

A man with a grey beard and short dark hair, wearing a white ribbed tank top, is the central figure. He has tattoos on his arms and is looking slightly to the left with a serious expression. The background is a dark, textured purple.

A HEART'S COVE HOTLIES NOVEL

Filthy Little

*Midlife*  
Fling

STANDALONE

LILIAN MONROE

# FILTHY LITTLE MIDLIFE FLING

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A NEIGHBORS TO LOVERS ROMANCE

A HEART'S COVE HOTTIES STANDALONE

# LILIAN MONROE



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ONE



# AUDREY

THE VAN CAREENS down a narrow residential street, far too fast for comfort. Slamming on the brakes has precisely zero effect on the speed of the vehicle, which is not good. The pedal feels spongy underfoot, even when I stomp my foot down as hard as I can. For some inexplicable reason, this sends a message to my brain to test whether the gas pedal is operational, so I lift my foot off the malfunctioning brake and try the other pedal, and—yep. That one's still working as designed.

Which means I'm now going *faster*.

This is bad. So, so bad.

I'm in a company van—*my* company's van—speeding down a residential street, moments away from disaster. Every one of the curtain twitchers in this town has only to look out the window and they'll see an out-of-control Organizing Goddess about to crash into someone's front living room. If I'm lucky, I'll crash into my own.

That's if I don't run someone over first.

*Hi! Thanks for welcoming me to the neighborhood. My apologies about the car wreck. Here's my business card in case you need your pantry rearranged!*

Yeah. That'll go over well. I wonder how long it'll take for a picture of my totaled van to make it onto social media. I'll be a laughingstock.

All because of Terry.

No—I won't think of him right now. I *can't* think of him right now. I'm about to die, and I refuse to let my ex-husband be in my final thoughts.

Which reminds me: I'm about to die. I should try to...not do that.

My stomach jumps into my chest and does its best to crawl up into my throat. I push down on the brake pedal again. Again. Panic races through me like a lit fuse, and my vision narrows with every breath.

There's a hill coming up, a long, steep slope that snakes all the way down to the coast. If I can't stop this van, I'm going down. I'm in big trouble. Huge.

I slam the spongy pedal once more. Again, again, again, pumping the brakes so fast my thigh burns, which reminds me that I don't go to the gym nearly as much as I should. And—really? That's what I'm thinking right now, when I'm not thinking about my loser ex-husband? I'm about to die and I'm beating myself up about how many lunges I've skipped lately?

Which is actually not a surprise at all, because perfectionism is a disease without a cure, and I've been afflicted by it all my life. Well, there is a cure, actually: I can Thelma-and-Louise myself into the Pacific Ocean, except without the cavalcade of police surrounding me.

Sucking in a deep breath, I grip the steering wheel for leverage and slam my foot down on the pedal in one last, desperate attempt to get out of this alive.

Did the car slow down, or was it my imagination?

The hill looms like the dip of a roller coaster, except the loop-the-loop will be my van going ass over teakettle all the way over the sea wall and into the ocean. Splash. Gurgle. Goodbye.

My hometown has always been Heart's Cove, this special, artsy town on the northern coast of California. It's fitting that it'll also be the place where I meet my tragic end.

*No*—not today. I refuse to let this beat-up company van be the cause of my death. I refuse to let my ex-husband rattle me

so much I can't fix this mistake and make it out alive.

Plus, if I decide to ignore the panic for a split second, I can admit it's not really his fault. His phone call threw me, but it's not the reason my brakes failed.

A feral yell makes it through my gritted teeth. Suddenly, the world is sharper. Colors are brighter. Time slows.

I will not die on this hill.

I need to slow this sucker down.

Maybe if I zigzag, I can coast to a stop in someone's front yard. Swerving back and forth across the road, I put the heel of one palm on the horn to warn everyone in a three-block radius that the local organizer lady is doing something really stupid.

Why did I buy this piece of crap van? I knew that mechanic in Santa Rosa was full of it when he told me it was in good shape. I should have listened to my instincts, but he started running his mouth about carburetors and spark plugs, and I remembered I didn't know anything about cars. My finger-wagging jerk of a brain took that moment to remind me that I'd never gotten around to learning about engines, which was obviously evidence that I was a failure and an idiot, and I took the mechanic at his word when he said I should buy this lemon of a van.

Mechanics. They're all liars and thieves, as far as I'm concerned. Scum. I should have known.

That, and I thought I saw the seller slip the mechanic a couple of bills before he popped the hood. I wonder how much money it took for that mechanic to sell his integrity. How much money did it take to make a fool out of me?

Stupid. So stupid.

I beat myself up about it so much that I procrastinated when I was supposed to take the van for its yearly service appointment—because that's the thing about perfectionism. Sometimes, I convince myself to delay tasks that I know I can't do perfectly, and I end up not doing them at all. Logically, I know it makes no sense. I know there are good mechanics out there (somewhere). I know I could have

brought the van in and paid for whatever repairs were needed without understanding every single detail.

But I didn't. I told myself I'd learn about engines so I didn't get swindled again, but that task was a mountain I didn't know how to climb. As a result, I did nothing.

Now my brakes have failed, and I'll fly down this hill and drown in the Pacific Ocean.

And who buys a house at the top of a steep hill? Who did I think I was?

I'm rapidly approaching my new home, going too fast to pull into the driveway. The van lurches as I make a tight turn, now fully perpendicular to the road. The front door of the house ahead of me opens, and an old man pokes his head out. He yells something at me, but I can't hear him over the sound of my horn and the screech of the grim reaper in my ear.

I yank the steering wheel around and the van tips onto two wheels, crashing back down as I complete another arm of the zigzag that might possibly be my worst idea yet. I try to angle the van uphill to slow down but there's a car parked on the road, so I have to lurch in the other direction, over the bushes that separate my house from the neighbor's, and onto my next-door neighbor's pristine front lawn.

And I shriek.

Because directly in front of me is a group of elderly ladies clustered near a colorful flower bed in front of my neighbor's house. Their white heads are perfectly permed. Their wrinkled faces are masks of horror, painted lips open wide in silent screams. Their bejeweled hands are clutching canes and hearts and purses, like they'll somehow plant their feet and win against five thousand pounds of steel and rubber and whatever else cars are made out of. Hell if I know. I'm not a mechanic.

Instinct kicks in, and I slam the brakes. Ha. They still don't work.

Tossing instinct aside, I jerk the wheel away from the ladies and crash into a flowering tree in full bloom. My airbag explodes into my face. A car alarm starts to go off, or maybe

that's just the ringing in my ears. Outside my window, big white flowers fall onto the grass all around me. Faint thumps on the body of my van tell me the blossoms are dropping all over me like some kind of beautiful, fragrant rain.

Southern magnolias. They're in bloom right now. The checkout lady at the grocery store told me all about it when she caught me reading a poster for the Heart's Cove Garden Walking Tour.

As the airbag deflates, I stare at the beautiful white flowers all over and around the van, and I begin to laugh.

Then I pass out.

TWO

# REMY

WHEN I ROLL up to my house in the garage's tow truck, the paramedics already have the driver on a stretcher. I cut the engine and slip out of the cab, and my eyes dart to the magnolia tree.

Hell.

A hard ball lodges itself in my throat at the sight of the tree and the van whose front bumper now has a tree-shaped indent in it.

It had to be *that* tree. Of all the trees on the street—of all the houses and cars and plants that they could have hit—it had to be that one.

At least the tree is still standing. It's decades old with a foot-diameter trunk. The driver must not have been going very fast. Judging by the skid marks on the sidewalk and the carnage on the lawn, the bushes slowed them down some before they made impact with the tree.

Good thing for them, because if they'd killed my magnolia tree, there'd be hell to pay.

Gritting my teeth, I head for the paramedics to get an update on the situation. And, fine, also to get a look at the idiot who just crashed into my magnolia. Hundreds of flowers litter the ground, covering the hood and windshield of the van like a funeral shroud. That tree was spectacular this year, and now who knows if it'll even survive the impact.

Hell and damnation.

My emotions are wound too tight to make any sense. All I know is they're bucking and rolling very close to the surface of my skin. I could break something. Or someone.

"I'm *fine*," a woman says from the gurney. Its mattress is tilted up at a forty-five-degree angle facing away from me, so all I can see is an arm flinging to the side for emphasis. Dainty fingers spread out in a stopping motion toward the paramedic. "I don't need to go to the hospital. I promise; I'm okay."

My steps slow.

"Agnes said you were out cold when they opened the door, ma'am. I strongly recommend you go to the hospital and get checked out. You could have internal injuries."

The digits curl into a fist, and the pointer finger shoots out. "First of all, I turned forty just three months ago. Don't you 'ma'am' me, you...you...you mustachioed donkey."

Mustachioed donkey. The paramedic's eyebrows twitch. I'm halfway to the gurney now.

"Second of all, who's Agnes and why is she suddenly the arbiter of who does and doesn't need medical attention?"

The woman in question steps out from behind the van. The little ball of gray-haired evil levels the driver with a glare. "I'm Agnes, and you need your head examined. That's unrelated to the car wreck, of course, but it needs to be done regardless."

The index finger curls back into the fist, and the arm disappears back behind the mattress. Just a couple more steps and I'll see the face of the woman who crashed into my magnolia tree. Anger still burns through me, but it's been tempered slightly. Now, the white-hot fury is mingled with cool, clear curiosity.

It's her voice, I realize. Sweet as syrup, so sincere, so *sure*.

A woman with a voice like that could bewitch a man with just a few words. She could have him on his knees simply by pointing one of those elegant fingers at the ground and using that witchy, honey-soaked voice to tell him to kneel. He'd fall



so hard he'd have bruises on his kneecaps for the rest of his life.

Suddenly, my knees ache.

And just like that, anger blazes back to life again.

The woman who sounds like a temptress just *crashed into my magnolia tree*. She's not getting away with that because of her voice.

I stomp the remaining few feet to glare at her—and oh, hell. The voice matches the face. The body's hidden beneath a blanket, but the lumps are in all the right places.

Pale green eyes shift to me and widen slightly, then narrow. A lush pink mouth presses into a thin line. "Who are you?"

I grit my teeth. I could say, "I'm the man whose tree you just mutilated," but my anger is still burning me from the inside out—anger and panic and decades-old hurt and inconvenient lust that just came up because of this woman's *voice*, of all things—and her eyes are green like new spring shoots, and the words all crowd up in my throat and get stuck. The best I can do is a couple of words ground out between my clenched teeth. "Tow truck."

Her shoulders droop. She smooths her hands on the blanket covering her thighs. "Oh. Right."

I pass her a business card with the garage's address on it. "That's where I'm taking it."

She takes the card, careful not to touch my grease-stained fingers. I try not to take it personally. She stares at the card for a moment, then nods. "All right. Thanks. I would come along, but I have to go get my head examined."

"Thoroughly," Agnes grumbles from my left.

I get the keys to the van from her, and then the paramedics wheel her into the back of the ambulance then close the doors, and I can finally breathe again. I turn to the tree. I don't want to approach, but standing on the curb in front of my house isn't going to make this any easier. Nodding to the ladies

gathered near the edge of my lawn, I make my way to the site of impact.

There's bark in the van's grille and a sizable gouge taken out of the trunk. I'll have to carefully trim the bark and watch the wound for fungus growth over the coming months. Two branches will have to be cut off, and I lost half the flowers, but as far as I can tell the roots are still intact. Magnolias have a large, shallow root system, so it would be obvious if they'd been damaged. It's been hell for my pipes, but this tree means more to me than a few underground repairs' worth of hassle. I think I can save it. I hope I can save it.

Please, *please* let me save this tree.

Turning to the van, I grit my teeth and get to work. The side of the van is covered in a fancy decal with the words "Organizing Goddess" written in swirly pink font. There's a silhouette of a woman in Grecian robes leaning on the *G*. It's ridiculous.

She's probably one of those women who spends her time decanting seventeen types of dried beans into perfectly matched and labeled containers just so she can take photos of them to impress strangers on the internet, but she never cooks any of them because half-empty containers would ruin the aesthetic.

I would know. My ex-wife loved making sure our home looked picture-perfect. Looked even better when I wasn't in it. There's no room for a grease monkey in glossy, social-media-worthy photos. No room for the nephew that needed me when the worst happened, either.

I take a deep breath. I'm being unfair. I'm not mad at Rebecca anymore—not like I was—but damn if the remnants of my feelings don't still mug me at the worst possible times. I felt inadequate and lost when she left me, still grieving and raw from my sister's passing, but I had to pull myself together to be there for my nephew.

"You all right, Remy?"

I turn to see Mac getting off his motorcycle. The local potter and schoolteacher takes in the scene and grimaces in sympathy. “Is the tree okay?”

“I appreciate that you asked about the tree before the driver,” I tell him.

He grins, shrugging. “Figured I’d check on what was truly important to you.”

“The driver is a menace,” Agnes cuts in, waddling over to stand by us. She snarls at the front fender and clicks her tongue. “Nearly ran us down.”

Lottie, Mac’s mother-in-law, joins our little posse and gives Mac a soft smile. She squeezes his forearm and arches her brow at me. “Think you can save the van?”

“Who cares about the van? Look at the tree!” Agnes’s arm shoots out for emphasis. “This magnolia was spectacular. You would’ve won the walking tour, Remy. It was a shoo-in until that maniac showed up. Nearly killed us! She should be arrested.”

“The walking tour doesn’t have winners and losers,” Margaret answers as she walks over to stand beside Lottie. The elegant older woman gives Agnes a very bland side-eye and exchanges a loaded look with her twin sister, Dorothy. The two of them own the local hotel, although they’ve been slowing down in recent years. The grapevine has been whispering about a new manager coming in to help them out.

Dorothy’s kaftan flutters in the early-summer breeze. Her hair falls halfway down her back in silver waves as she leans close to the tree to inspect the damage. “Poor baby,” she says, patting the trunk. “You’re strong. You’ll survive.”

“It better,” Agnes growls, vibrating with barely checked rage. “Otherwise the Organizing Goddess will get a piece of my mind.”

“I wouldn’t risk it, Agnes,” Dorothy says, still inspecting the wound in the bark. She runs a ring-clad hand down the hard, smooth trunk. “There’s so little of your mind to begin

with. Parting with any of it would be dangerous to your health.”

“Oh, go burn some sage and be quiet, you tree-hugging hussy.” Agnes stomps toward my front garden bed and glares at the riotous colors of the petunias bursting from my pots. At least none of my other plants were damaged. My sister’s favorite turquoise glazed pot remains unharmed.

But the tree wasn’t quite so lucky. A snarl curls my upper lip.

Dorothy ignores her and wraps her arms around the magnolia, probably to spite the other woman. “You’ll be okay,” she tells the green bark. “I promise.”

When she kisses the tree trunk, I decide it’s time for me to get back to work. I hook the van up to my tow truck, bid the ladies a pleasant and safe rest of the walking tour, and promise to have a beer with Mac later in the week. Then I make my way back to the garage and drop the van in the yard, resolving not to look at it until the honey-voiced devil woman ponies up some money. I’ll be damned if I’m doing *her* any favors.

Still grumbling to myself, I head to the elementary school to pick up my nephew from his summer day camp. While I’m leaning against the side of my truck, waiting, Danny runs out, dirty-blond ringlets wild around his head—just like his mother’s used to be. My heart squeezes.

“Hey, buddy.” I open the door for the ten-year-old.

“Remy! We played capture the flag and my team won!” He launches himself into the seat and bounces up and down in excitement. “I’m the one who got the flag! Everyone was cheering and we did a dogpile, but then Mrs. Wilson got mad and said dogpiles are dangerous.”

I chuckle and wait for him to clip himself in. “She’s probably right about that.”

“But we still won.”

“You did,” I confirm, then close the car door. I head around to the driver’s side and put my seatbelt on. “You okay

with going to the garage for a bit? I have a few things to finish up.”

“Can I help?”

I grin, putting the car in gear. “Sure, buddy.”

“Cool.” His feet kick up as we drive, knocking against the bottom of the glove compartment in regular thumps.

My sister and her husband passed away nearly three years ago. I’d give anything to have her back, but I never knew how deeply I could care about someone until Danny came into my custody.

It was worth the heartache of the divorce, worth the hell that followed. That smile on Danny’s face is worth anything. After my sister’s death, I think Danny saved me from the ocean of grief that washed over me. Some days, I indulge myself in thinking I saved him too.

When we get to the garage, Danny jumps out and follows me inside. I complete an oil change for a regular customer and her beat-up Volkswagen that’s been on its last legs for a decade or two, then I bring Danny into the office to finish up some paperwork.

My nephew takes a seat on one of the boxes stacked against the wall, crossing his legs while he grabs a socket set from the shelf beside him. I rummage around the desk for the Volkswagen invoice, clicking my tongue when I can’t find it. It’s not in the folder where it’s meant to be, nor is it in my pile of Need-To-Organize paperwork that is usually a catch-all for all the things I’ve yet to file and which, if I were honest, would really be called the Will-Never-Be-Organized pile.

Finally, I find the invoice crumpled at the back of one of my drawers, behind some tools and a collection of pens that no longer work. I smooth it out in front of me, trying to keep the frustration at bay. Jeff Owens, the guy who owns the garage, used to have a bookkeeper and a cleaner, but he’s had to downsize in recent years. Now all of this is up to me, and I’m not keeping up the way I should be. It’s too much work for one

man to take on, but unless I buy the place and run it myself, nothing's going to change.

By the time I've finished the paperwork for the day, I'm antsy and frustrated, but I swallow it down and tell Danny it's time to go. We head out into the main garage space and I head for my Chevy—and then I see the van.

My eyes drift over to the pink silhouette of the goddess leaning on the swooping font, and I discover I can't just walk away from it.

“Hold on, kid. One more thing to do.”

“That busted-up van?” Danny asks.

“Uh-huh.”

“What happened?”

“She ran into our magnolia tree.”

Danny straightens, intrigued by that tidbit of information.

I guide him over to the van and pop the dented hood. “Grab that light,” I tell Danny, motioning to one of the work lamps by the wall. “Let's figure out what's wrong with it.”

Danny scampers to grab the light, and then the two of us get to work finding out why the Organizing Goddess of Heart's Cove decided to use my tree to stop her car.

I'm not doing it because I'm nice. I don't want to help her. I don't care about the woman. I'm curious, that's all, and I might as well figure out what I need to tell her when she comes asking about her vehicle.

LATER, when the tools are put away and the garage is locked up, I glance at my nephew in the passenger seat. “How do you feel about a burger and a milkshake?”

His eyes light up. “Right now?”

“Right now,” I say as I put the truck in gear. “You can tell me about your capture the flag strategy.”

“We were sneaky,” he replies, an evil grin tugging at his lips.

A few of the tight bands that had winched themselves closed around my chest begin to loosen. Chuckling, I head for Harold’s Diner. The restaurant is in the old part of town, on the inland end of Cove Boulevard. The main drag through town is bright and cheery, with the busiest part nearer to the coast. That’s where the Heart’s Cove Hotel is, along with shops and cafés.

But Harold’s Diner doesn’t need to be located in the tourist area to be popular. The parking lot has a few vehicles in it when I pull in, as usual. This place is open 24/7 and has the best milkshakes in town. It hasn’t been redecorated since the day it opened.

After my sister died, I used to take Danny here to cheer him up. Maybe I was cheering myself up at the same time. We’d have dinner and a milkshake, and I’d pretend that everything was okay in the world. Over the weeks and months and years, it’s become somewhat of a refuge for us. As soon as we step inside, more tension drains from my body.

Our usual booth is next to the window, and Danny makes a beeline toward it as soon as we’re inside. He grins at me, his legs kicking, and waves at the waitress who ambles over.

“Let me guess,” she says to Danny. “Strawberry milkshake with extra whipped cream.”

Danny’s grin widens. “And a cheeseburger.”

She glances at me, brows raised, but she knows what I’m going to say already: “Same here. Fries extra crispy.”

I lean back on the vinyl seats and listen to my nephew tell me about his day. My back muscles loosen a little bit more, and I let the last of my anger fade away.

This, right here, is what matters. Even if the tree doesn’t make it, I’ll always have my nephew.

THREE



# AUDREY

IT'S dark out by the time I leave the hospital. The doctor said he couldn't find anything wrong with me, other than some bruising on the side of my head. I passed out from the stress and shock, apparently, and not from any physical ailment.

Woo freaking hoo. At least I have that going for me—along with a three-thousand-dollar hospital bill. The doctor gave me a few ibuprofen and recommended I take it easy for a few days, then sent me on my way. Between this and the no doubt extortionate repairs on the van, today has turned out to be an expensive pile of steaming-hot garbage.

Body aching, I stuff the paperwork from the hospital into my purse and shuffle to the taxi rank outside. I really didn't need another surprise bill right now. Not when I'm out a company van, work seems to be slowing down, and I finally closed on a house I shouldn't have bought in the first place. I signed on the dotted line when things looked like they'd never get bad, but twelve weeks later, the bank wouldn't honor the interest rate they originally approved, I had to drain my savings to make up the difference in down payment, and I've been hit with bill after bill after bill.

I can barely make ends meet. It feels exactly like it did six years ago, when I was drowning in lawyers' fees and the grief of the end of my marriage. I was supposed to be finished with that stage of my life. I'm forty years old; I should feel like a full-grown adult by now, shouldn't I? As I get older, I keep feeling like I ought to know more, be wiser, have my life

together. But the years go on and I discover I'm still just me, inhabiting an older body.

This fresh, awful situation is all that mechanic's fault. He took that slimy van owner's money and told me the vehicle was good to go. The lying rat.

But it was me who didn't get a second opinion. It was me who bought the van, who ignored that weird screeching noise, who ran the vehicle into the ground and ran myself into a tree.

Embarrassment burns the back of my throat. I should be better than this. I can't make these kinds of mistakes. What kind of person prides themselves on their organizational skills when they can't even manage to get a van tuned up? What kind of person strives for perfection in everything and falls short every single time?

Forty years old, divorced, van-less, with a big ugly bruise on my temple. A laughingstock. A disappointment. Organizing Goddess indeed.

By the time I'm in my house, I've lashed myself mercilessly, and I feel about two inches tall. I open the fridge and see nothing prepared for dinner—another failure. Didn't I used to have all my meals prepped ahead of time? Wasn't I the perfect housewife who was always on top of everything? What happened to me?

*Oh, an adulterous husband who shattered my confidence, a messy divorce, and a business that might be a little too much for me to handle.*

There's a hunk of cheese in the fridge door. I unwrap it and take a bite, chewing while I try to hold back my tears. The teeth marks in the cheese stare back at me, taunting, even little furrows down one corner of the block. This is a new low.

I'm still staring at the bite mark and feeling sorry for myself when my doorbell rings.

I put the cheese on the counter and head for the front door, groaning when I open the door to see my best friend standing on the stoop. Laurel is a brunette with perfect caramel highlights and an impressive collection of athleisure wear.

I pull the door open a bit wider to let her in. “You heard?” I ask.

“I heard, and I’m here to save you from yourself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She kicks her Birkenstock sandals off and sweeps into my home, homing in on the bite-marked block of cheese like some kind of hound trained to find a person’s most embarrassing displays of shame-related gluttony. She points at the aged cheddar triumphantly. “It means you’re taking bites out of blocks of cheese, honey. You’re wallowing.”

“I don’t wallow. And that’s artisan cheese, I’ll have you know.”

“You are like a pig in shit, sweetie. Except without the happy oinks.”

“Stop calling me pet names.”

“Babe.” She shakes her head. “Pardon the pun. Come on. Let’s put the cheese away.”

“What did my cheese ever do to you?” I grab the block and take another bite out of it, because I’m spiteful and immature. It doesn’t taste nearly as good as the first bite (and the first bite wasn’t great, what with me having to swallow my mortifying shame along with it), especially with Laurel looking at me with that patient, loving expression on her face. I chew and swallow, then look at the cheddar. It stares back at me, sniggering.

I sigh. “Fine.”

When the cheese is away and we’re sitting on the couch with mugs of chamomile tea, Laurel spears me with those big blue eyes of hers and arches her brows. “Now,” she starts. “Did you really crash your company van into your neighbor’s tree?”

I sip my drink and nod. “Yep.”

“And you did it in front of an audience? An audience that includes the twins?” Dorothy and Margaret are the font of all gossip in the town of Heart’s Cove, but I have a sneaking

suspicion Agnes isn't too far behind. I'm sure my run-in with the magnolia tree has been dramatized a million times over by now.

A sigh slips through my lips. "Yep."

"And then you passed out and had to be taken to the hospital?"

I put the mug down and slap my hands over my face. I can't even manage another "yep," so I just groan.

Laurel's hand lands on my upper back and starts making small circles. "Are you okay? Physically, I mean?"

"According to the doctors, yes. I passed out from stress and shock."

"That must have been pretty scary."

"My life flashed before my eyes," I tell her.

"Really?" Laurel folds her foot under her opposite knee. "What did you see?"

"That I'm a failure who can't even manage to buy a van properly, let alone run a business." And my ex-husband treated me exactly the way I deserved, so who am I to think I could actually rise above the breakdown of my marriage and strive for anything better in my life?

"Hey." Laurel points a finger at me. "No wallowing. If you go anywhere near another dairy product right now, so help me God..."

I snort, slouching back on the sofa. "I don't know. Ever since the divorce I feel like I've been in a tailspin."

"You've been divorced six years, Audrey." She sets her mug down on the coffee table and frowns at me. "In six short years, you've started a business that has grown to, what, seven employees?"

"Eight."

"Eight employees," she amends. "You've gained a social media following of rabid fans. You are the Organizing Goddess. In what world is that a failure? Look at this house

you just bought!” She points at the sliding glass doors that lead to the huge backyard. Beyond the back fence is darkness, but I know in the daylight I’ll be able to see a sliver of glittering blue ocean in the distance. It’s not the best area of town, but with property prices skyrocketing, it felt like I’d just snagged the deal of a lifetime.

The divorce wrecked me financially, and then I decided to pour every available penny into the business. I’m just now finding my feet, and this house is all I could afford. I paid a premium for that sliver of a view, a premium which has now come back to bite me in the butt.

“The house needs to be gutted and redone,” I say, glancing around.

“Oh, stop it. That’s a lie and you know it.”

“The bathrooms are dated.”

“They have character.”

“They have avocado-colored toilets.”

“I’m going to grab that block of cheese and beat you over the head with it, and then we can talk about avocado-colored toilets.”

A chuckle builds up in my chest. I glance over at Laurel, who pretends to be stern but is soon laughing with me. I wipe the tears that spring from my eyes and shake my head. “I’m sorry. I’m being horrible.”

“You’ve had a rough day. But look at everything you’ve accomplished in six years, Audrey. It’s incredible. You’re incredible.”

I don’t feel incredible. Pinching my lips, I say, “I can’t believe I crashed into a tree.”

“What did your neighbor say?”

“Haven’t met them yet, but I can’t imagine they’ll be happy.”

“Maybe you should bring something over tomorrow and apologize. Cookies or a pie or something. Everyone loves pie,

and I'm sure you have perfectly labeled pre-prepped pie crusts in your freezer, so it's not like it'll be a huge undertaking to bake one." She sees my pinched lips and starts laughing. I do have pie crusts in the freezer. "I knew it! And who knows? Maybe your neighbor is a man, and single, and wildly attractive. Maybe he'll invite you in and then give it to you over the kitchen counter, and then you can recover by eating pie together."

I roll my eyes. "Not this again."

"Audrey."

"My neighbor is probably a little old lady with a passion for gardening. You saw the place. Hot single men don't have flower pots in their front yards."

"You won't know until you go over there."

"If you start trying to get me to date again, *I'll* go grab that block of cheese and start bludgeoning."

Laurel gets an evil gleam in her eyes. "I never said anything about dating. Plus, it's been six years, honey. Don't you think you should put yourself out there?"

"I have a business to run, and apparently I can't even manage to buy a decent company van, so I'm not sure I'm exactly qualified to even do that. I don't have time for men. And you know I've never been interested in casual sex. My wires get crossed and I always get too attached. Didn't work in my twenties and I doubt it'll work now."

I got attached to Terry. Married him the year after we graduated college, and that union lasted a decade. I've spent more than half that again trying to recover. He's been a fixture in my life from the ages of twenty to forty. I gave that man half of my entire life, and he didn't deserve a minute of it.

Laurel hums. I glare at the coffee table and try to ignore her. When she takes a deep breath, I brace myself for another loving, stern volley.

"Tell me about the accident."

Bunching my lips to the side, I try to come up with an explanation, but all I can do is tell her the truth. “I forgot to schedule the yearly service. The brakes malfunctioned. I knew they were getting worn down, but I didn’t think it was that bad.”

“Hmm.”

“What do you mean, ‘hmm?’”

“That explains the van, but it doesn’t explain your mood. What’s really going on?”

“Laurel, I just told you.”

“I’ve known you for twenty years, honey. What happened?”

“I’ve got a lot on my plate.”

“You are at your best when you’re spinning a dozen plates, Audrey. Now tell me what’s going on.”

My sigh sounds like I’m fourteen years old and angsty about being grounded. But I know she’ll get it out of me one way or another, so I admit the truth: “Terry’s new wife wants me to organize her home. Their home.”

“*What.*” Laurel slams her tea down on a side table and stares at me. The tea sloshes over the lip of the mug onto the timber table. I’ll have to clean that before it ruins the wood.

Before I can do that, though, Laurel grips the edge of the couch and launches herself up, pacing the length of my living room and back. “Terry as in your ex-husband Terry? *His* new wife? His affair partner? That woman wants *you* to organize the home she shares with your adulterous ex-husband? Am I understanding this correctly?”

I nod, closing my eyes.

“You told her to shove it, right? You laughed her right off the phone? She thinks you’re a cold-hearted bitch because you shut her down so hard. Right? *Right?*”

I grimace. “I told her I’d look at my schedule and get back to her.”

*“Audrey.”*

“I could use the money, Laurel.” My excuse sounds thin even to my ears, but it’s the truth. “Things have been slowing down. I had to pull a lot of money out of the business for the down payment on this house, and I think I overextended myself. I’m worried. Plus, a job is a job.”

“No.” She points her finger at me. “*No*. You get on the phone right now and tell her to kick rocks. You cannot reorganize your ex-husband’s house with his affair partner looking over your shoulder. Just—no. Do you remember what he said to you when he told you he wanted a divorce? Do you remember every time you called me crying when—”

“*Yes*,” I hiss. I remember the monthly heartbreak that eventually wore me down. I don’t need to rehash it with Laurel, who was right there with me for the whole agonizing journey that led to me finding out I couldn’t conceive. Because Terry didn’t just cheat on me; he had an affair after he found out we wouldn’t have children together. That *I* wouldn’t be able to have his children. It was the ultimate failure, the ultimate betrayal. No matter what I tell myself about my business and my new house, I’m not sure I’m over the agony of it. I spread my arms, helpless. “That one job would cover my payroll expenses for a month, Laurel. I can’t just turn that down. Especially with the van and now the hospital bill.”

“You absolutely can turn that down.”

“You don’t understand,” I say, voice hoarse. She doesn’t get that I’m on my own. Those eight employees rely on me and no one else. They pay their rents and mortgages because I find the work and I sign their paychecks. I can’t just turn down a huge job because I don’t like the client. “I won’t even have to go over there,” I tell her. “I’ll send Paula and Meg—they’re my best employees—and I won’t have to deal with Terry and Caroline at all, other than taking their money.”

Laurel vibrates where she stands on the other side of the room, glaring at me. Then she spins on her heels and disappears into the kitchen, coming back a few seconds later with my block of aged cheddar, which she proceeds to launch



at me with the skill of a Major League Baseball pitcher in his prime.

I dodge the block, falling on my side with a startled yelp. The cheese bounces off the cushions and tumbles to the floor. “Hey! That’s my fancy cheese, you nutcase.”

“Nutcase? You’re calling *me* a nutcase? You, the woman who’s considering working for her ex-husband and his affair partner?”

I groan, then grab a throw pillow and shove it over my face. When I pull it away, Laurel is in the armchair to my right with her elbows on her knees, massaging her temples with the tips of her fingers. She glances at me, eyes narrowed.

“I know what you need,” she tells me.

“What’s that?”

“You need a fling.”

I sigh, turning to stare at the ceiling. I’m so tired. “Sex doesn’t fix everything, Laurel.”

“No. But it will fix this.”

Ha. Right. “And how’s it supposed to do that? A magical man will give me a magical orgasm, and all my problems will go away?” I snort. “Please.”

“You are under an incredible amount of pressure. You’ve spent six years rebuilding your life. You’re successful, in demand, and expanding your business every single year. Stop it—don’t roll your eyes at me. Maybe it’s been a slow month or two, but I bet you’re still making more money than you were this time last year.” She harrumphs when I click my tongue, then points at me. “You think you need to keep going and going and going, and you never think about taking care of yourself.”

My throat is suddenly tight. I frown at the ceiling. It has a godawful popcorn texture and a boob light. I don’t feel like a raging success staring at the dated fixtures, my whole body aching. I feel like a failure.

“You run around taking care of everyone and everything other than yourself, and you convince yourself that you should take a job organizing your ex-husband and his affair partner’s house.”

“Technically they’re married now, so...”

“She’s still the woman he cheated with,” Laurel responds, voice harsh. “He used and used and used you until there was nothing left, and then he walked away. You *cannot* take that job.”

My ribs constrict. I sit up and glare at my best friend. “Fine. I agree with you. But what’s this got to do with a fling?”

Laurel’s hands come up and shape an imaginary sphere in front of her. “A fling is a beautiful, perfect, fully contained phenomenon. You can enter into a fling with your eyes wide open and take from it everything you need. Then you leave it behind as a perfect period of time in your memory, and you move on, lighter and happier than you were before.”

“I just told you; I don’t do casual sex.”

“A fling isn’t casual sex, Audrey. There’s connection. There’s understanding. And there’s an end date.”

“I don’t have time for a fling or a relationship or even a one-night stand.”

Laurel sighs. “Something’s got to give, babe. You’re running around trying to take care of everything, and you’re letting things slip. What if your next accident is more serious? What if you end up hurt? Dead? You need to take a *break*, Laurel.”

“Normal people take vacations when they need a break.”

“Normal people don’t run Organizing Goddess, Incorporated.”

I tilt my head from side to side. “Fair.”

“There’s another reason a fling is what you need.”

“Yeah? Can’t wait to hear it.”

“Stop being snarky. You’re a woman in your prime, Audrey, and you need to be reminded of that. You need a man to run his hands over your body and have his eyes go hot and dark. You need his skin against yours. You need to hear him groan in your ear because it feels so damn good to be inside you. You need to get yourself out of your head and into your body.”

I look at her body, then down at mine. I grimace. “Right. And this mythical, wonderful man who makes me feel like a goddess—where do I find him again?”

“You open your eyes and *look*, for once. Six years and no sex is a recipe for running your company van into the neighbor’s tree.”

“Low blow,” I grumble. It’s my turn to rub my temples. I don’t mention that Terry and I weren’t intimate for the last two years of our relationship, so it’s been more like eight years since I did the deed. Eight years: over a third of my adult life. Good God. I stare at the block of cheese in the middle of the rug, my teeth marks still visible through the wrapper. “Maybe.”

Laurel comes to sit beside me. Her knee nudges mine. “You okay?”

I glance at her and tell her the truth: “I’m exhausted.”

“Okay,” Laurel says, bringing her hands together in a nonsense clap. “New plan.”

“What was the old plan?”

“Wallowing, and when you weren’t wallowing, you were running around like a maniac. It wasn’t working. Keep up, babe.” She shifts on the couch to face me fully. “You’re going to make a pie or brownies or get some flowers or something, and you’re going to go meet your hot neighbor—”

“We don’t know that he’s hot. And we don’t know that he’s a he.”

“—but first, you’re going underwear shopping.”

We stare at each other for a beat. I love Laurel like a sister; I do. But I'm not sure I can continue having this conversation. "I should probably get to bed, Laurel, so..."

"Don't you dare kick me out. You're buying sexy underwear and you're wearing it under your clothes from now on. And then you're dressing in something cute, you're marching over there, and you're introducing yourself to the owner of the tree."

"What's the point of all this?"

"The point," Laurel explains patiently, "is that you're so focused on doing everything perfectly that you're letting life pass you by. Stop worrying about organizing everything to the nth degree. Start inviting a little chaos into your life. Have hot sex on the kitchen counter and then eat pie."

"I crashed into a tree, Laurel. Don't you think that's enough chaos for this week, at least?"

She doesn't acknowledge me in the slightest. "After that, you'll go to the garage and find out what's going on with the van. You can borrow my car to get there. You'll get the prognosis, and you'll either get it fixed or buy a new one. Meanwhile, there'll be a bunch of hunky mechanics lusting after you because you'll look so hot."

I stare at her. She stares back.

"Mechanics are the scourge of the earth," I inform her. "One of them screwed me over and told me to buy that van."

Laurel ignores that comment and says, "Men can tell when a woman's wearing hot underwear, you know. It's a fact."

I narrow my eyes. "How did we become friends again?"

"We were study buddies in college. Keep up, honey."

"You copied all my notes, you mean."

"You're an insane notetaker, Audrey, I'd've been an idiot not to take advantage of that. Now listen. The goal is to get you the hottest, sexiest man to worship the ground you walk on for, say, a month. After a month, you'll be out of the danger zone."

“And what danger zone is that?”

“One where your head is so messed up you think working for your ex-husband is a good idea. A hundred or so orgasms should cure you of that. So. The plan. You’ll deal with the van. You’ll delegate this week’s work to one of your eight amazing employees. You’ll put all your focus into looking and feeling your best, and you’ll find a man who turns you on and then seduce him with your wiles.”

“Right.” I glance toward the hallway, wondering how I can get Laurel to leave.

“Then you’ll run into Terry at the grocery store one day, preferably after you’ve had so much sex you walk funny. He’ll notice you’re glowing and you look amazing, and then you’ll walk away and never think about him again, except to wish him the best when you’re feeling magnanimous and cackle at the dumpster fire of his life when you’re feeling petty. You with me so far?”

I can’t help it. My lips curl into a smile. My best friend is loony, but her plan does sound pretty great. “I’m with you.”

She smiles at me and wraps me in her arms. “Good. I love you, you know. I don’t want to get a phone call in the middle of the night telling me you’ve wrapped yourself around a tree.”

Throat tight, I nod. “I need a break.”

“Fling,” Laurel corrects. “You need a fling.”

I blink away my gathering tears and shake my head. Her plan might sound fun, but I live in the real world. There isn’t going to be a hot man who drops into my lap and lives to worship me. I’ve gone forty years without finding one; I don’t believe that’ll change now. “I can’t think about this right now, Laurel. I need to get over the shock of the crash first.”

“The crash was your wake-up call.” Laurel’s voice has lost its no-nonsense edge, and now she sounds oddly solemn. “You’re spreading yourself too thin trying to prove to everyone that everything is perfect. You need to loosen the

reins a little. Nothing will ever be perfect, no matter how hard you try.”

“And finding a man is supposed to fix all my problems? Doesn’t sound like you’re being a very good feminist.”

“Honey, I’m saying this in the most loving way I possibly can, but you need sex. You don’t need a man; you need a *fling*. Just a hot little tryst that can pull you out of this funk.” She pats my hand. “You need to get laid so you remember how good it feels to have an orgasm when you’re sweaty and sticky and wrapped up in another person’s arms. Besides, sex is never perfect. It’s messy and clumsy and awkward, until it isn’t. And all that messiness is what makes it beautiful. And if there’s anyone who needs a reminder that imperfect is beautiful, it’s you.”

I hum, unconvinced. The reason my business has been a success is because I make my clients’ spaces perfect. They don’t think messiness is beautiful; that’s why they hire me in the first place.

Laurel pats my knee. “You’ve been living in your head for years, and I need you to move back into your body. But you’re also goal-oriented, so I’m giving you a deadline. When did Terry the Cheating Bastard’s affair partner want to hire you?”

My lips twitch. “I told her I was busy this month, which was a lie, and she said she could wait.”

“There you go. You find a man, have a fling, and survive the next month. Then you can shift gears.”

“I don’t know...” I mull it over for a moment. The thought of having sex with an imaginary man fills me with terror...and maybe a bit of excitement. I haven’t had sex—haven’t had *good* sex—in so long that I’m not sure I still know how. And what about my business? I can’t take time off, not when I’m supposed to be pushing harder. But pushing harder is what had me crashing into a tree.

So...maybe Laurel has a point. Assuming I could find a man that I’d actually want to have sex with, maybe a fun little fling would be a nice change of pace.

I glance at my best friend and frown. “This conversation has lacked a lot of logic, and I’m feeling slightly worried that it’s still making sense to me.”

“See? Deep down, you know you need a good dicking.”

“Please don’t ever say that sentence to me again.”

Laurel laughs, then throws her arms around me and squeezes. She kisses my temple. “Delegate everything you can at work. Buy some lingerie. Bake a pie. Have a zillion orgasms with a man who drives you crazy. Got it?”

I huff. “Fine. Whatever.”

We head for the front door. Laurel pauses, meeting my gaze. “I love you, Audrey. You scared me today. I want you to be healthy and happy and free.”

“I want that too.”

She points her finger at me. “Have a fling. I promise it’ll help.”

“If you say so.”

She gives me an impish smile and slides her feet back into her sandals. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

LATE THE NEXT AFTERNOON, Friday, I pull a beautiful pecan pie out of the oven and set it on the stove. As much as Laurel makes fun of my organization, having pie crust in the freezer *does* come in handy for moments like these.

Today was busy. I had to prep one of my teams for a difficult client who wanted a full closet reorg, and then I had to run around to three different stores when we realized we were missing some of the baskets and containers we needed. I had to go through all my inventory and double-check that we weren’t short on anything else, and then I realized I was late putting together the schedule for the next two weeks.

That’s when my head started pounding, and I remembered the doctor told me to take it easy. I heard Laurel’s voice in my head telling me I was spreading myself too thin.

So I brought my brightest employee, Paula, into my office and told her that I'd like her to take over some scheduling tasks. Her face lit up. She already had ideas about who to pair together and software we could use to upgrade the system. Within two hours, she had a draft schedule for the next three weeks for me to approve, with all our current jobs allocated to employees, with notes about what materials would be needed.

I'm still blown away. I feel slightly guilty that I've clipped her wings in the four years she's worked for me. I wonder how many other employees feel that they can't work to their full potential. Even if only Paula is able to take on that kind of responsibility on a regular basis, it will free up precious hours of my week. I was able to do a full reckoning of the inventory for our next month of work, order what was running low, and even follow up on two inquiries I'd received through my website.

If I'd insisted on doing everything myself because I believed only I could do it perfectly, I'd still be working at the office instead of baking a beautiful pie to apologize to my neighbor.

Laurel was right. I need to loosen the reins.

