

*Fight
for me*

TAYLOR JADE

FIGHT FOR ME

WOLF VALLEY DUET

TAYLOR JADE


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For the girl who's sworn off love.. this is for you.

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PROLOGUE

I BRUSHED the back of my hand across my forehead, wiping away the perspiration that had gathered along my hairline. The North Carolina sun was harsh, and I squinted against it as I stared outside. I could almost hear her voice now, smell her coconut perfume, and see her blue eyes in the clear skies.

Everything reminded me of her.

I *hated* it. Couldn't escape the memory of her, no matter where I went. How much distance I put between us.

She was always *there*.

"Boss, shipment of flywheels just came in," Eddie's young voice echoed in the small workshop, pulling me from memory lane.

"Thanks," I grunted. "Bring me one and keep the rest for stock." I didn't spare him a glance as I focused back on the task at hand. I just had to keep my hands and my mind busy so I wouldn't go down that lane again. She had no place here—no place in my head or my memories. Not anymore.

It didn't matter that I moved seven hundred miles away though because she followed me everywhere. I saw and heard her even when I longed to forget her.

"Here, boss." Eddie handed me the flywheel, and he nervously watched me inspect it. Something about it was a little different than they usually were. "It's a different supplier, remember? The others were back ordered a month." I nodded then, briefly thinking back to the conversation we had last

week with our supplier. Parts were hard to get these days. No longer could I just pick up the phone and order whatever I needed.

Like my failed marriage, the automotive business was failing, too. I couldn't get anything right in my life, it seemed.

"All good, Ed." He nodded and scurried off, going to hide from what my other employees called my never-ending dark mood. I preferred to be alone. I didn't want to socialize, make friends, or let anyone in—not anymore. I had to protect myself. I was safest alone.

The two people closest to me had hurt me the most, and I wasn't making that mistake again. Except for Max Woods, that was. The man didn't take no for an answer, and despite my glares and grunts, he kept coming back for more.

"I told your employees to go home," Max announced. I bit back a sigh. "We're goin' out for drinks tonight." He walked into my workshop like he was my business partner instead of just my friend. I'd learned not to argue with him a year ago. It was pointless and a waste of my damn time.

"And I guess they all ran out without questioning why?" I grumbled, dropping my tools to the metal table beside the old Chevy I'd been working on. I glanced up at him with an arched brow, my annoyance clear on my face.

"You bet. You work them too hard. They skedaddled at the first opportunity," Max chuckled, going to the big garage door and closing it, shutting out the sunlight and casting us in darkness. I'd forgotten to hit the lights this morning and quickly regretted it when I walked into a workbench a moment later in search of the switch. I muttered a curse beneath my breath. Max snickered.

"You should watch where you're goin'," Max teased. "Wouldn't want to hurt yourself now." Locating the light switch, I flipped the lights on and then promptly flipped off a laughing Max.

"I really needed to finish this job. I've got bills to pay, Max." He glanced at the Chevy that had seen much better days

and the pile of parts on the counter beside it.

“It can wait a day. If you would just let someone help you, you might have been done already, but alas, Mr. Doom and Gloom only works alone.”

I knew what he was up to. Didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out he was taking me out to forget, but it wasn't like I could ever forget what today was.

It was the day my entire life fell apart, splitting at the seams. And I'd been struggling to cope ever since.

One Year Ago

Stale humidity clung to my skin, wearing me down with each step I took up the brick driveway. The scorching-hot sun burned against my sweat-soaked t-shirt, the thin material sticking to my skin. It was late in the day, the ground still damp from a summer afternoon rain shower. Watermarks covered my black truck—the same one I'd washed just this morning. I swore it was just about pointless to wash a vehicle anymore.

My best friend Ross's red Four-Runner was parked in the drive, his visit a welcome surprise. We'd grown up together. Our parents being business partners meant we had shared a lifetime of memories already. We'd known each other since we were in diapers and often joked about our own kids being lifelong friends.

It was the dream. One I really wanted.

Stephanie often invited Ross over for dinner, claiming she had to take care of him until he found a wife. She'd turned our duo into a trio in high school when her family moved into town. Somehow, she was the missing piece we didn't know we needed, always quick to be a soft place of reason or the biggest cheerleader at our games during football season.

Everyone always said she'd ruin our brotherhood, but instead, she strengthened it, and with time, I saw her as more than the nerdy girl who made me brownies after a big win and more as the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

Ross never looked at her as more than a sister, and despite everyone's warnings about her wrecking everything, I married her. Stephanie wasn't that kind of woman, and I would prove everyone wrong about her.

Turning my key in the lock, the mechanism groaned, my key getting jammed, reminding me for the hundredth time I needed to replace the old house's lock. Fighting with it for a moment, I finally got the key free and pushed open the heavy, wooden door. It creaked with the effort, and I sighed in annoyance. Stephanie had been so damn insistent on buying an old house with history, as opposed to something new and modern. I spent most weekends fixing something instead of working on my project car in the garage. But it made my wife happy, and you know what they say—happy wife, happy life.

"Steph, I'm home, honey," I called into the foyer as I kicked off my dusty, greasy work shoes at the door. "Ross, you better not be kissing my wife," I hollered with a chuckle, teasing him like I always did. It was like a running joke for the three of us since so many people still thought Stephanie was going to destroy our friendship.

The floorboards creaked beneath my feet as I made my way further into the house. A shuffle from down the hall was the only answer to my call. Dropping my wallet and keys on the table in the foyer, I headed into the kitchen, expecting to see them—Steph by the stove stirring something up for dinner and Ross reading a magazine at the counter, sipping on a beer. Instead, I was greeted with a dark kitchen, nothing on the stove, no beer on the counter, and nobody filling the space with warmth.

That was strange.

Following the open layout to the living room, the white and blue decorative pillows on the leather couch mocked me as my heart began to race. Fear like nothing I'd ever felt before instantly seized my body. My gaze flicked over the blue lettering on the white pillows: 'Be calm'. Steph loved to have quotes all over the house.

Ice filled my veins as I ventured further into our home, heading toward our bedroom. I faced the pale, blue door with my heart in my throat. Raising my hand, I circled my fingers around the brass knob, the floorboards moaning beneath my sock-clad feet.

Please don't let this be my reality.

Don't let everyone be right.

Stephanie wouldn't do this to me.

Ross wouldn't throw away a lifetime of friendship.

Stephanie's laughter floated under the door, followed by Ross's deep laugh. Inhaling a deep breath, I twisted the knob and pushed the door open, bracing myself for the worst.

I still wasn't ready.

Steph was standing on her side of the bed, pulling a brush through her long, blonde hair. Her wide blue eyes met mine. Her cheeks were flushed, and her lips were kiss-swollen.

My gaze trailed down her body—creased shirt, no pants, her long, tan legs on display for all to see. And then I saw Ross, lying on my side of the bed, hair a mess, guilty brown eyes wide, and lips parted on a silent gasp.

His shirtless chest was hidden by the dark gray sheets, and the decorative pillows we put on the bed every morning were carelessly tossed to the corner of the room.

"It isn't what it looks like," Steph whispered, inching toward me, dropping her brush to the messy bed.

Why was that cliché response every cheater had when finally caught in the act?

Shaking my head, I glared at my best friend, the man who had been the best man at our wedding. The man who told me to propose to Stephanie. The man who had been my brother my entire life. The man who said Steph and I would prove everyone wrong.

"I guess I really was the fool," I spat, not having the courage to look at Stephanie. Her warm hand latched onto my

arm, but I yanked it back, stepping away from her as if her mere presence near me burned. I swung my angry, hurt gaze to hers. "Don't touch me."

"Fuck, man, you weren't supposed to find out like this." Ross was standing now in only a pair of black boxers. He didn't even have the decency to grab his pants off the ground.

"Ross!" Stephanie gasped, her voice quivering.

"I can't keep hiding this. It's killing me, Steph. I told you I didn't want to do it like this! I fucking told you we had to tell him." He raised his hands, his voice shaking with anger and guilt.

"How long?" I stared him down, fighting the need to close the little distance between us. I wanted to wrap my hands around his neck and strangle the ever-loving shit out of him for touching my woman. For ruining our friendship. For breaking the years' worth of trust I had in him.

"Man, fuck. Chase, you gotta understand. I meant everything I said to you. I didn't want her; I didn't see her as anything other than your wife." He pulled both his hands through his already messy hair, and I balled my fists at my side.

Was that before or after he started fucking my wife? And in my damn house!

"How fucking long, Ross?" I snarled, and he swallowed thickly.

"A year."

Happy wife, happy life? They couldn't have been more wrong.

CHAPTER 1

MEN.

Good for absolutely nothing.

Except killing bugs. I'd at least give them that. But anything else? They were just sorry.

Dalton was *supposed* to be different. Dad always liked Dalton. I mentally scoffed. I bet he wouldn't like him so much now. To think that Dalton was the man Dad wanted me to marry—even gave him his blessing on his deathbed—only for that piece of shit to dump me two months later.

Two damn months. I was still trying to *heal*, and he just dropped me as if I meant nothing. As if I wasn't worth his time and energy anymore.

"I love you, Win, I really do, but you've got this darkness around you, this hatred and anger with the world, and it's toxic, babe."

Toxic. Darkness. Anger.

Screw him.

Shaking the last memory of my ex-boyfriend from my head, I swiped my hand across my forehead, wiping the sweat away. The air conditioning in Dad's old truck broke ten miles ago—the same truck Dalton promised my dad just six months ago he would help me take care of. I remembered it clearly because it was the same night he told Dad I was the woman he wanted to marry.

Lying piece of shit.

I rolled down the window of the old truck, and a gust of cool air flowed into the hot cab, blowing the few strands of my hair that fell out of the messy ponytail into my eyes.

North Carolina was supposed to be cooler than hot and sticky Florida, where I lived. At least, that was what Hannah said when she suggested going on this road trip. *“Let’s get out of town for two weeks. You need a break from work and all the Dalton drama. Girls trip!”*

After one really long day at the office, I’d agreed way too easily and let her plan the whole trip. I even offered to take my dad’s old F-150 for the trip since her lease was high on mileage. I should have taken it in for a service. I shouldn’t have trusted that Dalton would take care of things, but as per usual, I never learned my lesson until it was too late.

And now it was too late, and I was possibly going to die of heat stroke.

My phone pinged with a text from the passenger seat, and I leaned over to grab it. Glancing between the single-lane road and my phone, I scanned the text from the only person who still cared about me in life.

Hannah: *Where are you? You left two hours ago. I’m worried.*

Throwing the phone back into the seat, I sighed. We’d been best friends since college, and she’d been through it all with me—thick and thin, good and bad. She held me after my mom’s car accident during our freshmen year of college—the one that took her life way too soon when a drunk driver blew through a red traffic light. Then, she’d been there as we watched my dad slowly deteriorate over the next few years and his heart broke a little more day after day over the loss of my mom.

My best friend was still here after Dalton and had promised to never leave.

We’d shared many hardships between us. For every bump in my journey, she’d had her fair share, too, and when one

couldn't stand on their own, one was there to hold the other up.

But that didn't mean we always got along. Sometimes, Hannah drove me batshit crazy. And so, an hour ago after a petty fight about why I didn't want to drink the day away at a wine farm, I got in the truck and drove off, needing fresh air and to be close to my dad.

"I miss you, Dad." My fingers tightened around the steering wheel. "I miss you so damn much," I whispered, my knuckles white, the leather creaking beneath my grip.

Where did everything go wrong?

I was supposed to be getting married soon and starting the next chapter of my life. It had always been my plan—married by twenty-five, babies by thirty. Travel the world with my husband before having kids. And here I was, so far away from my plan, it wasn't even a joke. Dad always said life never went according to plan. And boy, was he right. I'd just been too stupid to listen and form a plan B.

Dalton was supposed to be the man of my dreams—the golden boy everyone loved and admired, star quarterback of the Fighting Knights, which had been a losing team until he joined. We'd met in college when I'd been assigned to write an article on the boy who was bringing our team to victory.

How cliché, right? The nerd and the quarterback—just the perfect mix of opposites to be considered cute and perfect. Except Dalton wasn't a golden boy. We weren't cute, and we were far from perfect.

I was just too naïve and too focused on having my perfect dream, too scared to have to start all over, that I put up with his red flags. I chose to ignore the parts of him that I should have addressed.

So lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice the speedometer dropping or the sudden slowing speed of the truck. Pressing my foot down on the accelerator, nothing happened. A groan similar to that of a dying walrus crawled up my throat.

No. No. No. This was not happening to me today.

“Come on, not today. Don’t do this to me. Please,” I begged the truck as it rolled to a stop on the back road I was driving down. A back road far from any civilization. There would be no easy help.

After pulling the hood lever, I opened the rusty door and jumped out, checking the deserted road for any passing-by vehicles with the hope that I wasn’t the only one out there. But there wasn’t another soul in sight. I sighed and lifted the metal hood of the truck, only to be greeted by a cloud of smoke blowing into my face.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” I swiped at the dusty air, choking on the rich smell of spilled fuel, and peered inside.

I didn’t know much about working on cars. I used to watch my dad work on it and pass him tools, but I never actually helped him turn a wrench or change the oil. But with one glance into the engine bay, I knew I was screwed.

“Thank you, Dalton. Thank you so fucking much, you piece of shit.” Rounding the vehicle, I reached inside the cab for my phone.

Searching for a tow truck proved impossible after five minutes when the closest driver was two hours out. Sweat beaded on my forehead, rolling down my temple as the summer sun beat down on me. There was a shop with a few reviews only a mile out, so I dialed the number, hoping they could come out and tow the truck back to their shop.

“Good day! Storm Automotive, where we put the lightning back in your car!” a female’s voice greeted me, a hint of a southern drawl dripping from her sweet voice.

“Hey! I just broke down about a mile away from your shop. Any chance you can tow me back and fix some engine problems?”

“A mile, you said? We have a truck, but we don’t typically pick up clients. Are you sure you can’t just milk it down the road, hun?”

Milk it down the road? Was she serious?

“Engine is blowing smoke, and while I’m all about strong independent women, I can’t push it there. You couldn’t just help a girl out? I’ll pay extra.” I kicked at the grass on the side of the road, hoping this woman took pity on me. If she didn’t, I was screwed seven ways to Sunday.

“Uh, I don’t know, hun. Let me speak to my boss. Please hold.” Silence greeted me, and then a country song began to play over the line. I sighed, rolling my eyes Heavenward.

If she calls me hun one more time...

Five minutes and two country songs later, there was still no response. My shirt was plastered to my skin, and the skinny jeans I had thrown on earlier in my haste to get out and away from Hannah were uncomfortably tight and warm.

Hanging up, I dialed the number again, only to reach their answering machine.

“Stupid woman,” I grumbled as I pulled up my GPS app and put in the directions of the shop. A string of curses flew from my lips when I saw that it was a twenty-five-minute walk. But what choice did I have? I locked up the truck and followed the road, my teeth gritted, my annoyance mounting by the minute.

Sweat dripped down my forehead, the salty beads burning my eyes. There was no town in sight, and for a moment, I wondered what kind of garage would be in the middle of freaking nowhere.

My phone vibrated in my hand. Glancing down at the screen, I ran my eyes over the low-battery notification. A scream bubbled in my throat, and the urge to throw something made my fingers twitch.

Fucking Dalton. If he had just taken care of the truck like he promised, I wouldn’t be in this predicament.

Locking the screen of my phone, I stuck it in my back pocket and hoped to hitchhike at least some of the way. Twenty minutes later, my sneakers scuffed against the old brick road of the town I’d *finally* found.

It was quiet, small, charming, and in the middle of absolutely nowhere.

As I stomped past an elderly lady, who was reading a newspaper on a bench, she peered at me over the top and wrinkled her nose as if she'd smelled something particularly disgusting. Her glasses slid down the bridge of her nose. "And where are you goin' in such a huff?"

Stopping, I hunched over, placing my hands on my knees. I wiped my sweaty palms on the thick fabric of my jeans. "Storm," I sucked in a large breath, "Automotive." The old lady nodded, eyes sweeping over my clothes, dusty sneakers, and no doubt flushed face.

"If you keep goin' past Daisies Pastries—they have the best sweet tea by the way, and you look like you could use somethin' to drink—it's down the side road there. Nice and private, just the way Chase likes it." She folded her newspaper, stood on two wobbling legs, and tucked the paper under her arm. "Hope your day turns around, sweetheart."

"Thank you." Sweet tea sounded like a mighty fine idea, but my dad's truck sitting on the side of the road, readily available for poachers to snag, had me pushing past the fatigue and thirst.

Daisies Pastries was a small corner café with daisies painted all over the glass windows. From a quick glance, a lot of people were sitting inside at the yellow tables and chairs. Seemed to be a pretty popular spot, which hopefully meant the tea—if I ever got around to grabbing a cup—would be as good as the old lady said it was.

Turning down the alley, I saw the dark blue sign hanging at the end of the alley, a bright white lightning bolt gleaming in the sunlight.

Blisters had formed on the back of my heels from a combination of new material and sweat, causing every step to ache from my heel to the arch of my foot to my toes.

You can do this, Winnie. You can do this. Fuck Dalton for not taking care of you and keeping his promise to Dad. Fuck

men.

Just as I stood in front of the dark blue, wooden door, raising my fist to knock, it flew open, knocking me down to the ground, where I landed on my ass. A rock dug into my right cheek, and I snarled. “You’ve got to be kidding me!” I screamed, slamming my fists against the ground in pain and irritation.

“I’m so sorry, ma’am. Didn’t see you there.” A large, tanned hand filled my blurry vision. I sank my teeth into my bottom lip to hide its trembling.

You will not cry. You will not. You are strong. You can do this, Winnie.

Swallowing past the burning ache in my throat, I blinked away the tears and looked up at the man bending over to help me.

Pushing his hand aside, I used the little bit of strength I had left and stood on shaky legs. Crossing my arms over my chest, I glared up at what was possibly the most gorgeous man I’d ever seen, standing before me.

“Do you work here?” I jerked my chin at the sign hanging above us, and he nodded, raising a dark brow at me. “Well, if I had a choice to go anywhere else in this goddamn state, I would!” I exploded. “The receptionist is rude. Do you know how long I had to wait on hold, how many freaking country songs I had to listen to? Why does it have to be country music? Silence would have been fine.” I paused, sucking in a much-needed breath, and wiped at the sweat dripping down my forehead.

“Not only that, but she tells me you do, in fact, have a tow truck, but you can’t help me?! How else am I supposed to bring a broken-down car to you? Huh? Tell me, sir! Tell me! Was I supposed to just push it down the damned road? Do I look strong enough to do that to you?” He opened his mouth, perfect lips parting, pink tongue darting out to wet his very plump bottom lip. “Don’t you dare answer that!” Jabbing my finger into his chest, I glared up at him. “I hate men. I hate all of them! Good for fucking nothing! I needed help today, and I

was denied! *Denied!* Now, can you pick up my truck or not? If not, point me in the direction of the next town. I'll gladly fucking walk."

He took a step back, green eyes flashing with annoyance, and raised a hand to his short, dark hair. After thrusting his long, tanned fingers through his hair, he dragged that same hand down his face.

"Would you like a bottle of water?"

He had to be kidding me.

CHAPTER 2

GETTING MARRIED HAD BEEN EASY. Too easy. Maybe it was because I let Steph pick everything or because I was in love with her and all I wanted was to spend the rest of my life with her. At the time, it felt right. Like maybe everything was going so smoothly and so easily because it was meant to be.

What a load of shit that turned out to be.

“Mr. Storm, are you still there?” my divorce lawyer’s sweet voice asked for the second time since the beginning of the dreaded phone call. Why couldn’t divorces be handled without phone calls and judges? Why couldn’t it just be a simple: she cheated on me with my best friend and I don’t want to be married anymore, and it just be done and over with?

My mind kept going back to the day I knew I wanted to marry Steph. The day we picked the church flashed through my mind. How I wanted to slow down time as she walked down the aisle toward me, looking akin to an angel sent straight from heaven to be all mine.

She’d been nothing more than a demon in disguise.

“Mr. Storm?”

Clearing my throat, I nodded as if she could even see me, blinking away the moisture gathering behind my eyes. “I’m here.”

“Right. As you’ve requested, I’ve finalized all the paperwork. I just need your signature and hers. Would you like

to do this in person together?” She’d been kind since the beginning, especially when I explained the reason for the divorce.

“What is normal?” My receptionist suddenly knocked on my locked door, holding up her phone through the small, glass square, and pointed at it frantically. I raised my hand to signify I needed a little more time before I could handle whatever was going on, and she nodded, waiting.

“Typically, I mail out the papers via courier to each party. It usually makes things easier. Is that what you would like to do, Mr. Storm?”

“Yes, I don’t want to see her again.”

“Very well. I will have them sent to you within the week. It’s been a pleasure, as always.” She hung up, and I threw my cell phone across the room, biting back a rage-filled yell. The device hit the wall and fell to the cement floor with a clatter.

My receptionist, Sherry, knocked on the window again, an apologetic smile tugging at her cherry-red lips. Since I had hired the woman, I’d never seen her without her signature red. If she happened to show up to work without it one day, I would immediately know something was wrong.

Crossing the space of the small office, I unlocked the door and held it open enough for her to shove the phone at me.

“There’s this woman on the line. She’s a mile out. Her truck broke down.” I raised a brow, urging her to continue. “She offered to pay extra for a tow.”

“I’m not interested in extra money. I’ve dealt with enough problems today. Tell her I’ll pick it up in the morning.” She nodded, her brown ringlets bouncing with the motion.

“Oh,” she frowned at the phone, her brows pulling low over her eyes, “she hung up.”

“Right. Well, guess she didn’t want our help that bad, huh?” Sherry turned and headed back to her desk, leaving me with a storm of emotions that I wasn’t ready to navigate.

Picking up my phone from the ground, I shoved it in my jeans pocket and headed to the shop, where everything was silent and peaceful. Where I could just be by myself with no one to bother me. Stuck in my own little world that reality couldn't penetrate.

Twenty-five minutes later, a glass of sweet tea from the café down the block and one of their grilled cheese sandwiches began calling my name for an early dinner. I took a few minutes to scrub my hands clean, using Fast Orange hand cleaner to get the grease off my hands. Didn't want to show up to get food with nasty hands and forearms. It was a show of disrespect to the establishment.

"I'm heading out, I'll be back in half an hour," I announced to my two techs on shift. Their heads were buried in the engine bay, and they barely acknowledged me.

Pushing open the old, wooden door that was the entrance to my lobby, a female suddenly screamed, "You've got to be kidding me!" Peering around the door, I spotted the woman in question, and I grimaced. I knocked her clean off her feet. She glared up at me her crystal blue eyes icy with irritation.

Immediately bending down to help her, she pushed my hands aside and stood on her own, rubbing at her butt where she had landed, and cast her eyes to her feet. I took the brief opportunity to look her over and really take her in. Her messy hair was pulled back into a ponytail, a few stray pieces stuck to her face, damp with sweat. Freckles covered her flushed cheeks. Her white teeth were sunk into a very plump bottom lip, and I swallowed down the urge to know what those lips might taste like.

I was going through a divorce. What in the hell was wrong with me?

My eyes trailed down the skin-tight shirt and jeans that showed off all her curves. My throat bobbed. God, she was beautiful. More beautiful than any single woman had a right to be.

Shaking the thoughts of what I wanted to do to her lips out of my head, I focused on her eyes again. Those damn crystal-

clear blue eyes. It was way too easy to drown in them like a man stranded at sea in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico.

“Do you work here?” Her voice was softer now, shaking with nerves. I nodded and watched as rage flooded her expression, her brows scrunched with anger, and her eyes turned even colder, freezing me within their depths.

“Well, if I had a choice to go anywhere else in this goddamn state, I would! The receptionist is rude. Do you know how long I had to wait on hold, how many freaking country songs I had to listen to? Why does it have to be country music? Silence would have been fine.”

I blinked. Sherry, rude? Wait, what did she have against country music? Who the hell pissed in her cheerios?

She paused, sucking in a deep breath, and then wiped at the beads of sweat on her forehead. Despite the anger spewing from her pink lips and sweat dripping down her flushed face, she was so goddamn pretty.

The prettiest woman I’ve ever laid eyes on.

“Not only that, but she tells me you do, in fact, have a tow truck, but you can’t help me?! How else am I supposed to bring a broken-down car to you? Huh? Tell me, sir! Tell me! Was I supposed to just push it down the damned road? Do I look strong enough to do that to you?”

I opened my mouth to answer some of her questions and inform her she did, in fact, not look strong enough to push a car a mile down the road, but she didn’t let me.

“Don’t you dare answer that!” She jabbed her pointer finger into my chest hard enough to make me wince. “I hate men. I hate all of them! Good for fucking nothing! I needed help today, and I was denied! *Denied!* Now, can you pick up my truck or not? If not, point me in the direction of the next town. I’ll gladly fucking walk.”

Taking a step back from the deranged woman, I had to swallow the urge to tell her I hated women just as much as she hated men, but after focusing on her lips for a third time, I decided I would be lying.

Because there was no way in hell I could hate her. Not when she looked like that, even covered in sweat and dust.

I hated Stephanie, but I certainly didn't hate all women. And the little strawberry-blonde, completely outspoken woman in front of me reminded me of that as she unintentionally batted her long lashes and glared at me with ferocity.

Dragging a hand through my hair, I opened my mouth to tell her to get lost. But I didn't say that either. What I really wanted to do was take her to Daisies to get a drink. I wanted to yell at her for telling me off about my damn employee. I wanted to tear her clothes off. I didn't want to go fix her goddamn truck. I wanted to make her stop hating men.

I was a big damn mess full of conflicting emotions. I was confusing the hell out of myself, and I didn't like it. Not one bit.

"Would you like a bottle of water?" I decided on the least complicated question to her verbal diarrhea.

Her brows raised, her lip curled, and I suddenly got the sense that I said the wrong thing.

