

A romantic couple embracing in a sunlit field. The man is on the right, leaning towards the woman on the left. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background is a soft-focus landscape with trees and a bright sun creating a lens flare effect. The overall color palette is warm, with greens, yellows, and oranges.

HEAD
OVER
HEELS

KARLA SORENSEN

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HEELS

a Wilder Family novel

KARLA SORENSEN

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*For the reader like Ivy —
who hides a mushy, soft heart behind a little armor and a lot of expectations.
I see you, and hope you can find someone who lets you put the armor down
for a while.*

Chapter 1

Cameron

Maybe I had a hero complex—some white knight syndrome bullshit that had always been ingrained in me, or maybe I shouldered more weight than necessary—but I could not physically imagine anything worse than having to let down the women in my life.

And I had a lot of them.

No wife or girlfriend, which was probably for the best. But I had a metric fuck ton of sisters (I had four, but it felt like three times as many most days), and they kept me on my toes *just* enough that it was impossible to make room for anyone else who might make a greater claim on my already massive sense of responsibility.

The street corner outside my hotel in Portland bustled—cars and people and the energy of a larger city that usually made me avoid them. At that moment, though, I wanted those city noises to be just a bit louder.

Maybe they'd drown out all the shit in my head.

I stared down at my phone with a grim set to my mouth and an imaginary elephant crowding to make room on my shoulders. Two elephants, actually.

In fact, I'd prefer if someone popped in front of me and took a crowbar to my junk so that I could have a pleasant distraction from the task that awaited me.

Maybe I wasn't the eldest son in the family, but I was the one running the family business, the one proclaiming our last name proudly, and I just lost us a massive contract that would've kept us busy for at least eighteen months.

If I thought too hard about all the jobs we'd said no to for this one...

No.

I couldn't go there.

Waiting for my business partner—and sister—to pick up the phone, the elephants gained a few friends until I couldn't believe I was still standing for how they pressed down all around me.

Greer picked up on the next ring. "Sorry, I was finishing up on the other line. How'd the meeting go?"

I rubbed my forehead. "Not great."

Loaded silence greeted my tight response.

Greer and I had worked together for too long for me to fake any sort of pleasantries—we'd been running Wilder Homes since we were in our early twenties. She handled the design side of things, most of the initial client interactions that locked in the schedule, and kept the communication flowing while I oversaw the construction crew, managed all the subcontractors, and built the damn houses.

And in rare cases like this, I attended an important client meeting that was about to blow the foreseeable future to fucking pieces.

"What happened?" she asked.

Before answering, I pushed my tongue into the side of my cheek and stared up at the long stretch of windows covering my hotel from the night before.

Greer booked my travel, picking an older hotel with interesting architecture, curved stonework around the windows, and eclectic decor inside. She picked it, no doubt, because she knew I'd stay somewhere cheap and nondescript, and then I'd be annoyed when I had to drive farther through downtown traffic for my meeting.

Well ... I was already annoyed because a few short days ago, newspapers across the Pacific Northwest broke with the story that our client was facing allegations ranging from tax evasion to sexual assault.

Not the kind of person I'd willingly enter into business with.

But it wasn't just about me.

And because I was a masochist, I dredged up the faces of every person who worked for us, my mind racing of how we could make this right for them.

You know, considering I didn't know how to give them work.

Greer wanted to know what happened? I blew out a harsh breath.

"Our schedule is suddenly wide open," I told her.

"Shit," she muttered. "So the story was true?"

"Unfortunately." I scrubbed a hand over my face. "Not that he admitted

anything in our meeting, but he definitely wasn't proclaiming his innocence either."

If I'd been somewhere more private, I would've kicked at something just to have an outlet.

"He didn't seem ... criminal when he hired us," she said. "He was so nice."

"I know." My jaw was tight around the words. "I know I did the right thing, but —"

She interrupted as soon as my voice trailed off. "Don't you dare feel bad about this, Cameron Marcus Wilder."

At the motherly tone—honest to God, my sisters could not help themselves—I rolled my eyes a little. "The full name wasn't necessary."

"It is if you're feeling even a shred of guilt." She cleared her throat, and the sound of a door closed on the other end of the phone. "If that story is true, and he's involved in half the things the articles are saying, you'd feel even worse taking a single penny of that man's money. If we have to lay the guys off for a couple of months until we can find a build to replace it, they'll get unemployment."

"I know," I said as my stomach churned. The trip to Portland, and the last-minute meeting with the sweet, grandfatherly old man who turned out to be involved in numerous illicit and highly illegal activities, was the last thing I needed to cram into an already insane week.

Back at home—a handful of hours away in Sisters, Oregon—we had a family fraying at the edges with my dad being sick. His decline from his third round of cancer was getting more and more apparent. As the oldest son still at home, I carried that weight too. How to step in where my dad and stepmom needed me. And for the most part, that was keeping Wilder Homes running like a smooth machine. It was the income for half our family, practically. Not just myself and Greer, but my dad and Sheila were still on payroll as minority owners—their share was worth twenty percent of the company, with Greer and I splitting the remaining eighty.

Weeks earlier, I'd promised my older brother Ian a job when he moved back home from London. He wanted to be back in Oregon because of Dad. My youngest sister, Poppy, had started helping out in the office.

Our collective grief was enough to deal with on any given day, but I couldn't help but feel a staggering sense of failure that I'd just pulled our entire company out of a job that would've been our biggest, grandest, and

most visible project to date.

A four million dollar crown jewel, tucked away in a lush piece of property in Western Oregon.

“How did he take it?”

My answering laugh was dry and humorless. “I can comfortably say that I’ve never been sworn at in such a creative manner in my entire life.”

She whistled. “That good, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, this is why we have a contract with very specific language, right? He can’t sue us.”

“He certainly wants to,” I said. “Believe me, he threatened that with very colorful language as well.”

The thought of it, undoubtedly the worst meeting I’d ever had in my life, left my bones cold and my skin uncomfortable.

I hated being stuck inside that office, knowing the consequences that came with it. Even though I knew I’d done the right thing, it left me feeling restless. A squirming itch that I couldn’t get rid of until I figured out how to make this right for the people who worked for us.

The sun was bright and warm, and I tilted my face up. The pleasing heat on my skin didn’t go very far to settle my nerves.

Normally, it did.

Being outside and working with my hands was my favorite thing in the world.

But even the sun couldn’t touch what was happening inside me at the moment.

Even though the decision to back out of the build was right, the burden of the consequences was breathtaking.

And no one would shoulder that burden except me.

“Well,” Greer said slowly, and I knew she was thinking through the millions of issues that would arise as a result of this. “I’m staying at Mom and Dad’s for a couple of days to help out. So I’ll start crunching numbers. We had to turn down some jobs because of our calendar for the next couple of years. I’ll circle back around and see if any of them still need a builder.”

Some jobs? We turned down more than that. A dozen at least had inquired, and we’d said no to every single one of them, passing them on to local competitors to boot.

“Okay. Thanks, Greer.”

She hummed. “We’ll be okay, Cameron. We’ve had slow years before.”

I exhaled a laugh. “When?”

“Okay fine, we haven’t had a slow year since you and I took over. But we will figure this out.”

The thought of heading back into the air-conditioned hotel sounded awful, and even though it was almost dinnertime, I glanced at the thick black watch on my wrist. “We can talk about it later if you want. I think I’m gonna drive back home tonight. I don’t want to stay here any longer than I have to.”

“Okay, but grab some food from the hotel before you leave. You’re a beast when you’re hungry, and I’m not talking to you about anything when you get back until you have food in your stomach.”

“You know I’m in my thirties, Greer. I don’t need my sister to tell me when to eat.”

“Yet you forget to have lunch just about every single day on the jobsite,” she said lightly. “This is why you need a wife, so that babysitting you is no longer my responsibility.”

I rolled my eyes and glanced toward the entrance to the hotel, a flash of gold hair snagging my attention. She wasn’t doing anything other than walking out of the building, but my throat went dry all the same.

When was the last time I’d physically lost my breath at the sight of a woman?

I honestly couldn’t remember.

If it was a movie montage, one of the romcoms Poppy forced me to watch when I was home with her, they’d do something clever in a moment like this. Slow the filming of everything around us. Pipe in some heavy bass music, fill your ears with a sensual beat that left nothing to the imagination of exactly how immediate my response was.

Everything about her looked refined—sleek and tailored and elegant.

Her legs were long and tan, lightly muscled underneath the ivory skirt wrapped around her thighs.

Her hair was pulled back off her face in a severe ponytail, and around her neck was a delicate gold chain that disappeared into the V of her black tank top.

Greer was still talking, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from this woman, especially not as she came within an arm’s length of me and paused. She shielded her eyes from the sun and glanced down the street with a nervous twist of her lips, and then moved her gaze past me to the building

just next door.

Because I just stood there—one giant, dumbstruck obstacle in the middle of the sidewalk—I was the next recipient of her attention.

Who had eyes like that?

No one I'd ever seen. Not with that particular shade of dark blue with green streaks in the center.

They couldn't be real.

I was tempted to ask, but I wasn't an asshole, and also... it felt like someone jammed sawdust into my mouth while I just stood there and stared at her.

Like an asshole.

"Pardon me," she said.

My mouth opened, but absolutely fucking nothing came out.

Then she smiled—polite and reserved—and walked past, leaving behind the briefest whiff of clean, fresh scent and disappearing into the tailoring shop just next door to the hotel.

"Cameron," Greer yelled.

I blinked and found my hand inexplicably rubbing at my chest. "Sorry. Got distracted."

"It's fine. Just ... don't beat yourself up, okay? I know you'll blame yourself if we're a little lean for a while. But it will be fine. I promise."

"Right." I blinked again. "Thanks, Greer. I'll, uh, talk to you when I get home."

I continued to stare at the ornate black door to the tailor's shop, not quite sure what had just happened.

It wasn't like I was immune to a beautiful woman. But for years, I simply didn't have the space in my head to take on a relationship.

Blinders went on to everything that wasn't work or taking care of my parents and siblings.

When you lived in a small town, which we did, most of the single women there knew me. Knew my family. The fact that I'd had those blinders on didn't go unnoticed by any of them.

I wasn't the guy knocked speechless at the sight of a pretty face and pretty eyes.

I was usually the guy who didn't notice them at all because I was too damn busy and too damn tired to think about it.

Maybe that was part of my problem. I'd not noticed for so long, that this

one—with the golden hair and dark blue eyes—hit at exactly the moment when I was feeling a bit unmoored. Unsteady.

That unsteadiness had me taking my sister’s advice (I’d never admit it to her) and ordering a sandwich from the cafe in the hotel lobby. I ate half while I sat at a table overlooking the street, but the stress of the meeting, the suddenly empty calendar, and the strangeness of the encounter on the street had my appetite disappearing quickly.

Wrapping the remainder of the sandwich into the paper, I tucked it into my laptop bag and returned to my hotel room to pack the rest of my stuff.

The elevator, old and historic like the rest of the hotel, was ungodly slow, and I eyed the top of the enclosure warily as it chugged up to the fourth floor. Inside the room, I set my laptop bag down next to the door and tossed my phone onto the bed.

For a moment, I considered face-planting right next to my phone and taking a nap before my drive, but the itch to get out of Portland and get back home was too strong.

My duffel bag was packed quickly, the natural byproduct of taking as little as possible with me when I was forced to travel, but in my haste to get back home, I didn’t do as thorough a sweep of the room as I should have.

I was halfway down to the lobby, another loud, slow ride on the elevator when I went to grab my phone out of my pocket and groaned.

“Shit,” I muttered.

It was still sitting on the bed.

The elevator door opened with a ding, and instead of exiting, I simply pushed the button for the fourth floor again.