I head upstairs to shower and change. I choose a fluttery blue sundress and wear my hair down. My feet get strapped into white sandals with a four-inch heel that clasp at the ankle with a thin strap, showing off my pink toes. I stare at myself in the mirror and see a stranger.

I used to love dressing up. Terry once told me that it's what he loved most about me. He said he liked that I was a real woman and I knew how to keep a man interested. I remember feeling profoundly insulted by those words, but I was too deep in the relationship to realize exactly why. I just painted a false smile on my face and let him kiss me.

Now I know. He never saw me as a person. Never saw the potential I had. I was an accessory to his life, and I got tossed aside when he decided I wasn't going to serve his purposes any longer.



After the divorce, I built the business I'd been dreaming about for years. I dressed in sensible clothes; I was often working hard in people's homes, and I had to wear attire I could move and sweat in. I'd spend hours redoing closets and pantries and reorganizing kitchen cabinets and drawers. I'd get dirty while I made people's homes functional and beautiful.

Now I mostly manage my employees and focus on expanding the business, but I still sometimes have to take on jobs myself when scheduling issues happen. I always dress sensibly, just in case. Maybe dressing in frumpy clothes has been a kind of armor I've worn without even realizing what I was doing. I've been hiding.

It's been a long, long time since I felt truly pretty.

I turn in the mirror and look at the backs of my legs. My calves look amazing in these heels. A smile curls my lips. My neighbor might be a little old lady with a passion for gardening, but that doesn't mean I can't dress up. Who knows? Maybe she has a hot son—or, *gasp*, a hot twenty-something-year-old grandson—who would be the perfect candidate for a fling. I could be a cougar, couldn't I? What's the use in turning forty if you can't enjoy it?

Grinning, I shimmy my hips to make my dress swish around my legs. Maybe Laurel is on to something. It's not really about finding a man; it's about remembering what it's like to feel good.

By the time I make it back downstairs, the pie has cooled enough to carry, so I walk it over to my neighbor's and ring the doorbell. Nerves flutter in my belly as I glance at the tree with its damaged bark. Pie won't fix the tree, but at least it's a nice gesture. Adults take responsibility for their mistakes. They apologize, even when it's hard. Besides, everyone likes pie.

No one answers the door, so I glance at the windows. There's movement in one of the upper windows, so I press the bell again.

The breeze ruffles the hem of my dress, and I take a deep breath of flower-scented air. The sun is sinking behind the

houses, and the colors draped over the sky promise a beautiful sunset. For the first time in years, I take the time to notice it.

This was my wake-up call. Something's got to change, and it's not just my underwear choices.

This is the start of a new chapter. I'll delegate. I'll relax. Maybe I'll even have a fling.

Just as the thought makes my lips curl into a hopeful smile, the door opens—and I freeze.

FOUR

# REMY

WATER DRIPS from the ends of my hair onto my neck and shoulders as I rip the front door open, already annoyed at having to rush out of the shower to answer the door. I just got home from work, and all I want to do is be alone for a couple of hours until I have to pick Danny up from a post-camp playdate.

I pause when I see who's on my stoop.

My new neighbor's eyes widen and drop to my chest, then down to the hand holding the towel clasped around my waist.

"I—um—I..." She sucks in a hard breath and looks at my chest again.

I don't know why I flex my stomach. Probably because a beautiful woman is staring at me like she can't believe what she's seeing, and apparently my ego controls the contraction of my muscles. But that beautiful woman crashed into my magnolia tree, and now she's standing outside my door wearing a pretty little dress and holding a pie in her hands like that'll make everything better.

It won't.

Her eyes drop to my stomach, and I can almost feel the rake of her gaze across my abs. Her cheeks grow red. "I'm so sorry." She whirls around and puts her back to me. "I didn't mean to... I don't..."

"Here to borrow a cup of sugar?" I drawl, suddenly unbothered about having to rush to the door wearing nothing but a towel. Her dress swishes around her knees. The straps

crisscross in the back, disappearing behind the curtain of her chocolate-brown hair and reappearing at her waist, where the dress dips down to reveal an inch of skin. I stare at the glimpse of her spine, my mouth dry.

This is the woman who crashed into my tree. The woman who could have killed herself—and my magnolia. I try to muster the anger I felt yesterday, but I find myself unable to do it.

I'm tired of anger. Being mad doesn't help Danny live a better life. It doesn't bring my sister back or make me married and whole again.

Instead, I drip water onto my entryway tiles and stare as she keeps her back to me like she'll combust if she faces my bare chest again. An odd, warm feeling moves in my chest, like a lazy cat stretching in the sun.

She's cute when she's flustered.

"I wanted to bake a pie and bring it over," she says, still keeping her back to me, "to apologize."

"I see."

"About the tree."

"I got that."

"I'm sorry," she says, and that siren voice wraps around my body like silk. "Is your... Is your grandmother home?"

My eyes, which had drifted down to the intriguing curve of her ass hidden behind the fluttering fabric of her sundress, snap up to the back of her head. "My grandmother?"

"She lives here, right?"

"What?"

"The..." She glances over her shoulder and succeeds in meeting my eye for about half a second before her gaze drifts all the way back down to my towel. She squeezes her eyes shut and turns her head to face forward again. "The garden is so nice, I assumed it belonged to a...a...a little old lady."

"A little old lady."

She was so imperious yesterday, sitting on the throne of the paramedic's stretcher. The evil part of my brain enjoys being the cause of her stammers. The not-so-evil part of my brain wonders if I judged her too harshly. I lean my forearm against the doorframe and wait for her to turn around again.

It takes a few seconds, but she does. She faces me, her chest rising and falling with every deep breath. Her gaze darts from my towel to my abs to my shoulders and up to the arm leaning against the door, over my wet hair, and finally lands on my face.

"Jesus," she whispers and squeezes her eyes shut again.

I can't help the smile that spreads across my lips as I see my neighbor standing on my porch, holding a pie with her eyes closed.

"Please accept the pie," she says in a low, husky tone. "Unless you're allergic to nuts, in which case I can make you something else."

"I'm not allergic to nuts," I tell her.

"Oh. Good." Her eyes are still closed. Her voice is hot. She might not know how to drive, and she might be the reason my magnolia tree gets a fungal infection and dies, but the woman has a great voice. My cock agrees, twitching from behind its terrycloth prison. With every second we spend together, the embers of my anger grow cool and gray.

The woman was in a car accident because her van is a piece of crap that likely hasn't been roadworthy in a decade. She's probably just as upset about the tree as I am. Once again, I let my emotions get the best of me. Instead of being empathetic, I judged her.

Now she's here, blushing furiously, and I discover my lips want to twitch. "Did you bake a pie for my imaginary grandmother?"

The woman doesn't open her eyes as she thrusts the pie toward me. "Yes. But you can have it instead."

"That's nice of you."

The pie trembles slightly as she holds it extended. “Take it.”

“Why are your eyes closed?”

“Because you’re naked.”

“I’m wearing a towel.”

“You’re naked under the towel.” Her brows are dark slashes, and they lower over her scrunched-up eyes. Her mouth, which was so lush and pink yesterday, is pursed into a thin line. She waves the pie in my general direction. “Take it. Please.”

“I’m not sure I should. If I take it, you’ll think I accept your apology.”

Her eyes fly open. Pale green irises stare up at me. “You don’t? Accept my apology?”

“You might have killed my tree.”

Her teeth bite into her lush lower lip, and she glances over her shoulder at the tree in question. The line of her neck curves enticingly, revealed from behind the curtain of her hair.

“You weren’t hurt?” I hear myself ask, even though I don’t care if she was. Truly. Still, I frown when it takes her a second to answer. “Were you? Hurt?”

She glances back at me and shakes her head. “I passed out because of the shock, according to the doctors. I wasn’t going fast enough to do real damage, so apart from some bruising...” She leans the pie plate against her hip and uses her free hand to lift a hank of hair from her temple, revealing a patch of purple skin.

Something tightens around my ribs. I’m an ass. I’ve been annoyed at this woman all day, resenting her voice and her body and her eyes, and she could have been seriously hurt. No wonder my relationships haven’t lasted. I’m not a good person. Taking Danny in must have exhausted every good deed I had inside me, and now there’s nothing but bitterness left.

She drops the hair and squares her shoulders, gripping the pie with both hands again. “Listen. I’m so sorry...um...”

“Remy.”

“Remy,” she repeats, and I can’t help but notice that my name sounds good on her lips. “I’m Audrey. Please take the pie.” She extends it toward me again.

I straighten and take the pie from her. Pecan. My favorite. I lift the pie a couple of inches. “Thanks.”

She nods, meeting my gaze again—and frowns. “Wait. Aren’t you the tow truck guy?”

“Took you this long to notice?”

A flush creeps up her neck and over her cheeks. “Um. Yes. I was...uh...distracted. I didn’t...see your...face, because—” She stops speaking abruptly.

I don’t like this woman. She’s a reckless driver who doesn’t take care of her vehicle. She cares about organization and appearances. She thinks a pie will fix the fact that she might have killed the tree that saved my sanity as a kid.

But my ego does like the fact that my body can cause a reaction like that in her. Makes me want to see what other reactions I could elicit.

And—fine. I don’t *hate* her. She took the time to bake me a pie, and it looks like she’s truly apologetic about the tree. She couldn’t have known what that tree meant to me, and I know she didn’t do it on purpose.

Maybe that’s why, instead of sending her off and shutting the door, I say, “If you’re free, I could take you to the garage and let you know what’s going on with your van.”

Her eyes have drifted to a tattoo on my left shoulder. She nods absentmindedly, then shakes her head and smiles at me a little too brightly. “Sorry. What was that?”

“I’ll drive you to the garage. I took a look at your van yesterday. We could go over what needs to be fixed.”

“Right now?”



“Might have to give me a minute to put some clothes on first.”

Her face goes red again, which pleases me in a weird, deep, perverted way. “Of course,” she responds. “That would be great. Just knock on the door when you’re ready.”

Without waiting for me to reply, she scampers off across our lawns, hops over the demolished part of the bushes, and disappears inside her house. I wait for the door to close, then I bring the pie to the kitchen and have a slice.

It’s delicious.

FIVE

# AUDREY

IT TAKES me a full ten breaths to get my heart rate under control. I lean against my front door and inhale for the eleventh time, then I open my eyes.

Oh. My. God.

My next-door neighbor is most definitely *not* a little old lady. He might be the sexiest man I've ever seen in my life.

And I crashed into his tree. And he hates me. I've seen him in a towel with water dripping over every solid, muscular slab. My mouth is dry. Other parts of me are not.

I fumble for my phone. "Laurel," I say when she answers. "Was that whole fling thing some sort of horrible joke?"

"What?" The phone shuffles and a door closes, and a lot of the background noise cuts out. She must still be at the office. "What are you talking about?"

"Were you playing a prank on me last night?"

"When I threw the cheese?"

"Screw the cheese! When you tried to convince me to have a fling! The whole sex-on-the-counter-then-eat-pie thing!"

"Audrey. Slow down. What's going on?"

"My neighbor is not a little old lady."

"Okay..."

"It's the mechanic!"

"The one who sold you that piece-of-crap van?"

“No! The one who towed the van yesterday!” I sound shrill, so I take another breath. “My next-door neighbor isn’t an old lady. He’s a man. A man who drives the tow truck that picked up my van from his own front yard yesterday. He opened the door wearing a towel. I’m mortified.”

Laurel lets out an excited squeak. “Did he bend you over the kitchen counter like we planned? And then you ate pie? Did you eat pie off his chest? Wait! Did he eat pie off *your* chest?”

“What? No! He hates me. I crashed into his tree, remember?”

“Oh.” Laurel sounds dejected, but she brightens up when she says, “Is he hot?”

I let my head fall back against the door and picture the sight of his arms, his shoulders, his chest, his dense pack of abs, and—“Yes,” I tell her. “He’s hot.”

His eyes were a dark shade of brown, surrounded by a network of crinkles, and he had chestnut-brown hair shot through with gray. His beard was cut shortish and almost white, and his body was the most insane, tattooed, muscular, manly piece of art I’ve ever seen in my entire life.

No part of me wants to be a cougar right now. I want every bit of his silver-haired, crinkly-eyed deliciousness.

And I crashed into his tree.

The hottest man I’ve ever seen is my next-door neighbor, and he saw me get wheeled away by the paramedics after I Crashed. Into. His. Tree.

I’ve never been this embarrassed in my entire life.

“Yay! This is *perfect*. Audrey, you can—”

“I’m not having a fling with my neighbor, Laurel.”

“Oh, boo. We talked about this, Audrey. It’s a sign from the universe.”

“What, that I should feel even more embarrassed than I already do?”

“No! It’s a sign that you should most definitely have hot and sweaty sex with this man.”

“I live next door to him,” I protest. “What happens when the fling ends?”

“You nod politely when you happen to cross paths and otherwise ignore each other’s existence. If you see him in the driveway, you wait until he’s gone before you go outside. You know, like a normal person.”

Before I can come up with a retort, the doorbell rings. “I have to go.”

“Wait! I need more deets.”

“He’s waiting for me, Laurel.”

“What? Why?”

“We’re going to the garage to talk about the van.”

“Hold on! What kind of underwear are you wearing?”

“Goodbye.” I hang up the phone and rip open the door, pasting a bright smile on my face. It takes a monumental effort to hold up the edges of my lips when I’m confronted with the mechanic on my doorstep. Somehow, he looks even more attractive than I remembered.

A white tee stretches over his broad chest, its sleeves straining around his muscular arms. What would it feel like to have those arms around me? How would he look propped up above me, all his attention focused on me? His hair is combed back but still damp, and his stubble has been trimmed. Low-slung jeans hug his legs, pale blue, worn, and soft-looking. He tilts his head to the Chevy truck parked in front of my house. “Ready?”

“Uh-huh,” I answer, unable to form real words, and slip outside to lock the door.

Following him down the flagstone path, my heart only skips the tiniest bit when he opens the door for me and waits for me to get in. It smells like engine oil and man in here, and I think I have a tiny orgasm as I watch Remy stalk around the hood of the car to reach the driver’s side. I’m not sure. It’s

been a while since I had one of those with someone else nearby.

I need to get a grip.

Laurel was wrong. I do not need a fling. The last thing I need to do is get involved with a man. She should never have put those ideas in my head. I've survived for six years without feeling attraction to any man, and now everything has gone haywire.

I focus on clipping my seatbelt and stare straight ahead as Remy starts the truck. We drive in silence for a while, down the neatly kept residential streets that lead to one of the main arteries through town.

"I really am sorry about your tree," I say in the stillness of the car.

Remy grunts. "Thanks."

"The brakes stopped working, and I lost control. It's never happened to me before."

"Your brake pads are worn out and there was a crack in the fluid line."

"Right," I answer, wiping my palms on my thighs. "And that's...bad, right?"

We stop at a red light and Remy glances at me, frowning like I'm some kind of idiotic crazy person. "Yes, Audrey. That's bad. When's the last time you went in for a tune-up?"

"Well, see..." I drift off.

"Yeah?"

"Look, I had it checked over when I bought the van last year, and the mechanic told me it was all good."

"Who?" The vehemence of his question makes me jump.

"Some guy in Santa Rosa. I made a mistake and trusted the seller when he recommended the mechanic. I needed a van, and I couldn't afford to buy new. I'd just signed the lease on an office space, I bought the house, and then interest rates went up—" I cut myself off. He doesn't need to know about

all my idiotic financial mistakes. “I just needed something to run around in until I could afford to replace it with something better.” Not that I owe Remy an explanation.

“Give me his name,” Remy says, a muscle jumping in his cheek. “There’s no way that amount of wear happened in a few months.”

“I don’t know the mechanic’s name,” I admit.

We pull into a gravel lot outside a garage, and Remy cuts the engine. He takes a deep breath and points those dark eyes in my direction.

I hold his gaze, jutting out my chin. “What?”

“You got a death wish?”

I flinch. “No. And I don’t need this from you, okay? I have a lot on my plate. I trusted someone I shouldn’t have. It was a mistake.”

His jaw tenses. “Yeah, it was. Come on. I want to show you something.” He slips out of the truck and comes around the side to open the door for me, but I’m already halfway out. He shuts the passenger door behind me and puts his hand on my mid back to guide me toward the big corrugated steel building in front of us.

His hand feels warm, the edge of it pressed against my skin. I try to ignore it. The way he leads me inside feels almost protective, and I shouldn’t like that as much as I do.

The garage doors are locked, and I try not to ogle while Remy unlocks them and pushes one side open. He moves with easy grace, his muscles bunching as he pushes the big rolling door open, his clothes stretching and straining against the bulk of him. The way his body moves is intoxicating, and I have to look away.

Life is simpler without men in it. I need to remember that. I can have a fling with my vibrator and tell Laurel to mind her own business. It’s not like her love life is all that hot, either.

When we get inside the garage, he flicks a bunch of lights on and guides me to the far corner where my van waits, dented

and forlorn. Remy pops the hood and starts pointing things out, using words I've never heard before to describe the parts of an engine that look like grease-encrusted metal spaghetti.

I nod along and make interested noises.

“Here. This is your brake fluid line.”

I look at the component he's pointing out. It's just one noodle of black spaghetti among many. I nod and try to seem engaged. “Right.”

“There's a leak in it, and it's got to have been pissing fluid for weeks, at least, judging by the state of it.”

I think of the puddles that used to appear overnight on my garage floor and pinch my lips, feeling stupid. My perfectionist brain gets out the flogger and slaps it against her palm, getting ready to strike. I should have known better. I failed. My throat is tight when I croak, “Right.”

“There's body work to do. Your front bumper. The fender. The hood.” He points out each item in turn. “You were lucky that the front axle didn't buckle. You'll have to replace the air bag and realign the steering column. Your tires are nearly bald.”

“Oh dear.”

Remy folds his arms across his chest and stares at the side of my head. I keep staring at the poor van and try to keep the feelings of failure at bay.

“So,” he finally says. “What do you want to do?”

That makes me turn. I arch my brows. “What are my options?”

“Well, I'd recommend junking it.”

My chest constricts. When I finally get a word out, it's barely above a hoarse whisper. “What?”

“Get a used van in decent condition and pay for a new paint job. In the long run, it'll be cheaper than fixing this piece of crap.” He unhooks the hood and lets it drop down. It lands with a clang, which rattles through my bones.



I stare at the dented hood, seeing nothing. I don't have the money to buy a new vehicle, never mind paint it and put my company logo on it. My savings are already getting near the danger zone. Depleting them completely wouldn't be smart, especially when I don't know what will break in my fixer-upper of a house, or what last-minute expenses will crop up with the business.

If I take the job at Terry's house, I could maybe make it work if I found a cheap enough van and prayed that nothing went wrong, and then—

“What are you thinking?” Remy asks, his voice losing the no-nonsense edge he'd used up until now. It sounds softer than before, like he actually cares what I'll answer.

I finally turn to look at him, and his good looks nearly blind me again. He's taller than I am by a few inches, his face carved, his muscles hard. The weak part of me wants him to close the distance between us, wrap me in those strong arms, and promise me everything is going to be okay. I feel so alone.

I give him the best smile I can, which must not be very good because it makes him frown. “I'm thinking I've made a lot of mistakes in the past six months. Six years.” I shake my head. “Longer. I'm also thinking I probably can't afford a new car, even if I buy it used.” I grimace. “I'm in a bit of a cash-flow pinch at the moment. I was supposed to be out of trouble within eight weeks, but between this and the hospital bill...”

Remy lets out a long sigh, but as he opens his mouth to answer me, the sound of an engine makes us both turn. A sleek little sports car slides into the garage through the half-open doors, and a manicured hand pokes out of the driver's window to wiggle its fingers at Remy.

Remy glances at me, his jaw tight. “Excuse me for a second.”

“Remy, baby!” A young woman gets out of the car and blasts us both with a zillion-dollar smile. She's wearing a figure-hugging red dress and six-inch spike heels. Her hair is perfect. Her skin is perfect. Her jewelry is delicate and

understated. Her body is unbelievable. It looks like she's about to go to an upscale cocktail bar with all her rich friends.

I know comparison is the thief of joy, but comparison is also a sneaky little devil with its hooks in my shoulder and its lips conveniently close to my ear, so it can infect my brain with all kinds of bitter thoughts. I can't help but look at that woman and think that my blue sundress might not be so cute, after all.

As Remy approaches, she pouts prettily. "You haven't called me. I've missed you."

A pit opens up in my stomach, and suddenly I feel stupid. Why would the hottest man in a hundred-mile radius be interested in me when women like this are begging him to call? How did I ever think a fling was even an option? He'd never want me. No matter what I do with my hair or my clothes or my shoes, I can't turn back the clock and look like a lithe twenty-six-year-old in a red-hot dress.

Remy says something I can't hear, and I sidle a bit closer to eavesdrop. I can't help myself.

"I know we agreed." She sighs, putting a hand on her hip. "But we had so much fun. I'm meeting the girls tonight and I thought you might like to join..."

"We had fun, Anna," Remy replies, voice neutral yet hard. "But now it's done."

Ouch. I hide my flinch. I am *definitely* not having a fling with this man. Knowing my habit of getting too attached once sex is on the table, I would definitely get hurt if we ever got involved.

"Will you at least take a look at my car?" The woman bats her eyelashes at the mechanic, and I have to turn away. I can't listen to this. I wander down the side of the garage, pretending to be fascinated by the huge tool chests and bits of machinery that line the wall. A door appears in front of me, and I glance through the grimy window. A messy office is on the other side, with a beat-up office chair and an ancient computer. I block out the sound of the conversation behind me and study the

shelves, the desk, the random assortment of stuff stacked in every corner.

“Let me get the door,” Remy says from behind me, and I jump so high I stumble back—right into his chest.

Rough hands close over my bare biceps, sending shivers racing over my skin. He steadies me, standing so close I can feel the heat of his body at my back. His thumbs stroke my shoulders once, quickly, then he releases me.

I turn. “Thanks. You startled me.” Stealing a glance down to the other side of the garage, I see the woman’s car turn out of the garage. “Her car was okay?”

“She’s going to drop it off next Wednesday,” Remy explains, then reaches past me to get the office door. He smells incredible, and by the time he guides me into the room, my head is spinning.

Laurel might have been right about me needing sex, but this is not the man I need to get involved with. That would be far, far too dangerous for my poor little heart.

“So—” Remy stalks behind the desk and pulls out a legal pad. He drops into the chair and wheels himself forward, resting his forearms on the edge of the messy desk. “My recommendation is for you to get a new van, but if you want to go ahead with the repairs on this one, I can put together a quote.”

“Sure,” I say in a small voice. He scratches a few things down on the pad and then some words fall out of my mouth: “Was that your ex-girlfriend?”

Remy glances up, dark, dark eyes sharp on my face. He leans back in his busted-up office chair and drums his fingers on the arms.

Heat flames on my cheeks. “I’m sorry. That’s none of my business.”

“No, it isn’t,” Remy agrees. “But I’ll tell you anyway. Anna picked me up on a night out a few months ago. It was casual, and it didn’t go anywhere.”

“She picked you up, huh,” I answer.

Amusement twinkles in his eyes, but the rest of his face remains unchanged. I want to make him smile. He runs his finger along his bottom lip and arches a brow. “Don’t believe me?”

“Oh, I believe you, all right. I bet lots of women try to pick you up everywhere you go.”

His gaze holds mine. “Not everywhere. Some women turn their backs on me when they see me without a shirt on.”

“Some women prefer to apologize while the other person is fully clothed.”

“Have you ever tried doing the opposite? Apologizing with no clothes on can be fun too.”

A flutter goes through my chest, and an alarm blares in my head. Am I... Am I *flirting* with this man? This insanely gorgeous man? This mechanic, who by definition must be the scourge of the earth?

Yes. Yes, I am. I blame Laurel for putting silly ideas in my head. She told me I needed sex, and now it’s all I can think about.

Maybe Agnes was right about my head, after all. I should go back to that doctor who told me I was fine and ask him to have another look.

I force my jaws to unlock. “I’m not looking for that kind of fun,” I lie.

Remy watches me for a moment, and the tension becomes almost unbearable. I wonder if he can see the truth in my eyes. Then he shrugs, and the moment is over. “Things with Anna have been over for a while,” he tells me.

I arch a brow. “Doesn’t seem like she agrees with that assessment of the situation.”

Remy shrugs. “Not my problem.”

I am *definitely* not having a fling with this man. He is cold-hearted. He would destroy me, casual fling or not.

“I see,” I finally respond.

Remy’s eyes coast down my body until his gaze suddenly drops to the page in front of him. Heat flares everywhere he looks, even though I know it’s a bad idea to be turned on by him. He’s bad news. He’s not fling material, or boyfriend material, or anything except neighbor-and-mechanic material.

Mechanics are scum, aren’t they? Why am I even entertaining this idea? He has a nice body and a nice face. These things are best admired at a distance.

“So,” he says. “You’re looking at about four grand total, and that’s with a discount on the labor. The body work is really what’s going to cost you.”

A spike of stress pounds through my sternum. I reach forward and fiddle with the items on his desk while I think, sorting the pens from the papers from the tools, moving them into neat piles. “Okay,” I say while my hands work. “Okay. Sure. Four thousand dollars. I have insurance. They might cover this.”

“Do you have comprehensive coverage?”

I bite my lip. “No.”

“This isn’t going to be covered,” he tells me gently, “but you can call them to check.”

My life is unraveling right before my eyes. I’ve always prided myself on being the responsible high-achiever. Valedictorian of my high school class, full-ride scholarship to college, business degree completed with honors. The works. I made a mistake with my choice of husband, but I had no way of knowing he’d wreck my life. I thought we were building a future together. Then the divorce happened.

That was six years ago.

Yes, I built this growing organization business. I have a social media following and I’m able to pay eight people a decent living wage. But I’m hanging on by a fraying thread. Ever since Terry and I finalized our divorce, I’ve been clinging on to sanity with the very tips of my fingers. His new wife’s

phone call evidently made me slip off, and now I'm waiting for the grisly *splat*.

"Are you okay?" Remy asks, voice gentle. The heat that had zinged between us has faded, and it left concern in its wake.

When was the last time a man was concerned about me? Even if it's simply Remy being polite, the sound of his voice and the softness in his gaze make me open my mouth and talk.

"I don't think I've been okay for a long time," I tell him. "Not since my marriage fell apart, at least."

And why did I just tell him that?

But instead of changing the subject, Remy tilts his head and hums. "I know what you mean."

"A lot of people talk about divorce like it's just another life event," I hear myself continue. "It's commonplace. Relationship isn't working? Get divorced. Move on. Easy." I grimace, mind stuck in the past. "That's not how it was for me. My divorce devastated me. It completely wrecked the image I had of myself and my life and my future. It felt like a part of me died, the part that had a vision for how her life was going to go. Now..."

I stop talking. What am I trying to say? That my divorce popped the bubble of my perfect life, and I've been in a tailspin ever since? That despite my successes, the shadow of my failed marriage hangs over me like a black cloud? That I've never really faced the fact that my "perfect life" wasn't perfect at all?

When I meet his gaze, Remy nods, and I can't even imagine how much he must be regretting me being his neighbor. Judging by how quickly he dispatched that beautiful woman earlier, he's probably frantically trying to come up with something to say to get me out of his office.

I imagined the softness in his voice. I mistook polite concern for something more.

But then in a low voice, he says, "My divorce taught me a lot about people and how they're capable of treating each

other. How little those vows really mean.”

“Messy?”

“Extremely.”

“I’m sorry.”

Remy shrugs. The light outside the exterior window is fading fast, casting half his face in shadow. He looks angular and harsh and beautiful. “It is what it is.”

I let out a sigh. “Yeah. Except I keep making stupid decisions, and they keep biting me in the ass.”

Remy’s fingers drum on the pad of paper. His gaze circles my face, and then he shakes his head. “The right decision here is to get rid of that crappy van and get a decent one. I can help you find something reliable.”

“That’s very neighborly of you,” I tell him with a tight smile. “Thank you. But I don’t have enough money for that. I’ll come up with four grand somehow. Do you do payment plans?”

Maybe if I can spread the cost out, I can pick up some more contracts and get an injection of cash. I’ll advertise extra hard. I’ll ask people for referrals. I’ll post on social media every single day. I’ll reach out to everyone who ever asked me about my services, and I’ll make them hire me. The image of my ex-husband and his pretty new wife pops into my head, and I pinch my lips.

Laurel is not going to be happy about this, but I might have to take that job no matter how many blocks of cheese she throws at my head.

“I could knock the labor off the bill, so you’d just pay for parts,” Remy says, then clears his throat and frowns like he didn’t mean to offer that at all.

“I’m not going to ask you to work for free,” I tell him, straightening my spine. “It’s okay. I hit your tree and ripped up your lawn. I already owe you so much. I’ll pay for the repairs to your property and my van.”

There's a long pause. Remy reads my face, then frowns. His gaze drops to the three neat piles I made on his desk, and a strange light enters his eyes. He leans back in his chair, glancing around the room. Finally, as I shift in my seat to try to dispel some of my discomfort, Remy tilts his head.

"You could organize this place."

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"The office. That's what you do, right? Labels and boxes and whatnot?"

Pinching my lips, I arch a brow. "Essentially, yes. But there's a lot more to it than that. I make spaces functional. I make it so that when you move through a space, it's easy to find what you need. Everything is at your fingertips, exactly where you'd expect it to be. It's not just labels and boxes; it's eliminating all the little annoyances that people experience in a space without even registering them."

And I'm *great* at it. Organization is the one area of my life where I feel complete confidence. There, my perfectionism is an asset.

Remy nods. "All right. This office is the farthest thing from functional. I could use your help."

Along the wall to my right are old, beat-up boxes that look to be full of a random assortment of rags, tools, and crumpled receipts. The layout of the room cuts off the flow and doesn't make use of the natural light. The vertical space hasn't been utilized at all.

Which means Remy's right. He *could* use my help.

Still... "This feels like charity."

"It's not." Remy leans forward. "How many hours would it take you to organize this office? For every hour you work here, I'll work one on your van."

"An hour for an hour," I repeat.

"A fair exchange."



“I don’t know,” I answer, frowning. “That still doesn’t seem fair. Your tree...”

“Look. The owner of the garage is an old guy who’s told me I can do what I want with it. I haven’t touched the office because I can’t stand the idea of dealing with any more paperwork than I have to, but look around. I need a new system. You’d be helping me out.”

His eyes are steady and beguiling as they remain trained on mine. His broad hands are braided on top of his desk, tattoos snaking down his arms and around his wrists. He looks a little bit dangerous, a little bit kind, and a lotta bit sexy.

I should say no. I already decided he’s not fling material, and spending any more time with him than necessary would be a terrible idea.

“I...”

“Say yes,” he says, voice low. “Help me out.”

“I can’t,” I whisper.

The sun sinks below the rooftops, and the light in the office turns dim. A beautiful beast of a man watches me with dark-brown eyes, almost begging me to let him help.

“Two for one,” he coaxes. “You work two hours in here for every one I work on your van. I’m practically ripping you off with that kind of proposal.”

“Well, you are a mechanic, so...”

The grin that flashes across his lips sends lightning through my veins. “Audrey,” he says, and I melt. “Say yes.”

Intoxicating, irresistible man. This is such a bad idea.

“Yes,” I hear myself whisper. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

SIX

# REMY

DANNY PRESSES his nose against the living room window.  
“Who’s *that*?”

I follow his gaze to the front yard, where my new neighbor is tidying up the broken twigs and branches from the bushes she demolished on Thursday. We haven’t spoken since I drove her home on Friday night, promising to start our exchange of favors at the beginning of the following week. It’s now Sunday morning, and I’m beginning to regret suggesting the whole thing.

I’m attracted to the woman. I can’t deny it. Whether it’s her voice or her eyes or the stubborn line that appears between her brows when she tries to argue her point, I’m not sure. I just know that the more time I spend with her, the more she intrigues me.

Which is bad.

I have one priority in life: the little boy kneeling on the sofa with his palms and face smooshed against the glass. His world was rocked far more than mine could ever be when his parents passed. When he came to stay with me, I promised myself he’d always be the priority. That promise led to the breakdown of my marriage and a seismic shift in the course of my life, but it was worth it.

I haven’t dated seriously since then, because the last thing I want to do is disrupt Danny’s life. I don’t want to bring a woman into his world that would treat him like anything less

than the amazing kid he is. I don't want him to ever feel like he isn't my number one priority.

He's smiling again. He's laughing and playing. He can talk about his parents without bursting into tears. His tantrums have all but stopped. Dating anyone risks all that progress. How would Danny feel if I brought a woman into his life and she started trying to mother him? How would *I* feel if she let him down even once?

I divorced the last woman who did that. I vowed to never let it happen again. Danny will always come first.

So why the hell did I make that stupid deal with Audrey?

She sat on the other side of my desk, green-eyed, lush-lipped, and I felt almost dizzy at the sight of her. All the anger I'd felt for her melted away when she told me about her divorce, because I knew exactly what she meant. It was the first time I'd heard someone talk about the breakdown of their marriage in a way that made sense to me.

My divorce wasn't just a breakup. It changed the way I think about people. It isolated me in a way I hadn't been able to put into words until I heard Audrey talking about her experience like she'd been through the exact same thing.

I wanted to help her.

I wasn't thinking about Danny. I wasn't thinking about money, or business, or anything logical. I was just thinking about the sad look in her eyes and what I could do to fix it. Then I remembered the Volkswagen paperwork, and I saw the organized piles she'd made on my desk, and words just vomited out of my mouth before I could stop them.

I'm such an idiot.

In the yard next door, Audrey gathers up her pile of twigs and leaves and stuffs them into a big trash bag. "That's our new neighbor, Audrey," I tell my nephew.

"Oh."

"Get your hands and face off the glass and come put your shoes on. You're getting greasy marks all over the window."

Danny pulls his face and hands away and stares at the prints he's left behind. He tries to rub them off with his fingers, which predictably makes them worse. "Whoops."

"Come on. Shoes. Don't you want to go to the water park with Jace?"

"Yes! We're going to race down the big slides. He thinks he's faster than me but he's not."

I grin. "Your mom was competitive too."

He glances at me, one shoe in his hands. "Really?"

"Yep. She was two years older than me, so when we were kids she could beat me in a footrace. The first time I won, she didn't speak to me for the rest of the day."

Danny's smile is wide and bright. "She was a sore loser."

"Big time."

"I didn't know that."

The ball of grief in my gut hasn't gone away, and it lets out a little pulse of pain. I ruffle Danny's hair and check his backpack. He's got a towel, snacks, water, sunblock, a hat, flip-flops, and his handheld video game in case the water park fails to hold his attention. I've probably forgotten something. Sometimes it feels like I'll never get the hang of this parenting thing. "Ready?" I ask, holding up the straps of the pack.

He slides them on and heads for the door. "I'm so going to beat Jace on the slides."

Huffing a laugh, I head out the door and lock up. Audrey glances up when she hears us, one hand going to the big floppy hat on her head. She's kneeling near the bushes again, spreading mulch around the base. Her gaze flicks from Danny to me, a questioning look on her face. Then she smiles and waves.

Danny stops in the middle of the yard to stare at her. "Are you the one who crashed into our tree?"

Audrey goes still, then slowly stands. She's wearing gardening gloves, a baggy old tee, and shorts that show off her

mouthwatering legs.

I like that she's taken it upon herself to clean up the bushes. She takes responsibility for her mistakes; I can respect that in a person.

Agreeing to fix her van in exchange for a tidy office was a mistake, and now I need to live with it. As her lips curl into a hesitant smile, my resolve strengthens: nothing will happen between us. Danny is and always will be my priority. I don't have time to date—at least not until Danny's older.

I watch her gulp, then incline her head. "Yes. Your...dad... was very kind when he explained what had gone wrong with my van."

"He's my uncle, not my dad," Danny answers, "but sometimes I call him Dad anyway."

The first time he did, I held myself together until he was in bed that evening, and then I buried my face in a pillow and cried. It was the first time I'd shed a tear in decades. Hadn't even cried at my sister's funeral, but that little kid calling me his father turned me into a blubbering mess. Danny did it casually, too, which somehow made it harder to handle. He was playing in the backyard and ran into the kitchen to say, "Dad! Watch this!" before running outside and throwing a baseball at a target I'd set up on the fence. Bullseye. Hit me right in the middle of my chest.

"Oh," Audrey answers. "I see." She puts on a brave smile. "I'm Audrey."

"Danny, be nice," I say, putting a hand on my kid's shoulder. "Now come on, we'll be late. We have to go."

He doesn't move when I nudge him, still staring at Audrey. "Did you bake that pecan pie?"

Audrey nods again. "Yes."

"It was really good," Danny says, then scampers to my truck without waiting for an answer, knapsack banging against his back.

Audrey tries to hide her smile, but I see it. I nod to her and follow my nephew to the vehicle. When I get back from dropping him off at his friend Jace's house, Audrey is no longer working in the front yard.

The twinge of disappointment I feel is ridiculous, so I brush it off and head for the front door. It's good she isn't outside. It's good our interactions have been minimal. I don't have the time or inclination to let a woman into my life, seductive voice or no.

Still, a not-so-small part of me is looking forward to seeing her tomorrow.

THE NEXT MORNING, I find myself squeezing a wrench with a white-knuckled grip as I glare at a stubborn, rusted bolt. My shirt is soaked through, and my mood is plummeting faster than the thermometer is rising. Of all the days for the air conditioning to break, today has to be the worst. It's Monday, the first day that Audrey is supposed to work in my office.

After another struggle with the bolt, I manage to snap it off and get the AC unit's cover open to try to fix the stupid thing. Panting hard, I glare at the internal components like I can make the air conditioner work by sheer force of will.

That's when Audrey rides up to the garage on a bicycle.

I frown as she parks her bike just inside the garage, leaning it against a clear patch of wall near the big front doors. I should have loaned her a car. Why didn't I think of that on Friday when she was here?

No—I shouldn't have. I don't owe her anything, least of all a vehicle. I'm already giving her an amazing deal on these repairs when I know she should just get rid of the van entirely. I should have just told her to get a new vehicle and washed my hands of the situation completely.

That would have been the smart thing to do, but apparently I'm not a smart man.

From across the garage, Audrey gives me a cute little wave, which I answer with a nod. She's wearing black yoga pants along with a black tee that's tied in a knot at her lower back, highlighting the curve of her waist and hips. Her hair is gathered up in a ponytail at the crown of her head, and she has gigantic sunglasses perched on her nose, which she pushes up to the top of her head.

"Hi!" Audrey calls, cutting across the oil-stained concrete floor toward me. She whistles, fanning herself. "Whoa! It's hot in here!"

"AC conked out this morning."

"Oh no!" She's carrying a backpack and a reusable grocery store bag full of what look like cleaning supplies which she'd stored in the front basket of her bicycle. "Have you been working in this heat all morning?"

"Haven't done any work all morning, because I've been trying to fix this stupid AC unit," I grumble. I grab a rag from my back pocket and wipe the ever-present grease from my hands. "If you want to start tomorrow, I'll probably have the unit fixed by then," I offer.

"No way." She shakes her head emphatically. "I'm not taking any more favors from you. You've done enough. All I've done is hit your tree."

"And give me a pie."

"The pie was an apology."

"A pretty good one," I admit.

"Your nephew seemed to think so." She smiles. "He's a riot."

I've had so many people question whether I'm able to take care of my nephew by myself over the past three years that any mention of my nephew makes protectiveness flash through me, instinctive and unwelcome. If I were a cat, the hair along my spine would stick straight up. My priority for three years has been taking care of my kid, and I've pushed anyone and everyone away in order to achieve that.



But Audrey is just being nice, so I force myself to relax. “He’s a great kid. I’m lucky to have him.”

I can see the questions dangling on the end of Audrey’s tongue, but she must see something in my face that makes her turn toward the office. “So,” she says brightly, “should I get started?”

SEVEN

# AUDREY

SWEAT DRIPS DOWN MY SPINE, my sides, between my boobs, and into every crevice on my body. I wipe my forehead with a damp forearm and lean against the window frame, trying to get a bit of the breeze to wash over me. Unfortunately, the breeze is hot. It feels like a blow-dryer blasting into my face, and I'm pretty sure it makes me sweatier.

Sighing, I turn back to the office and take stock. Organizing always looks worse before it looks better, and I'm in the "worse" stage of things. Every item has been pulled out and stacked. An Organizing Goddess bomb detonated, and I'm standing in the middle of the blast radius.

"Okay," I tell myself with a huff. "Let's do this."

I open another drawer and start sorting things where they need to go: obvious garbage, maybe garbage, obviously not garbage. I'll have to get Remy to weigh in on the "maybe" pile, and then I can start figuring out where to store things in a way that makes the most sense for how he works. He mentioned his hatred of paperwork, so I need to find a system that's logical and easy to maintain.

But it's so hot I can't think. My shirt is stuck to me, but at least I'm wearing leggings so my thighs aren't chafing.

As I pull an old, beat-up box of car parts out from a storage closet, I let out a groan. Sweat drips into my eye, and I get up to stand by the window again. This is getting dire. I need to cool down.

Shuffling to the door that leads to the garage, I glance out through the grimy window—I'll need to clean that—and see no sign of Remy.

“Screw it,” I mumble, and pull off my shirt. The thick cotton was stuck to my skin, and the minute I toss it aside, I feel better. I let out a sigh, closing my eyes for a moment at the sheer relief of wearing only my sports bra. There are times when I really wish I were a man, and most of them revolve around the ability to go topless without getting arrested.

While I'm basking in the relative relief of my shirtlessness, my phone rings. Laurel's name pops up on the screen. I answer and shove the phone between my ear and my shoulder. “Hey, girl.”

“You sound chipper!”

“I'm working.”

“Excuse me? That wasn't part of the plan. You were supposed to delegate and go underwear shopping, remember?”

“I'm not working for the business. I've delegated everything for the next few days. I'm working for my neighbor.”

“The super-hot neighbor who you want to bang?”

“First of all, I don't want to bang him. You're the one who wants me to do that.”

“Uh-huh,” Laurel answers, seemingly unconvinced.

“Second of all, we have a business arrangement.”

“Hot. Tell me more.”

“You're a real pervert, you know that?”

Laurel laughs. “Come on, tell me. My life is so boring. I need to be entertained.”

“Shouldn't you be working instead of harassing me?”

“My project manager is in a meeting with the hotel owners about the renovations, so I'm slacking off. Now tell me what's up.”

Laurel works for an architecture firm that specializes in restoration. She's extremely talented and works her butt off, but she hasn't been given any big projects lately. When she says she's bored, I believe her.

I lean against the window sill and tilt my head back to get more air. "Fine. I'm reorganizing his office at the garage while he fixes my van. We're doing two hours for an hour, so for every two hours I work here, he'll spend an hour on my van."

"That's way less sexy than it sounded when you called it a business arrangement."

"I did warn you," I tell her, smiling.

