eventually, she shuffles her feet. Even if Dad didn’t take the hint, Bree certainly did.

She makes some off the cuff comment that’s supposed to be witty. It’s not dreadful, but I’m so desperate for this ridiculous situation to end, I don’t even smile. Dad lets out a chuckle, and immediately after, Bree has bolted out of the kitchen.

“What the heck are you playing at?” I glare at him.

Dad just laughs, clearly not in the least bit repentant. “What?” He shrugs, still laughing. He’s trying to pretend like he has no idea what I’m talking about, but we both know that’s a load of crap.

“Please tell me you didn’t bring me down here to set me up with your housekeeper?”

It’s a passing thought, and I know the answer before he starts shaking his head, but it’s out of my mouth now.

Dad settles a little at the suggestion, and looks at me with a more serious expression. “You know I wouldn’t have brought you here at all if I didn’t have to, son.”

“I know,” I sigh. I take a good look at him, my eyes lingering a few extra seconds on his injured leg. “How are you feeling?”

He beams a smile. “As right as rain,” he banters back. Pointing to his leg, he continues, “I’ll be back on my feet in no time.”

A fact of which I have no doubt. There wasn’t much that could keep my father down. He had proven that time and again over the years. Even after all his suffering, he had never become bitter. There had never been cries of woe, or that life was unfair. I wish I could say the same about myself.

At that moment, Bree walks past the kitchen window with a watering can, catching my attention. Dad loves his garden as much as he loves his woodwork. It made me wonder whether Bree knew what was in store for her before she took the job. She’ll certainly not get bored here, at any rate.

When I look back at Dad, he’s gazing at me with one eyebrow cocked. “What do you think of her?”

“Of who?” I reply, pretending not to know who he’s talking about.

“Daisy the cow,” he says flippantly, “who do you think I mean?”

I couldn’t help but smile

“Oh, you *can* smile,” he declares. “I thought you might have left your sense of humor in the city.”

“One needs to find something humorous in order to smile, Father,” I reply sarcastically.

There was a beat of silence, before he widened his eyes and looked at me. “Well?”

I sigh. I suppose I have to answer the darn question and get it over with.

“I’m not going to lie. I’m a bit surprised. When you told me you’d hired a housekeeper, I imagined—”

“Some old woman with sensible shoes?”

It was like he could read my mind. I shrug and nod. “Exactly.”

“In my older years, son, there’s no law that says I cannot enjoy a nice view



now and again. And whether you're willing to admit it or not, Bree is easy on the eye. She's also a pretty hard worker."

"I'm happy for you. Truly. Now, how about some lunch?"

I don't even wait for him to reply, before rushing over to the larder. As I browse the shelves, I find myself thinking back on what he said. Bree was most definitely easy on the eye. But so what? Lots of beautiful women were. Claire was. But beauty doesn't amount to anything if they are a cheating liar, does it?

*You need to stay away, Jackson. All women are the same. They'll use you when they need to, and break your heart and throw you away when they're done. Cheating liars, the lot of them.*

3



# Bree

“Hello, Mr. Shilliday,” I say, as I enter the hardware store the next morning. The bell above the door tinkles, alerting him of my presence. Not that he really needs to be alerted, since his eyes are always watching the door. He greets me from behind the counter with a warm smile.

“Good day to you, Bree,” the old man smiles warmly, “the weather’s picking up, I see.” He points at the outside with his chin.

“Yes,” I reply with a nod. “It looks like it’s going to be a hot one.”

Mr. Shilliday is tall and thin, and reminds me of a long-legged bird, like a stalk or a heron. Maybe it’s the long nose, maybe it’s the string thin arms and legs, maybe it’s the way he moves in sharp, jerky movements. I don’t really know. What I do know is, if he turned to me and suddenly squawked instead of talked, I wouldn’t at all be surprised or taken aback. But he’s kind and pleasant, whatever kind of bird he is. And while he hasn’t actually told me, I just know he’s lived in this place all his life. Like he’s part of the town’s architecture, or the foundations.

Slowly but surely, I’m getting to know the folks in this small town. Mrs.

Briars runs the grocery store. She's also chairman of some committee to do with the town fair, which begins this weekend.

Bella and Sylvie run the hairdressers and beauty parlor, a tiny establishment, perfectly suited for the needs of this town. Bella is older, I'd say about fifty-ish, with black bobbed hair which, I'm afraid to say, does not do anything for her short neck. But hey, who am I to judge? Sylvie, on the other hand, is a little younger than me. Maybe twenty-two or three. She's slender and pretty, with bleach blonde hair that, unlike Bella, suits her very well.

I met them both on the day I actually moved.

Driving through the town, I had no idea how to get to my cottage, or where I was going. Stopping in Sharon Springs, my new home, I pulled over right outside Silver Belle. That's the name of their parlor. A very clever play on words, I thought. I was in my car and tried to reach Sharon Springs through Google maps, which was harder than I thought. It eventually did get me to Sharon Springs, but before that, it sent me down Lord only knows how many random dirt tracks. In the end, I came back to the town to get my bearings.

"Are you lost, honey?" A voice came through my open window.

I looked up to find Bella peaking in at my driver's side, and Sylvie on the passenger side, my head bobbing from one to the other.

"Well, yes." I conceded. "Completely."

"Oh, darling," Bella drawled. "Where do you wanna go?"

When I told her, her little round face lit up. "Are you the new owner of Carter's cottage?"

I admit, I wasn't quite expecting that response. How she could have known that, I could hardly imagine back then. But I know now.

"Sylvie, get the keys. You drive in front and take..." Bella stopped and

looked down at me expectantly.

“Oh, er, Bree.”

“Oh, what a cute name,” Bella said, beaming another huge smile.

I got the distinct impression that Bella wore that smile even when she slept. I could feel this vibrant energy coming off of her at all times. And it wasn't pretentious delight; something you'll see so often in the city. This woman was just genuinely happy.

“Sylvie, get the car, and take Bree to Carter's cottage.”

“Oh, no. I can't put you through the trouble,” I said to Sylvie, who looked just as pleasant as her coworker.

“It's no trouble,” Sylvie said. “We don't have anyone coming in for another hour. It'll pass the time.”

Don't get me wrong. New Yorkers are great. They pull together in a crisis and help each other out. But the city is just so busy. Everybody was always in too much rush to be able to just drop everything they were doing and go help a stranger, like Sylvie was about to do.

No amount of protest would change her mind; in the end, I just relented. When we finally arrived, she jumped out of her car and handed me a slip of paper.

“There's my number. If you need anything at all, you just call me up.”

“Thank you,” I replied, a little flabbergasted.

“It's no trouble. We're neighbors now, after all.”

Like an idiot, I looked about for another house, even though I knew my newly purchased cottage was quite isolated. A deliberate choice.

Sylvie suddenly laughed. “I don't mean like, neighbors neighbors.”

It didn't make sense in a sentence, but I got it.

“I mean, you're part of the community now. So, you know. You're my

neighbor.”

After I thanked her once again, Sylvie waved goodbye and headed back to town, leaving me to venture forth into my new home.

It may be a town in the middle of nowhere, but it has good people. I haven't had the chance to call Sylvie yet, but knowing that there's a town fair starting Friday night, I think I'm going to invite her to come with me.

Anyone who hears this story might be a little confused as to why I didn't actually know where my cottage was. Surely, I'd been there before, right? Wrong.

One might think, having made the big decision to buy the property, that I had been out to see it, you know, like normal people. But I didn't go to see it before agreeing to buy it, which caused my older brother, Jonathan, no end of angst. He told me I was completely nuts to buy a house I hadn't even checked out before, and he was probably right. My only excuse is, I was desperate, and the cottage was going for a steal. I did see it, kind of... when the realtor took me there. Via Zoom. That information did nothing to appease Jonathan.

“It could be riddled with woodworm. It might be falling apart at the seams. It's probably going for a song because there're a hundred things wrong with it,” he had bleated through the phone.

Ordinarily, my older brother is far calmer. He's the middle child, and far more pragmatic than our older sister. I'm the baby of the family, and clearly, the one everyone believes is incapable of just about anything.

“I'm not an idiot, John,” I had replied. “The cottage has been surveyed, and it's in good order. The price probably reflects the fact that it's situated in a town a million miles from civilization. That's all.”

He wasn't convinced though, and to be honest, if I were in his shoes, I probably wouldn't be either. But I've been here two weeks, and apart from a

few minor repairs, the cottage is just fine.

Of course, the whole town already knows who I am. Gossip travels fast when the population is five hundred and sixty people. Yes, I kid you not. Where I lived in the city, that was probably the population of the street on any given day. I've had fleeting moments where I do miss the brownstone in Astoria, but then, I remind myself why I'm here, and shake myself out of my reminiscing.

"What can I get you, my dear?" Mr. Shilliday asks, rounding his shoulders and leaning his tall frame toward me with his palms sitting flat on the counter. It does nothing to alleviate the fact that he looks like a bird, and me...what? A worm?

"I need a washer for a faucet," I reply.

"Has Ben sprung a leak?" Mr. Shilliday frowns with concern.

I certainly hope not. He seemed entirely leak-free when I left his house yesterday evening.

My mind is a little strange. It creates pictures from the things I hear or read. Whereas other people might take Mr. Shilliday's words as they were meant, my funny little brain has a tendency to go to another place entirely. Currently, I'm imagining Ben sat in the middle of the garden like a human sprinkler, with jets of water flying out of him in every direction.

I shake my head to rid myself of the image, even though it made me smile. "Oh, no. This is for the cottage."

His frown deepens. "And you're going to try and fix it yourself?"

Internally, I sigh. Yes, because no woman could ever do a man's job, right? It's not the first time I've encountered this old school mentality since I've come here. It's like the people who live in this town are stuck in a distant

past. I know he means no harm, but maybe if the old man left the 19<sup>th</sup> century for a day, he'd be surprised to discover what a woman was capable of.

Of course, while I'm thinking all this in my head, I still smile sweetly at him. "It's not a big job," I reply, trying not to let my slight frustration seep into my tone.

Mr. Shilliday nods amicably, though the dubious expression remains. "Try that aisle," he says, pointing me down the right path. "And if you can't find what you're looking for, just give me a holler."

"Thanks."

My smile remains until I turn away. And, immediately after, I roll my eyes.  
*Men.*

As I reach the aisle, I try to cut Mr. Shilliday some slack. I mean, it did take me an hour of YouTube to figure out how to fix the leak. It's not like I'm the world's greatest handywoman or anything.

I love YouTube. Want to fix a leaky faucet? YouTube. Want to make a candle? YouTube. Want to make some ridiculously extravagant dinner that needs thirty ingredients you've never heard of that you'll only make for yourself because you have no one else to share it with? YouTube.

The washers are in small clear plastic packets, hanging on hooks. There are so many to choose from. Lucky for me, I googled the size, and then took a picture of the one I needed. Yep, no handywoman at all. After a few minutes of searching the hooks, I finally find the one I need, but take three. Just in case. Because, well, you just never know.

The bell tinkles above the door again, alerting both me and Mr. Shilliday of another customer's entrance. Not that I can see anything from behind the six-foot-tall shelves, but I hear Mr. Shilliday greet whoever just came in.

"Well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes." There's a delighted smile in his



voice, so at least he's pleased to see them.

I don't hear the reply, because whoever it is, speaks far lower than Mr. Shilliday. But the old man carries on. "So, how long are you back for?"

With the items I need in hand, I make my way back to the counter as the conversation continues. Ben should be expecting me soon, and I don't want to keep the man waiting. I turn the corner and move toward the counter, when I suddenly find myself face-to-face with Jackson Scott.

He immediately notices me, and looks just as surprised as I do. I am about to open my mouth and say hello when, without a word, he swiftly looks away, turning back to Mr. Shilliday.

*Hello? We met in your father's kitchen yesterday. Don't you remember?*

Jackson Scott was a strange character, that's for sure. And, I have deduced, nothing at all like his father. The cave-man was cold and distant yesterday, and it is evidently clear that nothing at all has changed in the last twenty-four hours.

I hadn't seen him again after that horribly awkward interaction. Whether he had deliberately avoided going to any place I could be in, who knows? It wouldn't surprise me if he'd done that. Once I left Ben and Jackson to their father and son reunion, he spent a whole fifteen minutes in my head. I was trying to figure out what the heck his problem was, with no success. I finally kicked him out without an eviction notice, and thought about more important things.

He is totally delicious to look at though, there is no doubt about it. But all the looks in the world do not compensate for the caveman behavior that I was subjected to.

I hadn't seen him again all day. Ben was on the porch again when I was leaving, watching the sun slowly set. He lifted a hand to bid me farewell, but

Jackson was nowhere in sight. I didn't know whether I was relieved or disappointed. When I reached my car, I saw Ben's son and Jackson's younger brother, Daniel, driving up the lane. I decided to wait until he got out of his car just to say hello. And then, goodbye.

Daniel Scott is the exact opposite of his older brother. Friendly, open, kind, and always with a smile. He welcomed me into the family home as though he'd known me for years. It's unusual for a boy his age, but I blame Ben. Clearly, the father's character has rubbed off on this son, unlike the older one. The only similarity between the brothers is the looks. He is still only nineteen, nearly twenty, or so he tells me, but Daniel is a heartbreaker. In this town, I reckon he's the subject of more than one girl's diary. If I knew him better, I'd tell him to get out and see the world. I'd hate him to be stuck here another sixty years and become a relic, like Mr. Shilliday.

Back at the shop, I stand at the counter wondering what I am supposed to do. Do I mirror Jackson's demeanor and pretend we've never met? Clearly, he does not want to acknowledge my presence; but seriously, are we ten years old?

If he wants to act like a child, that's fine. But I'm a grown woman. I refuse. Point blank. Besides, I work for Ben. Jackson is going to have to talk to me sooner or later. The longer I let this go on, the more awkward it's going to get.

"Hi, Jackson," I say, donning my politest smile. It's not my best one, but it's all I can muster under the circumstances. For a long moment, he doesn't move. Not an inch. Just like yesterday in the kitchen. I don't know why, but my heart begins to race. Maybe it's the idea that if he doesn't speak, I'm going to look like a complete idiot. Especially because Mr. Shilliday is now watching us with interest. I wait as the seconds pass; one, two, three, four...

“Hey,” he replies, with about as much enthusiasm as roadkill.

He throws a nod in my direction as he speaks, but doesn't turn or even look at me. Maybe I should have just kept my mouth shut. Clearly, this is not going to get any better, or easier. But I started this conversation, and standing here feeling heat rise in my cheeks, my nerves get the better of me and I feel compelled to continue.

“How's your dad this morning?”

It's a stupid and shallow question, but I have nothing else. It's not like I know anything about him personally. The only connection we have is Ben. But it makes me sound like I'm trying too hard. I was going to be at the farm in another twenty minutes and find the answer to that question myself. Besides, Ben will be no different today than he was yesterday. He's got a broken leg, not some dreadful deteriorating disease that's worsening every hour.

“Fine,” Jackson replies.

Oh, good grief! I nearly want to shake him and see if he can cough up more than a single word. Ben tells me his wonderful son is some sort of business whiz kid in the city. Sure. I hope he's capable of speaking more than a single word to his clients, or he'll soon find himself bankrupt.

“Great,” I say, joining him in the single-word-reply revolution.

From the corner of my eye, I see Mr. Shilliday's mouth curling at the corner. At least the old bird's entertained at my expense.

“Well, I need to get going. I'll see you again, Mr. Shilliday,” Jackson says to the old man. As an afterthought, he nods his head to me. “Bye, Bree.”

I nearly collapse on the floor at the sound of my name. Not because he's this beautiful hunk of a man, and I feel blessed that my name has left those thick, soft lips. Nothing like that. Although, he is indeed a beautiful hunk of a

man, and those lips do look rather lush. It's more to do with my shock that, despite yesterday's encounter and his behavior this morning, Jackson Scott remembers my name.

The bell tinkles over the door again as Jackson leaves, and I place my washers on the counter. Mr. Shilliday is full-on smirking now. "So, you've met Ben's boy?"

I would hardly call the rather spectacular specimen that just walked out of the store a boy, but I keep that information to myself. "Yes, we met yesterday."

Not that anyone could tell, after that little encounter. Of course, I don't say this out loud. I'm sure Mr. Shilliday has far more important things on his mind.

My mind, on the other hand, has now moved from washers and leaky faucets, and is back to what Jackson Scott's problem is with me. Did I do him harm in a past life for which he's still holding a grudge? Did I cut him off in traffic on Eighth Avenue at some point? Who knows? I sure as heck don't.

So far, I've enjoyed working for Ben. I love the house, the wide-open space of the farm, I'm even growing fond of the chickens. But the arrival of Jackson has put a spanner in the works. First of all, I came here to avoid any involvement with men. And from what I can tell about him so far, I just know he's going to make my time here utterly miserable.

4



# Jackson

When Daniel asked me, on Thursday evening, if I would go to the fair with him on Friday, my initial reaction was no. When I agreed to come up here and help Dad, the plan was to stay away from the town as much as possible. The old house is far enough out of town not to have any interactions with anyone I didn't want to see. Apart from groceries and other necessary trips, there was no need to leave the farm. I wanted to stay separate, and far away. That was the whole point of moving back to New York after everything that had happened.

Anonymity.

“Really? You won't go? But why?” Daniel pressed. “It'll be cool. Besides, you haven't been to the fair in ages.”

“Likely because I don't live here anymore, genius,” I quipped back with a smile. “Anyway, aren't you a bit old for the fair?”

“No. It's the best thing to do around here in the summer. And besides, you're here now,” Daniel replied, cocking his head to one side and looking at me like I'm the younger brother and not him. “You've no excuses.”

I have plenty of excuses. In fact, they're reasons, not excuses. I just don't want to dig up all the old crap or revisit all the reasons I left in the first place. It's bad enough that I have to be here for any length of time. Putting myself in the situation of having to come face-to-face with old ghosts was not ever on the cards.

"It's just... I'm tired," I lied.

Daniel first gave me a look that told me he didn't believe me, and then went on to list all the reasons why he didn't believe me.

"Funny, you haven't been tired once in the last two days when you've been working out in dad's old gym in the basement. You haven't been tired when you've gotten up at stupid 'o' clock in the morning for your run." He shook his head. "That's just madness by the way, but let's not get distracted by my opinions."

"Sure," I replied sarcastically, a smirk on my face, "because none of the rest of this stuff are your opinions at all."

"No, they're facts, my dear brother. Facts that tell me you're lying. Look at you. You're in the prime of your life—"

"How old are you?" I blurted, chuckling at his words.

"Stop changing the subject, Jackson. Come on. I haven't seen you in ages. I want to spend some quality time with my big brother. It'll be fun."

We had never called each other step brothers. Dad hated the term. As far as he was concerned, we were brothers, and that was that. Ten years may be a big gap to some, but it made no difference to us. We still hung out like we were only two, maybe three, years apart. When Daniel was born, I was old enough to tend to him, and our bond has only grown stronger ever since.

He was fifteen when Lizzy, his mother, had passed away. Even though Dad had been there for him, Daniel often rang me for support, making me swear

not to tell Dad. He didn't want to upset him, or make him think that he wasn't doing a good enough job. He knew Dad was grieving too, and he didn't want to burden him. I never broke my promise. It's been our secret for the last four years.

Of course, I caved. Which is why I now find myself wandering around the town fair on Friday evening, scanning the crowd to avoid anyone I don't want to meet. Sharon Springs is a small place, but the summer fair draws people from surrounding towns and villages as well. So, there is a big crowd.

"What are we doing first? The shooting range, the fairground, or do you want a burger?" I ask.

Daniel looks like he can't make up his mind. He always was an indecisive kid. His head flicks from the burger truck to the rifle range further across the field to the fairground rides even further away. There's a big wheel all lit up, even though it's not yet dark. I can see the waltzers, some big thing with arms that has carriages on the end, spinning at great speed, among a few other rides. Emanating from that direction is a whole lot of screaming. Whether it's delight or fear, it's hard to tell.

"Let's do the rifle range," he finally says.

I nearly heave a sigh of relief. Not because he's made the decision. I'm just not keen on fairground rides, and never have been. They make me sick. Daniel doesn't know that, because I've never confessed it to anyone, Daniel included. It seems a little pathetic for a man of my age and size that I can't handle a fairground ride. But then, a man of my age and size probably ought not to be on a fairground ride in the first place. And now I sound like a snob.

We're moving through the crowd and heading over to the rifle range, when, out of the corner of my eye, I see a familiar face. It's not one of the ghosts that I'm trying to avoid, but nor is it someone I want to be anywhere near



either. Darn it. Yesterday in the hardware store, she was *determined* to have a conversation. I have no idea why. I don't know her, and I don't want to know her. Dad's housekeeper is a distraction; no, a temptation I cannot afford. I'm better on my own. A lesson I had to learn the hard way.