"Water?" she questioned, her voice dangerously low. "You think I want *water*?"

Good Lord, this woman was full of fire and rage.

"I don't think you want it; I think you need it, sweetheart." I did my best to ignore the term of endearment that slipped past my lips before I could stop it. Crossing my arms over my chest, her eyes tracked the movement, desire lighting her irises for the briefest moment before she shuttered them, closing herself off from me.

"Are you going to help me with my truck?" she bit out.

I sighed. "Let's get you some water, and then, we can talk about the truck." Reaching behind me, I opened the door and nodded for her to go in before me. When the air conditioning blew over her skin, she breathed the smallest sigh of relief as she walked past me and into the reception area.

“Come to my office, Miss... Don’t think I caught your name while you were yelling.”

She blushed, and *God*, I was not prepared for how stunning she was when her cheeks lit up like that. Her eyes bounced all over the small lobby before focusing on me. “It’s Winnie, and I’d really like that bottle of water.”

Leading her to my office, I silently hoped that Sherry filled the mini fridge in there like I told her to do yesterday. Otherwise, Winnie wouldn’t be getting a cold bottle. And I didn’t need this woman anymore irritated with me than she already was.

“Can’t say I’ve ever met a Winnie before,” I commented. And I really liked the way her name sounded rolling off my tongue.

“Mom was an old soul; it’s actually Winnifred, but it makes me sound incredibly old.” I bit back a snort. “Plus, my dad always called me Winnie.” Her voice caught at the mention of her father. I chanced a glance at her, but her expression was closed off once again.

She immediately took a seat in the chair opposite my desk for clients, and I—thankfully—pulled two cold waters out of the mini-fridge and placed one in front of her. She quickly snapped it open and then greedily gulped it down. Her slender throat bobbed as she greedily drank the refreshing liquid.

A minute later, after I’d taken my own seat on the other side of the desk from her, she twisted the cap back onto the empty bottle and put it on the desk in front of her.

“Thanks.” She braced her elbows on the armrests, all business. “Now, about my truck.”

Chuckling, I leaned forward, elbows on the wooden desk as well.

“Tell me about this truck, Winnie. I’m all ears.”

CHAPTER 3

THE GORGEOUS MAN I'd yelled at on the front steps of Storm Automotive turned out to be the owner, and with every passing second in his presence, I regretted my behavior more and more.

He'd been kind enough to offer me a bottle of water after I told him off about his business and his employee, who was, in fact, *not* rude. I was the one who'd been rude by taking out my bad mood and bad luck on a completely innocent person.

Way to go, Winnie.

"Before I tell you about it, I never got your name?"

The handsome man in front of me grinned, a flash of his perfectly white teeth brightening the room and showing me a glimpse of how truly beautiful this man could be. His smile transformed his features from a stoic grump to a warm human being.

"Chase," he introduced himself. "My parents were pretty basic with that one. I think yours is way better."

"You know, I can't say I've ever actually met a Chase." He shrugged.

"You must be from the middle of nowhere then."

"Maybe." I drummed my fingers on the armrest. "Now, about my truck—we really need to go get it before it's stolen." I stood to my feet, hoping he would sense my urgency, but instead, his deep laughter filled the room.

“Sweetheart, nobody is gonna steal your truck. Do you know where you are?” Shaking my head, I looked at him, waiting for an explanation. Where I was from, you didn’t leave anything on the side of the road if you wanted it to be there when you got back.

“Wolf Valley is home to some of the nicest, kindest people you will ever meet in your life.”

I pursed my lips, not particularly caring. “That’s great and all, but my truck isn’t in Wolf Valley, but rather the outskirts, and I don’t want to get a ticket either.”

“Alright. I’ll humor you.” He was well on his way to being on my bad side. *Humor me*. What a prick. “We’ll go get the truck. You remember where it is?” I nodded as he stood, his chair creaking, and grabbed a set of keys from the table.

Walking out of his office, he led me a different way, taking me through the workshop instead of the lobby we’d come in at. We passed by two guys, who were busy working on an old car. They both stopped and stared, and I glared in return.

“Right this way, Winnie.” Ripping my eyes from the two ogling men, I aimed my gaze at Chase, who had opened a small door that led outside, where a dark blue tow truck was sitting.

He opened the passenger door, and I quickly climbed into the cab, fastening my seatbelt as he rounded the hood. He hopped in, started the truck, and then pulled out onto the road. Once we were slowly gaining speed, he looked at me. “I’m gonna need some direction here.” I briefly gave him directions, given my phone was dead and I couldn’t show him the pin I created. “You’re not on the outskirts, by the way.” I sighed and rolled my eyes.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re a know-it-all?”

He chuckled and shrugged a bit sheepishly. “Only everyone.”

“Guess you needed a reminder then.” He fiddled with the radio, and soft country music filled the cab. I rolled my eyes again.

What is it with the South and country music? There are other genres of music.

Sneaking a glance at his side profile, instantly, I got struck again by his sharp features. Dark beard—just short enough that I could scratch my fingers through it—pink, full lips absolutely perfect for kissing and biting. His green eyes were striking as they remained focused on the road, but I could still picture them in my mind and the way they had swept over me not just once but twice.

His left hand was void of a ring, but there was a tan line from one, and my mind itched to know if he was scorned just as I was, but it was also none of my business. And then, I remembered Hannah.

“Can I borrow your phone?” I blurted. Hannah was going to be losing her mind. “Mine died, and I need to tell the person I’m staying with that I’m okay.” He nodded, shifting a little to pull it out of his front jeans pocket. He handed it to me, and I quickly dialed her number.

“If this is another scam caller, I am going to call the police,” she answered immediately.

“It’s me, Han,” I laughed and she gasped.

“Where the hell are you?!” she exploded. “You stopped answering me. I’ve been worried sick.”

I sighed. “I’m trying to get the truck fixed. I just wanted to let you know I’m safe, and I probably won’t be back tonight.” My eyes shifted to Chase as he slowed down behind a dump truck.

“Is this some type of code that the guy fixing it is super-hot and you want to have a quick one-night-stand after he fixes the truck?” she asked. I sank into the seat, quickly turning away from Chase so he couldn’t see my heated cheeks. Leave it to my best friend to manage to embarrass me.

“Absolutely not, Hannah! I’ll call you when I can get a charger for my phone; it died. Sorry I left earlier. I just needed some space.”

“It’s okay.” Her voice was gentler now. “I’ve been your best friend for years. I know you, girl. I’m here for you however you need. If this is what you need to heal, then I’m all for it. Just be safe, whatever you do. And then tell me all the details.” Rolling my eyes, I snuck another glance at Chase to make sure he couldn’t hear my ridiculous best friend.

“Love you too, Han. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Hanging up, I gave him the phone back just as we pulled up to my truck.

“Imagine that,” he gasped in mock surprise. I narrowed my eyes at him. “It’s still here!” he joked, taking the phone from my hand and shoving it back in his pocket. “Do you know what’s wrong with it?”

Shaking my head, I unbuckled my seatbelt and hopped from the tow truck. Quickly, I unlocked the driver’s door and pulled the lever to pop the hood. Chase was already there, lifting the hood, and peering inside by the time I shut the door and came around to stand next to him.

“There was a lot of smoke earlier,” I explained.

“When was it last serviced?” I thought back to my dad, and instantly, I was reminded about how Dalton failed him. I gritted my teeth, swallowing anger.

“A while ago. It was my dad’s; he gave it to me. We used to do all the work.” He looked over his shoulder at me, raising a brow. “What? You don’t think I can crank a wrench?” I stood on my toes and peered over the edge of the hood to look at the disaster of an engine bay.

Dad would be so disappointed.

“No, sweetheart, I don’t think you can. Considering you don’t crank one to begin with.” He laughed, shaking his head.

I ignored his snide comment. “So, can you fix it?” He grimaced, reaching into the bay and fiddling with what I believed was the alternator.

“I can, but it depends on how quickly I can get some of these parts. How long are you in town?” He wiped his hands on his jeans and closed the hood before turning to me.

“I’m not staying in this town to begin with, but my friend and I are here for two weeks.” I bit my bottom lip, worry and anxiety creeping into my heart. This whole trip was ruined all because I lost my crap and stormed out of the place I was staying with Hannah earlier. Now, my dad’s truck *might* be able to get fixed, but that was a might.

I should have gotten the truck looked at before making the trip. I shouldn’t have trusted Dalton to take care of things. I knew I kept coming back to that, but with each passing moment, I regretted trusting that asshole more and more.

“Let’s get it back to the shop. I’ll do my best to get everything overnighted, so you aren’t stuck in town too long.”

I scuffed my shoe along the ground, a frown pulling at my lips. “I shouldn’t have yelled at you earlier,” I mumbled.

He shrugged. “Shit happens; it’s already forgotten. Now, I’m going to need you to guide me as I back up.” I did as he asked and watched as he hooked up my dad’s truck to the wench. “Why don’t you wait in the cab?” I glanced between my truck and his. He smiled a little, and damn, why was that small, reassuring smile even better than the full grin he’d aimed at me earlier? “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure everything is secure before we head back.”

“Alright.” I drew in a deep breath. “Just please know that this truck is everything to me.” His smile widened, understanding passing through his eyes. With a nod, he turned his back to me and continued his work.

I sank my teeth into my bottom lip hard enough to make it bleed.

Dad, please forgive me.

CHAPTER 4

LEAKING CARBURETOR.

Worn belts.

Oil leak by the valve covers.

Thread-bare, worn tires.

I didn't want to tell Winnie that her precious truck needed a lot of work. She spoke about her dad in the past tense, and from the way she kept eyeing the piece of metal, the truck was important to her and likely very sentimental. I had a feeling it would break her heart to know how bad this truck actually was.

Most of the parts I would have to order, as they weren't something I typically carried in stock, but if I could get the order tonight, I might be able to have it running by the end of the week. But that was a big might. A lot of factors played into it—shipping, other issues popping up, and so on and so forth.

Winnie watched me nervously from the passenger seat of the tow truck, her blue eyes glancing between me and the truck as I secured it.

Sliding into the driver's seat, sweat dripped down my neck. The summer heat hadn't curbed yet even though we were heading into fall in the next few weeks. It was one of the things I had come to love about Wolf Valley.

We had seasons here. There was more than unbearable heat ten months out of the year, unlike back home in Florida, where you were lucky to have a winter, let alone spring. But here? I got to experience leaves falling and trees and land becoming

bare, only to see it all bloom again in Spring and thrive in the summer.

Pulling the truck onto the road, I checked my mirrors, and then Winnie, who was biting her nails.

“What’s got you so nervous?” I asked.

She pursed her lips. “Just thinking about the list of things my dad said the truck needed last. Dalton was supposed to take care of it, but he didn’t.”

Dalton? Boyfriend? Husband? I was a little disgusted with my curiosity and how badly I wanted to know.

Checking her bare left hand, which didn’t even have a tan line from a ring, I shook the thought from my head.

It didn’t matter if she was or wasn’t married or if she was the prettiest woman I had ever laid eyes on. I was not going near another woman. They only used their charm to get what they wanted and then bled you dry. Just like Stephanie.

Willing thoughts of the divorce to leave me alone for just one night, I focused back on Winnie.

“Do you have that list written down?” I didn’t need a list to know it needed an oil change and a few other basic needs, but from her worried expression, it appeared to be more than basic work.

Lovely.

“What’s your hourly rate, Chase?” She looked at me, dropping her hand to her lap and drumming her fingers against her jean-clad leg.

I shook my head. “Don’t worry about that, sweetheart. We can work something out.” I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye and saw her nostrils flare, her blue eyes round, and her lips curled in disgust.

“We most certainly cannot! I am not going to just throw myself at you! You men are all pigs—every single one of you!” She threw her hands up in exasperation and then turned to face the window.

What had I done now?

Her shoulders shook with bottled-up rage, and a quick glance at her reflection in the window revealed the tears streaking down her pretty face, coating those stunning freckles.

She quickly swiped at her cheeks, still giving me her back. Her sadness screamed in the silence of the cab, thrumming so loudly in the air around us, it was almost suffocating.

I hated when Steph used to yell and call me names during our fights. I hated it when my mother did it as a kid, but this was different.

Her anger and sadness weren't directed at me. They were directed at something else—someone else, even. And I hated that I couldn't take it all away, which surprised the hell out of me.

“I didn't mean it that way. Shit, I'm not that kind of man.”
Smooth, Chase, real fucking cliché.

“That's what they all say, and then next thing you know—” Her voice shook with anger, and her words abruptly cut off, unable to finish her train of thought. Didn't take a genius to figure out where she was going, though.

I knew the destination of that train, had been on it for far too long. Users had a funny way of always finding the givers and bleeding us dry.

Steph had been a user. Taking my money, my house, my best friend, and my love for granted. And still, she found a way to drain my fucking energy and money with the divorce. She wanted more and more—greedy bitch.

And looking at the woman sitting beside me, I saw something familiar. Something kindred. She'd been used and depleted dry, too, and now she didn't trust men.

Not that I blamed her. I didn't trust women either, but I wanted to help her. The stupid fucking voice in my head kept telling me to help her, even though I was up to my elbows in my own problems.

“I’m not that kind of man, but I get where you’re coming from.” I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. “Let’s get the truck back to the shop, get it on a lift, and figure out exactly what you need to get it running again. I can probably have a quote done for you in the next hour and a half.” She swiped at her eyes again before angling her body toward me.

“Thank you.” She glanced at the clock and then the setting sun in the distance. “Do you have any hotels in Wolf Valley?” Not sure what a city slicker like her would think about Wolf Valley Inn, but it wasn’t like she had many options. Not around here.

“I can drop you off after we draw up a quote. I’m going to have to order some of the parts. I don’t usually carry a lot in stock. If I can get it ordered before seven, it will be here tomorrow afternoon, and I can start working.”

She didn’t say anything, drumming her fingers on her jean-clad thigh again. “I can walk, or do you have Uber here?” I snorted at the question and caught the smallest smile curl her pink lips before it vanished. “Taxi?” I shook my head, and she sighed. “Where the hell am I?”

“Wolf Valley, sweetheart, and you don’t want to be walking anywhere at night. There’s a reason for the name.” This time, she was the one who snorted.

“Please,” she scoffed. “You’re telling me real wolves walk through the streets at night?”

“We’ve got a local pack. They tend to leave the forest when they smell newcomers.” This time, she laughed, a soft giggle that instantly lifted the gloomy energy in the cab.

“You need to work on your jokes. They are a little dry.” I chuckled at that one and pulled into the back of the shop. She jumped out of the cab and immediately went to check on her truck.

I watched her walk the perimeter, squatting to check for damage and inspecting closely, then sighing in relief when she saw none. She looked up to the sky, her eyes closing, and then her lips moved, a quiet prayer whispered to the Heavens.

I gave her space as I slowly exited the truck, and then closed the space between us with as many steps as possible to give her the time she needed.

She opened her eyes, aiming them right at me, and their blue depths sucked me right in. “I know it doesn’t look like much more than a bucket of bolts, but this truck is everything to me.” I nodded, hearing what she wasn’t saying.

This belonged to someone who wasn’t here anymore. And honestly, my heart broke a little bit for her.

“Then you came to the right place because I’m about as diligent as they get.” She smiled, kicking at the dirt between us, nerves dancing in the air.

“I’m glad. Mind pointing me in the direction of the restroom? I must look like an absolute disaster.” She reached for her ponytail, twirling the long locks around her finger.

I nodded my head in the direction of the door. “Straight in, behind the receptionist’s desk. Ask her for a water, too, and she might even have some snacks. I usually try to keep a few things for customers who are waiting for an oil change or something small.” Winnie nodded, her eyes lightening at the mention of food and water.

“I hope so; otherwise, I’m going to have to brave the streets again and hunt down some food.” I laughed at the small smile tugging at those plump lips. Plump lips I was *aching* to kiss.

“Go on in. I’ll need about thirty minutes with the truck before I can let you know what’s going on.”

“Thanks, Chase, and sorry for earlier. I was pretty hot and bothered.” Her cheeks flamed, and I thought back to the moment I laid eyes on her. She sure was hot then, both in the literal and figurative sense, and it definitely bothered me.

“No worries, sweetheart.” I aimed a small smile in her direction, trying to ignore how easily these smiles were becoming to me. “All is already forgotten.”

“Boss, are you sure we shouldn’t just tell the customer to send this to a scrap yard? They might even get some money for it.” Henry, one of my employees, shook his head, grimacing. “Fixing this will be like throwing money into the trash.”

Glaring at the tech and then the truck itself, I scratched my head. The truck needed a complete engine rebuild. Numerous gaskets needed to be replaced, and from what I could hear, it possibly had a broken rocker.

It wasn’t worth fixing. That was the truth.

But I knew to the woman sitting in my lobby, a scrap yard wasn’t an option. I wouldn’t even *think* of sending this truck to a scrap yard around her.

“Not happening,” I grunted, leaning my forearms against the engine bay, glaring at the neglected truck.

“You really going to consider fixing this hunk of junk?” He snorted, stepping away from the truck and wiping his dirty hands against his jeans.

Jutting my thumb at the glass window behind me, where I knew Winnie was sitting, twiddling her thumbs while she waited for good news, I shifted my gaze to Henry. “To her, this isn’t a hunk of junk. We are going to fix this.”

“Whatever you say, boss, but I think your intentions aren’t pure.” He averted his gaze from mine, looking at Winnie through the glass.

I wanted to remind him who he was talking to, but he wasn’t wrong. My intentions weren’t one hundred percent pure.

Looking over my shoulder at the broken woman sitting on the worn couch in the lobby, I just *knew* I had to help her. She was lost—stumbling through a dense forest where no light from above could penetrate and help guide her.

Washing the grease off my hands, I splashed some cool water onto my face before wiping away the sweat. Staring at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, I went over again what I would say to her.

Bad news—you need a complete rebuild. Good news—I can do it. Bad news again—it'll take me almost a week. Good news....

I couldn't find a positive to that one. She would be stuck in a town she didn't know, in a place where she had no friends, no family. What was the damn positive to *that*?

Exiting the bathroom, I passed by Henry, who smiled grimly at me and then nodded as he exited out the back door, heading home for the day. "Night, boss," he called as the door shut behind him.

I entered the lobby, shutting the lights off for the workshop as I went, clutching the list of parts I had messily written while inspecting the truck. Winnie perked up at my entrance, and her blue eyes scanned over me, her brows furrowing, lips forming into a pout.

"That bad?" she asked, standing as I gestured for her to follow me into my office.

"Not the worst I've seen," I offered, rounding my desk and taking a seat in my worn chair. It creaked as I leaned back and watched her fall to the new leather chair I'd bought just last week.

"Okay. I had a feeling it was gonna be bad. I haven't done maintenance in," she looked down at her hands, counting on trembling fingers. "two months, and I knew Dad had a list of things to fix, but..." Her bottom lip quivered, and she glared at my mahogany desk.

Reaching over the desk, I placed my hand over hers, hoping to calm her. "Good news is that I can fix it."

Her eyes darted up to mine. "Bad news?" she whispered, her voice a little shaky.

I winced. "It's gonna take me at least a week." Her jaw fell slack, eyes rounding.

"A week! The labor alone is going to cost an absolute fortune! Fucking Dalton!" She ripped her hand from mine and jumped up, angrily pacing the small space. I tracked her quick, heated moves. "He promised. He fucking promised." Watching

the steam blow from her ears, I couldn't help but grin at the mouth on this tiny woman.

You would never ever think she swore like a sailor. Not with her goody two-shoes appearance. But that mouth was sinful...maybe in more ways than one. I shook that shit from my head.

“You mentioned knowing how to work on the truck?” An idea struck—one I knew I was going to regret but couldn't stop from coming out of my damn mouth.

She paused, whipping her head in my direction. “Yes? I know a little bit. Not much though. Mostly just what Dad taught me as he worked.”

A little was better than nothing. I could teach her everything else. “How about you help me do it, and I can cut you some slack on the labor?”

Her pretty eyed widened in disbelief. “You'd do that for a stranger? A woman who literally screamed at you a few hours ago?” She sank back into the leather chair.

I normally *wouldn't* do this, but something was different about Winnie. Something about this fiery woman softened my heart. I wanted to help her. I also wanted to meet this Dalton. He needed a damn good ass kicking for abandoning her. No doubt in mind, that was exactly what he'd done.

“For a stranger? Never. For you, sweetheart?” My lips tilted up at the corners. “Definitely.”

CHAPTER 5

MUNCHING on the packet of Lays potato chips the receptionist had offered me, I watched Chase and another man inspect my truck through the glass window. They both looked angry as they leaned over the engine bay, their hands disappearing and then coming out covered in grease.

This wasn't going to be cheap. *Fucking Dalton.*

I had plugged my phone into the receptionist's charger and texted Hannah the update. I was going to be staying here overnight, ruining our girl's trip. Her response hadn't been immediate, three dots had shown on the message's app, and then disappeared before reappearing three more times. Eventually, she sent a simple, very un-Hannah-like response.

Hannah: *Okay. I love you. Be safe. I understand. Let me know when you get to the hotel safely.*

Her response worried me, but I trusted her to tell me if something was up.

Tapping my foot impatiently against the tiled floor, I watched and waited for the bad news. Because bad news was *definitely* coming. An hour later, I followed Chase to his office, where he relayed the sort of news I'd been expecting.

An overnight stay had just turned into a few days. Hannah wasn't going to understand. Hell, I wasn't going to be able to afford it, honestly. What in the hell was I going to do? I didn't have a vehicle. I was far from home. I was also far from where Hannah and I were staying.

While I paced his office, having a complete and utter silent meltdown while everything around me seemed to be crumbling, Chase quietly observed.

“You mentioned knowing how to work on the truck?” His deep voice penetrated through the chaos in my mind, and my pacing came to an abrupt halt.

I really wished I hadn’t told him that because all I knew how to do was pass the damn tools. Stopping myself from wearing a hole in his already worn carpet, I looked up at him. “Yes? I know a little bit. Not much though. Mostly just what Dad taught me as he worked.”

Lying through my teeth because I didn’t even know a little bit, I hoped this wasn’t going to blow up in my face, but honestly, what did I care about making a fool of myself in front of this stranger? *Very sexy stranger*, the little voice in my head reminded me as I took in his sexy grin.

“How about you help me do it, and I can cut you some slack on the labor?” I needed the help. God knew I had barely enough to cover this month’s rent, let alone a full engine rebuild. This trip was a stupid idea financially, but when I’d agreed, I’d been desperate.

And now look at me. Still desperate and in a way worse situation than just a breakup and a bad day at work.

Good going, Winnie.

No way this man wanted to just help a stranger. There had to be an ulterior motive. There always was with men. I’d come to learn that the hard way.

“You’d do that for a stranger?” I incredulously asked him. “A woman who literally screamed at you a few hours ago?” I slowly sat back down in the leather armchair across from him, scanning his features, watching how his eyes swept my whole body, pausing on my lips, and settling on my eyes.

He seemed to hesitate, an internal battle raging in his mind as his blue eyes unfocused for a moment.

“For a stranger? Never. For you, sweetheart?” A smile tipped up the corners of his lips. “Definitely.” *Sweet talker, this*

one.

Sweet talking was dangerous.

It was Dalton's sweet-talking that had gotten him into my pants and so wedged into my heart, I couldn't breathe without asking for his permission, but I wasn't the same naïve girl anymore. I knew better. And I wouldn't let Chase's southern charm sway me in any direction but the direction I wanted to take, which was to just get this truck fixed so I could get the hell out of Dodge.

Extending my hand, his brows drew together in confusion. "Strictly professional, Mr. Storm." A deep chuckle rumbled up from his chest.

"Why, sweetheart, who said anything about being anything but professional? Seems like your mind is in the gutter." Heat crept up my neck at the insinuation. Nonetheless, his tan hand reached across the table, his callused fingers wrapping around my hand, his grip firm but soft as he gently shook my hand.

A shiver rolled down my spine and tingles shot up my arm at the contact. Goosebumps trailed across my skin, and my cheeks flushed, my tongue growing heavy. Any coherent thought evaporated into thin air.

"Speechless, Winnie?" he teased, his voice lower now. Raspier.

The way he said my name. The way his lips curled into the most perfect grin. My heart skipped as I froze. Falling for a stranger was *not* allowed. Falling for this man was *not* happening. I had long ago sworn off men, and Chase Storm was no exception. He would never be an exception.

Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I willed every ounce of strength I could harness and firmly shook his hand.

"I'd prefer if you didn't call me sweetheart," I told him calmly. "I am only here to get my truck fixed, Mr. Chase. If you want to charge me the full amount for the truck, I understand, but I would like to help, regardless."

"You think I'm interested in you?" He arched a brow at me, his smile falling from his face. "You'd have to beg me to

kiss you, Winnie. You aren't my type. I prefer brunettes." Stunned speechless, my lips parted in shock. I gritted my teeth. All men were assholes, even the gorgeous ones.

Always the gorgeous ones.

I would never ever beg Chase Storm to kiss me. Even if he had the most beautiful lips I'd ever seen on a man.

"You could need resuscitation, and I wouldn't even dare to touch your lips." He snorted, only serving to raise my ire. "Don't worry; I prefer blondes, anyway." I smirked at his small chuckle and then noticed our hands were still interlocked. When I tried to pull my hand from his, his grip tightened.

He leaned across the desk, those green eyes locking on mine. My throat clicked when I swallowed. "I think you're bluffing because we both know you're dying to kiss me. I can see where your eyes keep going, and I can see the blush creeping up your neck all the way to the tips of your ears."

The audacity of this man.

I tugged on my hand again. "Let go of me, Mr. Storm." He relinquished his hold, and I stood, my heart racing, my mind a jumble of thoughts. I hated that he was right. "You mentioned a hotel?"