"At least let me picture it. What's he wearing?"

Despite myself, my cheeks flush. When I rode into the garage, Remy had on a set of coveralls with short sleeves that showed off his biceps. They'd been unzipped down to his navel, revealing a white undershirt. He looked hot as sin. I'd stared at his shoulders and chest for a bit too long before greeting him. "He's wearing coveralls, like a normal mechanic. I have to get back to work."

"Only you could take my advice about having a fling and turn it into organizing someone's office for free."

"Technically it's not for free, since he's fixing my van..."

"I'm disappointed in you, Audrey Scott."

I laugh. "I have to go."

"Fine. Let's have dinner this week."

"Done." I hang up the phone with a smile on my face, feeling lighter despite myself.

Laurel has been my best friend since college. We actually both grew up in Heart's Cove and went to high school together, but it wasn't until we lived on the same dorm floor in college that we befriended each other. And by that I mean she befriended me in order to use me for my excellent note-taking skills.

But the friendship is far from one-sided. She's let me cry on her shoulder more times than I can count, and she's dragged me out of my head whenever I get too obsessed about doing things exactly right.

If she says I need to loosen the reins a bit, I know from experience she's probably correct.

Still, this office reorganization doesn't exactly feel like work. It's the first time I've been hands-on with a client in over a year, and I'm realizing I missed it. I've been so focused on social media, client acquisition, and management tasks that I'd almost forgotten why I started this business in the first place. It's so *satisfying* to clean up a space. Making sure every single item has its own designated home is like catnip to me. It makes me feel like I've done something worthwhile.

So, with that feeling lending me extra energy, I use my dirty tee to wipe the sweat off my face and get back to work. The heat gets worse, so I open the door to the garage to try to get a cross-breeze going. I stand in the gentle air flow with my hands leaning on the desk, trying to sort invoices out by year. I found them all in various drawers and boxes, so I'm not even sure if they're supposed to be filed in the same place. They're faded and hard to read, so I lean down to try to decipher them.

That's when I hear a scuff by the door. I glance up in time to see Remy at the threshold, a tray of drinks in his hands. He opens his mouth to say something, but his eyes drop to my chest.

And I remember I'm not wearing a shirt.

Then things happen really quickly. Remy makes a startled noise, and his foot catches on the threshold's little metal lip. He stumbles slightly. I stand up straighter and move toward him, but I bang my hip against the desk, which makes me wince and bend forward.

Unfortunately—or maybe fortunately, depending on who you're asking—that gives Remy a prime view of my jiggling cleavage, and he lets out a grunt while his other foot catches on the threshold too.

He stumbles again and his tray of drinks flies up in the air. Being the helpful human I am, I make it around the corner of the desk with my hands outstretched, as if I can catch the drinks out of midair like Spiderman catching Mary Jane's lunch tray in the school cafeteria.

The problem is that I don't have super-sticky superhero hands, so all that happens is I put myself right in the blast zone. One of the cups hits me square in the boob, and ice-cold strawberry milkshake sloshes all over my chest and stomach, soaking into the thick waistband of my yoga pants. The other milkshake container bounces off the edge of the desk and hits Remy's outstretched arm, causing the top to pop off. His arm gets covered with the pink stuff, while the rest of the milkshake splatters all over the ground.

Remy falls to his knees and slips in the milkshake puddle, face-planting on the office floor. I stare at the back of his head, my entire body covered in sticky pink milkshake, breathing heavily.

What—what just happened?

“Shit,” Remy says, standing. “I'm sorry. I got you a shake, and I didn't—” He lunges for a stack of clean microfiber cloths I'd gathered from a half-dozen spots in the office and put in the corner of the room. He grabs two handfuls. Then he takes a couple of steps to close the distance between us, his boots squelching through the milkshake on the floor.

Then the fabric of reality rips, and I enter some kind of alternate universe, because Remy tosses the stack of microfiber cloths on the desk, grabs one, clamps a hand over my hip, and starts roughly mopping up the cold, sticky strawberry milkshake from my body. His hands are all over me, crude and businesslike, sending heat splashing into every corner of my being.

The man brought me a milkshake and now he's touching me all over, and I think I'm going to pass out.

“I tripped. I never trip. I'm sorry, Audrey, I just saw you, and—”

He wipes my stomach, apologizing again, then grabs a fresh cloth and swipes at my side, then across my breasts, and over my shoulder. His hand tightens on my hip to keep me steady when I rock back on my heels from the force of his movements.

I just stand there, taking it.

A third cloth appears in his hands, and he brushes at the skin above my bra. But at the same time, my brain reboots and I decide I should try to help him, so I grab for the cloth while he moves it, and it gets pinned in place while his hand keeps going. Suddenly, the most attractive man I've ever met is standing inches from me, and his hand is sliding through strawberry milkshake across my cleavage, smearing it all over my skin. Then his hand slides a couple of inches lower—God knows why—and he just...cups my breast.

We both freeze. The cloth is now pinned between my bra and my cleavage, but I can't move. Because an extremely attractive man has his hand on my boob, and all I want to do is lean into the touch.

Remy jumps back like he's been burned, throwing his hands up in a *don't shoot* motion. "Oh, God! I didn't mean to —"

Wide-eyed, I stare at him. My heart thumps. Up until the very last moment, there was nothing remotely sexual in the way he was touching me, but *he was touching me*.

And I *liked it*.

Silence stretches as we stare at each other. The cloth works its way out from between my boobs and falls to my feet, slowly soaking up some of the excess milkshake puddled between us.

Remy clears his throat, then jerks his chin. "You're not wearing a shirt."

I look down at myself and see smears of half-cleaned milkshake over my skin, stains soaking into the black fabric of my bra and leggings. "No," I confirm. "I'm not."



Remy finally clears his throat and averts his eyes. “Sorry about the shake. I thought you might need something to cool you down in this heat,” he tells the wall, which he’s been staring at intently since he turned away from me.

“That part was a success, at least,” I offer. Although my body is anything but cool. “Is there a sink somewhere? As much as I appreciate the shake, the delivery leaves much to be desired.”

Remy huffs, throwing me a glance. He combs his fingers through his hair, which leaves pink streaks through the strands. There’s milkshake mashed into his beard from where he face-planted at my feet. My lips really want to twitch, but I’m still too shocked.

His hand was on my breast. I felt the heat of it against my nipple. My pulse pounds.

With a deep breath, Remy turns for the door. He steps carefully over the threshold and glances back. “The bathroom’s on the other side of the garage,” he says, “but the water pressure’s bad. There’s a hose out back.”

“Oh, goody. I love getting hosed down.”

“What?” Remy stumbles on a flat piece of concrete.

“Nothing. Lead the way!” I try to sound bright, but I can still feel the imprint of his fingers on my hip, the rough touch of his hand on my chest. My nipples are hard, even in the heat of the garage.

I’m a bit wobbly as I follow him out the back door, where he leads me to what looks like a car-washing area. There’s a huge hose looped on a rack on the wall. Remy unhooks a few loops and turns the knob before handing the end of the hose to me.

I press the sprayer and immediately stumble back at the sheer power of the thing. “Um,” I say, staring at the end of it. “I’m not sure this is going to work.”

“Here.” Remy twists the sprayer so it’s more of a mist, then lets me have it again. I test it once and, satisfied that I’m

not going to power wash my skin off, I point it at my sticky chest.

I can't help the sigh of relief that slips through my lips. The water is cool, refreshing, and perfect. Remy turns away and stares at the far end of the lot like there's something fascinating happening between the weeds and gravel. Then, abruptly, he turns for the garage's back door.

"I'll go grab something to dry off with," he says, his voice sounding slightly strained. "Let me know when you're finished."

EIGHT

# REMY

I'M SUCH AN IDIOT. A colossal, unbelievable idiot.

I was trying to do something nice. The milkshakes from Harold's Diner are legendary and have been since 1968. I figured I'd buy a couple as a nice gesture. It's hot as hell in the garage.

Maybe, in some strange recess of my mind, I wanted to share that little piece of myself with Audrey. I wanted her to enjoy one of the milkshakes that have become like a soothing balm to my soul. Why, I have no idea.

Instead, I walked in on her wearing just a skimpy sports bra, and the connection between my brain and my legs malfunctioned. As I stomp to the office and survey the evidence of my clumsiness, I can't quite dispel the heat that's flooded my veins.

Her body—

No. I won't think of her body. This isn't like me. I've been with plenty of attractive women. I don't get tongue-tied and clumsy at the sight of someone wearing workout gear.

Until today, apparently.

I grab the clean cloths I'd dropped on the desk and rummage through one of the storage bins in the garage, but I can't find anything that isn't caked in grease. So, it's with a measly stack of microfiber cloths that I reemerge into the sunshine, intending to drop them on the concrete beside the hose and retreat back to the relative darkness of the garage until Audrey's done.

Instead, I stop dead.

She's hosed herself down and now has her hair undone, wetting the ends of it and frowning as she works the milkshake remnants out of it. The whole front of her body is wet and glistening, and where it isn't glistening it's clad in black spandex that's stuck to her body like it was painted on.

Her nipples are hard points, poking through the fabric of her bra. I want to put my mouth all over her.

All the blood in my body rushes between my legs, and I stand rooted to the ground until she looks up and sees me. Her pale green eyes widen slightly, and then her lips curl into a wry smile.

"I'm done," she says, like she isn't standing in the sunlight like my fantasy come to life. "Here."

I take the hose from her proffered hand and clear my throat. "Thanks."

As I strip the top half of my soiled coveralls off, I turn away. But when I start washing off sticky, half-dried milkshake from my arm and leg, I catch movement in my peripheral vision.

Maybe I'm just a weak, horny, shameless man, but I can't help but steal glances at Audrey as she blots the water from her front. She gathers her hair on top of her head and turns her back to me, squeezing the fabric of her clothes to get some of the moisture out.

There's nothing sexy about the way she's moving. She's not trying to seduce me. She's not paying me any attention at all...but every movement winds me tight and tighter. I wash quickly and shut the hose off, then grab one of the cloths from the ground and wipe myself down.

My head is a mess. I'm breathing more heavily than I should be, trying not to think too closely about the curve of Audrey's butt in her leggings or the way the wet fabric of her bra lets me see the outline of her nipples so clearly. In my haste to get away from her—away from this situation—I end up rushing through the narrow doorway at the same time as

her. My shoulder bumps hers, and we both turn to face each other at the same time.

Her face is level with my chest. “Sorry. You go,” she says, cheeks pink.

The whole weekend, I’ve told myself that whatever attraction I feel for this woman is a flash in the pan. I’ve reminded myself over and over again about not wanting to get involved with anyone beyond a casual night or two. I’ve looked at my nephew—my kid—and reminded myself that he’s my top priority, always.

All these thoughts have been mainstays of my last three years. I’ve lived my life in order to do what’s best for Danny, in order to serve my sister’s memory.

But three years of priorities and thoughts and reminders evaporate the moment I feel Audrey’s soft body pressed up against my chest. She tries to take a step away, but my arm snakes around her back without my conscious permission.

Her hands land on my stomach, and they’re like two brands, reminding me of everything I want. Everything I could have if I just gave in to temptation.

And why shouldn’t I?

Here’s a beautiful, successful, intelligent woman who blushes prettily when she’s pressed up against me. I’m not hurting my nephew by indulging in this moment. I can have a bit of casual fun—get these urges out of my system—and then go back to my regular life. Right? It wouldn’t be any different from Anna or any of the other women I’ve tangled with.

My hand tightens across her back. “Audrey,” I say, voice rough.

But it would be different with her. It would be *good*. She’d whisper my name with her siren voice, and I’d fall to my knees on instinct.

She blinks at me, tongue darting out to lick her lips. “Uh-huh?”

I'm not sure what I want to ask her. There are too many thoughts swirling in my head. *Do you want to give in to temptation with me? Do you want to explore the heat that's flared between us since the moment we met? Do you want to feel my lips on your body as badly as I do?*

She gulps, those wide, green eyes dropping to my lips. Her breaths are jagged, every inhalation pressing the cold, wet sports bra against my skin. I want her so badly I could scream. I dip my head—

And my phone rings.

Audrey jerks back. "I should go clean the office," she says, then darts away.

I swear violently, then fish my phone out of my pocket. There's a brand-new crack splintering across the screen. Wonderful. That probably happened when I fell face-first into a puddle of strawberry milkshake because I couldn't handle the sight of two inches of cleavage.

"What," I bark into the phone.

"Mr. Campbell? This is Miranda from the Heart's Cove Outdoor Day Camp calling."

I straighten, vision suddenly sharp. "Is everything okay?"

"Danny's developed a bit of a stomach bug. He's thrown up once already, so he's with our lead counselor right now. Are you able—"

"I'm on my way."

"Great, we'll see you soon."

I hang up the phone and stuff it into the front pocket of my coveralls. No time to change into street clothes. I jog across the garage, then make a hard left turn toward the office. Audrey is on her hands and knees, mopping up the mess I made.

"Danny's sick," I tell her. "I have to pick him up."

She glances over her shoulder, nodding. "Go. I'll handle things here."

Hesitating for a moment, I meet her gaze. Then I make a snap decision. I fish the keys out of my pocket. “If you need to leave, lock up before you go.”

She catches the keys in midair and gives me a nod. “No problem.”

Guilt twinges in my heart as I leave her with the mess I created, but my kid is sick. Heart thumping, I hop in my truck and head for the community center, where the day camp is headquartered. When I get there, Danny is pale and listless. The lead counselor tells me it’s probably just a stomach bug, but I should give him as many fluids as I can and monitor him over the next few hours. “If he keeps throwing up, take him to the emergency room. Dehydration can be dangerous.”

“Okay.” I scoop my nephew up and he wraps his arms around my neck. I sign him out of the camp and carry him to the truck, then glance over at him about a hundred times in the ten-minute drive back to our house.

He’s asleep by the time we get home. Irrational fear jumps through me as I carry him to the front door, which quickly turns to heavy guilt.

I was lusting after my new neighbor while my kid was throwing up. He’s supposed to be my priority no matter what. I’m the only person he’s got. He needs to know that I’ll be there for him always, not wrapped up in some doomed romance with a woman who shouldn’t even have caught my eye.

Our business arrangement was a mistake. Indulging useless fantasies was a mistake. The milkshakes were a mistake.

I made a promise to my sister’s memory. I vowed to put Danny first, always. For three years, I’ve done just that, and now I’m going to throw that away because of a seductive voice and pale green eyes?

I’m ashamed of myself.

A small part of me knows it isn’t rational. Even if I hadn’t had lustful thoughts about Audrey, Danny still would’ve



gotten sick. One has nothing to do with the other, but the ball of grief in my gut gives a violent pulse, and my thoughts are too tangled to make sense.

All I know is I have to take care of my kid.

Once I have Danny tucked into his bed, I get on my phone and Google furiously until I've worked myself into a frenzy thinking Danny's condition is dire. But then I check on him, and his temperature seems to have gone down since I picked him up from camp. He's breathing steadily in his sleep. I let out a breath. When he wakes up, I'll feed him, give him some fluids, and pray he can keep them down.

The tension that's gripped me all afternoon finally eases slightly, and I realize it's almost dark. I've been panicking for hours. I'm not cut out for this parenting thing—but what am I supposed to do? It's not like there's anyone else to take care of Danny, and besides, I wouldn't give him up for all the money in the world.

Exiting his room, I take a deep breath. Kids get sick. There's nothing to panic about. Everything will be fine.

Just as I get to the bottom of the stairs, the doorbell rings, and then I open the door to see Audrey on my stoop. She's wearing a dress again, and her hair looks freshly washed and styled. She's carrying a reusable grocery bag with a tinfoil-wrapped dish in it.

"I brought dinner and dessert," she says, then points to a sheet of paper tucked beside the dish. "And I also took messages at the garage. I couldn't find your schedule so I didn't book anyone in, but I took the most detailed notes I could."

For a second, I don't know what to say. Here's a beautiful woman standing on my stoop holding a bag full of kindness, and I've been cursing her name for hours. Instead of wishing me ill for leaving her alone at the garage after making a mess of the very office she was tidying, she sweeps into my life like a breath of fresh air. A tentative smile teases over her lips, and I have to stop myself from leaning toward her like a flower searching for the sun.

I hear myself ask, “Have you eaten?”

She shakes her head, then tilts it. “Well. I had some cheese. And crackers. Cheese and crackers, I mean. It’s not like I’ve been eating blocks of cheese.” She laughs nervously. “Anyway, there’s some homemade chicken noodle soup and brownies.”

“Soup and brownies sound amazing,” I say, needing her company, her light. I open the door wider. “Danny’s asleep, but I could use some food. Eat with me?”

Her lips curl into a shy smile. “I’d like that,” she says, stepping into my home. I lead her to the kitchen, where I pull out some bowls while she sets the brownies aside and lifts out a big container of chicken noodle soup.

“It’s still pretty warm,” she says, “but I’ll throw it on the stove to heat up a bit.”

I pull out a saucepan and watch her pour the golden liquid in. It smells delicious, and my stomach growls.

“I’ll slice some bread,” I say. “The spoons are in that drawer.”

It’s strange having a woman in my kitchen. I moved in here after my sister passed since I wanted to keep Danny’s life as steady as possible. It’s always been the two of us in here.

Now Audrey is in my space, and it feels right. It feels like the missing piece of a jigsaw has finally clicked into place, because she’s here, and she’s beautiful, and she thought of me when no one else did. I’m not on my own with my worries and my sick child. I can soak up her light and, at least for a little while, feel less alone.

But then she pulls open the utensil drawer—and freezes. She gets a weird, horrified expression on her face as she scans my silverware.

Frowning, I creep closer. “You okay? What’s up?”

Audrey stares at the utensils. “Remy,” she says, her voice a hoarse whisper. “What... What the hell is this?”

NINE

# AUDREY

THE MAN HAS no cutlery tray. His utensils are just a big jumble of forks, spoons, and knives, all mixed together at the bottom of the drawer. Shock splashes through me. I've never seen anything like it, nor have I ever been so appalled.

I've worked with hoarders and pack rats. I've helped people who haven't seen the color of their carpet in decades because it was so covered in junk. I've helped people clean out their closets to find hidden gems they forgot they owned, and I've discovered all manner of expired foodstuffs at the backs of clients' pantries.

But I've never—*never*—met someone who commits crimes against utensils like this.

Remy comes to stand beside me, the warmth of his arm soaking into mine. He looks over my shoulder. "Oh, just grab the first spoons you see. They're in here somewhere." He rummages around like some kind of serial killer, pulling out two soup spoons and one dinner spoon, all different styles.

I can deal with them being mismatched. I *cannot* deal with them being mixed with forks and knives like some sort of contemporary art installation that I've got no hope of understanding.

"Is this how you live?" I hear myself ask, turning to face him. His chest is so close it nearly brushes mine. As he frowns at me, not understanding, I realize we don't know each other at all. I point an accusing finger to his utensil drawer. "Is *this* how you live?" I repeat.

“...With a silverware drawer?”

“*Without a cutlery tray!*” I clamp my mouth shut to keep from hissing anything else. Like a demand that he get tested for psychopathy.

Remy’s gaze circles my face, landing on my outraged glare. And the man starts *laughing*. He leans against the kitchen counter and tilts his head back, a big belly laugh rumbling out of him. He finally quiets down and meets my gaze. I ignore the zing of heat it causes to see a smile splitting his face. The man has no right to be this handsome.

“I don’t see what’s funny,” I exclaim, prim.

Remy’s lips are still curled in a smile, and there’s something in his eyes I don’t recognize—almost like fondness. He shakes his head. “I didn’t mean to offend you, Ms. Organizing Goddess.”

“Well, you failed,” I say, pulling the drawer open again to check that I wasn’t mistaken. The mess of utensils clatter as they shift forward with the movement, and I’m once again confronted with the fact that the hottest man I’ve ever met probably has bodies buried in his backyard. “I’m offended.”

He gently nudges the drawer closed and opens another one that has large cooking utensils mixed with Tupperware lids, sans containers. A bag of elastic bands slides forward and dumps a dozen beige elastics all over the other items, and Remy doesn’t seem to notice. He grabs a ladle, shakes off the elastic band clinging to its handle, and shuts the drawer.

I’m astounded. Just—horrified.

Glancing around the room, I frown at the sight of a tidy kitchen/dining/living area. On the other side of the clean kitchen peninsula are three barstools, then a rectangular table with six chairs—one of them has a little boy’s backpack slung on the back, and there’s a stack of schoolbooks on the corner of the table, but it’s otherwise clear—and a big L-shaped couch facing a TV on the wall.

His place is clean. So why—

I open the drawers again, then check one of the cabinets. Mugs and cups next to the sink—fine. Not optimal, since his coffee maker is on the other side of the kitchen, but it's acceptable. But then the cabinet next to it has plates, bowls, and a random assortment of spices.

I close the cabinet and turn to face Remy, who's watching me with arched brows. He's ladled soup into a bowl, which he hands to me. "Find anything interesting?"

"I don't understand you," I tell him, grabbing one of the spoons he rescued from its utensil-drawer purgatory. "I'm seeing you in a whole new light."

"I'm sensing it's not a good one."

"It's a strange light," I say, moving to sit at one of the barstools. Remy joins me, leaving one stool between us. He drinks a spoonful of soup and lets out a groan. "This might be better than your pecan pie, which is saying a lot."

"Wait until you taste the brownies," I say absentmindedly, eyes on the kitchen cabinets. "Grandma's recipe." I spin on my stool to face him. "Explain the cutlery drawer to me."

"Well," Remy starts, then stops to have another spoonful of soup. He chews the chunk of chicken and points the spoon at the utensil drawer. "There was a tray in there, but it was a bit too small for the drawer and too short for my knives. I got annoyed trying to fit everything in whenever I unloaded the dishwasher, so I just got rid of it." He shrugs, nonchalant. "It works."

"That probably depends on your definition of the word 'works,'" I grumble.

Remy's lip twitches as he has more soup.

I turn to my own bowl and eat for a few minutes, then glance at him. "You know they sell them at the dollar store, right? Or you can order a cutlery tray online and have it delivered within a couple of hours."

"This is really bothering you, isn't it?"

“I’ve just never seen anything like it,” I say. “When you unload the dishwasher, do you sort the cutlery out at all or just dump it in? How did it get so mixed up?”

“I started trying to keep them organized, but they moved around too much every time I opened the drawer. Now I just chuck the cutlery in when it’s clean.”

I shudder. It’s an involuntary, instinctual reaction.

Remy finishes his soup and gets up to ladle himself another serving. He stands on the other side of the peninsula from me and spoons some soup into his mouth, watching me. “Would it make you happy if I got a cutlery tray?”

*YES*, I want to scream. But I just met this man a few days ago, and it’s not my place to tell him how to organize his drawers. I shrug. “Your cutlery drawer has nothing to do with me.”

Remy sets his bowl down and pulls out his phone. He taps on it a few times, then turns it to face me. An order confirmation stares back, informing me he just bought a cutlery tray from an online retailer. “It’ll be here in the morning. Now eat.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” I tell him, but a smile pokes through before I can hide it.

Remy chuckles and shakes his head. “I did if I ever wanted you to come over with delicious food again.”

“I see how it is,” I grumble, but a warm feeling has spread through my chest. “You’re just using me for my cooking skills.”

“No,” Remy says, eyes on his soup. “Not just your cooking skills.” His eyes glimmer as they meet mine. “I like your organizing skills too.”

I narrow my eyes, which makes him smile. “You’re lucky your kid is cute, Remy, because you’re really pushing it.”

He laughs, then glances toward the hallway that leads to the stairs and sighs. “Yeah,” he says. “I am.”

Earlier, in the garage, I sensed he didn't want to talk about his nephew. But now I'm in his kitchen and he's enjoying my food, so I tentatively ask, "Is he with you full time?"

Remy nods and finishes his soup, then puts the bowl in the dishwasher. He straightens and leans against the counter before saying, "My sister and her husband died three years ago," he tells me. "Car wreck."

Cold slithers through me as I remember how scared I was before I hit Remy's tree, and I wasn't even going that fast when I did. "I'm so sorry."

"Me too." He smiles sadly. "I took Danny in; there was no one else."

"That must have been difficult."

Remy clears his throat. "It was. I was married at the time, and she decided this wasn't what she signed up for. We parted ways not long after Danny came to live with us."

"Oh," I say, pushing my empty bowl away. "That's horrible."

There's a strange look in Remy's eyes, full of pain and resignation. He shrugs, then shakes his head. "No. She didn't want kids. She'd always been sure of that. I thought she was heartless to leave the two of us at a time like that. Now I just think she was protecting herself, and I can't blame her too much for that."

I think of my own failed marriage and hum. "That's very mature of you."

"Does it make up for the cutlery drawer?"

I meet Remy's dark gaze, trying to keep my face stern with very little success. "Nothing makes up for the cutlery drawer, Remy."

Remy laughs, and it's a raspy, warm sound. He combs both hands through his hair and lets out a breath, then turns to the foil-wrapped tray I left on the counter. "Did you say brownies?"

"Dad?"



We both turn to the hallway to see Danny, pale and groggy, leaning against the corner of the wall. Remy's next to him in an instant, scooping him up in his arms. Danny's probably too big to be carried around, but he still rests his head against Remy's shoulder and lets out a sigh. I can't blame the kid; if I had a right to rest my head on Remy's shoulder, I'd sigh too.

He hugs his uncle tight. "I'm thirsty," Danny mumbles.

"Here. Sit at the table. Audrey brought you some soup to make you feel better."

"Can I have some ginger ale?"

"Of course, kid," Remy says, settling his nephew at the table.

I slip off my barstool and put my bowl in the dishwasher next to Remy's. "I'm going to head out," I tell him as he ladles soup into a third bowl for Danny.

He glances over at me, a surprised expression on his face. It only lasts a second, and then he wipes his face clear and nods. "Of course. Thanks for the food."

I smile and touch his arm. His skin is warm and smooth, and his muscles are hard. "See you tomorrow," I tell him.

"Tomorrow," he replies, and then I make my way out of his house and into mine.

As I prepare a mug of chamomile tea and settle into the comfy armchair I've set up in the reading nook in my living room, my thoughts turn over the day, inspecting it like a rare diamond.

It was fun to get out of the office and get my hands dirty. I checked in with my staff at the end of the day, and they all seemed happy with how the day went. It was thrilling to feel the heat of Remy's gaze as he saw me in my bra. There was the shock of the milkshake mess and the refreshingly cold water from the hose. There was the moment in the garage doorway, and then the worry in Remy's gaze when he got the phone call from Danny's day camp.

And this evening, I got to see another side of Remy. A loving father, who stepped up when he needed to. He gave up his marriage—the life he'd built—in order to care for a child who needed him.

I can definitely forgive a messy cutlery drawer in the face of so much goodness. But as I drink my tea and think of the handsome, hardworking, caring man who lives next door, I start to worry that if I spend any more time with him, my feelings will mushroom into something I can no longer control.

Remy might just be the man of my dreams. The only problem is that there's no room in my life for dreaming when I have to take care of my business, my employees, and myself.

TEN

# AUDREY

THE FOUR CUPS Café is always busy. It was founded several years ago by four friends who decided Heart's Cove wasn't complete without a café and bakery worth visiting.

They were right.

Over the years, it's become the town's meeting place and a destination for tourists and locals alike. It's the pulse point of the town, a place where people start their days and mark their weekends. Jen, the town's most famous baker, keeps the place stocked with incredible baked goods. I watched her appearance on a televised baking competition a few years ago and couldn't get over her skill. I, like the rest of the townspeople, am proud to call her one of ours.

I inhale the scent of coffee and delicious goodies, then make my way to the line snaking from the front counter. A young woman stands at the register, her pink tee covered in bedazzled writing that proclaims her a "Heart's Cove Hottie." All the other employees wear matching shirts, which are also available for sale for anyone to buy.

The walls are decorated in art from local artists, the chairs are mismatched but coordinated, and the air is buzzing with laughter and conversation.

I join the line and look at the board on the wall to decide what I'll order. I'm perusing the array of baked goods when my attention is drawn to the corner of the room, where Jen, the baker, is presenting a table of women and men with a tray of

something that must be delicious-looking, based on the enthusiastic reaction from the crowd.

Jen doles out squares of something that looks like it involves chocolate until a red-haired woman stops her.

“None for Wes,” the woman says, taking a second plate for herself. “He’s a sociopath.”

“Just because I don’t like chocolate doesn’t mean I have a personality disorder,” he answers, his arm slung around the back of the woman’s chair. He speaks the words with an easy smile on his lips, then reaches up to tug the end of the woman’s ponytail.

She takes a big bite of the chocolate treat and smiles at him, teeth stained with chocolate. “I’m not so sure,” she replies a moment later.

The group laughs, and I shuffle forward. I watch as another woman—glamorous, beautiful, and a little older than me—walks into the café and cuts straight to them.

“Georgia!” the redhead calls out. “We sold one of the paintings this morning!” She points to an abstract piece above her head.

“Amazing!” The beautiful woman beams at the group.

I turn my attention back to the menu board and the display case of baked goods. I’ve never had a big group of friends, so those types of interactions are somewhat foreign to me. Laurel adopted me as her bestie, but apart from that, I’ve had very few close relationships.

I’ve always focused on what I thought was important in life. My grades when I was in school and college. My marriage when I was with Terry. My business after we’d divorced. Friends never seemed to understand when I wanted things to be just right. They told me to calm down when I’d stress over small imperfections. I always felt apart, misunderstood.

My marriage was supposed to be my anchor in the raging sea of life, and that turned out to be a lie. As laughter rings out from the table in the corner, I feel very alone. Strangely, my

thoughts turn to Remy. He's attractive, of course, but he has a good heart. There's something about him that's so endearing to me: the way he brought me a milkshake when he knew I must have been overheated, and then tripped over his feet and spilled it everywhere. The way he cares for his nephew. The competent, knowledgeable way he explained what was wrong with my van.

It must be because Laurel has planted the idea of a fling that I see him differently, that I want something more with him. Maybe I'm simply craving some kind of connection.

Sex is connection. Maybe a fling wouldn't be such a bad idea.

"What can I get for you?"

I smile at the young woman behind the counter and put in my order, then shuffle to the side to wait for the barista to make the drinks. I keep my eyes away from the table of friends.

Or I try—until someone says, "The Organizing Goddess lives! How are you doing, honey?"

Turning, I see Dorothy, the elderly hotel owner who has the glamorous twin sister, gliding toward me. She's wearing a kaftan with a blue-and-white floral print, her hair gathered in a half-up, half-down style. Dramatic earrings dangle from her ears. She looks fabulous.

"Oh," I answer. "Hi. I'm okay. I'm fine."

Dorothy puts her hands on my shoulders and stares into my eyes. "We were all very worried about you. And the tree, of course."

"Agnes didn't seem too worried," I say, then clamp my lips shut.

But Dorothy doesn't look insulted. She throws her head back and laughs, then hooks her arm around my elbow and tows me toward the corner table. "Fiona! Simone! Boys! Meet our very own Organizing Goddess."

"Audrey Scott," I supply.

“Audrey!” Dorothy repeats with a smile. “She’s the one who crashed into Remy’s magnolia tree last week.”

My head bursts into flame. I give them all a stupid little wave in an attempt to hide how embarrassed I am. “Hi. Nice to meet you.”

“Oh!” the beautiful, latecomer woman says—Georgia, someone called her. “I follow you on socials.”

I smile, a little kernel of pride glowing in my chest. “Yeah? Thank you.”

“I started folding my towels the way you showed, and my linen closet has never looked better.”

“It makes a difference to have a system,” I say, which is something I say so often I’ll probably have it engraved on my tombstone.

“Your website says you do closet reorganization,” Georgia asks, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Is that right?”

My spine straightens. “I do! We do a simple tidy or a full redesign. Usually I offer an on-site consultation so I can figure out what suits your needs best, and then we can schedule you in. It can take anywhere from a half day to several days, depending on the size of the job.” I dip my hand into my purse and come out with a business card. “Here.”

“Amazing!” Georgia beams at me. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Audrey?” the barista calls out, sliding two iced drinks onto the counter beside the espresso machine.

I jab my thumb at the drinks. “Those are mine. Feel free to call if you have any questions.”

“Will do,” Georgia says, and I leave the group to their conversation.

It’s not until I’m outside that I let my lips curl into a victorious smile. Terry who? I don’t need to work for my ex-husband. I can find new clients on my own! And judging by how close-knit that group was, if Georgia hires me and is happy with my services, she might gush to all her friends.

I slot the tray with both iced drinks into the front basket of my bicycle, then glance at the cherry-red scooter parked next to the curb. Maybe I should get one of those. Although, on second thought, flying off a scooter wouldn't be so great if I happened to have a run-in with another magnolia tree.

Huffing, I sling my leg over the seat and pedal to the garage. When I get there, Remy is poking around under the hood of my work van. I present him with the iced latte I got for him and smile. "How's it looking?"

"Thank you," he says, accepting the drink. He stares at it for a moment, then lifts his gaze to me. "You didn't have to get me anything."

"I figured it was safer than letting you carry the drinks around." I grin, trying to make him laugh, but I'm surprised when his cheeks grow pink.

This big, burly man is *blushing*. Because of me.

I can't hide the widening of my smile. "So, the van?"

"Right." He clears his throat. "I've fixed the leak and replaced the brake pads. Just need to realign the wheels, do the steering column, and replace the tires. Then I'll bring it to the body shop to fix the cosmetic damage. Should be ready in a couple of days."

I narrow my eyes. "I'm not sure you're sticking to our bargain," I tell him.

He sucks a bit of iced coffee through his straw and regards me with dark eyes. "Oh?"

"You seem to be doing at least as much work as I am. If I recall, it was meant to be two hours of my work for one hour of yours."

He leans against the front of my van, which puts him a few inches closer to me. I don't move back, enjoying the heat of his body—and his gaze. When Remy speaks, his voice is low. "I'm sure we can come to a new arrangement."

*Yes!* my body shrieks, but I school my features enough to pop a brow. "Your cutlery drawer does need work."



He flashes me a grin, and his eyes give me a dark, heated glance. He looks like he's thinking about sex, and I feature prominently in it. I feel the heat of that look right between my thighs.

“I wasn't talking about cutlery, Audrey.”

“Oh,” I whisper, overwhelmed. I'm in so much trouble.

I take a big sip of iced coffee and immediately get a brain freeze. I groan, pinching the bridge of my nose, and then feel a broad, warm hand on the back of my neck.

“You good?” Remy asks, concern soaking into his words. His palm feels rough against my nape, his thumb stroking the side of my neck.

So much for me being a seductress. Even if I wanted a fling, I'm not sure I could make it happen. I grimace. “I'm good. How's Danny?”

“He was fine this morning. Woke up his usual chipper self and refused to stay home. He said he couldn't leave Jace alone at camp all day.”

I snort and shake my head. “Kids. Well, I'm glad he's feeling better.”

“Thank you for the food, Audrey. It was kind of you to do that for us. You helped calm me down when I was freaking out about my kid.” His hand is still on my nape. While his thumb makes another sweep over the side of my neck, I lift my gaze to meet his. Remy's eyes are dark as they stare into mine. His tongue darts out to lick his lips.

He smells like engine oil and man. My legs feel like noodles. “It's no problem at all,” I whisper. My throat is too tight to voice the words properly.

Then, abruptly, Remy lets me go. He clears his throat. “I should keep working.”

“Of course,” I say, a little too brightly. “I'll get started in the office.”

Remy nods jerkily and turns his back to me. I shuffle into the office and lean against the door. The ghost of his touch

lingers on the back of my neck, and I wish he hadn't pulled away. Instead, I wish he'd led me to the relative privacy of the office, locked us in, and had his filthy way with me.

But he's my neighbor, and I'm the idiot who ran into his tree. Laurel's ridiculous fling plan is putting ideas in my head that have no business being there.

Better to keep things professional between us. To that end, I face the mid-tidy tornado of his office, and I get to work.

THREE HOURS LATER, the office door opens. Remy pokes his head through the door. He's stripped off his coveralls and cleaned his face and hands. "You hungry?" he asks.

"Starving." I shut the drawer I'd been working on and smile. "Is it lunchtime?"

Remy tilts his head toward the exit. "I was going to get a burger. You want to join?"

How can I resist? I agree, grab my purse, and follow Remy to his truck.

There's something oddly intimate about getting in someone's vehicle. It isn't the first time I've let Remy drive me around, but my heart still thumps a little bit harder as I click my seatbelt and feel the engine rumble to life around me. We drive for five minutes and pull into the parking lot of Harold's Diner.

"Take two with the milkshakes?" I ask. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

Remy throws me a less-than-amused glance. "Careful, Audrey. That mouth'll get you in trouble, no matter how beautiful you are."

Heat arrows through my core. I have to sit still for a moment as he climbs out of the vehicle, because he just called me beautiful *and* he promised me trouble, and he did both in a rumbly, growly, carnal voice. When I'm sure my legs will support me, I slide out of the truck's cab and follow him to the diner.

Remy holds the door open for me, his hand brushing my lower back as I enter in front of him. Instead of waiting to be seated, he cuts across the restaurant and slides into a booth. I sit across from him, trying not to blush when his knee nudges mine.

I feel like I'm fifteen years old, playing footsie under the table with the boy I'm crushing on. Busying myself with the menu, I pretend to be engrossed in all the options.

"The usual?" an older waitress asks, filling the cup in front of Remy with coffee.

"You know it," he says.

"And you, honey?"

I glance at the menu and panic. Usually, it takes me forever to choose something to eat. I typically look up the menu for restaurants ahead of time and dissect every dish to make sure I'm making the best choice. I've barely had thirty seconds to look, and most of those seconds were spent thinking about the feel of Remy's leg touching mine.

"Um. I'll, um..."

"You want a minute?"

"I'll have the Harold's burger," I blurt, on the edge of panic. "Can I get that with a side salad?"

"Only if you promise not to steal any of my fries," Remy cuts in, leaning back on the creaking booth seat.

"That's fine." I close the menu and smile at the waitress. "Thank you."

"Bring us a couple of shakes too, please," Remy says.

"Strawberry?" The waitress scratches something down on her notepad.

"Yeah."

"What other flavors have you got?" I cut in.

"Strawberry's the best," Remy answers.

“To you.” I arch my brows at him, then look at the waitress.

She grins. “Strawberry, vanilla, chocolate, and salted caramel.”

“Salted caramel, please.” I give her a sweet smile, then glance pointedly at Remy. “Thank you.”

The waitress leaves to punch in the order, and Remy grins. “So,” he says. “How’s the Organizing Goddess feeling today?”

Horny. Wrung out. Vaguely panicked. “Good,” I answer. “You?”

“Better,” he says.

My phone rings before he can continue. “Sorry,” I tell him, then reach into my purse to silence the call. When I see my ex-husband’s name on the screen, my stomach drops. I ignore the call, put my phone on silent, and paint a smile on my face before looking at Remy again.

But when I meet his gaze, he’s frowning. “Is something wrong?”

I shake my head. “No. Why?”

He glances at my purse. “Bad news?”

“A call from my ex-husband is always bad news,” I say, aiming for breeziness and landing somewhere in the land of bitter divorcées.

“You guys have kept in touch?”

I snort, playing with the edge of my napkin. “Not really. He had an affair and when I confronted him about it, he asked me for a divorce. Once everything was finalized, I pretty much vowed to never speak to him again.”

“So what happened?”

“I became the Organizing Goddess,” I answer lightly. “He wants to hire me to redo his kitchen. Or rather, his wife does.”

“Is she...”

“The affair partner? Yep.” I pinch my lips, shaking my head. “I’d just gotten that call before I crashed into your tree.”

Remy whistles. “Bad day.”

“I don’t know why it rocked me so badly. I should have just hung up on her and gone on with my life.”

The booth squeaks as Remy shifts, slinging his arm across the back of the seat. His tee strains against his chest, tattoos poking out from the sleeves. He drums his fingers on the top of the booth, studying me. “Why didn’t you?”

“Need the money,” I admit, ashamed. “More so now that I crashed my van and ended up in the hospital.”

“Hmm.”

“And maybe...” I pause, trying to put my feelings into words. This isn’t something I’ve ever admitted out loud, or even to myself. “Maybe I feel like if I’m able to be the bigger person, it’ll fix things somehow. Help me move on. If I can prove to myself—prove to him—that I can do that job, it means I win. He didn’t break me. Maybe...” I close my eyes. “This is so embarrassing. But maybe I want him to see how well I’m doing, and realize he was wrong to cheat on me.”

Remy’s brows draw together. “Right.”

“You think I’m crazy.”

“I never said that.”

“It was implied by your tone and that scowl on your face.”

He huffs, then rubs his forehead with his palm. “I used to think about my ex-wife running into me and Danny somewhere. The grocery store, maybe. The mall. The beach. I’d think about her face falling when she realized she’d made a mistake, and I thought it would make me feel good.”

“Did you run into her?”

“Yeah,” Remy says, a bitter smile curling his lips. “We ran into each other at a coffee shop. She was gracious, and I was rude. I felt like an asshole for weeks afterward.”

“I guess wanting to win is illogical,” I admit.

“Sometimes someone hurts you, and you want to hurt them back. It never helps.”

The waitress appears with our milkshakes, complete with whipped cream and maraschino cherry topping. I smile at her in thanks and take a sip. Delicious.

“I’m guessing you think I’m a terrible person now,” I say when we both have our attention on our drinks.

Remy’s knee presses against mine. “Not even a little bit.”

Gratitude is a budding flower in my heart. I give Remy a small smile, which widens when he pushes his milkshake toward me to taste.

I try it, see his arched eyebrows, and laugh. “The strawberry is better,” I admit.

His smile is victorious, and it sends a ball of glowing heat down to the pit of my stomach. And when our burgers come, he pushes a few fries onto my plate without me having to ask.

ELEVEN

# REMY

WHEN I'M JUST ABOUT DONE SCRUBBING the grease from my hands at the end of the day, the office door opens. Audrey's head pokes through, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, her lips curled in a wide smile.

"Want to see your new office?" She slides through the door and closes it at her back so I can't peek behind her.

"You're done already?"

"It was just a tidy and reorganization job," she says, waving a hand, "so I was limited in what I could really do. If it had been a full redesign with new furniture and everything, it would have a bigger impact and it would've taken longer." She shifts on her feet and bites her lip, and I realize she's nervous.

"I'm sure it's perfect, Audrey."

She huffs a breath. "Right. Okay. Ready?"

"Lead the way."

She turns to open the door, then steps aside to let me through. I stop in the doorway, blinking.

Somehow, in two days, Audrey has completely transformed the space. The layout is different, with the desk facing the entrance to the garage. Now, when the door opens, it no longer hits the edge of the desk, and there's room for an extra chair for customers to use while they wait. She's changed the shelving on the wall to line the opposite side of the room, with clear labeled boxes denoting their various contents. There's even a new hook on the wall with a shoe tray beneath



it on the floor, which will be handy when it gets rainy come fall.