As the mirrored panels started closing, a breathless voice called out, “Hold the doors, please!”

I snagged the edge of the door to stop it and exhaled slowly when I heard the sound of quick footsteps approaching.

The door pressed against my hand, and I jerked it back again with a bit more force than was necessary.

“Ivy, wait,” another female voice yelled.

A woman ran in—gold hair pulled back in a severe ponytail, and I realized with an uneven thump in my chest that it was the same woman from outside the hotel—and she tugged my hand away from the door at the same moment she punched the button to close the doors.

The press of her fingers, tight and firm on my arm, felt a whole hell of a

lot like the time I accidentally touched a live wire in the wall when I was putting up tile in my kitchen.

A quick jolt of unintended heat, and then gone again, with nothing left to show except a racing heart and tattered nerves.

When she pulled back, chest heaving, gulping in great heaving breaths of air, she sagged into the corner of the elevator. My mouth fell open because it *was* the same woman, but she was wearing a wedding dress.

An old wedding dress, by the looks of it.

That gold chain was still around her neck, disappearing underneath the dress.

Then her eyes met mine, and she exhaled a shocked laugh. “That was so rude. I am so sorry I just grabbed your arm.”

I wasn’t.

Did she want to grab it again?

I cleared my throat and rolled my neck. “Uh, it’s fine.” I eyed the dress, the ruffled neckline that came straight across her chest, the cut of the skirt and the slightly yellowish-aged look to the hem. Briefly, she closed her eyes, a hand over her chest like she could hardly suck in oxygen fast enough. “Are you okay?”

The woman in the dress stared at me for a second, color pink on her high cheekbones, then slowly shook her head. “I don’t ... I have no idea. What did I just do?” she whispered.

My brow furrowed as the whispered words hung in the eternally slow elevator. Right on cue, it slowed even more, emitting a high-pitched whine, a grinding noise that could not mean anything good, and a suspicious-sounding thump.

Then it came to a lurching stop, pitching her forward from her spot in the corner. I braced my feet and caught her with one arm around the waist to keep her from falling, one hand slamming against the railing on the side to keep us upright, and the last thing I saw before it went dark was the terrified look in her navy-blue eyes.

That was when the lights cut out.

Chapter 2

Ivy

I could practically see my obituary now.

Ivy Lynch—daughter of Richard Lynch III—dies in a freak elevator accident, wearing a vintage wedding dress and in the arms of a lumberjack.

It wasn't a story that did me any sort of justice, and I found it just a little bit more difficult to breathe.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “Are you hurt?”

He smelled like trees. And fresh air. And he was *so big*.

I shook my head because those were wildly unhelpful thoughts.

He was a stranger, for God's sake, and it didn't matter that he had arms the size of a fucking python.

“Are you hurt?” he asked again.

“No,” I said. “I'm not hurt.”

Why the hell was I still holding on to him?

Manners dictated a whole slew of reactions different from this one, but I found myself not really caring much what would be required of me in this particular situation.

Yet there was no fighting the years of etiquette classes. I could practically hear my teacher's prim voice in my head.

We do not cling to strangers like a koala, Ivy. It's unseemly.

My etiquette teacher also told me that swearing was coarse and unrefined and that didn't stop the endless stream of profanity that battered relentlessly at the filter between my brain and my mouth.

If that bitch were in here, she'd be holding on to him too. I'd been forced to listen to her for a long time too, because no matter how much she chirped at me, I bristled against every single one of her lessons for a solid decade.

Gently, I pushed against his chest, but he tightened the muscular arm wrapped around my waist, and my stomach swooped pleasantly as a result.

Good Lord, Ivy, I thought. I needed to get laid if this felt even the slightest bit like foreplay.

“Hang on,” he said, his voice a low, pleasing rumble next to my ear. “Just want to make sure we’re not going down. The last thing we need is you getting hurt.”

I sucked in a quick shaky breath. “Right.”

The possibility of a plummeting death. Couldn’t forget that.

Or why I was in that elevator in the first place.

If anything was unseemly, it was that.

Panic crystallized in my veins like little ice chips, my fingers tingling ominously. *What* in the absolute fuck had I done?

I pinched my eyes shut and heard Caroline’s voice in my head as I bolted into the elevator. She sounded panicked.

Of course she did.

My dad would be panicked too when he heard about this, but maybe he shouldn’t have assumed that I’d marry a childhood friend simply because it would solidify their two businesses.

My heart raced at the thought of Ethan, and not because he was the kind of man who elicited heart-racing thoughts on the regular. If anything, that was part of our problem.

Sure, he was kind. He had nice eyes. But his arms were skinnier than mine, his hands just a bit too clammy, and the thought of having sex with him—let alone a *lifetime* of having sex with him—was enough to send me bolting from the seamstress shop, my mom’s wedding dress dragging on the concrete as I sprinted back to the hotel.

I didn’t want to marry Ethan.

And I had a feeling that Ethan didn’t want to marry me either.

Did Caroline already call her son and tell him that I’d physically freaked out at the sight of myself in my mom’s wedding dress?

I groaned.

Call.

Phone.

I’d left my phone in my purse, sitting in the dressing room at the tailor’s shop.

I tugged out of his arms, heedless of his warning, and backed into the

corner, slowly sinking onto the carpeted floor of the elevator.

What did I do?

“You don’t happen to have any alcohol on you?”

“Ah, no. Can’t say that I do.”

I stifled a panicked laugh because if there was a bottle of whiskey in front of me, I’d chug straight from that bitch and do it with a smile on my face.

My dad was going to cut my ass off for this.

My big, good-smelling companion was nothing more than a faint outline in the weak light coming from the panel on the wall, and he watched me for a minute, then turned toward the panel, apparently satisfied that we weren’t dangling over the ground by a fraying elevator cable. I sank my head into my hands and tried to focus on deep, steady breathing.

“Do you have your phone on you?” he asked.

I kept my head in my hands. “If I did, I’d be on it right now. I’m assuming you don’t either.”

He cleared his throat. “If I did, I’d be on it right now.”

My head lifted, and I pinned him with an ineffectual glare.

He continued, probably because he couldn’t see my face clearly to see how very little I was amused. “Left it in my hotel room. That’s why I didn’t get out of the elevator at the lobby. I was headed back up there to get it.”

My eyes had slowly adjusted to the light in the elevator, and I caught a glimpse of his hard profile as he stared at the buttons. The sloping mass of his shoulders hunched in as he tried to find the help button.

He pressed it, and nothing happened. Then he pressed it again.

No disembodied voice on the other end, telling us help was on the way.

Those ice chips in my veins got just a little bit bigger.

“Fuck.” He stood back from the panel and surveyed the small enclosure. “My kingdom for a flashlight,” he muttered.

I exhaled a harsh laugh. “I have one in my purse.”

“Does your purse happen to be hidden underneath that skirt?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” I answered primly. My face was warm because I was in a *wedding dress*, in an elevator, with a tall, lumberjacky stranger, and I’d just essentially set off a grenade on my personal and family life.

And I’d left my purse in the shop next door in my haste to avoid a panic attack in front of my would-be mother-in-law and the very nice seamstress who had very nice plans to alter my mom’s very nice dress.

All in all—not my best day.

His big hands settled in the crease of the doors, and he tugged with a grunt, but they wouldn't budge. Then he banged on them with two giant fists. "Hey!" he yelled. "Anyone out there? We're stuck in here."

I closed my eyes when he pressed his ear against the door, trying to listen for a response.

He did it again, his deep voice filling the tiny space.

Nothing.

A few more bangs on the door and another shout for help yielded similar results.

The hotel elevators were tucked around a corner from the front desk, the architecture of the building allowing for multiple elevators in multiple areas. It was entirely possible that no one knew we were in here yet.

He slid his hands over the panel, looking for ... something. Then he set his hands on his trim hips and stared up at the ceiling of the elevator. "If I can get this open, how do you feel about climbing out?"

A slew of movie clips raced through my head, various images of elevators crashing onto the floor in a messy explosion of glass and metal. "Not particularly excited," I admitted. "They'll send help eventually, right?"

He sighed, and the light caught the edge of his jaw as he scrubbed at it with a big hand. "Sure hope so."

"I'm trying very hard not to freak out right now," I said, my voice deadly calm.

That was always the sign, wasn't it?

The worse things were, the more panicked I felt, the more still I managed to become. Everything crystallized, like ice climbing up a wall, and if someone applied just a bit too much pressure, I'd shatter into a million pieces.

The man went still, staring down at where I huddled in the corner, my knees against my chest and arms wrapped around my legs.

He blew out a slow breath, easing his long body down to sit in the corner opposite me. What could he make out in that dim light?

What did I look like to him?

It was an immediate reaction to reach my hand up and smooth it over my ponytail.

When I didn't find any stray hairs, I settled my arms back around my legs and set my chin on my knees while he studied me.

"Claustrophobic?" he asked.

I shook my head. “Just have your average aversion to being stuck in a giant metal tube suspended a few floors over the ground.”

He laughed under his breath. “Yeah, same.”

We lapsed into silence again, but it was too quiet. The kind of quiet that allowed for loud thoughts and louder fears. The spiraling kinds of thoughts that made it hard to breathe.

My dad was going to lose his mind.

My pulse hammered in my ears, tears pricking at the backs of my eyes, and I tightened the grip on my legs.

I’d seen myself in that wedding dress, looking exactly like my mom, and every instinct inside me screamed that I wasn’t supposed to be doing this.

There was no decorum, none of the etiquette I’d had drilled into me my entire life, no adult conversation about why Ethan and I shouldn’t get married and we deserved better than a glorified arranged marriage.

I gasped, *I can’t do this.*

Caroline, just as invested in our match as my own dad was, simply waved it off and told me I’d be just fine once it was done.

Once it was done.

I didn’t want to look at my impending nuptials as something to check off a list. A transaction to be completed, where the lifelong ramifications shouldn’t be processed until after it was completed, until names were signed and contracts were filed.

I always did what I was told.

Always.

My entire life was crafted around one thing—the knowledge that someday I’d take over my dad’s business. Instead of reading me bedtime stories, I used to sit on his lap in his office and hear briefs about executive finance meetings and the viability of his next investment.

And every consecutive phase of life brought me closer to that end.

First step- high school valedictorian.

Second step- Dean’s List in college. Double major in business administration and marketing, with a concentration in entrepreneurship.

Third (and most recent) step- Double master’s degrees—MBA and Commercial Real Estate.

The fact that I’d had no social life for the last decade was easy to understand, given I was glued to my fucking laptop. In his mind, it was a necessary sacrifice. The kind he’d made his entire life.

Step by step by step, I'd had a front-row seat to his success, and it was never a question of *if* I'd take over.

It was *when*.

Marrying Ethan was one of those steps. And I'd known about it—we both had—since we were fifteen.

That's my girl, my dad would say. *It's not always easy to do what needs to be done, but a Lynch does it anyway.*

Wasn't it so easy for my dad to say that?

He wasn't shackled off to a toothpick-armed crybaby with clammy hands.

With my father's voice echoing through my head, I'd take anything to derail the runaway train of my thoughts.

And the most obvious distraction sat right in front of me, with mile long legs and broad shoulders wrapped in a gray Henley. I could practically feel his massive arm wrapped tight around my waist, and my cheeks went suspiciously warm.

Yup.

I definitely needed to get laid once I was out of here.

A twenty-five-year drought, punctuated by a mediocre one-time romp to divest myself of my V card, was just a *bit* too much, given the current circumstances.

"What's your name?" I asked.

His head lifted, and the weight of his eyes was on my face again. "Cameron."

I stuck my hand out, assuming he could see it. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

There was a brief glimpse of white teeth as he smiled, and he shifted forward on the ground, sliding his warm, dry hand into mine.