Bree is heading in our direction, though she hasn't seen me yet. Surprising, given I'm nearly head and shoulders above everyone else here. Maybe it's because she's distracted, busily chattering with Sylvie Brecken.

*Didn't Daniel have a thing for her a while back?*

Great. If Daniel sees Sylvie... I need to steer him in another direction. If we continue on our current trajectory, we're definitely going to bump into them.

"Hey, how about a burger first?" I suggest, looking over to the burger truck in hope that Daniel's attention will divert to where I'm looking.

"Are you hungry?" he asks. He looks back at me at the exact same time I glance toward Bree and Sylvie. Big mistake. Daniel turns to see what I'm looking at, and immediately dons a smile.

"Hey, there's Bree and Sylvie."

*Yes, I know.*

"Is it?" I look over, pretending to see them for the first time. "Oh, yes. So it is," I say through gritted teeth. "Maybe we can catch up with them later."

*Please, Daniel. Let's just go get a burger.*

"Oh, come on. We have to go and say hi. They might be gone later."

I can't stop him from lunging toward them, so there's no point in trying. That being said, I don't follow him straight away. For a micro-second, I try and figure if there is any way out of this situation, but I already know the answer. Heaving a sigh, and knowing I have no choice, I turn and follow my brother, who has already reached the two women. He greets them with such excitement that makes me think that the thing that Daniel once had for Sylvie

didn't really go away. She's older than him by about two or three years, but Sylvie and her family have lived in Sharon Springs all their lives. We all know each other very well; they're good people. I just wonder why he hasn't made his move already.

"Hi, Jackson," Sylvie squeals, reaching up and throwing her arms around my neck, giving me a huge hug.

I hug her back gently and release her with a smile. It's been a while since I've seen her, but she always greets me this way. Like I'm her big brother as well as Daniel's. Maybe it's because I babysat them both about, oh, a hundred years ago. A time when she still wore ponytails and braces.

"Hey, Sylvie," I reply warmly.

"It's been so long since we've seen you," she continues in a delightful tone. "You're back to look after Ben?"

I chuckle a little. "For heaven's sake, don't let my dad hear you say that. He'll chase you down the street, wheelchair or not."

She giggles. "I know. Poor Ben! That accident has really cramped his style. So, how long are you staying?" She gives me a look, and I know what she's thinking. Just like everyone else, she knows why I haven't been back here as often.

"A few weeks, just to ensure that the business runs smoothly."

Bree just stands there, looking anywhere but in my direction, pretending to be interested in something farther across the field. Maybe she's making a point; and if I'm honest, I can't blame her. I've hardly been polite since our first meeting. It's just that she scares me to death.

"Have you been on the rides yet?" Daniel says, interrupting our reunion. He's talking to Sylvie, obviously.

"Not yet. Why? Will your big brother not go with you?" Sylvie says with a

grin, digging me with her elbow.

“He doesn’t do fairground rides. Come on, we can go together.”

I’m a little surprised that Sylvie just leaves Bree without introducing her. But then, she probably figures we’ve met already, her being Dad’s housekeeper. For a second, I don’t know whether to stay with Bree or follow Daniel and Sylvie. But my manners kick in. I can hardly leave the outsider here alone, even if her newfound friend clearly has no problem doing so.

“I suppose we should follow,” I say to her.

Bree brings her gaze back to me, and I can’t make out her expression. It’s not hateful daggers, but she’s hardly gushing with delight at the suggestion either.

Eventually, she shrugs. “Sure.”

We don’t speak as we walk after the two who’ve dashed off ahead. I have no idea what to say, and the truth is, I don’t really want to get to know this woman. Not just this woman. Any woman. I’m done with relationships. I’m done being hurt and treated like a fool. I know, it’s a pretty narrowminded view, but constant humiliation will do that to you.

The silence continues when we reach the ride that Daniel and Sylvie have queued up for. Only now, it feels more intense. At least before, the mere act of walking through the crowd served as a distraction. Now, we’re just a foot apart, stationary. Nearby, but not together. Daniel turns to me, whooping and hollering as they finally get their turn. I smile and wave in reply, and then, the ride begins.

I’m going to have to say something. This tension is thicker than the city traffic in rush hour. As I take a breath in to speak, I hear her voice.

“I really like it here. It’s so different than the city.”

I can’t give her the silent treatment again. It’s just not right. Besides, this

situation is different than the other times. I can't just walk away.

"It's just like every other small community," I reply, more to say something than nothing at all. I don't know if she's looking for my opinion, but what else am I supposed to say?

"I wouldn't know. I've lived in New York City my entire life. I've only been here a couple of weeks, but I think I like the gentle silence that prevails the air here. It's so much better than in the city."

I can't help but begin to feel the anger rise within me. Sure, life in a small community is great when all is going well. She ought to try living here when it isn't. Without realizing it, she was poking the hornet's nest, and no matter how hard I try, I can't keep the anger from my voice.

"Yes, well. I miss the city. I can't wait to get back there," I growl.

It was an instant conversation stopper, which was a stupid move. I don't know how to carry it on; and besides, I'm busy dealing with wounds that are slowly tearing open, inch by painful inch.



# Bree

He can actually laugh. I have to admit, I was beginning to wonder. But as I stand here at Sharon Springs summer fair, looking in every direction but at Jackson as he hugs Sylvie, Jackson Scott actually chuckles. I'm waiting for a heralding trumpet call or a heavenly chorus, but no such luck. Just the rowdy chatter, laughter, and delighted screams from the crowd that surrounds us.

By their conversation, Sylvie and Jackson seem to know each other very well. No surprise there. It makes perfect sense given that Jackson grew up here. At the store the other day, Mr. Shilliday had greeted him with fondness and familiarity. And, while Ben hasn't specifically said so, it's clear that the home he now lives in is where both the Scott boys were raised in. Evidently, Jackson knows everyone in this small town. And by what I've seen so far, everybody knows him, including the rather pretty Sylvie. Even though she is a bit young for him.

*You're jealous!*

I am not! Well, OK. Maybe a little. Maybe I'm also a little peeved that he can talk to Sylvie so freely, and can barely look me in the eye. Perhaps she's

part of a secret club. A special group of people that have the privilege of speaking with and being spoken to by Jackson Almighty. I'll bet there's a special hand shake and everything.

*Now you're just being silly.*

Yes, I know. And childish to boot. Ordinarily, I wouldn't be this snarky. It's just that I'm feeling a little sore at how he has treated me so far. I'm an outsider, I get it. But he has snubbed me twice now. I refuse to let him do it again. Which is the reason I am making a point of paying absolutely no attention to him at this very moment. Two can play that game, Mr. Scott.

Of course, I could not have foreseen this happening when I decided to call Sylvie up just the day before. While the idea of calling her had come to me like a flash of inspiration, I suddenly had second thoughts when I realized, I hardly knew anything about her. And by that, I mean, whether she had a boyfriend she might prefer to spend her Friday night with. She had told me to call her at any time, but I can see that being said very flippantly in a town this small. People still had lives.

*You miss a hundred percent of the shots you don't take.*

That's my sister in my head with her inspirational Instagram posts. On this occasion, she probably isn't wrong.

"Oh, Bree," Sylvie had cried with delight when she answered. "I didn't know if you were ever going to call, or if you just thought I was being nice."

I've only been here three weeks. Geesh. Maybe that's a lifetime of not speaking in these parts. Given her job, Sylvie likely doesn't go more than a few hours without talking.

"I've been super busy," I replied, feeling a need to defend myself.

"Oh, tell me about it. We've barely had any down time at the shop."

I have to wonder, in a town so small, if Sylvie's interpretation of busy is

anywhere near the same as mine. My job used to entail twelve-hour days, sometimes longer if I had to wine and dine a client. There are less than six hundred people in this town, how busy can one beautician get? Of course, I wisely keep this to myself. If Sylvie says she hasn't had any down time, then I ought to believe her. I really need to exorcise this cynicism I seem to have adopted. I wasn't always the kind of girl who questioned everything that came out of a person's mouth. I suppose I have both of my exes to thank for that.

"I was just calling up," I continued, "to see if you had plans for tomorrow night. If you're busy, we can take a rain check."

"Busy?" Sylvie cried. "In this town? Are you kidding me?"

If I'm honest, I didn't quite know how to answer that, and for fear of offending her, I kept my mouth closed.

"So, what did you have in mind?" she asked, as soon as she realized I wasn't going to speak again.

"I thought maybe we could go to the fair together."

"Oh, I'd love to go to the fair," she gushed with the same delightful tone.

At this point, my cynicism returned, and I'll explain why. I have my good days and my bad days, just like everybody else. But every time Sylvie spoke to me, she sounded like we had been lifelong friends, and I had rung her after not speaking to her for five years. The gushing delight and energy was difficult to take. Maybe because I'm just not used to it.

Living in New York my whole life, I seem to have adopted the general narkiness of the city. Everyone's always rushing, no one's willing to just stop and chat, and when they do, they certainly do not sound like a woman straight out of a hallmark Christmas movie. Which is exactly how Sylvie sounded every time she spoke.



*I thought you were curbing your cynicism?*

I'm working on it.

"Great," I replied, now trying too hard to sound just as delighted. Or was it that I actually was delighted? It's just been so long since I've felt the emotion, I've forgotten what it feels like.

That sounds nearer to the truth, even though I don't particularly want to admit it to myself. I had lost my entire sense of self in my last relationship, and one of the main reasons for moving to this small town was to rediscover who I really was. Who knows, I might even find parts of me I didn't know existed. Even though it took some effort, I relaxed and allowed myself to feel happy that Sylvie actually wanted to go to the fair with me. It was a warm feeling, like walking out into the sunshine on a beautiful day. When I finally hung up, I realized I was smiling.

"Have you been on the rides yet?" I hear Daniel say.

There's something in his voice—an invitation of sorts. A strong feeling of discomfort rises in my stomach because I know exactly where this is going.

"Not yet," Sylvie replies. "Why? Will your big brother not go with you?"

"He doesn't do fairground rides. Come on, we can go together," Daniel says.

*No! No! No!*

I did not come out on a Friday evening only to have to spend it in uncomfortable silence with a man who, when talking to me at least, cannot string two words together.

Of course, I do not voice any of that. In fact, I've yet to even look in their direction. While I've been listening to every word, I've pretended my attention has been taken by all that is going on around me. But it's too late. When I do slowly turn, acting as though I'm mildly curious as to what is

going on, Sylvie and Daniel have hurried off ahead, leaving me with the caveman.

*Great!*

“I suppose we should follow,” I hear him say.

I’m nearly certain it’s the longest sentence I’ve heard him speak yet, to me anyway. Yep. The longest before this was him telling me, with little enthusiasm I might add, how nice it was to meet me on the day I nearly knocked him across the kitchen with the door. While it may well be the longest sentence he’s spoken, I remind myself that it’s out of necessity only. He’s speaking to me because he *has to*, and I need to keep that in the forefront of my mind. I’m not going to make a fool of myself again.

“Sure,” I reply in a tone that tells him I’m indifferent at best.

And yet, if he were to hear the rapid thumping of my heart against my ribcage, I am certain the man would be completely confused. While my brain is telling me to ignore the caveman and give as good as he has given so far, my body is telling me the exact opposite. I can’t blame it. My fickleness is not my doing. I’m being heavily influenced by the soft, woodsy scent that’s wafting in my direction. It’s the same aroma I inhaled when I face-planted into Jackson’s chest in his father’s kitchen the other day. I sighed with delight then, and I’m struggling not to do the same now.

For all his rudeness, Jackson Scott has a definite tall, dark, handsome and moody vibe going on. I’ll be honest, he’s not the typical guy I would go for, not that there have been many. I married when I was young, and before that, I only dated a few guys. My ex-husband is outgoing, outspoken, and more than a little controlling. It appears that this is my type, given that Rob, the guy I left New York City to get away from, is exactly the same.

Of course, I should never have allowed myself to get involved with

someone else so soon after the divorce. I was damaged goods after my ex-husband, David, had finished controlling my every move, and forced me to question my sanity. I should have listened to my sister. But hey, there's nothing I can do about it now. I'll quote one of her other favorite sayings.

*It is what it is.*

We're moving through the crowd now, not that I can see much as I walk behind the great expanse that is Jackson's back. He must work out. No one is born with that kind of muscular breadth, are they? Even beneath his t-shirt, I can see the muscles of his shoulders, and I can only imagine the rest of him is just as defined. Worse still, his scent is even stronger now as I walk in his wake.

*Thanks a bunch, Sylvie.*

When we finally come to a stop, Sylvie and Daniel are already queuing for the ride. It's only in that moment, that I realize I wasn't even consulted if I wanted to join them. But as I look over at the two of them, chattering excitedly, I can't help but smile to myself, and am glad I wasn't asked. Daniel is looking at Sylvie with an expression I know quite too well.

I did say he was a heartbreaker. As they stand together waiting to get on the ride, it's obvious they make such a cute couple.

*Good for you, Daniel.*

The sense of discomfort returns once Daniel and Sylvie get on the ride. I'm barely a foot away from Jackson and neither of us have spoken a word. We're supposed to be the older and more mature adults, and we're acting like children. What the heck is wrong with us?

*Just say something.*

"I really like it here. It's so different than the city."

It's a pathetic statement, but I have nothing else. I don't know this man at

all, and to be honest, I'm scared to death of trying to get to know him, in case he shuts me down like he did in the hardware store. I've suffered enough humiliation and manipulation in the last five years. There's only so much a woman can take.

"It's just like every other small community," Jackson replies.

It's not a curt response, but neither does he sound eager to converse. Still, it's a start. Maybe we can have a conversation that involves more than a few syllables, if I can just keep this going.

"I wouldn't know," I say. "I've lived in New York City my entire life. I've only been here a couple of weeks, but I think I like the gentle silence that prevails the air here. It's so much better than in the city."

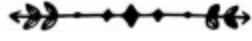
"Yes, well," he growls. "I miss the city. I can't wait to get back there."

That response *was* curt and abrasive, and suddenly, I've had enough. I just cannot do this any longer. I came to this little town to build myself back to the strong-minded woman I once was. I'm here to work on being the best version of myself, not sacrifice my sanity again by throwing myself to the lions. My self-esteem has been devoured enough. I will not put myself in a position where it can happen again.

"Right," I snap back. "Maybe the sooner you return, the better it will be for everyone."

I then turn on my heels and storm away. I feel the tiniest bit bad for not saying goodbye to Sylvie as I battle through the crowd and make my way to the carpark, but I'm sure Daniel will happily entertain her for the rest of the evening. As for me, I need to get as far away from Jackson Scott as is physically possible.

6



# Jackson

I can feel the sweat trickling down my back as I throw another log on the work bench. It's getting hot outside, and even with the barn doors flung open, it's still like a sauna in here.

Of course, Dad's workshop is not your everyday barn. Once the business started to grow, he took my advice and put the money he earned back into the business. Since, well, I am an investment banker who's pretty damn good at his job.

First, he bought bigger and better tools. Then he paid for the barn to be completely gutted and refurbished with everything he might need; from power tools, to circular saws, great big vices, and storage shelves. So, while on the outside, the building may look like any other barn in the country, the inside is actually a pretty well kitted out and modern workshop. Everything is clean and neatly organized in its proper place. Dad liked it that way.

"Your workspace reflects your mind," he had always said.

He had raised us this way, and evidently, his philosophy had stuck. My desk at the office is no different; minimal, and with everything in its proper

place. Sometimes, I wonder if I haven't got a little touch of OCD. I'm sure Cathy, my PA, would say I have.

I'm also pretty tired, but I only have myself to blame for that. If I hadn't been such an idiot with Bree yesterday evening at the fair, my mind would not have tortured me half the night, making it difficult to sleep. It wasn't just what had been said between us two, it was the fallout afterward when Sylvie and Daniel had come back from their ride.

"Where's Bree?" Sylvie had said, noticing that her companion was nowhere to be seen.

"Er, she had to go," I said with a slight shrug. I didn't really want to have to explain that it was my fault that she had to go. I already felt bad enough as it was.

"Oh, no," Sylvie cried, her hand jumping to her mouth. "This is all my fault. I should never have left her alone."

"She wasn't alone," Daniel piped up. "She was with Jackson."

Daniel had then given me a suspicious look, and since I struggled to hold a passive expression, his eyes narrowed.

"I know, but we came to the fair together. I shouldn't have left her. She was obviously feeling left out, and now I just feel terrible."

Daniel still stared at me with a knowing expression, and I began to feel more than a little uncomfortable. I felt guilty already, but listening to Sylvie only made it worse. It was my fault Bree had left, not hers. I simply could not allow her to take the blame for this.

"It wasn't you leaving her, Sylvie," I had confessed. "It was me."

Sylvie then frowned. "What do you mean, it was you?"

I felt a little embarrassed thinking about how to answer her question. I'm several years older than her, and thus, ought to be able to act better. Yet, my

actions had hardly reflected my maturity, or the fact that I'm a top-level professional back in the city. I had acted childishly, and on more occasions than one. When Bree had tried to speak to me in the hardware store, I had been less than forthcoming. Dad did not raise us to be rude or inconsiderate, and yet, that's exactly how I had acted.

By her actions, she had clearly had enough of my petty behavior. And who could blame her?

"Jackson," Sylvie pressed. "Tell me what you mean."

I wasn't going to get into my ridiculous insecurities with Sylvie, even though she would likely understand, given my past. Besides, the baggage I was carrying was no excuse. Bree had not deserved such crappy treatment, and now in hindsight, I wished I could have acted differently. But the damage was done.

"I just haven't been very accommodating, that's all."

Sylvie had crossed her arms, cocked her head to the side, and raised her eyebrows at me. "Really, Jackson? After all this time?"

Evidently, Sylvie was a little more astute than I had given her credit for, and now looked at me like I was the younger of the two of us.

"You can't take your past out on Bree. That's just not fair. She hasn't—"

"I know, Sylvie," I said, raising a hand in submission. "I'll speak to her tomorrow and apologize."

On the way home, Daniel had not raised the issue until we were just about to reach the house.

"What's going on with you?" he had asked. There was no malice to his question. His tone conveyed genuine curiosity.

"Honestly, man. I don't really know."

"Did Bree say something to upset you?"



“No,” I shook my head, “not at all.”

“Yeah, I’d be surprised if she did. So, why are you being so short with her?”

For a moment, I didn’t answer. Not because I didn’t know the answer. I just didn’t want to share it with Daniel. But my brother isn’t stupid, and a second later, he gasped dramatically. “Oh my god!” he cried.

“Don’t.” I warned.

“You like her,” Daniel had continued in the same excited tone.

“I said, don’t, Daniel.”

“What?” he had shrugged, a huge grin now slapped over his face. “She is kinda cute.”

I had parked the truck in the driveway and sighed heavily once the engine was off; both my hands still holding onto the steering wheel. Not only did I not want to have this conversation, the last person I that I wanted to have it with was Daniel. Like I said, he’s not stupid.

“I still don’t see what the problem is,” he had said, not moving from the passenger seat.

“I suppose I just don’t want to get hurt again,” I had conceded.

“But surely, there’s been other women since—”

“Nope,” I had replied.

Daniel’s jaw had fallen open as he gawped at me. “Really?”

“Really.” I nodded. “I know you don’t get it. And I truly hope you’re never in my position to find out. It’s not just the affair. It’s not even that she’s still with him. It’s the humiliation. The knowledge that half the town already knew what was going on, way before I did. I suppose—now that I really think about it—I’m angry. I’m angry at her for betraying my trust. And I’m

angry at all those who knew and didn't think it was their duty to come tell me."

Daniel had not said anything. I suppose there was nothing he could really say. Before we left the truck though, I made him swear not to mention any of this to Dad.

"You know I won't," he had replied, looking a little hurt that I'd even asked.

"I know, buddy. I know."

"Ahem."

I turn at the sound of someone clearing their throat dramatically. Whoever it is, clearly wants to let me know they are there. I'm a little surprised to see Bree standing at the entrance of the barn holding a tray. On it is a tall glass and a large jug, filled with what looks like cloudy water, even though I know it's Dad's homemade lemonade. Small cubes of ice bob at the surface like tiny icebergs.

"Your dad sent me. He thought you might like some lemonade, with the day being this hot," Bree says.

Her tone is entirely flat. The other times that she had spoken to me, there had been at least some hint of emotion, like she was actually making an effort. But that ship has sailed and I wasn't on it. She is here because Dad has sent her. Something she obviously wants to make clear.

"Thanks," I say, trying to sound far more friendly than I have been up to this point.