On the far wall hangs a photo of the garage from when it opened nearly forty years ago. I cross over to look at it, shaking my head. “Wow. Where did you find this?”

“It was stuffed at the bottom of a box under invoices from seventeen years ago,” she answers, smiling. “You like it?”

“This is unbelievable.” My fingers trail over the pristine desk. I open a drawer and smile when I spot an insert with perfect little dividers filled with various bits of stationery. Paperclips in one section, pens in another. “I love it.”

Audrey lets out a breath. “Good. I would’ve loved to paint the walls, but—”

“It’s perfect, Audrey. Beyond anything I could have ever expected you to do in two days. Thank you.”

She beams at me. “You’re welcome.”

I stare around the room again, shocked. “I might have to buy this place after all,” I tell her. “Jeff has been hinting at it for years, and it never felt like the right time. But now I’m feeling possessive of the place.”

Her laugh is bright and happy. She walks over to the desk and shifts the yellow pad of paper a fraction of an inch, so it’s perfectly in line with the corner of the desk. “I’m glad you like it.”

We stand on opposite sides of the desk, staring at each other, and I wonder how I was ever mad at this woman. She had a car accident after getting a call from her ex that rocked her. Then she had to face me in all my anger, and she did it with a pie in her hands and a brave look on her face—at least, her face looked brave when it was actually pointing in my direction.

She brought soup and dessert for my nephew—my son—when she could have stayed away. She’s kind, hard-working, funny, courageous.

And beautiful. Curvy. Sexier than I thought possible. Every minute I spend with her makes me appreciate her more. Want her more.

I'm not sure how I make it to the other side of the desk. All I know is one moment I'm behind it, and the next I've got my arms around Audrey, pulling her tight to my chest. Her arms come around my back and spread onto my shoulder blades, her breath ruffling along my neck. I curl one arm around her shoulders and let my other hand slide down her side, relishing the feel of her body against mine.

I shouldn't be touching her. I have no right to hold her. But she redecorated this office for me. She took care of me and my kid. She had lunch with me. She teased me. She made me feel alive for the first time in three long years.

I pull back a fraction of an inch and look down at her. Her lips are inches from mine. She smells like floral shampoo and woman. I want her desperately.

Her hand slides up to touch my jaw, fingers tracing the line of it. "Has anyone ever told you how handsome you are?"

Warmth glows in my chest. I grin. "Never. I think you should. Feel free to take your time and go into detail."

Her smile is wide and beautiful. "You're very, very handsome. When I saw you standing at your door wearing nothing but a towel, I think I had a very small, very spontaneous orgasm."

I'm about to have a spontaneous orgasm, and there won't be anything small about it. My arms tighten around her. When I speak, my voice is rough. "Did you?"

She nods, her finger trailing back along my jaw. "First one I've had in years."

I'm so busy enjoying the feel of her body against mine that it takes a few seconds for her words to sink in. I frown at her. "First what you've had in years? Orgasm?"

"With someone else, I mean—" She clamps her mouth shut and her cheeks flush red. "I, um... I wasn't... Forget I said anything. I was kidding."

No, she wasn't. Suddenly my heart is galloping in my chest. My arm bands tighter across her back, and my free hand cups her jaw. "You haven't had a man treat you right in a long time, have you?"

She meets my gaze for a long moment, then finally shakes her head.

"We're going to change that."

"Oh."

"Right now."

She blinks at me, green eyes wide. "Right now?"

"Right now, Audrey."

"Oh," she whispers once more. "Okay."

The feeling that sweeps through me is red-hot. It's pure, carnal sex. It's desire flaring to life because the beautiful woman in my arms is saying yes. I tilt her head back and kiss her, starting softly and quickly deepening it when she clings to me so sweetly I feel like I'm about to fall over. There's nothing in my head but the feel of her curves pressed against my body and the pressure of my cock trapped behind the placket of my jeans.

"Remy," she pants. "Remy."

"Right here, sweetheart." I tilt her neck back and kiss a line down the side. My fingers tunnel into her hair and she lets out a hot little gasp when I pull, gently first, then harder. All of a sudden I've got her pinned to the desk, and I'm not sure how we got like this.

She feels like heaven. She's soft, she smells incredible, and she's all mine. She makes me feel like there's more to life than duty and drudgery. I could own this garage. I could have this woman. I could use a cutlery tray, just because it makes her happy.

I kiss her hard, because I want her to understand what she does to me. My fingers sink into her waist, then slide up to cup her breasts. I'm panting hard, and my mind is splintering.

This woman has made life worth living, and I've known her less than a week. I can never go back to how things were before she crashed into my tree. Never.

"This is a bad idea," she says, fingernails digging into my shoulders.

I pull the neckline of her tee aside and kiss her collarbone, my other hand squeezing and shaping her perfect breast. "You want me to stop?"

Her voice is breathless when she gasps, "No."

That's the only encouragement I need. I have her shirt off in an instant, tossing it onto the newly cleaned floor. Grabbing her waist, I lift her onto the edge of the desk and notch myself between her legs. Her leggings feel smooth beneath my palms as I lift her knees to bracket my waist.

Audrey leans back slightly, and I get a fantastic view of her body. She's dressed in black leggings and a pink sports bra, her waist nipping in above the flare of her wide hips. Her skin is soft as silk as I slide my hands up her sides, tracing the edge of her bra straps with my fingertips.

She shivers in response, lids dropping low.

"How is it possible that you haven't had a man treat you right? Look at you, Audrey. You're gorgeous."

I wrap my hand around the back of her neck and bring my mouth to hers. Kissing Audrey lights a fire inside me. It burns hotter as I swipe my tongue over hers, as she clings to me with sharp fingernails. I hope they leave marks. I want the imprint of her on me so I remember what it feels like to be just like this.

Audrey pulls away, panting, then lifts her bra off over her head.

"Fuck," I groan, then press her down onto the desk with a hand on her sternum. She complies, and I fold my body over hers to take a nipple into my mouth. Her tits are magnificent. I knead one while I suck the other, scraping my teeth over her pebbled nipple. Her hands grip my hair as she arches into my touch. My cock is so hard it hurts.

The taste of her skin sends my mind into a tailspin. I gasp against her breast, using my hands to plump them up so I can take more of it into my mouth. When I pinch her nipples between my thumbs and forefingers, she lets out a low moan, so I do it again.

“Remy,” she pants. “Please.”

“Please what, gorgeous?”

“Please—” She writhes beneath me, reaching for my cock. I tug her hips toward the edge of the desk and grind myself between her legs. She falls back on the desk, rolling her hips to meet every movement of my own. All thoughts have fled my mind.

I’ve never wanted anyone as much as I want her. I haven’t been so close to making a mess of my underwear since I was a horny, hormonal teenager. I’m dry-humping the woman of my dreams in a mindless, frantic daze.

“You want my cock?” I ask, voice dark and low.

“Yes.”

“Say it.”

The look Audrey gives me is full of venom, and my dick lurches. My next-door neighbor is a sweetheart who loves to bake pies and brownies, but right now she looks mad enough to spit. The thought makes me so hot I get dizzy.

“Say it, sweetheart,” I tell her, hooking her legging-clad leg over my hip to grind harder. Her core is red-hot; I can feel it through our clothes. I want to get inside her so bad I can’t think of anything else.

She whimpers, and I know I’ve hit her right where she needs me. With too many layers of clothes between us, I grind my cock against her clit again. Again. Again.

“I want your cock,” Audrey says, breathless—and the leash that had been keeping me under some semblance of control finally snaps.

TWELVE

# AUDREY

REMY'S MOVEMENTS are rough as he pulls back and hooks his fingers around the high waistband of my leggings. In one swift movement, he tugs my pants and my underwear off, letting them drop to the ground below. Then he grabs my thighs and spreads me wide.

I've never had a man look at me like this, and suddenly I understand what Laurel was trying to tell me. I'm beautiful and powerful and sexy. I am a woman in her prime. In this moment I could ask for anything, and he'd bend over backward to give it to me.

But when I repeat, "Remy, give me your cock," he gets a feral light in his eyes. His hands skim up my thighs and over my hips. His thumbs brush on either side of where I'm wet and wanting.

"Not yet," he growls, and I want to punch him.

I'm so empty.

"Are you?" he asks, voice barely more than a guttural rasp, and I realize I said that last part out loud. His hand glides against my wetness, down to where I'm aching for more. He thrusts inside me with a thick finger, maybe two, and my body lifts off the desk. It's so good I could cry.

But then Remy drops to his knees, hooks my legs over his shoulders, and, keeping his fingers inside me, shoves his face between my legs. He licks me and groans like he's never tasted anything so good in his life. I shudder, gripping the edge of the desk, and wonder how the hell this happened.

I'm naked and splayed on my mechanic's desk. My mind shatters as he devours me, and for the first time in years, it goes blissfully blank.

There are no thoughts of business, or invoices, or payroll. There's no question of how I look or what people think. I'm not worried about being the best or making sure every single detail in my life is perfect. The sensations in my body are too intense to ignore. The pleasure builds and builds and builds until it feels like I've utterly lost my mind.

I realize I'm pulling his hair, but I don't have the wherewithal to stop. Vaguely, I note that my heels are digging into his back, that his free hand has moved under my ass to prop me up so he can have better access. His other hand is thrusting in and out of me in a steady, mind-melting rhythm. His tongue matches the cadence as he licks me, and I realize I'm chanting his name.

I'm out of my mind for this man, and I don't want it any other way.

Then he shifts, and another finger presses inside me. I'm so wet there's almost no resistance, and we both groan in unison.

"You taste like heaven," he tells me, sending pride and pleasure spiraling inside me. "Never tasted anything so good in my life."

To punctuate his words, he spends some time focusing on the little bundle of nerves at the apex of my thighs. We've gone from zero to sixty in no time at all, and I never want this moment to end.

"I want you so much," he says against my skin. "I can't wait to have my cock inside you. Can't wait to feel how wet and tight you'll be."

"So do it," I grate out through clenched teeth, desperate. "Please, Remy."

It isn't like me to ask for what I want, but then again, it also isn't like me to end up naked on a man's desk within a week of knowing him. It's like a switch has flipped inside me,



and suddenly I've remembered that I'm a sexual being. The noises Remy makes, the way he looks at me, the reverent way he touches me...it makes me feel safe and sexy and so turned on I can't think straight.

Remy groans, leaning his head against my thigh. "You can't say those kinds of things to me, Audrey."

I arch into his touch, and he curls his fingers in a way that makes my thoughts disintegrate. I fall back on the desk, bliss coating my body like a blanket. "Why not?" I manage to ask.

"Because I want to taste your orgasm on my tongue, and if you keep talking to me that way, I won't be able to resist shoving my cock inside you before I get you there."

I arch off the desk as he thrusts his fingers inside. Then his mouth is on me, and there's nothing but white-hot pleasure splintering through me like a fork of lightning. I come with a cry, grinding against his mouth, his hands, wanton and out of control. My climax spears me to the desk, stiffening my limbs, arching my back. Remy doesn't stop his torture until I go limp, and then he slowly stands above me and reaches for his belt buckle.

He's breathing heavily. His eyes are wild. He looks like a conquering hero come to demand his due. I've never been so turned on by a man's gaze in my entire lonely life. I feel like I could combust from him looking at me just like that. Fireflies flit in my veins, reminding me of the pleasure he's able to deliver.

He slides the belt halfway out of the buckle.

Then his phone rings.

I groan, and Remy shakes his head. "Ignore it."

His hands shake as he unbuckles his belt completely, unzips his pants, and hooks his thumbs into the waistband to pull them down. I rise up onto my elbows, and his gaze drops to my chest. His breath shudders as he stares at me—

And his phone shrieks again.

Remy swears, digging into his pocket to pull out the phone, face like thunder. But then he sees the screen and goes still.

He curses again, shoving a hand through his hair. “I’m late. I was supposed to pick Danny up from camp twenty minutes ago.” He turns away from me, his pants gaping open to reveal black boxer-briefs, and swipes to answer the phone. “I’m on my way. Yeah. I got caught up at work. Be there in ten.”

I sit up, still dazed, and cast my gaze around the room. It looks different, altered somehow. Remy picks my clothes up and hands them to me, his face tight. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I have to go.”

“I understand.”

“Do you mind locking up when you leave?”

“Not at all,” I answer, pulling on my panties. I stand on wobbling legs to get them up and notice the pause in Remy’s movements.

He stares at the red lace curving over my hips. “You were wearing those all day?” he asks, voice low.

I step into my leggings. “My undies?”

Remy shakes his head and fastens his pants and belt. “Never mind.” He hesitates for a second, then faces me and plants a kiss on my forehead. “Thanks for locking up,” he says, pressing the keys into my palm, and then he swipes his thumb over my jaw, drops his hand, and leaves.

A thin sheen of sweat covers my skin, and it proves too difficult to get my sports bra back on. Instead, I pull on my tee and gather my hair into a bun on top of my head. I let out a deep breath. The sound of Remy’s truck’s engine fades, and I’m alone.

As my heartbeat slows, I spin around the room and stare at the spot on the desk where I just orgasmed hard enough to forget my own name.

When silence reigns around me and my heartbeat has returned to its normal cadence, only one question remains:

*What the hell have I done?*

THIRTEEN

# REMY

BY THE TIME Danny is picked up and fed, my blood has cooled to a normal temperature. Thinking rationally, I realize I've made a mistake.

Being late to pick my nephew up from camp is the reminder I need about my priorities. Danny has to come first, always. What kind of parent am I to indulge in my desires when my kid needs me? I made a promise to my sister's memory to always put him first.

Today, I failed.

As Danny and I put a movie on and settle on the couch, I scrub my face and try to forget the sight of Audrey splayed on my desk like dessert. So she's beautiful and kind and intelligent. So what? I've been with plenty of women who have been beautiful and kind and intelligent, and I never let it get in the way of taking care of my kid.

She's no different.

But no other woman has ever taken the time to bring me soup and brownies when my kid was sick. No other woman has listened to my history with my ex without judgment or pity. No other woman has made me feel like maybe there's something I've been missing all these years when I convinced myself I was better off alone.

Danny falls asleep halfway through the movie, so I turn it off and bring him upstairs to his room. I tuck him into his bed and brush his hair off his forehead, seeing my sister's face in his features.

I love this kid in a way I've never loved any other person. How can I even consider putting a woman above that, when my history with women has proven that they won't be there when things get tough?

I'm not angry at my ex-wife for leaving—not anymore, at least—but I'm not going to put Danny in a position to be rejected again.

Frustrated, I head downstairs and out through the back door. My yard is bursting with vibrant green life, with flowers blooming in pots along the edges of the deck and bright green leaves shivering on the trees. Along the side of the fence that lines the border between my property and Audrey's, my vegetable garden grows. I built raised planters two years ago and have spent countless hours tending to these plants. I've got tomatoes, herbs, chili peppers, and lettuce. I've got cucumbers and peas, and a few strawberry plants in a patch of soil near the back fence.

Inspecting the plants, I notice the peas are nearly ready to harvest and the strawberries will soon be ripe. I pull weeds and frown at the leaves of my tomato plant that seem to have been eaten by some sort of bug. As the minutes pass, the solitude and peace of the garden begins to work its magic, and I finally feel grounded again.

“Hey, neighbor,” a sweet, tantalizing voice says from the gate on the side of my house. Looking up, I see Audrey standing just outside with the keys to the garage dangling from her finger. “Got your keys.”

“Come in,” I hear myself say, even though I know I should stay away from her. My attraction to her is what led to leaving Danny waiting for half an hour. Spending more time with her will only lead to trouble.

Audrey unlatches the gate and steps through, and all my valiant thoughts run out of my head like sand through a sieve. She's wearing that blue dress again, except this time she has a cream cardigan thrown over her shoulders. Her feet are clad in strappy white sandals with those solid cork-like bottoms I've always thought look weird, but I can't deny they make her legs

look delectable. The hem of her dress flutters above her knees, and she gives me a sunny smile.

Suddenly, everything's a little bit better.

I wish it wasn't. I wish her presence didn't make the air taste noticeably sweeter. I wish I wasn't wondering if her panties were lacy and red.

"Wow," she says, looking around the backyard with wide eyes. "You're really into gardening."

I hum. "Well, you know, 'As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster.'"

Her laughter is like a balm, and I forget why I wanted to end things between us. "*Goodfellas*," she says. "Great movie."

Up until this moment, I hadn't realized I wanted Audrey to like the same movies I do. Oddly happy, I reply, "One of the best."

"I saw some plants in your yard from my upstairs window, but this is amazing, Remy. It's like a world-class botanical garden back here."

I take in the plants, the flowers, the vegetables, the small greenhouse I built in the back corner of the lot. "It's been a labor of love," I admit.

"You did all this?"

"My sister started it," I say, then close my mouth as a lump forms in my throat.

"The one who passed?" Audrey asks softly. She glances at me and reads my face like she can see all my thoughts and emotions plainly written there. She gives me a kind smile. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

That sentence right there is what's so irresistible about Audrey. She has an incredible capacity for compassion without being overbearing about it. I noticed it in the way that she apologized about my magnolia tree, even though she could have blamed that other scumbag mechanic for lying to her about her car. Or the way she insisted on repaying me for the van in a way that she deemed fair.

She has a code of ethics, and she sticks by it. She's never asked me for anything. It makes me want to give her everything.

Now, she's giving me an out, and I discover I don't want to take it. I've touched her now. Kissed her. Tasted her. No matter how much I convince myself that I don't want to get involved with her—or any woman—I find it hard to let go of the budding intimacy between us.

So, instead of brushing aside the topic of my sister, I start talking. “We grew up in this house. My parents sold it when I was in high school, but Grace ended up buying it back when it went back on the market after she married her husband. I never really understood why, because to me, it was just the house where we witnessed our parents fighting each other all the time. They were so consumed with hating each other and so unwilling to separate that the two of us just got pushed to the side. We were never the priority to either parent,” I admit. That's why it's so important to me to be there for Danny. I never want him to feel like he isn't important to me, the way I felt when I was growing up.

“I'm sorry,” Audrey says. “Your sister didn't feel the same way about the house?”

I shake my head, pulling a few more weeds from around my peas. “She was the type of person to always look at the bright side of things. She loved the yard. She loved the magnolia tree.”

“The one I attacked with my van?”

A wry smile tugs at my lips. “Yeah. That one. Grace used to take me out of the house when our parents fought, and we'd sit under the tree and talk about our dreams. I remember one year, the tree was in full bloom, and it smelled amazing sitting there talking about the future. My mom was in the kitchen throwing plates at my father. He was shouting at her, threatening divorce, and my sister was just calmly telling me about how she wanted a house, and a family, and a big garden. After a while, I stopped listening to the fight and started



listening to her. She did that every time they got in an argument.”

“Sounds like her name was pretty accurate.”

I smile, pulling another tiny weed. “She was a better person than I am. When she saw the house was for sale, she said the old memories deserved to be replaced with better ones. She planted this garden. Well, most of it. I made the raised beds and built the greenhouse, but the trees and most of the mature plants are hers.”

Audrey watches me pull another weed and then starts pulling some of her own. When she’s not sure if something is a weed or not, she glances at me and waits for me to nod. I find myself relaxing a little bit more, and we slide into an easy rhythm.

Her nails are painted a soft shade of pink. I never noticed that before. As she works beside me, dirt clings to the edges of her cuticles and under her nails, and I wonder if it bothers her. It doesn’t seem to.

“Did you move in here after she passed?”

I nod. “Didn’t want Danny’s life to be disrupted.”

“That must have been strange.”

“It was, but I got used to it. Now it’s home.”

She follows me to the compost pile, and we toss our weeds on top. We’re standing next to the greenhouse, in the shadow of a large oak tree. The house stands silent at the other end of the yard, and I think about all the layers of memories that are imprinted into those walls.

I take a deep breath. “Audrey, about today...”

She turns to face me. “You don’t have to do this,” she says when I don’t finish my sentence. I frown, and Audrey continues: “I know that this thing between us can’t go anywhere, and I agree. We’re neighbors. I just moved in, and I don’t want to mess up any more than I already have. Plus, I’ve seen the types of relationships you have with women, so I

know you're not looking for anything serious. To be honest, neither am I."

It takes me a second to remember Anna, who stopped by the garage that first night I brought Audrey to look at the van. "Right," I say, and even though she's saying exactly what I was going to tell her, it's not as satisfying as I'd imagined.

"I'm busy with my business, and things are precarious right now. I can't afford to be distracted, and I think you feel the same way. Am I wrong?"

My brows tug together. "No," I start. But...

But what? Isn't this exactly what I was thinking too? Once the lust died down, wasn't I trying to find a way to extricate myself from the situation?

"So," she says with a breath, and hands over the keys to the garage, "here are the keys. I worked a total of eleven hours, which means you owe me five and a half on the van. If you go over, just charge me your regular rate and I'll make the payment." Her smile is bright—and a little brittle.

I take the keys from her, careful not to let my fingers brush hers. There's a weird feeling in my chest, a little bit tight, a little bit empty. "Okay. Good."

"So we're agreed." She gives me a businesslike nod. "Great."

"Yeah," I answer. "Great."

"From now on, we're friends."

"Friends," I repeat, and the word tastes bitter on my tongue.

"Yeah!" Her voice is cheery, but it rings false. She clasps her hands in front of her stomach, then abruptly spreads them like she wants to hug me. "Nice to see you, friend. I'll say goodnight and be on my way."

Then her arms come around me, and I'm enveloped in her scent and her softness. I wrap my arms around her, and the feel of her body against mine is the strike of a hammer on the anvil of my chest.

In this moment, I know with absolute certainty that I don't want to be friends with this woman. Not even a little bit. I don't want to wave at her from across the yard, or smile over a hedge and talk about the weather.

I want her naked and panting my name. I want to be the last man who ever makes her feel good. I want her to tell me she's mine, now and forever.

I'm not sure who moves first. Maybe she senses the shifts within me and responds, or she might have the same bone-deep reaction as I do to the feel of our bodies touching. All I know is one moment we're hugging and the next I've got her pressed against the side of the greenhouse and I'm kissing her like I never want to come up for air. She moans against my lips and claws at my shoulders, my back.

With one arm around her back, I lift her up and she wraps her legs around my waist. Still kissing her, I feel for the door to the greenhouse and walk us inside. I kick it closed behind us and bury my hands in her sweet-smelling hair. She gasps, grinding herself against me where we stand.

"This isn't what I meant," she says when we pull away to drag in deep breaths. "We weren't supposed to do this again."

"You want to stop?" I grate.

"No," she replies, kissing me again. Her teeth close over my bottom lip, and my hands drop to her ass. I crinkle the fabric of her dress so I can get to her skin, feeling the lacy contours of her panties against warm, soft skin.

All the blood in my body rushes south. I stagger. This woman is driving me insane. I've lost my mind.

"What color are they?" I rasp.

"What?"

"These." I snap the edge of her panties against her ass cheek, and she gives a cute little yelp. "What color."

"Wh-white," she says.

"Show me." I guide her feet to the ground and hold her waist until she's steady. Then I take a seat on the long timber

bench lining the side wall. I spread my arms over the backrest and grip it with both hands. Meanwhile, Audrey stands before me and slowly gathers the fabric of her dress up against her stomach.

Her panties are white lace, with a little blue bow in the front. They're mostly transparent. I've died and gone to heaven.

"Turn around," I grate. "Show me the back."

She obeys, flipping the back of her skirt up and leaning forward a bit to show me the way her panties cut high over her cheeks. The bench creaks as I grip it harder.

"You are so fucking beautiful," I tell her, and I can't take it anymore. I reach for her, hands clamping on her hips to drag her back toward me. She lands on my lap, her back against my chest. "Hands around my neck," I grunt.

I love the way she does what I tell her to do. Love how good it feels to have her hands braided behind my nape. Love how she shivers when I run my hands up her sides and over her breasts.

"Audrey," I say, spreading her knees with my own.

"Mm-hmm?"

"I have to be honest with you." I claw at her dress, gathering it up in a big clump against her stomach. My hands look so filthy against her clothes, and I almost feel bad about sullyng her—but I still let my dirty fingers coast along the gusset of her panties and feel my lips curl into a smile when she shudders.

"What?"

"I don't want to be your friend," I admit, rubbing her clit through the lace.

"Oh." It comes out breathy, and I'm sure she feels my cock throbbing beneath her ass.

"I want to be the man who makes you scream." I put a bit more pressure in my touch, relishing the way she rolls her hips toward my hand.

“Oh,” she repeats.

“Is that all you have to say?”

“I’m processing,” she replies, grinding against my touch. “There’s a lot happening right now.”

I shift my hold on her so she can use the heel of my hand to take her pleasure. “Process a bit faster, sweetheart.”

“Maybe...” Her fingers move against my neck, like she’s stopping herself from unclasping her hands. “Remy,” she starts again. “What...”

My brain is full of white noise. There’s a woman writhing on my lap, and all the oxygen has left my brain to do what it needs to do between my legs. I want to make her shatter. I want to make her mine.

But I can’t. There are reasons I can’t remember right now, but I know I’m not supposed to be doing this. Then my hand is dipping beneath the neckline of her dress to cup her breast, and she’s arching against my chest like I’ve just electrocuted her. Her nipple is hard against my palm. I squeeze her soft flesh and press the heel of my other hand where she’s wet and hot.

For me. Wet and hot for *me*.

Panting breaths tickle my ear as she turns her head toward me. Suddenly desperate to kiss her, I pick her up and spin her around so she’s straddling my lap, then crush my lips to hers.

I haven’t made out with a woman in a long time. Usually, sex with a woman is about orgasm—hers and mine—but it’s rarely about the pleasure of touch, the feel of her tongue against mine, the shape of her curves beneath my palms. With Audrey, I want to enjoy this. I want to shove myself inside her, of course, but I want to relish every second of having her in my arms.

I’m not supposed to do this; I know that. But I can’t stop myself, so I’m going to enjoy every second of it.

We kiss until I think I might explode.

Audrey pulls away and looks at me with those pale green eyes. “Maybe this is a fling,” she says, breathless.

“Right,” I respond, my hands having found the hem of her dress once more. They’re on a mission to shape her ass again, every perfect curve.

“We just need sex, and we’re attracted to each other, so we’re having a fling.”

“It’s casual,” I agree. My right hand finds the cleft of her ass, and I follow it down to where she’s wettest. Her panties are soaked through. I’ll die if I don’t get inside her.

She shudders at my touch, so I do it again. Her eyes get hazy when my touch runs over her rear hole. Hell.

“A casual fling,” she pants. “Temporary. A m-month.”

“Fine,” I answer, teasing her ass as I reach between us with my other hand. “Sounds good.”

She gasps when I touch her lace-covered clit with my left hand, my right still occupied behind. “Remy,” she pants, “that feels so good.”

“I haven’t even touched your bare skin yet,” I growl.

She huffs a laugh, leaning her forehead against my shoulder. Her hands slide down my stomach to my crotch, and I grunt when she presses those slim, imperious fingers against my aching cock. I’ve never felt so good in my life.

Hands shaking, I help her unbuckle my belt. While she opens the front of my pants, I fish my wallet out of my back pocket. I’ve got a condom. Thank God.

“Hurry,” she pants, wrapping her hand around my girth.

I have to close my eyes because it feels so good. Her breaths are coming faster, her movements jerky. She wants me as much as I want her.

I’ve never felt this undone. I’ve never wanted something as badly as I want sex with Audrey right now, this minute. Cracking my eyelids, I manage to make my fingers work to open the crinkling foil packet. My fine motor skills are shot.

She grabs the condom from my clumsy grasp with an impatient noise.

Shoving my pants and underwear as far down as I can manage, I try to get my heartbeat under control. But then Audrey's hands are on me again. She's sheathing me with rough, hurried movements. I reach beneath her dress and feel that white lace against the pads of my fingers.

Need—need to get inside. Need to feel her. Need to come.

I tug to pull her panties aside, but my movements are too rough. I tear the fabric to a useless scrap. It takes my brain a second to process the fact that I've just literally ripped this woman's clothes off her body, and then she positions herself on top of me. She's tight and wet and hot and—

Pleasure shatters through me. My vision goes white. I realize I'm gripping her hips too hard, so I force myself to loosen my hold. She feels better than I imagined. Better than anything I've felt before. I swear, and I don't recognize my own voice.

I know I'm being too rough when I pull the straps of her dress off her shoulders and pin her arms to her sides. I know I should slow down when I lean her back and take her breast in my mouth. I know my thrusts are too violent, too demanding. She's bouncing on my lap and clinging on for dear life. It's too much. I need to stop this.

But then she says, "More," and I come fully undone.

What follows is the hottest, wildest, most feral sex I've ever experienced. Audrey pulls my hair and drags my mouth up to hers. She grinds against me while I meet her thrust for thrust. She pants against my mouth and moans my name. She gasps when I slide my hand down the cleft of her ass to circle her rim.

My girl is so dirty it drives me insane. When she shudders atop me, I feel like I've just won a gold medal in the Olympics of Filth. I smile, watching pleasure overtake her features. I've never accomplished anything this satisfying in my whole miserable life.

When her gaze meets mine again, her eyes are hazy. Pleasure-drunk. Her hands are clinging to my shoulders, her breasts on full display. Her dress is a mess of blue fabric crumpled between us. She looks so dirty and so, so beautiful. A voice in my mind whispers, *Mine*.

“Wow,” she says.

A self-satisfied smile curls my lips. “That good, huh,” but I’m using bravado to mask whatever earthquake is currently happening in my soul.

She rolls her eyes, then gasps when I thrust into her again. When I reach between us to touch her where she needs it, I watch every twitch on her face. I drink in every gasp and whimper. I savor her next orgasm and finally, finally, give her one of my own.

Time ceases to exist. We float back down to earth together. Her fingers make small circles on the back of my neck, and I stroke her thighs with my thumbs. Finally, we begin to shift and separate. I dispose of the condom and buckle myself back up, and by the time I turn around to look at her, she’s got her dress back on and a scrap of white lace in her hands.

“You owe me new underwear,” she says, letting the ruined fabric dangle from her fingers.

I grin. “I’ll get you as much underwear as you want, as long as I get to rip it off you afterward.”

“Barbarian,” she says, but there’s a flush on her cheeks and a gleam in her eyes. She lets out a deep breath. “I need some water.”

“Come inside,” I tell her, and I lead her to the greenhouse door. My steps are shaky, and I carefully, so carefully, decide not to acknowledge what just happened in the hidden corners of my heart.



FOURTEEN

# AUDREY

COOL NIGHT AIR rushes over me as soon as the greenhouse door opens. I take a deep breath, inhaling the scent of the sea, cut grass, and the freshness of Remy's garden.

My legs are wobbly. My head is full of cotton. I follow Remy with the grace of a newborn giraffe as he crosses the yard and heads for the back door of his house.

I should really just go home and get a glass of water from my own house, but I need a minute. My brain isn't working properly.

We head for the kitchen, where Remy pours me a glass of ice water. It's the best thing I've ever tasted. I gulp down half the glass and set it down on the counter, then exhale. "Well," I say.

Remy leans against the opposite counter and watches me, brow arched. "How are you doing?"

I scan myself. "I'm good, I think."

"You think? I thought I did a decent job back there."

Heat flushes across my chest and up my neck. "You were passable," I lie. In reality, he was incredible. He made me melt like ice cream on a hundred-degree day. I've never had sex like that before, and I think I might need a lifetime to recover.

But I also want to do it again.

Remy pushes himself off the counter and approaches me like a big cat stalking its prey. He places his hands on either side of me, so I'm caged against the kitchen counter. He smells

like sweat and sex and Remy. Embers of desire flare to life in my veins.

“I think you’re lying, Audrey.”

“Oh?”

“I think I rocked your world. I think you’re already wanting more.”

*YES.* I reel in the word and force myself to slow down. I know myself, and I know that in my mind, sex and emotional intimacy are intricately linked. I also know that Remy doesn’t want a relationship. In the heat of the moment, we agreed on a fling, but we were both out of our minds. I need to pump the brakes—and hope the fluid line isn’t leaking—before I get my heart in trouble.

“Maybe we should talk about rules of engagement,” I say.

Remy leans back, giving me a few inches of space. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you told me you don’t date. I told you I was willing to have a fling. I think we should define what that means so neither of us gets hurt.”

Remy’s face goes blank. When he backs away and leans against the counter across from me, I feel a tiny bit disappointed. Then he nods. “A fling. Right. Okay.”

I meet his gaze for a moment and decide to start with the big one. “I require exclusivity for the duration of our relationship. I realize that isn’t the norm these days, especially for a casual relationship, but—”

“Done.”

“—it’s a non-negotiable for…” I blink. “What?”

“We’re exclusive. My turn. My kid comes first. That means I can’t drop everything and come to you. I might not be able to call and text as much as you like. Some nights, I won’t be able to get away. You have to be okay with that.”

“Of course,” I answer, still slightly reeling about his agreement to exclusivity. In the few times I tried to go out with

men after my divorce, I was shocked at the state of the dating scene. When I told a prospective date I wanted exclusivity, they'd usually immediately stop talking to me. It made me feel like an old-fashioned, sexless freak. I wanted to be okay with casual sex. I wanted to be able to separate sex from emotion... but I couldn't. My brain just doesn't work that way.

That, combined with the infidelity in my marriage, meant that non-exclusive relationships were a minefield for me. I ended up disengaging from the dating scene entirely.

But now, maybe I could do this. It's been so long, and the sex we just had was so good. Maybe I can have a successful fling. If we agree to the terms, I could protect my heart. All the benefits and none of the risks. I could relax, loosen the reins, and then go back to my regular life with a new outlook.

“What else?” Remy asks, studying me. “I can practically hear your mind whirling from all the way over here. Tell me what you need.”

I meet his gaze and try to dampen the thunderstruck feeling cracking through me. I've never had a man be so direct in asking me about my needs—and I've never believed he'd bend over backward to meet them.

With Terry, it was always me trying to meet *his* needs. Even when we were trying for a baby, I'd end up consoling him when the pregnancy tests all came up negative. I tried to make up for my failings by being the perfect wife in every other way.

Now, I realize nothing I ever did would have been enough for him. Even if we'd had children together, I doubt it would have changed the outcome. He'd eventually have tired of me, and I'd eventually have burned myself out trying to be the perfect wife for him.

But Remy is staring at me intently, waiting to hear what he has to do to fulfill my needs. He's completely focused on me, and the full force of his attention makes my insides turn to warm goo. My heart gives a violent lurch.

Reeling myself back in, I force myself to speak calmly when I say, “We should set a time limit to this fling. I mentioned a month earlier. Do you agree?”

A muscle feathers in Remy’s cheek. After a long pause, he answers. “A month? Seems pretty short, especially after what just happened. Might not be enough to get you out of my system.”

The way he says that is growly and possessive and a little bit angry. His arm muscles tense as he grips the edge of the counter behind him, and his dark eyes study me. I want to close the distance between us and run my hands all over his body. I want to stroke his beard and watch his expression soften.

But—fling. This is supposed to remind me that I’m a woman, and I need to loosen the white-knuckled grip I have on my own life.

“A month would allow us to scratch this itch without ruining our neighborly relationship.”

“Our neighborly relationship,” he repeats.

“Yeah. We wouldn’t want to make things awkward, since we’ll be living next to each other for the foreseeable future.”

“You think you’ll be able to forget the fact that you just rode me to oblivion in my greenhouse?” His voice is rough and low. It makes me want to wrap my legs around his hips and go on a hunt for oblivion once more.

I straighten and soldier on. I know a time limit is a good idea. It’s the only way I can protect myself from falling for a man who has shown me—and told me—he’s unavailable.

“A month is all I can offer,” I tell him. “I have a business to run. You have your work and your nephew. We both have a lot on our plates.” Plus, it’ll limit the amount of damage he can do to me. Whenever I feel myself getting too attached, I can just think of the built-in end date. But he’s right; a month is short, so I add: “The clock starts Monday.”

Today is Tuesday, so we’ll have a few extra days. I’m not quite sure why it seems so important to have that extra time

right now, but as soon as the words are out of my mouth, I discover I very much want him to agree.

Remy looks like he wants to argue, then abruptly relaxes. He dips his chin. “Fine. A month from Monday. After that, we go our separate ways.”

“Excellent.” I paint a bright smile on my face and stick my hand out. “It’s a deal.”

He stares at my palm for a beat, then slides his hand against it. When his fingers curl around mine, I’m not prepared for the jolt of heat that travels up my arm—nor am I prepared for the harsh tug he gives me. I crash into his chest and find myself wrapped in Remy’s arms.

He kisses me until I’m dizzy and panting and full of need. Then he pulls away, hands framing my face. “It’s a deal,” he tells me.

THE NEXT DAY, I work from home. Paula sends through a list of inventory requests, and I have a backlog of social media posts to create. One of the reasons I bought this house was the third bedroom on the ground floor, which is the perfect size for a home office.

Maybe Laurel was right about me needing sex, because today I feel like a new woman. I get more done in three hours than I’d usually be able to do in a full day. Without having to do the inventory checks, I can focus fully on one single task at a time. I get two months’ worth of social media posts drafted, scheduled, and ready to post.

I feel like a million bucks.

Then my phone rings, and I hear Georgia’s silky voice on the other side of the line. “How are you doing?” she asks after we greet each other.

“I’m great,” I tell her, and it’s the truth. “What can I do for you?”

“I was looking at your services on your website, and I’m interested in the closet makeover. Would you be able to come

over for a consultation sometime this week?”

My smile nearly splits my face in half. “Of course,” I say, and we set a time for the following Friday morning. I hang up and do a little jig in my home office. A new client! And with my new division of responsibilities, I’m able to slot her in far sooner than I would’ve if I’d been doing all the tasks I gave to Paula.

I review the inventory requests Paula sends through and check them against the partial notes I’d started to take. I should really double-check everything myself, because this is her first time doing it and I’m not sure she can complete the product orders to the same standard as I—

I stop the thought as soon as I realize what I’m doing. I’m letting the dark waters of perfectionism close over my head. I *just* delegated a task that Paula is more than capable of doing. She was thrilled to be given the responsibility. The last thing I need to do is undercut her confidence by redoing all the work she just sent through.

I don’t want to be the boss everyone hates. I don’t want to stifle my employees. I don’t want to live under the shadow of my failed marriage forever. I am not a failure, nor do I need to do everything myself in order to succeed.

Instead, I spot-check Paula’s numbers against the ones I’d started previously and approve her to make the orders.

My heart flutters as I send the email, because this is uncharted territory for me. I’m loosening the control I’ve had on my business for many, many years—but it will be worth it if it allows my employees and me to thrive.

Once I’ve sent the email, I push back from my computer and pad to the kitchen. I put on a pot of coffee and stare at the inside of my refrigerator while I try to figure out what I feel like eating. Mostly, I’m trying to calm down and remind myself that delegation is a good thing.

Worried thoughts race through my mind, and I realize that’s all my perfectionism has ever been: a charitable disguise for anxiety. I’m worried that I’m not good enough to run my

own business. My brain tells me I failed as a wife, and I could fail at everything else. The only solution I've found to quiet those thoughts is to try to make every single little detail as perfect as it can be.

But spreading myself too thin while trying to be perfect is no solution at all. If anything, it'll only perpetuate my anxiety whenever anything goes wrong. Like, for example, a van crashing into my neighbor's tree.

Focusing on the contents of my fridge, I try to bring my thoughts back to lunch. The doorbell saves me from making a decision that may or may not involve too much cheese. I leave the coffeemaker gurgling on the counter and head for the front door.

Remy is waiting on the other side. He's leaning on the doorjamb, glancing across my yard toward his magnolia tree, and he shifts to face me when I open the door.

My heart takes off at a gallop. The sunlight caresses his face as he watches me with dark, heated eyes.

"Hi," I say.

"Can I come in?"

I nod stupidly and open the door wider. Remy takes up so much space. His shoulders blot out the sunlight as he crosses the threshold, and I have the feeling I just invited a dangerous beast into my home. I close the door and turn to face him.

He's standing very, very close. His hands sweep up my hips and settle on my waist, the heat of them soaking through my shirt. Thumbs coasting over my ribs, he spins me around and gently presses me against the door.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, which sounds way more aggressive than I'd meant it to, but it's all I can manage with him looking at me like that.

"Cashing in on this fling I've agreed to," he says, and then he kisses me.

This morning, when I woke up, I thought I'd imagined the magic between us. I convinced myself that the chemistry was



mostly in my head, and there was no way the sex had been that good. I rationalized my excitement away, telling myself that I'd simply not had enough sex in the past few years to make any kind of judgment call about what happened in the greenhouse.

It couldn't possibly have been that good. The second time would cure me of any illusions, if I decided I wanted a second time with him.

But I was wrong. Remy lights my body up. He makes me feel like sparklers are going off in my veins, and his mere presence makes me so hot I'm feverish.

He flicks the button on my denim shorts and slides his hand inside. I gasp; he groans.

It takes about three milliseconds for me to crest, pinned against my front door with my mechanic's hand down my underpants. He slides his hand out of my panties and brings his glistening fingers to his lips, licking off the evidence of my arousal with carnal thoughts written in his eyes.

I want him so much I'm sick with it.

"Strip," he says, and he tugs at the hem of his own shirt. He tears it off while I'm still coming to terms with how much his command turned me on, and then I have to gape at his chest for a few moments.

"Audrey," he says, command soaking through the rasp in his voice. His hand moves to his belt. "Take your clothes off."

"Okay. Yep. Good idea." I drop my shorts, then lift my shirt off over my head.

I'll have to thank Laurel later, if I can work up the nerve; I took her advice and wore a new pair of matching underwear I bought over the weekend. The look on Remy's face when he sees the sheer black bra and matching boy shorts is worth every penny I paid.

"Bed, couch, or floor?"

The question makes me blink, and by the time I've processed it, Remy has his hands around me and he's lifting

me into his arms.

“Decide, Audrey, or I’m fucking you up against your front door.”

“Uh—couch,” I blurt, even though I wouldn’t mind the front door thing. “Down the hall in the living room.”

He stalks down the hall, unhurried and efficient. I cling to him, staring at the rumpled piles of clothing next to my front door. Then I’m turning the corner and a moment later, falling through the air and landing on the couch cushions.

He stares at me for a beat, then shakes his head. “You’re so beautiful, Audrey.”

My body has changed over the years, and some days I feel older than I should—but I could never feel self-conscious when he’s looking at me like that. Smiling, I spread my arms and invite him down to join me. His body presses me into the cushions as he kisses me, his beard rasping against my skin. His hands are everywhere. He tugs at my bra and shifts down to take the hard point of my nipple in his mouth.

“Don’t rip these undies,” I say, arching toward him. “They were expensive.”

“I’m not making any promises,” he says, sitting up on one elbow to get a better look at my bra. It’s clumped beneath one breast with that strap hanging off my arm. Remy looks like he’s about to come undone.