It was a big hand.

Rough, too.

He didn't sit at a desk and shuffle papers all day, I'd bet my entire trust fund on that.

It wasn't clammy at all, and he didn't wuss out from giving my hand a firm shake, which made my belly tighten pleasantly.

I managed to swallow past that unhelpful thought. "Ivy," I told him.

His palm was still pressed against mine, my fingers over his.

He cleared his throat, slowly pulling his hand away.

"Ivy," he repeated. "Pretty name."

“It was my mom’s middle name.” I fiddled with the hem of the skirt, then forced my fingers to stop. *Fiddling was a terrible habit.* I could practically hear my dad say it, just like he had over and over when I was younger. It was what led to the etiquette classes.

“What brings you to Portland?”

I sighed, dropping my head back against the panel wall. “How much time do you have?”

Cameron spread his hands out. “Plenty, apparently.”

My answering laugh was quiet.

Being stuck in that elevator felt like someone shoved me into a confessional.

We weren’t Catholic or anything, but I’d always imagined how freeing it must be to tuck yourself into that dark, quiet little space and not be able to see the person who sat on the other side listening.

To purge all your fears and sins, walking away a bit lighter than you’d come in.

It made me want to be someone else.

Someone who’d sit and talk easily with the big, tall stranger with rough hands. Just maybe, I could pretend I wanted to be here. Like I was the kind of woman who could roll with what was happening and enjoy getting to know someone who was—at a very short glimpse—undeniably handsome, with rough hands and strong arms.

My throat went a little dry because pretending to be someone else was the antithesis of my upbringing. I’d always felt like my real personality bubbled dangerously underneath the surface of every single interaction.

Can’t be too mouthy.

Can’t be too smart.

Can’t be too sharp, but heaven forbid I was too soft.

The men I’d met in my life were either intimidated by me—whether my name or my looks or my upbringing—or they wanted to conquer me.

Those assholes were easy to ignore.

When would I ever be in a situation again where my reputation—and my family’s—didn’t precede me?

This man had no idea who I was. And that felt an awful lot like freedom.

I didn’t need to clasp the lid tight on who I was. For once, I could just be me.

“I was here getting my mom’s wedding dress redesigned. It’s terribly out

of style. I hate it, if I'm being honest. But I'm expected to wear it all the same. The seamstress next door to the hotel was actually the one who made it for her when my parents got married," I told him, smoothing a hand over the voluminous skirt.

"Ahh. Was that the woman calling after you? Your mom?"

My heart squeezed just a little. That reaction *did* get the lid tightened.

Ruthlessly.

"No. She died when I was just a kid."

"I'm sorry," he said, voice low and sad.

"Thank you." Then I shrugged and decided on another un-Ivy-like answer. Honesty was much easier to give when you were both sitting in the dark. "I don't really remember her, though."

"I can still be sorry you lost something."

The straightforward way he said it plucked at a chord under my ribs, and I felt the furrow in my brow as a result.

"So you're about to get married?" he asked.

That was a harder question to answer.

My thumb rolled over my very empty ring finger.

"I was supposed to," I said slowly. "But I'm not engaged, no."

Cameron fell quiet for a few moments, easing his leg out to the side. I shifted as well, tilting my weight to one hip so I could tuck my legs toward the ground.

"Thought for a minute I had a runaway bride stuck in here with me." There was a smile clear in his voice, followed by an almost desperate desire to see it.

Then I exhaled a soft laugh, thinking about what he'd said.

Didn't he, though?

I was running. An unplanned escape that probably should have had some forethought and a better exit strategy.

As a result, my dad might never forgive me.

I pressed a trembling hand over my chest, the material of the dress scratchy and warm under my palm.

"Uh-oh," he said. "Did I say something I shouldn't have?"

I shook my head, words stuck at the base of my throat. He was a stranger. There was no way I could unload all of this on him—no matter what this elevator felt like.

But there was no one else.

No one to listen or hear what I wanted to say.

Cameron, my protective friend in the elevator, was as good a confessor as any.

The man had manners—the kind that Emily Post taught me about. I'd had that blue book of etiquette memorized before I went to high school, and I could easily pluck one line out that perfectly described Cameron the lumberjack.

Manners are a sensitive awareness to the feelings of others. If you have that awareness, you have manners, no matter which fork you use.

“He's ... fine. The man I was supposed to marry,” I said quietly. “Our families have always wanted us to get married. We've known it for the last ten years.”

“But you don't want to?” he asked.

I didn't answer right away. Somehow, telling him exactly how much it freaked me out felt like too big of a confession to make, that the sight of that wedding dress magically conjured the one line I wasn't willing to cross to keep my father happy.

I hadn't even known that line existed until today.

So I settled on a truth that was far more condensed and a bit simpler to say out loud. “I don't believe I do. But it's not just about me,” I said quietly. “Our parents feel very strongly about keeping their respective businesses in the family.”

The sound he made—sort of a low hum—was so pleasing, I fought a shiver.

“I can understand that,” he said.

A banging sound came from the top of the elevator.

“Anyone in there?” a muffled voice yelled.

Cameron moved to his feet. “Yeah, there are two of us.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No, we're fine,” he answered. “Can you get us out?”

“We've got an engineer on the way, but you might need to get comfortable,” the voice shouted. “It'll be at least a couple of hours. He's in Salem right now, but he's on his way.”

“Dammit,” Cameron muttered. “All right,” he yelled back up. “Thank you.”

I sighed, standing up to cup a hand around my mouth. “Excuse me?” I yelled.

“Yeah?”

“It’s *Portland*, there are hundreds of hotels within twenty minutes. Call one of them. We’re not going to sit here for hours while you’re happy to wait for someone to drive from the middle of the state.”

There was silence above the elevator. “We’re doing our best, ma’am.”

“Are you?” I said. “Because if that were the case, your elevator would be properly serviced, and two of your guests wouldn’t be stuck *inside it*.”

“We’ll start making some calls,” he said.

“Thank you.”

Cameron coughed, and I couldn’t tell whether he was stifling a laugh. “Guess I’ll let you handle it from now on,” he said easily.

My head pivoted, and I gave him a look over my shoulder. “I wasn’t inferring you couldn’t handle it,” I said.

He nodded. “I know.”

I’d heard my dad rip into employees for much less than this and sat at the boardroom table when he’d threaten everyone’s jobs as easily as breathing.

Frustration still hung like a dark cloud.

Cameron propped his hands on his hips, muttering another curse. “My sister will be worried. I told her I was heading right out.”

I sat back down in my little corner and watched him pace a few times, his movements graceful despite his size.

“Good Lord,” I said, “you’re going to snap the cables with that pacing.”

Eventually, he sighed, rubbing at the back of his neck and easing back to his original spot on the floor.

“Sorry,” he said. “Don’t do well when I can’t fix what’s wrong.”

I raised an eyebrow. That was a telling statement. Maybe he felt like he was in a confessional booth too.

“You have a sister?” I asked politely.

He laughed.

It was a good one too.

Cameron, with the big, rough hands and the quick reactions, had a *really* nice laugh.

The tiny little hairs on the back of my neck lifted at the sound of it. If his laugh was a recreational drug, there was a fortune to be made if you could figure out how to snort it or inhale it.

How pathetic, that I could easily get high off the hands and the laugh, and with none of the other good parts of him.

“I have a lot more than one,” he said.

My stomach chose that exact moment to emit a very unladylike rumble. My eyes pinched shut in mortification. “Excuse me,” I said in a tight voice. “I guess I’m hungrier than I thought.”

“Did you have dinner?” he asked.

“No. I wanted to wait until the dress fitting was done,” I said.

He pulled a bag over from the other side of the elevator. I’d hardly even noticed it, what with the mind-numbing terror when I thought we might die. Cameron dug his hand inside, and the telltale crinkle of deli paper had my stomach growling again.

“Here,” he said. “Turkey and ham on wheat, if you want the rest.”

“Oh I couldn’t,” I told him. “You go ahead.”

“I ate half just before getting in.”

My stomach rumbled again, and I grimaced.

“Take it,” he said, the smile clear in his voice. “I’d never forgive myself if I let a lady go hungry in my presence.”

“How very chivalrous,” I answered lightly.

Cameron laughed again, and I pinched my eyes closed, relishing the sweet wave of ... something... that came with it.

I didn’t dare name it.

For just a moment, I wished I was scared of the dark. Or claustrophobic. That I’d have a reason to eschew social niceties and curl up against his side, allow him to make me feel better about ... everything.

He was making this a bit too easy. To pretend I was someone else. Who could flirt in a situation like this, get to know someone who I’d likely never see again.

I reached forward, taking it from his grip. Our fingers brushed when I did. I cleared my throat, delicately pulling the paper away from the sandwich. “Thank you.”

I took a few bites, humming appreciatively.

Cameron was watching me. I could feel his gaze on my face as I tried to chew as quietly as possible.

When I’d polished off the sandwich, I carefully folded the paper and set it on the floor.

“Better?” he asked.

“Much.” I leaned back, stretching my legs out, careful not to tangle my feet with his. “So ... a lot more than one sister,” I said.

He nodded. “Yup.”

“How many siblings do you have?” I asked.

He grinned, those teeth flashing white again. “How much time have you got?” he asked.

I spread my hands out. “A lot, apparently.”

His answering laugh warmed something inside me.

Interesting.

It had to be the strange predicament we’d found ourselves in.

Or maybe the nature of what I’d been running from had me noticing things I didn’t expect.

An impetus for sexual attraction, as it were.

Great.

Just what I needed.

Like the universe had decided to hand deliver a hot, kind man in front of my face to say—see? If you’d married Ethan, you’d never experience anything like this.

“Well, Ivy,” he said slowly, “I hope you’re a quick study because this might get a little complicated.”

Something about the way he said my name—warm, amused, a little flirty—had my stomach dipping, the pleasant sort of flip-flop you get when you crest the hill of a road going a little bit too fast.

And it gave me the strangest lightning bolt of truth.

This is why you ran, Ivy.

Why I’d risk my father’s disappointment for the first time in my entire life.

I wanted to capture every bit of this feeling. Bottle it up and clutch it to my chest.

It was enough to have me feeling a giddy sort of high.

I wanted to be the girl in the elevator who could enjoy a moment like this, instead of list off a thousand reasons it was a bad idea.

So I didn’t.

It was one day. Not even that.

A couple of hours of one day, and I would let myself have this.

There was nothing I could do but close my eyes again and let it settle into my bones, and I smiled while I did.

“I think I can keep up.”

Chapter 3

Cameron

This was my favorite elevator in the entire *world*.

And I hated it.

There was just enough light from the useless panel on the wall that I caught glimpses of her facial expressions if I squinted just a little.

Her eyes were closed now, but she was smiling, and I couldn't help but wonder what the holy hell was happening that I found myself looking forward to the next couple of hours.

I'd lost my fucking mind, that's what was happening. Any frustration I felt after hearing we'd have to wait was long gone.

"Your family," she prompted gently in the moment of silence.

I cleared my throat. "Right. Well ... you want the short version or the long version?"

Ivy let out a thoughtful humming sound, and I swear to high heaven, the little hairs on the back of my neck stood up. "Happy medium?"

I blew out a slow breath. "I have three brothers and three sisters. Four each, actually, if you include my sister-in-law and brother-in-law, which I do because they both give me shit like we've been related since birth."

"Dear Lord, your poor mother," she drawled. "Are you *serious*?"

With a grin, I laid my head back on the elevator panel. "Yes. Oh, and two nieces. Hopefully more of those on the way."

I felt her watching me. Studying me.

"Your mother must be a saint," she said.