The truth of which is only compounded by the slightest movement in her eyebrow. She is trying to hide her surprise; but in my business, I've become more than capable of judging a person's inner thoughts through even a slight

change in their facial muscles. Knowing what people are thinking can make or break a deal.

“Here, let me take that off your hands.”

I stride the small distance between us and take the tray off her, placing it on the nearest surface. I’m not ignorant to her obvious interest in the workshop. Her eyes are wide, and her face is now clearly sketched with curious awe.

“It looks a lot different on the inside, doesn’t it?” I say.

I can’t hide the pride in my voice. I’m proud of my father for all the obstacles he’s overcome, all the suffering he’s endured, the strength that he has shown throughout his life, and the fact that all his effort has paid off. He built this business from scratch, and only ever saw any failures he encountered as a stepping stone. In truth, if I was half the man he was, I’d be happy.

“I’d say,” Bree says, taking a step into the workshop. “This is like the Tardis.”

I furrow my brow and frown at her. “The what now?” I ask, completely bewildered.

She looks at me as though I might have just landed on the planet yesterday.

“The Tardis,” she repeats, as though by saying the word again, everything will suddenly become clear to me.

Nope. Complete blank.

“Have you been living under a rock?” she asks, her eyebrows now so far up her forehead, they’re almost at her hairline.

“Clearly,” I reply, smiling a little.

She looks at me strangely for a second, and from what I can deduce, I think she’s trying to figure out whether I’m telling the truth or making fun of her.

I raise both hands. “I swear, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Shaking her head in disbelief, she continues. “It’s from a British TV show. Dr. Who? You’ve really never heard of Dr. Who and the Tardis?”

I shake my head again. I don’t watch too much TV since I find it a colossal waste of time. I hardly ever watch anything from our own country, never mind someone else’s.

“Wow. Well, then I suppose my sentence makes no sense.”

I can tell she’s about to turn and leave, and I want to stop her. I want to tell her that I was an idiot last night and that, in fact, I have been an idiot since we first met. But I don’t know where to begin.

“Can you tell me about it?” I say instead. Maybe if I can get her to stay for more than a minute, I can figure out what it is I actually want to say.

The suspicious frown on her brow does not instill me with confidence. Nor does the beat of silence that hangs between us. Bree is trying to figure out if she should stay or go, and while I cannot influence her decision in any way, I’m hoping it’s the former.

“He’s a time traveler,” she says eventually.

I raise my eyebrows in surprise. I did not see that coming. Not that I know anything about the rather stunningly beautiful woman before me, but she certainly does not strike me as a sci-fi fan. Then again, what does a sci-fi fan really look like? It’s not like they walk around in their Comic-Con costumes every day of the year, right?

My mind goes somewhere it shouldn’t. Like what might she look like in a rather tight and short superhero outfit? I quickly dismiss the thought.

*Geeze, man. You’re like a faucet. You’re either red hot or freezing cold!*

“The Tardis is his time machine,” she continues. “On the outside, it looks like a phone booth. But not like the phone booths we have here. It’s a British phone booth.”

“And they’re different?” I’m frowning again, and then something magical happens.

A beautiful, light, and airy natural sound that seems to suit her perfectly emanates from her lips as she giggles, clearly amused at my bewilderment. I don’t care much about my bewilderment in this moment though, I’m far too busy being a little transfixed by her gentle laugh. My stomach churns and twists, just like it did that day when I smelled her wonderful aroma. I can smell it now while she’s barely three feet away. Between her soft scent and her gentle laughter, I feel a little lost.

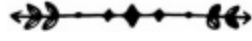
“Of course, they’re different,” she continues as the laughter fades into a soft smile. “Our phone booths are horrible, transparent boxes. The Tardis is this wonderfully enclosed box. On the outside, it looks like one person might fit into it, but when the door opens, it’s absolutely humongous inside.”

Her reference is beginning to make more sense now, and I nod. “Ah, which is why my father’s barn is like the Tardis. It’s deceptively regular-looking from the outside.”

“You see,” she says with a grin, “you’re not as dense as you pretend to be.” With that, she turns on her heels and leaves the barn without looking back.

I find myself grinning at her light insult, and a calming stillness wraps around me. I might not have managed the apology, but in some kind of natural way, I think things got better. I mean, I made her laugh. That’s got to be a good thing, right?

7



# Bree

So, today was a surprise. I mean, talk about doing a complete 180!

When I arrived at Ben's, my stomach was doing somersaults at the thought of coming face-to-face with Jackson. After a while, I concluded that he was not home, given that I had not laid eyes on him all morning. Feeling somewhat more relaxed, I focused on my chores. There's always lots to do in Ben's huge house, not to mention the garden. And when it's time for me to leave, I often feel that I have hardly accomplished anything.

It's not my place to say, but I really hope that when Ben's leg gets better, he takes on a housekeeper full-time. I would accept the offer, I think. I enjoy my work here. I have already made the house ten times tidier than when I arrived with my exceptional organizational skills. It's now also got that special, woman's touch. When I first came here, I immediately made note of the overwhelming influence of testosterone. No plants, no flowers, no style.

The day was a scorcher, and even in the shade, the heat was nearly unbearable. While pottering around the garden, I nipped into the house a few

times to enjoy a little bit of aircon. The house is cool and refreshing and I know Ben doesn't mind.

"Hey, Bree," Ben called to me through the open kitchen window just before lunch. He couldn't see me, but he had likely heard me moving about. He was on the porch in his usual spot. A table stood beside him supporting a cold drink and a book. I've carefully observed Ben's morning routine, swapping between reading the book and admiring the wonderful view that surrounds his home. He seems to have become more accepting of his circumstances. Maybe a bit of rest will do him a world of good.

"Yeah?" I replied, taking the dishes out of the dishwasher, one at a time.

"There's some homemade lemonade in the fridge..."

*Ooh, yum. I could definitely do with some of that.*

"Will you take a jug and a glass down to the barn for Jackson?" Ben continued. "I'm sure he's melting in there right now."

At that, I froze immediately. It wasn't because of the aircon either. It's not that good.

*Damn it!*

I had been certain the caveman wasn't home today. It hadn't occurred to me that he would be in the one place he was supposed to be. The very reason he was here was to help his father with the business, or so Ben had told me.

Of course, he was in the darn barn.

"Sure," I replied, after the longest pause in history. "Do you want anything?" I had added absently.

"No. No. I think I'm all good here."

"OK."

The ice tinkled against the jug as I walked carefully to the barn, gripping the round plastic tray. The pattern on the tray was full of big blooming red



flowers, and it made me wonder who had bought it. None of the men in this family, I would imagine.

Jackson had his back to me when I reached the wide doorway. The barn doors had been tied back, but with the humid heat and no air circulation, it likely didn't provide much relief.

My stomach started with the somersaults again. Only they were far bigger this time. In fact, these felt like quadruple backflips that the gymnasts perform in the Olympics. The ones from earlier seemed like simple cartwheels by comparison. I had considered placing the tray on one of the immaculately spotless workbenches before running away, but I had immediately reminded myself that I had done nothing wrong. It wasn't me who was acting like an ice-cold breeze.

And yet, I had to grab his attention somehow. I didn't want to call his name. It felt foreign. It wasn't like we knew each other, Jackson had made certain of that. As I considered my options, I couldn't help watching the way he moved in the butt-hugging denim shorts that showed off his rather humongous thigh muscles.

*Make up your mind, will you? Either hate his guts, or drool over him, but choose.*

Of course, I don't really hate his guts. I just have a strong dislike for the man.

I cleared my throat. More because I was worried, he'd feel my intense gaze at his backside and turn swiftly to catch me looking. Not the greatest scenario.

He had turned in my direction, and I was half-expecting a scowl after my biting remark, followed by my swift departure last night. But his expression caught me completely off guard. In fact, everything that happened for the

following ten minutes was utterly confusing. It was like I was having a conversation with a completely different man. A man I had clearly not yet met.

By the time I left the barn, the somersaults were gone. Not that my stomach was entirely settled. It was back to that twisting sensation I felt the first time I smelled him. If Jackson Scott's intention was to confuse me, he was succeeding lavishly. I don't understand the change; but then, nor do I really care. I hate confrontation, and more than that, I hate tension and discomfort. Maybe, just maybe, these next few weeks are not going to be so dreadful after all.

The bed is so warm and comfortable, it's tempting to stay in it for another hour. But today is Sunday. My only day off. There are still boxes to unpack and chores to do about the cottage. Not to mention, the one thing I have been putting off since I bought the washers.

Fixing the faucet.

Maybe Mr. Shilliday's lack of confidence in me had rubbed off. Before going into his store, I had been fully committed to fixing the constant dripping from the faucet at the kitchen sink. His dubious expression comes back to haunt me even now. Am I biting off more than I can chew?

I shower and dress in old denim shorts and a tank top. By a quick look at the hazy sky, I can tell it's going to be another hot one. I potter downstairs and set up my laptop. If I'm going to do this, I want to make sure that I know what I'm doing. I've watched this video three times already, but just one more time won't hurt.

OK, so I've watched it four more times, just to be sure. Now, with the wrench in one hand, and the washers in the other, I'm determined to do this thing. I face the kitchen sink like a warrior ready for battle.

“All right, faucet. I’ve had just about enough. You’re getting fixed.”

Yeah, thank goodness I live alone.

Putting the washers on the counter nearby, I find the place I need to loosen, and after adjusting the wrench to the size it needs to be, I begin to turn. This isn’t so bad. Once I get this off, I can take the faucet off, replace the washer and the seal, and I’ll have done it. I can add plumber to my long list of accolades.

As I’m turning the nut though, I suddenly feel pressure building up, and before I can stop it, the faucet comes flying off, projected across the counter by the blast of water that is now shooting out the pipe.

“Arrrrghhh!” I scream.

I’m completely freaking out as the blast of water shows no sign of slowing down, no matter how hard I press down with both hands.

After all the YouTube viewing, I’d forgotten to turn the damn water off at the mains.

“Oh, crap!” I cry, now soaked to the skin. Beneath my hands, the water squirts out in every direction. It’s spraying against the window and across the counters. I’m totally soaked, and with water in my eyes now, I have to use one hand to wipe my face so I can see.

What do I do?

Speedily playing the YouTube video on fast forward in my head, I remember the crucial element of the process that I had completely missed.

The stopcock. I’ve got to get to the stopcock.

I suddenly have a moment of crisis. I know that I’m going to have to move my hands away from the pipe to be able to get to the stopcock. But, like the genius I am, I haven’t even located it yet, so I have no idea where it might be. Marvelous!

A thick layer of water now lies over the counters, the kitchen floor, and me. My heart is racing, and all I can think of is that face Mr. Shilliday pulled when I told him I was going to do this myself. Great. I'll be the laughing stock of the town now.

*You have more important things to care about, Bree. Like, not flooding your entire house.*

Eventually, I make the terrifying decision to take my hands off the pipe. Not that they were doing much good anyway. But if I don't want to turn my house into an aquarium and me into its display, I need to find the stopcock.

I'm just about to let go, when I hear loud knocking at the front door.

This cannot be happening. Who the heck could this be on a Sunday? Of course, they couldn't arrive when I'm calmly and peacefully chilling in my perfectly unflooded house.

I know the front door is open, but I sure as heck do not want anyone coming in and finding me in this state. This is a small town. Which means that every single occupant would know what went down here by the end of the day. I'm certain whoever is at the front door will call at another time. Besides, I have more important things on my mind. The water. The flood. The aquarium. Me on display. The stopcock. Where is the darn stopcock?

By the time I find it, I'll have an ark, not a cottage. Only the flood will be on the inside and not where it's supposed to be. Outside.

"You know, it's usually better to put a paddling pool outdoors. I know it's hot out and all, but..."

I turn to see Jackson standing in the kitchen doorway, a smirk dancing on his lips. My hair is now stuck to the side of my face, I'm soaked through, and the water is still pouring out of the tap. I start to wonder what he's doing here, but then I immediately spot my purse in his hand.

“You left it at the house yesterday,” Jackson says, seeing me eye the extremely feminine purse in his gigantic manly hand. “But,” he continues, tossing it on the chair in the living area, “I believe we currently have more pressing matters at hand, don’t you think?” He nods to the sink.

That’s the understatement of the year.

8



# Jackson

“I’m sure she can do without it for one day,” I say to Dad, who is looking at me with a determined stare.

“Sure, she probably could,” Dad replies. “But maybe, just maybe, she’s going out of her mind wondering where it is. If I had lost my wallet and didn’t know where I’d left it, I would lose my mind for sure.”

“Then why don’t you just call her and tell her to come collect it?” I press.

“I’m not going to get her to come here on her day off, Jackson,” Dad blurts. “The poor woman spends enough time in this house as it is. Come on, son. I’m not asking for a miracle. I just need you to return her purse.”

I don’t trust him. Not one bit. It wasn’t his doing, of course. It’s not like he had hid Bree’s purse just so he could manufacture a situation where I would have to go return it to her. But still, after yesterday, I know he hasn’t given up on his matchmaking ambitions.

Dad knows full well that there’s a fridge in the barn, and that I have plenty of cold drinks to choose from. Sending Bree out to me yesterday was a ruse to get us talking. It had made me wonder whether Daniel had opened his

mouth, but I had dismissed the thought as quickly as it had arrived. He had promised he wouldn't, and I trust him. No, it had just been Dad's way of trying to get us to interact with each other.

And he is now at it again.

He's not going to give this up, and no matter what I say, he'll have a counter argument ready. Eventually, I relent.

Throwing the small tan purse into the passenger seat, I take the truck over to Carter's cottage. It's Bree's cottage now, but it's been known as Carter's cottage for so long, it'll take some time for anyone who lives in Sharon Springs to get around to calling it that.

It takes about seven minutes for me to reach her house. Her car is parked outside, so I know she's home. Taking a deep breath in, I grab the purse and slide out of the truck. I'm probably the last person she wants to see, but at least the air between us is better after our little talk in the barn. I would have hated coming out here had that not have happened.

The front door is open, and I rap the screen door with my knuckles. It vibrates noisily. After a minute, there's no answer, so I rap again. Still no answer. I peer through the screen and try and see inside, but there's not much to see. There's only a small porch visible with a doorway off to the left, but there's no way for me to see any farther than that. As I strain my ears to catch any sounds, perhaps her approach after me knocking the second time, there's a strange sound that doesn't really seem normal. Like gushing water. I knock one more time, and wait.

Nothing.

I look down at the wide step I'm standing on. I could just leave the purse here for her to find. Bree is so far out in the wilds here, it should be safe enough. Only, when I return home, I have no doubt Dad will want to know



what Bree said, and whether she's doing OK. He would not be pleased that I left the purse out here for anyone to pick up.

*Fine!*

Pulling the screen door back, I venture inside. It feels wholly uncomfortable and I take the first couple of steps slowly. The poor woman could be running around here naked for all I know. My mind goes to that place it shouldn't, and I shake my head to knock the thought off.

*Behave, for heaven's sake.*

The sound of gushing water gets louder, and even though I can't see it, I know it doesn't sound right. I hear Bree panting. She sounds distraught and I realize something is wrong. Lengthening my step through the cottage, I arrive at the kitchen doorway.

She's certainly a sight to behold. Soaked to the skin, her hair is plastered to her face and her body. She's standing in a good centimeter of water, as more of it is gushing out the pipe like a burst fire hydrant.

I can't help but smirk. Clearly, this is why she was in the hardware store the other day.

"You know, it's usually better to put a paddling pool outdoors. I know it's hot and all, but..." I shrug, smiling.

She turns at the sound of my voice, and now stares at me, her face a mixture of surprise and panic, and utter despair. Even looking like a drowned rat, my stomach still churns at the sight of her. I watch as her surprised eyes flick over to the purse I still hold in my hand.

"You left it at the house yesterday. But," I say, tossing her purse onto a chair, "I believe we currently have more pressing matters at hand, don't you think?"

Without really thinking about it, I stride into the kitchen and drop to my

knees, opening the cupboard beneath the sink.

“What are you doing?!” Bree screeches. “You’re going to get soaked.”

I can already feel the water hammering down onto my back and my head. The water seeps into my jeans at the knees, but it doesn’t really matter. It’s only water, after all. I reach my hand inside the cupboard and turn the stopcock. The sound of the battering water lessens, followed by a strange gurgling sound as the air is sucked back down the pipe with the receding water.

“Is that it?” I call out, while also lifting my head to look at the faucet.

“Yes,” she replies breathlessly. “Thank you.”

I get back on my feet and look down at her, before looking down at myself. I can’t help feel some amusement at the state we’re both in, and suddenly, I burst into laughter. At first, Bree only stares at me, but a second later, she’s laughing with me. I can feel the tension leaving her body as she does so. This is clearly funny now, but she likely wasn’t having too much fun before I arrived.

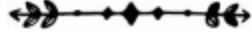
“You’re quite mad. Do you know that?” she says, the laughter eventually waning.

“Hey, I’m not the one who tried to fix the faucet without turning the mains off,” I reply with a smirk, gesturing to the faucet.

Her faces flushes and she looks embarrassed. “Yeah, well. Maybe Mr. Shilliday was right, after all.”

I frown in confusion, but she just shakes her head. “Never mind. I’ll go and get you a towel.”

“Thanks. I’ll finish up here,” I say, lifting the wrench from the counter.



# Bree

Running up the stairs, I press my hands against my burning face. I feel like such an idiot. I ought to feel relieved that, thanks to Jackson's timely intervention, I do not now live in a fish tank, but all I feel is embarrassed. In many ways, this could have gone way worse. No one would have come, or worse, it could have been Sylvie! I don't know how much help she would have been in this situation, perhaps just as much as I, but the news that I almost transformed my house into an aquarium would have reached the entire town.

I strip off my soaking clothes, and grab a towel to dry myself. It feels strange to be completely naked knowing that Jackson Scott is under the same roof as me. Yanking my dresser open, I throw on another tank top and a pair of shorts. After rubbing my hair roughly, I grab a scrunchie and fix it in a messy knot.

Poor Jackson is still soaked to the skin. The image of his shirt sticking tightly to his muscly torso springs into my mind. I sigh. There are other, more

important things to think about, I remind myself. I open the wardrobe and look inside. Maybe I do have something in here he can use.

After grabbing what I was looking for, I head back downstairs. I find Jackson in the kitchen with a mop in his hand, soaking up the water that's still spilt all over the floor.

"What are you doing?" I cry.

He turns to look at me, and shrugs. "Mopping. Do native New Yorkers not mop their floors after causing an indoor flood?" he smirked.

I cock my head to one side, and pull a face. "Funny. Here," I hold out what I've brought him—a dry towel and an oversized sweater that I 'borrowed' from my brother Jonathan about eight years ago. It has conveniently never been returned. "I'll do you a swap."

"I don't mind," he says, reluctant to hand over the mop.

As I glance over to the faucet, I see it's all back together, with new washers attached. "I think you have done enough to help me today. Please, you're making me feel guilty, and I already feel bad enough."

He looks at me and gives me a strange smile. "But, why?"

"Why what?" I reply.

"Why do you feel bad?"

"Well," I gesture to the mess and then to him, "because of all this. The mess, and me making a disaster out of something that should have been simple, and you having to come here and save me."

"Do you not like being saved?"

His smile is gone, replaced with a look that I can only describe as curious interest. Out of everything I just said, I find it surprising that Jackson chose to ask me about that in particular. I tense up trying to think of a proper reply.

I could regale him with my failed relationships over the last five years. I

could tell him that the only reason I moved out here in the wilderness is to try and get my life back in order. I could tell him that my stomach churns at the very thought of him.

Woah! Let's just take a step back here.

Ultimately, I decide on sharing none of those things.

"Hey, Dr. Phil," I smirk, "why don't you just come and take these things off me." I point at the towel and the hoodie.

Jackson rests the mop against a cupboard and enters the living room, where I'm currently at. He takes the towel and the sweater from my hands.

"That's my favorite sweater," I continue, "so I'll be needing that back when you're finished with it."

"Of course," he replies, before he starts to rub his head with the towel.

I step into the kitchen and grab the mop, taking over from where Jackson left off. The mop is small, and in a short while, I discover that it's also quite useless, at least for such a gargantuan job of mopping up Lord only knows how many gallons of water. I'm probably exaggerating, but honestly, at this point, I'm really not that sure.

It would just be easier to drop several towels on the floor and let them do the soaking. As I glance at Jackson still drying his hair, I conclude that using towels is a far better idea. I run back upstairs to grab them. There's a big pile of towels that I only recently unpacked inside a cupboard on the landing. Like any woman I know, I probably have far too many; but then, that 'just in case' section of my brain has never allowed me to part with any. Surprisingly enough, this is exactly one of those just-in-case moments. I quickly grab an armful of the thickest ones.