A woman could get used to being looked at like that. He makes me feel powerful and sexy and alive.

Then he lets out a harsh breath, kneels on the couch cushions, and tugs my panties down and off. His hands are on me a moment later, stroking, teasing, thrusting. I want him so much I’m shaking.

“What do you want me to do, Audrey?” he says, running his lips across my chest. He sucks my nipple into his mouth and tongues it. I’ve lost my mind. I should be working, and instead I’m getting ravished by a tattooed beast of a man on my living room couch.

“I want you inside me,” I pant. “Right now. Now—now.”

He lets out a harsh breath, and then I’m being manhandled again. He picks me up and turns me so I’m facing the couch, feet on the floor and knees pressed against the seat cushions. A broad hand pushes my chest down so my forearms are against the back of the sofa.

He swears. I feel exposed and so turned on I can’t think straight. I hear a condom, feel his hand slide over my hip—and then he thrusts all the way home.

I see stars. Actual stars, bright and white against my eyelids. I think I say his name. Maybe I scream it. I know at one point he reaches around to tease my clit, and I peak within moments.

I feel it when he reaches his own climax. I’m ragdoll-limp, clinging onto the sofa for dear life, and he thickens and pulses inside me. The feel of his orgasm makes warm honey spread through my body. I want more. I want it again. I want all of him.

And I know for a fact that I didn’t imagine a thing last night. This is every bit as good as I remembered.

Moments later, when we’ve caught our breath, Remy eases out of me and I wonder how I’ll ever recover from this. A month is an eternity. A month is long enough for my feelings to get involved—long enough for my heart to break.

But then Remy wraps his arms around me, turns me around, and brushes his lips against mine. For a moment, all my thoughts and worries flee and all I feel is the warmth and safety of Remy’s arms. He rests his forehead against mine and lets out a huff of a laugh.

“What?” I ask, letting my forearms rest on his shoulders.

“I thought I’d exaggerated it in my mind,” he says, voice rough. “I thought last night was a fluke.”

Warmth spreads through my chest. I pull back to look up into his dark-brown eyes, smiling shyly. “Same here.”

“It wasn’t a fluke. We fit, Audrey.” His hands coast down either side of my spine, stroking me like he can’t help but want to touch my skin.

Fear sparks, chasing away all that comfortable warmth. I should tell him I need to get back to work and ask him to be on his way. I should put some distance between us and protect myself.

“You want some lunch?” I ask instead.

His hands slide down to my ass, running up my sides, palming my curves. “Only if I get to have dessert after.”

I grin and swat at his beautiful bare chest. “Brute.”

He flashes me a smile, and I melt.

I feel his eyes on me as I slide my underwear back on, shimmy my bra back into place, and disappear down the hallway to gather my clothes. I drop his discarded garments by the bathroom when I hear him in there, and then I go make us some food.

FIFTEEN

# REMY

AUDREY MAKES me a delicious wrap with sliced chicken and a homemade tomato chutney. Her kitchen is insane. Not in the fittings and fixtures, but in the way it's organized. Everything is perfectly lined up. Every drawer has dividers. Every food item has its own little designated spot. The label of every can and container is facing out like she spent the time to arrange them just so.

Her brain must be an amazing place. I wouldn't even know how to start organizing something like this, but I can see how well it works. When I need a fork, I find it in the first drawer I pull. When I want a glass, it's exactly where I expect it to be. Everything is intuitive.

It's incredible.

At the garage this morning, I was able to find and file every piece of paper I needed. The office was no longer a place I tried to avoid; it was somewhere that worked exactly as I needed it to. If I bought the place, I could hire some help and have them hit the ground running. It wouldn't be such an insurmountable task to make that place my own.

I finish my sandwich and put my plate in the dishwasher, then glance at Audrey. "I think you might be a genius," I tell her.

She arches a brow. "In what way?"

"This." I wave a hand around the space. "The way you've set this up. It's amazing."

She hums, unconvinced. “The two drawers in that corner need some work. And I’ve been meaning to find a better place for the toaster.”

“Audrey. Stop it.”

She blinks.

“I’m telling you; you’re a genius.”

A tiny smile curls the edge of her lips. “Thanks,” she says, and it feels like a victory. Kissing her feels even better. She gives a cute little yelp when I lift her onto the edge of the couch, and I decide I’m going to be late getting back to work this afternoon after all. I’m in the mood for dessert.

WHEN I GET BACK to the garage, I do it with a smile on my face. I think about her all afternoon. I check my phone a few times to see if she’s texted me, and my heart gives a little leap when I see her name on the screen.

*I had fun today*, she says. Four innocuous words make my blood heat. I had fun too; I want to do it again.

But duty calls, and when it’s time for me to pick Danny up from camp, I lock up the garage and head over to the school. Danny is a bundle of energy, all signs of his illness vanished. He tells me about all the games they played and goes into great detail about how disgusting the ham sandwiches were for lunch.

“What’s for lunch tomorrow?”

“Pizza,” he replies with a big sigh. “Thankfully.”

I grin. My ten-year-old nephew sounds like a middle-aged man who just found out he narrowly escaped getting laid off from work.

After a snack, Danny and I head to the backyard. Danny finds a ball to toss around, which means he still somehow has more energy reserves to burn off.

Birds twitter. Danny calls out and gets me to play catch with him. An engine backfires down the street, and all the

sounds of the neighborhood blend into a gentle murmur.

Life is good—but for the first time in a long time, I admit to myself that something is missing.

While Danny entertains himself by trying to hit the target on the fence with his ball, my eyes drift to the greenhouse before snapping over to check on my plants. Another day, and some of these peas will be ready to harvest. I find a caterpillar munching on my lettuce, so I relocate it to another corner of the yard.

“What are you doing?” Danny asks.

I glance over to see him standing on the deck, leaning over the fence that separates my yard from Audrey’s.

“I’m trying to figure out how to get this mower started,” Audrey replies. The sound of her voice makes warmth slide down my spine and wrap around my middle. I find myself walking toward Danny just to get a glimpse of Audrey again.

“Danny, don’t snoop in other people’s yards,” I admonish, glancing over the fence to nod at Audrey.

She’s standing beside an ancient mower that’s at least fifty percent rust. She gives me a tight smile, then grabs the pull cord and gets herself in position. I shouldn’t be turned on by this woman bent over a lawn mower, but here we are. I’ve reverted to a baser version of myself, and all it took was a few tastes of her.

I watch her tug the cord—and stumble back when the string snaps in two. She gives out a cute little yelp and falls on her butt in the grass while Danny cackles like the evil child he is.

Maybe I’m a little bit evil, because a grin curls my lips too.

Audrey glares at the two of us, then swings those grass-green eyes to the mower. She stands up and kicks it, then huffs. With her hands on her hips, she faces me and Danny. “Either of you know a good lawn-mower repairman?”

“Not sure that hunk of rust is worth repairing,” I admit, “but I can mow your lawn for you.”



“Do you have any more brownies?” Danny asks hopefully.

Audrey’s shoulders drop. Her eyes sparkle as they meet mine, then swing to Danny. “No,” she says, “but I made falafels for dinner. There’s more than enough for the three of us; I just have to fry them up, but I was going to mow the lawn first.”

“What’s falafel?” Danny asks, uncertain. He frowns at me, then at Audrey. “Is it going to be gross?”

She grins. “I guess you’ll have to find out.”

“I’ll grab my mower,” I say, then ruffle Danny’s hair.

A little while later, after I’ve taken care of her lawn, I find Danny and Audrey in her kitchen. Danny’s sitting at her oval dining room table with a plate of fantastic-looking food. My stomach growls.

“Here,” Audrey says, sliding a plate across the counter toward me. “The falafels are homemade, but the tabbouleh and hummus are store-bought. I have still and sparkling water, or I could open a bottle of wine.”

The food looks incredible. I take the plate and thank Audrey, then accept the glass of wine she pours. She fixes her own plate and glass of wine, then joins Danny and me at the table.

“What do you think?” she asks my nephew, who has hummus smeared on the side of his lips.

He nods vigorously, tearing his eyes away from a piece of floral artwork Audrey has hanging on the kitchen wall. He looks at Audrey and swallows. “I like falafel.”

Audrey grins. “Good.” Her gaze lifts to mine, and her smile softens into something gentler. “Thank you for mowing my lawn, Remy. It looks great.”

“You need a new mower,” I tell her.

“I’ll add it to the list.” Her voice is wry when she adds, “Alternatively, I could make you dinner in exchange for you mowing it for me on the regular.”

I laugh. “I might be interested in taking that deal.”

This woman could convince me to walk over hot coals for her with a few bats of her eyelashes. And as we share a meal together, listening to Danny talk about his day at camp, some tight knot that has existed in my heart for years begins to unwind.

I like this, I realize. I like the ease of it. I like watching Danny steal covert glances at Audrey. I like watching her move around the kitchen. She thanks my nephew when he puts his dish in the dishwasher, then pulls open the freezer to show him the ice cream sandwiches she has stashed there. If I could bottle the delight on Danny’s face when he grabs one, I’d be a very rich man.

When dinner is done, we say goodbye to Audrey and I tell Danny to get ready for bed. While he’s brushing his teeth, I stand in the kitchen and look around, wondering if it always felt this empty.

SIXTEEN

# AUDREY

AFTER A WEEKEND SPENT cackling with Laurel and stealing glances over the backyard fence, Monday rolls around. I have one month to enjoy this fling before it fizzles out. The week is busy, but instead of draining me, it fills me with energy. The company schedule is packed, with three kitchen jobs and one closet/bedroom reorganization. I dash from job to job, checking on my teams, making sure everything is up to standard.

In between, I text Remy. I think about Remy. I race home when he tells me he's on his way.

We have sex every single day at lunchtime. He turns me inside out. I find myself itching for the moment his arms will wrap around me, wanting to feel the abrasiveness of his beard against my inner thigh. I love the darkness in his eyes when he enters me, the growl in his voice when he says my name.

I don't remember ever being this horny in my life. Instead of sating me, every orgasm seems to stoke the flames inside me. Every day, I want him a little bit more.

On Thursday, I pick my van up from Remy's garage. When I walk in, he's got his torso under another vehicle, and I take a moment to admire his strong legs. There's something serious wrong when legs clad in grease-covered overalls are turning me on.

He slides out and sees me. His lips curl into a smile. "Hey, you."

I actually, literally, flick my hair over my shoulder. What has become of me? “Hi.”

Watching Remy move is a delicacy all in itself. He rolls himself up, betraying the power of his abdominal muscles. Then he’s depositing his tools on a toolbox near the wall and heading to the sink to put gritty orange gloop on his hands. He scrubs and glances at me. “How was your day?”

“Busy,” I tell him. “I got three new clients and had to run around getting the materials for two different jobs. Things are picking up again, which is a relief.”

His eyes crinkle as he smiles. “Good.”

He dries his hands and turns to me. Then his fingers slide over my neck and his lips are covering mine, and I forget to think for a while.

“Want to see your new van?” he asks, a tendril of heat snaking around his words.

An involuntary shiver courses through me. I’ve got it bad for this man, and I’ve only got a few weeks to get him out of my system. “Sure.”

The Organizing Goddess logo stares back at me from a gleaming white van. The front is completely repaired, with no sign of the magnolia tree-induced damage. I nod along while Remy pops the hood and explains what he’s done, but mostly I’m staring at the line of his jaw, the movement of his hands, the way his short-sleeved coveralls highlight the size of his muscular arms.

“Thank you,” I manage to croak while he lowers the hood and pats the car fondly.

His eyes, when they meet mine, spark with a deep, carnal heat. “If you come to the office, I’ll give you the final bill.”

I nod and trail after him like a lovesick loon. His fingers curl into mine as he tugs me across the threshold, and when he closes—and locks—the door behind me, my heart begins to thump.

“What do I owe you?” I ask, meaning to sound coy but instead sounding breathy.

“I’m sure we can come to an agreement on the final price,” he replies, closing in on me.

I have the ridiculous urge to run, but I know I want to get caught. Remy crowds me against the wall, planting his palm above my head. His eyes are dark and full of promises. His free hand sweeps up my side, stroking my breast.

With trembling hands, I reach for the zipper of his coveralls. He helps me push the dirty garment off, and then he’s grabbing at my own clothes.

I wore a skirt that hits me just above the knees and a sheer, loose blouse. I knew what I wanted when I came here. Remy’s hands slide up my thighs and find the bare skin beneath.

“Audrey,” he says, voice harsh. “You’re not wearing underwear.”

I bite my lip. “Oops. I must have forgotten.”

His laugh is harsh and hot and makes sparks light in my core. Then his hands are on me, in me, and all I can do is cling to his broad shoulders until I’m shuddering at his touch. This is insane. I came here knowing we’d have sex given half a shred of privacy. I walked in and saw his legs, and I became aroused.

I’m very quickly losing my mind, and I’m not sure what the consequences will be.

But for once, my thoughts are quiet except for the insistent demand for more—always more.

Sex was a chore for me for so long. In my marriage, it became a task that had to be done for my husband’s pleasure. Sometimes I’d get off; often I wouldn’t. The only certainty was that once he orgasmed, it was over.

Remy seems to have a completely different objective. He focuses on me with single-minded intensity, watching my face as he drowns me in pleasure. Every time he touches me, it’s like he’s taking detailed notes on every reaction. He’s not just

taking what he wants with me lying back as a passive participant; he's creating a space where I can stretch and explore and *enjoy*.

So, when I get on my knees and unbuckle his belt, I'm not doing it from a place of duty or resignation. I want to return a fraction of what he's given me this week. I want to give, to know that he's coming undone from my touch just as I've done a dozen times from his.

"Audrey," he rasps. "I was joking about the final price agreement thing." His fingers stroke my cheek.

I pull his pants down to mid-thigh and wrap my fingers around his length. He groans, and a victorious thrill shoots through the center of my body.

"Oh?" I say as I bring my lips to his tip.

His hand lands on the wall behind me. "You don't have to —"

I take him in my mouth and suck. The noises he makes above me are the hottest thing I've ever heard. I'm doing that to him. I'm causing this big, powerful man to unravel. My mouth—my hands.

I've never felt so in control of my own sexuality in my life. I've never felt so attractive. Remy gathers my hair in both hands and begins to gently thrust into my mouth, and I know the sore jaw will be worth it. He says my name like a prayer. He groans when I reach down to touch his sack. He swears over and over again.

"Audrey," he pants. "Sweetheart. I'm going to—"

I redouble my efforts, and his grip on my hair tightens. When he spills in my mouth in a hot rush, I feel dizzy. I fall back, hitting the wall, and then I'm scooped up in Remy's arms and pinned to the wall.

He kisses me hard, like he wants to imprint himself on my lips. His whole body trembles as he holds me, and we stay there, locked together, for a long while. When we pull apart, Remy runs his thumb over my lips, his eyes full of something dark and solemn. "Where did you come from?" he whispers.

My heart thuds. I want to lean into him, to wrap this feeling of intimacy around me like a warm blanket. But we have just over three weeks left to have this fling, and then we agreed it has to end.

I have a business to run. I don't have the bandwidth for a relationship. I gave everything to my marriage, and it nearly broke me. I know I'm better on my own.

These are deep, undeniable truths. A few earth-shattering orgasms with a new man don't change them.

So, instead of indulging in the closeness between us, I let a teasing smile grace my lips. "Does that mean I get a discount on my bill?"

Remy huffs a laugh, pulling me into the circle of his arms. "Sweetheart," he says, voice low, "there is no bill."

BY FRIDAY, I'm walking on a cloud. I head to Georgia Neves's property, a beautiful strip of land right on the coast. Her home is gorgeous, and I have to take a second to stare at it before I get out of my van.

"Wish I could live here," Meg, my employee, says with a wistful sigh.

I snort. "Don't we all."

We get out of the van and head for the door to ring the bell. I'm slightly startled when the door opens and a gorgeous man is waiting on the other side. He's wearing old jeans and a white tee. "Mornin'," he says, and I detect a bit of a twang in his accent.

"Hi. I'm Audrey Scott with Organizing Goddess. I'm here to speak to Georgia about a closet makeover. Is she available?"

"Come in," he says, then calls out, "Sweet Peach! The closet people are here."

"Coming!"

The man winks at us, then leads us into the kitchen. A moment later, Georgia appears wearing a deep brown wrap



dress and gold accessories. Her smile is sunny as she greets us. She kisses the man on the lips, then waves us deeper into the home.

Every room is tastefully decorated, with gorgeous views of the ocean in the living and dining rooms. Upstairs, we pass a kids' bedroom, and I must stare for a moment too long, because Georgia says, "For my nephews. They come to visit with my sister and her man every few months."

"Oh, how nice," I answer with a smile.

A moment later, we enter the master suite. Georgia crosses the plush rug on the floor and pushes open the door to a huge walk-in closet.

"So," she says, planting her hands on her hips, "I have no idea where to start."

A familiar zing of excitement starts to build in my gut. Her closet is packed with stuff, but it's not very efficiently organized. The hangers are all squished together, and there's not enough shelf and drawer space. Her accessories are tossed on top of a dresser that's too deep for the space it's in, and it means another cupboard can't open fully.

I only realize I'm smiling when Georgia's lips curl in response. "I'm guessing you're willing to take on the challenge?" she asks.

"I can't wait to get started," I tell her. I run my hands down one of the vertical dividers in the closet and frown. "This looks new."

"It is," she admits. "I had a contractor fit the new closet out just a year ago, but I can't seem to make it work. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"There's nothing wrong with you," I tell her. "You just need a system."

From there, I sketch out my vision. I get Meg to take note of everything we'll need for the job—shelves, new rods, baskets and containers, drawer organizers—and by the end of our hour together, Georgia is bouncing on her feet with excitement.

“Last thing we need are some measurements.” I pull out my tape measure and then glance at Meg, who’s waiting patiently beside me. “How about you take the measurements, Meg.”

Meg’s eyes widen. “Me?”

Taking measurements for new jobs is something I’ve always done myself, especially in a job like this where we need to fit new elements into an existing space. Measurements need to be precise so that when I send them off to the cabinetmaker to make new shelves, they fit perfectly.

Meg is bright, and she’s worked with me for three years. Guilt squirms through me at the thought of her being relegated to grunt work and note-taking. I should be teaching my employees how to do these things. Instead, I’m piling more work onto my plate because I’ve convinced myself I’m the only one who can do it right.

“Here,” I say, taking my tape measure out of my bag. We go through a detailed list of all the shelving we need to add, along with a new set of built-in drawers. “This tape isn’t exactly accurate at the end,” I tell Meg, pointing to the metal piece attached to the tip of it, “so start at the two-inch mark, and then subtract two from every measurement. That way everything should fit just right.”

Meg frowns. “Okay.” She does the first and second ones correctly, so I leave her to finish the task while I talk to Georgia.

It turns out she’s lived in Heart’s Cove for a few years, and the man at the door was her high school sweetheart, Sebastian. They reconnected after decades apart and are now married.

A bark draws my gaze to the bedroom window, where Sebastian is playing fetch with an energetic brown-and-white dog. Georgia gets a soft smile on her face as she glances out the window, and I feel a twinge in my chest.

I want what she has. Not necessarily the big house on the cliff, but the companionship. The easy kisses. Maybe a dog.

“All done,” Meg says, emerging from the closet. She’s smiling, but it’s a bit hesitant around the edges. “Do you want to check the numbers?”

Yes. I do. I want to go over every single one and make sure they’re right, because no one could possibly do things as well as I can.

But those thoughts are my perfectionism speaking. They’re not serving me anymore. If I want to be a good boss—a good person—I need to let go of this need for control.

When I’m with Remy, I don’t feel this way. I no longer have to cling to life like I can wrestle it into submission. I don’t need to check and re-check everything to make sure everything is just right. I can just...be.

Last week, when he and Danny ate dinner with me, I accidentally smooshed a few of the falafels while I was frying them. I’d left them to the side without wanting to serve them to anyone, but Remy grabbed them when he went up for seconds. He ate them and shook his head, telling me how delicious they were. He called me a great cook.

The falafels didn’t have to be perfect for him to enjoy them. I doubt he even noticed they were oddly shaped—something like that wouldn’t even register on his radar.

I sat there, stressed, and then slowly let that emotion go. The food wasn’t perfect, and that was okay.

I want more of that in my life: more easygoing enjoyment. More joy. I want to be a better person.

So, instead of taking the tape measure and redoing all of Meg’s work, I just smile at the younger woman and tell her what I know she wants to hear: “I trust you.”

It’s hard to let go of control, but it also feels good.

Her smile is bright, which is a reward in itself. “Thank you,” she replies quietly, and she passes me the paperwork.

SEVENTEEN

# REMY

DANNY BOUNCES on his toes as we wait for Audrey's door to open. I think the kid is smitten, and I don't blame him. Ever since we had dinner at Audrey's place, he peeks over the fence whenever he's in the backyard.

Earlier, he convinced me to invite Audrey to check out the other gardens on the Heart's Cove Garden Walking Tour. The kid has shown precisely zero interest in the walking tour, but now, apparently, he's desperate to go check out the other gardens in town.

Fool that I am, it took nothing more than a question from my ten-year-old nephew to walk over to Audrey's and ask her along.

The door opens. My heart turns over.

"Remy," Audrey exclaims. "And Danny!"

"Will you come walking with us? We're looking at plants." Danny helpfully points at the bushes, as if to explain what a plant is.

"Oh!" Audrey looks surprised. She's wearing a loose white dress that hides her curves. Her feet are bare. "Umm.... I was just finishing up a few things for work, but..."

"No pressure," I cut in. "I should have called earlier to ask."

"No, it's okay." She smiles. "I was just trying to get caught up with invoices, but staring at the screen was beginning to

make me go cross-eyed. I'd love to go for a walk. Let me grab my shoes."

Danny and I step away from her door. A few moments later, Audrey emerges in the same white dress, with white leather sneakers on her feet and a purse slung over her shoulder. She smiles at me, and life feels a little bit better than it did a minute ago.

"Is that the van you crashed into our tree?" Danny asks, pointing.

Audrey jerks her gaze away from me and stares at the van. "Yes," she answers.

"Oh." Danny stares at the van. "Why?"

"She didn't do it on purpose," I cut in.

"I made a mistake," Audrey says, walking toward us. She smiles softly at Danny when he faces her. "I was supposed to get the van checked after I bought it, but I didn't. The brakes failed."

I like how she talks to Danny. She's honest with him and speaks to him like he's smart enough to understand. I like that she admitted her mistake without trying to explain it away.

"Why didn't you get the van checked?"

I frown. "Danny, be polite."

Danny ignores me.

Audrey lets out a sigh. "Well, that was a mistake. Sometimes I get really worried about doing a task perfectly, and it makes it hard for me to start that task at all. In this case, I wanted to learn more about cars so I didn't get ripped off by another mechanic, and I procrastinated."

"What's procrastinated?"

"It means I put it off instead of dealing with it."

"That wasn't very smart."

"Danny," I warn.

Danny glances at me, then at Audrey. "Sorry."

She comes to stand beside us and shakes her head. “It’s okay. You’re right.”

“Remy won’t rip you off. You should just get him to take care of your van.” He says it like Audrey is the biggest idiot who ever lived. I huff, half embarrassed, half amused.

“I think that’s the plan,” Audrey says, meeting my gaze, a question in her eyes.

“That’s the plan,” I confirm. There’s no way I’m letting this woman drive something I haven’t inspected. It’s bad enough she kept the van instead of getting a new one. For the next second or two, my brain tries to figure out how I could gift her a new work van without making her uncomfortable. Then Audrey smiles at me, and my thoughts disintegrate.

We start walking, and Audrey pulls a pamphlet out of her purse.

Glancing over, I grin. “You have the walking tour brochure?” Why does that not surprise me? Audrey seems like she’s prepared for everything. She probably had the pamphlet filed in a special folder arranged alphabetically by year.

She flicks it open and gives me a sideways glance. “How else would I know where to go?”

Laughing, I take her hand and tangle my fingers through hers. “You’d let me lead you.”

“Hmm,” she says, but there’s a grin playing over her lips. She slides the brochure back into her purse.

Danny scampers ahead, and the two of us stroll behind. The air smells of sweet floral blooms and a hint of the ocean. We pass under a Catalina cherry tree, and I wish it were a month earlier so Audrey could have seen it in full bloom. A few minutes later, we arrive at one of the houses on the walking tour.

The home is a Spanish-style residence with white arches and a terracotta-colored roof. The home belongs to a woman called Wilma, who’s currently watering a pot of geraniums. She turns when she sees us and waves.

“Good evening,” she calls out, setting her hose down to come greet us. She kisses my cheek and then does the same to Audrey. Danny is inspecting something in the grass—probably a bug.

“Your flannelbush is beautiful this year, Wilma,” I tell her, nodding to the sprawling ornamental tree in the center of her front yard. Its yellow flowers are vibrant, hanging off spindly branches.

The older woman smiles. “Not as nice as your magnolia. I was so sorry to hear what happened. The roads are full of maniacs!”

Audrey clears her throat. Her cheeks are red.

“No one got hurt,” I say, squeezing her hand. “It was an accident.”

Audrey asks Wilma about her garden, and the older lady is all too eager to give us a personal tour. I half-listen as Wilma talks, most of my attention on the curve of Audrey’s shoulders and the way she nods when she finds something interesting.

The sun dips, setting her skin aglow. A sense of peace settles over me, a feeling that wells up from somewhere deep and forgotten in the hidden chambers of my heart. As we walk away from Wilma’s house, the sky blazes with a beautiful sunset. We cross the street, pausing at the top of the hill to look at the view of the ocean.

Audrey’s hand is warm in mine. Her presence is a salve on my rough and calloused soul. She said this fling would last one month, but as we enjoy a moment of quiet solitude, I don’t think I’ll be able to let her go.

THE FOLLOWING WEEK, I find myself working on a Jeep that’s a regular visitor of the garage. I’m trying not to count down the minutes until I can call Audrey and tell her it’s time for our lunchtime visit. I’m half-hard just thinking about it. It took barely two weeks to train myself like Pavlov’s dog. Midday means sex with Audrey. It means tasting her kiss,



touching her body. It means one more hit of the drug she provides to see me through another lonely night.

Every day over the past two weeks has only served to stoke the fires between us. I'm desperate for her.

But before I can indulge in my favorite addiction, I hear a familiar booming voice.

"You ready to buy this place, or what?"

Jeff Owens is a tall, lanky man of about seventy. A career mechanic, he built this garage with the help of his wife as a bookkeeper and a steady stream of young apprentices, one of whom was me. With dark brown skin and sharp, near-black eyes, he's always cut a striking figure. His hair is gray now, but he has hardly any wrinkles and he moves like a man twenty years his junior. I started working for him when I was seventeen, and he taught me everything he knows about cars.

I stand up and shake his hand, grinning. "Hey, Jeff."

The older man gives my hand a couple hard pumps and slaps me on the shoulder. He cuts straight to the chase. "Rose and I are ready to retire for good. You buy this place now, or I put it on the market."

"You can't just spring this on me, Jeff."

"Spring it on you?" He guffaws. "Remy, I've been wanting to sell the auto shop to you for years. What's the problem? You've got the skills. You've got the customers. Shit or get off the pot, kid."

I was nearly ready to take that plunge...and then my sister was killed in a car wreck, and the trajectory of my life changed forever. She and her husband had life insurance, which helped with some of the expenses of suddenly having to care for a kid. But I had to change my entire life plan, and buying this garage no longer seemed like a priority.

But maybe that's an excuse. Danny and I are good, so what am I afraid of?

Is it possible that I've been using my responsibility for Danny to avoid taking any risks? Did my sister's death and my

divorce scare me that badly?

“Is it because you haven’t been able to find an apprentice? Get another mechanic, Remy. Hire someone to help you out. If this place is yours, you won’t have to run any decision by me ever again.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I grumble, stalling. I head over to wash my hands and then lead him to the office.

When Jeff whistles at the sight of the new office, I feel a burning flame of pride for Audrey.

“You’re already making the place your own,” Jeff says, smiling wide. “Name a price. Let’s do this.”

Fear grips me. If I own this place and I fail, I won’t be able to provide for Danny. I won’t be able to keep my promise to my sister.

I’ve learned over and over again in the course of my life that no one will be there for me when things get difficult. My wife walked away from me when I needed her most. My sister died. My parents cared more about their contentious, bitter marriage than they ever did about the well-being of their children.

I’ve been on my own for so long that I don’t even know what it means to have a safety net.

What if I buy this place and it becomes too much? What if I’m not good enough to handle it on my own?

An image pops into my head: Audrey, sitting across from my desk, hearing just how much it would cost to fix her van. Pure panic swept over her expression, and then she set her jaw. She straightened her spine. She took a deep breath, and she met my gaze.

She’s a woman who isn’t afraid to take life on. She wouldn’t hesitate to grasp this opportunity. After her divorce, she didn’t curl into a ball and barely survive; she built a business, a life.

Would she walk away from me if things got tough? Or would she prove that she’s exactly the woman I think she is?

I meet my mentor's gaze, and I nod. Then I tell him my price. I know exactly how much this business generates. I know how much Jeff wanted for it three years ago. At that time, I had pre-approval from the bank for a business loan, so I know roughly how much they'll let me borrow.

Pride shines in his eyes, and then Jeff nods. "I think we can make that work," he tells me. "I'll have the lawyer draw up the papers. You talk to the bank and get the money together."

My heart thumps. For three years, I've lived with Danny at the forefront of my mind. I've pushed aside every other priority. Career, companionship—it all got left behind.

Maybe that was a mistake. Maybe being a good parent is showing your kid how to go after what you want. It's putting your kids first while modeling what it truly means to live life to the fullest. Judging by the way Danny has taken to Audrey, maybe being a good parent could also include a loving relationship with a partner.

I stand, shake Jeff's hand, and walk him back out to his car. As long as the bank agrees, this garage will be mine.

As I stand in the midday sun, watching my old boss drive away, I let my lips curl into a smile.

Then I pull out my phone and dial Audrey. "I have good news," I tell her when she answers. "I think we should celebrate."

EIGHTEEN

# AUDREY

A SHELF STACKED with printer paper blurs in front of me. My legs feel wobbly as I stand in the office supply store, and I try to remember what it is I'm here to buy.

Instead, I'm thinking about what Remy did with his tongue. He wanted to celebrate his decision to purchase the garage, and we definitely lit some fireworks together.

When I looked in the mirror afterward, my hair was a mess and my cheeks were flushed. It's been nearly an hour since then, and I don't feel back to normal yet.

My phone buzzes. Remy.

*Thinking of you*, he writes.

A spark lights between my legs. *Me too*, I answer, unable to contain my smile.

*Danny has a sleepover at his friend's place on Friday*, he types. *We could do dinner. You could spend the night.*

My pulse speeds up. So far, Remy and I have had nothing more than a few stolen moments in the middle of the day. I've seen him some evenings in his yard, and he and Danny have come over for dinner twice more since the falafel night. But it's like we're living a double life. Daytimes are naughty, filthy fun. Nights are responsible and chaste.

To have so many hours with just the two of us would be... amazing. Intoxicating. Dangerous.

What if I wake up in his arms and decide I don't want it to end?

An entire night in Remy's bed. Hours upon hours upon hours to feel his skin against mine. It's a very bad idea, and I desperately want to do it.

"Audrey?"

Jerking out of my reverie, I turn to see my ex-husband at the end of the aisle. Terry is a broad-shouldered man who was very beautiful when I met him. Age seems to have hit him harder than I remembered. His skin is sun-damaged, his hair thinning. A paunch hangs over his belt buckle.

A month ago, I would've thought he looked like every other man my age. I would've told myself Terry was as good as it got for someone like me, a woman past her prime. Now I know better.

"Terry," I reply, tucking my phone into my purse. "How are you?"

My voice is steady. I wait for the pinch of pain, the bitterness, the hurt. For years, I found it hard to think of this man without my eyes tearing up. I'd worked so hard to be the perfect wife. I twisted myself into knots to make sure he was satisfied with me.

Why? For what purpose did I do that to myself?

As he approaches, his feet scuff the floor. That used to annoy me. He dragged his feet all the time. His shoulders are sloped as he slouches in front of me.

"I'm good," he tells me. "Better now that I see you. You look great, Audrey." My ex-husband's lips curl into that coy smile that first attracted me to him. He sticks his arms out to the sides and shakes his head. "Wow."

I feel nothing. No attraction. No bitterness. There's no overwhelming wave of grief at the thought of our marriage ending.

Then I realize there is an emotion coursing through me: *acceptance*.

We were married, and that relationship ended. It doesn't mean I was a failure of a wife. The time we spent together was

a chapter of my life that is now closed, and I'm ready to move on. Maybe I already have.

"Thank you," I tell him, and grab a ream of printer paper off the nearest shelf. "I've got to get back to the office," I say. "Have a good day."

"Wait, Audrey!"

I turn, glancing at my ex-husband.

"Caroline is still waiting on a quote for our kitchen and pantry reorganization." He ambles closer, arching his brows. "Can you do it?"

Two weeks ago, the thought of entering the home that my ex-husband shares with his new wife filled me with dread. Since then, a switch has flipped.

I've got to give it to Laurel, she was right about the whole a-fling-will-fix-everything thing. I feel like a whole new person.

In the short moment before I give Terry an answer, a few realizations hit me. I have no feelings for this man. I'm more confident than ever. I feel hopeful about the future for the first time in a long, long time. I'm able to break the chains of the anxiety masquerading as perfectionism and live a better life. I've delegated, and the sky didn't fall.

I want to turn my back on this man and walk away, but... why? If I feel nothing for him, what's the harm in taking his money? I *like* organizing homes. I love running my own business. What if this was just another job? I'd send my employees over, take his money, and move on with my life.

If I no longer have any feelings of grief and anxiety and bitterness toward him, there's nothing stopping me from booking him in and treating him like any other client. Well—maybe I could charge an extra adulterous ex-husband fee. Say, fifty percent on top of my normal costs.

My lips curl into a smile. "I think I can," I tell him. "I'll call Caroline and get the details so I can schedule a consultation."

“Great, great,” he says, sidling closer. “So, what have you been up to? You look great,” he repeats.

“I’ve been busy with the business, mostly,” I answer. “Excuse me, I really should get back.” I smile at him the way I’d smile at any other client, pay for my printer paper, and then walk out of the store.

The summer sunshine warms my skin, and I tilt my head to the sky. Then, buoyed by this new version of me, I pull out my phone and open the messages I’ve exchanged with Remy. He wants to spend the entire night with me, and I know exactly how to respond.

*Can’t wait*, I tell him. And it’s the truth.



NINETEEN

# AUDREY

ON THURSDAY, when I tell Laurel about my date for Friday, she drags me to a specialty lingerie shop two towns over. I get sweaty and frustrated in the changing room, but by the end of the excursion, I have a new set of red undergarments. The lace is utterly see-through, and the panties are crotchless. It's completely obscene.

The little bundle of lace sits in the luxurious paper bag from the lingerie shop as Laurel and I stop at a wine bar for a drink and a bite to eat. She makes me laugh, and by the end of the evening, I've convinced myself that red, lacy, crotchless, see-through undergarments are a completely reasonable thing to wear to one's first overnight appointment with one's fling. But I also have an extra glass of wine, so I'm giddy when Laurel drives us home.

The next day, I go through the motions of work, overseeing the jobs that are happening that day and checking the schedule for the next few weeks. I manage to call Caroline, Terry's new wife, and my voice remains professional for the entire conversation. We make an appointment for an in-person consultation so I can prepare her quote.

It feels good to take the job. Not in a vindictive way, and not because I need the money, but because if any other client called me for a full kitchen reorganization, I wouldn't turn them down. There's no spike of emotion; it's just business.

Remy doesn't contact me for a lunchtime quickie, which only cranks my nerves that much tighter. By the time the workday is done and I've showered and slipped on the

scandalous underwear set I bought yesterday, I'm jittery and nervous.

I'm spending the night with Remy Campbell, the world's hottest mechanic. I'll be at his mercy, in his bed. We won't have to rush to put our crumpled clothes back on to get back to work. We'll wake up next to each other for the first time.

This coming Sunday, we'll have two weeks left in our month-long fling. I've had sex with him more than a dozen times already, but tonight feels different. It feels like something is shifting.

As the minutes drag on, my nerves get worse. I call Laurel.

"What if this is a bad idea? I'm developing feelings for him, Laurel."

"Okay," she says, pragmatic as always. "Let's think this through. What's the worst-case scenario?"

"I fall for him, he rejects me, and my life falls apart."

"Mm-hmm," Laurel answers. "And is that likely?"

"The rejection part?" I bite my lip, thinking of the way Remy's gaze softens every time I open the front door. Or how he held me that day in his office, trembling, his arms clamped around me like he never wanted to let me go. "I'm not sure. I think he likes me, but he's been clear that his nephew is his priority. Plus, he's buying the garage. He probably doesn't have time for anything more than a fling."

"We don't know that," Laurel answers, "so there's no use spiraling. What about the other part? How likely is it that your life will fall apart as a result of his rejection?"

With a deep breath, I force myself to consider the worst. I remember the depths of my despair when Terry told me he wanted a divorce. He was the unfaithful one, and yet I was so tightly wound around his little finger that I was hurt when he showed me the divorce papers. I should have been furious, but I couldn't see through the pain.

But I persevered. I started a business. I bought a house. Yes, it has avocado-colored toilets, but it's all mine.

“No,” I finally answer. “My life wouldn’t fall apart. I’d get through it.”

“Good.” Laurel sounds proud. “I love you, Audrey. Now go have some filthy sex with your neighbor and stop overthinking this.”

Laughing, I thank her and hang up the phone. It takes me a while to figure out what to wear over these undergarments, but I settle on a fluttery wrap dress that’s red with small white flowers all over it. It’s summery and flirty, and it keeps the red of my bra from showing through.

The crotchless panties feel strange, but the thought of Remy seeing them convinces me to keep them on.

A few minutes later, the doorbell rings, setting my heart thumping.

Remy stands on my stoop wearing a white button-down paired with navy pants. His beard is trimmed and his hair is styled. When I hug him hello, I inhale the scent of cologne and Remy.

His hands coast down my sides. “You look beautiful,” he tells me, voice low.

Unlike my ex-husband, when Remy gives me that compliment, it warms me from head to toe. I smile, then grab my purse from the console table. “Where to?”

“How do you feel about Italian?”

“I feel good about Italian,” I tell him, smiling.

“Dolce Vita has a great wine list. Our reservation is in fifteen minutes, if you’re ready to go.”

I’m giddy and nervous as I lock my front door. It’s been so long since I’ve been on a date. I follow Remy down the path and whistle when I see the Audi parked in front of my house. “Where’s the truck?”

“Jeff told me I couldn’t take a pretty lady out to a nice dinner in a busted-up Chevy,” he says with a grin. “He loaned me one of his.”

“I like Jeff,” I tell him, slipping into the passenger seat. Remy closes the door and circles the car, and I take a deep breath to try to get my heartbeat under control. The car smells of leather until Remy comes in, and then it smells like leather and him.

I’ve seen this man naked. I’ve had sex with him countless times. I shouldn’t be this nervous about having dinner with him.

But as Remy drives to the restaurant, he sets his hand on my thigh, and I realize I’m nervous because this is a new kind of intimacy. Sex is intimate, but it’s also a shield. If I open the door, and then a minute later I find myself being ravaged by this man, I don’t have to think about my feelings at all. I can hide them behind lust and desire, pretending they don’t exist. Then he leaves, and I can tell myself my feelings are exaggerated by the post-orgasmic glow.

Now there will be no hiding. We’ll sit across from each other in a candlelit restaurant, and I’ll have no choice but to let him get to know the real me.

The alternative is telling him to turn the car around and sleeping in my own bed tonight, alone. And that’s no alternative at all.

“I’m not sure this is within the bounds of our fling,” I say as he parks in front of the restaurant, trying to keep my voice light.

Remy shuts off the engine and turns to face me. His eyes are dark in the fading light of the evening, and he reaches over to touch my cheek with the backs of his fingers. His gaze flicks between my eyes, and I sense him trying to read my thoughts. “Do you want me to take you home? Are you uncomfortable with this?”

All of a sudden, tension drains out of me. I smile and lean toward Remy, pressing my lips to his. “No,” I tell him. “Not even a little bit.”

He leads me inside the restaurant, where we’re met by a hostess who smiles and brings us to our table. The light is low

and romantic. The tables are covered in thick white tablecloths, with flickering candles in the center of each one. Couples murmur to each other at other tables, and low, delicate music thrums through the space.

I feel special and pretty and cherished. It's a new feeling, and I like it very much.

Remy orders the wine, a full-bodied Syrah that dances on my tongue and warms my belly. "Not too rich?" he asks, watching my reaction to my first sip.

I arch a brow. "You're a man of hidden talents, Remy. Mechanic, single dad, sommelier."

He laughs, a quick slash of white teeth against the shadowed angles of his face. His eyes are dark across the table, full of carnal promise.

I rub my thighs together. The ridiculous panties I'm wearing feel like no barrier at all.

After we've ordered, Remy reaches across the table and takes my hand in his. He brushes his thumb over my knuckles, back and forth.

"Thank you for having dinner with me, Audrey," he says quietly. "It's been a long time since I've wanted to take a woman out to a nice meal, but I couldn't think about anything else today."

"Me too," I admit.

"I tried to fill out the business loan paperwork for the garage and had to give up halfway through," Remy admits with a self-deprecating smile. "I was nervous you'd call me and cancel."

"I thought about it," I admit, and before I can stop myself, the truth falls out: "I was worried going out with you tonight would make it that much harder when our fling ends."

His hand squeezes mine. "Does it have to end?"

My answer gets stuck halfway up my throat. Our food arrives, saving me from my answer. I eat delicious chicken cacciatore and learn that Remy has a deep hatred of olives.

“My dad forced me to eat everything on my plate growing up,” he admits. “I threw up after eating a Greek salad once, and I haven’t been able to stomach olives since. Don’t even talk to me about feta cheese.”

I laugh into my glass of wine. “Good to know.” I tilt my head. “Was he very strict?”

“He was old-fashioned,” Remy tells me. “He wanted to be the head of the house, but he couldn’t hold down a job. So my mom had to work, and he resented her for it. They fought all the time.”

I think of my upbringing, the cold expectation of high achievement that was instilled in me from early childhood. I never saw my parents fight, but I grew up with constant tension in the home. “Did they stay together?”

“Until the bitter end,” Remy answers with a grimace. “They must have gained something from their explosive arguments. Maybe they were addicted to the loving period right after a fight, and they couldn’t see that it was temporary. My dad died young. Heart attack. My mom lived another five years, but she passed eight years ago.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“At least she got to meet Danny,” he says, then takes a sip of wine. “There’s that.”