"Stepmother, actually," I corrected gently. "My mom died when I was young too."

Ivy's face turned sharply in my direction, and holy hell, I would've

shoved a whole suitcase full of money at someone if it meant I could see those dark blue eyes. “She did? How old were you?”

“Just shy of eight. She, uh, she got a really aggressive form of cancer. I remember bits and pieces, her hospital bed where she’d read to us, that sort of thing.”

The silence between us was a living, breathing thing.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

“Thank you.” My chest didn’t ache anymore when I told someone about her. That was the weird thing about being so young when I lost her. It was such a foundational piece to how our family ended up, that it felt a little bit like telling someone else’s story. “My dad, with his three sons, remarried Sheila, with her boy and two girls, a couple of years later. And because that wasn’t enough chaos, they added Poppy into the mix just after they got married, and I’m not sure she’ll ever cease to remind us that she’s the cherry on top of the whole pile of kids.”

“My goodness,” Ivy sighed. “I’d ask their names, but you’re right, it takes a PhD to keep all that straight.”

“You don’t have one of those? What kind of woman did I get stuck with?”

When she laughed—a delicate, affronted little sound—I felt my whole stomach tense, a pleasing contraction of my muscles directly from the low, throaty sound.

At least she did laugh because I had to resist the urge to bang my head against the elevator wall.

Was *that* my best attempt at flirting? Good Lord. I didn’t know how to do this anymore. It had been too damn long since I wanted to. My cheeks felt suspiciously hot, and for the first time, I was thankful for the low lighting.

Ivy shifted, tucking her legs to the side, and it brought more of her face into the light.

The sharp edge of her jaw, the high cheekbones and the line of her nose.

She wasn’t a soft beauty.

Something was intimidating about it—the angles of her features were almost severe, but that was why I wanted nothing more than to keep studying them.

Maybe it was the nature of my job—to figure out how something came together in a way that worked, that was built to last—but I wanted nothing more than to see her clearly enough to piece together why I found her so

damn attractive.

This was not me. And stuck in the dark elevator with a beautiful woman, I didn't want to fight that anymore. It was a break from my reality—wearing blinders to anything like this—and it felt good to want to take it.

“No PhD,” she said lightly, folding her hands demurely into her lap. “Just some boring old master's degrees.”

I whistled. “Some?”

“Two.”

“Slacker,” I muttered. She laughed again, and damn if it didn't feel like I won the lottery when she did that.

“I don't think anyone's ever called me that,” Ivy said lightly. Just as I was about to apologize, she spoke again. “Congratulations on being my first.”

The subtext had me huffing out an incredulous laugh.

I wasn't much of a believer in fate, but this—being stuck in there with her, after noticing her outside—felt an awful lot like it was meant to be. And I didn't know what to make of that.

All I knew, the only thing I was certain about, was that I wanted to take in everything I could while she was there.

“You're telling me no one teases you?”

She paused, tilting her head as she considered the question. “No.”

“That's a shame.”

“Most men are too intimidated to tease me,” she said easily. Her eyes never wavered from mine. “And it's a rarity when they have the balls to flirt with me.”

A sharp spike of interest crawled hot up my throat.

Who was this woman?

“Is that what you're doing?” she asked. Like she was asking about the weather. Or what I was eating. Or some other mundane question that didn't really matter in the grand scheme of things.

Honesty couldn't hurt, though.

“Trying to decide whether it's a good idea or not,” I answered.

She hummed but didn't answer, and I found myself grinning.

“Where'd you go to school?” I asked.

“Gonzaga for undergrad, and I just finished at Stanford and Indiana University for those two slacker master's degrees. Online for all of them, not that that makes it any easier.”

My eyebrows rose slowly. Smart girl. “My almost brother-in-law went to

Stanford. I think I forgot to mention him in the count.”

“I’d need flashcards and a spreadsheet to keep track,” she told me.

“I take it you don’t have a big family.”

“Just me and my father.”

It sounded lonely, but I decided to keep that nugget to myself for the time being.

“Gonzaga,” I said quietly. “Does that mean Spokane is home?”

“No. My dad went to Gonzaga, so ... you know how it goes. I’m from Seattle actually. It was more convenient to do my schooling online, so I could stay home with my father. It’s just the two of us.”

She was younger than me then, by a solid handful of years. And she lived nowhere close to the place I called home.

Not that it mattered where she lived, I told myself firmly.

“What about you?” she asked. “Where did you go to school?”

With a self-deprecating grin, I shifted on the floor too. Our knees brushed. I didn’t move, and neither did she. “This will horrify you, but I didn’t.”

“Oh.” She blinked a few times. “I suppose it was rude of me to assume.”

I waved that off. “It’s fine. College wasn’t for me, and I knew that in high school. I hate being stuck inside, and the thought of working at a desk would have me losing my mind.”

She cleared her throat, which was a prim, uncomfortable sound, and it made me grin.

“Don’t feel bad,” I told her. “I learned by doing, you know? My dad taught me and my sister everything we needed. No classroom in the world could’ve done what he did half as efficiently. I took over our family business with one of my siblings. We’ve been running that for the past ... ten years or so.”

“That’s wonderful. I plan to take over my dad’s business someday, so I can appreciate that.”

“Without the arranged marriage this time,” I said.

She laughed. “Yes, precisely.”

I liked that she wasn’t actually engaged. Or actually about to walk down the aisle to someone.

In fact, every single aspect of how we found ourselves here just lent weight to the fleeting nature of it. I already found myself wondering if she’d get a drink with me once we were out. Sit somewhere quiet, where the

lighting was low enough to be romantic, high enough that I could actually see her clearly.

“What about you?” she asked. “You mentioned your sister would be worried. There’s no one else wondering where you are?”

My mouth curled in a satisfied grin. “That your way of asking if I’m single?”

For a moment, I wondered if I’d screwed up by saying it out loud, because I caught a glimpse of her mouth falling open in surprise.

Then she cleared her throat again. “Yes,” Ivy said. “I suppose I am.”

She moved again, our legs now touching beyond just the knees. I kept my gaze on her face, waiting for her to look back at me, and after a prolonged beat, she did.

I smiled.

“Married to my work, as it were,” I said. “Not sure there’s a woman who’d want to deal with the hours I keep because my family takes a lot of my time too.”

“You don’t get lonely?”

I exhaled a wry laugh. “I’m too damn busy to feel anything along those lines. I live about half a mile away from my parents, so I’m there most nights to make sure they don’t need help with anything. My dad’s sick, and my mom can only handle so much around the house and property. My sisters are constantly up in my business, and my brothers are somehow even worse.”

She tilted her head. “You love them a lot.”

“Don’t tell them that,” I said.

Ivy laughed. “I do believe your secret is safe with me, Cameron.”

My name on her lips was potent.

Powerful to an irrational degree.

The impulsive side of me wanted to surge forward and capture it with my lips, no matter how insane that might seem. I hardly knew her, but attraction didn’t always factor in those mundane details.

You could want someone at a single glance. Or after a single conversation.

I’d always been aware of the truth of it, even if I’d never personally been knocked on my ass by that type of instant desire.

I was now, though.

No, there were no blinders on. I was seeing everything about this clearly. The stark details of how impossible this was wasn’t lost on me. Probably not

on her either.

“It is safe with you,” I murmured. “I’m sure we could tell each other all sorts of things in here, knowing they’ll never see the light of day.”

There was subtext in that too, and I wasn’t sure she’d heard it.

We were skirting an invisible line—two strangers stuck in an untenable position. But no matter how beautiful I found her, how certain I was that we ended up here for a reason, I would never be that man who’d push too far, too fast.

But if Ivy stepped a single toe over that line, I was no fool.

I’d meet her there without hesitation.

“So,” she said. “No wife at home.”

“Nope.”

“No girlfriend waiting by the phone.”

I smiled. “Nope.”

She inhaled slowly. “And no family pressure to marry someone you don’t love because it benefits them financially?”

Her subtext was a bit different from mine, but it was there.

Remember that white knight syndrome? Everything inside me screamed to tell her she shouldn’t ever have to do that, that she deserved better than a business deal for the rest of her life. That she deserved the chance to fall in love, and if her father loved her, he’d want that for her too.

But I swallowed it down because even though she might be younger, Ivy was a stranger. I knew nothing about her life besides these few little details she’d given me.

“No,” I answered. “I can’t say my family is big on pressuring us kids for anything of the sort. Besides, no one’s even asking if I’m ready to settle down because I’ve got one sister and one brother married, one sister engaged.”

“And the two nieces,” she added. “With hopefully more on the way.”

“Exactly.”

“What *is* this family business?” she asked. “That keeps you from being stuck inside and doesn’t expect you to take a wife to keep it running.”

There was something about the clipped way she asked things, the precise way that she spoke.

There was just something about her, I supposed.

I grinned. “We build houses. Usually just new construction, hardly any renovations, but we used to do that too. I’m from a small town west of here,”

I said.

Ivy exhaled a quiet laugh from her nose.

“What?” I asked.

At first, she didn’t answer, but her study was a tangible thing in the dark.

I nudged her knee with mine. “Come on, out with it.”

“Nothing. It’ll sound intolerably forward.”

“Oh come on,” I cajoled. “What else do we have to do?”

She sighed, straightening the skirt on the wedding dress. “I was thinking about how disgustingly cliché this is.”

My lips curled in a smile. “Yeah?”

“I’m stuck in an elevator with a ruggedly good-looking small-town builder,” she said in a pointed drawl. “We’re one plot device away from a cheesy Christmas movie.”

I kept my eyes locked on her from across the space. “You think I’m good looking, huh?”

“Don’t be crass, you know you are.” She exhaled slowly, like she was put out by this entire conversation. “Men always know when they’re good looking. It’s why most of you are obnoxious about it.”

“Was the almost fiancé good looking?” I asked.

And what a dick question it was. Like it mattered.

But somehow, it did matter. I wanted to know what kind of man caused her to run.

She settled her head back against the panel.

“He’s pretty,” she said carefully. “Pale skin. Blue eyes. Two hundred years ago, I’m sure the women would’ve had the vapors the moment he walked into a room. But he’s not my type. I prefer men who are tall enough that I can wear my favorite shoes and not gain intimate knowledge of the top of their head.” Ivy sniffed. “Plus, he had toothpick arms and clammy hands.”

“Ahh. Now I know why you ran.”

Her lips curled up in a smile. “He didn’t have your hands,” she added slyly.

My eyebrows popped up. “What does that mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh, who’s flirting now?” I asked.

Ivy didn’t say a damn word, simply stared me down.

Gently, I nudged her knee with mine. “Come on. You owe me that explanation.”

“Do I?”

She was arching one of those eyebrows as she said it. I knew the tone well enough from the millions of times my sisters pulled that facial expression.

“No,” I answered simply. “I’ll just sit here and agonize over what you could possibly mean.”

Ivy sighed, like she was horribly put out, and I couldn’t stop my smile. She straightened her posture, looking about as regal as anyone could on the floor of an elevator in a vintage wedding dress. “Fine. It was your palms,” she stated calmly.

I held them out. “My...”

Her eyes were locked onto mine, and she didn’t drop them. Goose bumps prickled down my arms. “Your hands, when you shook mine, I noticed that they were...”

“What?”

I heard her swallow. Registered the tilt of her chin. “Rough. They were rough. I’ve never ... I’ve never been touched by a man with hands like that.”

Heat roared, a quick snapping fire through my veins, and I had the most insane desire to ask her if she wanted them to touch her more.

“I’m sorry,” I managed, but holy shit was that a lie.

I wasn’t sorry at all. Not if she liked it.

“You shouldn’t be sorry,” she said so very calmly. “I liked it.”

My eyes snapped over to hers. Had I said that last part out loud?