I'm still thinking about how many towels it would take to cover the entire kitchen floor as I dance down the stairs. Seven? Maybe ten? There's a lot of

water. Maybe I can just...

As I enter the living room, I stop dead in my tracks.

*Oh my.*

Jackson is standing with his back to me, his wet shirt in a soggy pile on the floor near his feet, while the towel glides across his naked back. His muscles ripple with the movement, and I find myself utterly transfixed. When I had followed him across the field at the fair, I had somewhat noticed the defined curves under his t-shirt, but good grief. There's still a thin layer of water covering his skin that shimmers when he moves.

As I continue to gawp at him—yes, my mouth has dropped open—I notice his perfect triangular form. My eyes travel from the broadness of his shoulders and upper back, right down to his slender, yet muscular waist. He's not overly tanned, but with muscles like that, his lighter skin tone takes nothing away from the dips and crevices that move when he does.

Jackson turns around. I don't know whether he felt my eyes on him prickling his back or not, but regardless, he's now looking at me slightly amused. For what feels like forever, I cannot move. Really. I'm stuck to the spot with my mouth still hanging open. My eyes fall to his naked chest, which is no less defined than his back. I remember face planting into it on the first day we met, and I can now clearly see why it felt so solid beneath my cheek. His pecs are like rocks, followed closely by exquisitely defined muscles that run right down his abdomen.

Neither of my exes was a fitness fanatic, and honestly, I've never seen a six pack in real life. Until now, that is. Eventually, and with great effort, I pull my eyes away and make contact with his face again.

He's smiling at me, but not with any arrogance or bravado. In fact, as I look at him, I'm utterly surprised that he actually looks a little bashful. If I'm not

mistaken, his cheeks definitely look a little redder than usual.

Wait. Is Jackson Scott blushing?

He's not the only one. As I finally manage to move my feet, I can feel my own cheeks blazing as though they're on fire. As I hurry passed him, still clutching the towels close to my body, he grabs the sweater. "Thanks again for the dry clothes."

"Yes. Yes. No problem," I blurt hurriedly, before diving into the kitchen, throwing all my energy into chucking towels willy nilly over the floor.



10



# Jackson

## *JACKSON*

I feel a little sorry for Bree as I tighten the nut on the faucet. Clearly, she had wanted to feel independent and do it all by herself. Other than the fact that she had forgotten to turn the water off, I'd say she'd have done a pretty good job on her own. She was obviously embarrassed, but she had no reason to be. There were a million and one women in the world who would not have even attempted to do such a job by themselves.

I ensure that the faucet is secure, before leaning back under the cupboard and turning the stopcock back on. I turn the faucet on and off to check my handiwork, and the water flows through easily, and stops when it's supposed to. That being said, I didn't get a chance to ask what the fault was to begin with, but the fact that Bree had the new washer and seal ready, I guess it was something like a drip or a leak.

She is not back downstairs yet, and, looking at the water on the floor that splashes as I move about, I go routing for something to clean it up with. I find a mop and bucket tucked into a cupboard in the corner, and so I get mopping.

“What are you doing?”

I look up and find that she’s back in the living room, looking at me somewhat strangely.

Carters cottage was built many years ago using brick and mortar, unlike the cheap cardboard houses they built these days. The floor was so solid that I had not heard her come back down the stairs. Judging by what she says next, I can tell that she feels awkward to see me clean up her mess, and hands me a towel and a large sweater. Bree is dressed in fresh dry clothes, her damp hair tied in a knot above her head. It shows off her long neck line while strands of red hair drape down and frame her face.

She says something that catches me unawares, and it hits me.

“... I already feel bad enough.”

She has no reason to feel bad. She made a mistake that a thousand other women, and *men*, had also likely made, and it isn’t such a big deal. But I can tell by the tone of her voice, that it is a big deal to her.

“Why do you feel bad?” I ask curiously.

“...because of all this.” She gestures in the general direction of the kitchen. “The mess, and me making a disaster out of something that should have been simple, and you having to come here and save me.”

Once again, the tone of her voice grips something in me. Due to my own sufferings, I feel like I understand her. “Do you not like being saved?” I ask.

Bree now looks at me, a million tiny nuances dancing across her face. I can see fear, and guilt, and shame. And I clearly don’t know why. I haven’t really taken the time to get to know her story. Up until yesterday, I’d been too busy purposefully avoiding her. She looks like she’s on the verge of telling me something important; but then, in a flash, it’s gone, and she goes for flippant humor instead.

After her harsh words at the fair, I had deduced that Bree was a confident woman who could quite easily take care of herself. Now, I'm certain that her confidence and general happiness were to mask pain. I should know, I've been wearing a similar mask for years.

She flies past me and disappears again as I dry my hair. With her out of the way, I quickly whip off my soaking wet t-shirt. The towel feels soft on my skin, and its floral scent reminds me of Bree. Unconsciously, I've likely breathed in the same scent on her clothes whenever she's been near me. I breathe in deeply now, enjoying the fragrance.

A moment later, I turn around to find Bree gawking at me. Not casually glancing or just normally looking, but full-on, jaw-on-the-floor, gawking. I suddenly feel the need to cover myself, but I fight against it. Perhaps now that she has realized that I've seen her, she'll turn away, or move to another room, but she doesn't. She just stands there, and I feel utterly exposed. Maybe it's because it's been so long since I've been naked in front of another woman. The last time was with my ex-wife, and that was years ago. I can feel heat rising to my cheeks and I want to say something, but what can I really say?

Bree snaps out of her stupor and looks mortified, clearly as embarrassed as me. I don't want things to get weird between us again, and so, as she passes me, I quickly grab the sweater. I need to say something.

"Thanks, by the way."

It's weak, but Bree doesn't seem to notice. She's too busy mumbling a hurried reply before turning her back on me. Only then, do I allow myself a wide grin. If nothing else, she's given me a confidence boost.

Shortly after, Bree invites me to sit with her on the porch. She's holding two beers.

“It’s the least I can do,” she says, handing me a cold bottle.

The old porch swing is still here. It’s been part of this cottage for as long as I can remember. But I don’t sit on it. Instead, I walk past it and sit on the chair opposite to it. The chair’s new, clearly an addition from Bree. She sits on the swing though, and tucks her long naked legs underneath her.

“It looks like you got the raw end of the deal, huh?” She smiles before taking a swig of her beer. “You came to return my purse, and ended up getting roped into a tsunami of my doing.”

There she goes again, demeaning herself.

“So, what brought you here?” I ask. I have no idea if she’ll open up to me or not, but I’m doing what I should have done in the first place. Being a nice person.

She heaves a great big sigh.

“Wow, that good, huh?” I smile at her.

Bree looks at me and laughs. That light and soft laugh that suits her so well.

“I’m sure you don’t really want to know,” she says.

“Then, I wouldn’t have asked,” I reply with a shrug.

She hesitates for a long minute and then appears to have decided upon something. “I suppose, I’m here to find myself again. And yes, before you come out with a smart remark, I did lose myself.”

I raise my hands in surrender and shake my head. “I swear, I wasn’t going to say a thing.”

She studies my expression before continuing. “I left a lot of crap behind in the city, not the least of which, was a rather narcissistic and controlling boyfriend.”

I nod, but don’t speak. It makes complete sense. It does explain a lot of her behavior ever since I’ve met her. I wonder how long was she with him, and

more to the point, what she might have been like before they were together.

“Clearly, I’m a jerk magnet, because my husband before him was not much different.”

My eyes widen at that statement.

“Yeah,” she nods, seeing my surprise. “I was married for five years. The first couple of years were OK. The last three, not so much. You would think, wouldn’t you, that after one disastrous relationship, I’d have learned my lesson. But oh, no. Not me.”

She takes another swig and stares out ahead of her, falling contemplatively silent. I get the feeling that I may have reopened an old wound.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine,” she says, shaking her head fervently, her pitch far too high for me to believe her. “What about you?”

“I too was married,” I reply, feeling it only right that I give her as good as she has given me. I started this conversation, after all. I suspect there was something lurking beneath that smile. I just couldn’t have known how tough she had had it. If I had, I would’ve avoided asking. Did she too carry a terrible past with her, like I did? Was she here to put it all behind her?

“Things just didn’t work out,” I continue.

I feel guilty that I’m holding back even after she was so honest. It’s not really right, but being back in this town has been tough enough. I’m not sure if I’m strong enough to start thinking and talking about all that again.

“What happened?” Bree asked.

Maybe I was going to have to tell her after all. I could give her the gist, couldn’t I? I don’t need to go into details.

“I found her in bed with another guy.”

“My God,” Bree blurts. “What a witch.”

I nearly spit out my beer at her vehemence. And suddenly, I'm laughing. I don't really know why. Maybe the tension needed to be broken, or maybe I just find Bree's utter disgust of my cheating wife funny. She starts laughing with me, and we are at it for so long that my cheeks begin to hurt.

When we finally come down, Bree still lets out a few titters, and then she sighs deeply. "Wow. I didn't know how much I needed that."

Her words resonate with me and I immediately feel so much lighter, like I've just shaken off a great weight.

"Yeah, me too," I agree.

She looks across the meadow facing her house, and her eyes soften as she takes another sip of her beer. But I'm not interested in the meadow, I'm too busy drinking her in. The same feeling from earlier is back in my stomach, and however much I might have battled it up to this point, I have to admit, the desire I feel for her is growing.

*Maybe because you're letting yourself get to know her.*

That was probably it.

After another short pause, Bree looks back at me. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Uh-oh," I say, but with a smirk. In truth though, I'm already feeling a little defensive. If she wants to know more about my divorce, I'm going to have to make my excuses.

"Go on," I encourage, pretending that I am as open as a book.

Bree narrows her eyes a little, as though she's uncertain of herself, but then, she takes a deep breath and commits. "What happened to your mom?"

Internally, I'm relieved, which probably sounds awful. But to me, this is far safer ground.

"Mom was born with a heart defect," I begin. "She was on medication all

her life. The doctors had told her she wouldn't even reach the age of eighteen, but she did, and married my father at 19. That was the first miracle in her life, she used to say. When she gave birth to me, that was the second miracle. However, she died when I was six."

Bree is listening intently and then frowns at my last statement. I don't understand her confusion at first, and then I suddenly realize why she's bewildered. "Daniel?" I ask.

"Yes." She nods, waiting expectantly.

"Dad remarried a lovely woman called Lizzy."

"You guys are half-brothers?" Her eyes are wide with surprise. "No one can tell. You're so close."

"We never saw ourselves as half-brothers. Dad never allowed the term in the house. We have always just been brothers."

This seems to please Bree, and she smiles warmly. "Your dad's an amazing guy," she says.

"He is. He was dealt a crappy hand in life, but he never gave up or complained. Lizzy died of cancer four years ago."

"Oh god." Bree gasped as her hand flew to her mouth.

"Yes. Like I say, Dad's had a rough life. But he rolls with the punches and doesn't let anything get him down."

"You've had it tough too, Jackson," Bree says.

I can't remember ever hearing her call me by name before. It sounds wonderful coming from her lips.

"You've lost two moms in your lifetime. That can't have been easy."

"I don't really see it that way, but I understand that other's might. Lizzy was a good woman, but she never replaced my mom. Besides, I was at NYU and away from home a lot when Lizzy first got sick."



Bree now gawks at me. “You went to NYU?” she balks.

I can’t help but laugh, “Yeah. Why, do I not look smart enough?”

“No, no. That’s not it at all. It’s just... I went to NYU too.”

It was my turn to look stunned. My dad’s housekeeper went to NYU?

*Yeah, but she’s not just a housekeeper, is she?*

“Ah, that’s shocked you, huh?” she grins. “Why? You think a housekeeper can’t get into such a prestigious uni?”

It’s like she read my mind, not that I’d ever admit it. It now occurs to me that I don’t even know what she did in the city.

“OK, I give in.” I raise my hands in surrender. “What did you actually do in the city?”

Bree grins. She then closes her fingers together and throws a gesture like a mafia guy in the movies. “I could tell you,” she says, grimacing and putting on the worst Italian accent I had ever heard, “but then I’d have to kill you.”

I can’t help but laugh, but then I shake my head. “Come on. Spill.”

“I worked in the financial district.”

“And?”

“My employers were Barker and Reid,” she says.

My eyes fly open and are now as wide as saucers. “Barker and Reid?” I blurt, unable to hide my astonishment. “But they own half—”

“Half the city. Yes, I know.”

I’m struggling to connect the dots here and can only look at her with utter disbelief. “But you’re feeding my dad’s chickens.”

“Yes, I know,” she says again, and laughs.

I can’t do anything but shake my head. Barker and Reid were big. My own company had several times facilitated mergers for our clients with Barker and Reid at the helm. I simply could not get my head around it.

“You gave all that up to come and live here?”

“I’ve discovered that money isn’t everything,” Bree says evenly. “I also discovered that manipulative boyfriends do not like their girlfriends earning substantially more than them. Apparently, it’s emasculating,” she hissed.

“It really isn’t,” I reply. “Not to a man who is whole in himself. A man who feels threatened by you earning more, is not troubled because of the money. He’s troubled because he cannot control you. And a real man doesn’t need to control a woman,” I say with some feeling.

“Dr. Phil’s back,” Bree quips with a smile.

This conversation was getting a bit too heavy for a Sunday afternoon.

I change the subject and we talk instead about life in the city. We talk for hours, covering everything from pizza places and our favorite restaurants, to the social housing issues and the unnecessary homelessness. Rob, her ex-boyfriend, pops into the conversation on occasion, but not often.

The more time I spend with Bree, the more relaxed I become in her presence. I realize I haven’t had such a good time with anybody else in years. Something about Bree makes me feel alive inside. In one afternoon, she’s broken through defenses I’ve spent years building, and she hasn’t even been trying.

Eventually, I bid her goodbye. It’s late in the evening, and time that I left. She has offered on more than one occasion, to make us something to eat, but I’ve already overstayed my welcome.

“I should get going,” I say, getting up to leave.

Bree looks disappointed but tries to hide it. It makes feel a little warm inside.

“Oh, well. Yeah. Of course,” she says, standing up with me.

Leaving the empty beer bottle on the table, I move across the porch, but

she's in my way. And then we do this silly dance, both of us hopping from one foot to the other, trying to move out of each other's way, but ending up going in the same direction. Eventually, I take her by the arms and hold her in place.

My intent is to keep her still while I step around her, but then, she looks up straight into my eyes. Her eyes are like pools of clear water that I could just fall into, and with her lips slightly parted, looking soft and luscious, my heart thuds in my chest as I wonder what they would feel like pressed against my own. Our eyes lock, and it's clear, neither of us wants to turn away. We're caught, transfixed, held together in this single moment of time.

Her skin feels so soft clasped between my fingers. I move them gently, brushing the tender skin of her inner arms. If I let this linger any longer, something is going to happen between us. I just don't know—even though my gut feels like it's twisting into noodles—if it is what I really want. I need to leave. I need to think this through, without the raging testosterone that is currently pumping through my body, swaying and overriding my rational mind.

Bending my head, I softly kiss Bree on the cheek. I hear a slight gasp leave her lips. Her breath reaches my skin, sending a shiver down my spine. Her floral scent reaches my nostrils, mesmerizing my mind. I *really* need to leave.

"I've really enjoyed my time with you," I say. And I actually mean it. "I'll see you tomorrow."

With that, I step around her and head to my truck without looking back. I just can't. If I do, I might just give in to the temptation to stay longer. And I don't want to think about what might happen next.

As I drive back to my house, I can still smell her sweet scent, feel the softness of her skin under my fingertips, and remember the twist in my gut as

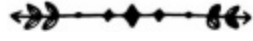
I considered kissing her.

Yet, despite all that we had shared together this afternoon, doubt still niggles at the back of my mind.

*Could I really trust another woman? Especially a city woman?*

My ex-wife, Claire, had been a city woman too, and look how that had turned out. I want to believe that all women are not two-faced liars that don't jump into bed with another man the minute my back is turned, but the wounds are still too deep, the scars are still too fresh.

Can I really risk getting hurt again?



# Bree

Monday morning is infamously bemoaned by many. But not by me. Not this morning. I practically jump out of bed with a renewed sense of purpose. In the shower, I let the hot water pound my body. My skin feels soft and tantalized as I lather the shower gel all over myself. I'm reminded of Jackson's fingertips stroking the inner part of my arm, and my belly spasms at the memory. I can still feel his lips on my cheek, and the woodsy aroma that makes my tummy do cart wheels.

If someone had told me three days ago that Jackson and I would spend five hours on a Sunday afternoon talking like we'd known each other all our lives, I'd have laughed in their faces. His arrival at Ben's house at the beginning of the week had been dire, as had the several days since. But yesterday had changed everything. Well, for me at least.

*Oh, come on, Bree.*

From my experience; based on what I saw and heard, I have to believe that things had changed for Jackson too. Why else would he have stayed so long? He could have up and left any time. When I offered him food on no less than

two occasions, he had refused both times, saying that he had to go. But then he proceeded to stay for another hour, while we talked of yet another subject. I truly believe we could have sat there talking another five hours and had no problem filling the time.

It had felt freeing, uplifting, and yes, even natural.

At the same time, it had also felt more than strange. I had never had such in depth conversations with a man before. Neither David nor Robert would have had strong opinions on important subjects. Most of my conversations with them had been banal, bland, and superficial. Jackson, on the other hand, had challenged me and my ideas. We had both shared our opinions passionately, and yet at the same time, respected each other's differences. It had been refreshing.

There is no doubt about it. I know my feelings are growing for him, and that scares me a little. Not to mention, it goes against the very reason I came here. But like a child who has done something wrong, I don't want to look at the mess I have made right now. It makes me feel bad about myself, and I don't want to feel that way anymore. I know I vowed five years of celibacy. But Jackson isn't Robert, or David.

This is different. I can feel it. Way different.

*Are you sure you're not just seeing what you want to see?*

Am I? Three days ago, I could barely look at the man. In fact, three days ago, I had stormed off and left him alone at the fair, unable to tolerate his attitude any longer. But then, the Jackson I was with yesterday, was not the same Jackson as the other day. He was not the moody caveman from the day I had first met him, nor was he the wary but friendly Jackson who had been in the barn on Saturday, pretending to be interested in my taste in TV shows.

Once the disaster had passed, and we had settled on the porch, I felt as

though a wall between us had come down. I saw Jackson allowing himself to be the man he actually was. No defensiveness, no hiding behind a veneer, just a genuine man speaking from the heart.

As I step out of the shower and get ready for work, I push my earlier doubts aside. I refuse to look at them. Today is a new day.

I get out of my car and walk toward Ben's house with a spring in my step. As I announce my arrival, I cannot keep the happiness from my voice.

"Well, someone's woken up on the right side of the bed this morning," Ben says, wheeling himself out of his study as I close the front door behind me. An open book sits on his knee, indicating that he had just been reading it.

"You want some coffee?" I ask perkily.

Ben grins and shakes his head. "No, but I'll have a cup of whatever you had this morning."

There's a twinkle in his eye. Has he done the math, connected the dots? His son went out yesterday to drop off a purse, and given the fact that I live barely three miles down the road, and not somewhere like Milwaukee, he's bound to know that we spent the afternoon together. Or maybe, Jackson just told him.

"Did Jackson get your purse back to you, all right?" Ben tries not to give anything away, but he has a dreadful poker face. I can see he knows the answer to that question already.

"He did. Thank you, Ben. I'll be honest," I say, moving across the hallway to put my bag in the closet. "I hadn't even noticed it was missing."

"Must be nice," he smirks, "having so much money that you don't care if you lose some."

"Oh, now. I did not say that," I say, grinning back at him. "Are we for the porch today?"



“As always,” Ben replies. “And you know, I can feel my leg getting stronger. I reckon I might be able to get this cast off earlier than the doctors think.”

I can't hide my surprise. “Ben! It's only been three weeks. You're looking at six weeks rest, at the minimum,” I say emphatically. “The minimum.” Repetition for emphasis. “It could even be longer than that.”

“Not if I have anything to do with it,” he grumbles back.

I open the front door wide, before stepping behind the wheelchair. Grabbing the handles, I begin pushing him outside. “Just think of all the reading you're catching up on. If I was wheelchair-bound for six weeks, I'd devour that huge library you have in there as fast as I can manage it.”

Ben chuckles as we turn the corner of the porch, when suddenly, I falter.

I hadn't seen him yet, and I presumed that Jackson would be working in the barn. From what I had gathered so far, he was an early riser. I mean, unnaturally early, like, when the moon hadn't yet gone back to bed.

At this moment, however, Jackson is not in the barn. He's in the garden wearing running shorts and a tank top, showing off many of those muscles I had been gawking at yesterday afternoon. With long pruning shears in hand, he's stretching up to a tree with outreaching, spindly branches that hang over the lawn. Going by the pile of twigs and leaves lying beside him, he looks like he's been pruning the tree for a while.