He stood as well, grabbing a set of keys off the corner of his desk. "I'll drop you at the lodge. Don't want the wolves to eat you up now." He deliberately ran his eyes over me. I clenched my jaw so tightly, my teeth ached. "They love fresh meat." He snickered, holding open the door for me.

I wanted to decline. I wanted to tell him to shove it, but I didn't want to be wandering the streets in the dark. I was tired, hungry, and on the verge of tears. Today had been one of the worst days I'd ever had.

He led me out back to a pick-up truck, where he hopped into the driver's seat without helping me into the passenger seat like earlier. *Pig*. The drive was silent except for the soft sound of the radio playing some more country music. I

cringed, hating the sound of whoever was crooning about beer and cheating women.

He pulled to a stop in front of a small, cabin-like building. I bit back a grimace. “Welcome to Wolf Valley Inn.” I glanced between him and the “hotel”. He had to be joking. This had to be one big, fat joke.

“You mean the cabin?”

“Looks can be deceiving,” he offered with a shrug. My lips screwed up in distaste as I looked back at the inn. There had to be bed bugs, cockroaches, spiders, and who knew what else hiding inside the building.

“Right, well, I’ll see you tomorrow morning at the shop?”

“Bright and early. I like to start before the sun rises.” Fighting the urge to roll my eyes at the cocky grin taking over his chiseled jaw, I nodded.

“I’ll see you then.”

Warily walking through the big, oak door, I spotted an elderly lady perched at a large, wooden desk near the entry of the cabin. She put her book down, pushed her glasses up her nose, and smiled at me. Past her, I could see that it was two stories, and there were few rooms.

“Hello, dear. You look like you’ve had quite the day.” If only she knew. Leaning against the desk, I inhaled slowly and sighed. Her graying hair was pulled back by a claw clip, a few wisps of hair framing her heart-shaped face. In her youth, she would have been absolutely beautiful.

“The longest,” I agreed. “You wouldn’t happen to have a room available for the week?” She smiled, the wrinkles on her face scrunching with the movement, her gray eyes lighting up.

“A whole week? I love it when you young folk give our town a chance in the off-season. I’ve got the perfect room for you. It overlooks the valley. You might even see the wolves dancing at night.” *Apparently, Chase wasn’t teasing about the wolves. Good to know.*

She fiddled with some keys that were on the side of her desk, scribbled something in a very large book, and then looked back up at me.

“No bags?” I glanced down at my dirty sneakers and then back at her, shrugging my shoulders.

“Anything still open in town? It was an impromptu trip.” She frowned, her eyes scanning over my messy hair, flushed face, and disheveled clothes.

“Not at this hour, but we have a washer and dryer over there, and I think I have an extra set of pajamas left over from last year’s big slumber party.” She pointed to a door behind her, where I saw a laundry sign, and then bent down to rummage through her desk.

“Ah! Found ‘em.” She pulled out a bright pink shirt and shorts set. “One of the local girls threw this big slumber party, and everyone wore these cute pajamas. I ordered one set too many. Guess it’s your lucky day!”

Taking them from her shaking hands, I hugged them to my chest. A beggar couldn’t be a chooser. At least this way, I could sleep in something clean and still be able to wash my clothes so I had something clean to wear in the morning.

“Thank you. Thank you so much.” I nearly wept at her generosity for a complete stranger but quickly swallowed the lump forming in my throat.

“Follow me, dear.” She moved graciously for her age. A slight limp to her step slowed her down, but she moved quickly across the wooden floor, the boards creaking under our weight. She stopped at the end of what I thought was the lobby and pointed to a door, hidden from sight. “It’s good luck to see the wolves. Keep an eye out for them. Town folk say if you see them dancing under a full moon, you’ve found your soulmate.”

Wolves dancing? Soulmate? Full moon?

The people of this town were off their rockers.

“I saw them the day I met my late husband,” she continued. “We built this lodge together, lived here our whole

lives, and watched those wolves more times than I can remember.” Her gray eyes were focused on a set of rocking chairs in front of a big window that looked out into the darkness outside.

I longed for a love that made me look like her. The wistful look in her eyes, the smile that tugged at her lips, the instant happiness that radiated from her at the mention of her husband. I wanted those kinds of memories when I was old. I wanted to forget about Dalton and the pain he had caused and look forward to bigger and better things.

She handed me a big, red key, her weathered, wrinkled hands soft against mine. “I hope you enjoy your stay in Wolf Valley, dear. Let me know if you need anything. I’m always around.”

With that, she hobbled away, leaving me in front of the wooden door. Inserting the key into the lock I twisted it, letting the door fall open to a small room with a single, large window. Closing the door behind me, I walked up to the window, staring out into the darkness lit up by only the moon. I looked for the damn wolves but saw none.

Collapsing onto the bed, I opened my phone and found Hannah’s name.

“Hey, girl! How’s it going?” she answered on the first ring, sounding cheerful.

Her voice was my undoing. The tears I had barely kept at bay rushed forward, the lump in my throat burning with the overwhelming sadness and stress I had fought so hard to hide today.

“I keep blaming him. I keep blaming him,” I cried, rubbing at my eyes as the hot tears rolled down my cheeks. “But I should have taken the truck in for the maintenance. I should have. Me. Not stupid fucking Dalton!” I wailed, clutching my chest, unbearable pain squeezing my heart.

“Didn’t you say the hot mechanic was going to fix it? Don’t cry, hun. It’s going to be okay,” she soothed.

I hiccupped. “It’s all I have left of my dad. It’s the last piece of him. I had to sell everything else to pay the bills. I had to sell everything, Hannah!” I cried, finally telling her the hard truth. I’d kept it hidden for so long, even from her. But I couldn’t keep it bottled inside anymore. Everything hurt so damn much!

“Everything?” she whispered, knowing that I was talking about my parents’ wedding bands, my mother’s jewelry, my father’s watches, their house, their memories. Everything was gone. Sold. No longer mine.

“There were so many bills, and his life insurance policy hardly covered anything,” I cried, hiccupping on the truth.

“Did Dalton know?”

I sniffled. “He helped me sell it all, and he promised to keep the truck running. He knew. He knew how important it was to me; he just didn’t care.”

“Hold on a moment, Win.” The line went quiet, and then a minute later, there was a knock at my door. Wiping the tears, I inhaled a shaky breath and stood up.

Twisting open the door, Hannah stood just on the other side holding both our suitcases, a watery smile on her face. “Didn’t think I’d let you have all the fun now, did you?” she whispered, dropping the bags and pulling me into her arms. I sobbed and clung to her shoulders. “Now, let’s get you cleaned up.” She ran her hand over my strawberry-blonde tresses. “I hear there’s a bar in town. This is still a girls trip, so no more crying over that prick. I won’t allow it.” Pushing us into the room, she tugged our bags inside and shut the door.

“What would I do without you?” She grinned, bending down to open her bag.

“Be absolutely miserable, of course. Now, you stink, so hop in the shower, and I’ll get some clothes out for you. You brought your black jeans, right? And that top—the one that makes your boobs look good, right?” Shaking my head at her, a small smile tugged at my lips. “I fucking knew it! Dalton can

eat shit. You're hot, you're beautiful, and we are going to have fun tonight!"

An hour later, I'd checked the stupid window more times than I could count, looking for those damn wolves, while Hannah touched up her makeup and tried on every outfit in her suitcase.

"I hate all my clothes," she whined, finally settling on a black dress with heels. I had been sitting on the bed, scrolling through Instagram when my breath caught in my throat. "Why do you look so white?" She peered over my shoulder at the picture of Dalton and his new girlfriend. "Give me that!" Snatching the phone she tapped on it, her long nails making clicking noises before she thrust it back in my direction.

"What did you do?" I asked warily, wrapping my hand around the phone.

"Blocked that piece of shit. Now stand up. Let me look at you." Doing as she asked, I turned slowly in my skin-tight black jeans, black and gold handkerchief top that was tied in a perfect bow at my back, letting everyone know I was forgoing a bra. "Ah, I fucking love this top. I need to buy one. Let's go find you someone to make you forget Dalton ever existed."

Since there were no Uber or taxis in town, we followed a poorly lit pathway from the lodge to a small shack of a restaurant, where loud country music pumped from the open doors. I grimaced. I was already so sick of country music. "I've been told there are wolves, Han. We have to be careful." I warned her. She threw her head back and laughed, brown curls bouncing with the movement.

"Wolves? Real ones? Maybe there's a real cowboy who can save us." She grinned, winking as we walked through the open doors into a crowded bar, where people were line dancing in the center of the room and every table was full. "Over there!" she shouted over the music, pointing to two empty stools at the bar.

Linking hands, we made our way through the warm bodies, apologizing to the people we bumped into on the dance

floor. Sinking into the stools, she flagged down the bartender, her hazel eyes bright with life.

“Two dirty martinis—the dirtier, the better.” She winked at the blushing bartender who nodded, slipping two napkins in front of us.

“Fancy seeing you here, sweetheart.” Chase’s deep voice in my ear startled me. Falling from the barstool, I reached out, grabbing his broad shoulders, my fingers digging into the material of his t-shirt. His big, strong, hot hands immediately landed on my hips, tingles shooting across my body at the contact.

Looking up, my eyes clashed with his green ones. A blush crept across my cheeks at the desire swirling in their mossy depths.

“Chase,” I whispered, completely and utterly breathless.

CHAPTER 6

DROPPING WINNIE AT THE LODGE, I watched her perfect ass sway with each hesitant step she took up to the large, brown door. Her apprehension was much like mine had been when I first moved here. You could spot a city slicker a mile away.

Tearing my eyes from her, I peeled out of the drive and blindly reached for my phone in the center console. At the first light, I rolled to a stop and found my best friend's name.

"I've been waiting for your call," he answered gruffly. It was Tuesday; we always met up at Sadie's, the local bar, after work, but I hadn't made arrangements with him like I usually did in the afternoon. "Heard there's a hot new thing in town, and she took your head off this afternoon."

Grimacing, I dragged a hand down my face.

News of any kind traveled faster than wildfire here. How anyone saw her yelling at me this afternoon was beyond me when it was in a back alley, but I should have known better. Some parts of the small town still hadn't crept their way into my understanding.

"You should know better than to listen to the hens." He chuckled, and I pulled off from the light that finally turned green.

"Guess she really ruffled your feathers then? Sherry was telling everyone about it in Daisies. One of the guys overheard and told the whole crew." He was referring to the construction

crew he managed; they always sent someone to pick up lunch from Daisies.

“I don’t want to talk about it. I’ve had enough woman trouble today,” I grunted, thinking about the phone call from earlier.

“Problems with the divorce?” I heard him lower the volume on the television in the background, but the last thing I wanted to do was rehash the phone call without a goddamn beer in my hand.

“Sadie’s in an hour?”

“Yeah, man. Leave the grump at home while you’re at it.” I grunted in response. “Maybe we can try seducing those twins again.” He was referring to the Grace girls—a handful that I wasn’t interested in, but Max hadn’t been burnt by someone he cared about. He didn’t understand my reservations.

“I’ll think about it. You better have shaved that animal off your lip. It’s a lady deterrent.” He groaned, knowing that I was referring to the mustache he’d been growing for the last two months. He heard that it was a lady magnet, but it aged him about ten years. Made him look pretty rough.

“Look, I know you had a wife, but that’s past tense. Trends change, man.”

I barked out a laugh. “Trust me. Women like a beard or nothing at all. You’re barking up the wrong tree, man.” He grumbled something I couldn’t catch and then abruptly ended the call.

I parked my truck in the drive of my single-story home, recently refurbished by Max and his crew, completely with the perfect, white picket fence that Stephanie hated. One that I wanted to start a family in when I met the one.

It was a home that had space to grow, so I wouldn’t have to move again. A large yard for the dog and kids, a garage for my truck, and everything a woman could ever dream of having, if only I could find her.

Had to get over being bitter first, though. And that was going to take a good while after the way Stephanie burned me.

Shutting the truck off, I hopped down, thinking back to how cute Winnie looked a few minutes ago when she almost fell out of the cab. Shaking thoughts of the crazy woman from my mind, I locked the truck and headed up the stone pathway. Stopping at the mailbox, I grabbed today's mail and then entered the dark, empty home.

I missed coming home to warmth. A meal on the stove, lights already on, someone to share my woes with. I missed sharing my life with someone.

Flipping on the entry lights, I dumped the mail on the kitchen counter and then jumped into the shower, washing off the grease, dirt, and grime from a long day.

An hour later, I was sitting on a bar stool in a crowded Sadie's, where Max ordered us another round of Coronas. I'd needed the beer after the day I had, and I could already feel myself loosening up a bit, even with the current conversation Max and I were currently having.

"So, you should have the papers next week?" He nodded at Alex, the bartender, in thanks as he slid us our bottles.

"According to the lawyer." I swallowed a healthy swig of the ice-cold beer.

"Ready to be a free man?" He bumped my shoulder with a shit-eating grin.

I shrugged. "If she signs the papers," I grunted, and his smile fell. Stephanie had been a real pain in the ass during the past year since I grabbed my things and high-tailed it out of town. She refused to cooperate. Refused to divorce me. She was leaving me hanging in the balance, never letting me find freedom from her. Never letting me just heal.

"What do you mean *if*? She cheated on you. She's the one who should have initiated this divorce in the first place."

"She's been calling." I shrugged. "I let it go to voicemail and then delete them." He choked on his beer, narrowing his eyes at me.

"You've been holding out on me. How long?"

I swallowed another mouthful of beer before answering him. “Every day for the last two weeks.” He nodded thoughtfully, and then something caught his attention, his gaze shifting to the front door.

“Damn.” He quietly whistled. “Look at those two.” Inclining his head, he gestured to the two women who just entered. Winnie entered my mind, the anger in her eyes, the venom in her tone toward men. She’d been burned before. But how badly though? “The girl—the one who took your head off. She a strawberry-blond? Long legs?” I whipped around, only to see Winnie following a brunette through the crowded dance floor.

Black jeans clung to her shapely legs, a black top barely containing her breasts that bounced with every step. No bra. My eyes slid down her legs again and then back up to her long hair. Hair that I wanted to wrap around my fist as I dragged her body against mine.

“Tell me her friend is single,” Max whispered, and my eyes darted to the brunette for a moment before focusing back on Winnie. A timid smile played on her pink lips, and dark makeup surrounded her blue eyes, making them pop.

I turned my back to her as they approached the two empty bar stools next to us. Her intoxicating scent engulfed me as she settled on the uncomfortable seat. “I know that look,” Max said, leaning into me so he didn’t have to talk too loudly. “You wanna knock boots with her,” he chuckled.

“I don’t wear boots, fucker,” I growled, fisting my beer bottle. Winnie was infiltrating every single one of my senses, and I couldn’t *think*.

“Two dirty martinis—the dirtier, the better.” Winnie’s friend had a husky voice, one that had my best friend groaning and adjusting himself in his seat.

“Fuck me,” he rumbled, downing the rest of his beer in one go.

Turning toward the feisty blonde, I took a swig of liquid courage and then leaned in closer, my lips brushing the silky

strands of her hair. “Fancy seeing you here, sweetheart.” She wanted to keep things professional, but I couldn’t help teasing her. Her anger was an instant turn-on. And I was nothing if I wasn’t a little bit of a masochist, apparently. Gussed I liked making myself suffer.

She whipped her head toward me, nearly toppling off the bar stool. She reached out, her cold fingers latching onto my shoulders. Immediately, my hands found her slim, bare waist, my fingers digging into her creamy, soft skin. My body came alive, and my hands tightened their grip on her.

Her gasp of surprise was soft against the loud country music, and my name on her lips never sounded better.

I helped her back onto the stool, her fingers still clinging to my shoulders. Mine were sinking further into her soft skin, but even though I knew she wasn’t going to fall, I couldn’t let go. This woman had me trapped.

Her friend cleared her throat as two dirty martinis were placed on the little white napkins in front of the girls. “Thanks. How much?” Max was quick to interrupt Alex from answering.

“Put it on my tab and bring us another round.” I looked over Winnie’s head to see a flirty smile playing on her friend’s lips and rolled my eyes.

Max had met his match.

“You can let go of me,” Winnie whispered. At some point, my face had moved so close to hers that her warm breath fanned my skin, leaving behind the scent of cool mint toothpaste. She removed her hands from my shoulders, and I immediately missed her touch. Shaking the thought from my head, I released her, reminding myself that I wasn’t going to fall for her cute smile, sultry eyes, or sinful voice. I was done with women. Done.

I had to be. And all those dreams of finding the one had to die, too.

“Max, and you are?” Max reached around me and Winnie to introduce himself to the brunette who hadn’t lost her smile.

She shook his hand, a blush heating her cheeks.

“Hannah. You must be Chase?” She was looking at me now, and I nodded, reaching for the beer bottle Alex was placing on the counter to replace my other one.

“Winnie. Nice to meet you.” Winnie shook Max’s hand, and I clenched my hand around the cold bottle, hating that he was touching her.

She’s not mine.

She’s just a client.

Just a hot fucking client who will be gone at the end of the week.

Still didn’t stop me from being irrationally jealous.

“You two hungry?” Max’s grin could rival a wolf’s. If only Hannah had been wearing red.

“Starving!” Hannah answered for both of them. Max left the bar to ask the hostess for a table in the corner where it was quieter. Eating at the bar was a nightmare. Did that once and swore to never to do it again.

Winnie downed most of her martini in one gulp, her lipstick leaving the perfect imprint of her lips on the glass. She whispered something to Hannah. The two seemed to have a soft argument before Max returned, where he led us to a corner booth.

Max and I shared a bench while the girls slid in on the other side, Hannah nursing her drink, while Winnie placed a now empty glass on the table.

“What do you guys recommend?” Hannah’s hazel eyes were focused on Max, and she batted her lashes at him. I swore I heard him sigh. Just his kind of woman.

“You can’t go wrong with the chicken wings.” He pointed at them on the plastic menu in front of Hannah. I watched Winnie scrunch her nose in disapproval.

“Not a fan of chicken, sweetheart?” Her eyes darted to mine, anger flaring at the nickname.

“Bones. She doesn’t eat anything with bones,” Hannah answered, noticing Winnie’s lack of response.

Doesn’t eat anything with bones? Never heard of that before, but just in case it stemmed from some kind of trauma, I didn’t say anything else on the matter.

I glanced at the menu, looking for something else that she might be able to eat. Max, of course, had other ideas.

“Aren’t you a weird one? Very quiet compared to the stories I heard around town today.” I kicked him under the table as her cheeks heated with embarrassment. He swung his gaze to mine with a pained hiss. I narrowed my own eyes at him, willing him to just shut the hell up.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.” She flagged down a server, ordering another martini, before focusing her gaze on the menu. Hannah mouthed an apology to Max and then continued to flirt with him across the table.

“How about grilled chicken?” I offered, catching Winnie’s attention. “They have a homemade marinade here. It’s my kryptonite.” Her lips tipped up into the smallest grin.

“Comparing yourself to Superman now? Should I be calling you Clark?” she teased, the girl I had met today slowly coming to the surface.

“Wouldn’t be very professional now, would it?” She giggled just as another martini was placed in front of her and Hannah. We placed our orders at the same time and then fell into an uncomfortable silence.

“So, you’re stuck here for, what, a week?” Max prodded, looking at me and then Winnie, who nodded. “How about I show you lovely ladies a little bit of fun tomorrow?” Hannah perked up, and Winnie immediately started to shake her head.

“Define fun, Max?” Hannah answered for the two, despite Winnie’s reluctance.

“I have to work on the truck, Han. You go with him,” Winnie told her.

“Come on now. You’re in Wolf Valley—might as well see some of the beautiful parts. We can go river rafting in the afternoon. That’ll give you plenty of time to work on the truck in the morning.” Winnie bit her lip, and I had to use all my strength not to reach across the table and release that plump, pink lip from her teeth. And then soothe her bite with my tongue.

I wanted to be the one to bite her lip. I wanted to taste her lips. I wanted to devour her moans.

“You think that will be alright?” She glanced between me and Max, and I nodded.

“Should be fine. We’ll have to order some parts and won’t be able to work much tomorrow anyway.” I grunted, finishing my beer before flagging down the server and ordering a glass of water.

“You should see our vacation bucket list!” Hannah said and then started excitedly listing them off to Max, who was surprisingly very invested in everything she had to say.

Our food was placed in front of us a few minutes later, the table falling into a comfortable silence as everyone dug in. Delight took over Winnie’s face as she bit into the chicken for the first time, and I breathed a silent sigh of relief. She liked it. I’d gotten that right.

“You gonna join us tomorrow?” Max nudged my shoulder. I started to shake my head, but then caught Winnie’s hopeful expression.

What happened to keeping things strictly professional, sweetheart?

“I think I can take a few hours off,” I said instead.

God, I was so screwed.

CHAPTER 7

HANNAH WAS ABSOLUTELY SMITTEN with Max, who I had come to realize was Chase's best friend. He was a total flirt and charmed himself right into my best friend's jeans. She twirled a lock of her curly, brown hair around her finger while she batted her damn lashes at him like he was the hottest man on Earth.

Meanwhile, the hottest man on Earth was actually sitting right in front of me, his green eyes glaring a hole into the table. I brought my third martini glass up to my lips. Tilting my head back, I downed the contents and flagged the server down for another.

My nerves had finally eased after the second drink, and now, I was nursing a nice little buzz. Nobody could touch my happiness. Not Dalton. Not my dad's broken truck and certainly not the sexy, angry-at-the-world man before me.

He had switched to water an hour ago, and a small part of me wanted to order him a damn beer, hoping it would loosen him up, but from the glares he kept shooting at Max and then at the table, I knew his anger was at his best friend for suggesting we share a meal.

We had interrupted their guys night, and they'd interrupted our girls night.

"You should slow down," he muttered as my fourth martini arrived at the table. "I wasn't joking about the wolves. You can't outrun them sober—imagine drunk." A small smirk tugged at his lips, his dark stubble hiding the hint of a dimple,

but in the dim lighting, I saw it—just barely. And I longed to feel that stubble against my lips, my neck, my thighs.

No, Winnie. Don't go there.

Martinis were my kryptonite, and I shouldn't have ordered this one, but I wanted just one night to forget and let my hair down.

“If you'll excuse me.” I stood on shaky legs and took a wobbly step toward the ladies' room, Chase immediately stood as well, his hand going to my hip, absorbing my weight as if it was nothing. “I don't—” I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I'm okay.” My tongue was heavy in my mouth. I wanted to drop my head to his shoulder and close my heavy eyes, but I also wanted to dance.

“Are you sure? Don't need you falling in the middle of the dance floor,” he huskily whispered, his voice sounding like pure sex.

“I'll be right back,” I told him, using all my strength to step out of his hold and walk as confidently as I could to the restroom, where I nearly fell over once I was alone in a stall. These stupid fucking heels. Stupid skinny jeans that never wanted to come off.

After washing my hands a minute later, I fluffed up my hair, wiped at my smudged lipstick, and walked out the restroom with all the confidence of a lioness ready to attack.

Hannah caught my gaze across the dance floor, and at my small gesture, she darted up, waving the boys off, and bounced to my side.

“You're drunk, girl.” She giggled as we wove our way into the center of the floor, swaying our bodies to the rhythm.

“So drunk.” I agreed, throwing my hands up and shaking my ass to the beat.

“He can't take his eyes off you!” she screamed over the music, and I laughed.

“He can't have me. No one can!” I closed my eyes, the loud bass pulsing through my body. God, I loved music. Loved

how easily I could lose myself in it. How simple it was to empty my mind and just let it flow through me and take over.

Sweat dotted my hairline, my feet ached, but I was free. Opening my eyes, I made a quick beeline for the table, picking up my drink and tossing back the whole thing in two sips before winking at Chase, who watched me, expressionless.

I slammed the glass on the table and nearly fell straight on my ass making my way back to the dance floor, where Hannah was waiting for me.

“Everything is...” I giggled, the laughter just flowing freely from me as I threw my head back. “Spinning!”

Hannah held onto my forearms, her worried, hazel eyes darting between me and something over my shoulder.

“You’re going to regret this in the morning,” she said on a short laugh. I ignored the concern in her tone because tonight, I had to forget. We came on this trip to forget. I needed to forget.

The song changed to something country, and we both froze, completely out of our element. Some girls in tiny shorts and boots noticed our discomfort and lack of knowledge and began to teach us how to line dance. After a quick lesson—where I stumbled and made a fool out of myself quite a bit—we were back to laughing and enjoying the night.

“You were meant to break down here. I’m telling you, we would never have had this kind of fun before where we were at.” Hannah’s hand wrapped around mine as we copied the girls in front of us, moving to the beat of a Luke Bryan song—whatever in the world that was.

“I just wish the truck hadn’t broken. Stupid fucking Dalton!” I screamed, fighting the anger that wished to consume my body.

“Stupid fucking Dalton!” Hannah loudly agreed and then twirled me around. I tripped over my own feet and started to fall. Hannah shrieked. I shrieked. Everything was spinning around me.

But I never made contact with the hard floor.

Instead, one strong arm wrapped around my middle, pulling me tight against a warm body, and then I was being pulled off the dance floor.

“You need water,” Chase’s deep voice growled near my ear. Damn, his growly voice was sexy.

“I need to forget,” I said back, closing my eyes and wishing the bar would stop spinning.

“You don’t need to drink away your troubles. It doesn’t help because come morning, they’re still there.” I opened my eyes and turned in his arms. My breast brushed against his chest, and I fought back a moan at the contact. Looking up through my lashes into his green eyes, pain reflected back at me.

I saw a man who also needed to forget.

“Let’s forget them together,” I whispered, my mind buzzing with need. He shook his head.

“Let me walk you home, sweetheart.” I dropped my head to his chest, his heartbeat thrumming against my cheek.

“You don’t want me either? He was right. He was always fucking right.” The first hot tear rolled down my cheek as Dalton’s cruel words played in my head again.

I don’t want you. Nobody wants you. Nobody wants a woman who cries about her dead dad all the time. Nobody wants a woman who can’t satisfy her man. Nobody wants a woman who looks like you!