Every day, I learn something new about Remy. He’s good with his hands. He’s smart. He’s hard-working. His heart is enormous, with an incredible capacity for love that evidently went unappreciated for most of his youth.

What would it feel like to be loved by him? To have the kind of devotion he shows toward Danny focused on me? Would I still feel like I wanted to be the perfect girlfriend, the perfect wife—or would I feel secure enough in the relationship to let that crutch fall away?

When I’m with Remy, I don’t feel like I have to be perfect in order for him to enjoy my company. After all, I met him by crashing into his beloved tree. Perfection was never on the table. As we share a candlelit meal, I realize that it feels good

to let go of that expectation. It's like stripping away a suit of armor, letting each piece crash to the ground in a clank of dented metal.

I let another fall and give him one more small piece of me. "My parents are still together. They were strict as well, but they didn't fight. They always told me education was the most important thing. For as long as I can remember, I knew that doing well in school was all that mattered. If I got a bad grade, they wouldn't raise their voices. I'd get cold silence and a few disappointed words."

"That sounds very isolating."

"It was. I started obsessing about doing well, and that led to me wanting to be perfect in other areas. By the time I met my ex-husband in college, I was convinced that the only way my life would work was if I had the stereotypical picture-perfect life. Husband. Kids. Career. The supermom who has it all."

"You never had kids?" Remy's voice is quiet.

An old, layered pain pulses deep inside me. I shake my head, and let the last of my armor fall away. "We tried. I couldn't conceive."

That was the biggest failure of all. I was the perfect wife with the perfect house and the perfect job that was flexible enough to suit my husband's needs—and my body didn't work as it was meant to.

Remy gulps, then reaches over and squeezes my hand. "I'm sorry."

I suck in a hard breath, then let it go all at once. Blinking, I stare at the man across the table from me. Those two little words, said with such deep empathy, are something that no other man has ever given to me. Terry pulled away when we tried and tried and tried and couldn't get pregnant. When I found out about his affair and confronted him, he said words I'll never forget: "Can you blame me for looking elsewhere when my wife is defective?"



Remy's thumb begins to stroke my knuckles again. He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't have to. I can see in his eyes that he feels the old pain pulsing in my veins, and he wants to take it away. I can sense in the gentle movement of his thumb over my skin that he cares about me more than he cares about my uterus.

Logically, I know I'm not defective. It's been over six years since Terry said that to me, but today is the first time I believe it when I tell myself he was wrong. I'm whole just as I am.

"Thank you," I say, throat tight.

"How do you folks feel about dessert?" the waitress says, cheery, reaching over to clear our plates. I spring away from Remy, pulling my hands back across the table.

I clear my throat and try to surreptitiously wipe my eyes. I'm about to say no, as usual, when Remy answers, "Doesn't hurt to have a look, does it?"

"Of course! I'll be right back with the menu." The waitress disappears with our plates.

Remy winks. "You look like you need something sweet. I hear the cannolis here are delicious."

I snort-laugh, using the thick cloth napkin on my lap to dab at my eyes. "Oh, twist my arm. Let's have dessert."

Remy smiles like he just won the lottery. We eat cannolis and then head into the cool, dark evening together, and Remy takes me home.

I'm no longer afraid. When he parks the car in his driveway, all I want to do is wrap my arms around this beautiful, loving, empathetic man. I want to give him all of me.

TWENTY

# REMY

WITH TREMBLING HANDS, I open the front door and lead Audrey inside. A dark, empty house greets me as my heart thumps unsteadily.

We turn to each other in the foyer, and I kiss her. I couldn't stop myself if I tried. Her cheeks feel soft beneath my fingers as I cup her face; her body melts into mine. Her lips are so soft I find myself unable to hurry. I want to savor the feel of her, the taste of her.

She whimpers sweetly, and that sound rings like a gong in my chest. *Mine*. The echo rattles my bones as I deepen the kiss, stroking her with my tongue, losing myself.

“Remy,” she whispers, and I shatter completely.

This can't be a fling. It can't be temporary. I want to hear her say my name like that for the rest of my days. I want to feel her warmth against my skin. I want to share my bed with her, share my life with her.

“Come upstairs,” I say.

We kick our shoes off before I tangle my fingers with hers. I spent hours cleaning and tidying today, trying to shed the nervous energy that pounded through me. Now we walk through the house and neither of us is paying attention to the vacuumed floors and sparkling bathrooms. All of my energy is focused on the feel of Audrey's palm against mine, the brush of her shoulder on my arm.

My bedroom waits at the end of the hall. Once inside, I turn to Audrey again and start where we left off.

Since the beginning of our fling, we've met like two clashing weather systems. It's been violent and rough and so, so good. Today, it's different.

I pick her up and lay her down across my bed. Her hair splays out around her head like a halo, and that gong rings in my chest again. This is how life is supposed to be. This is who I'm supposed to spend my time with. This is the woman I've been waiting to love.

I stumbled through the past few years in a haze of grief, duty, and parenthood. I told myself it was enough, but I was wrong. I was a blind man grasping for something I hadn't even realized was missing. Audrey gave me my sight back. She crashed into my life—and my tree—and woke me up from the slumber in which I'd been slowly dying.

*I love you.*

The words press against my lips, but I know I can't speak them out loud. She smiles at me, her full mouth curved so beautifully, and I want to tell her everything that's in my heart. I want her to know what she's done for me, realize how profoundly she's changed the course of my life. She makes my days brighter. She gives me a reason to keep going.

But I met her just over two weeks ago. We entered into this agreement knowing it would end. I have just over two weeks to convince her she's not done with me after all.

I lie down beside her and let my hands roam over her body. She turns toward me, arching against my chest, and runs her hand up my arm. Her lips are soft, sweet, and mine. I'm never letting her go.

"I have a surprise for you," she whispers, and her cheeks grow pink.

I pull away slightly, just far enough that I can meet her gaze. "What kind of surprise?"

A bite of her lip, and my cock is throbbing. My girl is sweet and sexy and so, so dirty. She reaches for the knot of fabric at her waist, unties it, and slowly peels it open. The red

fabric slips off the curves of her body, and I'm faced with the sight of my dream woman wrapped in red lace.

My mouth goes dry. "Wow," I rasp.

Her hands skim the cups of her bra, and I watch as her nipples begin to poke through the thin, transparent fabric. "What do you think?"

"I think I'm glad I didn't know you were wearing this until now; otherwise, we never would have made it to dinner."

Her smile is pure wickedness. Unable to resist, I bring my mouth to her breast and suck her pebbled nipple through her fabric. She gasps, digging her fingers into my hair as she arches into me. My hands are everywhere. I can't stop squeezing and stroking and shaping. Her tits are perfect. I spend some time lavishing the red lace with attention as Audrey gasps and writhes beneath me. I'm so hard I can't think straight.

All the chivalrous, tender thoughts that had manacled me earlier begin to dissolve. Now there's nothing but lace and skin and Audrey.

I need her.

But when I reach for the little string holding her panties on her hips, she puts her hand on mine.

"Wait," she gasps as she spreads her knees slightly. Her hand guides mine to where I know she needs me—and I freeze. "They're crotchless," she says in a small voice, blinking at me. "I bought them yesterday."

I must stay immobile for a long time while I process the fact that my dream woman is wearing crotchless red lace panties that she bought to wear for me, because Audrey shifts.

"Remy?" she asks, voice uncertain. "Is that okay? I can take them off if you prefer—"

That's when I pounce.

TWENTY-ONE

# AUDREY

REMY JUMPS off the bed so fast I let out a gasping giggle, scrabbling to stay on top of the covers. He rips his shirt off—just literally grabs the opening between two buttons and tears the garment open in one swift movement—and then goes to work on his belt.

I sit up to take the sleeves of my wrap dress off, but Remy growls, “Don’t you dare move, Audrey,” so I fall back and watch him strip.

He’s hard. He grabs his cock with his fist and pumps once, his eyes dark as he watches me. His chest heaves as he sucks in a hard breath, and he shakes his head. “What are you doing to me?”

“Right now I’m just lying here,” I note, then squeal when he grabs my thighs and tugs me to the edge of the bed. His hand finds the opening in my panties, and a moment later his fingers are inside me. I gasp, arching into the touch.

Remy swears. The word gets bitten off, his voice so harsh I barely understand it. Then he drops my legs and rips open the nightstand drawer. A moment later he’s lifting my ankles onto his shoulders and sliding a condom over his steel-hard shaft.

His muscles are stark. I can see the pulse thrumming in his neck as he stands before me, and the sight of this big, powerful man coming apart at the seams is the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.

I did this. I turned him on so much his hands tremble. I made his eyes go dark with desire. Me.

When he's sheathed and prodding at my entrance, my ankles still resting on his shoulders, he wraps his arms around my thighs and meets my gaze. "I'm not going let you go, Audrey," he vows—and then he drives himself home.

I cry out, suddenly stretched and full of him. Pleasure floods me in a flash. From one moment to the next, I lose my mind entirely.

"You think you can come here, wearing this"—he tugs at my panties while still thrusting into me—"and I'm going to let you walk away after a month with me?"

I smile at the possessiveness in his tone. It's harsh and hot and makes me want to explode. "A month was our agreement," I tease, breathless, and I'm not sure if I'm saying it to remind him or me or just to see how he'll react.

He curves his body over mine, spreading my legs so my knees are cradled in his elbows. His thrusts slow until he's stripping away my sanity with every deep, unrelenting roll of his hips. "Audrey," he rasps.

I curl my fingers into his bedding. "Mm?"

"A month won't be enough to get you out of my system. An entire lifetime wouldn't be enough to accomplish that."

My head spins. Every fiber of Remy's being is intent on me—on my pleasure. His hands keep my legs spread. His cock drives into me, unrelenting. Maybe it's the sheer overwhelming nature of his attention that makes his words hit me so hard.

He wants a lifetime with me.

And while we're like this, tangled in each other, alone in the world for at least one night, I discover the idea of a lifetime with Remy doesn't scare me at all. I reach for him, and he lets my legs drop so we can wrap our arms around each other. Suddenly, the moment is more intense than any sex we've had before. His stubble abrades my skin as he kisses my jaw. His chest hair rasps against my bra, my breasts. I let my hands roam all over his hot, hard skin as my legs wrap around his hips to accept every inch of him.



A shift happens within me. This is no longer about scratching an itch. It's not about a fling to clear my head for a month. Now, it's about Remy. It's about this kind, loving, beautiful man that sets my body alight. He kisses me, long and deep, and I cling to him with every bit of my strength.

My heart unfurls like a flower opening its petals, and suddenly I'm terrified of what this man could do to me. We're not having sex anymore; we're making love.

"Audrey," he says, voice deep and gravelly. "You feel so good, sweetheart. I'm losing my mind."

"That makes two of us," I gasp, and then he's pulling out and I'm being flipped onto my stomach. My head is near the pillows, and I feel Remy's hands on my waist.

He groans as he traces my sides, his palms stroking all the way down to the panties still hugging my hips. His fingers run down the opening along the center of the panties, and my hips arch up to meet his touch.

"My dirty girl," he grates, hand coasting down between my legs, stroking down to where I'm wettest and back up between my ass cheeks. I jerk when his fingers run over my rear.

"Inside," I pant. "Want you inside me."

"Patience," he admonishes. I moan as he strokes my hole, so he asks, "You like when I touch your ass?"

"Yes," I repeat, the word fading out on the end of a breath.

"Want me to keep going?"

My cheeks smart, fingers curling into the blanket. "Yes."

"Spread your legs, beautiful."

I comply, and I feel the bed shift as Remy kneels between my legs. He stretches to reach for the nightstand again. I hear the pop of a cap, and then his fingers are on me again—and they're cold. My inhalation turns into a moan as he rubs, his fingers sliding with ease. "Is this okay?" Remy asks, voice gentle.

I make an unintelligible noise, my face stuffed in the pillow. His fingers are sliding up and down my cleft, and it feels so good I can't make words.

“Audrey,” he says. “I need you to talk to me. Is this okay?”

“Yes,” I pant.

“Good girl,” he says, voice low. “My dirty, beautiful, good girl.”

One hand reaches between us, down to my clit, and the other focuses behind. I realize I'm undulating on the bed in response to his touch when Remy lets out a long, low groan.

I've never felt this out of my mind before, and I don't know if it's the sex or everything that came before. My feelings for Remy have grown so quickly that I can hardly make sense of them. I feel safe with him, comfortable. He makes me want to let go of the white-knuckled grip I keep on my control. He makes me forget to overthink.

With his hands stroking me all over, all I can think about is how good it feels to be in bed with him and how I don't want this moment to end.

“You look so good like this,” he tells me. “You have no idea, Audrey.”

Pride and lust and a bit of embarrassment tangle in my breast. An orgasm starts to build below my navel. It rushes at me, so fast I can barely breathe.

“Remy,” I pant. “I've never—”

“Never what,” he says, voice low.

“Never done...this...”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No.” The word comes out embarrassingly fast. “I want...”

“Want what?”

There's only one word I can respond to that: “More.”

Remy lets out a trembling breath—and then eases a finger in my rear. It feels strange, but it makes sparks go off in my blood. I make a noise I’ve never made before—something between a grunt and a moan—and Remy begins to thrust his finger into me before adding another.

“Please,” I say, and it sounds like a whine. I don’t even know what I’m asking for.

But his movements redouble, stretching me while his other hand works my bud, and suddenly, without warning, I’m climaxing. Remy swears behind me, his voice guttural, his breaths coming out harsh. I rock into his touch, needing more, needing to ride this feeling out until it tears me apart.

Then I’m being shifted higher, my hips angling up, and with his fingers still thrusting into my ass, I feel Remy’s cock at my entrance.

“Tell me if this is too much, Audrey,” he says, prodding at me.

“Nmmffg,” I respond.

“Need your words, beautiful,” he pants, hips moving in small jerks. He’s beginning to lose control, and I’ve never been so turned on in my life. My orgasm is winding down, but my body is keyed up.

I know exactly what I want. It’s the same thing I’ve needed from him from the very first moment: “Need you inside me.”

When Remy enters me in one swift thrust, a second orgasm blasts me into the stratosphere. I cry out, and then my vision goes white.

I barely hear Remy’s rasping voice through the sheer violence of my pleasure. “My girl likes having both holes filled,” he says, and another wave of lust crashes into me. “Filthy, dirty girl. You’re so perfect. You’re so fucking perfect I can’t stand it, Audrey. You have no idea how good you feel. Look at you.”

I’m boneless, limp, gripping onto the blankets with the last scraps of my strength. Just when I think I can’t take anymore, Remy pulls his fingers out of me and grips my hips with both

hands. He yells my name through clenched teeth, thrusting into me with a few powerful jerks of his hips.

I feel it when he finishes. It makes a warm, gentle kind of pleasure spread through my whole body, and then I'm collapsing on the blanket, completely spent.

My consciousness is hazy for a minute or two. I feel Remy get up and hear some water run. A moment later, he sits on the bed beside me.

"I have a washcloth," he says quietly. "It's warm."

I shift to grab it, but Remy eases me onto my stomach and slowly peels my red panties down my legs. He cleans the lube and fluids off my skin, then tosses the washcloth into the ensuite bathroom. It lands on the tile floor, but he makes no move to pick it up. Instead, he lies down beside me and curls his arms around me, shifting my body so my head rests on his chest.

Dazed, exhausted, and thoroughly sated, I run my fingers through his chest hair and let out a long breath. "I've never done that before," I admit.

Remy's arms tighten around me. "Did you like it?"

I know I'm blushing, so I keep my head on his chest and nod. "Yes."

His touch is gentle as he tilts my chin up. Then Remy kisses me, and it's nothing like any of our previous embraces. He brushes his lips against mine, barely touching, then only very slightly deepens the kiss until I'm softening against his body and curling my hand around the side of his neck.

This kiss feels like a promise, like the start of something new. Before I drift off to sleep, an errant thought skitters through my mind.

*I'm already in too deep.*

TWENTY-TWO

# AUDREY

WE DON'T GET much sleep. Twice in the night, we wake up and find ourselves needy for each other. Sex doesn't reach the fever pitch it did last night, though, instead turning languid and tender. A few times, I wonder if I'm making a mistake by letting this man past all my defenses. I worry that by making love with him like this, I'm setting myself up for disaster.

But it's impossible to feel unsafe with Remy. He is so focused on my needs, so attentive and careful. He treats me like I'm precious, and I can't bring myself to push him away.

I've never felt this kind of closeness with anyone. I realize that when we opened up to each other last night, it laid down the foundations of a deeper intimacy between us. Now, even just a few hours later, we're already reaping the rewards.

He can sense when I'm close to orgasm. He can tease every ounce of pleasure out of me. He can make me feel loved and safe and cherished.

By the time the sun comes up, my armor has been completely stripped away. My walls have been obliterated.

"Morning," he whispers, his arms wrapped around me.

I sigh into his warmth, letting my fingers drift over the warmth of his skin. "Morning."

"How do you feel?"

A small, secret smile tugs at my lips. His first thought this morning isn't sex or breakfast or himself. His first thought is me.

“I like waking up next to you,” I admit, then clamp my lips shut because I feel like I’ve shared too much. No matter what last night was like for me, it doesn’t mean anything has changed.

But Remy squeezes me close, a sigh ruffling my hair. “Me too, sweetheart.”

We shower together and do all the fun things that happen when two people who are in the first phase of a chemistry-filled relationship shower together. Then we clean off the evidence, make coffee, and drink it outside while Remy gives me a tour of his plants.

I listen to him rattle off Latin names, explaining why he planted a certain variety in a certain location, telling me that this plant repels pests and that plant should be flowering soon. He picks a bright red strawberry off his plant and hands it to me, watching my reaction while I eat it and smiling when I tell him it’s delicious.

Halfway through my cup of coffee, we enter the greenhouse. My eyes drift to the bench where we first became intimate, and my blood begins to heat.

Remy has other ideas. He begins to explain the process of soil blocking with the same focused intensity he used to make love to me. I inspect the metal contraption used to make soil blocks, little squares of soil that are used to start seedlings, and watch Remy’s face light up as he explains exactly how it works.

“The first few times I tried it, the soil blocks just disintegrated. I almost gave up, but I was sick of using the plastic trays, and I lost a bunch of seedlings when I tried to transplant them.” He glances at me, earnest and passionate. “Soil blocking leads to a healthier root system and it makes it easier to transplant, so I really wanted to figure it out. But the next time I tried, I lost ninety percent of my soil blocks because when they were moist enough to stay together, they grew mold.”

He snorts, shaking his head, and inspects one of the millions of little plants he’s got neatly aligned on one of the

tables. As I watch him, an old, forgotten hardness in my chest begins to dissolve. I should probably be listening to whatever he's trying to teach me about seedlings, but all I can do is stare at the way he moves, sure and competent. He grabs a hose and starts misting water over all his plants.

I sip my coffee and stare.

He's so focused on his task that he doesn't realize how attractive he is. I don't care about any of this stuff. Gardening isn't sexy. It's just...this big, burly, tattooed mechanic who can give me the most powerful orgasms of my life is a huge plant nerd who laments the overgrowth of mold on his little cubes of dirt.

I'm falling for this man. It hits me like a slap across the face.

I'm falling in love with Remy—not because we have chemistry. Not because of the sex. Not because he makes me want to explore physical intimacy in ways I've never experienced before.

No, I'm falling for him because he taught himself how to garden and he cares for his plants with a gentleness I never would've expected. And because he has that same patient, caring quality with Danny, a little boy he didn't have to take in but did. I'm falling for him because he's given me the tiniest speck of that kind of attention, and I want to give it back to him tenfold.

Life would be so good if we were together. For a moment, as I grip my mug and watch him work, I allow myself to believe that I deserve all this and more. I deserve a man who treats me like a queen, who has interests and passions of his own, who has an immense capacity to love and care for the people around him.

Then he shuts off the hose and puts it away, and I snap out of my drifting thoughts.

No matter what he said in the heat of the moment, it doesn't change the facts: we agreed to one month. Not only that, but Remy told me, clear as day, that his nephew came



first. He told me he didn't do relationships because Danny had to be his priority.

And besides that, I have a business. I have a life. It takes every drop of my focus to attend to the millions of tasks I need to complete in order to keep my business afloat.

I agreed to this fling because I needed a break from real life—but that doesn't mean real life went away. This fling is designed to have an end date, because that's the only way things work out between us.

There's no use fantasizing about things that can never be.

"Hungry?" Remy asks, opening the greenhouse door for me.

A waft of cool air washes over my skin. I nod, trying to hide the sadness creeping up my throat. "Yes," I say. "I could use some food."

His grin is sinful. "I wonder why that is," he muses. "Did you do any vigorous activity last night?"

Laughing, I follow him inside. We have breakfast, and then we do some more vigorous activity.

Then, finally, it's time for him to go pick up his nephew and for me to go home. When he kisses me goodbye, we cling to each other as if it's the last time we'll see each other. Then he pulls back and presses a chaste kiss to my forehead.

"I'll call you later," he promises, and then he leaves to return to the real world.

I close my front door, lean against it, and begin to cry.

REMY and Danny come over for dinner on Sunday. I hear all about Danny's sleepover while I feed the two of them, and for an hour or two, I feel complete. Remy squeezes my hand before walking across to his place for the night.

It's sick how much I miss him when he's gone. I spent one single night with him, and now I feel like I won't survive in my bed alone.

But ten minutes after they leave, my doorbell rings. I open it and am immediately crowded against the entryway wall. Remy kisses me hard, then leans his forehead against mine. “Sorry,” he says, breathless. “Just needed to kiss you.”

My heart pounds as I cling to him. “Uh-huh.”

“I have to go back.”

“Okay,” I say, and then we kiss some more.

When he leaves, I find myself smiling about nothing at all.

But Monday rolls around, and work sweeps me up in its whirlwind. A call from Terry’s wife, Caroline, surprises me. She has to reschedule our consultation because she has an appointment at our original agreed-upon time. On a whim, I agree to a consultation that very day to see about their kitchen reorganization.

I’m not sure exactly why I agree. I think it has to do with seeing Terry and feeling nothing for him. On top of that, I feel oddly jittery and nervous about Remy showing up for our usual noontime screw. As much as I want Remy’s company, it doesn’t feel so good to think about him coming over for a quickie when we have a free half hour at lunchtime. After the night we spent together, going back to a sexy fling makes me feel oddly nauseous.

I want more. Even though I don’t deserve it. Even though I can’t have it.

So, when Remy calls me to ask if I’m free, I tell him that I can’t meet up today. I have a client meeting.

“That’s too bad,” he says. “Let me know if you’re free this afternoon. I miss you.”

My heartstrings give a violent jerk. I nod, even though he can’t see me. “Sure,” I say, then I hang up and go meet my ex-husband’s new wife.

CAROLINE IS a beautiful woman in her early thirties. She greets me at the door with a wide smile, as if we’re old friends

and not on two sides of the same scumbag man. She's wearing a glamorous yet casual diaphanous dress that flutters gently around her calves. I almost turn around and leave again, but I remember the medical bills and the money I owe Remy for the van, so I square my shoulders and exchange a few pleasantries before getting down to business.

"Let's have a look at your kitchen," I say, matching her smile with one of my own. "Once I know what the job entails, I can get you scheduled in with one of our teams."

"Fantastic," Caroline says, sweeping down the hallway while I scurry after her.

As part of the divorce settlement, Terry and I sold the house we shared and split the profits. I used my share to start my business. By the looks of it, Terry used his to upgrade his home.

A twinge pinches my heart as we walk into the open-plan kitchen/living area. On the opposite wall is a big painting of a New England fishing town Terry and I visited on one of the first trips we took together after we got married. He bought that painting from an up-and-coming artist. It used to hang in our foyer.

There's a magnetic strip on the kitchen wall, and I recognize the big chef's knife as Terry's.

I shouldn't have come here.

Seeing Terry in person made me feel nothing, but seeing the remnants of the home we shared is an assault on my psyche. The ghosts of the dreams I had for us haunt these items.

It's not that I want that life back, nor do I want the man. But being his wife was a big part of my identity for the decade we were married. I tried so hard to be exactly what he needed me to be, and I failed.

My emotions aren't rational, but I can't change them.

"Here we are," Caroline says, indicating the kitchen with a sweep of her hand. The fabric of her sleeve trails below her

wrist, lending more drama to the movement. “The room is big and bright, but I can never keep it tidy.”

I unlock my jaws. “I can help you with that,” I tell her, my words on autopilot. “Tidying is mostly about having a system that works.”

“I’ve watched so many of your videos,” she says, opening the pantry to show me her work. “I tried getting these shelf organizers and a spice rack, but things never seem to get replaced back where they go.”

*I wonder if that has anything to do with the useless worm of a man you married, I think uncharitably.*

Instead of voicing that thought out loud, I smile. “Did you want the full kitchen and pantry reorganization?”

“Oh, yes, please,” Caroline says.

She’s sunny and friendly, and it’s hard to dislike her. When I discovered the affair, I also discovered that Terry had told her our marriage was all but over. She’d thought we were sleeping in separate rooms, which wasn’t true, and that we were just waiting on financial matters to divorce legally. Why she stayed with him after discovering he’d told her so many lies, I have no idea. Spending a bit of time with her now, I start to feel a little bit sorry for her. The bulk of my anger was aimed at my ex-husband, but I’d kept a shred of rancor for her. Maybe it’s time to let that go.

The tension gripping my body eases as we walk around the kitchen. She tells me how she uses the space as I make notes. I open every cupboard and jot down ideas for changes. Meg is assisting on a big garage reorganization, so I’m on my own today. It reminds me of the first year of my business, when I did everything myself. Before long, I’m lost in ideas and suggestions and notes. At the end of the day, I love my job.

Then the front door opens.

“Honey! I’m home!” Terry’s voice booms through the foyer and down to where we are. I stiffen. He used to say the same thing to me.

Caroline straightens, a soft smile on her lips. “In here, babe! We’re looking at the kitchen.”

“Who’s ‘we?’” A second after the question reaches us, Terry appears in the mouth of the hallway. His eyes meet mine, something like surprise flitting through them. “Oh! Audrey! I wasn’t expecting you here so soon.”

“There was a break in my schedule,” I explain, then straighten my notes by tapping my stack of papers on the counter. My heart begins to thump a bit harder as I focus on keeping my face nice and neutral. “We’re nearly done with the consultation, though. Caroline was very helpful.”

“That she is,” Terry says, crossing the kitchen to kiss his wife.

I avert my eyes. I’ve never felt so awkward in my life. Why did I come here? What’s wrong with me? I actually thought this would be like any other job? I thought this would give me *closure*?

All these recent orgasms must have melted my brain. I should have listened to Laurel when she first threw the block of cheddar at my head.

The need to get out rises in me so fast, it feels like panic clawing at my throat. I turn to the happy couple—and see Terry rubbing Caroline’s abdomen while she smiles beatifically.

I turn to stone.

Terry looks up at me, something sharp in his eyes as he studies my reaction. “Did Caroline tell you the good news?”

My body belongs to someone else. I hear my voice ask, “What news?”

“Seventeen weeks along,” Caroline explains, cradling the small bump that had been hidden by the loose fabric of her dress.

A vice clamps around my throat. My ex-husband called me defective, traded me in for a younger model, and finally got the perfect family he always wanted.

Now he's rubbing my nose in it.

Why—*why on earth*—did I come here? Why did I put myself in this position? Why did I open up the locked box where I'd stuffed the past?

"Congratulations," says the disembodied voice that belongs to me. "That's fantastic."

"We decided to try at the beginning of the year, and two months later—" Caroline beams at Terry, who leans over to kiss her temple. She laughs, shaking her head, cocooned in her own glowing happiness. "I never thought it would happen so soon. I'm not sure I'm ready!"

I want to barf.

We tried for seven years. Countless pregnancy tests, stared at for long, agonizing minutes while hope blossomed and soured into countless disappointments. Every menstrual cycle brought with it a new wave of grief.

I thought I'd accepted the fact that I'd never have children, but seeing my ex-husband with his pregnant wife is a punch in the gut I hadn't anticipated.

"I should get started on this quote," I tell the happy couple, waving my papers around. "I'll be in touch."

I won't be in touch. I'll come up with some excuse—anything to avoid ever coming face-to-face with these people again. This is the worst idea I've had in a long, long time.

Halfway to my van, I hear my name. Terry comes jogging down the flagstone path toward me. "Audrey, wait." He huffs to a stop a few feet away. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I lie.

He arches a brow, seeing right through the words. "Audrey. Come on. We were married for a decade. I know what 'I'm fine' really means."

Shock and grief morph to righteous anger. His tone is too familiar, with an edge of fondness that he has no right to use. I straighten my spine. "I need to get back to work, Terry.

Congratulations on the baby. Truly. I know how much you wanted a family.”

*And how I was never able to give it to you.*

“Audrey, don’t be upset.” He inches closer, his voice dropping.

I open the driver’s side door, suddenly exhausted. “I’m not upset, Terry. I wish you the best. Now I need to get back to work.”

“I wasn’t lying, you know,” he tells me, catching the edge of the door before I can close it. “You do look great.”

What? Confused, overwhelmed, and needing to escape, I say, “Thank you,” in a flat voice. “If you could let go of my door, I’d appreciate it. I have to get back to work.”

“We never talk anymore.”

I frown. “Terry, we’re divorced. Why in the world would I talk to you?”

His face softens. “It’s just... I’ve missed you.”

Words are not computing in my brain. Frowning at my ex-husband, who still hasn’t let go of the door, I shake my head. “What?”

“Maybe we could have dinner sometime. Or just grab a drink and catch up. You used to love going to cocktail bars with me, remember? I could get an old fashioned, you could get a mojito.”

“Terry, I’m never going to reminisce about the good old days with you. Ever.”

He laughs, as if I’m joking, and angles his body closer.

“Let go of the door, please. I have to go.”

“Audrey, come on. You can’t be serious. You just wiggled into my house wearing *that*—”

I look down at my leggings and loose Organizing Goddess-branded tee, frowning.

“—and tell me you weren’t trying to make me jealous.”

There's a beat of silence between us while I try to process the words that just came out of his lying mouth. "I think you might actually be delusional," I tell him. "Clinically, I mean."

Another grating laugh. "Come on, Audrey. One last time. For old time's sake."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Terry licks his lips, and a little bit of vomit rises up my throat. "We were good together."

"If you don't take your hand off my door, I'm going to smash your fingers." Blinking, I stare at him until he uncurls his fingers from the car door. Once I've closed it, we meet each other's gaze through the window.

Then I turn my head to face forward and I drive away.



TWENTY-THREE

# AUDREY

SELF-MEDICATION ISN'T a good solution to soul wounds, but it's the only option I have at the moment. Wine glugs out of a bottle and into my glass, and I stare at the ruby liquid. Then I spin around, stomp upstairs, jump in the shower, and try to scrub the oily feeling from my skin.

My ex-husband just propositioned me. My ex-husband who married his affair partner and who is now expecting a child with her just propositioned me, after he tried to get me to work for him.

What in the world—

My loofah is going to rub my skin raw if I don't stop scrubbing. I set it aside and stand under the stream, tilting my head up to the showerhead. I open my mouth, swish, then spit out the water, but I still feel like I'm about to throw up.

I can't believe I went over there. I can't believe I thought I could take their money for that job, and it would be a good idea. I should never have even entertained the idea, no matter how little I thought I felt for my ex-husband.

I certainly feel something now—a heaping mound of revulsion.

I get out of the shower and pull out every skincare product I own. My face gets cleansed, tretinoined, serumed, misted, and moisturized. I tap some oil all over my face and neck, then start on my hair.

By the time it's dried into my best approximation of a blowout, I'm calmer.

I can't believe that just happened. When I get downstairs, after having thoroughly pampered myself in an attempt to scrub the last couple of hours from my memory, I see my forgotten glass of wine. Lovely. I dump half of it down my gullet and am about to start on the remaining half when the doorbell interrupts my pity party.

I consider ignoring it, but it could be Laurel, sniffing out my desire to eat cheese with her uncanny ability to sense my despair. She won't go away; she'll just keep ringing the doorbell until she has to break a window to get inside. It'll be cheaper to let her in the front door.

Maybe, through her weird telepathic abilities, she'll know that Terry tried it on with me. She's probably on my stoop with a pitchfork right now.

But when I pull the door open, it's not Laurel standing on the stoop. It's Remy, with his hand on Danny's shoulder. Danny has a shoebox in his hands.

I hold the door open with my shoulder, mind reeling. "Hi."

Remy's gaze circles my face. "Everything okay?"

I nod. "Uh-huh!"

"I brought you these," Danny says, thrusting the box toward me with the same gusto with which I presented Remy with my pecan pie. "They're from last year."

"We were cleaning out Danny's room, and we found them," Remy explains. "He thought you'd like them."

Danny takes the lid off, and I peer inside to see pressed flowers lining the bottom. "You have that painting in the kitchen with the flowers," Danny explains.

My eyes fill with tears, which is possibly the most embarrassing reaction I could have had to a kid bringing me flowers. "Thank you," I say, throat tight. "That's so thoughtful of you. Come in."

"Remy showed me how to do it last year. We put the flowers in Mom's old dictionary and then put a big heavy plant pot on top. And then they turned into this!"

“They’re beautiful.”

“We were going to get a frame to put them in, but Danny thought you might enjoy arranging them yourself,” Remy explains. As we walk toward my kitchen, his hand slides down my spine to rest on my lower back. He leans in and adds quietly, “Say the word and we’ll leave. I should have called ahead.”

Suddenly, all my anxiety vanishes. As usual, Remy is thoughtful and in tune with me. The contrast with my ex-husband couldn’t be more stark, and the last of the oily film on my skin sluices off. I glance up at him and smile, shaking my head. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Bad day?”

“Better now.”

He grins at me, and he’s so handsome I can hardly stand it. Old memories tear apart and drift away, and I walk into a sun-drenched kitchen with a gorgeous man at my side and the thoughtful boy who brought me flowers.

Remy’s hand drops off my back as we approach the dining table. Danny is carefully taking out the flowers and laying them down on the table.

“This is a pansy,” he tells me. “This is foxglove. Foxglove is really good for attracting hummingbirds because they like the shape of the flower, but it’s really toxic to humans.”

“You know a lot about flowers.”

“Remy taught me. Some boys at school made fun of me when I did a Show and Tell about plants, but then Sarah C came up to me after and said she liked what I said and asked if I could help her choose some flowers to give to her mom for Mother’s Day. And Sarah C is the prettiest girl in my whole grade, so no one made fun of me after. There are four Sarahs in my grade and Sarah C is the nicest. Maybe next year she’ll be in my class.” Danny places another flower down on the table and surveys his handiwork with his hands on his hips. Then he glances at me. “Do you like them?”

My heart is nearly too big to fit inside my ribcage. “I love them, Danny.”

He smiles. “It’s a thank you for the brownies and the pie and for dinner. Do you have any brownies today?”

Laughing, I meet Remy’s gaze. He rolls his eyes and says, “You’re shameless, kid.”

“I can whip something up for you,” I promise. “But let me find some way to display these flowers.”

Leaving the two boys, I head to the garage and rip open one of the boxes I haven’t gotten around to unpacking. Truth be told, I haven’t unpacked it since I got divorced and left our marital home. I open the old cardboard flaps and take out a large frame of brushed gold. The mat inside is rich cream with more gold edging, framing a photo of my wedding day. In it, I smile at Terry, head over heels in love, our arms wrapped around each other, the rest of our lives ahead of us and full of possibilities.

What a fool I turned out to be.

With a few quick movements, I unclip the back of the frame, pull out the photo, and slide it back into the box. Then I take the empty frame and head back to the kitchen.

“I found this,” I tell Danny, flipping the frame over so he can see the front.

“Oh, wow! Nice!”

Being an organized lady, I have an abundance of stationery and craft supplies. I find some glue and a nice thick piece of paper, and we spend the next half hour arranging the flowers and gluing them down. While they dry, I start cooking dinner. The bottle of wine I’d opened to drown out my sadness gets split between two glasses. Danny and Remy play sous-chefs for me, and I end up deciding to make a nice spread with steaks, creamy mashed potatoes, peppercorn sauce, and a fresh summer salad.

While the potatoes boil, I whip up some brownies (at Danny’s request) and stick them in the oven. I let him lick the spatula while Remy grins at the two of us. That smile banishes

the last of the darkness from my mood, and I beam at him in response.

By the time the potatoes are done, the glue on the flowers has dried. We put them in the frame and admire our work. I clear off some decorative items on the mantel in the living room and rest the frame against the chimney.

“What do you think?” I ask Danny.

He nods. “I like it.”

“I do too,” I tell him. “I’ll have to figure out a way to hang it on the brick.”

“I’ll come by tomorrow with my drill,” Remy offers, sliding his hand around my shoulders.

I smile at him, then rest my head on his shoulder. The pieces of my heart that had splintered earlier today have shifted back into place. A thin thread winds through the wounds, knitting them shut. Maybe there’s a second chance for me in this life. Maybe I can have a job I love, a man who drives me wild, and a little boy who cares enough to give me the flowers he’s been drying for a year.

Maybe I can have it all.

By the time dinner is served, I’m breathing easier than I was this morning. We eat, clean up, and then I say goodbye to the boys. Remy squeezes my hand at the door, his eyes dark. I wish he didn’t have to leave.

“Can I stop by later tonight, once he’s in bed? Finish that bottle of wine? I won’t be able to stay long while Danny’s alone in the house, but we could talk about what put that look on your face earlier.”

My heart melts for this man, and I nod. “I’d like that.”

So, a couple of hours later, the doorbell rings again. Remy comes inside and wraps his arms around me. He kisses me softly, tenderly, like he’s missed me in the short time we’ve been apart. I can’t blame him; I have too.

“Been wanting to do that all day,” he says, confirming my thoughts.

“Me too,” I admit. And if I hadn’t been too scared to accept his call earlier, I could have enjoyed his kisses instead of facing my ex-husband and his pregnant wife.

“You going to tell me what put those shadows in your eyes, or do I have to kiss those secrets out of you?” His thumb strokes my jaw.

“Option two doesn’t seem so bad.”

Remy chuckles, obliging, and kisses me long and deep. Then he pulls away and wraps his arms around me, squeezing tight. “Bad day?”

“How can you tell?”

“I know you, Audrey.” He says the words quietly, with deep conviction. They ring through me like a bell, and I realize he’s right. We’ve known each other less than a month, but this man understands me in a way that I hadn’t thought possible. He respects me. He didn’t come back here tonight because he wanted sex; he came back because he could tell something was bothering me, even though I tried my best to hide it. He’s here to offer support, without asking for anything in return.

It’s hard to resist that kind of temptation. I haven’t felt the comfort of companionship since before my divorce was finalized. I’m not sure that I ever felt supported by Terry—not like this.

So, I tell him about my appointment with Caroline. I tell him about Terry’s arrival, and how I found out that they were expecting. We sit on the living room couch and finish the bottle of wine, and Remy keeps his arm across my shoulders as I tell him everything I felt while I stood in their kitchen and grieved the life I never got to live.

“I don’t even want him,” I say. “I’m glad we got divorced. We were wrong for each other. But dealing with infertility was such a huge blow, and I guess I never really got over it.”

“It’s not really the type of thing you get over, I think,” Remy says, his fingers making small circles on my arm, just below the sleeve of my T-shirt.

“No,” I agree.

Remy tugs me closer, and I fall against his chest with my head resting against the side of his neck. We stay like that for a long time, mostly silent. Then I tilt my head and kiss him because I have no words to express how much his presence means to me.

Unbidden, the thought of Terry at my car door pops into my head. My teeth grind.

“What is it?” Remy asks, gaze flicking between my eyes.

I sigh. I might as well say. I’ve already bared my soul to him. “Terry made a pass at me.”

Remy’s body goes rock hard. His jaw clenches, eyes turning intent. With what looks like a great effort of will, he loosens the hand that had gripped my shoulder a little too hard. “Did he,” he grits out.

I nod. “I threatened to smash his fingers in my car door.”

“Good girl,” he murmurs, and he presses a kiss to my temple. Both of his arms wrap around me, and we stay like that for a long while.

“I should get back,” he finally says. “Don’t like leaving Danny on his own in the house.”

Disappointment pierces my breast, but I nod. “Okay.”

“Let me take you out to dinner again,” Remy says, voice low. “I want to spoil you.”

I want that too. But I’m scared. Today rocked me, from the putrid rot I witnessed in Terry to the soothing balm of Remy’s presence. Can I afford to let another man in?

I throw up the only defense I have. “Do fling participants spoil each other usually?”

Remy’s arm is still around me. He sets his wine glass down on the end table beside him and brings his other hand to cup my cheek. “Is that still what this is to you, Audrey? Just a fling?”

My heart is a beating drum. No, this isn’t a fling to me anymore. Maybe it never was. But what if I open myself up to



him and he hurts me, like Terry did? What if I start dreaming of a future with him, and those dreams shatter at my feet?

This man seems too perfect. I can't let myself get swept up in the fairytale, because I know that fairytales are just fantasies. I know he has hidden flaws. Warts. Imperfections. Seeing Terry today should have strengthened my resolve instead of weakening it. I should know that it's better for me to protect myself.

But the thought of pushing Remy away is as alien as the thought of accepting Terry's advances. How can I close myself off when he's shown me how good life can be?

My throat is tight, but I force myself to speak. "I don't think it was ever a fling between us, Remy."

A short breath huffs out of him, and his shoulders drop. His thumb strokes my cheek as he rests his forehead against mine. We close our eyes and breathe each other in until Remy says, "I don't want this to end at the end of the month, Audrey. I don't want it to end at all."

A trembling smile curls my lips. "Me neither," I whisper.

His kiss is languorous. It heats my blood as he tugs me closer, letting his hands roam all over my body. All too soon, he pulls away. "I have to get back to Danny," he tells me quietly.

"Okay."

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," he says as we get up.

I walk him to the door, where we kiss once more. "Tomorrow," I repeat, and then he leaves.

It's the first time we spent time alone together without tearing each other's clothes off since the start of this fling. We didn't have sex, but somehow it felt more intimate than anything we've done before. I bared my heart to him as he held me on the sofa, and he cradled me in his arms like I was precious to him.

As I get into my cold bed—alone—I drift to sleep and dream of the possibility of forever with Remy, Danny, and our

perfect little life together.

TWENTY-FOUR

# REMY

LEAVING the bank fills me with a sense of elation. I have pre-approval for a business loan, which means I can call Jeff and tell him this is really happening.

But I don't want to call Jeff. Instead, with my phone in my hand, I dial Audrey.

"Hey, you," she says. "How's your morning going?"

"Better now that I'm talking to you," I tell her.

I can hear the smile in her voice when she teases me: "You're a shameless flirt, Remy Campbell."

Laughing, I head down Cove Boulevard toward the local café. The sun shines through the trees lining the street, their vibrant green leaves fluttering in a gentle summer breeze. The air smells fresh, and life is good.