I realize that I've stopped moving, and quickly resume, pushing Ben to his usual spot. Ben throws me a glance. “It's good to see a man hard at work, right?” He smirks.

I laugh nervously and try and think of something to say. “You're only jealous that it's him and not you.”

“You're right about that. I can't wait to get out of this darn chair.”

I spent the morning doing routine stuff; making the beds, vacuuming the rooms, a little bit of dusting. Now, I'm in the kitchen, washing the cupboards. Ben's workshop might have been immaculately tidy, but the men in this house are definitively messy. There are splatter stains on the lower parts of the cupboard doors, and I'm hunched down on my haunches with a cloth and some disinfectant, rubbing it vigorously.

Behind me, I hear the kitchen door open.

"So, how are your pipes today?" Jackson asks.

I blush, even before I push myself to stand up and face him. When I do turn around, he has a huge grin across his face. The tank top hangs loose near his waist, but it's tight against his chest. The hugely solid chest that I had the privilege of eyeballing yesterday.

"They're not dripping anymore," I quip back. Two can play this game. "Which is always a bonus."

It's now Jackson's turn to beam a deeper shade of red, and I struggle to hold back a laugh.

"Yes," he continues, clearly not willing to give up yet. "I've heard that's quite serious," he speaks through his grin. "It's always a good idea to get a leaky pipe looked at."

I can't help myself any longer, and I burst into laughter, leaning back against the counter to support myself. Jackson is laughing too, and moves closer to me. So close, in fact, that his arm brushes mine, sending a tingling sensation right through my shoulder and up the back of my neck. His skin is hot, likely from all the hard work he's been doing in the garden. It only increases the intensity brewing between us.

He looks down at me then, and I gaze up at him. Just like last night, when we gazed at each other for what felt like eternity, there's electricity crackling

between us. It makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

A second later, the kitchen door swings open, and Ben struggles himself through it. I feel like I should pull away from Jackson; maybe he doesn't want his father to see us standing so close together. But he doesn't budge. His arm is still brushing against mine. I don't want to move either. I'm enjoying the sensation too much. Besides, it's too late. It will look too obvious if I suddenly jerk away now. Instead, I take my cue from Jackson and stay exactly where I am.

"You do realize you're only creating more stuff for me to fix," Jackson says to Ben. "You can scale a mountain, create amazing pieces of art from chunks of wood, but you can't get through a door without bringing the door frame down with you?"

I could tell that Jackson was just teasing his father. His tone made it obvious.

"Have you ever tried to drive one of these things?" Ben banters back. "It's all power and no steering."

"They should give you lessons in the hospital," Jackson retorts. "Either that, or put some padding on those wheels so you don't destroy the entire house."

Ben snarls at Jackson playfully, and I can do nothing but smile. It's the first time I've seen both father and son pulling each other's legs. It's testament to how close they are. I recall Jackson telling me about his mother's death yesterday, and wonder how poor Ben had coped; losing his beloved wife, and suddenly left to look after a young child all by himself. Both Jackson and Daniel were fine young men, and therefore, no matter how hard it had been, Ben had clearly been a good father. Their witty back and forth was heartwarming to me.

Ben then looks from Jackson to me and back again. I can see that the twinkle in his eye has returned, and wonder what is going through his mind.

“Right, I need you kids to go into town for me.”

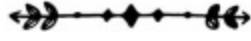
“But I still have—”

“The cleaning can wait, Bree,” Ben says. “This is more important. There’s an order waiting for me at Shilliday’s and it will be quicker if you both go.”

I look up at Jackson.

He looks down at me and shrugs. “OK, then. Let’s go.”

12



# Jackson

“Has she moved back to New York City?” Dad asks when I walk into the living room.

The TV is on but the sound is muted, and an open book sits on the table beside him, telling me that he was reading it only a moment before. I honestly don't know how he does it. I couldn't read and focus on a book, if there was a flashing screen of images anywhere nearby.

Dropping down onto the sofa across the room, I heave a sigh. Dad is just looking at me expectantly. When I only smile and do not speak, he glances at his watch. “You know what time it is, right?”

“It's late,” I reply, pretending to avoid his imminent fishing expedition into where I've been for the last five hours.

“You were only returning a purse,” Dad states the obvious.

“Uh-huh,” I say evenly.

“Well?” Dad presses, desperate to know why returning a purse has taken me all afternoon.

I shrug. “Well, what?” I'm really struggling not to laugh at this point. Dad

has a dreadful poker face, but I'm quite adept at hiding what's really going on inside me. Not just because of the masks I've had to wear over these last few years, but it comes in very handy when dealing with clients.

"Come on, Jackson. Tell me what happened?"

"We talked," I say. "I fixed her plumbing, and then we talked."

"What?"

I sat with Dad for another hour, telling him all about my afternoon. He listened with interest, his eyebrows rising on a few occasions, like when I told him of Bree's exes, and the fact that her last overcontrolling boyfriend was the reason she had moved to Sharon Springs.

"So, you both are not so different after all," Dad says, when I finally finish.

There's a look in his eye that tells me exactly what he's thinking.

"Don't bring out the champagne just yet, Dad," I say. "I admit, I enjoyed this afternoon, but I'm not rushing into anything. Not again."

Claire and I had a whirlwind romance. We met in November and were married by the following June. Everyone told me things were going too fast, but I hadn't listened. Idiot that I was. A year later, Claire had proven my friends right, and I was left with my pride in tatters.

"No one's saying you have to rush into anything, Jackson. But it's been three years—"

"And I have to move on at some point, right?" I finish his sentence.

"All I'm saying, son, is that not every woman is like..." Dad stalls. He has never been able to say Claire's name since her cheating came to light. It was funny in a way, that he was telling me to move on, when he still held a grudge of his own. "...her," he finishes with a little vehemence. "You've kept your guard up all this time; trying to protect yourself from getting hurt again."

And I can understand that. But while your behavior ensures you'll never feel pain again, it also guarantees that you'll never feel anything else either."

Dad had always been wise. And he was never wrong. Nor was he the first to tell me to move on with life. Phil, my business partner, had been trying to set me up with women for months. He constantly encouraged me to get back in the game, get back on the horse, live a little.

It was easier said than done.

Well, before Bree, at any rate. Somehow, she has unlocked the gate to my fortress, and swung the door wide open, wandering around the inside with avid curiosity. And more surprisingly, I've let her.

"So, what's your next move?" Dad asks.

I chuckle and shake my head. "I don't have a *next move*, Dad. We had a pleasant afternoon, and I admit that I enjoyed her company. For now, though, I'm going to just play it by ear. Test the waters. See what happens."

He just nods at me with an approving smile. There's something behind that smile that I know very well. His mind is working overtime. No doubt there's some scheme being concocted in his head at this very moment.

"I don't need your help, Dad," I say, as I get off the sofa. I'm exhausted. Perhaps because of all the talking I did today. "I'm going to bed."

"All right, son," he replies with a smile. A smile that I know, lets on more than he intends to. "Sleep well."





# Bree

Once I slide into the truck, Jackson flashes a grin at me before starting down the long drive that will take us off Ben's property.

It's kind of exciting, going on an errand together. While I knew I would be seeing Jackson again today, I couldn't have imagined we'd be spending time in such close proximity. Nor can I help feeling more than a little bit pleased that Jackson, without any objection, appeared eager to take on Ben's task with me in tow.

But as we pull out onto the main road, my excitement wanes as I quickly remember where this errand is taking us. We're picking up an order from Mr. Shilliday's, and a sudden dread shrouds me.

"Oh, no," I say out loud.

Jackson flicks his head in my direction. "What?" he asks.

"We're going to Mr. Shilliday's," I say as way of an answer.

"And?" Jackson presses.

"He's going to ask me about the faucet."

Jackson looks confused. Of course, he does. He has no idea about my

exchange with Mr. Shilliday in the store the other day, before he arrived. I suppose I have some explaining to do.

“When I was in there last, you know, the day you were...”

“Being a jerk,” Jackson replies, throwing me a wide grin.

I smile and shrug. I can’t disagree. He had been a total jerk. “Well, I was buying the washers for the faucet. That’s when Mr. Shilliday asked what I wanted them for, and I told him. I also told him I was going to fix it myself. His doubtful expression at that declaration did not exactly fill me with any confidence. I just know he’s going to ask how it went, and I’m going to have to tell him that his lack of confidence in me was well-founded.”

“No, you don’t,” Jackson says bluntly.

His straight answer surprises me.

Jackson is shaking his head. “You don’t have to tell him anything. It’s none of his business.”

“But he’ll ask. I just know it.”

“Then tell him the job is done. That’s all he needs to know.”

“Oh, come on, Jackson. You know as well as I that he’ll push for more.”

Jackson chuckles then. “Then tell him you fixed it with no trouble at all.”

“But that’s a lie.”

“Only a little one.”

I’ve always been something of a straight arrow, and the idea of lying doesn’t really sit well with me.

Jackson looks at me again and raises his eyebrows at my concerned expression. “Don’t tell me you’ve never told a little white lie now and then?”

“Yes, but—”

“There you go.” He throws out a hand, gesturing that his point is made. “Besides, what happens in Carter’s cottage, stays in Carter’s cottage.”

I giggle at his comment.

“Your attempt at creating an indoor pool will be our little secret.” He winks, and grins. “Besides, would you prefer the other option?”

I don’t know what the other option is, so I shrug.

“That Mr. Shilliday discovers the truth? That the old man thinks it’s a funny anecdote, and the entire town finds out about it?”

No! That does not sound fun at all, but I hardly get the chance to answer before Jackson continues with a more serious tone. “Believe me, you don’t want that.”

When we arrive at Shilliday’s, the old man welcomes us both with a pleasant smile. “I have Ben’s order ready for you,” he says jovially, nodding to a pile of cardboard boxes stacked together near the counter.

“Great,” Jackson says, turning toward them. I am about to do the same when Mr. Shilliday speaks again. “So, how did you get on with that faucet, Bree?”

I glance at Jackson who has already lifted a box. With his back to the old man, he grins at me and winks, before making his way out to the truck.

Putting on my best poker face, I lie through my teeth. “No problems at all, Mr. Shilliday,” I reply. “I now have a fully working faucet.”

I can see his eyebrows rising slightly, conveying his surprise. “Well, good for you, my dear,” he says, clearly believing me.

It feels dreadful to lie, and I don’t ordinarily like doing it, but Jackson had reminded me of the consequences of telling him the truth. The idea of the entire town knowing about my mishap did not bear thinking about.

We carry each box out to the truck until they’re all loaded. When Jackson carries the last box out, Mr. Shilliday follows us.

“Tell Ben I’ll come to see him again this weekend,” Mr. Shilliday says.

I get distracted by someone calling my name. I turn to find Sylvie standing outside the beauty salon, waving at me and inviting me over. I suddenly feel bad. I hadn't yet rung her to apologize for just up and leaving the fair. I ought to have said goodbye at least. I'm sure she thinks I'm an awful person. I suppose now is as good a time as any to beg her forgiveness.

I move across the street and begin talking before I even reach her. "I'm so sorry about Friday night, Sylvie," I say. "I should have called you and—"

"Don't worry about it," she says, swiping a dismissive hand. By the time I reach her, I see her smiling warmly at me. "Jackson told me all about it. He's cute and all, but he can be a complete idiot at times."

I look at her with a deep frown.

*Had Jackson actually told her the truth?*

"Oh, he told me why you left," she says, as though she'd just read my mind. "Jackson Scott has a lot of baggage, and the last place he wants to be is back here in this town."

Sylvie suddenly shifts her gaze in the direction I just came from and glares. "And that," she growls, nodding her head across the street, "is the very reason why."

It's the first time I have seen such an expression on Sylvie's face, and I'm desperate to know the cause of it. Following her eyes, I see a very attractive woman standing beside Jackson and Mr. Shilliday. She's tall and slender with long wavy blonde hair. Her skin tight jeans show off the curve of her backside, and the tiny crop top exposes the flat midriff of her stomach.

I can't help it. I am immediately jealous. Judging by the way she's talking to Jackson, they clearly know each other. No surprise there in this town.

"Who is she?" I ask.

"That's his ex-wife."

“What?” I blurt.

This wasn't making any sense. Jackson had told me he had been married and divorced, but I had assumed that his ex-wife was in the city, given that is where he currently lived. My gaze moves from the woman to Jackson. While she's gushing; I can hear her gooey voice from where I'm standing, Jackson has his arms folded firmly across his chest. His expression is blank, bordering on a scowl. I know that look. I've been on the receiving end of it.

“Uh-huh,” Sylvie replies, the bitterness still prevalent in her voice. “They were married a year before she cheated on him with Anthony Fischer. Jackson hates coming back here because of the pain she caused him. I'm actually surprised he was at the fair on Friday. When he comes back to see Ben, he rarely comes into the town. He's avoided seeing her as much as possible. I suppose the only saving grace is that Anthony isn't with her.”

I'm astonished at this information, and to be honest, it's a bit of an overload.

“They're still together?” I exclaim, glaring at Sylvie in disbelief.

“Oh, yes,” Sylvie replies, now turning back to look at me. She sighs. “I suppose you need to know the whole story for it to make any sense. So, Jackson met Claire after he had moved to New York. It was a whirlwind romance. They were married within a year. Jackson wanted to raise a family in the country, where he had been raised, so they moved back here.”

I'm listening intently, devouring every word.

“He arranged to work from his home office when he could, but as you can imagine, it wasn't always possible. He would fly into the city and stay for three or so nights a week, and then come home. Clearly, Claire approved of the money he was making,” Sylvie snarls, “she was always about the town spending it. She was a weekly regular with us. Maybe it was the lonely nights

that made her stray, who knows.” Sylvie shrugs. “But Anthony caught her eye and that was that. Like I said, Jackson hates coming back here. It’s just too painful for him still. As far as I know, he hasn’t been with anyone else since. He told me once that he would never put himself in a position where he could be hurt again.”

Very quickly, things begin to fall into place in my head. Jackson’s foul mood when he had arrived on that first day had nothing to do with me. He simply did not want to be back in the place where he had experienced such heartache. Perhaps his brusqueness toward me had been a defense mechanism; his way of not allowing anyone in so he could not be hurt again. I can totally understand that.

“Why didn’t she just leave Jackson if she wasn’t happy?” I say, still feeling a little dumbfounded.

“I told you. She liked his money. Anthony is a carpenter. Hardly comparable as far as bank balances are concerned,” Sylvie replies. The scowl has gone from her face, and she now looks a little sad. She obviously cares about him very much.

Sylvie has already said enough, but like some hungry beast, I want to know more. Perhaps it’s because I too now have feelings for the man. Maybe I want to garner all that I can from Sylvie, because I know for a fact that I won’t hear it from Jackson. On Sunday afternoon, he had told me the bare minimum about his divorce. Evidently, it was still a very sore subject for him.

“So, how did Jackson find out about the affair?” I continue.

“He came home early one week,” Sylvie replies. “He had told her he was going to stay in the city for three days, but since his work concluded earlier than expected, he wanted to surprise her and came back after two. In the end,

it was poor Jackson who got the surprise. He walked into his house and found them in their bed.”

“Oh my God!”

He had told me he had found her in bed with another man, but he hadn't mentioned it had been on their marriage bed. I now turn and look back at Jackson, my heart nearly breaking for him at what that must have been like. Claire has left, and he is talking to Mr. Shilliday alone again.

But then he turns and looks at me. He gestures me to hurry over to him. He clearly wants to get away from here ASAP.

“I better go,” I say to Sylvie. “Maybe I'll give you a call later. We can meet up for some coffee.”

Sylvie is smiling again, and she replies with that hallmark movie delight that is her natural way of being. “Oh, I would love that.”

“OK. Well, I'll see you later then.”

As I cross the street, my gut spins like the drum of a washing machine. What am I supposed to say when we get back into the truck? Should I say nothing? Would that not be weird? Jackson had seen me talking to Sylvie. And we both saw Claire. He's bound to know she's told me at least something about her.

I take a deep breath and slide into the truck feeling a little dread. I find Jackson's mood to have made another 180. I had been excited to make this journey with him into the town. The journey back now did not hold the same appeal.



14



# Jackson

“I suppose you know the whole story now,” I growl, as I start the truck and pull away, leaving Mr. Shilliday on the sidewalk.

I can’t look at her. I don’t want to see any more of the pity that I already noticed in her eyes when she left Sylvie and crossed the street to me.

I hadn’t seen Claire approach. If I had, I would have moved quicker. As I was still talking to Mr. Shilliday, she had come up from behind me. It was Mr. Shilliday’s face that warned me first. Looking past me, his expression quickly changed from jovial to perturbed. It was only when I turned around to see what had caused it, that I regretted wanting to know.

“I’m so sorry, Jackson,” Bree says in the quietest voice I have ever heard her speak.

“I don’t need your pity,” I spit.

“And you won’t get it,” Bree replies, her tone still neutral. “I’m just sorry that you had to see her. I know you were trying to avoid it.”

“Oh, Sylvie told you that too, did she?” I snarl.

Bree doesn’t reply to that. Maybe she doesn’t know what to say, or more

than likely, my aggressive tone is making her uneasy. If I were in her shoes, I'd probably stay silent too. That way, I wouldn't piss me off more than I already am.

*What am I doing?*

It's not Bree's fault. I'm taking the anger I feel toward Claire out on a completely innocent bystander. Maybe I'm even more angry that Bree was there and saw the situation unfold. I knew I was going to bump into Claire sooner or later. I just wish Bree hadn't been there to see it. She's about the only person in this damn town who doesn't know the story.

*Not anymore.*

No, of course not. Seeing Bree talking with Sylvie, I know for a fact, Bree now knows just about everything. It's frustrating. My life is not an open book for everyone to read!

The angrier I get, the harder I press my foot on the gas. We're now flying down the dusty main road as we head back to the house.

*Had I not suffered enough when I was still living here? Do I have to go through all this crap again?*

The speed climbs steadily, and in my peripheral vision, I can see Bree taking a hold of the passenger handle above the door. If she wasn't in the truck, I'd be going even faster, just to get this anger out of my system.

"Jackson," Bree says. Her voice is unsteady and I can hear the fear.

I press harder on the gas.

"Jackson," she cries.

My mind is a confused mess of anger, regret, humiliation, and shame. I moved back to the city for a new start, to get away from the wagging tongues, and the pitying looks, and the—

"Jackson!" Bree now screams.

I lift my foot off the gas and slam hard on the brakes. We're both thrown forward in our seats. As the truck skids across the road, I grip the wheel as tightly as I can, trying to control the drift. It seems to go on forever, but eventually, the truck comes to an aggressive stop, throwing us back against our seats.

Plumes of dust swirl about the truck. The engine is still running, and we're positioned across both lanes at an angle. For a minute, I just sit there with my hands still gripping the wheel. I'm breathing heavily. My heart is thumping in my chest. The adrenaline mixes with the anger and rage and humiliation.

And then, I feel a soft touch. I hardly notice that Bree has scooped over to sit closer to me. Her hand sits on top of mine. It looks so tiny in comparison. Her fingers fold around my white knuckles and hold me firmly, but her grip is not tight.

"Breathe," she says gently.

For a second, I feel foolish. But then she says it again. "Breathe, Jackson."

I inhale a lungful of air and hold it in for a few seconds, before blowing out it all out. I can feel the tension loosening its grip. I repeat the process a few more times, until I feel relaxed.

We sit there in silence for some time. I don't know for how long, but I don't really care. I'm too busy staring into nothingness as my mind races through all the torment I've chosen to repress these last three or so years. Bree does not let go of my hand, even though she cannot possibly know that her gentle touch and the heat of her palm is providing me the comfort I need.

Eventually, I heave a sigh and move my free hand to the ignition key to turn the engine off. When I bring it back to the steering wheel, I rest it on top of hers and finally turn and look at her. She softly gazes at me.

"I'm sorry," I murmur.

“I know,” she says with a slight nod.

“That wasn’t fair. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

“I know that too,” she says, in the same calm tone. “Are you OK?”

I snort a derisive laugh. OK is probably the farthest from how I feel right now.

“That’s a no then,” she says, a slight smile twitches at the corner of her mouth.

“I’m angry,” I say.

“Well, that’s the understatement of the week,” she says lightly.

“I suppose.” I laugh.

We sit quietly for another moment. I’m teetering on whether I want to tell her what’s going on in my head. On Sunday afternoon, I had been more than economical with the truth, but doing that again now was pointless.

“I’ve been trying to avoid what happened back there ever since I got here,” I begin.

I might as well tell her. Sylvie has likely told her a version of what happened, based on whatever she knows. But if Bree is going to know how my marriage ended, I want her to know what really happened. Not what the town thinks happened.