Chase’s warm, calloused hands cradled my face, his thumb swiping at the tear rolling down my cheek. “Never said I didn’t want you, sweetheart.” He pressed his whole body against mine, and I could *feel* him. My eyes widened, and he smirked. “Never said I didn’t want you,” he repeated. “Just not like this. Not when you can’t even remember your own name.”

Max suddenly showed up beside Chase, Hannah hanging off his arm. “Let’s get them home.” He was looking at me, brows drawn with worry. He held a water bottle out to me. “You might want to start hydrating,” he offered with a smile, and I took the bottle from him with a shaky hand.

Chase took it from me and cracked it open, then held it to my lips. I greedily gulped down the water, the cool liquid bringing some clarity. Once I'd drained the bottle, I laid my head back on Chase's chest again.

I was *so* tired.

Chase shifted my weight so that I was leaning against him, and he led me out of the bar, Max and Hannah tailing behind us, still flirting back and forth.

"Don't believe him. Don't believe whoever said that you aren't wanted. You are beautiful, Winnie, but I can't go there with you. I just can't," Chase told me quietly. I chose not to respond.

Chase and Max walked us all the way to our room, and they didn't leave until we had shut the door. Then, Hannah helped me get to bed after making sure I got another bottle of water in me.

"I wish you hadn't accepted the dinner invite," I mumbled into the pillow. God, I felt so *heavy*.

"We had fun, Win," she sighed into the darkness.

"Now we have a double date," I argued. I didn't want a double date. In fact, I didn't want a date at all. This was supposed to be a girls trip, and now we'd invited in two guys.

"River rafting is hardly a date. Just don't think—focus on having fun. We won't see them ever again after this week."

Why did that make my chest ache? Just how drunk was I?

"I don't want to fall for him," I whispered before I could stop myself.

Hannah cleared her throat. "Why?"

I picked at the blanket covering my body. "I don't want to need anyone ever again. I needed Dalton, and he left me. I needed Dad, and he left me, too. You're the only one that has stayed. I can't handle that heartbreak again."

"Dalton was a piece of shit from the beginning," Hannah told me. "He never deserved you. Chase isn't him; I can

already tell.”

“He has his own baggage,” I muttered, remembering his words. *You are beautiful, Winnie, but I can't go there with you.*

“Sometimes, people just need help carrying their baggage,” she said on a yawn. I grunted and rolled over to fall asleep. All the while, I couldn't help wondering if Chase needed my help and if I needed his.

—

Chase wasn't a morning person, and neither was I. Despite the two cups of coffee I'd had while sitting in his office as we searched for truck parts, my head still throbbed with a dull pain, and my eyes burned with exhaustion.

“That's all we can do today,” Chase finally said. I reached up to rub at my forehead. “Some of the parts should arrive tomorrow.” He grunted, standing up from his chair abruptly. I blinked slowly, trying to comprehend his short sentence.

“Right. So, river rafting time?” He hadn't said much, other than good morning and to follow him to his office. The part where I begged him to make us forget the people who had hurt us hadn't been brought up.

I was beginning to regret actually remembering all that happened last night after dancing.

I had been almost sure he would tease me this morning, but alas, he was quiet—and grumpy.

“I'll meet you guys there later. I have some work to do.” He led me to the front door of his shop and nodded at me before turning away without another word.

And that was why I wanted to keep things professional. Because the little bit of hope that had wormed its way into my heart was already crushed by his cold, careless, grumpy demeanor.

Max picked me and Hannah up from the lodge in his Jeep Wrangler. I opted to sit in the back, fidgeting with the hem on my white shorts. Hannah insisted I looked good, but the last

time I wore these, Dalton hadn't thought so, and he made sure to let me know about it.

Nobody wants to see your cellulite, Winnie. Don't dress like you're thirteen. You're a woman, for Christ's sake.

Hannah and Max talk about the town, and he tells her the history of the name and how he grew up here. The drive was short, and I zoned out for most of it. He parked in a dirt lot that said River Rafting Parking. He opened the door for Hannah, who blushed, not used to gentlemen. Her taste in men was usually toxic assholes who were only interested in one night of fun.

“Chase said he'd be here.” Max scanned the lot for Chase's truck, which peeled in a moment later. He hopped out in a pair of black trunks and a black tank, ink I hadn't noticed before crawling across his shoulders, up the back of his neck, and an entire sleeve on his right leg.

“Wipe the drool,” Hannah whispered, bumping my shoulder with a giggle. She knew I loved ink on a man, especially full sleeves. Meant he wasn't a fucking wimp.

“Follow us, ladies.” Max led the way, and Hannah fell into step with him, leaving Chase to walk beside me. He was quiet, his green eyes hidden behind dark shades. While we waited in line to catch the bus to the top of the hill where the rafts were, I tied my hair back into a ponytail. He watched me, and I longed to find out what he was thinking.

On the bus, I sank into a window seat, expecting Hannah to slide in next to me, but she was cozied up to Max. They were both smiling, and despite what she said last night, they were totally on a date. Chase took the seat beside me, his leg rubbing against mine, causing those tingles to race up and down my spine.

“Headache?” he muttered, not looking at me.

“Little bit.” He nodded but didn't ask anything else until we got to the top of the hill. We listened to a debriefing of what to do in the water, how we had to return the rafts, and repeats of “wear life jackets at all times.” We'd left our bags in

Max's car, so I kept my tank top and shorts on, enjoying the hot summer sun glowing on my skin.

We each took our own rafts down the river. It was exhilarating and fun, and I couldn't contain my laughter as Hannah and I bumped into each other and sailed down the water, getting splashed in the process.

At the bottom, we climbed out of the rafts, Hannah and I standing on the bank while the men fished the rafts out. "Can we swim here?" Hannah asked Max, who nodded. She started shamelessly stripping, and Max's jaw dropped. She was a stunner—body toned to perfection from hours at the gym. I envied her more often than not.

"Why are you so quiet?" I found the courage to ask Chase, who was staring at the river.

"Nothing to say," he grunted.

I huffed. "You're full of shit. Has anyone ever told you that?" I crossed my arms over my chest, glaring at him.

One of those perfect brows rose over his shades as he looked in my direction. "And you're a pain in the ass," he threw back before looking away from me again.

He wasn't paying attention as I surged forward and pushed him backward into the cold water, but neither was I when he grabbed my hand, tugging me along with him.

I landed on top of him, both of us fully submerged. I immediately tried to swim up, the air knocked out of me from the freezing temperature. I broke the surface first with him right beside me, shaking his head like a dog, water splashing me.

"I can't swim!" I fake panicked, pretending that I couldn't tread the water. He moved faster than I thought possible, his hands pulling my flailing body to his.

"I've got you. I've got you." His voice was soothing, his cold lips pressing against the shell of my ear. I wrapped my legs around his torso, feeling his length at my core. Immediately, I was reminded of last night, of how much I wanted him to kiss me, how he said he wanted me.

Maybe we could carry each other's baggage.

I circled my arms around his neck. "Oh, Clark, my hero," I cooed, smiling when the realization crossed his features.

"You can swim," he drawled, arching his brow at me again.

I nodded, grinning. "I'm from Florida, baby. I grew up in the water."

CHAPTER 8

WINNIE WAS A FUCKING TEASE. She was playing with fire she didn't want to get burned by.

Her toned legs were wrapped around my waist, her arms twined around my neck, and her lips just weren't close enough to mine. It was downright frustrating.

She wanted me to make her forget last night, how I hurt her by essentially rejecting her, even though hurting her had never been my intention.

God, how I wanted nothing more than to forget everything other than her.

Her blue eyes were dark with desire, her wet hair dark and slicked back. She blinked slowly, her pink tongue darting out to lick her lips. I swallowed thickly, my Adam's apple bobbing. I longed to lick at those lips myself. Taste them.

She was so hot and cold. One minute, she was rubbing her hot, tight body on me, and the next barely, she was barely saying two words. God, I wanted to get inside her head. See what she was thinking. Learn what made her tick. What made her happy. What made her sad.

"You can let me go now," she whispered, but my hands only tightened on her waist. I didn't want to let go. What I *wanted* to do was kiss her.

I wanted to know about this Dalton and what he did to her.

I wanted to know why she thought I wouldn't want her.

I needed to understand the worried look in her best friend's gaze when she looked at the two of us together like this.

I needed to know why the damn beat-up, piece of crap truck was so important.

Winnie unhooked her legs from around my waist and then her arms from around my neck until my hands were the only thing holding her body to mine. I was reluctant to let go.

“You said you can't do this, so let me go, Chase.” I hated her for using my words against me. I hate that I had only known her for twenty-four hours, and she was already completely under my fucking skin.

Biting back a sigh, I let her go, and she swam away, not sparing me a glance. Getting out of the water, she immediately started to strip out of her white, cut-off shorts, her perfect ass on display in a black thong bikini. I groaned, knowing it was going to be impossible for me to get out of the water now.

Her tank top went next, her creamy skin seeming to glow under the bright, summer sun. Her perky breasts bounced with every step she took towards Hannah, and the two women immediately engaged in conversation before racing each other to the river, jumping in, their screams getting swallowed up by the cold water.

“Fuck me,” Max groaned, chucking his shirt to the ground and racing toward me, cannon-balling right on top of me. I shoved him away and surfaced, slicking my hair back. He shook out his hair, tiny droplets of water splattering across my face. I scowled at him before wiping them away. “Did you see that?” he whispered, watching the two bombshells splash each other. They giggled loudly, their laughter infectious.

“You wanna knock boots with her?” I grinned, and he chuckled.

“You fucking bet I do. What about you?”

I couldn't find the words, so I just nodded, my gaze on the temptress splashing her friend. It had been more than a year since I had been with a woman that actually made me yearn.

I'd had quite a bit of hook-ups since moving to Wolf Valley, but nothing meaningful.

I was desperate to have a connection with someone again and also terrified all at once.

The thought of losing myself in Winnie was almost too tempting. She was here for the week, and then I'd never have to see her again.

We could have a lot of fun for a week. We could make each other forget the past.

I wanted nothing more than to forget Stephanie. To stop seeing her crystal blue eyes everywhere I turned. I wanted to only see Winnie's shade of blue eyes. I wanted to forget the pain Stephanie had caused me.

Her betrayal cut me to the core, and I knew I couldn't give myself fully to Winnie. I couldn't give her more than a week because I'd never be able to give myself fully again. And she deserved more.

Max left me to my thoughts and swam over to the girls, where he picked up Hannah by the waist and threw her in the air. She squealed loudly before she smacked into the water. A moment later, she resurfaced, immediately splashing Max.

I watched Winnie, unable to help myself. A small, timid smile lit up her face as she watched the exchange between the two. She glanced at me briefly, and I wondered if that was hope in her gaze.

I want it just as badly, sweetheart.

Max splashed her, and then the look was gone, instantly replaced with fake anger as she charged at him. I joined in on the fun, pulling her thrashing body against my chest. She shrieked with laughter, and I took the opportunity to inhale her overwhelming scent, my lips so close to her neck. Close enough to taste.

Unable to help making an ass out of myself, I placed the briefest kiss just behind her ear, and she stiffened, halting her movements. Hannah and Max didn't notice, too invested in each other, but I felt Winnie's muscles tighten.

She turned in my arms, her cold hands on my biceps, her blue eyes dark with desire. Her teeth sank into that bottom lip again. My fingers dug into her waist beneath the dark water. She was so close, I could kiss her if I wanted. And *damn*, did I want to. I wanted to so *badly*.

I leaned forward, my nose brushing hers. She sharply inhaled, and the world came to a staggering halt around us.

“We can’t do this,” she whispered, her words breathless and shaking.

“Maybe I’m changing my mind,” I rasped, dropping one of my hands to grab her ass cheek, hauling her closer to me, our bodies flush against one another.

She shivered. “I just want to get my truck fixed,” she insisted, but her body melted into mine, betraying her true desires.

I was such a glutton for punishment. “Just one week,” I pushed, skimming my nose along her jaw.

“No. I deserve more.” Suddenly, she was pushing at my chest, her nails biting into my skin, frantic to get away from me. “I won’t fall for another trap. I won’t. I won’t.” Sensing her panic, my hands fell from her waist.

She swam away, rushing toward the shore. Hannah finally noticed something was wrong with her friend, and she deserted Max, following Winnie. They both screamed at each other, their words lost in the roaring of the rushing river.

Max raised a confused brow at me, and I shrugged at the sudden change in the afternoon. Winnie flipped *so* easily. I couldn’t keep up with what she wanted. Her mixed signals were driving me crazy.

Suddenly, Winnie began throwing her wet clothes on and stormed off, throwing Hannah the finger as she ran to the parking lot. Hannah stood there, staring after her, dripping wet, holding her clothes in her shaking hands.

“Everything okay?” Max and I quickly reached the shore. Hannah shook her head, looking into the distance where

Winnie was waiting by Max's Wrangler, her arms crossed over her chest, her right foot tapping urgently against the gravel.

"She's just been through a lot in the last few years and doesn't trust men," she explained, and Max threw his head back on a deep chuckle.

"Funny because this one doesn't trust women, thanks to his ex-wife." I rolled my eyes at my best friend. Hannah's hazel eyes darted to my bare ring finger and then back to her friend.

"Sounds like the perfect match to me," she said with a sly grin.

I narrowed my eyes at Max. "Ah, fuck, Max, I told you not to talk about her. I told you not to push anything, but of course, you can never take no for an answer." Grabbing my clothes from the ground, I headed toward my truck, walking past a glowering Winnie.

I stopped at my house, showered, and then headed back to work, where I started working on Winnie's truck. The quicker I got this truck done, the better. I needed her out of town before the end of the week, and I wasn't in the mood to flirt with her while working on the old truck anymore.

I knew she was lying when she offered to help—she didn't know shit about vehicles, really. Even less than she'd claimed she did. I knew she couldn't afford all the labor, so I had already decided to do it for free. Especially now. I needed that woman out of my life.

I didn't have the willpower to be civil toward her after today. Not when all I wanted to do was fuck the trauma her ex had caused right out of her. And maybe even teach her a lesson about being moody all the damn time.

Because I'd *never* experienced this much emotional whiplash in my life—not even when I caught my wife sleeping with my best friend.

CHAPTER 9

“I TOLD you I wasn’t ready to date or even fool around with anyone! I told you! Why can’t you just respect my wishes?” I screamed at Hannah as I shoved my legs through the white denim shorts. “You insisted on this stupid rafting. You just had to push my boundaries!” Pulling the wet tank top over my head, I slid on my flip-flops and glared at her.

“You are being ridiculous,” she snapped. “It’s been two months since Dalton! You won’t even allow yourself to heal, Winnie!” she screamed right back, never cowering away from my anger.

“You have no right to tell me what to do; you know what he did!”

“And we both know he’s a low-life piece of shit that never ever deserved you,” she said calmly, but my anger only intensified when I looked over her shoulder to Chase and Max, who were watching us cautiously from the river.

“You promised today wouldn’t be a date, and then you had to be all over Max like a wet rag!” Hurt flashed across her face before anger quickly replaced it.

“Just like you were practically having sex with Chase?” Hannah sneered at me. “You can’t blame me for everything, Win. You want him just as much as he wants you. But you’re denying yourself any chance at happiness. Life is short, Winnie—so fucking short. You’re afraid to be like your dad, but at least he found the love of his life.”

“Don’t bring him into this,” I whispered, tears clouding my vision. *Love killed him, and she knew this.*

“Loving your mom gave him life,” she said, stepping closer, reaching her hand out to me.

“Loving her ended his life.” I stepped back from her when I saw the men coming up to the shore behind her. I didn’t want them to hear our fight. I didn’t want Chase to know anything else about me. I just wanted him to fix my truck so I could get the hell out of Wolf Valley.

I wanted my heart to stop racing whenever he came around and the stupid butterflies to evaporate from my stomach whenever his green eyes latched onto me.

I wouldn’t fall prey to another man that just wanted me for sex. I wouldn’t do it. I wouldn’t be the naïve girl again. I knew better. I knew fucking better than to let Chase get so close.

“Love isn’t a killer, Win. Love gives you life. Love brings you happiness. But you have to open yourself up to it. You have to stop pushing every man away. Not every man is going to treat you like Dalton.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Neither do you,” she pushed, her hazel eyes bright with anger and frustration.

I fisted my hands at my sides. “I asked you not to do this. I begged you, Hannah. I don’t want a man. I don’t want to fall in love ever again.”

“We went on this trip to live. And I’ll be damned if I let you fade away right before my very eyes!” she snapped.

“We can live without them. We can be happy without them!” We were screaming at each other again. For sure, we were putting on a damn good show for everyone around, but I couldn’t make myself care. We would never see these damn people again.

She shook her head at me. “We need them just as much as they need us. Open your heart, Win. Open it for your dad. If you won’t do it for me or you, then do it for him.”

“How could you,” I whispered. Turning on my heel, I stormed away, flipping her off as I went. I came to a stop by the Wrangler and impatiently waited for the rest of the party to make it up here so I could get back to the hotel.

Talking about my dad was a no go. Telling me to open my heart for him was a low blow. Hannah had crossed the line.

I crossed my arms over my wet tank top, thankful for the blistering summer sun since it would dry my clothes faster. Chase blew past me, barely casting me a glance before he threw himself into his truck and peeled out of the gravel lot, tiny rocks flying into the air. The roar of his exhaust caused a few people to pause and stare as he flew off down the road.

Guessed he wasn't very pleased with my response to his advances. Not like I cared anyway. In a week, I'd never see him again. He'd become a distant memory.

—

As I watched the sun set over the valley through the window of the lodge's room, guilt slowly crept into every crevice of my heart. Max and Hannah had dropped me off hours ago, and then she left with him without saying goodbye—not that I blamed her.

Time alone had given me the perfect opportunity to evaluate my actions and sincerely regret them. After pacing the small room three times, I finally grew the courage to leave and face Chase. He deserved an apology. He'd been nothing but kind and straightforward with what he wanted from me. And not only had I led him on and then flipped a random switch, turning against him, but I'd acted like an immature brat, too.

Walking the streets of Wolf Valley, I checked over my shoulder every few minutes for a stray wolf, the little voice in my head mocking me each time I checked and saw nothing. The streets were empty, everyone either home or in one of the two restaurants in town I had noticed. I entered Daisies Pastries, and a bell jingled over the door as I opened and closed it gently. A young girl behind the counter looked up

from her book, pushing a pair of glasses up her nose as she smiled in greeting.

“Welcome to Daisies!” she chirped. A few other patrons briefly glanced at me from their tables before going back to their meals as I made my way up to the counter.

“Hey, what do you recommend?” The menu behind her on the wall was large, taking up most of the expanse of the wall, and quite frankly, overwhelming.

“What are you in the mood for?” She snapped her book shut and put it on the corner of the counter, focusing all her attention on me.

“An apology dinner?” I grimaced, and she smiled.

“We make a mean grilled cheese. You can’t pass on the sweet tea, and we have something fresh out of the oven. I think Dylan just made his famous chocolate chip brownies.” That must have been the heavenly smell floating in the air.

“I’ll take one of each.” She smiled, writing down the order on a pad and then calling it in through a small window to what I presumed was the kitchen. She then rang it up on the register, and I handed her my credit card, surprised at the low price for everything.

Small-town living sure did have some perks.

A few minutes later, she brought my order to the counter and handed me two sweet teas. “It was a real pleasure to meet you. I hope you come by again. Dylan bakes something fresh every day.” The young girl smiled sweetly, pushing her glasses up her nose again.

“Thanks, hon. I’ll definitely come back!”

Mustering up all the courage I had left, I exited the café and headed down the alley to Storm Automotive. Halting on the front steps where I had laid into Chase yesterday, I cringed. My behavior wasn’t exactly something to brag about. And yet, he remained kind and civil. If he threw the food back in my face, I deserved it.

Surprised to find the door open, I entered the dimly lit lobby and easily spotted Chase under the hood of my truck, even though he said there wasn't much work he could do today without the parts we ordered this morning.

Knocking on the window of the door that led to the workshop, I held up the bag of food with a small, hopeful smile at his surprised expression.

He threw down the tool he was holding into a toolbox and then wiped his greasy, black hands on his jeans, smearing oil and whatever else had been caked on his hands onto the denim. When he began crossing the large space with a shake of his head, I opened my mouth to apologize. Yet when he opened the door, I found myself speechless at the sight of him.

Messy hair, grease smudges on his face, bright green eyes, full lips hiding behind his beard, tattoos peeking out of the tank top that clung to his muscles... He was practically sex on a stick.

"Whatcha doing here?" he questioned, his forest green eyes sweeping over me.

"Dinner?" I shrugged, not knowing what else to say.

"Not hungry but thanks." *Of course, he was going to be cold.*

I tried not to let the hurt creep into my heart and my expression. I knew I deserved his attitude.

"Right, well, mind if I keep you company while you work on the truck then?" He grunted, holding open the door for me to follow him.

I placed the bag of food and two sweet teas on a closed box that was near the truck, then peered into the engine bay as if I knew what I was looking for.

"Just changed the spark plugs." I nodded as if I could see the sparkling, new spark plugs. Meanwhile, I had no idea what the hell a spark plug even looked like or where it was located.

"Oh, yeah, they look good," I commented, hoping to come off intellectual, but he chuckled. I snapped my head in his

direction. Amusement danced across his features.

“You can’t see them, sweetheart.” Warmth fluttered in my stomach at the familiar name. “I knew you didn’t know a damn thing about this truck.” I blinked back tears, suddenly overcome with emotion.

“It was my dad’s,” I whispered, turning back to the truck. Leaning against the hood on my forearms, I dropped my head. “It was his pride and joy.”

Chase was quiet now, his sneakers scuffing against the ground as he neared me. His arm bumped mine as he leaned over the hood next to me.

“It’s a beautiful truck, Winnie. Just needs some work to get her up and running good again.”

“He died four months ago.” I choked on the words, old grief coming up to clog my throat and steal away all my strength. My knees went weak at the admission, and I clung to the metal under my arms, trying to keep myself upright.

“You used to work on it with him?” he questioned softly, and I nodded, unable to find the words to speak. “Bet you were really good at passing tools.”

I nodded again, sniffing with a small laugh, still not trusting my voice. God, why was this so hard? How could grief still cripple me after four months?

“I’d love it if you passed me tools, Winnie.” This time, I couldn’t contain the cry that bubbled up in my throat, and it escaped my parted lips. His arm wound around me, holding me up just when I was so sure my legs would buckle.

“You don’t have to be nice to me,” I croaked, hot tears rolling down my flushed cheeks.

He leaned his cheek against the top of my head. My chin wobbled. “Who said I was being nice?”

“What’s in it for you?” I threw back, looking at the engine through blurry eyes. There wasn’t a chance in hell I’d have the strength to look into his green irises right then.

“A distraction,” he muttered.

I sniffled again. “From what?” I pressed, curious now.

“My shit show of a life.” He sighed. “You’re a welcome distraction, sweetheart, regardless if you want to be professional or not.” I was suddenly reminded of his offer. One week. Just one week. It seemed so tempting now.

“I was supposed to do the regular maintenance, and Dalton was supposed to fix everything wrong with it, but I couldn’t afford it, and my ex broke his promise,” I found myself spilling, hatred crawling through my veins at the thought of Dalton’s empty promises.

“Clearly,” Chase grunted.

“Fuck Dalton.” I turned to look at him. Anger swirled in his green depths, turning them the color of damp moss in a shaded area after a rainy day.

“Fuck Dalton,” Chase agreed, a small grin tipping his lips. “Good thing you found me. I’ll fix her right up.” He patted the truck.

“Thank you, Chase.” He raised his hand to wipe at the tear that fell from my eye. Then, his rough, warm hand cupped my cheek.

“Don’t thank me for doing what’s right, sweetheart.”

“You’re a good man,” I said softly, leaning into his touch. “There aren’t enough in the world.”

He sighed. “You’re beautiful, Winnie. So fucking beautiful, you take my breath away.” With that simple statement, he stole mine, too.

“We can’t do this.” I swallowed thickly. “We can’t.” He leaned into me, his lips so deliciously close. The scent of sandalwood wrapped around me, intoxicating me. Making me drunk on him.

My hand landed on his chest with every intention of pushing him away, but instead, I found myself fisting the material of his shirt, pulling him impossibly closer.

He kissed my forehead, his lips soft in comparison to his scratchy beard. Tingles shot down from the crown of my head

to the tips of my toes.

“I won’t kiss you until you beg for it, Winnie.” My eyes fluttered shut, my breaths shaky. “I won’t take what isn’t mine to take.”

Just like that, he stole my breath again. I was an absolute goner.

Because if he asked me right now, I’d drop to my knees and beg this beautiful man to kiss every inch of me.

CHAPTER 10

VIXEN.

Siren.

Temptress.

Angel.

They were all words to describe Winnie. She was a contradiction all herself, and while it was frustrating, I couldn't seem to get enough of it.

Her little gasp nearly knocked me to my knees. I wanted nothing more than to close the nonexistent space between us and kiss the pout straight off her full, pink lips.

But I wouldn't kiss her when she was telling me no, even if her body was screaming yes and sending all the green light signals.

"How about that food?" I questioned after hearing her stomach growl. Her cheeks heated at the sound, and she stepped back, ending the moment with a quick nod, her blue eyes dark with desire.

I brought her into my office, where we ate the food she'd brought. She told me about the girl behind the counter, who recommended everything, and I knew instantly that she was talking about Serena. Her parents opened the café a few years ago, and as soon as she turned eighteen, she'd been running the show.

She shared the story about Hannah and how they became friends in high school after fighting over a boy. And then, I

told her about Max and how the fucker wouldn't take no for an answer when I first moved to town.

"Why did you move here?" she asked timidly, finishing her grilled cheese and then slurping down the sweet tea.