Last night, I held Audrey in my arms like we belonged to each other. I hated leaving her. Hated hearing about the hurt she'd been through at her ex's house. Hated the thought of that scumbag coming on to her.

"I'm heading to Four Cups," I say. "Want a coffee? I can tell you my good news when I deliver it."

"Can't wait," she answers.

A few minutes later, I park in front of my house and cut across the yard to get to Audrey's front door, two drinks in hand. Audrey opens the front door before I ring the bell and extends her arms toward the coffees.

“Gimme.”

Chuckling, I hand over her cappuccino and plant a kiss on her forehead. “In need of caffeine?”

“Among other things,” she answers, a sparkle in her eyes. I’m not the only shameless flirt around here. Audrey leads me through the house to the back patio. We sit on her deck chairs before she asks, “What’s the big news?”

I watch as she opens the lid to her coffee to take a sip, sighing as the chocolate powder hits her tongue. Summer sunlight gilds her skin, the breeze making tendrils of her hair dance to the music of the summer wind. I don’t think I’ll be able to live without this woman.

“I got pre-approval for a business loan,” I tell her, settling into my chair. I stretch out my legs and take a sip of coffee. “I’ll call Jeff this afternoon and tell him this is happening. I’m buying the garage.”

“That’s amazing!” She brightens, reaching over to squeeze my forearm. “Congratulations, Remy! How do you feel?”

“Terrified. Excited.” I’ll have to check over the contract, which means I need to find a lawyer who can take me on at the last minute. And then I’ll have to look into hiring an apprentice, maybe an office manager. My mental to-do list lengthens with every passing moment.

Audrey interrupts my racing thoughts. “You’re going to do great,” she says like she means it, and a knot tightens in my chest. I don’t remember the last time someone believed in me so unreservedly; it’s an addictive feeling.

“Thank you,” I say, voice hoarse. “There’s so much to do.”

“It’ll be fun,” she promises.

We slip into easy conversation. I ask her about her day, and she tells me things have been great now that she’s delegating a few extra responsibilities to her team. She’s been able to work on her advertisement strategy and has already gotten three inquiries from new clients this week.

“Are you going to do the job at your ex-husband’s house?”

Audrey huffs. “Hell to the *no*. It was stupid of me to go over there in the first place. I’ve learned my lesson.”

I hadn’t realized I’d tensed up when I asked the question, but her response makes my muscles unknot. “Good,” I say.

A sunny smile is her response, and I fall a little bit harder for her. She takes a sip of cappuccino, giving herself a foam mustache. Her tongue darts out to lick it off, and I realize she’s the cutest, sexiest, most intelligent, funniest, brightest person I’ve ever met. I’m never letting her go.

“I’ve drafted an email to his new wife,” Audrey continues. “I’m going to give them a recommendation for another person to hire. I’m not setting foot in that house again, no matter how much they offer to pay me. It’s bad for my mental health.”

“I’m proud of you.” I stand and pull her out of her chair. With my arms wrapped around her, I kiss my woman until I’m sure she understands what she means to me. Her sighs are as soft as the curves of her body. She tastes like coffee and Audrey. When the kissing becomes too heated for the backyard, she leads me inside and up to her bedroom, and we make love.

I kiss the mole on her left breast. I stroke the softness of her lower belly. I grip her thighs and worship every inch of her. I’ve fallen for this woman hard, and right now, I have only my body to prove it to her. It’s only when she’s chanting my name and twisting her hands into the sheets, her body glistening with sweat, that I give in to the temptation to slake my own needs.

When it’s over, Audrey’s body is draped over mine. She sighs. “I guess we’d better get back to work.”

“No,” I complain, squeezing her closer.

She laughs, letting her fingers trace the edge of my jaw. Her touch is magic to me. Her smile makes my heart sing. “You need to buy a garage, and I need to tell my ex-husband to pound sand. We’ve got big moves to make.”

So, an hour later, I’m sitting in the garage’s office dialing Jeff’s number. His deep, rumbly voice answers on the second

ring, and we come to an agreement.

I'm buying his garage—finally. The fear that had kept me from making any big decisions for the past three years is slowly being worn down to nothing, and I know I have Audrey to thank for that. She's dragged me out of my shell, shown me how good life can be.

And my life won't be complete without her in it.

THE NEXT DAY, a car I don't recognize drives into the garage's lot. I watch a man who looks to be between forty and fifty exit his car. His lip is curled in a slight snarl as he glances around the garage, but his expression clears when he sees me. He strides forward and shakes my hand.

"Terry Scott," he introduces himself, pumping my fist firmly.

My brows jump. Is this *the* Terry? "Any relation to Audrey Scott?"

Terry's eyes narrow for a brief second, then a genial smile graces his lips. "My ex-wife," he says, then adds in a conspiratorial tone: "Dodged a bullet there."

The muscles in my back go solid. "Oh?"

"The woman is a psycho. I just tried to hire her to help my wife out with the kitchen. Audrey comes over, acts totally unprofessional, then runs off and emails us that she can't do the job. She didn't even give a reason."

It takes a conscious effort to uncurl the fingers of my hands, which had bunched into fists during Terry's little speech.

"I'm sure she had her reasons," I answer, then nod to his car, needing to get my feet onto steadier ground. "What can I do for you?" *Besides kick you so hard you fly into orbit.*

"It's been making a weird clunking sound when I accelerate," he says, striding back toward the vehicle. I briefly consider giving him the Audrey treatment and telling him I

don't want his business, but there's some sick sense of curiosity that makes me want to keep talking to the man. Instead, I decide I'll compromise and charge him an asshole fee, then use the extra money to take Audrey out this weekend. She deserves it.

I sweep my hand toward the office. "Let me give you a quote."



TWENTY-FIVE

# AUDREY

A WEEK PASSES IN A FLASH. After emailing Terry and Caroline that I won't be able to complete the job at their home, I feel lighter than I have in years. I throw myself into work, and all my downtime is spent with Remy. Even Laurel calls on Sunday to complain that we haven't had our weekly dinner since last month.

When I tell her I'm busy following her very clear directives, she laughs and gives me a pass.

Almost every dinner is eaten with both Remy and Danny. The times we spend together are full of laughter and light, but every time I go back to my house, alone, I worry that I've broken the cardinal rule of flings.

I've gotten too attached. But is that a bad thing?

Remy and I agreed that it was never truly a fling. He wants me, and I want him. We're exploring this beautiful new thing blooming between us. Why put a time limit on it? Why not see what happens?

Every time I open Remy's cutlery drawer to see the organized utensils, it gives me a rush of warmth. Every time he hugs me, I feel whole. Every time Danny tells me about his day, I'm swept up in the happiness of the moment.

This doesn't have to end. It started as a fling, but it could end as a happily ever after. Right? Don't I deserve that just as much as anyone else?

On the Monday of the final week of our fling, Remy hires a babysitter for Danny and takes me out to dinner at a local

Asian fusion restaurant. We eat small share plates of delicious food, and I decide that yes, I can have it all. I can delegate at work and still perform to a high standard. I can meet a man and get swept up in a romance with him. If I let go of the anxiety of my perfectionism, I can believe that I'm deserving of all these beautiful things.

Full of good food and sated by laughter and conversation, I let Remy walk me to my front door. We make out like we're half our age until I'm panting against my own front door.

"I should go home," he says, not moving an inch. "I only booked the babysitter until ten."

"Fine," I pout.

He laughs, gaze soft. "Goodnight, Audrey," he says, then he straightens and pushes away from me. When he's descended my porch steps, he turns back to face me. "Oh—I forgot to ask. Would you mind picking Danny up from camp on Thursday? I have a meeting with the lawyer to go over the sale contract for the garage. The only available appointment all month was Thursday, but it's cutting it a bit close to pickup time."

"Of course," I answer, oddly flattered at being given this responsibility. "It's no problem at all."

"Thank you." Remy jumps up the steps again and plants a kiss on my lips, which makes me laugh. I feel all bubbly and warm inside.

"Goodnight, Remy."

"Goodnight, Audrey."

I smile all night until I'm lying in my bed grinning at my dated popcorn ceiling like some kind of maniac. Trying to reel in my own emotions, I tell myself I need to focus on work this week.

But it's hard to think about business when Remy calls in the middle of the day, or shows up with a coffee and a croissant, or strips me down and bends me over the kitchen counter. With Remy's gentle tugging at all my loose threads, my life seems to be unraveling before my very eyes.

Then, on Wednesday, the consequences of my unraveling begin to make themselves known. I realize I made a mistake when checking the schedule Paula created for this week. We've double-booked one of the teams, which means I have to rush to a job and do a pantry reorganization on my own. The labels for my label maker have run out, so I'll have to drive three towns over to get new ones in time to finish the job tomorrow. By the time the day is done, I'm run off my feet, exhausted, and more than a little flustered.

I should have checked the schedules more closely. We've had an influx of bookings, and Paula isn't accustomed to scheduling everything in at the last minute. This week's chaos could have been avoided if I'd done my job properly instead of doodling "Mrs. Audrey Campbell" on invoices like a schoolgirl with a crush.

But the week of disasters isn't over. On Thursday, I get a call from Meg, who's at Georgia's house and sounds close to tears.

"Audrey, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to mess up, but I forgot, and now—"

"Slow down," I tell her through my phone's handsfree setting. I pull over on the side of the road, halfway back to my office from finishing the pantry job. I'm sweaty and stressed, and I can't understand what she's trying to tell me. "Meg. Slow down. Tell me what's going on."

"The measurements!" she wails. "The measurements are all wrong. I forgot to subtract two inches on most of the shelves. They're"—*hiccup*—"too long!"

I knead the steering wheel and close my eyes. Shit.

Delegation is great, except for when it goes wrong. I should have checked all her measurements, just like I should have verified the schedule and the inventory thoroughly, instead of only spot-checking. I didn't train my team members properly, and now the gaps are showing.

This is my fault. Every single mistake is a failing, and it falls on my shoulders. The walls of the van close in on me—a

van whose repairs I still haven't paid for—as I realize that the past month has been one long descent into disaster.

I've been so focused on sex and flings and happiness that I neglected what really mattered: my livelihood. I told myself that I could be a carefree boss who empowered her team, and then I didn't even give them the tools to succeed. What is wrong with me?

Everything I do turns to garbage. My marriage. My finances. My business. I try so hard to make everything perfect, and I fail every single time.

Did I really think, as recently as dinner on Monday, that I could have it all? That a sexy mechanic could drop into my life, give me a thousand magical orgasms, and make everything all better? Did I really think I could delegate the work that only I could do for years?

I'm a fool. I've allowed myself to get distracted by sex like some horny dimwit.

“Audrey? Are you firing me?”

I blink. “What? Meg—no. No, I'm not firing you. Just sit tight. I'm on my way.”

Swinging the car around, I race toward Georgia's house and lash myself with my mental whip some more. This is my fault. I took my focus off my business for a few short weeks, and now all the mistakes are piling up.

The phone rings as I turn onto Georgia's street. I park in her driveway. When I go to answer the call, a text from Remy pops up: *Still available for this afternoon?*

The phone screeches again, Paula's name flashing on the screen. I flick Remy's text away. I don't remember us deciding to meet up this afternoon, but it's going to have to wait. My business is in the process of imploding. I pick up the call.

“Audrey,” Paula says, “we've run out of drawer organizers. They're sold out at every store I've been to, and we can't get any ordered in until next week. We need them for the McCurdy job, and we've already rescheduled twice. Mrs.

McCurdy said she wouldn't tolerate any more delays, and half of our new clients are from her knitting circle."

"Fuck!" I slam my hands on the steering wheel.

There's a tense silence. "Audrey?" Paula sounds worried. I've never sworn around her before.

I suck in a deep breath. "Okay." I exhale. Inhale again. "Okay, Paula. Thank you for telling me. I'm pulling up to a job right now, but I'll deal with the drawer organizers as soon as I'm done. There's a shop in Eugene that sells them; I can make the drive tonight and have them for tomorrow afternoon."

The drive is five hours with zero traffic. It'll take six with bathroom breaks. I'll have to drive all evening, find a motel to sleep for a few hours, and then drive all day tomorrow. But if I get the supplies by tomorrow afternoon, we can finish the job on time. Maybe somewhere closer sells them. I'll call every store in a two-hundred-mile radius. I can fix this.

"I'm sorry, Audrey. I miscalculated how many we'd need, and I forgot to order extras." She sounds like she's about to cry. "With the last-minute bookings this week, I forgot to cross-check, and..."

*My fault. My fault. My fault.* "It's okay, Paula. It was my mistake. I should have checked the orders over and made sure you had done them correctly."

"I really wanted to do a good job. I really like doing the schedules and inventory. I'm so sorry—"

"Paula, it's fine. We'll figure it out. Okay?"

She sniffles. "Okay."

We hang up. One more deep breath, and I'm ready to go inside. Georgia answers the door with a kind smile.

"I'm so sorry about this," I tell her. "I promise we'll make it right."

"It's not a problem," Georgia answers, leading me to the bedroom. "These things happen."

All of Georgia's clothing has been pulled out of the closet. There are portable clothing racks lining the far wall, and half the bed is stacked with sweaters and pants. Typically, we would have had the closet reorganized and all the clothes put away within the day.

Now, Georgia will either have to live with a bedroom where a bomb went off, or we'll have to put everything back and then pull it out again when we can come back.

I find Meg on the walk-in closet floor, sniffing, measuring the space between two vertical supports. She looks up when I enter, and her bottom lip wobbles. The tape measure trembles in her hands, with shelves littered around her kneeling body in a semi-circle.

"I'm sorry—"

I kneel beside her. "No more apologizing, Meg. These things happen. I was distracted, and I should have checked the numbers. It isn't your fault."

She sighs, staring at the shelves which are now useless. Worry gnaws at my gut. There are too many things slipping through my fingers. Too many mistakes piling up. My business might fall apart before my eyes.

I need to fix this immediately. Panic tightens my throat. My business is an extension of me. The name I've built for myself was proof that my divorce didn't break me. If the Organizing Goddess fails, it means Audrey Scott failed too. Just like everyone thought she would. Just like Terry said I did.

I can't let that happen. I *can't*.

"Let's get this cleaned up and get Georgia's things back in here. We'll get the measurements and get these fixed. Okay?"

Meg nods. "Okay. You're really not firing me?"

"Of course not, Meg. You're one of my best team members. Now come on." I fish a tissue out of my purse and hand it over. "Let's get this cleaned up."

As we put the clothes away, I nab the drawer organizers that had been allocated to this job. Meg packs up the rest of our supplies, and we meet Georgia downstairs. She's in the kitchen, tapping on her laptop at the island. She smiles tentatively when we enter.

“Mission aborted?” Georgia asks. She doesn't seem mad, but there's definitely disappointment in her eyes.

I grimace. “I apologize about this, Georgia. It's not the way I like to do business. As soon as the shelves are fixed, I'll call you to reschedule.”

“That works for me. Anything I can do to help?”

“No, thank you,” I tell her. “I'll be in touch.”

Meg and I head out. I run the drawer organizers over to Paula at the McCurdy job, then head home to pack an overnight bag. I call six stores before finding one halfway to Sacramento that has the organizers I need. I check the time. I can make it before closing time today, which is the first bit of good news I've had all day.

I'll drive to the store, pick up the organizers, and drive back in the night. By tomorrow morning, this crisis will be halfway fixed. Then all I'll have to do is go over every schedule, invoice, and inventory calculation and comb through for more mistakes.

Everything will be perfect; I'll make sure of it.

Panic rattles around my chest, and only the thought of saving my business fills my mind. With my bag slung over my shoulder, I head for my car. I've clipped myself in and put the key in the ignition when my phone rings. Remy.

My thumb hesitates over the screen. I want to talk to him—everything inside me is yearning to hear his voice telling me everything will be okay.

But that yearning, that need, is exactly what got me into this position in the first place. I've let my team down because I was distracted by my fling with him. I've made a bad impression on half a dozen clients because I was too busy



having midafternoon sex breaks with my neighbor instead of focusing on work.

I can't afford any more distractions. All my failures compound until all I can hear is the thumping of my own heart. I have to fix what I can and admit to myself that there's no room in my life for a relationship.

I ignore the call and start driving.

TWENTY-SIX

# REMY

WHEN THE CALL to Audrey goes to voicemail, I frown. I'm sitting outside the lawyer's office, waiting to go over the contract of sale for the garage. But the meeting start time has come and gone, which means I'm definitely not going to make it to Danny's camp by pickup time. I called Audrey to remind her, but I haven't been able to get through.

I fire off a text message. *All good to pick Danny up from camp?*

The message delivers, but it doesn't get read.

That's okay; Audrey is probably busy. She wouldn't have forgotten. The woman has planners for her planners. She doesn't know the meaning of the words "junk drawer." She'll pick Danny up from camp, just like she said she would. I trust her. I wouldn't have asked her for this favor if I hadn't.

But...usually she answers my calls. And if she doesn't, she calls back within minutes. Odd.

The lawyer's office door opens, and a man with salt-and-pepper hair waves me inside. I get up, gather my documents, and try to clear the worry from my mind.

An hour later, I've sent Jeff an amended contract, but I still haven't heard from Audrey. Instead, there are seven missed calls on my phone from a number I don't recognize.

Worry flares in my gut. Hands trembling, I call the number back.

“Mr. Campbell?” The lead counselor’s voice is familiar. My stomach plummets.

“Yes. Is everything okay? Did Audrey pick Danny up?”

“Um, no,” the woman on the line says. “We’ve been trying to reach you. Danny is here—”

“I’m on my way.”

“Thank you.”

Dashing to my truck, I jump in and dial Audrey’s number. No answer. I check my previous message and see she still hasn’t read it.

Is she okay? Did something happen?

My breaths come hard and fast. I want to try Audrey again, but Danny’s waiting for me at camp. I promised myself he’d always come first. I told myself he’d never feel tossed aside the way I did growing up. He’d be my priority, always.

Audrey understands that. So, if she’s not with Danny, it means something went seriously wrong. That’s the only explanation that makes sense. But before I can figure it out, I have to pick up my kid and make sure he’s okay. Visions of Danny sitting on the school steps fill my mind. What if he’s upset? What if he feels like I failed him?

I toss my phone aside and tear out of the parking lot. I get to the school in less than ten minutes, and I find Danny playing catch with Jace in the back field.

A breath blows out of me. I watch him laugh as he dives and rolls to catch a ball, holding his baseball glove up triumphantly.

Danny’s perfectly fine.

Across the parking lot, Jace’s mom waves at me from the driver’s seat of her SUV.

I jog over to her as she lowers the window. “Elodie, hi.”

“Remy,” she says with a smile. “Busy day?”

“Something like that,” I answer. “Were you waiting here because of Danny?”

She grins. “Jace refused to leave him on his own, and I figured I could listen to my podcast while we waited for you.”

“Thank you,” I tell her. “That’s really— Thank you. My...” What is Audrey to me? Girlfriend seems juvenile. Partner seems presumptuous. I glance at my phone in my hand, but there’s still no word from Audrey. Something has to be wrong. There’s no other explanation. I clear my throat. “I had a ride lined up for him, but it fell through.”

“I don’t mind,” Elodie tells me, smiling. “The boys love each other.”

I rap my knuckles on the edge of her window frame. “I should get Danny home. Still on for a playdate on Saturday?”

“Of course.” She calls Jace’s name, then waves goodbye to me as her son comes running.

Danny sees me, calls out a goodbye to the counselor across the field, then dashes toward my car. “Remy! We played catch.” He shows me his baseball glove for emphasis. “Jace said we could practice on Saturday at his house.”

“Sounds fun, buddy,” I tell him, ruffling his hair. “You okay? Sorry I’m late.”

“That’s okay. Jace says if we want to turn pro, we have to put in the hours.” He throws the baseball up in the air and bobbles it when he tries to catch it again. “But wasn’t Audrey supposed to come pick me up today?”

“Something came up, and she couldn’t come,” I tell him. It’s not exactly a lie if I don’t know what happened, is it?

Why hasn’t she called?

“Oh. Okay.”

My heart is thumping weirdly. I trusted Audrey to pick my kid up, and she just...didn’t show. That’s not like her. Something must have happened. Audrey wouldn’t let me down like that unless there was a good reason. The only thing I can think about is that she’s hurt—or worse.

Fear and panic and worry go through the meat grinder of my psyche until I'm so keyed up I'm not sure I can drive. My hands shake, and I can't take a full breath. I need to know Audrey's okay. I grab my phone and call out to Danny, "Hey, buddy, sit tight for a sec. I'm going to make a phone call."

Then I face away from him and try Audrey's number one more time.

TWENTY-SEVEN

# AUDREY

I MAKE it to the store before it closes, and I buy every single drawer organizer they have. I also grab some extra wicker baskets and various supplies that we use in Organizing Goddess projects, along with velvet hangers by the truckload. Everything I see that could be remotely useful goes in my cart. I buy enough labels for my label maker to last me two years. I'll have to do a thorough inventory of my business, but right now I just need to make sure there are no more crises until I can place orders with our usual suppliers. I'm in survival mode, which means I need to pay a premium for these things.

By the time I've loaded everything into my van, I'm sweaty and exhausted, and my business's bank account has shrunk considerably. The sharp edge of my panic has worn down, and for the first time in more than six hours, I feel like I can breathe.

My phone buzzes. I fumble through my things, and my brows jump when I see the dozens of notifications on my screen. Remy's name flashes on the screen. What in the world...

"Hello?"

"Audrey," Remy says, sighing. "You're okay."

"What? Of course I'm okay." What is he talking about—

"You were supposed to pick Danny up from camp, and you didn't show," he says in a strange voice. "I thought something happened."



My entire body goes cold. As if my legs suddenly lose all their strength, I stumble into the side of my van and grip the handle to keep myself upright. “Remy—oh my God, Remy. I’m so sorry.”

There’s a short, sharp pause. “Did you... Did you *forget*?” His voice is colder than I’ve ever heard it.

I slap my hand over my mouth and squeeze my eyes shut. “I’m so sorry, Remy. There have been a bunch of fires to put out at work, and I just... I didn’t... I feel terrible. Is he okay?”

“He’s fine.”

We stay there, on either end of the phone call, and neither of us speaks. My breaths are sharp as they saw in and out of my lungs. Remy is completely, utterly silent. A thousand emotions flit through me, but the one that feels the strongest is profound, unsurprising shame. Of course I messed up. Don’t I always screw everything up?

This month was supposed to be my carefree month, when I threw out the rulebook and did things like have a fling and delegate my work. But what I failed to consider was the fact that unless I try my hardest at all times, the consequence is always failure.

I’m a perfectionist for a reason. It’s not because my standards are high; it’s because I—always—fucking—mess—up. Unless I try my hardest to be perfect, my entire life inevitably falls apart.

“Explain to me what happened,” Remy says, and I don’t recognize his voice. “Explain to me what was so important that you forgot to pick my kid up when you said you would.”

“I...” What can I tell him? That drawer organizers took precedence over his child? Tears spring in my eyes. “I got caught up, Remy. Things went wrong on a couple of jobs, and I’ve been so distracted these past weeks with you, and—”

“You’re blaming me for this?”

“No. No, of course not.” I gulp. My phone buzzes, and I pull the phone away from my ear. There’s a text message from Paula with a photo attachment. I close my eyes and press the

device back to my ear. “Remy, all I can say is I’m sorry. We ran out of inventory at work, so I had to drive halfway to Sacramento, and it just completely slipped my mind that I’d agreed to pick Danny up.”

“I see.”

I feel like a steaming-hot pile of garbage.

“I have to go, Audrey,” he tells me, sounding like a stranger.

A tear leaks out of my eye and drops down my cheek. “Yeah. Okay. Tell Danny I’m sorry. Maybe—maybe I’ll stop by later and apologize in person.”

“Yeah.”

The call clicks, and I’m alone in a half-empty parking lot. I glance at the big strip mall behind me. The storage store is next to a huge furniture store, which is next to a big discount clothing store. The streetlights in the parking lot are beginning to come on. The hum of cars on the highway in the distance fills the air.

I feel so alone.

Climbing behind the wheel, I leave the engine off and wipe my eyes with both hands. My hands shake. The mental lashing I’m about to give myself is going to be severe; I can already tell. I let Remy down. I let Danny down. I let my employees down.

I fucked up, bad.

Didn’t I tell Laurel that I couldn’t do a relationship? I can either have a business or a love life, never both. I already tried to throw myself into a relationship when I married Terry, and there was only a shell of myself left at the end of it all.

I should have known I’d mess this up somehow.

Dragging in a shuddering breath, I wipe my eyes once more and tap my phone until I open Paula’s photo message. It’s a screenshot of my business’s review page online, and my rating has dropped an entire star. She says, *Have you seen this?*

The guilt and shame cede to confusion. I frown and look up my own business's name on Google. Sure enough, the business now has three and a half stars. Heart pounding, I click on the reviews. There are a slew of new one-star reviews, all posted today. Some of them have written reviews along with the one-star ratings, some of them don't, and all of them are dragging my rating down to a level that will guarantee I never get any more bookings.

The panic, which had eased during the drive and shopping spree, comes back with a vengeance. I scan the reviews, looking for clues. My hands tremble so much I can't read the words on the screen, so I have to clip my phone to its hands-free holder just to be able to make sense of what I'm seeing in black and white.

Who wrote these reviews? Surely Georgia wouldn't? She didn't seem upset. Mrs. McCurdy? But no—her job is still on schedule. The pantry organization I did yesterday? That one got completed on time too, and the client was overjoyed with the results.

So who...

"Unprofessional," one reviewer proclaims with their single-star review. The username is just random letters and numbers.

"Audrey Scott was late, and the final product was sloppy," another reviewer says. I don't recognize the name, and there's no profile picture. That one makes no sense; I hardly ever go to jobs myself anymore. I'm mostly in the office doing managerial tasks. Plus, I'm never sloppy.

So who would be complaining about me being late to a job and doing bad work? What's going on?

The phone buzzes again, and a text from Remy comes through. *I need some space tonight*, he writes. *I'll talk to you tomorrow.*

The day from hell compounds, and Remy's words launch me over the edge of a very tall cliff. I've spent three and a half weeks falling into bed with this man—falling *for* this man—

and I completely messed it up. He asked me for one single favor, and I couldn't even do that. I've neglected my business, failed my employees, and now I might have truly destroyed my only chance at success. I have some vindictive ex-client who thinks they can bombard my business page with negative reviews.

And the man I fell for no longer wants to talk to me.

I bury my face in my hands and weep.

By the time I come up for air, six new one-star reviews greet me. My rating is down to three stars. It feels like the world is ending, but that's not really anything new. I always fall short of perfect, no matter how hard I try. Makes me wonder why I try at all.

With thoughts of my empty house, empty bed, and empty life, I wipe my eyes, turn on the engine, and head home.

TWENTY-EIGHT

# REMY

WHEN I GET behind the wheel of my truck, Danny is busy playing on his handheld video game. He doesn't look upset that he had to wait a few minutes for me, nor does he look sad that Audrey didn't show up.

“How do you feel about a burger and milkshake tonight?” I ask, voice full of gravel.

Danny brightens, facing me with wide eyes. “Really?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Really.”

“Yes!” He fist-pumps the air. “Milkshakes on a school night!”

I try to chuckle, but it comes out raspy. My hands tremble as I try to turn the key in the ignition, and it takes me a few moments to realize I'm deeply, monumentally angry.

For the first time since my divorce, I trusted a woman to be there for me. I asked for a simple favor, and I was let down. How many times is this going to happen before I get the hint? How many times do I have to realize that no one will ever prioritize me—prioritize Danny—before it sinks in?

I thought I was falling in love with Audrey. What a joke. How could it be love, when she can't be bothered to even remember her promises?

Not just any promises, either. She forgot about my *kid*. The one person in my life that always comes first. The one person who matters.

She could have let me down, and I'd forgive her in a blink. But she wasn't there for Danny.

We pull into the parking lot in front of Harold's Diner, and I realize Danny has been speaking the whole time I've been driving. I must have been making the right noises to answer him, because he doesn't seem to notice I haven't heard a word.

"And we're going to play college baseball and then turn pro. Jace says I'm good enough. What do you think?"

"I think you can do anything you set your mind to, buddy," I tell him.

Danny's smile is small. He keeps his eyes on his baseball glove, tracing the stitching with the tips of his fingers. "You think my mom and dad would have liked to watch me play baseball?"

Too many strong emotions are bad for a man's cardiac health. It takes me a few deep breaths to gather myself together before I can answer. "I think they would have loved it," I tell my kid. "They would be so proud of you, Danny."

He meets my gaze, then, and his smile widens. "You think Audrey will want to come to a game?"

I don't want to lie to the kid, so I just nod toward the diner and say, "Let's get some dinner, all right?"

THAT EVENING, I'm too wired to fall asleep until after I see headlights swing into the driveway next door, then get up to make sure Audrey gets inside okay. A light flicks on upstairs in her house, and I let the curtains fall down to cover my window.

Something broke between us today, and I'm not sure if we'll be able to fix it.

I'm not sure I want to fix it in the first place.

If Audrey can't put Danny first—can't put me first—is there anything there worth salvaging?

ON SATURDAY, I drop Danny at his friend Jace's house and thank Jace's mother once again for waiting around on Thursday evening.

She smiles at me and waves me off. "Stop it, Remy," she says. "How could I say no to you?"

There's an invitation in her words. It wouldn't take much for me to pursue it, to start something that would end horizontal with this woman. I've done it before. Ever since Rebecca left, it's all I've done. Casual sex, meaningless connections.

Suddenly, I'm exhausted.

Instead of acknowledging her advances, I just smile and tell her to call me if Danny needs anything.

Driving back to my house makes my ribs wind tighter around my heart. By the time I'm parking in my driveway and glancing over at the house next door, it feels like I'm walking to my execution.

I can't go over there. Not yet. I can't face Audrey in all her beauty and loveliness and do anything but tell her how angry and hurt I am. I'll just make it worse.

So, I head into my own house and bask in the silence—for a short while, at least. The doorbell rings not twenty minutes later.

When I open up, Audrey stands on the stoop wearing a knee-length white dress and tan shoes. Her hair is gathered up in a bun, and her eyes are pale green, wide, and sad.

"Hi, Remy," she says.

I rub my forehead, blowing out a breath. "Audrey, I know we were supposed to hang out today, but..."

"I just want to apologize. I know I messed up."

I'm having déjà vu. All that's missing is the pie.

"I understand if you're mad at me," she says.

"I am," I can't resist replying.



Her throat bobs, and she nods. “That’s reasonable.”

I wish she wasn’t looking at me like that, like she wishes she could wrap her arms around me. I want that too—but what would it accomplish? If I can’t trust her to be there when I need her, what are we doing here? It’s been more than a fling since the start, and maybe that’s where it went wrong. Maybe we should have stuck to the rules of engagement in the first place.

“I need to, um...” I jab a thumb over my shoulder, unable to come up with an excuse that makes sense.

Audrey doesn’t need one. She jerks, then takes a step back. “Of course. I won’t keep you. Have a good day.”

I watch her dart through the gap in the bushes, and then I close the door. My insides feel scraped raw.

Getting involved with Audrey was a mistake that should have remained a fling. It would have saved us both a lot of heartache.

TWENTY-NINE

# AUDREY

I SPEND THE WEEKEND WORKING. It's all I can do, because if I slow down, I'll start thinking about everything I've done wrong, and then I won't be able to do anything at all. Every new one-star review gets flagged as spam, but only a few of them get removed from my company's online listing. At least half a dozen times, I stare at my screen and sob, which feels particularly pathetic. I eat a lot of cheese.

Laurel tries to save me from myself on Sunday night, when she drags me to her place and feeds me a home-cooked meal and copious amounts of wine.

"He's a jerk!" she says, pounding her fist on the table when the conversation turns to Remy. "You're too good for him. You made an honest mistake, and he shouldn't have been asking you to pick his kid up in the first place."

While I appreciate my best friend defending me like a paladin with her sword, she's wrong. I messed up—bad—and I don't think Remy will ever forgive me. I don't blame him.

"He's a good guy," I tell her, then take another bite of gnocchi which turns to glue in my mouth.

"You broke the cardinal rule of flings, Audrey. You got attached."

"I told you that would happen from the start."

Laurel sighs, swirling her wine. "You're too sensitive for your own good."

My eyes fill with tears, but I'm so sick of crying. I flutter my hands at eye level like a ninny. Laurel laughs, and I snort. "Maybe all the orgasms messed up my hormones," I finally say.

"We could buy you a really huge dildo," she suggests. "That might help. Exposure therapy."

I snort, and a tear rolls down my cheek. "No, thank you."

"At least you told Terry to eat dirt. I can't believe he came on to you after pretending to be a doting husband to his pregnant wife."

"You can't?" I answer bitterly. "I can. I should have known he'd do something like this from the moment I got the first call about organizing their kitchen."

"Yeah," Laurel concedes, so I scowl at her. She snorts, and I try to laugh. It comes out garbled and weird.

I eat another piece of gnocchi and gulp down some more wine. Then I say, "At least I did it. I had good sex with a hot man for the first time in years. That's something."

"That's definitely something!" Laurel lifts her glass. "Cheers to that."

I touch my glass to hers and force a smile, but I know bitterness is hiding just behind the curl of my lips. The thing is, Remy isn't a jerk. He's got such a big heart, and if I'd been worthy of it, it could have been mine.

I'm not worthy of it, though. I only have enough mental capacity to take care of myself and my business. Maybe that's something I just need to accept. I'm not good enough to have a relationship with a decent man on top of it.

I huff at myself, frustrated.

The fling was supposed to be a fun, temporary thing. It was supposed to be like a vacation for my mind, something to focus on that wasn't work.

But then work fell apart, and I'm still dealing with the consequences. Next week, I'll have to go back to Georgia's place and pretend I'm not mortified by the mistakes I made.

I'll have to pray she's so happy with the end result that my mess-ups won't overshadow my work.

Being with Remy reminded me that I'm a woman and that I crave companionship. But if I have to choose between my livelihood and a relationship, how could I choose anything but my livelihood? Clearly, I only have the capacity to make one of those two things work. I can't put a man above everything that I've accomplished, everything that I am.

Besides, it's not like Remy even wants me anymore, so all this ruminating is pointless emotional drivel.

"You have to admit," Laurel says, "it's kind of crappy of Remy to withdraw so much and not even hear you out. It kind of reminds me of how Terry used to make you feel. You were always trying to fix something when you were with him. Like he was this unattainable goal, and you were always trying to chase it." She pinches her lips and meets my gaze. "It worries me to see that dynamic cropping up again."

"Yeah." She's not wrong. I can't go through another Terry. I can't take on someone else's problems and try to twist myself into the perfect shape for someone else. I blame myself enough for my failures; I can't stand the thought of someone else blaming me too.

Laurel reaches over and pats my hand. "Maybe this just isn't the right time for you, honey. You'll meet someone eventually, but right now it's time to take care of you."

I nod, and the tears fill my eyes again. "Yeah," I say, but I don't quite believe her. I wonder if maybe I'm destined to be alone. Maybe having a partner requires too much from me, and I no longer have the capacity to provide it. Maybe it's a woman's plight to give and give and give and receive nothing in return.

It's easier to be alone. At least then the only person I have to take care of is myself.

GEORGIA'S new shelving gets cut to size by Wednesday, so I'm back at her place on Thursday. When the last shelf slides

in perfectly, I let out a sigh of relief. Nodding to Meg, we start sorting through clothes and organizing them in a way that makes sense. I set up a small ottoman at a dressing table and hang a piece of art Georgia brought out when I asked if she had anything she'd like to display.

It takes hours to finish. By the time Meg and I are done, the sun is dipping close to the horizon—but the closet looks fantastic.

Georgia comes in with Sebastian close behind, and she clasps her hands at her breast, stopping in the middle of the new room. Sebastian whistles, brows arched high.

“Do you like it?” I ask.

“Like it?” Georgia repeats. “Do I like it? Audrey, I *love* it.”

“Here, let me give you a tour.” I show her all the drawers and explain why I organized them the way I did. I show her how to pull out the hidden laundry bag and where her shoes are stored. She gasps at the sight of a few designer pumps artfully displayed on the far wall.

When Georgia wraps her arms around me and squeezes, I finally feel the tension in my back unknot.

“I’m calling the girls,” she says, her phone in her hand. “They have to see this.”

“We’ll get out of your hair, then,” I say, nodding to Meg.

“No way!” Georgia looks up at the two of us. “You have to stay for dinner. The girls will want to ask you questions. You’ll probably have a bunch of new clients by the end of the evening.”

Excitement sparks, but I see Meg’s shoulders round. She’s worked hard today, and I can’t keep her here any longer. “Thank you for the kind offer, but we have work to finish up at the office. I’ll leave some business cards,” I tell Georgia with a smile.

“All right,” Georgia says, opening a drawer to admire the jewelry storage. She smiles at me. “I’ll see you around at Four Cups, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I reply, and I leave her house. A deep sigh slips through my lips.

That went well. One crisis of many averted.

Still, I can't quite manage to make my smile stick. A job well done doesn't seem quite as satisfying as it did a month ago, and I know it's because I'm heartbroken.

Meg helps me unload the van at the office, but when it's time to go, she lingers.

“What's up?” I ask.

“I wanted to talk to you about something,” she starts.

I sit down on a chair and invite her to do the same. “If this is about the measurements, really, Meg, it's no problem. I should have been better about training you and checking your work. The mistake is on me.”

“It's not that,” she says, then chews her lip.

I'm bone-tired from the past week of catch-up work. I'm worried about the online reviews. I'm sad and lonely and not in the mood to stay in this office one minute longer than needed. But this is my business and my employee, so I nod patiently. “What is it, Meg?”

“I want to quit,” she blurts.

I straighten. “Oh. I see.”

“It's not you. I've really liked working here, but I can't handle the ups and downs. Sometimes it's really busy and I have to work until late, and sometimes my hours are short. I need something more regular. And...” She arches her brows. “Brad and I are going to start trying for a baby.”

Meg's eyes shine as she says the words, her face full of hope and happiness. Across from her, I feel old and washed-up and empty.

She continues. “This job is so stressful sometimes, Audrey, and I don't think I can do it. I want to find something part-time, where I have regular hours and less stress. An office somewhere, maybe.”

I sigh. She's not wrong. The business is great, but jobs come in waves. And because we're in people's homes, we can't leave them with a disaster in their kitchens when the clock strikes five and the workday is meant to be over. Sometimes, things take longer, and we have to work late. Georgia's closet is the perfect example; it's nearly eight o'clock in the evening and we're just getting ready to leave.

"I understand," I tell her.

"I've really enjoyed working here, but it's too stressful. I'm sorry, Audrey."

"Don't apologize. Do you want to keep working with reduced hours until you find something else?"

She gnaws her bottom lip, then shakes her head. "No. I'll finish out two weeks, but after that I want to be done."

It hurts to have an employee quit, but I understand. She wants predictable hours, and I can't give those to her. Sighing, I stand and open my arms. We hug, and she lets out a big, relieved breath.

"If you need a reference, you can use me," I tell her.

"Thanks. And thanks for being so cool about it."

"You have to do what's right for you," I tell her, and I mean it. That's the reason I didn't pursue things with Remy. It's the reason I started this business in the first place.

To put myself first.

I just wish it didn't feel so meaningless when I manage to do it.

I say goodbye to Meg, finish up some paperwork, and then I drive home. I collapse into bed, relieved. Georgia said she'd talk me up to her friends. That's a good thing.

Maybe the low rating on my Google page isn't the death blow I thought it was. Maybe this can be fixed. Life will go on, and everything will be okay.

Movement outside my window makes me glance over. My bedroom overlooks the backyard, and I have a view of Remy's



garden as well.

He's near the back fence, hose in hand, watering some plants. The man isn't wearing a shirt, and a violent pang hits me right in the middle of the chest.

I used to have a right to touch his body. In another life, I could have walked over to his place and wrapped my arms around him. I would've tilted my head up and accepted his kiss, and maybe we would've disappeared into the greenhouse for long, blissful minutes.

I could have shared my success at Georgia's today with someone else. I could have mourned the departure of a good employee with him. He would've told me the reviews were just a speed bump, and everything would turn out okay in the end. I would've believed him.

Or—more likely—my success never would have happened, because I'd either be distracted by the newness of the relationship, or I would have been consumed with trying to make *his* life easier. I would push aside my own goals to make room for his.

Terry used to do that. I had to be at his beck and call to make sure he always had his needs met. If he'd forgotten to buy his mother a birthday present, I was the one who had to drop everything to go and buy one. If we got overcharged on a bill, he'd point it out, but I was the one who had to wait on hold on the phone for hours to get the charge reversed.

It was exhausting. I felt like his mother half the time, and his maid the rest. Is it any wonder I stopped wanting to sleep with him?

I'm not going through that again. Not even for Remy.

Looking away from the window, I try to turn my thoughts back to the joy on Georgia's face when she got the first glimpse of her new closet—but the first thing she did was look at Sebastian, who smiled at her with a tender look in his eyes.

My heart aches, but there's nothing I can do to fix it. If I have to choose between my own sanity and a less-than-

fulfilling relationship with a man, I'm choosing my sanity every time.

Still, I peek through the window again and watch Remy for a few more seconds. What could have been shimmers in front of me until I lie back and let it go.

THIRTY

# REMY

AS THE DAYS PASS, jobs pile up on my schedule, and I make a note to hire an apprentice. I'll have to put together a job description and post it online somewhere, but for now, I scratch out a "Now Hiring" sign with a sharpie on a scrap of paper and tack it to the front door. Good enough.

I could use someone in the office too. If I didn't have to do so much invoicing and paperwork, I could take on more work.

Being busy is good for one thing, though: it stops me ruminating over Audrey.

Jeff and I will close on the garage once the lawyers finish all the paperwork and the bank agrees to lend me the full amount of money, which should take another few weeks. But now that we've signed the sale agreement, I'm looking around the garage like it's already my own.

Truthfully, it's felt this way for a long time, and that feeling intensified after Audrey performed her magic in the office. I've just been too scared to officially take the leap. The victory feels emptier than I thought it would, and I know it's because I've got no one to share it with.

While I'm busy keeping my thoughts at bay, a familiar car rolls into the garage. I look up to see Terry Scott exiting the driver's side. My whole body stiffens as he lifts his hand to wave.

"Hey there," he says, then jabs his thumb at his vehicle. "The noise is back."

“That’s because you refused to make the repairs I recommended last time, and you went for the quick fix.”

Terry laughs, as if I’m joking, then throws his hands up. “All right, all right,” he says, “you got me. But the price you quoted was insane. Can you do a discount?”

I grunt noncommittally, glancing at the car, then at him. “No.”

“Come on,” he cajoles, then pulls out his phone. “I’ll write down a number, and you tell me whether you agree.”

“You’re wasting your time,” I tell him. “I don’t negotiate.”