“When I come back to Sharon Springs, I rarely go into town. I’m usually not here long enough to have a reason to do so. *Claire* and her new husband, *Anthony*,” I snarl their names, “settled down here after our divorce. Of course, the house they now own was partly paid for by the divorce settlement, which only adds to the sting.”

Bree frowns at that statement. “But I thought—”

I lift a hand to stop her. “I’ll get to that.”

I pause for a second, wondering for one last time, whether telling Bree

everything is a good idea.

*She already knows.*

Of course, she does. Sylvie couldn't have stopped herself from spilling the gossip.

"Their affair was bad enough," I begin, "but finding them together in our bed felt like a knife to the heart. Almost worse was discovering that most, if not all, of the town knew what was going on, and not one person thought to tell me."

"Oh God," Bree gasps, her hand touching her mouth. "But why?"

I shrug. "Damned if I know. Maybe none of them wanted to be the one to break the news to me and be the tattle tale. Even though I can guarantee, their tongues were wagging amongst each other. Discovering your wife is cheating is bad enough. But the humiliation of knowing that every person you grew up with knew and didn't tell you about it." I sigh and shake my head. "I can't describe that."

Bree's forehead is furrowing even deeper, and I know she has questions. "Even Sylvie?" Bree asks, her bewilderment written all over her face.

I shake my head. "Sylvie didn't know. She wasn't here at the time. She wasn't even in the country. After college, she took six months out and toured Europe with some girlfriends."

Bree looks relieved, as if she would've struggled to believe that Sylvie would have kept such a thing to herself. She then frowns again. "Claire does not seem to care though. She was speaking to you like you were best friends."

I snort again and shake my head. "Oh," I say, with heavy sarcasm in my tone, "that's because her affair was my fault."

"I beg your pardon?" Bree's eyes fly wide. The disbelief is back on her

face.

“Oh, yes. She feels no shame for what she’s done, because, according to her, she was thrust into the arms of her lover due to my lack of attention.”

“What a load of...” Bree suddenly presses her lips together to stop herself from continuing. I have a fair idea of what she was about to say.

“Apparently, if I hadn’t worked so much, if I hadn’t been away in the city for days on end, if I had paid her more attention, she would not have sought the affection of another man. She wouldn’t have gone looking for attention if she was getting what she deserved from me. Strangely enough, though, she had no problem spending all the money I earned from the job that kept me away from her so often. Not once did she tell me to change my job, take a pay cut, find work somewhere closer to Sharon Springs, so we could be together more often.”

“Of course not. She wanted it both ways,” Bree deduces.

I shrug and nod. “Her attorney put that very same argument across in court. She postulated that I had been a neglectful husband. That, had I been there more often and cared for my wife the way a husband ought to, her client would not have been forced, in her *despair*,” I snort at the very thought of Claire’s manipulations back then, “to find comfort in the arms of another man.”

Bree’s eyes are wide again. “So, she cheated on you, and got a settlement.” Her tone conveys incredulousness.

“That’s the justice system for you.”

We stay silent for another moment. I can’t know what is going through Bree’s head, but too much of my past is whirling around in mine. I had tried to avoid confronting it all for so long. Drowning myself in work, I had pretended that none of it had affected me so deeply. The idea of getting into a

relationship again scared the living daylights out of me. And so, instead of dealing with my wounds, wounds that had clearly not healed as well as I had convinced myself they had, I had simply ignored them. It was ridiculous, when I now think about it. It was like ignoring a gaping gash and hoping, that by not looking at it, I could avoid infection or sepsis.

But why had it taken three long years for all this stuff to come to the surface? I suppose, not seeing Claire had helped.

*It's more than that and you know it.*

Of course, I knew it.

Somehow, Bree had caught me in some sort of spell. She had reached under my skin, without me noticing it, and forced me to process my emotions. Perhaps all the emotion I had felt after seeing Claire was not just anger. It was fear, too. Fear that, once I start to feel something for someone again, I could get hurt again. I just don't know whether I can take another heartbreak.

"It makes sense now," Bree says, her voice cutting through the silence between us.

I glance at her and raise my eyebrows. "What makes sense?"

"What you told me when we were driving into town. You said I wouldn't want the whole town knowing about my business. I noticed the change in your tone when you said it, but I didn't understand why at the time. But it makes sense now."

"You can hide in a city the size of New York. There's no hiding here," I offer. Then I start the engine. "We should get back. Dad might get worried."

"How you holding up?" Dad asks, when I finally drop down onto the sofa later that evening.

As usual, he had been reading. Upon hearing me come in, he had put the book aside and turned his lounging chair to face me.



I'm a little confused at the question, and I'm trying to think why he would ask me that. When we got back to the house with his order, I had acted like nothing had happened. Almost as though she knew I didn't want it spoken about, Bree had done the same without me having to ask her. Amongst her many other talents, she was also a very intuitive woman. The day had gone on pretty normally after that. I had headed down to the barn and Bree had gone on to finish her housekeeping duties.

I hadn't been around when she left, and she hadn't come to say goodbye. Not that she normally does. Maybe I thought she might, after the day we'd had. In the end, I decided it was better that things remained as normal as possible. That way, Dad wouldn't start asking questions. As placid a man as he was, he was far from stupid. Bree suddenly cooing all over me would have certainly piqued his curiosity.

I'm now on the sofa, still wondering about his question, when a realization suddenly hits me. "Mr. Shilliday," I say.

It's a statement not an enquiry, and Dad inclines his head in acknowledgement. "John rung me right after you pulled away from the store."

Mr. Shilliday was a longtime friend of Dad's.

"He told me *she* had arrived on the scene, just as you and Bree were leaving. He also told me you were not in the greatest of moods when you left."

I shrug.

Maybe if I hadn't gone through my entire history with Bree earlier, I might have had the energy to tell Dad what was going on in my head. But as I discovered afterwards, dealing with my pent-up feelings had been pretty exhausting. It had been kind of therapeutic, I suppose.

I had never actually been to therapy, much to the chagrin of Phil, who reminds me how it's helped him every chance he gets. My business partner is a good guy. We've known each other since university. He could not have been more supportive when the proverbial crap hit the fan. But even after all his persuading, I had not felt I needed therapy. Maybe I had been wrong.

"What happened?" Dad presses, clearly not satisfied with my silence.

"She came, she talked, she left," I reply plainly.

Dad looks at me intently for a long minute. He seems to be weighing a few things up. Maybe how seeing her might have affected me, maybe wondering how I'm feeling. I don't really know. I can't read his mind.

"Were you angrier that you saw her, or angrier that you were with Bree when you saw her?" he asks.

*How does he do it? How does he know you better than you know yourself?*

"You're my firstborn son, Jackson. Of course, I know."

My eyes fly wide. "Get out of my head!" I blurt.

Dad just smiles. But it's not his usual warm smile. It's an acknowledgement, with added concern on the side.

"Bree's a good girl, Jackson."

"She's a woman actually, Dad," I reply dryly. "You can't call women girls anymore, it's politically incorrect."

"Whatever," he snarls, which only makes me laugh. Dad's an old-fashioned man and nothing is ever going to change that.

"All right. Bree is a good *woman*," he says pointedly.

"I know that."

"Then maybe, you ought to do something about it."

I instantly feel a twisting in my guts. It's not fear, but apprehension. I've been off the horse for so long, I can't even remember which end the tail is at.

Dad is right, and I know he is right. But after today, after reliving the pain all over again...

“What if—” I begin apprehensively.

“What if, what?” Dad nearly barks. “What if I had let your mother’s death stop me from ever marrying again? What if I had let Lizzy’s death cripple me for life? What if I had caged myself in my own mind, instead of looking outside at the world? Life is a contact sport, son. You cannot go through it without pain.”

His words hit me hard. I had admired Dad for so long. I had seen life throw all kinds of trials and tribulations at him, and he had got back on his feet every time. Surely, I could do the same. He had been the best example of determination and resilience I had ever seen, and instead of following in his footsteps, I had decided to hide in the shadows, pretending to have found some sort of solace in them. I had built a wall around me so high, it wasn’t just keeping people out, it was keeping me in. I had been a prisoner. I was not living.

But I don’t want to continue doing that. I don’t want my tombstone to read:  
*Here lies Jackson Scott. He sacrificed the joy of living so he would feel no pain.*

I had to break out of this mental prison. I had to move on, step out of the past, face the fear, and live again. Even if things don’t work out between me and Bree, which is a terrifying thought, at least I would have tried, right? Dad’s words swirl around my head like a mantra.

*Life is a contact sport, son. You cannot go through it without pain.*

“You’re right,” I say, looking straight at him with newfound conviction. “I’ve been a coward.” They’re harsh words, but true. “Maybe it’s time to pull up my big boy pants and start living again.”

Dad chuckles. I can see relief in his eyes.

“I have to go back to the city for a few days. Phil called earlier. He needs me back to warm up a prospect.”

“Well, you’re all caught up now,” Dad says. “No more orders have come through since I put it up on the website that I’m out of action for a while. If you need to take a few more days...”

I smile. “I think we both know I need to come back, Dad.”

Dad beams a huge grin at me. “Good for you, son.”

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# Bree

“Jackson has had to go back to the city,” Ben says, when I arrive the next morning. I can’t help the frown, and I kick myself that Ben sees it.

He shakes his head. “It’s nothing to do with yesterday,” he continues.

So, Ben knows what happened yesterday. I shouldn’t be surprised. Ben and Jackson must have talked about it. But I am a little surprised. Jackson had given me the impression that he didn’t want Ben to know. He hadn’t mentioned running into Claire to Ben when we returned. It certainly wasn’t my place to bring it up, so I had taken my cue from Jackson and kept quiet about it.

Clearly, Jackson had changed his mind at some point.

“It’s just some work stuff he has to attend to,” Ben carries on, as I push him out to the porch, his book balanced atop his knee.

“OK,” I reply.

I don’t know what else to say. It’s not really my business. I had thought a lot about our encounter with Jackson’s ex-wife when I got home yesterday. One thing that clearly stuck out to me was the fact that Jackson would never

have disclosed all that stuff about himself to me, if I hadn't been with him when he ran into Claire. I have a definite feeling that he wished I hadn't been there. I've already deduced he's a pretty private guy.

The Sunday afternoon that we had spent talking on the porch, he had merely skimmed over his divorce. He had found her in bed with another guy, so they got divorced. End of story. While he had scared me to death with his crazy driving when we left the town yesterday, by the time he had told me everything, I understood Jackson Scott far better.

There was no way I could have known how painful the entire situation had really been for him, but it did explain quite a lot about his demeanor. The coldness toward me, his wariness of getting close to someone else. I had also wondered whether the fact that I too was from the city, as Claire had been, had played a part. *Probably.*

Ben is now looking at me with a strange expression. I raise my eyebrows at him.

"What?" I ask.

"He's not had it easy, Bree. I know he can be hard work at times, but he wasn't always like that. Before *her*," Ben snarls, "he was happy, easygoing. The world was his oyster and his future was bright." Ben sighs and looks whimsically out into the immaculate garden. "She damaged him more than Jackson will ever admit. Now, his outlook toward life has been tainted, he sees danger where there is none."

"That's what a crappy experience does to you, Ben," I say.

He glances up at me then, a knowing look in his eyes. I get the impression that Jackson has shared my story with his father.

"I told Jackson last night, and I will tell you the same. Life is a contact sport. Nobody gets through it without pain. Believe me, I know."

I think of the hardships Ben has suffered in his life. Losing two wives could not have been easy. Raising his children alone was likely just as difficult. And yet, by looking at him or speaking with him, no one would ever think he had suffered such woes. His was always positive. In fact, I cannot remember a day since I arrived at this house where I hadn't been greeted by him with a smile or a witty remark. Ben believed in moving on. I too believed it with him.

The next few days pass by, and each morning, I arrive at Ben's house and do the chores he's paying me to do. It's strange not seeing Jackson. When he first arrived, with his moody attitude and blatant dismissal of my existence, I dreaded the few weeks that I'd have to tolerate him. But now, I miss him. It's not like we were *always* together. He had been at work in Ben's workshop most of the time. But the fleeting times when our paths cross in the house has become the norm for me. It's just not the same without him here.

*You know it's deeper than that.*

Maybe I do. But maybe, I'm just not ready to admit it yet. In the back of my mind, there's still that niggling voice, telling me that I came out to Sharon Springs to find myself, not another guy.

I lay in my comfortable bed, and as is usual on a Sunday morning, don't want to move. It's not just the warm, snuggly comfort that it provides. It's also the only morning I don't need to jump up and be out of the door by eight 'o' clock.

I'll get up soon and have a well-deserved shower. After that, I might call Sylvie. We could meet for coffee this afternoon, or maybe something a little stronger. I reach for my phone on the bedside locker to check the time. It's 10:37am. But there's something else that catches my attention. A text message from my brother Jonathan.



“Hey, lazy one. You up yet?”

I smile. I quickly and excitedly tap a reply. “Oh, yeah. I’ve been up since five this morning. You know me.” I add a laughing emoji and press send.

The phone rings immediately afterwards and Jonathan’s name pops up on the screen.

“Sure, I believe you,” Jonathan responds, after I swipe to answer. I can hear the smile in his voice.

“How are you?” I say with a grin. “It feels like ages since we talked. What are you up to?”

“Oh, nothing much. Just the usual Sunday morning.”

For Jonathan, that likely means he’s been up since six, been out for a run, been to the gym, and is now comfortably back home. He’s probably sipping a smoothy at this very minute, made of every vegetable he can get his hands on. He’s been a gym rat for a few years now. Right after he had strange palpitations and the doctors told him he *needed* to exorcise burgers and junk food from his lifestyle.

“How’s Sarah?” I ask.

“She’s good. You should call her.”

I wasn’t too impressed with Sarah when I first met her. She appeared to be far too clingy. But as she and Jonathan grew as a couple, I realized it was just her way of showing affection. Jonathan was happy. And that was all that mattered.

“So, how’s the new digs?” he asks.

I sit up and lean against the headboard. “You should come out here and see for yourself. It’s about as isolated as you can get, but I like it.”

“I might just do that.”

I’m about to reply, when there’s a knock on the door. My first thought is

that it's Jackson. Is he back? Has he come over to see me?

"There's someone at the door. Hang on a minute," I say to Jonathan, practically throwing myself off the bed. I switch to loudspeaker and drop the phone on the duvet, while I scour my bedroom for a hoodie to throw over my thin strapped pajama top.

"Sure," he says.

With the hoodie on, I pick the phone up again.

"I might have to call you back," I say, as I skip down the stairs.

I can hardly believe my eyes when I reach the front door. Jonathan is on the porch with his phone still to his ear, and a big smug grin beaming all over his face. I yank the door open, while he opens the screen door, and we're now both standing there with our phones still in our hands.

"Is it anybody you know?" he says, beginning to laugh.

"What are you doing here?" I squeal, dropping the phone onto a nearby table. I don't give him a chance to answer, and launch toward him, throwing myself at him. He's still laughing when he catches me, grabbing me tight, before spinning me around right there on the porch. My legs are wrapped around his body, my feet off the floor. Jonathan has no difficulty lifting me with his huge muscular build and, still laughing, he carries me into the house.

When he finally puts me down, he gives me a long and tight hug. He then takes a step back and looks me up and down. "So, you've been up from five this morning, have you?" he smirks.

"You knew that wasn't the truth the minute I said it," I reply with a grin.

"Yep. You always did love your Sunday lie ins, even when you were a kid."

"Yes, well," I quip back. "Unlike you, who's up at a sparrow's fart and hitting the gym, I am not a morning person. At least, not on a Sunday."

I'm so happy to see him here, I can hardly think. Spinning around aimlessly, wondering what I should be doing, my eyes land at the kitchen.

"Coffee?"

"After that drive, you bet."

I stare at him. "You drove?"

"Sure. It's only a few hours."

I shake my head and laugh. "You're quite mad, you know that?"

"For years." He smirks.

We settle on the porch holding steaming hot cups of coffee and enjoy the morning birdsong. Jonathan already took a good look at the cottage. He's now scanning the area round about.

"Well, what do you think?" I glide my hand through the air in the general area of the garden.

"It could do with a mower," he says, then grins.

"Oh, give me a break. I'm still unpacking. The garden is the last thing on my mind."

He looks at me with a warm smile. "It's actually quite nice here," he says, before looking back out at the garden and the rolling fields that tumble beyond. "A lot quieter than the city."

"That's why I like it here so much."

Jonathan doesn't speak for a long minute, like he's considering something, and then he turns to me again. "So, you're staying? You're not coming back to the city? Ever?"

"I've only just got here," I deflect.

"You know what I mean, Bree."

Of course, I know what he means. He knows my reasons for being out here. He also knows, because we talked about it before I left New York, that once I

got my head straight, I had a few options. I could either sell the cottage or keep it and rent it out, if I ever wanted to go back. The move out here was never meant to be permanent. I was going to give myself a year, and then reassess my options.

But in all that planning, I had never expected to meet someone like Jackson. Now, as I try and think about how I want to answer Jonathan's question, Jackson Scott does little but muddy the waters of my mind.



# Jackson

Dad is already in the kitchen, sipping a cup of coffee when I walk in. He glances up at me and looks a little surprised. “When did you get back?”

“I caught the red eye last night. I got here at around two this morning. Clearly, I didn’t wake you.” I smile, walking over to the cupboard and reaching for a mug.

“Didn’t hear a thing, son,” he replies, shaking his head. “How was New York?”

I shrug as I pour the coffee. “Same old, same old. Just business. I won’t bore you with the details.”

“I wouldn’t understand what you say anyway,” Dad quips back. “I don’t understand half the terminology you use when you’re talking to me about your work.”

I turn and lean against the counter, and grin at him. “And here’s me thinking you’re an educated man.”

Dad rolls his eyes. “Ask me about the French Revolution, the Great War, the history of the Apache’s, and I can tell you all you want to know. But

these zeros and ones,” he waves a dismissive hand, “I haven’t a clue.”

I didn’t actually deal with zeros and ones. I’m not a website designer or a coder. But there was no point telling Dad that. Clearly, he had heard the expression somewhere and threw it in there to make a point.

“You heading out onto the porch again today?” I ask.

Dad shakes his head. “No, John’s coming over. We’re going down to the river to do some fishing.”

“Oh, cool.”

Mr. Shilliday’s store is closed today, since it is a Sunday, and it’s good to hear Dad talking about getting out of the house again. Sitting on the porch day after day has surely lost its appeal by now. Dad loves his reading, but he loves being outside even more.

“What about you?” There was a glint in his eye, and I knew what he was asking.

“Do you mean to ask me if I have any plans of going and visiting your favorite housekeeper?” I smirk.

Dad chuckles. “Yes. Something like that.”

“Then, yes. I’ve had some time to think these last few days, and nothing’s changed since the last we spoke of it. You were right, as usual. I need to move on, and I think Bree is someone I would like to try that with. If it doesn’t work out...” I shrug.

“You won’t know until you try. At least you’re going to give it a chance,” Dad says. “That’s a start, son.”

“I know.”

“I’m not going to sit here and tell you things will be peachy. I can’t know the future. I couldn’t have known, when I married your mother, when her time might be up. Granted, we knew it was coming, but we didn’t live

looking at the clock. Every day was a gift and we used it as such. Lizzy, well,” Dad shrugs, “that was a completely different situation.”

“You haven’t had it easy,” I say.

“Who does?”

“I know, but Dad, you’ve seen more hardship than most.”

“I’ve also had more opportunities than most, son. More opportunities to love, to live, to experience what life has to offer. If I had let your mother’s death stop me, I wouldn’t have the memories me and Lizzy made before she got ill. Even more important, you wouldn’t have had a younger brother.”

“Yes, well,” I say, pretending that it wouldn’t have been such a bad thing, but I quickly add a smirk. He knows I’m only jesting.

“All I’ve ever wanted is for you and Daniel to be happy. I’m no fool, Jackson. I’ve been around the block a few times. Life is good, then it’s bad, then it’s beautiful, then it’s hard. It’s all part of the journey.”

“Did you ever consider getting into motivational speaking?” I ask, still smirking.

Dad chuckles then. “I’m not sure I’d be much use. I’ve been trying to motivate you to get a life for the last three years, and look how that’s turned out.”

“I’m going over to see Bree, aren’t I?”

“You are,” he says smiling, “but I think we both know that has nothing to do with me. You didn’t go looking. She found you.”

I give Dad a dubious look.

He shrugs. “It’s true,” he says emphatically. “And sometimes, it’s just the way these things happen. The stars align, stuff plays out in your favor, coincidences bring people together in the strangest of ways.”

“Are you talking about fate?” I blurt, hardly believing what I’m hearing.