Her question was innocent, but it brought up a lot of unwanted memories. Did I want to tell a complete stranger about my ex-wife? Was I ready to let someone else in on the hell I'd been through? What that bitch was *still* putting me through a year later?

Deciding against it, I shrugged, giving her the same bullshit story I told the rest of the town.

"Wanted a change of scenery, got tired of the city. What brought you out here?" It felt wrong to feed her the partial lie, but with her being so hot and cold, I couldn't trust her enough to let her in yet. I didn't want to open an old wound for no reason if she was only going to leave at the end of the week and remain a stranger.

Winnie paused, blinking quickly. I noticed her eyes changed color whenever she was close to tears, and now they were turning a dark gray, like the clouds during a bad storm. I reached across the table, her reaction making me regret my invasive question. I rested my hand on top of hers. It trembled beneath my touch. Her bottom lip quivered, and I suddenly felt like the biggest jerk.

Guess she was running, too. And I'd been scared to share my past. I scoffed at myself.

"You don't have to tell me. I don't need to know." She shook her head.

"Hannah said I have to open up. I don't want to turn into a damn hermit crab," she muttered, scrunching her nose up. I bit back a smile. She was downright adorable sometimes.

"I'm ready whenever you are. I might just start calling you hermit, though." She cracked a grin at my stupid attempt to lighten the mood. I had been good at flirting once upon a time. Maybe I hadn't completely lost my edge.

Flirting with Stephanie had come to me like second nature. But nothing felt easy anymore. Especially not when Winnie looked at me like I was one of her biggest fears.

“Remember that ex I mentioned?” Her voice shook, so I nodded, suddenly angry at the pain that flashed through her features. Her brows furrowed, and I wanted nothing more than to soothe that line away on her forehead and make the asshole pay for whatever he did to her.

“Dalton?”

“Piece of shit asshole, he is,” she spat, jumping up from her seat. She ripped her hand from mine and started pacing the room. “Ugh, his name—the thought of him—makes me so fucking angry. I want to just hit something!” She stomped her foot, and I couldn’t help but find humor in such a little thing containing so much anger.

“Have you tried boxing?” I offered, and she glared at me with a shake of her head.

“We met in college. He was the star football player that rescued a losing team and brought them victory.” I snorted and then groaned.

“Let me guess, you were the cheerleader?” She didn’t look like one, but fuck, the thought of her in a tiny skirt, her hair in a ponytail, wearing a tight top made my jeans too tight.

“Do I look like a fucking cheerleader to you?” She put a hand on her hip, jutting it out, with all the sass of a cheerleader. Cracking a grin, I let my eyes swim over her, starting at her head and then down to her cute little sneakers, and back up again.

“You look like my wet dream, Winnie. I don’t want to imagine you in college,” I told her honestly, watching the blush creep up her neck to her cheeks.

Her jaw dropped, and desire swam in her fucking beautiful eyes. She wanted me. Her body couldn’t lie, but her fucking mouth could. And always did.

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that.” She started pacing again, crossing her arms over her chest, pushing her

full breasts up.

“Don’t lie, sweetheart. You’re going to be thinking about that all night.” She didn’t answer, just flipped me off. I chuckled.

“I was a journalist actually—wrote an article about him—and of course, he charmed his way right into my fucking pants,” she emphasized the word pants, and I snorted. “We dated, got serious pretty quickly, and I just didn’t notice all the red flags. My dad loved him, Hannah hated him, and I should have trusted her.”

I didn’t like where this was going, but I knew it was going to be ugly.

“Turned out, he was only with me for the sex. Nothing more. And when times got too tough because I was mourning my father, he left me. Told me he couldn’t deal with me being depressed.” She sucked in a deep breath. “Even after he promised my dad to take care of me and help me with the truck when Dad was on his death bed, he just...left.” She rubbed her arms, as if she was chilled. “And then I found out that he was cheating on me.”

Fucking asshole.

Low-life scum.

I clenched my fists, now understanding her anger, her hesitancy, every fucking thing. Getting dumped after going through something so traumatizing was horrible. Honestly, I, personally, would rather be cheated on than lose yet another rock, someone I relied on, so quickly.

“How did you find out?” I found myself asking, finally feeling like I might’ve found someone that could relate to me. That could somewhat understand what I’d been going through.

“Text messages on his phone. It was his secretary” I blew out a breath at her admission. “So, Hannah decided a girls trip was necessary, and I agreed, needing to get as far away from him as possible.” She sank back into the chair across from me.

“So, that’s why you need to keep it professional? You think I’m going to be like him?” That left a sour taste in my

mouth.

She shook her head. “I just want to work on myself. I’ve been in a relationship for the last two years. I’m tired of relying on a man.”

She’s just here for a week.

Don’t let her tempt you.

Fix the truck and let her go.

We went back into the shop, where she sat beside me, handing me tools every now and then. We kept up a light conversation until she mentioned needing the restroom before she disappeared for a good while.

Sighing, I set the wrench down and wiped my hands on a grease rag before going in search of her. I found her asleep on the couch in the lobby, and a small smile tilted my lips as I stared down at her like a creep. In sleep, she was calm, her features more open and less guarded.

She was stunning.

Shaking my head, I headed back into the bay and continued working on the truck, glancing over at her through the window every so often.

She woke after an hour and embarrassedly apologized. “I don’t know what happened, I just saw the couch, and my eyes were so heavy.” She twirled a lock of hair around her finger, fidgeting.

“No harm,” I assured her. I leaned my elbow on the truck. “How about I drive you home?”

She immediately shook her head. “You’ve done enough, really.”

Waving her off, I washed my hands in the sink and then grabbed my keys off the counter before leading her out, flipping off the lights as we went.

“Thanks, Chase,” she said softly as I held open the passenger door for her.

I smiled at her. “It’s nothing. You’re on my way home anyway.”

“No, I mean for everything. You’ve been so kind to a stranger.”

I chuckled. “You aren’t a stranger, Win.”

—

It was late when I eventually pulled in front of my house. Grabbing the mail on my way inside, I flipped on the entry hall switch and skimmed through the few bills in my hand. I blinked slowly when I saw my name handwritten on an envelope with my old home’s return address.

The house Stephanie and I had bought together. The one where we were going to have a family. The same one she cheated on me in.

Wiping a hand down my face, I clenched my jaw. I didn’t want to read whatever she had to say. I didn’t want to let her taint what had been a good night.

But somehow, Steph always had me doing everything I didn’t want to do. Ripping open the letter, my eyes glanced over her delicate handwriting, bringing back an onslaught of memories of letters she’d written me over the years. Despite the distance between us and the time apart, she still had a hold over my heart.

Dear Chase,

I miss you.

I miss your dirty work shoes at the front door.

I miss the grease stains on your jeans.

I miss you coming home to me every night with a tired smile.

I miss our Friday night tacos.

I miss the way you looked at me like I held the damn moon.

I miss everything about you—and us.

I'm sorry for hurting you. I'm sorry for sneaking around behind your back. I'm sorry for choosing your best friend. I'm sorry that I fell for him. But most importantly, I'm sorry for doing it in our home, in our bed, where we spoke about our future and the babies we were going to have.

I wish I could go back. I wish I could go undo the past, but I can't.

I got the divorce papers. Please, let's try to get past this. We can try marriage counseling. I'll move to your new home; we can start over. Just the two of us. I love you, Chase Storm. I love you so much, and I hate myself every day for the pain I've caused.

Please forgive me. Please rethink the divorce. Please let me be your wife again.

Love,

Steph

Fisting the letter, I crumpled it in my palm. Storming into my bedroom, I shoved the damn thing into the top drawer of my dresser. The audacity of her to beg for me to come back after everything she did...

I wouldn't go back to her.

I wouldn't fall prey to her tricks again. She could have Ross, she could have his love, they could even make their own family in the house I bought for us. I didn't care anymore. As long as I wasn't involved.

They caused enough pain.

I just wanted to be free.

CHAPTER 11

TEN YEARS **A**go

Blue jays chirped in the distance, hopping from branch to branch above my head. A squirrel raced across our fenced-in yard, and another followed. The stale, summer air was sticky and heavy, but Dad never cared—said it built character.

I disagreed, but I still loved sitting outside with him on the weekends. Mom kept bringing us water and fruit, but nothing took the edge of the heat off. She stayed inside, baking some surprise for the week, like she did every Saturday.

“Look here, Winnie,” Dad said, his voice strained. He was bent over the hood of his beloved truck, wrenching away at something, like he had been for the last two hours. I’d been passing him tools while I read some book Mom picked up at the library for me.

I stood on my toes, peering into the engine bay of Dad’s most prized possession. He was usually very quiet while he worked, only grunting when he got his finger stuck in something or couldn’t figure out how to fit a part in its designate spot.

“What am I looking for?” I scrunched my nose at the rich smell of oil and swallowed thickly, looking up at Dad, who was grinning down at me.

“I’m going to show you how to do an oil change.” He swiped at his forehead, leaving a streak of black across his skin, weathered from hours in the sun working on this very

truck. Mom said it was his first true love, but Dad always disagreed and said it was her. I secretly took Mom's side.

This was his first love; it was his first car, and he'd treated it better than any car he ever bought Mom.

"Why don't we just take it into the shop like Mom's car?" I glanced behind us at Mom's white sedan. He had just taken it in for a service two weeks ago, and Mom complained bitterly about the loaner car the entire time. He chuckled, ruffled my hair, and leaned down to the ground where six small bottles of oil were lined up along with a filter.

"Because this one's part of the family. Your mom and I feed you, right?" I nodded, not following his analogy. "Well, we're going to feed this ole girl." He patted the fender, and I couldn't help but giggle.

Dad had always been crazy about this truck. Mom said he was crazy in love, but I knew there was more to it.

"And Mom's car isn't part of the family?" I pushed, and he cracked a grin.

"Nah, we'll trade it in for another car at the end of the year. This one," he patted the fender again, "we're never trading her in. One day, she'll be yours, and I'm going to show you how to take care of her."

—

Present Day

I shot up from the pillow, startling Hannah, who rolled out of the bed with a loud groan. "What the fuck, Win?" she complained from the floor.

"I need to call Chase," I mumbled, jumping from the bed and fumbling for my phone in the dark room.

"It's the middle of the night," she groaned. I squinted at the time on my phone. I couldn't call him at three A.M. I couldn't ask him if the truck was going to be okay.

"I dreamed about my dad." The first tear rolled down my cheek at the vivid memory. God, it felt like just yesterday he was showing me how to do an oil change while I was sitting

there, cracking jokes and thinking that I'd never need to do that because my dad would always be there to do it.

And now, he was gone.

"Oh, Win, I'm sorry, hun. I'm sorry." She rounded the bed and wrapped me in her embrace. The grief took over, reducing me to a sobbing mess.

"I failed him."

"Not possible. Chase is going to fix that truck. He's going to get it good as new; I promise. He's a good man." She kissed my hair, her nimble arms steel bands of strength wrapped around me.

"I wish I had paid attention when he was showing me what to do. I wish I hadn't assumed he'd be here forever," I cried into her neck.

"You had every right to assume he'd live a long time. He was taken from us too soon, but there's no point in being angry about it or having regrets. He loved you more than anything, and he was so proud of you. He'd be happy that you're taking care of the truck now."

I nodded, at a loss for words. Because deep down, I knew she was right. Dad was a kind, soft, loving man, and he wouldn't want me to be beating myself up over Dalton and all should haves and could haves.

Once I stopped crying, Hannah went back to bed. I laid awake, staring at the ceiling and praying that Chase would have good news in the morning.

Slipping out of bed and being extra careful not to wake Hannah, I threw on some clothes and quietly snuck out of the room. I had to do something, or else, I was going to go crazy.

The lobby of the inn was quiet, lit only by dim lights along the walls. It was weird to see the front desk empty, but I passed on by and headed out into the dark morning. The birds were only just waking up, their song filling the air around me.

An owl hooted in the distance, causing the hair on my arms to rise. If I listened hard enough, I was sure I could hear

the howl of a wolf, but I chose to ignore it.

Following the carefully groomed walking path, I stopped at a bench that overlooked the valley. The sun was starting to rise over the mountain, light falling over the earth in slow motion, bathing the Wolf Valley in a warm glow.

“You would have loved it here, Dad,” I whispered, looking up at the sky. Dad loved nature, but he loved sunrises the most. We’d watched so many from the cab of his truck.

I love you, Winnie.

I could almost hear the deep timber of his voice and feel the warm embrace of his hug.

“I miss you, Dad, I miss you so much. My heart aches for you. I wish you hadn’t left me. You weren’t supposed to follow Mom. You were meant to stay here with me, to protect me from the Daltons of the world.”

I’m sorry, my little Winnie the Pooh.

I blinked back the tears that threatened to spill. Nobody would ever call me that silly nickname again.

“I’m too young to be parentless. Who is going to walk me down the aisle? If I ever get married.” I scoffed. “I can’t trust men. I can’t trust them not to hurt me or to end up like you and mom. I don’t want to die of a broken heart.”

I didn’t hear him anymore, and I wondered if I just imagined it all. The scent of tobacco clung to the air, reminding me of the times I begged him to quit smoking, but he’d just smiled and asked if I would quit eating chocolate.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be ready to love again,” I admitted my biggest kept secret to the valley, soaking in the morning rays, the birds’ melody, and the animals waking up around me.

I waited for the sun to fully rise before calling Chase, needing to know if the truck would be good as new when he was done with it.

“Everything alright, Winnie?” His voice was deeper than normal, and I feared I’d woken him up.

“Did I wake you?”

“No. Been up for an hour. What’s up?” He cleared his throat, and his voice returned to normal. *His morning voice.*

My heart quivered at the sound—a part of him too sexy to be true. This man was pure walking sin.

“Just worried about the truck,” I admitted, standing from the bench to pace the walkway.

“I found out the carburetor is only going to come in next week, so I won’t be able to have everything ready by the end of the week. You’ll have to stay a little longer.”

My heart sank at the news. I had a feeling it wasn’t going to be ready,

“Uh-huh,” I murmured, my steps faltering.

“I’m sorry, Win. Really, I am. I’m doing the best I can, sweetheart.”

I hated but loved when he called me that silly name. I hated how my heart skipped a beat, but I loved how his voice softened. My insides never failed to turn to mush.

“It’s okay. I just need to get it right. It’s really important.”

“I know, and I promise you, I’ll have that truck running better than new once I’m through with it. It won’t be easy, but I’ll do it for you.”

A small smile tilted my lips. “Why for me? Because of the hefty bill you’re gonna slap me with?” I hated the words that flew from my lips, but I was scared he was just being kind because of the big payday.

“Because you’re worming your way into my life, Win, and despite all the fences and walls I’m putting up, you keep getting through them. I don’t want a goddamn penny from you—just your trust.” I sank back down to the bench, speechless.

This man always knew the right words.

He always knew what to say to get under my skin, to bring my defenses down.

“I don’t trust anyone but Hannah. You’re wasting your time,” I told him, and he chuckled.

“You think all men are the same, huh? All of them are like your scumbag ex? I thought all women were cheaters. We were both wrong, Win. And I’ll prove it to you one day at time. I’ll prove I’m the better man.”

“I don’t want to love you or anyone ever again,” I blurted.

“I don’t want you to just love me, Winnie.” He drew in a deep breath. “God, I fought this for so long, but I can’t fight you anymore, sweetheart. I want you to fall in love with me because you know who I am. I want you to erase my past. I want you to show me that real love does exist.”

Tears burned in my eyes at his sweet words, knowing I couldn’t be selfish enough to keep them. “I can’t show you something I don’t believe in.”

“Then I’ll make you believe.”

CHAPTER 12

CHASE

MY SWEET CHASE,

I tried calling after you never responded to my last letter. I see you've blocked my number. And I can't get through to you on social media. My lawyer says to stop reaching out, to respect the boundaries you've placed, but I can't just give up on what we had. I have to try and fight.

I tried calling your work. I was promptly denied access to you and told not to call back. I wonder what you told everyone about me—about us. Chase, please give me a chance to explain.

I know I shouldn't have gone after your best friend, but shit, one late night and a few too many drinks led to a year of mistakes. I thought I loved him. I thought he could make me happier than you, but the truth is, he was just a warm body to keep me company when you couldn't.

I love you.

I love being your wife.

I love what we had and the memories we made in this home. Our home Chase.

Don't stop loving me.

Don't give up on me because of one mistake. Don't let me go.

Please just think about it. We were so beautiful, so perfect, and I know I ruined it, but let me fix it. I found us a marriage

counselor. She's the best in the state and has helped fix so many marriages.

We can move away from here, away from Ross and all the memories. We can start fresh, make new memories of just you and me. I want so badly to move forward.

I told Ross that you're the one I want. I only realized this when I realized I was pregnant a few months ago, and I so desperately wished it was your baby. I never loved Ross, not the way I love you.

I lost the baby and saw that as my chance to get you back, to have another chance at happily ever after with my one true love.

Ross understands. We haven't spoken since I miscarried, and I told him I wanted you. Please know that I am telling the truth. This isn't some elaborate plan to hurt you. I just want a chance.

Chase, please reconsider the divorce. We were so beautiful together. I haven't forgotten our vows. Have you? I won't give up on you, even if you've given up on me.

With love,

Steph

Anger coursed through my veins. She was pushing into my new life where she didn't belong. I wanted her to sign those fucking papers and move on. I didn't want anything to do with her and her ridiculous sob story.

She ruined us, and there was no fixing it.

You didn't come back from a mistake like that. You can't make someone forget how you repeatedly slept with his best friend.

Shoving the letter into the same drawer as the one before it, I slammed the drawer shut, hating that she called my work and I hadn't even known. But my front desk attendant had been smart enough to protect me.

She should take her lawyer's advice and leave me the fuck alone. I was half-tempted to write her a letter back and tell her

to fuck off and have a family with Ross because I would never want one with her—not after her lies.

And in my fucking bed at that.

In my house.

I would never be able to forgive her, no matter how much counseling we went through. I didn't have the willpower to look at her and not snarl.

She didn't deserve my kindness. She didn't deserve my house. She didn't deserve anything from me, but my mother had raised me better.

Locking the front door on my way out, I took the short drive to work, thinking about my earlier conversation with Winnie.

She'd been on my mind since last night. I had tossed and turned in bed, unable to sleep without seeing her blue eyes. So, at the ass-crack of dawn, I went for a jog, and then she called just as the sun had fully risen over Wolf Valley.

There was a hint of fear in her voice and a touch of sadness, which wrecked my soul. I longed to meet her ex-piece-of-shit boyfriend and wring his neck for not maintaining the truck like he apparently promised her dad he would. Instead choosing to not only cheat on her but abandon her in her time of need.

All he had to do was take it into a shop and have all this work completed instead of letting her drive it and allowing the problems to just get worse. It made my blood boil to think about anyone treating a woman like that.

At the shop, I noticed Max's Jeep Wrangler parked out back and groaned. It was too fucking early to deal with him.

When I opened my truck door, he was already hopping out of his Jeep with a big, cheesy grin, and I knew exactly who put that look on his ugly mug. He handed me a cup of coffee with a wink.

“Before you tell me it's too early, we need to talk.” He followed me into my shop. I turned the alarm off and started

flipping the lights on.

“About?” I sipped at the scalding-hot liquid, thankful he thought of me.

“Hannah and Winnie, of course. I had the best sex of my life last night. That woman is a fucking goddess, and then she didn’t even stay the night. She got dressed, kissed me, and asked for a ride home to take care of Winnie.”

“Good to know, but really, I’m not interested in your sex life.” I grinned when he scowled, shaking his head at me.

“Shut up. You’re just jealous you aren’t getting any.” I rolled my eyes. “You haven’t worked your charm on Miss Sworn-Off-All-Men.” I groaned at the reminder of the weeks it’d been since I laid with a woman. Hell, it’d been a whole year since sex had contained any meaning or depth to it besides the act of just getting off.

“Oh, wait. You have worked your charm. She just isn’t dropping her pants. Can’t say I blame her, she must have seen some gray hairs and wrinkles,” he joked.

“Shut up, Max. She’s been hurt by her ex and whoever else in her past.”

“You’ve also been hurt by your bitch of an ex-wife, but that hasn’t exactly stopped you from pursuing her, has it?” I shrugged.

“Not like I was going after her with the right intentions at first.” He snickered.

“I mean, her body is smoking, but Hannah is the whole package, man. What changed from a fuck and duck?” I hated when he said that, and he knew it.

“I can’t put my finger on it, man. She’s just crawled into my head, and I can’t get her out. The more time I spend with her, the more I need to know everything about her.”

It was silent for a little while, and I began getting things set up for work, enjoying the peace. It didn’t last long before he opened his big mouth again. “Alright, hear me out.” I arched a brow at him. “Han and I were talking about it last night.”

“Before or after the sex?” I bumped his shoulder, and he scowled.

“After, dickhead. How about a double date at an actual restaurant? Maybe we can take them out of Wolf Valley to the city. I know a few nice places out there.” I started to shake my head at the thought of the awkward hour car ride out to the city, and then her immediate rejection.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. You take Hannah out. I need to work on this truck.” I thought back to my words earlier this morning to Winnie.

I don't want you to just love me, Winnie. God, I fought this for so long, but I can't fight you anymore, sweetheart. I want you to fall in love with me because you know who I am. I want you to erase my past. I want you to show me that real love does exist.

“I’ll think about it,” I offered, throwing the empty coffee cup into the trash and heading over to her truck.

“What’s holding you back?”

“Stephanie wrote another letter,” I informed him. “Apparently, she’s tried calling me, but I blocked her a few days ago, and she’s called here.” I started on the oil change and noted that the truck needed all the fluids flushed.

“Begging for you again?” I nodded, and he scoffed. “That’s so fucking low of her. I wish I could meet her and give her a fucking piece of my mind.”

I snorted. “Not much good that would do. She’s a stubborn bitch.” I pushed an empty drip tray under the car and then pulled the drain plug.

Black slush poured out of the oil pan, alerting me that it was well overdue.

“You really going to slap that pretty girl with a large bill?” he asked, glancing at my clipboard that rested next to the car with the long list of work that needed to be done.

“I don’t exactly plan on it.” I rubbed at the back of my neck. Nothing with Winnie was going according to plan.

“Agree to the date,” Max urged. “We can take separate cars for privacy.” He wiggled his brows, and I shook my head.

“You need to grow up, man. You aren’t sixteen anymore.” He shrugged and tossed his now empty coffee cup into the trash.

“You’re the one with your brain in the gutter—not me. So, tomorrow night, we pick the girls up at seven?” he pushed again.

An irritable sigh slipped past my lips. “I’ll think about it. Stop pressuring me. You know how I feel about dates.”

He glanced at his watch and grimaced. “I’ll see you later. Gotta whip my crew into shape so I can finish that job. I need a good payday.” He waved on his way out, and I nodded at his back, finally alone.

The rest of my employees staggered in, and they all slowly got to work. Someone cranked up the radio, and heavy metal blasted through the small space. Before I knew it, it was lunch time, and everyone was gone again for the hour, while I was still cranking away at the goddamn truck.

“Hungry?” Winnie’s soft voice startled me. I turned to see her holding up a bag from Daisies. “I got the grilled cheeses again.” Her smile was small—shy. Fear clouded her blue eyes, but she stood her ground, waiting for me to respond.

“Starving, Win. Absolutely starving.” Her smile grew, all traces of her fear and anxiety leaving her body as she closed the space between us. Opening the bag, she offered me a hot sandwich, the rich aroma filling the air around us.

“Good. Otherwise, I’d have to eat two of these on my own.”

She kept me company for the rest of the afternoon, passing me tools, keeping up small talk, and even cracking jokes with my few employees. At one point, she jammed out to some old rock song playing and had the whole shop in hysterics at her horrible dancing skills.

Hannah swung by to pick her up at sunset, and they left with the intent of going to Sadie’s for line dancing.

After locking up, I sat in my truck, going over the day and how Winnie had a light about her. She made everyone around her happy.

Dialing Max's number, I held the phone up to my ear.

"What's up, asshole?" he answered gruffly. A drill sounded loudly over the line.

"Still working?" He grunted in answer. "Need some help?"

"Half my crew called in sick, and we're supposed to have this job finished by the end of the week. If you could lend me an hour or two of your time, I would really appreciate it."

"I'll be there in five. And Max?" I started the truck, and it roared to life.

"Yes, Chase?" he countered.

"Count me in for the date. Separate cars." I winced at the loud crash on his end. I was pretty sure something got broken.

"Fuck yes! You got it! I'll call Hannah now and make the arrangements. Oh, man, you're the best. You won't regret this. I have a good feeling about it."

I knew he was right. There was no chance in hell I was going to regret spending two whole hours alone with Winnie.

"You know, Chase, I think she's your second chance."

I blinked, not following. "Second chance at what? I'm not going to marry her, Max."

"Don't speak too soon, bud. She's your second chance at happiness. She found you for a reason, her truck broke down in our small town."

I scoffed. "I don't know if I believe all that, but I'll keep my mind open." I ended the call before he could spout more nonsense and headed to the construction site.

Winnie—my second chance? Funny.

There was no way that gorgeous girl would ever settle down with the likes of me in this middle-of-nowhere town, away from her friends and family.

Thinking about her strawberry blonde hair, blue eyes, and full lips, I couldn't help but smile. There was something very special about her.

I was going to be so ruined when she left town.

CHAPTER 13

I'D BEEN in Wolf Valley for almost a week now, and not only was it slowly starting to grow on me, but so was a certain mechanic. I'd never been a huge fan of small towns. I didn't like the idea of bumping into someone I knew every time I went out or everyone knowing my business.

Hannah and I grew up in South Florida near the beach, where the chances of you knowing someone in the grocery store were slim to none. After high school, everyone went their own ways to colleges all over America, except for Hannah and I, who stayed close to home, not wanting to leave each other or our parents.