The darkness seemed like a curse, something with malicious intent to keep us from seeing each other clearly.

With each confession falling from her lips, that line between us faded into something flimsy and insubstantial.

I wasn’t even sure the line was still there, but hell if I wasn’t going to make sure.

My whole body was tense, some invisible hand pushing back against my chest so that I didn’t surge forward toward her and slide those hands into her hair, along her face, down the line of her neck and shoulders.

“Did you?” I asked, my voice low and unsteady.

Rough. Forget my hands, my *voice* was rough. Sounded like I’d chewed rusty nails and tried to spit them back out.

Ivy sucked in a quick breath, her hands fidgeting restlessly in her lap, and after an eternal pause, she started moving carefully. My heart hammered wild

and fierce in my chest as she moved to her knees, bringing her closer to me. The skirt fanned out around her, and when some of that white lace covered my leg, I ran my thumb over the edge.

It was so delicate. Refined.

Like her.

This smart girl with beautiful eyes and sharp features who I wanted to devour whole. I wanted to find the soft parts of her and see what her lips tasted like.

Once Ivy settled on her knees, she let out a loaded exhale and picked up my hand. She turned it over, trailing the tips of her fingers along my palm, then the length of my fingers.

“Fucking hell,” I whispered under my breath. I was getting a hard-on from a woman *touching my hands*. My other hand curled into a fist as Ivy pulled my hand up and settled it along the side of her neck.

Her skin was warm and soft, and my fingers molded instantly to the back of her graceful neck. The golden-blond hair of her ponytail tickled the backs of my fingers.

“There,” she said shakily. “I wanted to feel it there.”

I pressed my thumb, tilting up her chin. “Like this?” I asked.

“Yes,” she whispered. The movement of her swallow under my palm was like a fucking drug.

Slowly, I shifted my legs straight out, straightened my back where I sat propped against the wall, sliding my palm up, allowing my fingers to coast over her jawline and over those carved cheekbones. Her eyes fluttered shut.

What the hell was happening?

“Ivy,” I said urgently, “I can’t see you very well, so if this is something you want from me, you better make it real clear.”

There was a moment when she froze, and I braced myself for her to pull away. For the inevitable *I can’t believe I did this* and *I’m so sorry* to be said out loud.

Except she didn’t.

She hiked up that wedding dress and moved forward on her knees, swinging her leg over my lap, and I said a blasphemous prayer of thanks to whatever cosmic chain of events ended with us here.

“If I didn’t want it, would I be doing this?” she asked, even as she settled her sweet weight over me, and I clutched at her waist to grip her tight to me.

She made a tiny rocking motion with her hips, hissing out a breath when

she felt me between her legs.

“I’m so damn glad you are,” I said, just as I slid my hand against her cheek. We paused there, a quick moment of study in the dark, and then I surged forward and took her mouth with mine.

Sweet.

Soft.

Dangerous.

And that was just her lips. When she opened immediately, a breathy sigh escaping her mouth into mine, I swallowed it with a deep groan and swept my tongue against hers.

Ivy’s hands slid into my hair and gripped the strands tight as I kissed her deeply, memorized the taste of her, the way her tongue felt when it twined with my own.

It didn’t feel like a first kiss.

Because nothing was tentative or experimental.

She kissed me like we’d done it for years, like we knew exactly what the other person wanted.

Wasn’t that the crazy thing about following your instincts?

There was no logical way for me to know that she’d like it when I curled my fingers around her neck again, using my thumb under the edge of her jaw to direct the kiss, but she did. It was clear in the slight tremble of her hands, the sweet moans that came from deep in her throat, the way she pressed so tight against my chest like she couldn’t get close enough.

Which was convenient because I couldn’t either.

With one arm wrapped around her waist, fingers digging into her dress, she set a maddening, slow rhythm with her hips.

She broke away on a gasp but didn’t pull back, so I buried my nose into the slope of her shoulder and breathed in greedily.

“You smell so fucking good,” I growled. “Please tell me this is okay.”

“Please,” she begged. “Oh, please don’t stop. God, I needed this.”

With a groan, I sucked at the skin under my mouth, where her neck sloped into her shoulder, and it made her writhe on top of me.

I’d never been a one-night stand guy. Never been a casual sex guy.

But my hands trembled from the effort it took not to shove at the skirt of her dress, tear at the zipper of my pants and see what she felt like wrapped tight around me, how well she took every inch of me.

She tugged at my face, and I slanted my mouth over hers again, our

tongues dueling, something messy and slick and so much hotter than anything I thought could be managed on the floor of an elevator.

I slid my hand up her back, tangling the ends of her hair into my fingers, tightening my hold when she whimpered a broken sound of relief into my mouth.

The sharp tips of her fingernails pricked against my scalp, and I groaned. She was so responsive.

The sex would be incredible.

I knew it. Knew it so fucking deep in my bones that I wanted to tip her back and see what it took to have her legs shaking around me.

Could I do it with just my hands?

My mouth?

Or would it take everything to get her there?

I sucked at her bottom lip, releasing it with a pop, and she tipped her head back with a decadent sigh.

“This is insane,” she breathed. “Why does this feel so good? I don’t even *know* you.”

Untangling my hand from her hair, I let it coast slowly over the line of her arm, where she clutched my shirt until my palm rested on the firmness of her thigh. Slowly, I gathered up the material of her skirt, and she shivered.

Her skin was smooth and warm. My palm skated over her shin, her knee, the firm muscle of her thigh, and as it did, I sipped delicately at her lips, just the whisper of kisses, while she struggled to gain her breath.

“That’s why it feels good,” I told her against her mouth. “Our secret, Ivy. No one will know, and there’s something delicious about that, isn’t there?”

She nodded.

“You’ll go home after this,” I told her, using the edge of my teeth on her bottom lip. “And you’ll think about what we’re doing right now.”

My fingers tightened on her thigh, my thumb digging in just under the delicious curve of her backside.

“You’ll think about my hands,” I whispered into her skin, “and you’ll try to touch yourself in the same way, but it won’t work.”

“Oh,” she breathed, rubbing her nose along the edge of mine, our lips brushing against each other. “Please, Cameron.”

“Please what?” I nipped at her chin.

“Please touch me,” she begged.

“I am.” My thumb brushed her inner thigh, back and forth and back and

forth, never moving farther, and she shivered again. “Have you ever done this with someone you don’t know?”

“No,” she managed. “I *never* do anything like this. Everything is ... planned out. I’m always in control of what’s going to happen, always know what’s going to happen.”

“And you don’t now?” I asked.

She shook her head. In the weak light of the elevator, I could tell she had her eyes closed, and suddenly, I wanted them wide open. I wanted her to look, to see, to know exactly how important this was for me.

“Look at me,” I said, voice firm. Her eyes snapped open. “There she is,” I murmured. “What do you want to happen, Ivy? I want you to tell me.”

“I can’t,” she whispered. “I’ve never...”

My body stilled. “You’ve never... what?”

She smirked. “I’ve done *that*,” she said lightly, and my body sagged in relief. “Once.”

“With your would-be husband?” I asked. My thumb never stopped its soft brushes against her skin. Refusing to move closer to the heat between her legs.

Ivy shook her head slowly.

“Was it good?” I asked roughly.

Again, she shook her head.

“It would be with us,” I promised her. Then I kissed her, fierce and deep and hot. I poured my fucking soul into that kiss, making promises that I had no right to make—about how I’d make her feel, how I’d bring us both an unholy amount of pleasure if I got the chance. As I did, I tightened my hand on her thigh until I was sure she’d have marks. I broke the kiss and spoke against her mouth. “It would be *good*, Ivy. We’d both end sweaty and shaking and so fucking spent that we couldn’t move. I could make you forget your name if you let me.”

She sighed shakily, throwing her head back as she gripped my wrist under her skirt and tried to tug my hand closer to where we both wanted it.

Just as I started edging the lace underwear out of the way, our mouths working against each other in an erotic kiss that I very much wanted to recreate where my hand currently was, the elevator made a loud clanging noise, and another banging came from above us.

We both froze.

The sounds got louder. Closer.

“You two still all right in there?” a voice asked. “We found another engineer. He should have you out soon.”

“For fuck’s sake,” she whispered. “Are you *joking*?”

With our eyes locked on each other, and my hand between her legs, I called out, “Yeah, we’re here.”

Ivy’s eyes closed, and she dropped her forehead against mine.

“Great,” they said. “We should be able to bring you to the closest floor shortly. He’s working on the issue down on the ground floor.”

“Thank you,” I answered.

I wasn’t feeling particularly grateful, though.

Would it be wrong if I told the guy to buzz off? Give us about twenty more minutes like this so I could find all my favorite spots to touch her?

Ivy slowly pulled herself off my lap, and my hand brushed against her thigh as she moved back to her spot.

My head banged against the back of the wall.

“Is, umm, Ivy in there with you?” the voice asked.

Her eyes widened. “I’m here.”

“Your mother-in-law is waiting for you. She’s been very worried. She just wanted me to let you know she’s still here.”

Ivy tucked her knees up to her chest and covered her face with her hands. “Okay, thank you,” she said.

I swiped my hand over my mouth.

Her mother-in-law. Right.

Looks like the date was over.

My hands itched to reach for her, but the moment was well and truly broken. There was no recovering it. No asking her out for a drink after this. No moment when I could sneak another kiss and hope for another date. A phone call. Anything.

“Probably for the best,” she said stiffly.

Her eyes were closed again.

I didn’t say shit because I didn’t trust myself to speak.

“I shouldn’t have...” Her voice trailed off. “You can’t really ever pretend to be someone different. And that’s not me,” she said. “I don’t ... I don’t do things like that.”

My jaw clenched tight.

“I have responsibilities,” she continued. “Expectations. And I can’t just ... I can’t ignore them simply because we ...”

“Almost fucked on the floor of an elevator?” I finished helpfully.

She let out a shocked exhale.

It was the opposite of the white knight, but I couldn't find it in myself to regret saying it.

“I don't do shit like this either, Ivy,” I told her. “I don't screw strangers as a habit, and I definitely don't break up engagements.”

“I'm *not* engaged, no matter what she called herself,” Ivy said hotly.

The spark of temper was enough to soothe the snarling beast pacing behind my ribs. I wasn't alone in this. The only reason she felt as pissy as me was from good old-fashioned sexual frustration.

With clanging metal and tools in the background, I bounced the back of my head against the wall again.

“You weren't pretending to be someone different,” I said. “You wanted that. You. Not someone else. You climbed into my lap and tried to shove my hand underneath those lace panties of yours because you've never had someone like me touch you or talk dirty to you. Don't lie to yourself that you were someone different because *you* wanted me to do all those things.”

She didn't say anything, simply stared me down, and then rose gracefully to her feet. I did the same and took a moment of satisfaction that she had to tip her head back to meet me in the eye.

“Are you trying to make me hate you?” she asked silkily. “Will that make it easier when we both walk out of here?”

“Of course not.” I tugged my duffel bag off the ground and slung it over my shoulder, then picked up my laptop bag in the other hand. “I just refuse to accept that you'll tell yourself some story that you weren't acting like yourself. I think the fact that you ran and that we had this happen—it's exactly what you needed, and you just can't admit it.”

“You don't know anything about me,” she said calmly.

As she said it, the lights in the elevator flickered back on. We both winced at the sudden intrusion of light.

But it was only a moment, and our eyes locked.

She was so beautiful it was hard to look straight at her.

But I refused to drop her gaze.

“You're right,” I told her. “I don't know you. I wish I did, though.”

Her mouth opened slightly.

Our time was running out, and I decided to take the risk. Gently, I touched my thumb to the curve of her bottom lip.