Dad shakes his head. “Don’t you find it most unusual? The two of you live in one of the busiest cities in the world, having never met, only to end up in Sharon Springs, a tiny town, at exactly the same time. All because I’ve broken my leg. I don’t know much about fate, or if I even believe in it. I just find it difficult to believe that you two being brought together was mere coincidence.”

I shrug. I suppose I can’t argue with him. He’s not wrong. Bree and I would likely never have met in the city. Even though we both worked in the financial district, the chances of our paths crossing were infinitesimal.

We finish our coffee and I hang around the kitchen for a bit. I want to help Dad get into Mr. Shilliday’s truck. With his leg in the cast, it’s likely not going to be an easy feat.

“What are you hanging around here for?” Dad says after a little while.

“I’m waiting for Mr. Shilliday to get here. You guys might need help—”

“My leg is broken,” Dad quips back. “I’m not incapacitated, for god’s sake. How the heck do you think I get dressed in the morning, or get myself to the bathroom?”

In fairness, I hadn’t really thought about it. Dad had never asked for help with any of those things, so it had never occurred to me to wonder how he managed those tasks.

“Get going.” He throws a hand toward the door. “You have your own business to attend to.”

“All right.” I raise my hands in submission. “I was only trying to help.”

“I don’t need your help,” he says. “Stop procrastinating and get it done.”

I grin then. Yep. Dad knows me all too well.

Ten minutes later, I turn away from the main road and head down the dirt track that will eventually lead me to Bree’s house. There’s that twisting in my

stomach again, the nerves turning my guts into noodles. There's fear of rejection, but I'll be honest, the fear of her saying yes to us giving it a try is even stronger. I haven't been in a relationship in over three years. I haven't even been near a woman in three years. I'm actually terrified, like a teenager about to ask a girl out to prom.

*Pull yourself together, man.*

I'm almost at her cottage, when I hear squealing coming from Bree's house. Bringing the truck to a slow stop, I look down the driveway to make sense of what I'm seeing. There's a car parked behind Bree's, but my attention is dragged to the porch in front of the cottage. The same porch we spent five hours on around this time last week.

Bree has her arms and legs wrapped around a tall and muscular guy. She's squealing with delight as he starts to spin her around. By the look on his face, he's clearly as pleased as she is. I feel my heart crack in my chest, but I can't pull my eyes away. It must be Rob, her ex-boyfriend. It has to be. I look back to the strange car in her driveway. It has a New York plate. I continue to watch as Rob, instead of setting her down, carries her into the house, just like a husband carries his wife over the threshold of a new home.

Only after the door closes behind them, does the anger begin to rise within me, and I slam the truck into reverse. I hit hard on the gas and back out the way I came. As I reach the main road, I spin the wheel so hard to turn, the truck skids. I slam on the brakes and just sit there.

There's a tornado of emotions flying around my head. Anger, confusion, stupidity, grief, and pain. It's all there.

How could I have read it all so wrong? Had I been entirely blind? Had I seen things that were not there?

No, I'd felt something real from her. I'd felt her tender touch of comfort,

and watched her blush under my gaze. The kiss that we nearly shared last Sunday had not been desired by me alone. But then, I'd disappeared for a few days. And so what does she do?

*While the cat's away, the mice will play.*

Bree had played me, and like a fool, I had gone along with who I believed she was. Clearly, she was no different than Claire, or any other woman for that matter. They were like monkeys; keeping a tight grip on one branch only letting go when they had a firm grasp on a better one. With my absence, she had obviously turned back to what she knew. Her ex.

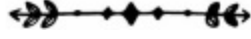
Had anything she told me been true? Had it always been the case that he was going to come out here and join her? Had I been nothing but a snack to fill her temporary hunger pang, while she waited for the main course? All these questions and no answers made me even angrier. I had fallen for her sob story, like the idiot that I am. Thinking I was out of town, she had taken the opportunity to welcome another man into her arms.

*Just like Claire.*

Well, she was welcome to him. She was welcome to this narrow-minded gossiping town, she was welcome to her life with a man who had treated her so badly, if that had even been the truth. I slam the steering wheel with the palm of my hand and bellow out a painful cry of anger and frustration.

I don't care that the walls are so high that I'm a prisoner in my own head. I don't care if I forgo living to save myself from pain. I should have stayed where I was, safe behind the walls.

As I finally pull away and head back to Dad's house, I come to a decision. I'm going back to New York, back into the safety of my work and my isolation. I would soon forget about Bree and her little cottage, and after that, there would be no more pain.



# Bree

When I finally manage to open my eyes, which is a struggle, all I can feel is complete exhaustion. Jonathan had travelled back to the city late last night. No matter how much I had tried to persuade him to stay longer, he had refused. Like me, he had to work this morning. Unlike me, he was determined to be up and have his usual morning routine down before he readied himself for work.

*Crazy gym rat.*

While I had thoroughly enjoyed the day I had spent with him, all the laughing and talking and reminiscing had exhausted me. When I finally crawled into bed last night, sleep came immediately. Even now, I can barely keep my eyes open. I don't want to imagine how Jonathan must be feeling.

Still lying in bed, I check my phone for messages. Before leaving, he had promised to text me once he reached home safely.

“I won't ring, Bree. I don't want to wake you. But I swear, I'll send you a text so you know I got back safe.”

“You better,” I had warned.

Sure enough, I find his message on my phone, sent at 2:47 that morning. I wince at the thought of how hard he must have struggled to get out of bed. But knowing Jonathan, he would have done it, no matter how tired he was.

Now, it was my turn.

*Come on, Bree. If your brother can do it after a three-hour drive, so can you.*

With gargantuan effort, I decide to work my way out of bed in stages. First, I push myself up to a sitting position, leaning on the head board for support. My neck feels like rubber—thin, pliable rubber—and is seriously struggling to support my head.

What is wrong with me? Why am I so tired?

*Maybe because you’ve been in bed before ten ‘o clock every night since you arrived here, unlike last night.*

Yes, maybe. Maybe it was also the few beers I had, while Jonathan had his Coke. But jeez, it was only three or four. Has this country existence really affected me so much, I can’t even take a few beers? In fairness, I had worked pretty hard last week, and then there was the whole drama when Jackson had bumped into Claire, and the can of worms that had opened.

Besides, Jonathan had totally ruined my lie-in yesterday. Not that I had complained. Not at all. I had loved seeing his familiar face. I had missed him very much. We had always been close, and when I still lived in the city, we had met every Wednesday for lunch, unless I just *had to* have it with a prospect.

Before he left, he had promised he wouldn’t be a stranger, but had told me that the road went both ways.

“You know, you’re always welcome to crash at our place if you come to

visit.”

“*If* I come to visit?” I had balked, laughing. “God, Jonathan, you *would* think I was never going to see you again. Of course, I’ll come and visit. I just want to give this place a chance, that’s all.”

“Of course, you do. I get it.”

But he didn’t get it at all, because I had made absolutely no mention of Jackson. We had talked about every single subject under the sun, I had even told him about Sylvie, Ben, and Daniel, and how wonderful they all were. But Jackson’s name had not crossed my lips. I know exactly why. I didn’t want to see the judgment in Jonathan’s eyes.

He had never liked David, and very much like our older sister, had told me to take some time out for myself after the divorce. I had not listened, and the crappy relationship with Robert had been a direct result of me ignoring both of my siblings’ wise advice. If they now find out that, in the short time that I had been here, I was already involving myself in yet another relationship, their judgments would never cease. Jonathan might have keeled over if he had found out.

The shower didn’t help much, but after the strong cup of coffee, I’m feeling a little more awake. Not as much as I would like, but there’s nothing I can do about that. I’m sure that once I get to Ben’s and start my chores, I’ll be fine.

“Good morning,” I say, stifling a yawn.

“Late night?” Ben smiled.

“Yes, that and all this heat. It’s killing me.”

Ben frowns. “Does it not get hot in New York?”

“Oh, sure. But New York is a concrete jungle with aircon in every building.”

Ben smiles and nods. “Of course there is. But the country air is good for

your lungs,” he continued, as I push him out to the porch. “Contains none of that smog and pollution you find in the city.”

“No aircon in the fields either,” I quip back, but I’m smiling.

When I walk back into the kitchen, I nearly jump out of my skin. My heart thumps against my chest, out of the joy and exhilaration at seeing Jackson again, even if it is only his back as he stands facing the counter scrolling through his phone. Ben hadn’t mentioned he had returned, but I don’t mind. It’s a nice surprise.

“Hey,” I say brightly as I walk across the kitchen toward him.

Jackson side steps away and looks down at me. His face is like thunder, and I’m more than a little taken back. It’s not quite the reception I was expecting.

“Hey,” I say again, “are you OK?”

Maybe something bad happened in the city. Maybe he’s still struggling after seeing Claire. Whatever it is, I want him to know that I’m here for him. I know it all now. He knows he can talk to me if he needs to.

“I’m fine,” he replies gruffly.

I’m suddenly transported to the first time we met. Jackson the caveman is back. The same Jackson who could not speak more than two words to me, or want to be anywhere near me. What the heck is going on?

“What happened?” I ask.

He can’t be mad at me. We haven’t even seen each other since he left. Something has to have happened in the last few days. Maybe he just needs a little coaxing to open up.

“I said, I’m fine,” he snaps.

Clearly, he wasn’t; and while I want to be as understanding as possible, I am not his proverbial punching bag that he can whip one out on whenever he



desires. I didn't tolerate his attitude when we were at the fair, and I'm not going to suffer it now.

"What the hell has gotten into you?" I demand.

He grunts at me, but doesn't speak.

"Jackson, will you act like an adult for once in your life, and tell me what's going on?"

He's still snarling and takes another step back. "I'm learning lessons I didn't know I needed," he spat back.

"What?" I demand, utterly confused.

I have absolutely no idea what on earth he's talking about, and his cryptic replies are not helping. He's acting like I've done something wrong, but I couldn't have. If he just bothered to explain, it would help a great deal.

"Do you know what, Bree? Just do your chores," he spits vehemently. "Do the job you're here to do and leave me the hell alone."

I falter and take a step back, my jaw dropping open at the fervent aggression I hear in his voice. I can hardly believe I'm talking to the same guy that was here not a week ago. Evidently, his foul mood *is* because of me, but I can't for the life of me guess what I could possibly have done wrong. But then, why should I care? I *know* I haven't done anything wrong. All I feel is anger. Anger at how callous he is toward me after everything we've shared together. I'm still confused, but my anger outshines my confusion.

"Did you ever think the reason you're so good at fixing faucets is because you act like one?" I bite back. "One minute you're running red hot, and the next, you're freezing cold. I never know where the hell I am with you. The world around you is not the problem, Jackson. It's you that needs fixing." I'm shaking with rage and my words are harsh, but I just can't stop myself.

Jackson's face gets redder, and he takes a step toward me. Any second now,

I'm going to be blasted with his exploding retort. Like me, he's shaking with anger. With his fists clenched at his sides, I'm just waiting for him to pop.

I'm more than surprised when instead, he just glares at me for a long minute, before eventually shaking his head. Does he not have an answer? Is he struggling to find his words? I never find out, because a second later, he turns on his heels and storms out the kitchen door, slamming it shut behind him.



# Jackson

The tube is hot as hell, packed with exhausted workers doing exactly what I'm doing—heading home at the end of a long day. I can't wait to get back to my apartment and rip this suit off. Slipping into my shorts and a tank top, and relaxing with a cold beer in hand, sounds like heaven right now.

The tube stops at the next station and we all collectively sway back and forth, like a wave. More people get on than get off, and there's a shuffle amongst the commuters to make room. Not that there was much to begin with. The sight of a red-haired woman suddenly grabs my attention, and my breath catches in my throat. Her hair is tied in a scruffy knot on her head.

*Could it be her?*

Holding my breath, I strain my neck to see her face through the crowd. When the train starts again, the jolting movement breaks up the sea of bodies, and I finally catch a glimpse. It's not her.

It's not Bree.

My plan had not worked exactly as I had hoped. I was determined to return to the city and forget all about her, but like a splinter in my mind, I just

couldn't get her out. Before going home to Sharon Springs, I had hardly noticed redheaded women in the city. Now, I see them everywhere. On the tube, in the elevator, on the streets. It's driving me insane. During the day, the thought of her distracts me from work; at night, she invades my dreams.

Dad has phoned a couple of times. I know he's worried. I've only been back a couple weeks and we would never have talked this often before. The conversations are not heavy, certainly not as heavy as the day I had left.

I had stormed out the kitchen and left Bree alone in there. She had put on a good act, that was for sure. She could have won an award. But I was not going to fall for her lies anymore. Maybe if she had just admitted the truth, maybe if she had shown some semblance of guilt, we could have talked.

*No, you couldn't have. You were too angry.*

It was true. Saying I was angry was putting it mildly. Of all people, I thought she would have understood humiliation and betrayal more than anyone else. But after taking the leap and finally opening up to her, she had taken the last vestige of dignity I had left, and thrown it back at my face. I just couldn't stay in that town any longer.

In my room, I had packed my bags again, after only unpacking them the day before, and left my suitcase at the door. I needed to talk to Dad, but I wasn't going to do it while Bree was still there. I would wait until after she had left. I spent the hours in between, booking another flight, organizing a cab for that evening, and ringing Phil and letting him know I was coming back again. He was surprised. Pleased, but surprised.

"But you only just left," he had said, his voice giving away his confusion.

"And now, I'm coming back," I had replied shortly.

Phil knew me well enough not to push it, and the conversation was a short one.

With my laptop set up in my bedroom upstairs, I got to work. Dad likely thought I was out in the barn, because I didn't hear him calling for me throughout the afternoon. At 5 pm on the dot, I heard the front door slam. I peeked out the window and saw Bree get into her car and drive away, leaving a plume of dust swirling in her wake.

*Goodbye, Bree.*

I had checked my watch, gauging how much time I had before the cab arrived. Not much. After packing my laptop, I carried my bags downstairs and left them at the front door. I was about to open the door and search for Dad on the porch, when the study door behind me opened, and the familiar crashing of his wheelchair against the doorframe made me turn. He stopped midway through the doorway when he noticed my bags.

"You're leaving," he had barked.

"I'm leaving," I replied.

He had said nothing for a long while. I just waited.

"Is this to do with the argument?"

I frowned for a split second, and then understood Dad had likely heard me and Bree going at it in the kitchen.

"It is," I said.

He stared at me expectantly. When I didn't say anything more, he continued. "Well? Are you going to tell me what happened or do I have to consult a psychic?"

"I've had time to think, Dad. I was all for trying, but I've come to the conclusion that I'm just not ready."

"Horse crap!" he spat.

I knew he wouldn't believe me, but I didn't want to tell him the truth about Bree. She was still his housekeeper, and in a way his caretaker, so I didn't

want any bad blood between them. Besides, it had been my own fault, after all. I had been the idiot who had believed her. Dad had only been on the sidelines, encouraging me to do what he thought was right. He couldn't have known the kind of woman Bree was either. She was very good at hiding her real self.

I shrugged. "I'm going back to the city. My mind's made up."

"So, you're just going to lie to my face?" He was annoyed. He hated lies. His words had made me feel guilty, and I found myself in a dilemma once again.

"You're not going to like what you hear. Besides, I don't want to make things awkward."

"Things are awkward now," he growled. "This," he had gestured animatedly from himself to me and back again, "this deceit is awkward."

"Oh, come on, Dad." He was being a little dramatic.

"You don't lie to me, Jackson. You never have. What's so different now?"

I had sighed heavily. He was going to force me to tell him by making me feel guilty. His favorite trick in the book.

"I found Bree with another guy," I said. I caught the low grumbling of a car engine and, with a quick glance out the window, saw the cab pulling up outside. "Look, the cab's—"

"Hang on just a damn minute," Dad had demanded. "What do you mean, you found Bree with another guy?"

"I went over yesterday morning, and there was a guy at her house."

"It could have been anybody," Dad argued.

"Anybody who had her wrapped around him like Christmas paper?" I countered in frustration. "The two of them laughing and giggling like a pair of teenagers in love? I don't think so, Dad. I should have just done what I've

always done. Stayed in my own lane. I'm going back to what I know." I walked over to him and squeezed him tight. "I love you," I said, before turning and opening the front door. I had stepped outside with my bags, and had almost shut the door behind me, when—

"Wait—" Dad cried.

"I'll call you in a few days," I said, before shutting the door.

I didn't want to hear him make excuses for Bree. I saw what I saw. Anything he would have tried to say would have fallen on deaf ears anyway.

I had felt a little bad leaving without saying goodbye to Daniel, but I didn't want him to see me in such an angry state. It was partly that. I also didn't want to hang around and listen to Dad trying to persuade me to stay. I've faceted Daniel since. It's obvious my younger brother is just as curious as Dad had been, but I haven't told him about Bree either. All he knows is that my work called me back to the city. Whether he believes that or not, I don't really know.

"Hey, man. How's it going?" Phil asked, leaning into my office.

I just look at him blankly. Phil and I rarely see each other when we're in the office, which is why I'm shocked to see him here. We're just too busy. If we get time to talk, it's a quick check in at the coffee machine. If we need to talk about something more in depth, we almost always have to make an appointment. The exception to that, is the monthly progress meeting we have, where we both come prepared with numbers, clients, and investment opportunities. Phil never just 'pops in.'

"That good, huh?" he says, when I don't reply.

"Is there something wrong?"

It's the only conclusion I can come to for such an impromptu meeting.

Phil simply walks in and drops himself on the chair opposite to me.



“I was hoping you could tell me.”

My frown deepens even more. And then I shrug.

I’m not in good form. I haven’t been in good form since I came back. I just want to get my work done and go home, which is where I have been spending all of my free time, just staring into blank space, allowing my mind to drift aimlessly into nothingness. A few stiff drinks usually help the process along.

“Jackson,” Phil presses, looking at me like I’ve just landed from another planet. “You haven’t been right since you got back. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

I know exactly what he means. Clearly, I haven’t hidden my state of mind as well as I thought.

“Do you remember me saying hello to you this morning?” he asks.

There is absolutely no recollection of that interaction in my head, but I pretend to recall. After a few seconds, I shake my head. “Nope.”

“No,” Phil shakes his head along with me, “I didn’t think so. Just like you probably don’t remember not replying. I don’t know, man. Your body might have come back to the city, but your head is still in Sharon Springs. Is it your dad? Are you worried about him?”

“No, it’s not Dad. Dad is fine. You know Dad.”

Phil smiles. “I do, which is what has me confused. Is it Claire?”

There isn’t much I haven’t shared with Phil over the years. In fact, he’s the closest thing to a best friend I’ve got. But for some reason, I haven’t mentioned Bree to him since my return. Maybe I’m ashamed to admit my own idiocy. Maybe I just don’t want to talk about it. Maybe it’s because I’m trying to forget all about her.

*And how’s that working out for you?*

“There’s a few things,” I say.

“All right,” Phil says in his usual solution-based tone. “How about drinks after work?”

I pull a face.

“Listen, bud,” he continues. “I love you. You know I do. I’m worried about you. And besides,” he smiles, “we haven’t gone out for drinks in months. Maybe blowing off a little steam will do us both some good.”

We settle in our regular bar, situated about three blocks from the office. It’s only when we sit down that I realize how long it has actually been. Phil was right, it had been months.

“There we go,” he says, placing a small tumbler with a finger of amber liquid in the bottom. “First round’s on me,” he says as he settles down beside me. “So, what’s going on? And I want the unedited version. Not just what you think I need to know.”

I start from the beginning and lay the events of the last two weeks out on the table, the detailed version. Phil is a good listener. Not one of those people who interrupts every five minutes to prod about something that will be disclosed sooner or later anyway. He sips his drink, nodding every so often as I relay everything that happened with Bree; seeing Claire, and the crap that ensued. I tell him about my conversation with Dad, and how fired up I was to get back on the horse and give this relationship thing another shot. And then, finally, I tell him about seeing Bree with another guy at her house. I skip the argument in the kitchen. I didn’t see the point in adding that.

“I decided to come back here and forget all about her,” I finish. “It’s best for everyone, I think.”

“Right,” Phil says, sounding entirely unconvinced that it was best for anyone. “Hang on.”

He goes back to the bar and gets another round.

“It was my turn,” I protest on his return.

“There’s plenty of time.” He dismisses me with his hand. “You can get the next one.”

We both sip some more, and then he looks at me. “Let me get this straight,” he says, placing the tumbler carefully back onto the worn table in front of us. “You meet this girl, this stunning, beautiful girl, by your account.”

I nod.

“Clearly, some magic happens between you...”

“Well, I’m not sure I’d go that far,” I counter.