There was something comforting about the way Serena, the young girl from Daisies Pastries, remembered my name every morning when Hannah and I came in for breakfast. And what we loved the most was that Serena and Dylan, the pastry chef, remembered our orders after only two days.

"This place is growing on me," Hannah commented, looking out the café window at the street where people bustled by. She sipped on her cappuccino and thanked Serena when a croissant appeared out of thin air.

"Wolf Valley or a certain contractor?" She blushed at the mention of Max, her hazel eyes snapping to mine immediately.

"Hush now. I don't need the whole café knowing my business. You know gossip spreads like wildfire in towns like this." She looked around warily.

“What are you trying to hide?” I picked up my latte and sipped at the steaming hot liquid.

“Nothing. It’s just a fling and going to end as soon as we leave to go home. No need to get attached or anything,” she dismissed, but I knew she was falling for him.

“Just a fling, huh?” I teased, and she nodded.

“What about you and a certain mechanic? Is it going to turn into more?” She changed the subject, and I hated her for it, but I knew it was coming.

“You know how I feel about dating. I came on this trip to heal, Han, not to fall in love with a stranger. Plus, you can’t fall in love in such a short time, and I’m not sticking around longer than necessary.”

She shook her head in disagreement, but I didn’t have anything else to say on the matter. Chase was a fine man to look at, and he was kind, but I wasn’t staying long enough to fall in love with him, despite our phone conversation yesterday.

My phone buzzed on the table at the same time as Hannah’s. We both reached for them, and she instantly smiled at whatever message awaited her.

I couldn’t help the smile that tugged at the corners of my lips either.

Chase: *Be ready tonight at 7 sharp*

Winnie: *Why?*

Chase: *Max talked me into a double date*

Winnie: *I already told you no dating*

Chase: *Humor me, sweetheart*

Winnie: *Dress code?*

Chase: *Doesn’t matter. I know you’ll look beautiful*

Butterflies erupted in my stomach at his simple compliment. He’d never passed one so openly before, and the

fact that he thought I was beautiful, that anyone other than my best friend would think I was beautiful, was staggering.

Dalton had knocked my confidence completely. And I wanted to build it back myself, but Chase was certainly helping.

“Who has you smiling like that?” Hannah asked with a cheeky grin because she knew exactly what man had this effect on me, no matter how hard I fought it.

“You know exactly who it is. Stop playing coy.”

“So, you’ll go?” she asked, finishing off her croissant. I glanced back down at my phone and then up at her. Her cheeks were flushed, and sparkles lit up her eyes.

Did I look like that?

Did I want to look lovestruck?

Did I want to fall for Chase?

—

Naturally, neither of us had anything appropriate to wear on a date, so a shopping spree was in order, and Hannah was more than excited to walk along the bustling main street of Wolf Valley. We went into every store, trying on dresses, shoes, and accessories, befriending almost half the town in the process.

Like I had suspected, we were the town gossip, and everyone wanted to know who we were and what the hell we were doing in their small part of the world.

And then, the questions about the men came. Hannah was a god at deflecting, too damn good at brushing them off, while I stammered and stuttered like a goddamn fool.

“Do you really think a blowout is needed?” I asked as we entered the small salon. Hannah simply turned to me with big eyes and a slack jaw like I was the crazy one. I hated wasting money, especially when I wasn’t working and couldn’t hit those overtime hours.

And naturally, my best friend had no worries or cares about money because she made enough being a teacher and her parents were always right there shoving their platinum cards at her.

“I’ll get it today, Win. My treat.” She asked the lady behind the counter for two blowouts and then turned to me with a big grin when she told us to follow her to the back.

“You’ve paid for enough, Han. I’m not here to mooch off your money.”

“Mooch, hun. Mooch away. I’d rather spend it on us anyway. Pampering is needed. Hey, do you by any chance do manis and pedis here, too?” she asked the sweet, older lady, who nodded and pointed to the corner of the salon where two young girls were doing nails.

“Hannah, no,” I protested, but she shook her head, completely ignoring me.

“We’d like those as well. Do you think you have time?” She completely disregarded me and continued talking to the older lady.

“I’ll check the book, but it shouldn’t be a problem, dear. Where are you two going tonight?” She raised a white brow, mischief and excitement lighting up her gray eyes.

“We’ve got hot dates!” Hannah squealed, and I sighed, knowing we were for sure going to be the town’s hottest gossip once again come tomorrow.

I could see the headlines now in tomorrow’s newspaper: *Two city girls steal the hearts of Wolf Valley’s hottest bachelors.*

“Are you two new around here?” I cringed at the question. I hated being in the spotlight, and Hannah knew that.

“We’re just visiting because my friend’s truck broke down outside of town, and Chase is fixing it for her, but we’ll be heading back to Florida next week.” Hannah glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. “You live in such a beautiful part of the world; we had no idea it even existed.”

She gets the subject off of us after sensing my discomfort, thankfully.

“I’ve lived here my entire life now. Watched the town grow into what it is today, and the people come and go. It’s nice to have some fresh faces in the salon. Thank you for stopping in, dear.” She left us to two younger women in their fifties, who proceeded to wash our hair and then blow it out, telling us about their children and husbands.

The atmosphere was light and friendly with even simpler conversations that put my heart at ease and distracted me from thoughts of Chase, the truck, and my dad.

—

Ever the perfect gentlemen, Chase and Max picked us up at the door of our room, both holding a single pink rose with matching, sinful grins on their sexy faces. Hannah squealed as she rushed forward, pressing a kiss to Max’s cheek and instantly bringing the rose to her nose.

I, on the other hand, hesitated as Chase’s green eyes skimmed over me, narrowing slightly at the shiny, silver stilettos, and then darkening with lust as they swept up my legs, over my waist, all the way up until they landed on my eyes.

Hunger.

Desire.

Need.

Want.

So many emotions swam in the mossy depths of his eyes. I swallowed back the gasp bubbling in my throat and took an unsteady step in his direction. His gaze immediately shot back down to my feet and then landed on the perfect amount of cleavage that the black dress Hannah picked out for me to wear for tonight amplified.

I reached for the rose, stopping myself from biting the lipstick straight off my lip when his warm hand landed on my waist. He pulled me closer, and my nose skimmed his jaw. The

overwhelming scent of sandalwood invaded my senses, and I sank into him, pressing the softest kiss to his neck before I even really realized what I was doing.

“Hi, sweetheart,” he rumbled, his voice thick with need, his hold tight with want.

I wasn't going to survive the night.

Hannah and Max walked ahead of us, their hands linked, their heads bent toward one another like old lovers, not like two strangers who barely knew each other.

I wanted to be free like Hannah. I wanted to open my heart and be whoever I wanted for the remaining time I had here with Chase, but my fears and anxieties from the past were holding me back.

Max led Hannah to his Jeep, and Chase led me to his truck, where I shot him a puzzled look. “Need some alone time with you,” he grumbled, pressing a kiss to my forehead. Immediately, all the voices in my head reminding me that this was a bad idea quieted.

He opened the passenger door for me and helped me into the raised cab, his hand lingering a moment longer than necessary on my hip before he teasingly dragged it down my exposed thigh.

When he closed the door with a wink, I clenched my thighs together, desire pooling in my stomach at the thought of alone time together.

I wanted his hands back on me. I needed to feel his calloused fingers on my thigh again and hear the rasp of desire in his voice. Needed to hear it again so I knew that it was all for me.

Once he slid into the driver's seat, I jumped when he slammed the door, pulling me straight out of a fantasy where we never made it to dinner.

“What's going on in that pretty head of yours, Win?” He didn't look at me as he shifted the truck into drive. He just reached over and rested his hand on my thigh like it belonged there. Like this was normal.

Like we were more than strangers.

“I don’t do this,” I softly admitted, looking down at his tan hand gripping my thigh. Tingles shot across my skin from the contact.

“What don’t you do, sweetheart?” He followed Max out of Wolf Valley, where we were the only two cars on a deserted road.

“Date.” Roughly, I cleared my throat. “I don’t date.” I swallowed, almost stuttering on the word.

“Then don’t call it a date. How about just two friends having dinner? Can you do that, Winnie?” I nodded, not trusting my damn voice because somehow, he always knew what to say. “Did I tell you that you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen?” I looked at him in the dark, thankful he couldn’t see my reddening cheeks.

“No, you didn’t,” I whispered, my hand landing on his, our fingers immediately linking together.

“I thought you were beautiful that day you showed up at my shop, all enraged, eyes wild, hair a mess, but nothing prepared me for the version of you I got tonight. God, Win, you drive me fucking wild. I vowed to myself I wouldn’t do this again with someone. I wouldn’t do the whole dating thing, but you just crept right into my heart like it was always meant to be yours.”

“Chase, stop, please.” I closed my eyes for a moment, drawing in a deep breath. “I told you I can’t do this with you. Don’t ruin tonight.” My teeth sank into my bottom lip, trying to prevent it from shaking. I needed to hold onto every ounce of strength I had left to deny him. All I wanted was to lean across the stupid console separating us and kiss the ever-loving breath out of this gorgeous man. This was killing me.

“Let me pretend for the night that this is more than one date. Let me pretend that you’re as into me as I am you,” he softly pleaded, making my heart lurch.

“Chase, there can’t be more. I already told you this. I’m leaving when the truck is ready. I’m going back home—a

home that is far away from here.” His fingers tightened around mine, his heat warming me up from the inside out.

“Where is home, Win? How far is far away?” He merged onto the highway, his left arm resting on the driver’s side door as he sank further into his seat, his fingers gripping the side of the steering wheel.

“South Florida.” His hand on my thigh tightened so much, for a brief moment, I wondered if it would bruise.

“Where?”

“By the beach,” I answered vaguely.

“Come on, Win. What city?” His grip on the steering wheel tightened, his knuckles turning white. Instantly, I knew something I said triggered him.

“Delray Beach,” I whispered, hating the way his knuckles went even whiter and his face paled. “Why, Chase?”

“That was home for me, too,” he said quietly, his voice almost lost to the loud whiz of the highway coming through the cracked windows.

“Why did you leave?” His grip on my thigh loosened, and I tightened my hold on his fingers, not wanting him to let me go.

His throat bobbed as he swallowed. “I needed a fresh start, so I packed up everything I owned and left.” He was being purposefully vague—too vague for my liking—but I didn’t press. Because at the end of next week, it wouldn’t be my problem. He would become a distant memory, and tonight would just be one night of breaking every promise I made to myself after Dalton abandoned me and cheated on me.

I would let him in for the night. I would let myself indulge with him. Enjoy the taste of what we could be, but never would.

Just for tonight.

CHAPTER 14

MAX HAD CHOSEN some swanky place in the city. The girls were in awe, both expressing their gratitude multiple times. It was a simple evening shared in great company.

Winnie sat next to me, her hand resting on my thigh like it belonged there as she spoke with Hannah and Max about trivial things. I couldn't focus long enough on the conversation to partake when my mind was a million miles away.

I didn't want to let Stephanie control my life. She had single-handedly ruined our marriage and made me never want to trust another woman again, but I was starting to think that I shouldn't let her have that power.

Winnie showed me every day that she was nothing like Stephanie and that there were good women out there in the world. Ones that didn't cheat on you with your best friend.

Maybe I was wrong about being sworn off women. Maybe I was wrong to fall for Winnie, but there was no stopping this train. It had already departed the station the day she blew into town.

I gently placed my hand on top of hers, and she jumped, her head immediately snapping to mine. Too many questions swam in her blue eyes. I didn't know how to answer them.

The server interrupted our brief moment with the check, and then, before I knew it, we were back in the truck heading back home, the night coming to an end too early for my tastes.

“Would you want to come back to my place for another bottle of wine?” Our hands were linked. Whether I initiated or

she did, I had no clue nor did I care. Her fingers tightened their grip around mine.

“Yeah, I think I’d like that.” She looked out the window at the dark sky, the stars on full display dancing around a full moon. “I wish the sky looked like this at home,” she whispered, and I knew exactly what she meant.

The city lights never allowed for a night like tonight.

I didn’t want to be wrong about her. I hated that, in this moment, she stole my breath, crippling me in a way that hadn’t been possible since I was in love with Stephanie and asked her to be my wife.

I willed thoughts of my ex-wife out of my mind. She had taken enough; she wasn’t ruining tonight. She couldn’t take this from me, too.

Pulling into my gravel lot, I shut the truck off. The music faded away, and all that filled the silence of the cab was our combined breathing.

I didn’t feel like a thirty-year-old man—not with the nerves skating across my skin. I knew how to take care of a woman—at least, I thought I did.

I thought I was a good husband.

I thought I kept my wife satisfied.

I thought a lot of things, and now, I knew nothing other than the fact there was a beautiful woman in my car waiting for me to make the next move. I could be the perfect gentleman and just share a bottle of wine and then walk her home.

I could be that man.

But when it came to Winnie, I wanted to be someone else.

“I know what you want, Win. I know you want something temporary, but I don’t think I can do that with you. I’ve been burned before, and I’m willing to jump into the damn fire with you because I know you are worth it. But I need to know before I burn myself that we are more than one night or one week.”

I did my best to brace myself for her reaction. Looking at her in the near-darkness, the light from the full moon our only light, it illuminated her in the most stunning way, making Winnie seem like a dream come true.

“Chase, I can’t...” I started to pull away from her, already sensing her rejection, but her fingers tightened around mine once again, not letting me go. “Don’t do that. Don’t pull away from me.”

“Tell me what you want, Win. Tell me what you need,” I pleaded, unbuckling my belt and leaning over the center console to press a kiss to her forehead. Her sharp inhale was all the confirmation that I needed that she felt this, too.

“I don’t know what’s right anymore. I do know that my heart is screaming at me to never let you go, but my head is screaming and begging me to run because I won’t survive being hurt again.”

Cupping her face, I brushed my thumb over her trembling bottom lip. “I’m not going to hurt you, baby.”

She looked at me with conflicted eyes. “I want to trust you. I want to fall in love with you because I know it would be easy. Everything just makes sense when I’m with you. I know I’m safe and happy, but I’m so scared.” Kissing her forehead again, I ached to kiss her lips, to steal her breath away, to taste her, but she wasn’t ready.

“Come on. Let’s go inside. I’ve got a bottle of wine I’ve been waiting to share with the right person.”

I opened my door and started to let go, but she tightened her hold again, stopping me. “You’re not mad?”

Turning my head, I frowned at her. “Mad about what?”

She flushed, glancing briefly at the crotch of my pants before looking into my eyes. “You know...”

I laughed softly. She was so damn adorable. “I’m not some horny teenage boy who gets mad when you tell me you aren’t ready to have sex, Winnie. I will wait for you. I’ll wait for you in the fire, waiting for you to put it out.” She let my hand go,

and I jumped out of the truck, rounding the front and helping her out, admiring her beautiful body as she leaned against me.

“You’re a good man, Chase. Too good.” She watched me unlock the front door and then followed me into the entry hall. She bent down to unbuckle her heels, but I dropped to my knees for her, quickly untying the buckle, my fingers grazing her small ankle.

She gasped softly at my touch but said nothing as I stood back up. She was noticeably shorter now, just the way I preferred. “Thanks,” she whispered, her blue eyes darkening with desire.

“Go take a seat in the lounge. I’ll grab the wine and glasses. There are some candles on the table. Light them for me?”

“Chase, forget the wine.” She closed the space between us, her hands going to my chest, fingers curling into my shirt, pulling me closer to her. My heart knocked against my breastbone. “Stop being the perfect gentleman. Please.”

Dropping my hands to her waist, I wished there wasn’t a dress separating me from her soft skin. “What do you want, Win?”

“Kiss me, Chase. Burn me please. I need to be burned by you.” Groaning, I didn’t give her a chance to change her damn mind because I *needed* to taste her full lips. I needed to know if she was as sweet as I imagined.

Leaning forward, I brushed my nose against hers. When I pressed a kiss to the corner of her lips, she moaned softly. It was the sweetest sound in the world. “Like that, sweetheart?”

“More. I need more.” She curled her body impossibly closer to mine, her hands sliding up my chest, around my neck, and into my hair, tugging me even closer to her. “Burn me, Chase,” she pleaded against my lips, her eyes falling shut, waiting patiently.

The air crackled, the hair on my arms standing on edge, desire for this beautiful woman consuming me from my head to my toes. I groaned, wanting to take it slow, but knowing it

wasn't going to be possible. Once I tasted those lips completely, I was going to lose my fucking mind.

Pressing my lips to hers, a groan bubbled in my throat as a moan escaped hers. I dropped one of my hands to her sweet ass, cupping it, pulling her flush against me. Her addictive lips parted in surprise, and I took advantage. My tongue swept into her mouth, and I groaned at her taste.

I needed more.

I bit down on her bottom lip, and she made a soft noise of surprise.

Her noises, her scent, her body was enough to have me busting out of my damn jeans like the teenage boy I told her I was not. She drove me absolutely crazy.

“Winnie...” I whispered.

“Chase, more,” she answered, her words breathless.

I was so fucking hard for her. I knew she felt it against her stomach through the too-thin material of her dress.

Sliding both hands under her legs, I picked her up. Her long, bare legs wrapped around my waist without hesitation. Pressing her against the wall, I devoured the moans slipping past her wet lips. I pulled away from her lips, only to suck in a greedy breath of air before kissing across her jaw. Her chest rose and fell rapidly against mine.

Her hands were lost in my hair, fingers tugging me closer, legs tightening, her body trembling.

I wanted to *fucking devour* her.

She grinded her hips against mine as I sucked at the sensitive skin of her neck. Pulling back, she stared at me, blue eyes half-lidded as I pressed a kiss to her pink lips.

“Bed, Chase, please,” she breathlessly begged, her lips brushing mine.

“Someone’s desperate,” I rasped. Her body trembled against mine, her eyes wild with want. Gripping her ass, I lowered my head to her neck, kissing a trail up to her ear, and

brushed my lip over her earlobe. At her answering moan, I sucked the spot behind her ear and hummed against her skin. “I want to fucking lose myself in you, Winnie.”

“Yeah?” she asked, breathless. Her breasts brushed against my chest as she arched her back, trying to erase any space between us.

I growled. “What do you want, Winnie?”

“You.” Her answer was quick, breathless, heavy with desire and lack of thought.

“Tell me more.” I eased her off the wall, carrying her to my bedroom.

“I want you everywhere.” Her lips brushed over my jaw until they latched onto my neck, her teeth nipping, tongue teasing.

A low groan crawled up my throat. This little vixen was such a tease. “Is that what you really want, sweetheart?” I pulled back so I could look into her beautiful eyes.

Her kiss-swollen lips formed into a pout. “It’s what I need, Chase. What I’ve needed for days.” I groaned at her admission. We were *finally* on the same fucking page. I needed her like I needed oxygen for my next breath.

I lowered her feet to the plush carpet of my room, my eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness. I drank her in as the clouds moved past the moon, allowing the white light to shine into my bedroom. She turned around, giving me her back, and pulled her hair to the side. The silver of her zipper glinted in the darkness. I skimmed my fingers up her back, along her spine, and her body trembled at my soft touch.

“Chase, please.”

God, I couldn’t get enough of her sweet begging.

“Please what? I can’t read your mind,” I teased in a low voice.

“Touch me,” she begged. I dragged the zipper of her black dress down ever so slowly, revealing her bare back, perfect creamy skin on display for me. I stopped at the bottom, black

lace meeting my fingers as her dress pooled to the ground leaving her in a black lace thong.

I groaned.

“Fuck, Winnie. You’re so fucking beautiful.” She turned, immediately reaching for the buttons on my shirt and tearing through them with a hunger I’d never seen before.

I leaned closer until our noses were nearly touching. Her panting breaths ghosted over my mouth, making me delirious. She pushed my shirt over my shoulders, letting it fall to the ground with her dress, then her cold hands skimmed over my taut muscles, tracing their way over my tattoos.

I slid my hand into her panties, no longer able to control myself as I glided my middle finger straight through her pussy lips and hummed in absolute ecstasy.

“You’re so wet for me, Winnie,” I whispered against her lips, our lips brushing with each word, bodies trembling with need.

“More, Chase, more!” she moaned, throwing her head back as I answered her pleas. “God, yes!”

She looked so good—flushed cheeks, eyes wide and wild for me, body trembling for my touch. Her eyes were hooded as she stared up at me, dark lashes fluttering wildly with every stroke of my fingers. Her lips parted, a look of pure desperation written across her face. Desperation for me and what I could do to her.

I pressed the heel of my hand against her clit as I pumped my fingers in and out of her dripping-wet pussy, pulling the first orgasm out of her willing body. She gasped, her body going stiff against mine, her nails digging into my biceps, holding us in this moment. She exploded against me. Her eyes fluttered shut, and my name left her lips on a low moan.

“Chase...”

I gently pushed her back onto the bed. Her strawberry blonde hair fanned out around her, her chest rapidly rising and falling as she struggled for air. My fingers never stopped their movement inside of her, and suddenly, her hands left my

biceps, and both clutched at my hand, still working, needing to give her another orgasm. “Chase, stop. I can’t—” Her breaths were choppy, her body tightening all over again, and then she was falling into ecstasy once more.

A smirk tilted my lips as I leaned over her, roaming my eyes over her beautiful, flushed face. “I’m not done, sweetheart. We’ve got all night. I plan to burn every fucking inch of you.” She moaned, those blue eyes falling shut as her body went limp. I was hard as a fucking rock, ready to sink into her wet heat and have her scream my name as I brought her to another orgasm.

Unbuttoning my jeans, I stood and let them fall to the floor, followed by my black boxers. She licked her lips as her dark eyes took me in. Every inch of me.

“Chase...” She leaned up on her elbows, pushing her breasts forward. Crawling over her body, I pressed a tender kiss to her lips, my cock brushing against her pussy. Her body shook violently from the brief touch.

“You want my cock, Winnie?” She nodded, her teeth sinking into her plump, bottom lip. “Say it, baby. I need to hear it.” I kissed her jaw, and she moaned.

“I want your cock, Chase.” Her voice shook with the words.

And then, I realized. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

Dropping my head to her shoulder, I rasped, sounding like I’d been chewing fucking gravel, “Fuck, Win, I can’t give it to you.” I groaned, and she stiffened.

“Why the hell not?” she barked, her eyes wild with anger now.

“Condom.” I curled my fingers into the comforter. “I don’t have a fucking condom.”

She sighed in relief, flopping back onto the mattress. “I’m on the pill. Please, Chase, don’t stop now.” Christ, she was too good to be true.

She wrapped her arms around my neck as I lined my hard cock up with her slick entrance. Slipping just the head inside, we both moaned simultaneously. My head fell to her neck, lips sucking on any skin I could touch.

“Chase—*oh, God.*” A broken sob crawled up her throat as she moaned my name again. *My* fucking name.

“Louder. Scream for me.” As I slid all the way in, she fucking delivered, my name bouncing off the four walls of my bedroom like a prayer as I rocked in and out of her.

She whimpered as her orgasm peaked, her body going stiff even as she rolled her hips against mine. Nothing coherent slipped past her lips as she wildly clutched at my sweat-dampened skin, her pussy milking my cock like it was made for me.

“Winnie, I need you to cum for me again, sweetheart,” I groaned, thrusting into her harder, losing any semblance of control I had. “That’s it,” I growled as her walls tightened around me again. “Yes. Give it to me.” I dug my fingers into her hips, bruising my fingerprints into her flesh. I moaned her name as I came, and her body arched into mine, pressing against me.

“Chase!” she screamed, her own orgasm tearing through her. I leaned my forehead against hers, brushing my lips against her cheek.

I wasn’t going to be able to let go. Not now. Not now that I’d had her like this.

She wanted me to burn her, but she’d burned herself right into my soul tonight.

CHAPTER 15

THE SOFT CHIRP of a bird's morning song pulled me from a deep sleep. Keeping my eyes closed, I pressed my face further into the pillow, trying to block out the morning light that was begging to creep into my eyelids.

I wasn't ready to wake up yet.

My body ached in the most delicious way. My bones felt hollow, and my mind was free of stress and worry, my heart light as could be. Chase's heavy arm was wrapped around my bare middle, tugging me closer to him, pressing my back against his broad, hairy chest.

His lips were at my neck, softly kissing a trail down my throat to my shoulder, the scruff of his beard ticklish in the most beautiful way.

This.

This was what life was all about.

Mornings in bed with someone you loved.

The thought wreaked havoc on the peace in my mind as I contemplated the capability of loving Chase so soon. I wasn't that reckless. I wasn't that girl—the one who just fell for a guy after one night of amazing sex.

But it wasn't the sex that made me fall for him.

It was Chase. Just *him*.

His green eyes that saw right through the bullshit I spewed... His giant heart that he tried to hide behind a grumpy persona...

It was the way he kneeled at my feet to take my shoes off last night.

And how he always helped me into his truck.

How he looked after working all day, covered in grease, eyes tired, muscles surely aching, yet a smile still remained glued to his lips as he let me pretend to know how to work on my dad's truck.

My hands that clutched the sheets to my chin shook, and my heart raced as I finally let myself come to the simple conclusion. I wanted to tell him. After the way he poured his heart out to me, begged me to burn in the fire with him, I had just sat there, pretending like I wasn't ready to jump, only to realize this morning I'd somehow jumped long ago.

Fear seized my body, clawing at my throat. Panic threatened to ruin every good thing that happened in this bed. I wasn't scared that he would hurt me like Dalton.

Chase wasn't a liar or a cheater.

Chase was a good man. He was the man my dad would have wanted me to find.

I was terrified I'd fall so deeply in love that I would never be able to find my out if I needed to. And with all great love came an even greater loss.

I didn't want to end up like my parents.

I couldn't become dependent on a man for my will to live.

I wouldn't allow it because I was more than that.

His hand traced an absent-minded pattern on my stomach, causing a flurry of butterflies to take flight.

And all thoughts of independence flew away with them. I didn't want this to end. I wanted to know if he felt the same way about me. Would he love me unconditionally? He asked me to jump into the fire; I would do it for him. I'd jump off a damn bridge to follow him.