Last time he was here, I wanted to overcharge him a bit to pay for dinner with Audrey. Now I just want him to leave.

“Here.” He shows me the screen, where he’s got his calculator app pulled up and a number written down. That number is about a third of what I quoted him for the repairs. I’m about to tell him to take his offer and shove it where the sun don’t shine when a notification pops up at the top of his phone. It’s an email, and the subject line is written in big bold letters:

*Your review for Organizing Goddess has been successfully posted...*

I go completely, utterly still until the notification disappears. I frown. Did he review Audrey’s business? Why?

“So? Looks like you’re thinking about it,” he says, grinning.

This guy came on to Audrey just a couple of weeks ago. He’s got a pregnant wife at home, and he tried to hit on the woman who moved on from him. My hand once again curls into a fist, and I just barely resist the urge to punch him across the jaw.

I need to figure out what the hell is going on here.

“Come into my office,” I grit out.

Sitting at the computer while he takes a seat across from me, I navigate to the search engine on my screen. I type in

“Organizing Goddess Heart’s Cove” and wait for Audrey’s business to pop up.

That’s when I see her star rating and the slew of one-star reviews that have recently been posted. My brows climb up and up and up. Did Terry do this? Is he trying to get back at Audrey for turning him down?

Protectiveness slams into my gut like a punch. We might not be perfect for each other, but she sure as hell doesn’t deserve this. This man is sitting in an office she redesigned and reorganized; I know for a fact that she’s good at what she does.

“Unprofessional,” the reviews scream. “Showed up late, did a poor job.”

All of them have the same bad grammar, and I’m sure they were all written by the same person: the man sitting across from me with a stupid, smug smile on his face.

This pathetic excuse of a man was so insulted by her rejection that he’s trying to tear down the thing that’s most important to her. What a scumbag. What an *ass*.

I want to strangle him. I want to go back in time and snatch Audrey away from him before he could ever hurt her. She deserves so much better than someone like him. Hell, she deserves better than me.

Suddenly, I look back on the past week with more clarity. My anger lifts like a curtain at the start of a play, revealing a scene I couldn’t possibly have glimpsed before.

Audrey is on her own. Just like I am. She told me she was dealing with emergencies at work, told me there were scheduling and inventory issues. She didn’t tell me about the reviews, but that would have been only one of the many fires she had to put out.

Her business is everything to her. She built it from the ruins of her divorce. Her business *is* her. She must have been panicked, overwhelmed.

Yes, she messed up. She forgot to pick Danny up. That can’t happen...but maybe, if I’d taken the time to talk to her,

we could have prevented this.

Things aren't perfect, but we could be a team. I could have called someone else to pick Danny up or rescheduled my meeting with the lawyer. Audrey has been through hell these past few weeks, and when she needed me most, I pushed her away.

She made a mistake, but she's not a bad person.

I retreated when she needed me most.

The worm on the other side of the desk drums his fingers on the armrests of his chairs and grins at me. "Do we have a deal?"

Ha. He wishes. I narrow my eyes at him, and I wonder if Audrey has lumped me in the same category as him. Am I just another man who's let her down? Another man who expected perfection from her and tossed her aside when she couldn't achieve it?

The thought makes me sick. I want to *be there* for her. I want to be the one she turns to when things get rough because she knows I'll always help her. I don't want to be the type of man who gets angry, who punishes the woman he loves because she's swamped by life.

And that, I realize, sitting across from Audrey's ex-husband, is exactly what I feel. Love. Deep, thrumming, undeniable love.

I love Audrey, with her cutlery trays and her stationery. I love her brain. I love her body. I love the little wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and the way she laughs at things I say. I love the thought of forever with her.

Am I really going to throw that away because she dropped the ball one single time? Danny is resilient; he wasn't bothered by the extra half hour playing with Jace. I can put him first and still be there for the woman who's stolen my heart.

Because right now, Audrey needs a protector, a defender, a partner. She needs someone in her corner.

And that someone is going to be me.

An idea sparks, vindictive and vengeful. I braid my fingers on my desk and lean forward, staring Terry in his beady black eyes. “I think we can come to an agreement,” I tell him, and Terry gives me an oily, triumphant smile. The moron.

AS SOON AS Terry is out of my garage, I drive his car over to one of the lifts and make sure he won't be able to drive it out of here without my say-so. Then I head to the office and open one of the filing cabinets. I take out the records on Audrey's work van, which I find in a folder labeled with this month and year, exactly in the spot I'd expect to find it. Because the woman I love is an organized goddess.

I find the VIN—vehicle identification number—and plug it into an online database to find the previous owner.

That's another man who tried to screw her over, who nearly succeeded. Another pathetic scumbag who didn't deserve to be in her presence.

Is there any wonder she backed off when I withdrew? Every other man in her life has used her in one way or another. No one has ever taken care of her.

I was so angry about not being first in her life that I didn't even consider that she might want to be first in mine. The realization hits me, and I have to lean back in my office chair to let it set in. I scrub my face, feeling ashamed of myself.

Audrey must have felt exactly the same way I did. She's had to fight for everything she has. She's been on her own, even when she was married.

Instead of being angry, I should have been there to support her. I should have forgiven her, wrapped my arms around her, and told her I was there. I should have been compassionate, empathetic, worthy. Instead I tossed her aside like garbage at the first hurdle.

I'm going to fix this. I'll make sure she knows how important she is to me. Whether or not she wants me afterward is out of my hands.



The previous van owner puts way too much information on social media. I flick through a few photos and—*aha!*—his brother-in-law is a mechanic in Santa Rosa.

Call me Nancy fucking Drew, because I think I just solved a mystery.

She might never want to take me back. We had a fling, and now it's over. But Audrey won't get bullied and pushed around by a man when I can do something about it. I sure as hell won't let myself be lumped in with all the other lowlifes who treated her badly.

Audrey deserves to shine. I'm going to help her do it.

I lock up the garage and scroll through my phone until I find Mac's number. He's got kids now too—stepkids—who are around Danny's age.

"Mac," I say when he answers. "I need a favor. Can you watch Danny tonight? I've got to go on a little road trip."

THIRTY-ONE

# AUDREY

YESTERDAY WAS Meg's last day, and I'm already feeling her absence. It takes me hours longer than usual to finish the day's tasks, and I end up working until after seven o'clock.

The past two weeks have been tough. I don't remember work being so difficult, and I know I'm hanging onto sanity by a thread. Remy hasn't spoken to me, other than a polite nod when we happen to leave or arrive at our houses at the same time. Once, the day before yesterday, it looked like he wanted to talk to me, so I lingered by my front door a bit longer than necessary. I heard him sigh and disappear into his backyard, and I went inside and cried.

It's silly to be so hung up on a man I dated for a few weeks. It makes me feel stupid and emotional, but what can I do? He made me dream of a better life, and now I need to resign myself to the fact that that better life was a mirage.

The Organizing Goddess office is near the center of town, just a few streets away from Cove Boulevard. I stare out the window at the leafy green trees and the fading light of the sun, and I know it's time for me to go home.

Home—what a concept. That house hasn't felt like home since the day I messed up and forgot to pick Danny up from camp. I poured all my savings into it, and now I'm wondering how soon it'll be before I can afford to move again.

Sighing, I gather my things and head for the door. My van is making an alarming new noise, but I've burned my relationship with the town mechanic, so I'll have to find

someone else to trust to fix it. I add that to my mental to-do list as I drive toward the house on the hill I never should have bought.

By the time I've parked in my driveway, I feel bone-tired and empty.

Then my phone rings.

I lean back in the driver's seat and check the device, rolling my eyes at the sight of my ex-husband's name on the screen. What does he want now?

"What." I pinch the bridge of my nose and wait for the sound of his grating voice with my eyes closed.

"This is a courtesy call, Audrey. After I hang up with you, I'm calling my lawyer."

I drop my hand and stare through the windshield, seeing nothing. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, don't give me that shit, Audrey. You know exactly what I'm talking about."

"Terry, I think you might actually have lost your mind." I pull the door open and slip out, then turn around to grab my purse from the passenger seat. Closing the door with my hip, I hold my phone between my ear and shoulder while I fumble with the keys to lock the van door (the fob broke a few days ago, so I have to lock the doors manually, which is something that actually needs to go on my mental to-do list too).

"If that piece of shit doesn't give me my car back, I'm calling the police. I mean it, Audrey."

I freeze, straightening. "What?"

"Don't play dumb."

"I'm not playing anything," I grit out. "What are you talking about?"

Stepping onto the flagstones leading to my front door, I freeze. Terry says something in my ear, but I'm staring at the newly shorn blades of grass between the flagstones. Then my gaze travels the length of my yard.

Someone mowed my lawn.

I blink, staring. It's ridiculous to feel this much gratitude for a twenty-minute yard work chore, but as I stand in my front yard, my eyes begin to fill with tears.

One item, finally, I can cross off the mental to-do list without having to do anything at all. The relief is nearly overwhelming, which is absurd.

"...and I took down the damn reviews, so he owes me the keys. So tell him to get his ass over here and return my car before I call the cops and press charges. I mean it, Audrey! Right now!"

Terry's voice brings my attention back to the call. "Wait. Slow down. The reviews? That was *you*?"

"I... Listen, Audrey—don't—I'm not—"

"You review spammed my business because I wouldn't sleep with you, you cheating *asshole*?"

A bird squawks as it flaps out of Remy's magnolia tree, and I realize my sentence came out as a shriek. I drag in a breath in a futile attempt to calm myself down.

"I-I didn't say that," Terry stammers. "I was joking."

"Oh, go to hell."

It feels good to smash the "end call" button, and it feels even better to navigate to Terry's number and click the big red button that says, "Block Number."

Then I look my business up online and nearly begin to cry when I see my star review back up to the four-point-seven rating it's been since my business's inception. All the one-star reviews are gone—every single one. I click through the reviews to make sure, reading through the words of genuine customers gushing about the great work I did in their homes.

The words blur, and I realize I'm crying.

Then the rest of Terry's words sink in. Someone was holding his car hostage in exchange for taking down the reviews.

My head snaps toward my next-door neighbor's house. I'm running before I know it, smashing my finger against the doorbell and then banging my fist against the door.

"Remy!"

The house stays dark and quiet. I knock again and again before I finally have to acknowledge that no one's home. Phone in hand, I find Remy's number. No answer.

My heart sinks and thumps at the same time, and I need to rub my chest to try to ease the discomfort. I glance across the yard to my own front lawn, and I know it was Remy who mowed it.

For the first time in weeks, hope blooms.

Maybe... Does this mean... Is he...

Staring at the silent phone in my hands, anxiety suddenly swamps me.

What if he's just being nice? Remy is kind and big-hearted. What if he doesn't want to be with me, and these are just favors he's doing because he's a good person?

A car screeches to a stop in front of Remy's house. I spin around in time to see Terry launching himself out of the driver's seat, his face like thunder.

"You," he hisses.

I face him fully, widening my stance. "What are you doing here?"

"You *boyfriend*," he spits the word, "stole my car."

I glance at the car behind him and arch a brow. "The car you drove here?"

Terry vibrates, his face bright red. "You've always been a little bitch, Audrey."

Something inside me snaps. It's tiny, a single fine thread that had held all my beliefs together. I feel it disintegrate in the depths of my heart, and suddenly I can stand tall. "You need to leave," I tell my ex-husband, "Or I'm calling the police."

"Call them! I'll tell them that scumbag mechanic held my car hostage!"

"Why did he do that, Terry? Is it because you harassed me online with dozens of fake reviews?"

I didn't know faces could turn purple. Terry's eyes bulge. It's oddly satisfying.

My ex-husband has a terrible temper. I used to tiptoe around him when we were together, doing everything in my power to make sure he'd never get upset. Now, I don't have the desire or the patience to do it.

I step off Remy's porch and narrow my eyes. "You need to leave and never speak to me again. We're done, Terry."

His narrow, twisted mouth opens—and a car screeches down my quiet street. It's a white sedan I don't recognize until the driver slams on the brakes and stops next to Terry's car.

Caroline flings herself out from behind the wheel and tears open the back door. She grabs a handful of men's clothes and tosses them at Terry's car with a feral yell. "You cheating *bastard!*"

Terry's gaze flicks from her to me and back again. "Caroline, what are you doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" she asks, circling her car to get to the passenger side. She rips the door open and grabs something from the seat, brandishing a brown legal envelope. "I'm divorcing you!"

The envelope slices through the air and lands at Terry's feet.

"No you're not," he growls.

"I've retained a lawyer, and I'm taking you to the cleaners." Her eyes are slits. "That prenup we signed wasn't

just for shits and giggles, *sweetheart*.” She says the pet name like an insult.

“Caroline, calm down.”

I sidle toward the gap in the bushes so I can head for my own house, keeping the two of them in my sights. Caroline is at her car’s driver’s side again, the door open. She snarls at her husband. “I’m calm, Terry. I’m suing you for full custody of our child, and I’m making damn well sure that infidelity clause in our prenup comes into play.”

The purplish color of Terry’s skin drains completely, and his face turns bone white. “Wait,” he says. “No. Caroline—wait.”

“My sister is staying at the house with me. Her husband is installing cameras. If you need to speak to me, do it through my lawyer.”

And with that, Caroline slips behind the wheel of her car and drives away.

I click my jaw shut. I’ve made it to my own front door, my hand on the knob in case Terry turns his anger on me. But he’s in a daze, staring at the clothing and toiletries strewn over the street. He picks up the legal envelope and glances inside. His shoulders round.

Quietly, I slip inside my house and lock the door. Through the front window, I watch him pile his belongings into the back seat of his car and drive away.

All is quiet.

I should feel vindicated, victorious—and the very petty part of me does—but mostly I feel tired. Caroline has a long road ahead, but at least she won’t have to drag Terry along with her.

That’s when I realize that I’m glad he and I divorced. It’s no longer an empty, neutral feeling. Now, having witnessed the mess he made of his next marriage, I feel nothing but bone-deep relief at having left that part of my life behind.



My gaze drifts over the newly-shorn grass of my front lawn.

As I look at the evidence of Remy's good deed—because no one else could have done this for me without wanting anything else in return—a warm feeling spreads across my chest. It's like the warmth of the morning sun on my skin. Like the dawn of a new day.

Then I get an idea.

Hyperventilating, I let the curtains fall back over my window and make a beeline to my kitchen. I work at warp speed, not stopping until I hear a car pull in next door. Remy's garage opens and closes, and I give myself ten minutes to gather my thoughts, get changed, and tamp down my nerves.

Then I take a deep breath and cross our front yards one last time.

THIRTY-TWO

# REMY

I'VE JUST STEPPED out of the shower when I hear the doorbell ring. Annoyance sparks. If this is that scumbag Terry, I'm going to do what I've wanted to do from the moment I met him and punch him in the mouth.

He got his precious car back. All he had to do was pay the minimal price we agreed on at the start—and take down all the fake reviews he posted to Audrey's business. The look on his face when I told him what it would take to get his vehicle back was priceless. That useless weasel went white as a sheet and started stammering. Then his face suddenly got red, then turned purple. I've never seen anyone so angry.

But he took those damn reviews down, and he got his car back. All's well that ends well, except for the fact that he's blacklisted from my garage for the rest of his life, and if he ever goes near Audrey again—physically or virtually—he'll be in real trouble.

Because that's the thing about cowards—their bravado only extends to people they know they can shove around. And I'm not one of those people.

Smirking, I dry myself off and pull on a pair of sweats. On bare feet, with my hair still dripping onto my bare shoulders, I make my way to the front door, ready for a fight.

But the sight that greets me is one I've seen in my dreams. Audrey stands on my stoop wearing a fluttery blue dress, her hair dancing in the summer breeze, holding a home-baked pecan pie.

My mouth is suddenly dry. I did it for her—of course I did. I got that idiot to take down the reviews. I made a trip to Santa Rosa. I mowed her lawn.

I hoped it meant we could speak to each other again, but now she's here, and I find that all the words have fled from my mind. I can't think of a single thing to say.

She gulps. "I made pie," she says.

My gaze drops to the dish, and warmth unfurls in my chest. "Is that for me or my grandma this time?"

Lips curling, Audrey shrugs. "It's for the person who held my ex-husband's car hostage until he stopped cyberbullying me."

"Ah," I nod, heart thumping.

"And also for the person who mowed my lawn, if they happen to be one and the same."

My throat is so tight it's hard to speak. "They are," I tell her.

Tears shimmer in Audrey's eyes. "Thank you," she whispers, then extends the pie toward me.

Instead of taking it, I open the door a little wider. Watching Audrey's chest rise as she inhales, I try to still my thumping heart as she steps inside my home.

Suddenly, everything is better. I missed having her here. Missed her face, her laughter, her voice. I missed everything about her, and I never want to feel that way again.

"Is Danny here?"

"Sleepover at Jace's," I explain.

"Ah."

We walk to the kitchen, where she places the pie down. She'd been carrying it with potholders, and she slips them off her hands before turning to face me. Her gaze rakes over my chest, my shoulders, up to the hair still leaving droplets on my body.

“Hi,” she says shyly.

My arms are around her before I give myself conscious permission to move. I have her crushed to my chest so fast she lets out a little *oof* of surprise, and then there’s no time to talk because I’m kissing her. Her lips are soft, pillowy, and perfect. She tastes like heaven. The feel of her hands shaping my shoulders and tangling into my wet hair is a tonic to my weary soul.

I pull away from her only far enough to meet her gaze, gripping the hair at the back of her head to tilt her face up to mine. “I’m sorry, Audrey.”

Confusion flits across her features. “For what?”

“For being so hard on you and pulling away when you needed me. I’m sorry I got mad. I’m sorry I wasn’t there to help you through the hard times.”

She shakes her head, eyes wide. “What? No! I’m sorry, Remy. I messed up. You asked me for a simple favor, and I was so wrapped up in my own world that I let you down. It was my fault.” Her lip wobbles. “And now you fixed the review problem, and you mowed my lawn, and I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you because pie doesn’t actually make up for everything you did for m—”

Lips crushed to hers, I let out a moan when she softens against me. I drop a kiss on her jaw. “Pie makes up for everything,” I tell her, running my lips down her throat. “You being here is everything I need.”

“That’s not fair to you.” She gasps when I cup her breast and knead. God, I missed touching her.

“I’m not worried about things being fair.” I kiss her harder, wanting her to understand. But when I pull away, she’s just as confused as ever. I hold her, leaning my forehead against hers. “Audrey, I’m in love with you.”

“You... What?”

I meet her gaze and smile softly. “I love you, sweetheart. I’ve loved you from the moment you opened my cutlery drawer and looked at me like I was a psychopath.”

“Well, I think that was justified...”

Laughing, I press my lips to hers. “I asked you for a favor, and I know you forgot. It was a mistake. I forgive you.”

“It was *Danny*, Remy. I forgot to pick up your child. I can never forgive myself—”

“You’re going to have to,” I tell her. “Right now.”

Her chest heaves. I wrap my arms around her and squeeze.

“I won’t do it again,” she says quietly. “I promise, Remy. I won’t mess up like that again.”

Pulling away, I let my hand slide over her cheek. “Of course you will, Audrey. It’s inevitable. You’re not perfect and neither am I. We’ll both mess up and have to deal with the fallout afterward. But I don’t want mistakes to keep us apart. Life is hard, and you make it better. Be imperfect with *me*, Audrey. Let me pick up your slack when you need it. Let me take care of you and do the same for me in return.”

It breaks my heart to see Audrey’s lip wobble. A tear escapes her eye, and I brush it away with my thumb. “You’re far too good for me, Remy. You’ll get tired of me.”

There’s only one word to respond to that, and it’s the absolute truth: “Never.”

She gulps, her hands sliding to my chest, fingertips tracing the tattoo on my left pectoral. She blinks, and another tear falls down her cheek. Then she looks up at me. “I’m scared.”

“What are you afraid of, sweetheart?”

“That I’m making the same mistakes all over again,” she tells me. “That I’ll let you in and you’ll push me away. That I won’t be able to be good enough to handle a relationship and a business and all the ups and downs of life...”

“Audrey,” I say quietly, “listen to me.”

She blinks, meeting my gaze.

“I love you. I love all of you. I’ve spent the past few weeks beating myself up because I pushed you away when you needed me, and I realized that I can’t live without you. I want

to be the man you turn to when things get tough. I want you to look at me and know that whatever happens—whatever mistakes you think you make—I'll always be there for you. I am your safe harbor, sweetheart. And you're mine."

All at once, the tension leaves her body. "You love me," she whispers.

"I love you like I've never loved anyone before."

"You want to be with me."

"I want forever with you, Audrey."

Her breath catches. "I want that too."

Stroking her cheek with my thumb, I let my lips curl into a smile. "Good."

When I kiss her, my touch is tender. I nuzzle her skin, brush my lips against hers, and savor every touch, every breath. Soon, she's clinging to me like she's afraid her legs won't hold her, and I feel like the luckiest man in the world—until she whispers the words I've been dying to hear.

"I love you, Remy."

A growl rattles my chest, and I stop trying to hold back.

THIRTY-THREE



# AUDREY

A MOMENT after I utter those magic words, I'm being picked up and dropped on the edge of the kitchen counter. Remy spreads my knees and notches himself between my thighs.

"Say it again," he commands. His hand tunnels into my hair and tugs. "Say it again, Audrey."

"I love you," I gasp. Arousal tumbles through me as Remy tugs me to the very edge of the counter. With one hand buried in my hair, he reaches between my legs with the other. My panties are yanked to the side and his thick fingers slide where I need them most.

"You're wet for me already," he rasps, sliding a digit inside.

"Mm-hmm," I manage, rolling my hips in time with his touch.

He adds a finger. "I'm going to fuck you right here, Audrey, and you're going to tell me you're mine. You understand?"

I nod. "Yes."

"Say it."

"I'm yours."

His sigh is one of pure relief. Then things happen quickly. He hooks his thumbs into the waistband of his pants, shoves them down to his ankles, and gives himself a swift stroke. His eyes are dark as pitch. One hand claws at my dress, shoving it

up to my stomach before hooking my knee over his elbow and tugging me so I'm almost hanging off the edge of the counter.

I'm breathless. My heart thumps. I want him so badly I could cry.

Then, without saying a word, Remy shoves himself home.

We moan in unison, and then he's hooking both elbows beneath my knees and spreading me wide. I grip the edge of the counter and hang on for dear life.

"Say it."

"I'm yours," I gasp.

"Mine." He slams into me. "Forever."

"Forever," I agree.

Then my arms are around his neck and he's lifting me up, turning around, and pressing me against the wall. He drives himself inside me so hard I see stars, and I never want it to end. I kiss his jaw, rake my nails across his shoulders.

"I love you, Remy," I chant over and over while he strips away the last of my sanity—but what did sanity ever do for me, other than make me into an anxious, overthinking mess?

"This is it, Audrey," he says, pounding into me against his kitchen wall. "You're it for me. There's only you."

"Only you," I repeat, because I can't manage full sentences.

When I come with a cry, he lets out a satisfied growl and then joins me with a climax of his own. Slowly, Remy lets my legs drop to the floor as he holds me close. Our breaths come in sharp pants. I push a hank of hair off my sweaty forehead, blinking to clear my vision, and then meet Remy's gaze.

His eyes are soft, and his lips are curled into a smile. "I meant it, Audrey. I want forever with you."

My heart is too big for its cage. I find myself smiling, and every last bit of fear that had gripped me before has vanished. "Forever sounds good."

He presses his lips to my forehead, then bends down to pull his sweats back up from where they'd been clumped around his ankles. I fix my clothes and drag in a few much-needed breaths.

Then we eat pie.

Spearing the last pecan on my plate, I make a mental note to tell Laurel her initial master plan of “do it on the kitchen counter and then eat pie” actually came to fruition.

“I want to show you something,” Remy says, threading his fingers through mine.

“Okay.” I smile as he tugs me down the hallway toward the garage door.

Remy pauses with his hand on the knob, glancing at me, then lets out a gust of breath. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

We step through, and I freeze on the bare concrete floors. My eyes widen and for a few moments, I can’t utter a word.

“You like it?”

“Remy,” I breathe, turning to him. “What... How...?”

“Took a trip down to Santa Rosa,” he explains. “Got your money back.”

I turn to the gleaming white van with the Organizing Goddess logo proudly branded on the side. “You bought me a *van*?”

“Well, I used the money you paid for the original van, and I figured I could convince you to let me use your old one for parts. Works out in my favor, really.”

“Remy. Stop it. You did this for me even though I messed up so badly?”

Remy’s smile fades slightly. He reaches up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, shaking his head. “Audrey, you need to forgive yourself for not picking Danny up that day. I have.”

Tears fill my eyes. “You’re too good for me, Remy.”

That makes him grin. “No. I just understand that we all need someone to lean on once in a while. I want to be that man for you, Audrey.”

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I pull Remy down for a kiss. As his lips crush mine and his arms curl around my body, I finally, *finally* feel like I’ve found a home. Avocado toilets not included.

Pulling away, I glance at the van. “How did you get my money back without returning the old van?”

“You know that scene in *Goodfellas* when Joe Pesci flips on a dime and makes the ‘Funny, how? Funny like I amuse you?’ speech to Ray Liotta? I just literally quoted the movie to the guy when he tried to laugh me out of his auto shop.”

Giggling, I shake my head. “You didn’t.”

“I make a good mobster, apparently.”

Laughter bursts out of me. I lean against Remy, falling a little more in love with him with every second I spend with him. “Thank you,” I finally manage between giggles. “I love it.”

“Good,” he says, squeezing me tight. “Because I love you.”

Tilting my head up, I accept his kiss. “Love you too, Remy.”

# EPILOGUE

## AUDREY

EXACTLY ONE YEAR to the day after I crashed into Remy's tree, I walk down the aisle carrying a bouquet of magnolias. My dress is the same white as the flowers, sleeveless, with a subtle trumpet shape. When I meet Remy's gaze as he waits by the altar, the rest of the world falls away.

Laurel, my maid of honor, takes the bouquet from me and stands to the side while I slip my hands into Remy's. When it comes time for the rings, Danny presents them to us with a wide smile on his face.

And not long after that, we are pronounced husband and wife. Kissing Remy after tying the knot is one of the happiest moments of my life.

After my divorce, I didn't think I'd marry again. I thought love was for other people and that companionship was out of reach. Now, I can't imagine my life any other way.

I'll take Remy's name and finally shed the last of my identity as Terry's wife. I'd considered going back to my maiden name, but it seemed like a lot of paperwork for little benefit. Now, the benefit is moving on completely from the mistakes I made in the past.

Two months ago, I moved in with Remy and Danny full-time. My home is currently empty, but we have plans to rent it out in the coming months. For now, it's a nice refuge where I can return when I sense that Danny and Remy need some alone time.

It's a big adjustment, but the three of us are adapting. Danny, especially, seems to be thriving. That may or may not have to do with the number of brownies and pies he somehow convinces me to bake for him.

At work, I've hired a bright young woman to replace Meg, and she's taken to the job faster than I could have hoped. And about a month after Remy bought the garage, I ran into Meg at Four Cups and mentioned that Remy was looking for someone to take care of the office for two or three days a week. She's been the perfect addition to his team, and she's especially enjoying the flexibility of the role now that she's expecting a new addition to her family.

Every week, I get a little better at delegating. It helps to have Remy there to motivate me to clear my schedule when he makes promises that are dark and dirty. Crashing into his tree was the best thing I ever did for my business—and my life. That's a thought that makes me smile as I wrap my arms around my new husband and celebrate our union.

After our wedding reception, Danny heads to Jace's house for a sleepover, and Remy and I go home.

"Still happy we didn't rent the honeymoon suite?" Remy asks, unlocking the front door.

"This is my honeymoon suite," I tell him, kicking my heels off. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

His smile is pure, quiet joy. We wrap our arms around each other, and then we make love. My wedding night is beautiful, and it's not until Remy is asleep beside me, the moonlight carving shadows on his body, that I take stock of what just happened.

I met and married the love of my life. I was accepted into his life—into his child's life—with open arms. I've finally found somewhere I belong, where I don't need to be perfect to be loved.

Slipping out of bed, I wrap a robe around my body and pad downstairs. On bare feet, I walk over the front lawn to the magnolia tree in full bloom. The wound from my van's front

grille has healed, and the tree seems to be thriving once more. This is the tree that brought Remy into my life. It's the tree that provided him with a safe haven as a child, the tree that kept the memory of his sister alive throughout all these years. I touch the smooth green bark and whisper, "Thank you."

A creak makes me turn around. Remy steps off the front porch and joins me under the fragrant white blooms. He wraps his arms around me as we inhale the scent of the flowers and the cool night air.

"I dream of a day," Remy says quietly, "when I'll wake up, old and wrinkled, and you'll be by my side. I'll wrap my arms around you and pull you close. We'll make love, because I'll be obsessed with you until the day I die. Then we'll have coffee in the backyard and listen to the birds. We'll putter around the garden, and you'll show me a new organization system for all my seeds. Then, at dinnertime, Danny will come home with his wife and kids, if he has them, and tell us some piece of good news that will make us want to celebrate. We'll have a delicious meal together, share a bottle of wine, and then head up to bed. You'll smile at me and tell me you love me, and we'll fall asleep next to each other knowing that the next day will be just as good."

My chest tightens as I listen to Remy's words, knowing he's not only speaking to me, but to his sister's memory.

"What's the good news that Danny will share?" I ask.

"I don't know yet," Remy replies, smiling. "We'll have to wait and find out."

"I love you, husband."

Remy touches his nose to mine. "And I love you, wife."

We kiss softly, tenderly, and then breathe in the sweet night air. Under the branches of a blooming magnolia tree, I lean my head against his chest and know that all of our dreams will come true.

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# DIRTY LITTLE MIDLIFE CRISIS

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# PREVIEW

ONE

# FIONA

A TIRED GROAN shudders out of my best friend's rusty old Toyota. That...doesn't sound good.

On the bright side, Simone's hooptie has successfully gotten us three hundred miles north of Los Angeles and into our destination vacation town. Unfortunately, it doesn't look like it's going to make it much farther.

I grip the worn plastic door handle as if it'll help keep the car together. If Simone's worried about her car breaking down, she doesn't show it. With wild red hair tied back in a messy bun on top of her head and thick, black-rimmed glasses framing her pale blue eyes, Simone looks far younger than her forty-four years—a fact that has often needled at my own insecurities. Time hasn't been so kind to me.

Another screechy noise escapes the hood of the car as we turn onto the main drag of Heart's Cove, and I start hunting the signs on the street for a mechanic. Even if Simone isn't worried about this hunk of junk, I need a way to get out of here at the end of our two-week stay.

We make it about fifty more feet before the engine sputters, the car rattles, and the whole thing dies right there on the street. Simone expertly navigates the coasting car to the curb as smoke curls out of the hood in thick black puffs. Parked in a semi-appropriate spot and acting like nothing at all is the matter, she pulls the handbrake and tucks a strand of flame-red hair behind her ear.

I throw my best friend a glance. “We should have taken my car.”

“We couldn’t take your car. It reminds you of Voldemort.”

“Voldemort?”

“He Who Shall Not Be Named. That shiny white Mercedes is the only thing that asshole left you in the divorce and looking at it reminds you of his cheating ass. I see it in your eyes every time you turn the key in the ignition. There was *no way* we were taking your car. Big Bertha did just fine.” She taps the dashboard fondly, as if there isn’t a plume of dark smoke coming from Bertha’s hood. My best friend gives me a meaningful stare. “This vacation is about us, about pampering, about being the women we were always meant to be. Besides, we made it, didn’t we?”

“Barely,” I grumble, fighting the grin trying to curl my lips.

“I’ll find a mechanic this afternoon. We won’t need the car for the next two weeks, anyway—everything in Heart’s Cove is within walking distance from the Heart’s Cove Hotel. It’s in the brochure.”

Through the windshield, past the smoke, I spy a faded green-and-white awning above the hotel door. A screen door hangs slightly crooked and lace curtains frame the interior of every window. Paint is peeling on the old siding, but neatly trimmed grass lines the front of the hotel and baskets bursting with colorful flowers hang from every post. A low hedge lines the sidewalk leading to a small parking lot, the other side of which is a well-maintained path to the front door.

This accommodation is quaint, though a bit worse for wear. It isn’t exactly what I’d put as my first pick.

Or maybe it’s not what John, my ex-husband, would have liked. Do I *actually* mind this place? It’s kind of cute, in a lost-kitten-with-patchy-fur-and-three-legs kind of way. If Simone’s to be believed, it’s got great reviews and a killer continental breakfast.

John would've taken one look at this place and complained nonstop until we found someplace else, maybe even canned the whole vacation—but he's not here. He's in his swanky office in L.A. with whatever hot, young assistant he's decided to stick his junk into. Or maybe a paralegal. Or a junior partner. Or an intern. Or all of the above.

*Deep breaths.*

Simone must see my pursed lips, because she punches me in the arm. “Quit sucking lemons, Fi. Come on. We have art to create.”

“How many times do I have to tell you I'm not an artist? Why did you have to choose an art retreat for our big self-actualization getaway? I'm a precision gal. Organizing. Planning. Why can't we have a vacation job hunting or something? At least it would be useful.”

Simone lets out a snort and exits the car, casting a quick glance at the smoke still escaping her hood. She kicks a tire for good measure, then slings her purse over her shoulder and waves me forward. “Come on! The sign on the door says to check in inside.”

Pushing thoughts of my ex aside, I follow Simone out of the car. The air tastes fresh here, if you can ignore the smell of Bertha's dying engine. Full of floral scents and a hint of salt from the sea, the smell unwinds a knot of tension between my shoulders. Simone's right. I need a vacation—and why not do something that I never would have done before? Why not try something new?

It's not like there's anything for me back in Los Angeles. Now that the fancy penthouse was transferred to John's name last week and my half of its worth has finally hit my bank account, I'm officially homeless. The divorce is settled, so I'm officially single, too. My dream of moving to the hills and getting my picket fence and perfect little family are gone with the penthouse, but I'm trying not to think about it too hard. Starting over at forty-five isn't something I'd planned on.

Simone decided I needed some time to figure myself out, so I'm here. About to do two weeks of art, yoga, and

meditation classes in the hope of *finding myself*, even though I'm terrified of what I might discover. I find myself in the mirror every morning, and I'm not sure I like what I see. I'm on the other side of forty-five, with new wrinkles appearing every day. Things are sagging where they never used to, and soft where they were once taut.

Compared to John's younger, prettier, more docile playthings, I feel positively dumpy. I'm not sure a week of painting and *ohm*-ing will help any of that.

Simone's already halfway to the door by the time I take a step. She turns around and plants her fists on her hips, arching her brows at me. "Um, earth to Fiona! Get a wriggle on, girl. Our first class starts in half an hour."

I pause, tilting my head. "I thought you said tomorrow was day one."

"I lied. Deal with it." She pushes a stray piece of red hair off her forehead, looking zero percent remorseful. Her eyes sweep down the street then back to me, shoulders dropping slightly. Speaking more gently, she says, "I knew you'd never get in the car if you knew you had to try drawing something today. Your comfort zone is doing its best to keep you hostage, so you know, desperate times and all that."

"Who are you calling desperate?" I pop a brow.

Simone grins, but before she can open her mouth to answer, a rumble sounds from the asphalt separating us. My best friend's eyes widen as she looks at the ground where a crack is splitting the pavement apart. I take a step back, a hand on my chest.

Then the parking lot of the Heart's Cove Hotel explodes.

No, really. It explodes.

Asphalt everywhere. A geyser of water shooting fifty feet into the air, cascading down on top of us. I scream, putting my purse over my head while I crouch down. Rocks and bits of asphalt rain down around me, biting my skin as they land. I put a hand on the back of my neck, pull it back, and see blood.

What the...?



Water's still raining down on me as shouts erupt. Doors open, and a siren sounds in the distance. I'm still crouched on the sidewalk, staring at the blood on my fingers.

What in the name of self-actualization is wrong with this town? Where the heck did Simone bring me? Maybe I should hightail it out of here, but how would I even do that? Our car is out of commission.

I'm stuck, stuck, stuck. Just like I was stuck in my marriage. Stuck in a penthouse I didn't like. Stuck in a city I never wanted to be in. Stuck around sycophants and snobby housewives preening and gossiping while I felt like I was dying a slow and painful death as life passed me by.

Water seeps into my dress, soaking my back. I curl myself into a ball, worried another stray chunk of asphalt is coming for my skull. My thoughts rush around me, and my comfort zone constricts inside my head.

I should have stayed at home. What if John needs me for something? I should be apartment hunting and trying to find a job. A vacation is the last thing I need. Why would I even deserve a vacation? I need to get my butt in gear and start figuring out how to start my life over.

Emotion chokes my throat, and I feel silly. I'm not the kind of person who falls apart. I'm the rock. I'm the one who keeps the family together.

*That didn't go so well, did it?*

Tears threaten to spill onto my cheeks and I fight my rioting emotions to hold myself together. It's just a burst water main. I have a shallow cut on the back of my neck, but I'm fine. Just wet and weirdly emotional.

Then, a shadow. The water stops, and I hear the pitter-patter of a geyser hitting an open umbrella. The lack of water raining down on me allows me to take a full breath. I lift my head to see the owner of the umbrella currently helping me maintain a shaky hold on my own sanity.

Holy *ohm*.

Heart's Cove might not be so bad, judging by this vision in a wet t-shirt.

Tall, dark, and handsome doesn't even cover it. This guy looks like he belongs in every forty-something woman's wet dream, not in a sleepy town called Heart's Cove. He's broad, and by the way his wet shirt clings to his chest, I can tell he's packing serious muscle. My eyes sweep over the curves of his pecs and shoulders, down his arms and over his trim waist. Snapping my eyes back up before they reach dangerous territory, I see a hint of a smile on his full lips.

"Um, hi," I stammer, standing up as I brush my hands down my navy wrap dress. The back of it is soaked. My dress clings to me as much as his shirt hugs him, and I catch my mystery man's eyes heating as they take me in. A strange kind of warmth knots in the pit of my stomach as I tuck a strand of black-brown hair behind my ear. I gulp, still staring at my savior.

He has dark hair and rich, tan skin with two patches of grey hair above his temples. The rest of his hair is piled to one side in short, loose curls, one of which slides down across his forehead.

I watch in fascination as he lifts a broad hand to sweep the stray piece of hair back, his grey-blue eyes still studying me. Is he even real? I'm not sure people this good-looking exist in real life. Maybe I finally snapped after the last horrendous fifteen months. The geyser was the last straw. Something in Bertha's engine fumes has turned my brain to mush. I've finally lost my marbles.

"I'm Grant." His rich, deep voice sends a tremor shivering down my spine. It sounds real enough.

I barely manage to croak out a response. "Fiona."

His lips curl into a smile, as if the sound of my name pleases him. A curl of heat beads in the pit of my stomach and I place a hand over the offending spot. I feel... I'm not...

I haven't felt this in a *long* time.

Grant lifts a hand toward me, and I suck a breath through my teeth as he reaches around the back of my neck. As I close my eyes, I imagine him pulling me close, crushing me against that glorious chest of his, and taking my lips in his.

A man like him would take control. I can sense it in the electricity zinging between us. He'd pin me to a wall and show me what I've been missing for the past twenty years. He'd light up every nerve ending in my body and be as rough, as commanding, as demanding as he'd need to be.

And I would melt like freaking butter on his tongue. God, his tongue—I wish I could melt on it. Preferably when his hands grip me tight and I feel the raw power coiling in his huge body. *Wet and weirdly emotional*, huh. Yup, still accurate.

But Grant's touch is feather-light when the pads of his fingers brush across the back of my neck. They're calloused, rough. Not at all like John's doughy, soft hands were when he palmed my skin back in the days when we actually touched each other.

Grant's skin may be rough, but his touch is soft. A silent gasp escapes my lips before I can stop myself, heat flooding between my legs, spreading through my core, and all the way up to the tips of my ears.

This is... Oh, no. Is this menopause? Did I just have my first hot flash under a geyser in the middle of a parking lot?

But when I open my eyes, Grant's expression is soft. "You're bleeding," he says, almost to himself. Before I can stop him, he hands me the umbrella, then grabs the edge of his shirt and rips off a strip.

The man *rips his freaking shirt apart* and uses it to dab at my admittedly very minor wound.

I might faint.

This is a fever dream. This isn't real life. It can't be.

I stare at the strip of skin now exposed by the rip, just above the waistband of Grant's pants. His stomach is hard, and the unholy desire to run my tongue over that bit of flesh bubbles through me without warning.

“Fiona!” Simone’s voice cuts through the lust fogging my mind. My best friend runs over, shielding her face with her hands as she laughs. “Can you believe it? I think it’s a sign.”

“Of what? Poor municipal plumbing?”

Grant lets out a chuckle at my words, and the desire to make him laugh again overwhelms me. I steal a glance at him as Simone walks up to me, her eyes widening as she takes in the specimen standing next to me.

“Well, hello there, handsome. I’m Simone.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me, then drops into a curtsy in front of Grant.

A freaking curtsy, as if the man is the King of England.

My best friend is a maniac.

“Grant,” he replies with a smile, not at all bothered by the fact that Simone is insane. “I’d better go check on the twins. They’ve been having trouble with the hotel maintenance lately, and I’m sure they could use a hand.” I make to give him the umbrella, but he shakes his head. “Keep it. I don’t mind getting wet.” A flash crosses his eyes as his gaze drops to my lips then away, so quickly I wonder if I imagined it.

Call me the Wicked Witch of the West, because I’m about to melt right where I stand.

Simone squeals as she hooks her arm through mine, and we watch Grant stride around the geyser, his white shirt soaking through and clinging to every muscle in his back. “He is *delicious*. It’s definitely a sign.”

“A sign of what?”

“That this vacation is *exactly* what you needed.”

“He’s just a friendly local.”

“I *hope* he’s friendly,” Simone answers, the word sounding *very* different when she says it.

I shake my head, laughing, and nod to the hotel. “Should we go find out what’s going on?”

“Yeah, but first let me grab some tissues. I don’t want to drool all over the hotel floor if I’m going to be in the same

room as that *friendly local*.”

Rolling my eyes, I fight the smile off my face and jerk my head toward the green-and-white awning, setting off in the same direction as Grant went as if there’s a tether pulling me toward him.

Maybe Simone’s right. Maybe this vacation was a good idea, after all.

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Fiona is only in town for a vacation, until a flooded hotel room sends her to look for alternative housing arrangements...with the town’s hunky handyman.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lilian Monroe adores writing swoonworthy heroes and the women who bring them to their knees. She loves making people laugh and is eternally grateful to have found people who share her sense of humor.

When she's not writing, she's reading (or rereading) a book, walking, lifting weights, or attempting to play the guitar with very limited success.

She grew up in Canada but now lives in Australia with her Irish husband. He frequently asks to be used as a cover model for her books, and she's not quite sure whether or not he's joking.



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