“You have no idea how much I wish I did,” I said in a low, urgent voice. She sucked in a breath like she was going to reply.

The elevator started moving, and her eyes flickered.

I couldn’t define what I saw there. She did such a good job of shuttering it immediately.

This was the woman I saw on the street. Severe and sharp and impossible to approach.

My gut screamed with a desperate urge to kiss her again, just so that I could see her while I did. See her eyelids flutter shut and the blush climb in her cheeks up close.

I thought about asking for her number. Thought about how much I didn’t want this to be the last time I ever saw her. But the doors opened on the fourth floor, and a crowd of people immediately exhaled in relief at the sight of us.

A woman in the back shouted Ivy’s name, a cell phone pressed to her ear. “Yes, she’s okay, I see her now.”

With another glance at Ivy, I wondered if anyone else would notice the slight puffiness of her lips, the flyaway hairs along her face from my hands in her ponytail.

She lifted her chin. “Goodbye,” Ivy said.

“Good luck with ... everything,” I told her.

Then I pushed through the crowd, determined to forget her.

Chapter 4

Ivy

In general, I was very good at following directions. Doing what I was told.

Doing what I was raised to do.

But there were a few exceptions. Moments when it felt like I was a champagne bottle that had been shaken one too many times, and someone pressed down on the cork just right.

That was my secret. I *always* felt the tension simmering underneath the surface. It was never a surprise to me. My skin, most days, felt fair to bursting with all the things I *wanted* to say and wanted to do.

But following that impulse had been trained right the hell out of me.

I was a firm believer that most women had a dark layer to them. Some kept it hidden better than others, with sweet smiles and apologies. Some never showed it at all, but gawd, they probably ended up on an episode of *Snapped*.

But underneath the sweet and feminine desire to please, to be liked and loved and universally adored, was a spiked-heel, blood-red-lipstick wearing badass who wanted to command every fucking room she walked into.

That woman wanted to be feared. Because if she was feared, then no one hurt her.

And when it became just a little too difficult to keep playing that role, when someone squeezed just right, when the right bruise was poked, that was when shit hit the fan. The vessel couldn't withstand the pressure, and when the slightest release was available to me, I followed every screaming instinct inside my head, no matter the consequences.

Less than a week ago, it was the wedding dress incident. Followed swiftly by the momentary *weakness* in the elevator.

I was still working on erasing that one from my memory, which was difficult because if we'd been in that elevator for another ten minutes, I would've let that man screw me through the wall.

Not the easiest of rebellions to forget.

In college, it was my one-night stand with the study partner. Relatively mild and completely understandable in the grand scheme of things.

In high school, I snuck into my dad's wine room downstairs and plucked a 2008 Chateau Petris from the massive wall—on a dare from a group of girls who said I never did anything fun.

That wasn't worth it because fuck those bitches for peer pressuring me, and me for caving so easily when all they really wanted was some free booze. That bottle of dark red wine, as it turned out, tasted like dirt and was worth close to six grand. My father noticed the empty spot immediately and grounded me for a month.

It was the first time he told me he was disappointed in me. Felt like he'd slapped me across the face, considering how much it stung.

And when I was in middle school, I punched a boy bullying one of my classmates, despite the fact that I'd never been prone to violent outbursts. No one did anything about him because his parents were ostensibly richer than God Himself. The teachers never saw anything because he was one of those smart bullies—the absolute worst kind.

I tried telling my father once at the dinner table.

"It's unfair," I told him. "Can't you do anything about it?" I demanded.

I'd never forget how he calmly set down his salad fork and steeped his hands in front of his face.

"Ivy, for the rest of your life, you will see unfairness play out in front of you. When you're the adult, you get to make a choice how you react when it happens to someone else and the outcome is within your sphere of control." He lowered his brows, carefully setting his hands down on the table. "This is outside my sphere of control. I can't do anything about this child, no matter what he's doing at the school."

"Does that mean I can do something about it?" I asked.

Dad didn't answer right away. "I'd think carefully about that. One of those unfair things you'll face is being a powerful woman in a man's world. I'm raising you to be that kind of woman in your sphere of control—which is this family and my business. Men, and women, will challenge your authority because they trust you less, simply by the nature of who you are. If you're

overly emotional, they will call you hysterical. If you're cold and firm, they will call you a bitch. If a man was all those same things, he'd be *passionate*. A great leader with a level head on his shoulders."

"Well, that's stupid," I said at the time.

"It's life, Ivy. And that's the reality you need to prepare for. Just because we don't like it doesn't mean we can pretend it doesn't exist."

At the age of thirteen, *that* was the kind of dinner conversation we had—the nuanced topic of gender dynamics in the workplace. It wasn't difficult to wonder why I kept everything locked down like a nun in a whorehouse.

I'd be judged ten times as harshly for making any of the same decisions my dad's nonexistent son would have.

Like punching a bully who deserved it because all my classmates were absolute cowards.

Dad didn't outright answer my question. That wasn't usually his way. He'd tell me the challenges I'd face. Tell me why those challenges existed. And then he'd remind me—not too subtly—how a Lynch would handle it.

I remember him leaning forward. "Lynches are above reproach, Ivy. Have you ever seen our family lowered into a scandal?"

I shook my head.

"It gives them ammunition." Then he picked up his fork again. "I'll never hand a weapon to someone who'd use it to destroy me. That's beginner's folly."

I thought about his words the rest of the night and tried to pick apart exactly what he meant. And the next day, when that little asshole started right up again, it was the begging of his victim that had me marching over to him.

I didn't even know how to throw a punch because I was certainly never taught *that* in etiquette class, but something tucked way back in the hidden recesses of my brain knew what to do.

He'd cornered that kid—smaller than him, with less money than him—and kept shoving him back into the brick wall when he tried to walk away, laughing that stupid nasally laugh every time he did.

My sphere of control, as it turned out, was that back corner of the playground.

The satisfaction I gained from tugging on the back of his uniform, rearing my fist back, and feeling it crunch in his nose was unholy. A rush of power that I'd never experienced.

That was the day I decided I'd rather have them think I was a bitch than

view me as weak.

His nose bled a little, and that little prick ran straight to the dean's office.

My dad was called within the hour, and the look he gave me when he walked into that meeting sent ice through my veins. Because there were no witnesses, and the kid being bullied refused to speak against me, the asshole's parents couldn't do much except point at the bruise on my knuckles.

"She did that at home last night," my dad lied smoothly. "I'm quite sure our housekeeper was in the room as well, if you also need her testimony."

I kept my hands still in my lap, no fidgeting to be seen during the entire meeting, and I was allowed to return to classes.

The bully left me alone, though. And he left the other kid alone too.

When I got home that night, I asked him why he lied.

He looked at me for a moment and said, "Because I'd rather live with that on my conscience than have your reputation tarnished in the slightest amount. Once that happens, you can't undo it. Not in our world."

Because Lynches were above reproach.

Lynches didn't act like everyone else.

My father never spoke of it again.

Until today.

I sat across from him in the plush leather chairs opposite his purposely intimidating desk.

His hands were steepled in front of him, and he hadn't spoken a word since he walked in. He made me wait, of course, because if you wanted to talk about power plays, this first meeting since my incident in Portland was textbook.

My father was the master at establishing dominance within a room, and I'd had a front-row seat my entire life. It didn't matter that I was his daughter—his only child. That dominance included me too, especially when I was guilty of a transgression in his eyes.

I shifted, brushing some invisible lint off the hem of my fitted black sheath dress. Hair was pin straight, brushing my collarbones. Legs were crossed at the ankle, nude heels off to the side, allowing for a small flash of bright red bottoms.

Back was ramrod straight, away from the surface of the chair.

He couldn't fault me my posture or find a single flaw in how I presented myself.

Always look like you're in charge of the room, Ivy. People will respect you more when you walk in looking like the boss.

Nerves crawled through my belly, and I took a few deep breaths to erase them, but it was impossible.

Still, he stayed silent.

As much as I looked like my mom, I had my dad's eyes. Normally, they were warm when aimed in my direction. Pleased and proud.

But not today.

He was wearing a charcoal gray suit, fitted to his barrel chest and wide frame, with a silver tie and white shirt. Onyx and silver cuff links winked in the overhead lights of the room. The look on his face—like he was carved in stone—was the same one I'd seen him give a boardroom full of executives when he was really, really pissed off.

Not once, in my entire life, had that look ever been directed at me.

My dad wasn't the warm and fuzzy type. But he always told me when he was proud of me. Always affirmed me immediately when I got an A, won an election or a competition, or beat him in one of our countless chess games. Those affirmations carved out the basis for our relationship, and I craved them with a fierceness.

Knowing I'd just knocked the legs out from under him in this really, really big thing ... no positive affirmations were coming my way anytime soon.

I blew out a slow, quiet breath and held his gaze because even if my ribs trembled from the force of that look, I would not cry.

"I trust your trip was successful," I said.

Asking was the polite thing to do, after all. I already knew it was successful. My dad scooped up numerous properties when one of his biggest competitors was forced to sell after his name was embroiled in heavy scandals—the legal kind that wouldn't go away quickly or quietly.

It was a last-ditch effort to save face and would cost him mightily.

"I've never liked him," I continued as if my dad was actually engaging in conversation. "He came off nice, but underneath, you could tell he was a complete asshole."

Dad raised an eyebrow.

"Do you remember when he came into the office a couple of summers ago?"

There was a slight incline to my dad's chin, so I took that as a yes.

“He walked past the conference room where I was working on some valuations with one of our interns.” I sighed slowly as I immersed myself in the memory. “Friendly at first. Like a sweet grandpa. Then he leaned and told me I had a great fucking ass, and if I wanted it taken care of, I should come and work for him instead.”

A vein throbbed in my father’s temple. “And you’re just telling me this now?”

“The moment was mine to deal with, not yours. Besides, I didn’t want to risk him getting a volatile reaction out of you when that was likely his whole point. So I looked him in the eye and told him that if he didn’t back away from me, I’d shove a ballpoint pen between his legs. After that, I informed him I’d happily take his corner office once we’d dismantled his business.”

Dad’s eyebrow arched slowly. “A bit violent for my tastes, but I can’t fault you for that.”

Silence filled his study, and it was agonizing.

Disappointing my father was never usually worth the relief I felt when the bubbling pressure of my momentary rebellion eased.

He was all I had.

This room, the quiet, stilted room, was my entire family.

In my lap, my fingers twisted briefly, a visible weakness that slipped through, and I let out a deep breath before stilling them in my lap again.

“So,” I drawled, “you’re mad at me.”

A muscle in his jaw twitched, and his gaze lowered back to his desk. “I’m not sure you’ve left me much choice, Ivy. This pairing between you and Ethan not only made sense because we trust him and his family implicitly, but the Lowells are our biggest investor and now sit on the board. How am I supposed to feel about you renegeing on a deal that’s been in place for ten years?”

“It was a deal you made without me and Ethan getting a true say in the matter,” I argued. “I was fifteen when you told me about it. Of course I didn’t think about the ramifications of it then. I was a child. So was he.”

“You had a crush on him,” Dad said. “Followed him around like a puppy dog whenever he was here. I was hardly forcing you to marry someone vile.”

My hands couldn’t stay still anymore, and I swept my hand over my face. “A crush for a single year, and it was hardly reciprocated. Ethan is relieved, Dad. I spoke to him as soon as I got home from Portland. He doesn’t want to marry me any more than I want to marry him.”

Dad scoffed. “Please. As if he could find anything to complain about. You’re beautiful—far more attractive than he is—and smart and successful. You have a flawless pedigree.”

“I’m not a broodmare,” I said, my voice taking on a hot edge. “My *pedigree* isn’t up for debate, nor is it consequential to this conversation. I would think that my father would want me to choose a life partner because I love them. Not because they benefit our business.”