Would he stand by my side forever?

“Morning, sweetheart,” his deep, raspy voice whispered in my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

Sinking further into him, I let his warmth wrap around me—the perfect blanket. “Hey.”

“You hungry?” He kissed the spot behind my ear, and my toes curled under the warm blanket. My stomach growled in answer. Chase’s deep chuckle vibrated from his body through mine, and I sighed, a small smile tilting my lips.

“A little.” He pressed another kiss to my neck and then slipped his arm from my waist before rolling off the bed. I watched him stand, taking in his beautiful tan skin, glowing in the morning light. His muscles flexed as he stretched his arms above his head.

“Well, you can’t eat me, Win.” I quickly looked away from him. “Grab a shirt from the top drawer, and I’ll whip you up some eggs.” My cheeks flushed a deep red at the insinuation. But in my defense, he *did* look good enough to eat.

He slipped on his boxers from the night before and winked at me as he exited the room, closing the door behind him, allowing me all the privacy I needed—not that I really thought privacy was a thing after what we shared last night. Stretching out in his bed, I inhaled his scent and finally took in the simply decorated room.

No artwork hung—just four bare white walls stared back at me. The room had the basics—a bed, a nightstand, and a dresser. He was surely lacking a woman’s touch. At least the scent of laundry detergent and a scent that was uniquely Chase lingered on the sheets.

Stepping onto the plush carpet, I slipped on my underwear from last night and then crossed the room, opening the top drawer and picking up the first shirt I saw. As I pulled it out, a few pieces of paper fell to the ground at my feet.

Throwing the shirt over my head, Chase’s intoxicating scent overwhelming me in the best way possible, I bent down to pick them up. My eyes caught a signature at the bottom: *With love, Steph.*

Before I could think better of snooping through his private things, I read more, my heart in my throat, my chest squeezing painfully.

Chase, please reconsider the divorce. We were so beautiful. I haven't forgotten our vows. Have you? I won't give up on you even if you've given up on me.

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

Chase was married?

He wasn't single?

Chase was fucking married?

I dropped the letter as if it was a literal flame burning my fingers. This couldn't be real. Chase wasn't this kind of man. He was a *good* man. He wasn't a cheater. He wasn't a liar.

I wracked my brain, trying to remember if I ever asked about previous relationships. I had spoken about mine in-depth, and it hit me. I hadn't wanted to press when he always cut the conversation short about his past, so I left it, and now this. This fucking bomb.

I bent down and picked up the letter again, along with the others that had dropped with it.

Dear Chase,

I miss you.

I dropped the second letter, bile rising in my throat at the thought of Chase using me to cheat on another woman, let alone his wife. Bending down to pick up the letter, I shoved both back into the drawer and slammed it shut. Dropping to my knees, I tried to control the fear that reared its ugly head, all my trauma rushing forward with it.

Panic seized my body, and my muscles locked up, tears streaking down my cheeks.

This wasn't happening again.

Not again.

Chase *wasn't* a liar.

You don't know him, the voice in my head reminded me, the one that told me Dalton was cheating. The one that I should have listened to but never fucking did. Because I'd thought Dalton was a good guy. I thought the same things I was now thinking about Chase.

Chase asked me to burn with him, and oh, how he burned me.

Fuck.

A cry escaped my burning throat, and black dots lined my vision as the anxiety and panic built. Sweat dotted my hairline and coated my body in a thin layer.

I didn't deserve this.

I should have listened to my gut.

I knew better.

Chase was supposed to be a good man.

Why me? *Why?*

I gripped my throat, wishing the pain in my chest would ease or the burn in my throat would disappear, but they only seemed to intensify.

“Win, is everythin—” Chase was at the door, and it squeaked open with his approach. I curled into a ball, hiding my face from his view. “Holy shit, Win. Talk to me.” He rushed into the room, falling to his knees at my side, his arms wrapping around me.

He meant to help, but I was too far gone. The black dots were dancing in my vision again, just like the last time.

“Breathe, pretty girl. Breathe with me.” I tried to listen to him, but my heart broke at the sound of his beautiful voice and feel of his skin on mine, his arms like bands of steel wrapped around me.

He managed to pull my head up. I looked into his green eyes through my blurry vision, tears swimming in my eyes.

“Breathe, sweetheart. Just breathe for me,” he softly coaxed.

Chase was a good man. Chase wouldn't hurt me. Chase was a good man.

I mimicked his movements, inhaling a deep breath, exhaling a moment later. I repeated the exercise until my chest wasn't so tight, and my throat didn't burn so badly. Tears rolled down my cheeks. I didn't have the energy to wipe them away. Instead, I fell apart in his arms.

I hoped and prayed what I read wasn't the truth.

Because I loved Chase.

“Are you...” the words shook, my tongue heavy with the accusation, “married?” The word tasted sour after last night.

Chase stiffened, his muscles clenching, and I knew. I just fucking *knew* I'd been played again.

I had fallen for him after I swore I wouldn't, and now look at me.

Broken all over again.

CHAPTER 16

AS I HELD Winnie's trembling body to my chest, the words that slipped past her lips were unexpected and my worst nightmare. She wasn't supposed to find out like this.

I looked over her head at the chest of drawers—the very one I had told her to get a shirt from, the same fucking drawer that held the letters from Stephanie, begging for me to reconsider our divorce. I had caused this panic attack.

I made her cry.

I did this to Winnie.

Guilt tore through me. She had opened up about her ex. She had poured her fucking heart out to me, and I hadn't done the same.

Instead, she thought I cheated on my wife with her. I made her the other woman when she was so much more.

Her tears soaked my skin. Each one that fell hit me heavier than the last. Her shaky breaths were hot against my neck. I remained stiff—immobile—not knowing how to explain. Should I console her? Should I tell her the truth? Could I trust her with the truth that was my wife, my best friend, my failed marriage?

All I knew was that we weren't supposed to be here. Not on the floor of my bedroom, my heart in my throat and hers in pieces around us.

"I need to go," she whispered, placing a hand on my chest, her nails biting into my skin as she tried—and failed—to push me away. Because I was *not* letting her go. I wasn't going to

let Stephanie rip something else from me. She would not be the reason I lost something else.

“Sweetheart,” I swallowed thickly, my voice sounding strangled, “no. Please.” I wasn’t above begging.

“Don’t call me that!” she spat, pushing harder at my chest, cries tearing from her beautiful lips. I squeezed my eyes shut, her agony like a living, breathing thing inside of me. “Is that what you call your *wife*, too?” she screamed, her hands tugging at her hair, desperation and pain pouring out of her.

“No, Win. No. Just let me explain, baby.” She pushed me again, this time taking me off guard, and she fell back on her butt, scooting away from me. I watched as she wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked back and forth. I reached for her, my fingers brushing her knee, and she screamed, smacking my hand away. I jerked back and roughly yanked a hand through my hair, my fingers catching on the tangle and pulling painfully. “Fuck. Winnie, don’t do this, baby. Just let me explain.”

She cried when I said her name, shaking her head. “No, no, no, no.” She held her hands up to her face, rubbing her eyes. I tried to pull her hands away, but she started screaming again. “No, no! Not again, not again!” Her voice shook with every syllable, getting louder until she was left shrieking the words.

I wrapped myself around her, absorbing whatever she threw at me, wishing I could take away her pain, wishing I had just fucking told her about Stephanie.

Fucking Stephanie, ruining my life again.

“I have to go. I have to go. Let me go!” she mumbled at first and then screamed again, pushing me away. She stood and rushed to the bed, where she grabbed her phone and then dashed out of the room with me hot on her heels. I couldn’t let her leave like this.

“Winnie, please, sweetheart. You can’t leave like this. Don’t leave like this.” I reached for her wrist, but she yanked away from my touch. Her fingers curled around the door

handle, and she threw it open. Sprinting down the porch stairs in just my fucking shirt, she took off.

In the wrong fucking direction of town. Honestly, I was thankful that she didn't know her way around. It made it harder for her to get away from me.

I followed the path she took, the gravel of my driveway biting into my bare feet. A moment later, the asphalt of the road tore through my soles, but still, I pursued her.

"Leave me alone! Leave me alone!" she shouted over her shoulder, running with no destination in mind, only focusing on the need to get away from me.

"Never, Winnie. Never gonna do that, baby." I was right behind her now, giving her the illusion that I couldn't catch her. But if I really wanted to, I could throw her over my shoulder right now.

She stopped suddenly and bent over, her hands on her knees, back arched, gasping for air. I almost crashed into her but managed to stop in time, sucking in a greedy breath of the crisp, morning air.

Winnie turned, jabbing a finger in my chest, her hair a wild mess of tangled curls, makeup smeared under her swollen, red-rimmed eyes. "I fucking trusted you," she brokenly whispered. "I trusted you to not be like *him*."

Grabbing her, I didn't let her push me away this time. She didn't know the fucking truth. And I knew that was my fault, but I would *never* intentionally hurt her. I would *never* do to someone what my wife fucking did to me.

"I am not like your ex, Winnie, and you know that. Don't ever compare me to that lowlife. I told you last night, and I'll tell you again—I'm not the man that is going to hurt you. Ever." She scoffed, still trying to get away from me. "Intentionally, Win. I'm never going to *intentionally* hurt you."

"You just tore my heart into absolute smithereens, Chase, especially after everything I told you! You have a *wife*! Where's your fucking ring, huh? You take it off to lure in the newcomers who don't know any better?" She narrowed her

blue eyes at me, her brows furrowing, anger rolling off her in thick waves.

This woman was a damn hurricane, and I was in her path of destruction. Too bad for her, I'd let her destroy me every fucking day if it meant I got to keep her.

"You made me the fucking other woman!" She ripped herself away from me. "I hate men. I fucking hate all of you! All you do is cause pain. Every single one!" She headed past me, back toward the house.

I followed numbly, not sure how the fuck I was going to fix this. Because as usual, she had drawn her own conclusions, and there was no persuading her otherwise.

"We're getting divorced!" I shouted at her retreating back, and she halted. Stumbling, she whipped back around to face me so fast, her hair lashed out into the air.

"And you think that makes it okay? You think the fact you're getting a divorce means it's okay to pursue another woman? To fuck another woman?"

My own anger rose at her careless words. If only she fucking knew. We were more alike than she would ever care to admit.

"She fucking cheated on me, Winnie!" I barked. "She cheated on me with my best friend for over a year. So, yes, we are getting divorced, and it does make everything okay." Her jaw dropped. I continued walking past her, not reaching for her this time. And when her hand grazed my elbow, I didn't stop.

This was never going to work.

I should have known better.

Because in Winnie's eyes, it didn't matter that I was getting divorced, that Stephanie was the reason our marriage ended.

In Winnie's eyes, all I'd done was cheat, too.

CHAPTER 17

THREE MONTHS AGO

Dalton's phone vibrated every two seconds as text messages flooded in. He was singing in the shower, and even though he was completely offkey, there was something I just loved about the way he sang at the top of his lungs with no care in the world.

Thinking there was some big work crisis that needed his attention, I reached for the phone that was resting on the corner of the couch. The screen lit up, a string of messages from a woman—his secretary from the office.

He'd been coming home later and later, complaining about one of his clients threatening to drop their contract if his team didn't provide a new marketing campaign in one week. Although, that was what he said every week while I cooked dinner and waited for him at the table until eventually, I was too tired to hold my head up.

Lea: I wish you would break up with her already

Lea: I'm tired of the same excuse over and over

Lea: I don't care if her dad just died

Lea: I want to be with you. I want to stop hiding

Lea: Think about the baby. You can't lead a double life forever.

Steve: Have you broken up with Winnie yet? You can't keep doing this to her, man. Wait until Mom finds out.

Lea: Why aren't you answering me?

Lea: **One missed call**

The phone vibrated in my hand again, and I immediately declined the call without even thinking.

Lea: *Dalton baby?*

I declined the call again.

Lea: **Two missed calls**

Dropping the phone to the floor, I ran for the bathroom. Dropping to my knees, I hurled into the toilet, my entire breakfast meal coming up in one heave.

Not Dalton. Not my Dalton. Not after he promised my dad he would take care of me.

Why? Why? Why?

This had to be a prank. Wracking my mind of the date, I knew it wasn't April yet. And Dalton had never been one to play jokes.

"What's wrong, Win?" I looked over my shoulder. He was standing there, dark wet hair falling into his dark eyes. his bushy brows were furrowed, concern flitting across his face for the briefest moment before it was gone again.

Wiping my mouth with a piece of toilet paper, I flushed the toilet and stood on shaky legs. Curling my arms around my stomach, I stepped back from him, afraid to even speak the words aloud.

"Your phone was going crazy." I stopped when my back hit the wall. I watched his eyes widen, and I saw the guilt flash through them... and then, the anger.

"You went through my phone?" he accused right away, and I knew it wasn't a joke. He wouldn't immediately become defensive if it weren't true. Dalton really was cheating on me.

"I thought it was a work emergency. You said there's been a huge crisis at work, and you were in the shower." I was rambling, my thoughts completely jumbled as my world crumbled apart. "Lea misses you," I whispered, bringing my

hands up to my chest, wishing I could claw my heart out and make the pain stop.

“What exactly are you accusing me of, Winnie?” he sneered. I choked on the sob bubbling in my chest.

I couldn't handle any more loss. It was too soon. I *just* started to heal from the loss of my dad.

Shaking my head, my emotions betrayed me as tears rolled down my cheeks. I bit down on my lip to keep my mouth shut, the sobs threatening to break loose at any second.

“Are you really going to cry now? I'm so sick and fucking tired of you crying all the time. It's been two months, Winnie. You can't cry every fucking day.” He crossed his arms over his chest, and I whimpered as his cruel words slammed through me.

“You're cheating on me!” I screamed, losing absolute control at his cruel, careless words.

“You invaded my privacy,” he spat with so much anger directed toward me, it stung.

I wasn't invading his privacy. We'd been dating for years. Hell, we lived together. If anything, he had taken advantage of me.

He closed the distance between us, jabbing his finger into my chest where my heart was splintering into a thousand pieces.

“I can't do this anymore. I can't fucking pretend anymore. I love you, Win, I really do, but you've got this darkness around you, this hatred and anger with the world, and it's toxic, babe.” If I thought my heart couldn't break further, I had been wrong.

“Get out!” I pushed at him, but he was stronger. How foolish I had been to once admire his strength.

He shoved my hands aside and towered over me.

“You want me to get out of *my* apartment, Winnie? The one I've been graciously hosting you in, never asking for rent,

never asking you to fucking clean or do anything? I let you *grieve.*”

He let me grieve.

“Fuck you,” I sneered, using every ounce of strength I possessed to push past him. Rushing into our bedroom, I ran into the closet and pulled out my two suitcases. Quickly, I started throwing all my belongings into them.

“You did,” he said from the doorway of the bedroom, a smug grin twisting his lips. I sucked in a sharp breath. This wasn’t my Dalton.

“This isn’t you,” I whispered, zipping the suitcases shut and standing to face him. He threw his head back and laughed before crossing his arms over his chest, leaning against the doorframe.

“Actually, Winnie, this is exactly who I am, and you knew that in college. You knew it the day you interviewed me, and you loved it. Thought you could change me, huh, babe? Lea doesn’t want to change me. She loves me the way I am.”

I hated the sound of her name in his mouth. I hated the way he sneered at me and the hatred in his eyes.

“You lied to my dad.” He rolled his eyes.

“You really thought I was going to marry you? You’re so fucking dense. You were just a good, convenient fuck, and now you aren’t. Get your shit and get out.”

Grabbing the handles of both my bags, I brushed past him, not giving him the satisfaction of seeing me fall apart. In the hallway of the apartment building, I sucked in the deepest breath I could.

I didn’t need him.

I deserved better.

Taking the elevator down to the parking garage, I threw my bags into the back of the truck and then sped off to Hannah’s apartment, where I no longer could keep the tears at bay. Standing on her doorstep, I fell to my knees, overcome with sadness and anger. So much anger.

She swung open the door, Taylor Swift blaring inside her small apartment.

“Oh, Winnie, what happened?” She threw herself at me, wrapping me in her arms, comforting me without question. Just like she always had.

“Dalton,” I cried into her neck, not able to find more words than that. She had always hated him, had always told me to be wary, but I hadn’t listened.

If only I had. Maybe then I wouldn’t be in this predicament—homeless and broken-hearted.

—

Present

I wanted to go home.

To the place I had grown up where Mom baked cookies in the kitchen and I pretended to help. To the garage where Dad and I had spent hours working on the truck. To my bedroom where I read romance books about perfect men.

To the last place I had been truly safe and loved.

Looking over the valley, I fell in love with the scenery all over again, wishing like crazy Dad was here to see it with me.

“Why do I keep choosing the wrong ones, Dad?” I asked the sky, jumping in surprise when Hannah sat beside me on the wooden bench.

“He’s not Dalton, honey.” She didn’t look at me, but I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye. “He’s so much more than that piece of shit. And you know that.”

I always hated when she was right.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, playing dumb.

“Chase called Max in a flat panic an hour ago, and we’ve been looking for you ever since.” She dropped her head to my shoulder and sighed.

“We?” I asked, confused.

“Max, Chase, and I. Don’t worry. They went back to the shop to finish the truck when I called Max to let him know I found you. Chase said you’d probably want to go home tomorrow.”

Somehow, in all the chaos, he was *still* putting me first.

“He has a wife,” I whispered, my heart breaking at the words.

Hannah sighed, her hand settling on my knee, giving it a gentle squeeze. “A wife he’s trying to divorce,” she reminded me.

“He should have told me.” I leaned my head against hers.

“Yeah... he fucked that one up.”

I frowned back up at the sky. Why was the universe so damn quiet when I actually needed help?

“I think I love him,” I blurted. I slammed my mouth shut so hard, my teeth clacked together. Had I really confessed that out loud?

Hannah giggled. “You think? I know you love him, Win. I saw the way you looked at him last night. And honey, the way that man looks at you... Oh, how I wished someone did the same to me.” She sighed all dreamlike, as though Max wasn’t obsessed with the very ground she walked on.

“How does he look at me, Han?” I asked softly, desperate to know if I was just hoping for things or if it was all real.

“Like you’re his peace. You’re not the moon or the sun—you’re the whole fucking planet and galaxy.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. “Then why didn’t he tell me?”

“Maybe he was scared.” We watched a herd of deer run across the valley.

“Of what?” I asked after a long pause.

She lifted her head, forcing me to lift mine as well. Her eyes met mine, and a small, sad smile tilted her lips.

“Losing you.”

CHAPTER 18

SLAMMING the hood down on the truck, I wiped my hands on the rag tucked into my pocket and then leaned back against my toolbox.

I'd worked solidly for the last twenty-four hours with my team to finish it for Winnie. I knew what a trapped bird looked like, and I wasn't going to be her cage.

I hated myself for even considering letting her go, but I had fucked up. I hurt her. I made her relive memories of her ex. I made her feel insignificant, and I hated myself more for that.

"Never thought we'd finish this project," Eddie grumbled, running a hand over his balding head. "I also can't believe the girl is paying us. Clearly not the smartest tool in the box," he cracked a joke, and I immediately turned toward him.

"Don't talk about the customers like that."

Henry chuckled. "You're only defending her because you're trying to date her. How's that going for you?" I groaned, hating the two fuckers almost as much as my best friend, who walked in at that precise moment.

"Honestly? You want to know?" he asked my employees as though they were privy to information about my personal life. "He fucked that one up. Royally fucked it up," he added with a snicker.

"Go home." I glanced at my two techs. Their shoulders were shaking with silent laughter at my expense. "You can go, too, Max. I don't need you here." I turned my back on

everyone and started putting my tools back into my box, slamming the drawers shut.

“It’s Tuesday, man. You’re stuck with me.” He leaned against the bumper of Winnie’s truck, and I groaned, hating our stupid Tuesday night ritual.

I just wanted to be alone. I wanted to lick my wounds in peace and mourn what I could’ve had with Winnie before I went and fucked it all up.

“Hannah called me earlier.” He let the sentence hang in the open space as the back door slammed with the techs’ departure. It was now just the two of us left in the big garage. “She says Winnie is miserable.”

I shrugged and walked away from the now clean area to the wash bay, scrubbing my hands of the grease and hours of labor. I rolled my stiff shoulders. “Can we talk about anything else?” I grumbled, dragging a wet hand down my face.

“Any updates on Stephanie?” He switched direction—another topic I didn’t want to fucking think about, let alone talk about.

“Pick something else.” I ground my teeth together, turning the tap off.

“I don’t feel like it. Stop being a fucking bear, man. It might slide with your employees but not with me. Has she sent you another letter?”

Try three letters and a dozen phone calls to the shop. She was relentless. I was surprised she hadn’t just shown up here, but I guessed she still had some brain cells left. Ross hadn’t fucked them all out, apparently.

“Three.” I turned to him, crossing my arms over my chest. “Are you going to interrogate me all night? If so, I’m going home.”

“Have you spoken with your lawyer about the letters?”

“Alright,” I growled. “I’m going home. You can fuck off.”

“Chase, cut the bullshit. I’m here for you, man.” Anger seeped into his tone, and my steps faltered. Max wasn’t one to

get angry. He usually let things roll off his shoulders. “I saw the aftermath of Stephanie, and I fucking saw the light Winnie brought into your life. In a week, that woman changed you, and I’d be a shit friend if I let you throw it all away because of your whore of an ex-wife.”

“Lawyer suggested I schedule a joint meeting with Stephanie and her lawyer, where she will have to sign the papers, but I’m not going anywhere near her.” Tension rolled through my muscles at the idea of sitting across from Stephanie. Even being in the same room with her made me sick to my stomach.

I never wanted to see her again.

“If it means cutting your ties with her, don’t you think you should do it?”

“And if she still refuses to sign the papers?” I retorted.

“Take Winnie with you. Show her you’ve moved on,” he suggested. The thought of putting Winnie through that sent a shudder running through my body.

Shaking my head, I glared at him. “Winnie and I are done; she made that clear enough. And I would never in a million years put her through that kind of emotional trauma. She’s been through enough. I was supposed to be her peace.” Until I betrayed her trust.

“You still can be. People make mistakes. It’s what you do after that really counts. Don’t let her go, man. Don’t fucking let that woman go.”

“It’s not up to me anymore,” I reminded him. She ran away from me. I didn’t just let her go.

“Call her. Try to fix things,” he urged again. “Tell her the truck is done. Just get her here, man.” He picked up my phone that I’d left on my toolbox and tossed it to me.

Sighing, I slid it open, my thumb hovering over her name. When I looked up at him, he raised his brows as if to ask, *are you going to be an idiot and let her go, or are you going to man up?*

Pressing her name, I held the phone to my ear and let it ring.

“Chase?” Her voice was soft, my name sounding too perfect from her lips.

“I finished the truck if you want to come pick it up?” Something dropped in the background. Max rolled his eyes at me and frowned.

She roughly cleared her throat. “Oh, yeah. I, um, I’ll be there soon.” She ended the call before I could say anything else.

“She’s coming here,” I informed Max, who grinned.

“Well, you could have been nicer on the phone, but I guess that’s a start. Call me after she leaves.” He was already turning to leave, his construction boots scuffing across the floor until he was finally gone. I stared at the truck I’d busted my ass to finish for her.

The same damn truck that was the reason I met the woman of my dreams.

—

Twenty minutes later, there was a soft knock on the back door before it whined as Winnie opened it. Immediately, I noticed her swollen eyes. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail, and her clothes were disheveled. I hated myself a little more.

The closer she got, the worse she looked. All because of me.

Her blue eyes were red-rimmed and dull, lacking the life I normally saw there. There was no sparkle, no light, absolutely no fire. “Hey,” she whispered, her voice hoarse.

“I’m sorry it took so long.” I wanted to apologize for the other night, but I didn’t know the right words to say. So, I apologized for the truck like a fool.

“It’s okay,” she dismissed. She walked over to the truck, her hand brushing over the fender with affection. “Thank you for fixing it. I was so worried.”

I wanted to tell her that I'd look after this truck till the day I died if she'd let me, but from the stiffness in her posture, I knew she was guarded and still hurting.

"I love a good project. Do you want me to show you everything?" I offered, and she shook her head.

"I trust you." Her eyes went wide with the statement, as did mine. My heart rate went crazy. Her jaw went slack, and then suddenly, she snapped it shut. Looking away from me, she focused on the truck again. "The bill?"

My tongue was unnaturally heavy in my mouth. If she trusted me, then we still had a chance. I could fix this.

"No charge." She snapped her head to me, her teeth sinking into her trembling bottom lip. Her watery eyes held mine as she sniffed.

"You can't do that. You can't fucking do that to me, Chase," she whispered.

"I can. I own the place. it's called Storm Automotive, remember?" She shook her head at my little joke. I just wanted to ease some of the tension in the air, but instead, anger took over her beautiful features. Even full of rage, she was still the most stunning woman I'd ever laid eyes on.

"I am not some charity case, Chase. I have money. I can afford to pay you." She crossed her arms over her chest.

"Never said you were a charity case, nor did I imply it, Winnie. I want to apologize for the other night."

"So... what? Now sex is the payment?" She snorted and turned her back to me. "I knew you were just trying to get into my pants. Guess you and Dalton really are the same." Anger unlike any other I'd ever felt coursed through my veins at being compared to her shady-as-fuck ex.

Storming across the space keeping us apart, I wrapped my hand around her waist and spun her into me. Her hands landed on my chest with a smack. Her blue eyes widened in surprise, a gasp escaping her pink lips.

“I am nothing like that piece of shit. Don’t you ever compare me to him. I would never ever hurt you, Winnie. Can’t you see? I poured my heart out to you. I begged you to burn with me, baby.”

Her hands turned to fists against my chest.