“Hear me out. Some magic happens between you. You, after all these years of celibacy and solitude, finally decide you’re going to take the plunge with this woman, and then you change your mind when you see her in the arms of this other guy. Does that about some it up?”

I nod. There’s a punchline. I can hear it in his voice. I know Phil, and I know his tones, so I wait for the inevitable.

“Tell me again, how you know that this guy was in fact, Bree’s ex.”

I gawk at him. “She was all over him like a rash, Phil.”

“OK. But does that really mean it was her ex? Did you even ask her?”

“I didn’t need—”

“Did you ask her?” he presses.

“No.” I sigh.

“So, you just jumped to a conclusion.”

“A conclusion anyone might have jumped to under the circumstances,” I defend.

Phil shakes his head in disagreement. “You see, my man, that’s where you’re wrong. Your experience with Claire has tainted your entire view of women.”

“Is that your therapist talking?” I smirk.

Phil isn't fazed and nods. “Probably. Doesn't make it any less true though. You've been so terrified of getting hurt since Claire, you've hidden yourself away. This is the first time in years that you tentatively stick your head over the parapet, and you tell yourself you're going to give it a chance. You think you see a friendly across the trenches, and things look safe. But then what looks to you like the enemy suddenly arrives, and you dive back down again. But how do you know that wasn't a friendly wearing the enemy's uniform?”

“I just know,” I reply, feeling more than a little frustrated at having my deductive abilities questioned.

“But, how could you? You didn't ask her.”

“You didn't see her, Phil. She was hanging onto this guy like a limpet. Arms, legs, everything.”

Phil leans back in his chair and nods. He takes another sip, and after a small pause, puts the glass back down again.

“When Freya and I had been dating for about ten months,” he begins, “she wanted me to throw a barbecue and invite both families. She thought it would be a great way for everyone to meet. We were getting pretty serious, and we thought it was time.”

I sip my drink again wondering whether there is a point to this story. Phil liked his stories and his analogies. He used them in the office and out; and I have to admit, most of the time, they're pretty good. What he and Freya meeting each other's family had to do with me, however, I can hardly imagine. So, I'm starting to feel just a little irritated.

“When the guests started arriving, there were introductions and greetings and all that jazz. I'm in the middle of flipping patties for the burgers when Freya runs past me, launches herself toward this guy, and literally throws her

arms and legs around him. And I'm not just saying this, Jackson. You know I wouldn't lie to you. But just like the guy in your story, he stood there with a beaming grin on his face, spinning her around while she giggled in delight."

I'm now sitting up and looking at Phil intently.

"I swear," he says, raising his right hand.

"Who was he?" I ask, as I slowly begin to realize why this story is so very pertinent.

"Her cousin," he replies. "They'd grown up two streets away from each other, had spent their entire childhood together, and were as close as two peas in a pod."

My mind is now wide awake and paying attention, and I'm beginning to realize, at great speed, that I may have made a colossal blunder. I had seen just what I wanted to see. A woman betraying my trust. My irrational fears regarding women had clouded my judgment. I hadn't even considered an alternative rational explanation. Bree had to have lied to me, and that was that.

What an idiot!

"I can hear the cogs turning, man. What's going on?" Phil says, searching my face to figure out what is going on in my head.

"I think I might have messed up big time," I murmur, struggling to contain the sickening sensation that is now whirling about in my stomach.

Phil grins and nods. There's some smugness in his grin. "Then my work here is done," he declares dramatically and laughs. "So, talk to me."

"Remember when I fixed the faucet?" I say.

"Yes."

"Well, Bree lent me a hoodie that fitted me quite well. In fact, it's still at Dad's house. I didn't return it to her before leaving. She said it belonged to

her brother.”

“And thinking back now, would this guy you saw on the porch have been about the right size?”

I shrug. “It was hard to tell, but if I had to answer, I’d say yes. I’m a big guy. And this hoodie fit me pretty well.”

Phil’s eyebrows now rise and he’s nodding, knowing that he’s made his point. “You can’t know for sure, until you go and talk to her. But I’m going to be honest with you. From what you’ve told me so far, you’ve done this woman wrong. She’s not Claire, Jackson. Neither is every other woman walking the planet. Bree sounds like a good one.”

She is. I have known that all along.

“My advice?” Phil continues. “Get your butt back to Sharon Springs and see if you can undo the damage you’ve done.”



# Bree

It's been nearly two weeks.

It feels a lot longer than that though.

It had been two full days since our fight in the kitchen when I discovered that Jackson had gone back to the city. I didn't see him the day after his big meltdown, but I figured he was just avoiding me. I concluded that he just needed time to cool off. I wanted to talk it out, but Jackson and I are clearly not the same. The day after that, the argument and all that he had said to me was really starting to bug me. I needed to know what Jackson had meant, why he had been so awful and nasty, after all the things we had shared. I was losing sleep, and I couldn't stand not knowing any longer.

Around midday, when he still hadn't shown his face in the house, I went out to the porch to talk to Ben.

"Is Jackson in the barn?" I had asked.

Ben looked a little surprised and confused at the question, which I found strange. He looked at me for another long minute, before slowly shaking his head.



“Jackson’s not here, Bree,” he said in a heavy tone. A tone I had never once heard coming from Ben since I’d started working for him.

At first, I had not understood what he was telling me. “Well, do you know when he’ll be back?”

Ben looked confused again, before he eventually figured it out and dropped the bombshell. “He’s gone back to the city, Bree. He isn’t coming back.”

If a stiff wind had passed by, I think I might have been blown clean off the porch. I was completely astounded at Ben’s words. I don’t know how long I stood there in a trance, but the touch of someone’s hand brought me back.

Ben had wheeled himself over to me, and held my limp hand in his. “Are you OK?”

Shaking my head, I had opened my mouth, but no words had come out. My mind was numb, and clearly, my other bodily functions were not working too well either.

“Go home, Bree,” Ben said.

“No. I’m fine,” I had croaked, my voice struggling through my throat. “I’ll be—”

“Bree!” Ben said sharply. “Go home. Come back tomorrow.”

And so, I had driven home in a daze, and promptly taken myself straight to my bed.

It’s nearly two weeks later, and the shock has passed. A sadness, a lethargy of sorts, has taken its place, and I can’t seem to find joy in anything anymore. It’s silly, really. It wasn’t like I’d led a miserable existence before Jackson arrived, and his presence had given my life meaning. But his leaving has sure left a vacuum deep inside of me.

My longing for him only reminds me there’s nothing I can do about it. I haven’t tried to get in touch with Jackson, because I’m too scared of his

rejection. So instead, I choose to suffer. Until maybe, sometime soon, this horrible, dreadful feeling passes.

The house hasn't been the same. Me and Ben are not the same. It has nothing to do with Ben. He tries his very best to cheer me up when I walk in the door every working morning. But happiness has truly left me. The contentment I once felt working here, is gone. Jackson took it with him when he left.

"Bree, I need you in here," Ben calls one morning, as soon as I arrive.

His tone sounds ominous, and so I run into the study, terrified that Ben might have finally lost his patience, attempted to do something he shouldn't, and I'm going to find him face planted on the floor.

But I don't. He's just sitting in his wheelchair, looking at me intently when I hurriedly come to a stop a few feet away from him.

"Sit down, Bree," Ben says, pointing to a chair not far from him.

I'm a little confused, and I suddenly fear the worst. He's going to fire me. He can't stand to look at my miserable expression one more day. He's had enough. This is it.

"Please," he presses, since I still haven't moved; the worst-case scenario flying around my head.

I take the seat, my heart thumping in my chest. I know there is only a week or so until Ben gets his cast off, and I thought I'd have more time to look for something else. In truth, I was considering asking Ben if he would like me to stay on permanently. He definitely needs someone to look after this huge house. But now, it looks like my silliness has lost me that opportunity. I'm going to lose this job, aren't I? And then what?

"We need to talk," Ben says, wheeling himself a little closer to me.

I hold my breath as I wait for those dreadful words.

*I'm going to have to let you go.*

He won't say them straight away. Ben's too nice of a man to do that. He'll tell me what a great job I've done, and how invaluable I've been, and how much he will miss me being here, but then... then he'll say it.

"It's not what you think," he continues. "I'm not letting you go."

I immediately breathe easy. Ben smiles a little when he sees it. "I knew that's what you were thinking. But I haven't brought you in here for that."

"Then, what?" I say, now relieved, but also confused.

"Well, you haven't been yourself lately—"

"I'll do better, I promise," I blurt.

"Bree," Ben says firmly. "I already told you. I'm not letting you go. I just want us to talk about it."

*About what?*

I know exactly what he's referring to. I'm now not sure whether him letting me go is better than what's coming. Discussing how I'm feeling with Ben since his son left the building sounds like the most uncomfortable situation ever.

"I want to tell you what I know, and then maybe, you can tell me what you know," Ben says.

He's making absolutely no sense, but I nod anyway.

"Jackson came over to see you a few Sundays ago—"

"You mean with the purse?" I frown.

"No, the Sunday after that."

I frown even deeper and then shake my head. "No, he didn't."

"Oh, but he did, Bree. You just didn't see him."

"What?" I exclaim, confused, but also a little frustrated.

"He saw a man at your house, and so he left."

Ben is watching me as I process those words, and the pieces finally begin to fall into place. “Oh my God,” I breathe.

All this because Jackson had seen Jonathan? *Really?* I can feel the anger rising in me now.

“He left because my brother came to visit?” I bark.

I can see the relief on Ben’s face, along with this look that he’s known all along that there was an honest explanation.

“Seriously?” I snap again. I’m now angry that Jackson’s hot headedness has gotten the better of him once again. “That massive row in the kitchen was over Jonathan?”

Ben nods slowly and looks a little sad. “He wouldn’t listen to me, Bree. I did try to reason with him before he left, but he wouldn’t listen.”

“He never listens to anybody,” I bark again. “He’s so caught up in his own pain, he can’t see past it.”

“You’re right,” Ben agrees. “That woman really did a number on him.”

I know he means Claire.

“Jackson sees the world through a different lens after what she did,” Ben continues. “He sees danger everywhere. I was angry too, Bree, when I found out about the conclusion he had made about you. I had no doubt in my mind that he had read it all wrong. But like I said, he just wouldn’t listen.”

I heave a sigh. Partly to try and calm myself, partly because I can’t believe Jackson has been so stupid.

“Now, I know I’m an old man,” Ben smiles softly, “but there’s nothing wrong with my eye sight. You two clearly hit it off when Jackson was here, and by your uncharacteristic misery this last three weeks, you’re obviously hurting. I have no doubt Jackson fell for you, and I’m sure you did too...”

Ben is still talking, but I’ve stopped listening as those last words pierce me.

Of course, I've avoided thinking about all this in my misery. But hearing Ben tell me I've fallen for Jackson, feels like a punch to the stomach. Is it even possible, after us knowing each other for such a short amount of time? Could I really feel for him so deeply?

I nearly laugh out loud, because clearly, this is my MO. I did exactly the same with Rob. It shouldn't really come as a shock. I just fall for guys too fast. And yet, I am shocked. I haven't been listening to a word Ben has been saying, and when I finally join the conversation again, I can only look at him blankly.

"What are your thoughts?"

"What?" I say, completely lost.

Ben looks at me for a long moment. "Did you hear anything I just said?"

I can feel heat rising to my cheeks with the embarrassment of zoning out, and I bashfully shake my head.

The sound of the front door closing distracts us both, and relief washes over me as Daniel calls out that he's home. His presence takes the focus off me, and I couldn't be more grateful.

"We're in here," Ben replies.

"Hey," Daniel says, walking into the study. "I forgot my wallet, and..." He looks at me and then he looks at Ben, and the smile he wore a second ago disappears. "What's going on?"

Ben looks at me with his eyebrows slightly raised. It's an unspoken request for permission to tell Daniel. I nod. Daniel isn't a fool. Like his father, he has sharp eyes; and, since Jackson's departure, I've noticed a certain hesitance about him when he's spoken to me, which had never been there before.

Ben explains to him the gist of it. Daniel listens carefully.

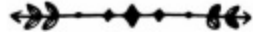
"Well," Daniel says, when his father shares his conclusion, "you guys did

look really good together. Whether Jackson admitted it or not, I know he likes you.”

“You have a choice to make, Bree,” Ben says. “You can either continue dwelling in this painful agony, or you and Jackson can talk to each other and try and sort this out. I can’t tell you what to do, but I know this much—When the right person comes into your life, you need to grab on to them with both hands. Life is too short for missed chances.”

Coming from Ben, it hits me hard. He was speaking from painful experience. Maybe, just maybe, I ought to take his wisdom seriously.

20



# Jackson

The plane is nearly empty and I could not be more relieved. It's not a long flight, but a screaming child for any length of time is enough to drive anyone mad.

After talking with Phil last night, I didn't waste any time. I booked the flight right there in the bar. He laughed at me when I told him I was taking a few days off.

"You think?" he had said. "If you weren't so damned reactive, you wouldn't even be back here."

That was me. Reactive.

I had come to the only conclusion that my mind allowed for at the time. I now worry that jumping to that incorrect conclusion about Bree might just be the biggest mistake of my life, and it most certainly ruined something really special. My narrowmindedness will be my undoing.

While I still don't know for sure whether it was Bree's brother on that porch, I have no doubt in my mind, that it wasn't her ex. The more we had



talked last night, the more Phil's sensible reasoning had convinced me that Bree just wouldn't have done what I thought she had done.

*She wasn't Claire.*

What she was, was a beacon. Without me even asking, she had been a kind ear to my problems, a ball of comfort for my demons, and a calming sensation in my despair.

Claire hadn't been like that at all. Not that I had many demons when we were together, but looking back, I realize that Claire had always been a selfish and conceited woman. Even now, her arrogance and piousness remained unmatched.

I suddenly recall the conversation between Bree and me on her porch on Sunday afternoon. Bree's reaction to me finding Claire in bed with someone else was perfect, and had made me laugh. "*What a witch.*" We had then fallen into hysterics, and now, I quietly chuckle to myself as the memory comes back to me. She certainly had not held back her opinions about Claire and everything else. She can definitely hold her own when the situation demands it, like her smart comment in the kitchen that day when we had fought so viciously. She was right though. I have been just like a faucet. Running hot then cold; and Bree never knowing what to expect next. I hadn't been a good person.

There's an announcement that we'll be descending soon, so I follow the instructions and fasten my seatbelt. The nerves are beginning to roll around in my stomach, and the sensation is making me feel a little sick. I still had enough time to gather myself, but the angst at what was going to happen once I see Bree again was beginning to rise.

She was either going to forgive me or hate me forever. I couldn't see any other option. The latter was a terrifying thought, but nothing I didn't deserve.

I had silently accused her of betrayal, and left her without so much as a goodbye, never mind an explanation. And now that I know the truth, I can't even begin to imagine how I must have made her feel. She had not put on the performance of a lifetime when we had argued. She genuinely had no clue what the hell I was talking about.

*Idiot!*

The plane lands. My nerves go stronger as I climb out of it. In about an hour's time, I'm going to know where I stand with Bree. A part of me wants to get it over with, the other part wants to run back to the city like the coward I am. But like Phil had said last night—If I don't come back and face this now, I'm going to spend the rest of my life wondering what it could have been.

I had already been close to insanity with thoughts of Bree cropping up nearly every minute of every day since I had left. In truth, whatever happened next, couldn't make me feel any worse than these last couple of weeks, could it? I don't want to think about it anymore. I stride across the airport concourse and look for a cab.

My brain is confused when I turn a corner and head toward the airport's exit. I had informed neither Dad nor Daniel that I was coming back, and yet, somehow, they're both here to receive me. Dad in his wheelchair, Daniel standing beside him, looking aimlessly about.

What the heck?

With a confused frown, I stride toward them. When I'm about twenty feet away, Dad looks up and his eyes find me. His jaw drops at the sight of me, which only confuses me more.

What the devil is going on?

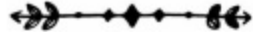
“What are you doing here?” Daniel blurts, when I finally reach them.

“I could ask you the same question,” I say, looking from one to the other.  
Dad suddenly bursts into a grin and begins to chuckle. “Oh, this is going to be good,” he says.

“What?” I cry, not feeling any less confused.

Dad turns his head, and absently, I follow his gaze.

“Oh,” is all I can manage when I see what he’s looking at.



# Bree

My stomach is in turmoil as I walk out the lady's room at the airport. Daniel and Ben have persuaded me to fly back to the city to speak to Jackson. While I was totally on board with the idea yesterday afternoon in Ben's study, the doubts have begun creeping in now that I'm about to catch my flight.

I could get to the city and Jackson could refuse to see me. What if he doesn't believe me when I tell him that it was Jonathan whom he saw at the cottage, and not some guy he needs to compete with?

*Then it's his loss.*

While I wish I could simply dismiss any future we might have with such flippancy, I know it's not how I really feel. I had carefully thought about what Ben had said about my feelings for Jackson, and realized that it was all true. I had fallen for Jackson Scott. In a big way. I'd love to say that my heart will withstand whatever reception I am going to receive when I see him again, but it would be a lie. I am utterly terrified of the rejection, of seeing

that look of disdain on his face again, that scowl he aimed at me in Ben's kitchen when we were screaming at each other.

I take a few steps into the airport concourse and head in the direction I left Ben and Daniel. I suddenly stop dead in my tracks.

Jackson is staring at me with his mouth open, clearly as surprised as I am. Behind him, Daniel and Ben have huge grins on their faces. I feel a flush of heat rush to my cheeks as I slowly begin to walk again. At the same time, Daniel steps behind Ben's wheelchair and pushes him away. Clearly, they're making themselves scarce, which brings some relief. I don't really want to have this conversation around an audience.

Jackson's eyes remain fixed on me the whole time I walk toward him. While my heart is pounding against my chest with delight and nerves, he looks perturbed. No, not perturbed. I think the expression he is conveying is remorse.

"I'm sor—"

I launch my arms around his neck before he finishes, and as our bodies clash together, he pulls me to him, his strong arms wrapping around me in a warm embrace. My actions are about as far from playing hard to get as they come, but I don't care. I don't want to play hard to get. I'm just so relieved he came back, and that he's here, holding me in his arms.

"I don't deserve someone like you," he murmurs in my ear, after we've been holding each other for a long minute.

"Sure, you do," I reply, not yet wanting to let go. "We're both equally messed up."

He loosens his hold and I take a step back. The sadness is still there in his eyes. "I'm sorry for all the horrible things I said," he says. "I made a judgement I had no right to make. A judgment that doesn't fit you at all."

“It was my brother that you saw on the porch that day,” I reply.

He nods. “I know that now.”

I’m a little surprised, and wonder how he could possibly have known. Had Ben spoken to Jackson after I left yesterday?

“I came to my senses after a very good friend of mine called me out on my stupidity,” Jackson says, answering my unasked question. “I’m just a hotheaded.”

“Well, why change the habit of a lifetime?” I quip back with a smirk.

He chuckles then, lightly shaking his head at me.

When he stops, the serious expression returns. “If it’s not too late, if I haven’t ruined everything yet with my conclusion jumping, I wonder if maybe, we could—”

“Yes,” I reply eagerly.

Jackson smirks. “You don’t even know what I’m going to ask. I was about to say, I wonder if maybe we could fix the leaky faucet in Dad’s barn.” He grins.

“You were not,” I laugh, playfully smacking his arm.

“You’re right. I wasn’t going to say that at all. I was going to ask if we could start over.”

“No.” I shake my head, much to his sudden chagrin. Then I smile. “I don’t want to start over. I want us to pick up where we left off.”

“Before I yelled and screamed abuse at you in Dad’s kitchen, right?” he quips.

“Preferably.”

“So, if I remember correctly, you walked into the kitchen that day, and by your tone, you were delighted to see me back.”

I nod. “I was.”

“And if I had been smarter, I would have already figured out that it was your brother who had come to visit, and I would have been delighted to see you too,” he continues.

“You would.”

“Then perhaps, I would have turned to you with a smile. Like this.” He smiles warmly. “And I would have taken you in my arms, like this.” He pulls me back toward him, holding my body tight to his. “Then I would have looked into your eyes, and said: I missed you so much.”

I smile looking up at him. “And I would have said: I missed you too.”

“Then, I would have gazed at you for a few seconds, drinking you in like I’m doing now, and lowering my mouth...” He lowers his beautiful lips toward me, and my heart is beating out of my chest. “I would have kissed you,” he murmurs, before his lips meet mine.

He kisses me so tenderly, my heart flutters, my stomach flips, and I lose myself in that moment. I don’t care if we’re stood in an airport. I don’t care if Daniel and Ben are watching from afar. I don’t care about what the next minute will bring. I am lost in this moment, because deep inside me, I just know, that it’s the beginning of something I’ve never had before.

Something wonderful.