“You’re getting emotional, Ivy,” he said dismissively. “This is why we make agreements like the one with Ethan. You’d have a smart, successful husband who would be loyal to you, and both our futures would be set. Your children, your *grandchildren* would want for nothing.”

My throat tightened briefly, and I used every shred of energy to keep my emotions bottled up. Locked tight. Nothing able to escape.

“You and Mom loved each other.”

His eyes darted briefly to the painting of Mom on his study wall. “We did. Eventually. When I met your mother, she’d just moved here from a small town and wanted nothing more than to escape that kind of life.”

It was a story I’d heard a hundred times. The only story he was willing to repeat as I grew up.

She got a job working at the receptionist desk at the firm where my father was slowly working his way up the ladder. Then she moved up as well. Until they shared an office, and a vision for what they wanted out of life. My dad asked her to marry him after one date. One kiss. Because he knew she was exactly what he needed.

Together, they built an empire and lived happily ever after.

Or happily, until she was gone. Leaving the two of us alone with that empire they’d built.

It was the setup of a princess story, wasn’t it? Something you’d read in a hardcover book with gilded edges and gold etched into the front.

It was my bedtime story, just like any good fairy tale. And fairy tales had a very specific point, beyond the limited entertainment they provided. They were used to teach a lesson. To caution kids in a perfectly innocent way.

The lesson I was supposed to glean from mine was obvious—don’t fuck up the family legacy by choosing unwisely. And it took me this long to decide that it was something I needed to unlearn. Not that I was choosing unwisely, simply that I was finally choosing something for myself.

Without, you know, dismantling my family in the process. Which is why

I hooked a muzzle over the sharp tongued reaction and snapped the lock impossibly tight.

I'd inherited that sharp tongue from him, after all. It would do me no good to unleash it now.

I tried a softer approach, which was not an approach often taken with him. He liked the strong, snarky side of me, but I wasn't sure it would do me much good right now.

"Don't I deserve a chance to pick for myself?" I asked. "Look me in the eye and tell me I don't."

My dad didn't so much as flinch. "Love is a foolish thing to chase, Ivy. There's no guarantee that it will last, and it certainly doesn't pay the bills."

I rolled my lips together and fought the urge to scream, just to see what he'd do.

Deep under the surface of my skin, I could feel the pressure building again. One featherlight bubble at a time.

That's what everyone forgets. A million pounds of feathers is still a million pounds, and eventually, it'll crack whatever is holding it up.

"The Lowells are furious," he continued. "And I can't ignore that."

"Yes, I'm aware," I said tightly. "I still had to travel home with Caroline."

Caroline Lowell yapped at me the entire flight back from Portland to Seattle, informing me that if my mother were around, she'd be mortified at how I'd acted.

Lynches didn't act like everyone else.

Which was the only reason I didn't tell her to shut her damn mouth and stop talking to me about my mother.

"Your birthday is tomorrow," my dad said quietly. "And as you know, we'd hoped to announce your engagement to Ethan at the board meeting tomorrow morning. The Lowells and I decided it's best for you not to attend."

My eyes popped open. My stomach trembled. The muzzle rattled ominously. "What? I haven't missed one in years."

"Then you should have thought of that before you ran through downtown Portland in a fucking wedding dress," he snapped. "Everyone in that hotel knows it was you stuck in that elevator, in your mother's wedding dress. I've already stopped one story, but I can't guarantee there aren't others."

The trembling in my stomach bloomed out, until my fingers were locked

tight to keep from visibly shaking.

“Their trust is vital, Ivy,” he said. “My trust in you is vital, and I confess that at the moment, it’s wearing a little thin. You’re too old to have tantrums.”

“This isn’t a tantrum,” I answered as evenly as I could. Which was to say, not very evenly, because my voice shook from all the emotion threatening to spill out. “Dad, I’ve done everything you’ve ever asked of me. Gone to school where you told me to, took the classes you wanted me to, chose my majors because they were yours,” I said.

“Now you’re blaming me for your education?” he asked in a dangerously quiet voice. “I’m disappointed, Ivy.”

Lynches didn’t cry.

Lynches *didn’t* cry.

I willed back the burn pressing against the bridge of my nose.

“No,” I said. “But this is my life you’re bargaining with, and I deserve some control over it.”

He opened up a drawer to his desk and slapped down a manila folder.

“On that, we agree,” he said, pushing the folder closer to the other side of the massive desk. “I did my best with you growing up, Ivy, but I think I’ve kept you under my wing for a bit too long.”

“What’s this?”

“As you know, the stipulations of your trust dictate that the money from your mother’s life insurance will be yours when you turn twenty-five.” He paused, and I made sure not to drop his gaze. This was another power play, I was sure of it. “But I never told you that it also includes a piece of property.”

In my chest, my heart thrummed with sudden nerves. “What property?”

“It was your grandparents’,” he said. “As you know, they died after your mother did and left her their home in Sisters, Oregon.”

Carefully, I reached forward to pull the folder into my lap. “And it’s mine?”

He made a quiet sound of assent. “It’s yours. All assets in her name are yours as of midnight tonight. And I hope you make a wise choice with it, Ivy.”

The papers inside the folder blurred because I focused too hard on what he wasn’t saying for any of the details to register. My head lifted, and I met his eyes—still just as hard as they had been when this meeting started.

“Please speak plainly because I’m not in the mood for games,” I told him.

“Careful,” he said silkily. “I’m not in the mood for childish petulance. I thought we’d outgrown that when your *outburst* forced me to lie for you at school.” He spread his arms out wide. “Suddenly, I find myself in a similar position, don’t I?”

My cheeks were hot, and I took in a deep breath. “What are you asking of me?”

He jerked his chin toward the folder I held in my hands. “I would’ve bulldozed and sold that land years ago just to be rid of it, but because it was left in her name, now it’s yours. For a small town, it’s valuable property, especially in the right hands.”

My mind raced. “And what do you want me to do with it?”

“That, Ivy, is your first project.” He sat back and folded his clasped hands over his flat stomach. “I think some space from Seattle would do you good. Give the Lowells and the board a chance to ... forget. And you can prove to the rest of us that you still deserve a seat at the table.”

It was incredible, how simply he said it.

Like he hadn’t just plunged a knife straight into my fucking back.

I’d always imagined that righteous indignation would be hot. Flames licking up the sides of my skin, melting away clothes and jewelry and all manner of material things.

But this was so very, very cold.

My fingers prickled. My scalp tightened. And I fought a shiver from the way my bones were coated in ice, like they’d shatter at the slightest touch.

While my brain sliced through the devastating ramifications of what he’d just said, I had a vivid, painful memory of my dad sitting front and center at every single concert, every dance recital, every competition. How he sat across from a chess board and explained every move and every outcome with infinite patience and belief in my ability to learn quickly.

His support might not have been in hugs and laughter and gentle fatherly affection, but it was in his *presence*. In reading through my school papers and projects and helping me be a sharp thinker. In teaching me the ways to be strong and smart and capable. His support was that he was there. That I was always by his side.

“You’re sending me away,” I whispered. But the whisper didn’t last long. “You’re ... you’re *punishing* me, threatening my place within your company because I won’t marry someone I don’t love?”

By the time I got to that last word—the crux of our entire issue—my

voice filled every inch of his study. I'd never, not once, yelled at my dad.

His face was placid, but his eyes gleamed dangerously. "Call it what you like, Ivy. I'm beholden to my board, the same as you will be someday. If you can prove to us that we can still trust you to make wise decisions. *Levelheaded* business decisions. That you can set aside childish emotions and do what needs to be done," he shouted. "I raised you better than this, and I will not have you risk what I've built. I plan to visit after a week or so to monitor your progress, but I expect you to fix it, Ivy." Then he smacked a hand down on his desk. "And don't come back until you do."

A shocked exhale left my mouth, and there was no stopping it.

"I can't come back until ... what's finished?" I asked, voice dangerously quiet.

He arched an eyebrow. "This decision rests entirely on your shoulders, Ivy. If you expect to run Lynch Holdings when I'm gone, you'll have to weigh a million things every single day. Know in your gut what the right thing is to do, know what will grow your business until it's something you'd willingly bleed for. That is what I need to know you're ready to do," he finished. "Inside the folder is all the pertinent research for you to take a few weeks to ... get this settled. A couple of builders in the area. All with impeccable reputations. A real estate agent that can help you should you decide to sell. But no matter what you decide, I expect you to come back to me with visible proof of an investment well spent. A seed of your own business well-planted. Then show me what you can grow from it."

And just like that, I was dismissed.

My heartbeat echoed sluggishly in my ears, my limbs slow to react, like the chord between my brain and my body had been severed.

Maybe if I was another girl, raised by another man, I would have let the tears fall. Might have asked my dad to give me a hug and tell me it would all be okay. That he loved me no matter what.

Behind my dad were two shelves among all the books. Framed academic awards that I'd earned, my diplomas from high school and college.

Out on display in his study.

Not in my room in the other wing.

Not in an office of my own.

My heart cracked, just a little, at the realization that my achievements were on display as if they were his. Something I'd never really noticed before because I was always basking in the moments where he told me how proud

he was. How great I'd be someday, when I could fill his seat at the table.

There weren't framed photos of us on that shelf, just one picture of me from an article in the *Wall Street Journal*.

The future is bright for Lynch Holdings Heiress

The longer my dad stayed silent, the further those hairline cracks in my heart spread, and the harder it was to stop the burning at the back of my eyes.

I did, though. Because I would not walk out of this room.

He opened up his laptop and gave me a brief look. "Is there anything else?"

Somehow, I managed a jerky shake of my head. "No, sir." And I stood, even though my legs felt weak, and my heart ached. "I won't let you down."

"I expect not," he said, eyes on his screen. "Good luck."

I made it all the way to my bedroom with dry eyes, and they stayed that way while I chartered a flight to Sisters for a few days later, packed my bags, and wondered exactly what the hell I was supposed to do next.

Chapter 5

Cameron

“Wake up, asshole,” someone snapped from above me.

Then that same someone ripped the comforter off my bed.

I groaned into my pillow, swinging my hand toward where my big brother disappeared with my bedding.

“The sun’s not even out yet,” I mumbled. “What’s your problem?”

“Jet lag,” Ian said, completely unrepentant. “London time is eight hours ahead. And you’re out of coffee. Who lets their brother crash at their place when they’re out of coffee?”

I scrubbed at my face as I sat up, glaring at my older brother. “The nice kind. I wasn’t gonna wake up Mom and Dad because your flights were delayed.”

He grinned. “You need more sleep, sunshine?”

“Yes.”

Ian tossed the blanket back at my face, but instead of crawling back under the covers like I desperately wanted to, I motioned for him to get the hell out.

“Get your ass up,” he said. “I want coffee, and I guarantee Mom will have baked goods.”

I sighed. “Fine. But make sure they’re awake before you make me leave this house.”

Five minutes later, I’d tugged on a T-shirt and black athletic shorts, and we hopped into my UTV to drive the half a mile between my house and our parents. I’d built my A-frame cabin about five years earlier, but kept it on their plot of land, because it gave me peace of mind that I was close if they needed anything.

Most of our siblings had moved away. Erik, the eldest of my stepsiblings,

was married with an infant daughter, and lived in Seattle, as did Adaline and her fiancé. Greer was a couple of hours west of Sisters in Salem with her husband and stepdaughter, but she spent half her time at home now that Dad was declining so quickly.

Ian, older than me by a couple of years, had lived in London for years before finally deciding to move back. And our youngest brother, Parker, played football in Portland, on the same team as Greer's husband.

"I've been half a world away for years," Ian said as I swerved down the well-worn path between their house and mine. "It's gonna take me a while to get used to this."