“You didn’t tell me you were married!” she shouted, pounding her small fists against my chest. “You kept a big fucking secret from me, and I can’t just forgive you! I want to God, I want to just sink into your arms and kiss you, but I can’t because I’m hurting, and I promised myself I would never let a man hurt me again.” The anger deflated from her body, and she sagged against me, her head dropping to my chest, tears soaking the thin fabric of my shirt.

A small slither of hope infiltrated my body at her words. She still wanted me.

“We can fix this. Winnie, don’t give up on me,” I pleaded. “Please let me fix this.” She shook her head, whispering no over and over, crushing me further with every broken whisper.

“I have to go.” She pulled away. My hands were still on her waist, keeping her with me, and she glanced down at them and then at me. “Let me go, Chase.” I shook my head. Crying in earnest now, she yanked herself out of my hold.

“Winnie,” I rasped, my voice like gravel, “please don’t go.”

“I can’t do this. I won’t do it again. I deserve better. I fucking deserve better.” She took another staggering step back.

She deserved the fucking world, and I wanted to be the one to give it to her.

Shaking my head, I reached out for her. “I can do better, sweetheart. Let me give you what you deserve. I am the man for you. There is no one who will try harder than me.” A broken sob ripped from her throat.

“I’m sorry, Chase. I’ll send a check in the mail.” With that, she slipped into the driver’s seat of the truck, slammed the door shut, and started the old vehicle. She navigated it

carefully out of the garage as I numbly opened the big door and watched her drive away.

Digging my phone out of my jeans pocket, I held it up to my ear, calling Max.

“And?” he answered immediately.

I swallowed thickly, tears burning in my throat. “She’s gone.”

“What do you mean?” he snapped.

A tear ran down my cheek. “She’s fucking gone.”

CHAPTER 19

ONE MONTH **Later**

I was a mess.

I could barely sleep.

And when I did manage to drift into a semblance of a dream, I was plagued with what-if moments with Chase.

What if I hadn't run home?

What if I had let him be better?

What if I dated him?

What if I went back there?

What if I called him and begged him to come here?

What if, what if, what if. I couldn't escape them.

I spent the days I had off from work sitting in Dad's truck and journaling. I drove to the local park that overlooked the small lake and poured my heart into the pages of an abandoned journal I had found when I got home.

Journaling had initially helped with the grief of losing my dad. At least, that was what the grief counselor tried to convince me of. Now, it wasn't helping a damn thing.

I longed for Chase in a way I'd never wanted anyone else. I craved his company, his scent, his voice, his smile, his kindness... Everything about him, I missed.

My phone buzzed with a string of texts from Hannah trying to plan a girls night. It was her last Friday night before

school started, and she was dying to try out a new bar. But the absolute last thing I wanted to do was get dressed up and put on a fake smile.

Flipping the phone over so I couldn't see the lit-up screen, I tapped my pen on the blank page. I'd filled so many of these pages about Chase already. I didn't want today to be the same.

I was so much more than this. I didn't need to rely on a man for my happiness and fulfillment.

My obnoxious best friend started calling, the phone vibrating on the center console, not just once, but four times, until I finally pressed the phone to my ear.

“Yes, Hannah?”

“Knew you couldn't ignore me forever,” she teased naturally like a good best friend. She'd been relentless in trying to lift my spirits, but every day, I mulled over my last words to Chase and wondered if there was any chance to go back and fix it.

Was he the one?

Would Dad have liked him?

Who was I kidding? The two of them would have bonded over the truck and probably spent afternoons working on it together.

“Earth to Winnie...” Hannah sang, getting my attention again.

“I'm not going out tonight,” I repeated for the fifth time since she brought it up last night during our daily Facetime video.

“You say it like I'm actually giving you a choice. I'll be at your place at eight in an Uber, so you better hurry up and get ready, or you're paying for it.” She hung up without giving me the opportunity to reply.

Glancing at the time on my phone, I saw it was already after six, so I chucked the journal into the passenger seat and started the truck, rolling up the windows and blasting the air conditioning.

August in Florida had to be the worst time of the year, especially in the afternoon after the daily rain showers. I needed a shower and a glass of water before I even considered my friend's silly demands.

—

Sometimes, listening to Hannah was a good idea, and other times, it was bad. Tonight was one of those rare exceptions.

The new bar in town was packed. Warm bodies bumped together as we pushed our way through the crowd trying to get the bartender's attention for a drink.

"Why couldn't we go to the normal place?" I linked my arm with Hannah's, so we didn't get separated. Her curls were wild tonight, her hazel eyes bright with mischief, her red lips curled into the prettiest smile.

"What fun would that be? Plus, didn't you say you needed something to write about for work?" She was referring to the stupid article my boss suggested I do.

He wanted me to switch from the entertainment column to local events and activities. And a new bar opening up in town fit the bill.

"Whatever," I grumbled as she finally got the bartender's attention and ordered our usual.

"You'll be fine once you've got some alcohol flowing through your veins. Plus, you need to forget about him for just one night." She winked.

"Don't know what you're talking about. I don't think about him anymore." She laughed, shaking her head.

"You can't fool me. We both know you long for him. And when you're done being stubborn, we can talk then."

I sighed. "He isn't the one," I reminded her for the hundredth time, yet I didn't know who I was trying to convince anymore—me or her.

"Yes, I know. You don't need a man. Blah, blah, blah. Hun, you are so predictable. News flash—you do need a man

because your fingers are certainly no match for a good dick.” I flushed at her crass words.

“Life isn’t about sex, Hannah.” I sipped on the martini she handed me.

“I know. Life is about living, which means if you risk nothing, you’ll achieve nothing. You refuse to risk your heart, so you’ll never live.” She downed her martini and then set the empty glass on the counter. She waited for me to do the same before dragging me to the dance floor.

An hour and two more martinis later, I was floating on a cloud. The music was loud, and sweat slicked my skin as Hannah and I danced the night away.

Hannah was wrong. I didn’t need a man to live. I didn’t need Chase to have fun.

Twirling around, the world spinning around me, the music so loud I could barely think, I bumped into something hard. I whipped around to apologize, my eyes taking a moment to focus.

Dark brown eyes met mine, and I stumbled back into Hannah, nearly tripping over my too-high heels.

Dalton.

The blonde bimbo at his side narrowed her blue eyes at me, her name escaping my mind. She placed a hand on her hip, the other latched onto Dalton’s big bicep as though I might steal him from her. Something sparkled on her hand, and my eyes zeroed in on the flashing diamond on her ring finger.

They were engaged. It had only been two months.

“Win.” His lips moved, but I couldn’t hear over the music or the chaos happening on the dance floor. But I knew what his lips looked like when he said my name. Because once upon a time, it had been my favorite thing.

Revulsion turned my stomach at the sight of the happy couple. Hannah was at my side, her hazel eyes set in a harsh glare, her arms crossed over her chest.

“I need another drink,” I screamed to her over the music. We brushed past the disgusting couple until we were back at the bar. I drank way more than I should, needing to forget Dalton ever existed.

It was late when we finally left. I could barely see straight. Hannah was giggling to someone on the phone in the Uber, and all I wanted to do was sleep.

I leaned my head against the cold window, wishing I hadn't had the last martini as the world spun horribly fast. My head throbbed, and I longed for blood to flow into my sore feet.

Hannah dropped me at home, promising to call once she got to her apartment, but I knew she was too busy with whoever was on the phone.

I stripped out of the dress and held onto the wall of my shower as I washed the sweat and smoke off me. Then, I crawled into bed, clutching my phone a little too tight.

I dialed his name without thinking about the time or the consequences. Drunk me was a hell of a lot braver than sober me.

“Winnie? Are you okay?” I giggled at the alarm in his tone.

Why wouldn't I be okay? I was just peachy.

“I'm okay,” I slurred, and he groaned.

“You're drunk calling me?”

I pouted at my ceiling. “Should I hang up?”

“No!” Chase exploded. “Who did you go with? Wait—it doesn't matter. Don't answer that. Did you have fun?” He sighed. I heard the rustle of sheets in the background.

“Did I wake you?” I blinked at the ceiling, feeling like I was on a boat as everything rocked back and forth.

“Couldn't sleep,” he grunted. God, I missed the sound of his voice.

“I can’t either,” I whispered the truth to him. I swallowed thickly. “I saw him tonight.”

He hesitated before asking, “Who?”

“Dalton. He’s engaged,” I whispered, choking on the sob building in my throat. “It’s only been two months.”

Chase was quiet for a minute, and I checked the phone to see if our call was still connected, squinting through the darkness to focus.

“I’m sorry, Winnie,” he finally uttered. “You deserve better.”

“I thought you could give me better,” I slurred, remembering his words.

“I thought so, too,” he agreed. I sighed heavily, wishing he was here now, my entire body aching for him.

I closed my eyes. I was *so* drunk. “Is it too late?”

Chase sharply inhaled. “For what, sweetheart?”

My hand shook. “To forgive you?”

He was quiet for a moment before he asked, “How much did you drink?”

I frowned at the question. “Lost count. I miss you, Chase. I miss you so much.”

“Go to bed, Winnie, I need you to call me in the morning after you’ve slept and tell me all that again, sweetheart.” His deep baritone was lulling me to sleep. My eyelids were so heavy.

“I wish you were here,” I whispered, struggling to move my lips as exhaustion took over.

“Me, too, baby. Me, too.” He drew in a deep breath. “Goodnight. I love you.” I fell asleep before I could respond, drifting into a dream about Chase admitting his love for me.

CHAPTER 20

SHE CALLED ME.

A month late...

But it was a phone call from her, nonetheless.

Pacing my room, I pressed my cell phone to my ear for the third time.

“The number you are trying to reach does not have a voicemail set up at this time.” Tossing the phone to my unmade bed, I stormed into the ensuite bathroom to get a shower.

Ten minutes later, I was holding the phone up to my ear again. It rang. And fucking rang. But no answer. Her damn automated message picked up again.

“The number you are trying to reach does not have a voicemail set up at this time.” I ended the call, immediately dialing Max.

“It’s a bit early for you on a Saturday, man,” he grumbled, his voice thick with sleep.

“I need Hannah’s phone number now,” I grunted, not in the mood for any of his usual jokes. I needed to talk to Winnie. I needed to fix things now. I needed to know if her drunken rambling has just been that—rambling—or if she’d actually meant what she’d said.

“We aren’t talking anymore,” he mumbled into his pillow.

“Get me the fucking number!” I snapped. “I need to talk to Winnie now.” He groaned, but then my phone buzzed with a

message from him of Hannah's contact.

Hanging up without saying goodbye, I called Hannah. She answered on the first ring.

"Listen, I'm so sick of the scam calls. It's too fucking early. My head is splitting. No, I don't want whatever you want to send me. No, I won't change my mind. Lose my number."

"Hannah, it's Chase!" I rushed out, hoping she heard me before she ended the call.

"Chase?" She groaned. "It's too fucking early for this."

"I need you to call Winnie. She's not answering me. I need to know she's okay."

"Did she call you last night?" she asked softly, her sheets rustling in the background. I checked my watch, noticing the early hour, and *almost* felt bad. Almost, but not quite.

"I heard about Dalton," I confirmed, and she sighed.

"I'll call her and let you know. We had a lot to drink—well, she had a lot. Seeing him with his new fiancé really messed her up."

"I know. Please just call me back." She hung up, and I waited a few minutes, pacing my room. Too long passed by, and I snarled, storming into my closet.

This was bullshit. I was getting her back.

Hannah's name popped up on my phone just as I grabbed a duffel bag and began throwing clothes into it. I pressed the phone to my ear. "She didn't answer," Hannah told me, sounding worried, too. "I'm gonna have some coffee and then go check on her."

"What's her address?" I was moving through my house already, duffel bag zipped and thrown over my shoulder. I grabbed my truck keys off the entryway table and locked the front door on my way out.

"Are you serious? It'll take you ten hours to get here, Chase. She'll be okay by then. You don't have to worry about

her. She's not your girlfriend."

"Address, Hannah," I snarled. "I clearly don't have all day." I threw the duffle into the backseat and slid into the driver's seat, slamming the door shut.

"I'll text it to you." Hannah blew out a soft breath. "She's going to be livid, Chase."

I snorted. "I've seen her mad, and I assure you, I can take it. Thank you." I ended the call, plugged Winnie's address into the GPS, and peeled out of the driveway.

—

The sun was setting by the time I finally entered South Florida. I was still thirty minutes away from Winnie's townhouse, and I had absolutely no clue what I was going to say to her when I got there.

She'd never called back, and I hadn't heard anything else from Hannah, so as far as I knew, Winnie had no idea I was about to walk up to her doorstep.

I mulled over the thought of getting flowers, but it was too cliché, and Winnie never seemed like the flower kind of girl.

Max called every hour to check on where I was, pissed I didn't bring him with me. But he could fix things with Hannah in his own time—not on my time.

"How do you know she's going to be home?" Max questioned for the third time.

And like every time before, I answered the same way. "If she's not there, then I'll wait outside until she comes home."

"How sure are you that Hannah didn't blow your whole surprise?" He'd avoided talking about Hannah since she and Winnie left town a month ago, never telling me more than it was over between them.

"Why don't you tell me what happened with Hannah? Thought she was the one?" The line went silent.

"We weren't compatible," he stiffly responded, and I smiled. Those two were made for each other, but I'd let it go—

for now. Only because I had my own shit to tend to. “How much further? You sure you aren’t gonna fall asleep before you get there?”

“Considering I’ve been drinking coffee all day and I’m now less than thirty minutes away, nah, man. Not gonna fall asleep.”

“Alright. Well, call me if it ends in an epic failure. I’ll hop on a plane and drive back with you. Then, we can be sworn off women together.”

I hung up, not even bothering to answer the jackass. He could wallow in misery alone.

I was going to convince Winnie we were meant to be together, and then I was going to pay Stephanie a visit.

She wouldn’t have the power to ruin my life any longer.

—

She was home.

Her dad’s truck sat parked right in front of the door that I assumed was hers. There were a few Amazon packages outside, a bench with a pillow on it that read, ‘Welcome Home’, and an outdoor rug that read, ‘Team Ross or Rachel’.

All the packages were “Team Rachel” today.

I braced myself, sucking in a larger breath than necessary, before rapping my knuckles against the door.

“Shit!” I heard from the other side as something fell. “Be right there,” came through the door, her voice muffled but perfect.

The door swung open, the wreath on it smacking against it from the force she’d used to open it. She took one look at me and then slammed the door back shut.

Dammit.

“Go away!” she shouted through the door. It shuddered as she leaned against it.

I leaned my shoulder against the doorjamb and crossed my arms over my chest, getting comfortable. “Not going anywhere, sweetheart.”

“Then you’ll melt out there for all I care!”

My lips tilted up in amusement. “The heat doesn’t scare me, Win.” I sank to the ground, leaning my back against the door. Ten minutes passed in silence. A neighbor waved at me cautiously. Loud commotion suddenly sounded from inside the house.

My phone buzzed with a text, so I pulled it out of my jeans.

Hannah: *You got me into big shit. You better fix things. She needs you.*

The door swung open, catching me off guard, and I fell backward, my head bouncing off the floor. I groaned as she moved quickly, grabbing her packages and then slamming the door shut on my head.

I certainly didn’t think it would be easy, but I didn’t think I’d be stuck outside in the boiling summer heat.

Standing up, I shook off the ache in my muscles from a day of driving. “A water would be great! Thanks,” I hollered. A noise of frustration was the only thing that met my ears.

“Let me in, Winnie.”

“Go to hell, Chase!” she barked, full of fire and rage. I grinned.

“What about last night? Were you lying?” The door flew open, and I dropped my smile. Hurt filled those big, blue eyes, wrecking me in the worst possible way.

“What do you think?” She wrapped her arms around her torso and leaned against the open door.

“I think you’re trying to protect yourself from getting hurt, but you’re only hurting yourself. because I’m not him, baby.”

Dropping to my knees, I reached for her, my hands settling on her hips. My fingers sank past the thin material of her shirt

to touch her skin. Looking up into her watery eyes, I swallowed thickly, “Fight for me, sweetheart. Fight for my love. Fight for us. Fight with me for the rest of our lives. Don’t waste your breath on that piece of shit. You sing a song that only I can hear. Your voice is my perfect melody, and I can’t live without it or you. I’m begging you, Winnie. Jump into the goddamn fire with me. Fight for me. Don’t run away anymore—please.”

“Oh, Chase.” She sighed and sank down in front of me, her knees crashing against mine as she wrapped her arms around my neck and wept into my chest.

I squeezed her to me, enveloping her in my arms. “I’m here, baby. I’ve got you.” Her body trembled in my arms, and I tightened my hold, doing my best to absorb her cries.

“I’ll fight,” she croaked. “I’ll burn with you, Chase.” Her voice was a broken whisper in my ear, and her lips brushed the softest kiss to my neck—her silent promise.

I stood, and her legs immediately wrapped around my hips as I walked into her home, slamming the door shut behind me. I blindly reached for the lock and twisted it as I kicked off my sneakers.

Her lips were on my neck, and all I could think about was getting her naked body beneath mine.

“Chase, kiss me,” she whispered against my neck, the desire in her voice sending chills down my spine.

“As you wish, sweetheart.” I pressed her against the wall, memories of the first time we were together burning through my mind.

I kissed a trail up her jaw, her moans getting louder the closer I got to her mouth. When I sank my teeth into her bottom lip, she gasped into my mouth.

Grinding her hips against mine, she began demanding more, and I wanted nothing more than to deliver.

“Where is your room?” I groaned against her lips, stealing a breath of air before kissing down her neck, finding that spot I knew she loved me to worship.

As my lips touched the small spot where her neck and shoulder met, she arched into me with a soft moan.

Found it.

She tipped her head up, pressing a kiss to the side of my mouth, then the underside of my jaw before pulling back. Her blue eyes were hazy with lust. *God*, she was beautiful.

“Upstairs.”

“Hold on, sweetheart.” I held her body impossibly closer to mine and stopped kissing her long enough to find the stairs. And then, I was barreling through her bedroom, tossing her onto a neatly made bed.

She lay there, blue eyes dark with desire, half-lidded as they looked up at me. Her teeth sank into her already swollen bottom lip, enticing me—tempting me. Her fingers played with the hem of her t-shirt before she brought it up over her toned stomach, exposing her upper body to me inch by fucking torturous inch.

“I can’t do slow, Win,” I growled. “I need you now.”

“I’m yours, Chase.”

I unbuttoned my jeans, letting them fall to the ground, and shucked my boxers in one movement. My shirt went next, hitting the floor with a soft thud. I crawled over her, kissing her hip, and then grabbed the edge of her shirt and yanked it all the way off, my eyes feasting on her beautiful body.

All for me.

“I need you,” she moaned. Leaning up, she unhooked her bra and flung it across the room, where it hit the wall with a smack before falling to the floor.

“I’m yours, Winnie—all fucking yours.” Her hands skated over my shoulders and down my biceps, her nails scraping across the skin as she drew me closer.

“Finish undressing me, Chase,” she begged.

I nearly lost my balance moving too quickly. Using one hand to yank her tiny shorts down, I tossed them to the floor

before gripping the strap of her black thong and pulling them down too, leaving her completely bare to me.

“Now, Chase, please. I need you,” she begged, wrapping her legs around my hips, my cock brushing her wet pussy.

We both groaned at the contact, and her eyes fluttered shut.

Deciding to give her exactly what she was begging for, I slid my cock between her wet folds, her answering moans only getting louder until there was no more space between us. Our bodies, hearts, and minds were connected in a way I’d never experienced before her.

“*Fuck,*” she moaned, her nails biting into my skin, her head thrown back in ecstasy. “I need more.”

I lifted my hips and then slammed them back against hers, her answering scream was all I needed to know I was doing something right.

A thin layer of sweat coated our bodies as I thrust into her. Her moans were choppy, and my name falling from her lips every few seconds nearly set me off the edge, but I held onto the little bit of self-control I had.

“Winnie,” I groaned when her walls began to tighten around my cock.

“*Hm?*”

“Come for me, sweetheart,” I rasped. I cupped her cheek, bracing my weight on my elbow. Her eyes slowly opened. “Burn with me, baby.”

“Oh, God,” she moaned before exploding around me, her body arching up, her lips latching onto my neck. Her screams vibrated against my racing pulse.

“I love you, Winnie.” I dropped my forehead to hers, spilling inside her. “I love you, sweetheart.”

She held me to her, not letting me break our connection. Turning my head, I burrowed my face in the curve of her sweaty neck.

“I love you, Chase.” Her voice cracked on my name. “I think we’re absolutely crazy, but God, I love you so much.”

EPILOGUE

“YOU DON’T NEED to come with me.” Chase ran a hand through his hair before fidgeting with the buttons on his shirt for the third time in the last minute.

He was so nervous.

We were about to sit across from his ex-wife in a small room with two lawyers. Max had been the genius to suggest I go with him, and naturally, two months ago I’d thought it would be a good idea.

Seeing Chase’s reaction now, I was rethinking it.

“What are you really afraid of? I’m not scared to meet her. I’m not worried about anything she can say. I’m stronger than that, Chase. You have to trust me.”

He shook his head. Placing his warm hands on my hips, he pulled me to his chest. Pressing his lips to my forehead, he rested his head on top of mine.

“I trust you, Winnie.” He sighed. “It’s her that I don’t trust. I don’t know what she’s going to pull today. I just don’t want her to hurt you.”

Slipping my hands between the collar of his shirt and his neck, I pulled his lips down to mine. “I.” *Kiss*. “Love.” *Kiss*. “You.” *Kiss*.

His hold on my hips tightened, more than likely creasing my dress that I’d painstakingly ironed just an hour ago.

But it didn’t matter.

Nothing mattered more than easing his fears. I was his peace, as he was mine.

“I don’t know what I did to deserve you,” he mumbled, brushing his nose against mine. “You’re everything I’ve ever wanted, sweetheart.”

“You fixed my truck, silly.” I giggled, and he chuckled. “Speaking of, I think it needs more work.” I frowned. “It struggled to start yesterday.”

He pulled back from me, concern lighting his eyes. “What do you mean?”

I glanced at the time on the clock behind his head, noticing we were going to be late, and grabbed his hand, leading him out the front door. “Don’t worry about it now. You can look at it later after we’ve dealt with all this crap.”

The drive was short but felt like an eternity with Chase constantly drumming his fingers on the steering wheel and then fidgeting with the collar of his shirt.

I tried to contain my own nerves. I was about to meet the woman he’d chosen to marry. The one that had cheated on him and broken his heart, making him swear off all relationships until me.

He held my hand as we met his lawyer in the lobby of the address we’d been given, his fingers interlocked with mine.

“It’s good to finally put a face to a name, Mr. Storm.” She stretched out her hand, and he stiffly shook it, his muscles tense.

“Likewise, Elena. I’d like you to meet my girlfriend, Winnie. She’ll be accompanying me today.” He left no room for discussion, but I’d been under the impression he’d cleared it with her before this moment. At her surprised look, he hadn’t informed her.

“Right. I’ll just have to bring in an extra chair.” She nodded at me and quickly walked away, her black stilettos clicking loudly against the tile.

“Well, that went well,” I commented, leaning my head on Chase’s shoulder. He shrugged before following her, tugging me along.

In the cold room, we sat at a long table and waited. Elena, his lawyer, briefed us on what to expect. Stephanie was going to play on any information she could, so we were to give her none. I was supposed to be quiet, but what Elena didn’t know was that I had been waiting for a moment to meet this woman.

To give her a damn piece of my mind for hurting Chase.

Chase kept his hand on my knee, his thumb rubbing gentle circles. Whether to ease my nerves or his, I wasn’t sure.

“I just want to sign the papers and leave,” he whispered to me, but Elena heard and nodded.

“That would be ideal, and I will do my best to make it happen.” She stood as the door opened and two more women entered. Chase stiffened, his gaze locked firmly on the blonde. *Stephanie.*

We didn’t move as she scoped out the room, her eyes shifting between me and Chase. “I thought it would be just us, Chase.” Her voice was husky, and the faint smell of nicotine filled the air.

“If you will please have a seat,” Elena coaxed, sitting beside Chase as Stephanie and her lawyer sat across from us.

The lawyers went back and forth while Stephanie stared at Chase, pouting like a five-year-old who had their candy taken away.

That’s right, bitch. He’s mine now.

Chase signed the papers first, and Stephanie followed with reluctance. She put on a whole show of dabbing at her eyes with a tissue after signing the papers and then whimpering like a beaten dog.

Chase’s body deflated beside me as she leaned back in her chair, glaring between the two of us.

She did this.

She lost Chase.

This was all her fault, and she had the audacity to act like the wounded. I think not.

As we stood up to leave, I waited until we were in the lobby, barely containing myself before then. “Hey, Stephanie?” Chase’s hand in mine jerked me to a stop, already trying to prevent whatever catfight he anticipated was about to happen.

She stopped, turning to look at me.

“I just wanted to thank you.”

“For what?” she spat, the ugliness Chase spoke of finally coming to light.

“Chase, of course.” The man himself snorted, trying to cover up his laugh as he wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me to his chest.

“Easy, sweetheart,” he whispered, his lips at my ear.

“Just want her to know what she lost.” I looked up at him, hoping like hell she heard me.

His lips tilted up at the corners. “I’m free now, Win.” He pecked my lips.

I slid my hands along his flat stomach, letting a seductive little smile tilt my own lips. “Take me home, Chase.”

His eyes flashed with need. “Yes, ma’am.”

I gave Stephanie a little finger wave with my free hand as Chase hurriedly towed me out of the building, heading straight for his truck.

THE END

I HOPE YOU ENJOYED FIGHT FOR ME! Want a peek into Chase and Winnie’s future? [Subscribe to my mailing list and you’ll get instant access to an exclusive bonus scene!](#)

THANK YOU

Thank you for reading *Fight For Me*, a small town, enemies to lovers romance. I hope you enjoyed your adventure with Chase and Winnie! Please consider leaving a review on Amazon/Goodreads! They really help authors like me SO MUCH!!!

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