I grunted. "You will. But don't expect anyone to bust out the tea and crumpets because you're fancier than us now."

He exhaled a short laugh. "Believe me, I don't expect anything of the sort." I parked the UTV, and we got out, walking side by side as we ascended the wide steps to the wraparound front porch of their log cabin. He shouldered me. Hard. "You couldn't even buy me coffee."

I shoved him back. "You weren't supposed to be at my house, dick."

"Asshole," Ian tossed over his shoulder, shoving me back so he'd get inside the house first.

Sheila was in the kitchen, shaking her head as we tussled our way into the house. Dad was in his favorite recliner, and an oxygen cannula snaked around over his ears as his thin chest rose up and down while he slept.

"Sorry," I said quietly.

Sheila hustled over, wrapping Ian in a tight hug. "You're home," she said in a hushed tone.

"I'm home," he said. Ian towered over her, his dark hair pulled back, and I could see enough of his face that he looked just as relieved about that as she was. He kissed the top of her head. "Looking good, Mom."

She patted her salt and pepper hair, styled in the same blunt bob she'd always had. "Liar."

Ian tilted his head toward Dad. "How's he doing?"

Sheila and I traded a look.

"Just say it," Ian said.

"He's eating less," I answered quietly. "In bed most of the day. When he does get around, he's got to be in the wheelchair."

Ian's jaw clenched, his dark eyes not moving from our dad as he nodded.

Sheila sighed. "Hospice aides are here twice a week to help with bathing

him and such, it's a big help. His doctor and nurse come right to the house too." She patted his chest. "It's good you came home when you did. He'll be so happy you're back."

My eyes burned a little when Ian cleared his throat and dashed a hand under his eye. "Yeah," he said, voice gruff with emotion. "I'm happy too, Mom."

"Parker coming home for the fall festival?" I asked.

It was Dad's favorite time of year in our small town, and he'd made a simple request that our whole family be together for the weekend.

She paused. "I think so. He and Beckett have a bye week, so the timing works out well."

Now it was time for Ian and I to share a look. Our youngest brother didn't take it very well when Dad decided to forego any treatment and instead live out the rest of his life without the drugs ravaging his body.

"He came home for Greer's wedding, right?" Ian asked.

That was a few months ago, and he hadn't been back since, and in those few months, Dad had declined. A lot. But I nodded. "Yeah."

Sheila wiped under her eyes. "It was hard for him to see your dad like this," she whispered like she was afraid for Dad to hear. "But he came home. They talked a little bit. He calls a couple of times a month. It's ... better. But he's still afraid to watch him die."

Join the fucking club, I thought.

But I'd never say it out loud.

I wrapped my arm around Sheila's shoulders and kissed the top of her head. "We'll all be here with you, no matter what you need, Mom."

She sniffled. "Best boys in the world," she said. "Can't understand how neither of you are married yet. Any girl would be so lucky to have you."

Ian frowned, and I smothered a grin.

Her comment, innocently meant, instantly brought up a vivid memory of Ivy. I'd done my best to avoid thinking about her the last week.

No good would come from it.

Only once had I indulged it. Just once.

In the shower, where I played out an alternate ending to our elevator adventure. One that ended with me pressing her against the wall, with her slim thighs tight around my waist.

I blinked.

"Well," I said, "Ian's never getting married because he's a prick."

He conceded that with a lift of his brows. “And Cameron’s not married yet because he’s ugly, and no one wants him.”

I barked out a laugh, earning a glare from Sheila.

I held up my hands. “Sorry.”

“Ian?” my dad said, voice groggy from sleep. “Are you here?”

Ian shoved me as he walked past. I tried to trip him, and he flipped me off when I missed.

“Yeah, Dad,” he said. “I got in late last night, so I stayed at Cameron’s.”

He leaned over for a hug, and my dad’s thin arms held him tight for a long moment.

When Ian pulled back, Dad cupped my brother’s face in his hand.

Ian smiled. “Hey, old man.”

Dad smiled back. “You need a haircut. You look like shit.”

Sheila and I laughed as Ian rolled his eyes, falling back onto the couch with a groan. “Cameron, don’t you owe me some coffee?”

I snagged a blueberry muffin from the counter, wolfing down half of it in one bite. “Get it yourself.”

“So good to have everyone home,” Sheila sighed. But she was smiling happily as she said it, pouring some coffee into a mug as she walked it over to Ian.

“Don’t spoil him,” I said. “He’ll never leave.”

He glared at me over the rim of his mug.

Shuffling footsteps came down the stairs, and Poppy was rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“Holy shit, why is everyone being so loud this early?” she muttered.

“Cameron’s fault,” Ian said.

Her eyes snapped open, registering the sight of him on the couch. She squealed, running at him for a hug. He set his mug down just before she tackled him.

“Oof,” he said, ruffling the top of her hair. “Hello to you too.”

She ruffled his hair right back. “You look awful,” she said in a gleeful tone. “What a refreshing change.”

Ian shoved her onto the end of the couch, and she laughed, kicking at his legs with her feet.

And the whole time, my dad simply smiled, happy at the sound of his bickering children filling the room.

We ate breakfast, talking as the sun came up.

Ian told us stories from London, places he loved to visit, the things he'd miss now that he was back. Poppy chattered happily about school—which she was taking her sweet ass time to wrap up—and I envied how blissfully unconcerned she was with her lack of plans when she finished.

Dad would pipe in occasionally, but for the most part, he was content to listen, his wheelchair parked at the table and a picked apart muffin in front of him.

“You taking Ian into the office today?” Sheila asked.

I nodded. “If he’s up for it. Not that I have much to get him up to speed on, unfortunately.”

“Greer hasn’t had any luck with the jobs you turned down?” Dad asked.

I shook my head. “They all found someone else since we last talked, which I get.” But their question reminded me of a missed call I had from my sister. “She called me yesterday, and I never got a chance to call her back. I was working on something.”

With that in mind, I excused myself from the table and punched in Greer’s number.

“Oh my *gosh*, you are alive,” she said. “I was starting to worry when you completely ghosted me yesterday.”

I rolled my eyes. “Glad you’re not being too dramatic this morning. I was in the office working on something when you called and forgot with getting Ian from Portland last night, we didn’t get back until midnight.”

“Did you listen to my voicemail?”

I winced. “No?”

“I don’t even know why I leave them,” she muttered. “You’re as bad as my husband.”

“I like your husband, so I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“What were you working on?”

“Poppy and I were organizing the shop since we haven’t booked a new job.”

She was quiet. “About that...”

“What?”

“If you’d listened to my voicemail,” she drawled, “you’d know.”

I straightened. “Did you book us a new job?”

“I think so, yeah. You know the farmhouse down the road from Mom and Dad’s? The one that’s been sitting empty for years?”

The plot of land was incredible, even if the house likely needed work.

“Yeah.”

“Well, the new owner called me yesterday.”

“Anyone we know? I thought everyone said it was left to family, and they didn’t want it.”

“The first part of the story is true,” Greer said. “She didn’t know about it until recently.”

“She renovating?”

“I don’t think she knows yet.”

“When are you meeting with her?”

Greer sighed tiredly. “I was supposed to meet with her in a couple of hours. She’s flying in from Seattle, but that’s why I called. Olive is sick,” she said, referencing her stepdaughter. “She woke up with a fever and said it hurts to swallow, so I think she’s got strep. I need to take her in today.”

“I can take the meeting,” I said.

Her pause was loaded.

“What?” I asked.

“I always take the meetings,” she said. “So you’d have to be like ... friendly. And nice. And *friendly*.”

“I *am* friendly,” I answered, completely affronted.

“You’re passably warm to our customers when necessary, but I do the lion’s share of the customer service, and don’t pretend otherwise, Cameron Wilder.”

It was a good thing she couldn’t see my frown, because she’d know she was right, and my sisters never let me forget it when I admitted they were right.

“Scout’s honor,” I said. “I will be the nicest version of myself.”

She snorted. “Make sure you take Ian.”

“Why? He’s even worse than me.”

“True,” she said, “but you hate renovation jobs. Truthfully, I didn’t talk to her long. She was so excited we had an immediate opening in our schedule that we booked a meeting right away. This way if we can still manage to pull in a new build, then Ian can run a smaller crew on the house—whatever it is she wants done with it—and you can stay freed up for anything else we get lined up.”

I grunted. “Fine. But if he’s a jerk, you have no one to blame but yourself.”

“I’ll take the risk.” She pulled the phone away from her mouth and said

something to Olive. “I gotta go. I’ll text you the info for the meeting. Don’t be late.”

“Okay, Mom. Tell the munchkin I hope she feels better.”

“I will,” she said. “Give Ian a kiss for me.”

“Absolutely not.”

Greer was laughing when I hung up.

When I walked back into the house, Ian and Poppy were cleaning up in the kitchen while Sheila got my dad rearranged back into his chair, covering him with a blanket and then smoothing the wispy gray hair over his head.

My heart clenched.

He looked so small. So tired all the time.

Ian chucked a dish towel in my direction, and I caught it against my chest. “Get your ass in here to help,” he said.

I tossed the towel back. “Can’t. You and I need to go make ourselves presentable.”

His brows furrowed. “Why?”

“Ready for your first client meeting for Wilder Homes?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” he said, nudging Poppy with his hip. She nudged him back, but he didn’t budge.

Dad hummed. “I knew Greer would find something. She always was smarter than the two of you.”

Sheila chuckled as I rolled my eyes.

“Dad, the day you stop giving us shit is the day I’ll finally start worrying about you,” I said, walking over to drop a kiss on the top of his head. He patted my arm.

An hour and a half later, Ian and I were both showered and wearing jeans and Wilder Homes shirts. He’d pulled his dark hair back into a low bun, and he caught me staring at it while we walked to my truck.

“What?” he asked.

“What does the long hair prove? Is it like, an ego thing?”

I tried to poke at it, and he swatted my hand away.

“Fuck off,” he said without any heat.

As I climbed into my truck, I was grinning. So was he.

“Maybe I missed you a little bit,” I conceded.

“Maybe I did too,” Ian said. “Now where are we going?”

I pulled my phone up and saw a text with the address, even though I knew where the house was, not stopping to read the paragraph’s worth of

information Greer included after it. “Fucking hell, why are her texts so long?” I mumbled. “That would take me a month to type up.”

I set my phone in the console and pulled down the dirt road, winding through the towering fir trees. My parents had a bit over fifteen acres, and it wasn’t just my house on the land, but we passed the small house where our oldest brother Erik used to live, and where he and Lydia stayed when they were in town.

“You moving in there?” I asked Ian.

He shrugged. “Don’t care much where I sleep,” he said. “But Sheila said she could put some food in the fridge at Erik’s if I wanted privacy.”

I nodded.

“I think I’ll stay with them as long as she doesn’t mind,” he added quietly. “I like the thought of being close. For whatever.”

There was nothing for me to say to that because we both knew why he was saying it.

Our gazes held for a minute, and then he looked away.

The short drive to the property was quiet, the traffic was light since it was still early, and I glanced in the back seat to make sure I had extra client contracts if she was ready to sign one today.

“If you’re up for it,” I told Ian, “I’ll likely have you be the site manager for this job. I’ll help, of course, especially on the front end when we’re finalizing plans, but I’d rather keep myself freed up in case we can still book a new build.”

Ian nodded. “Sounds good. Jax won’t mind?” he asked, referencing my best friend, who’d worked with us for years.

“Nah, when we had to lay everyone off last week, he decided to go hide in the mountains or something. He’ll be out there in a tent for a month, if I had to guess.”

Ian exhaled a short laugh. “Ten years ago I would’ve said that sounds great. I think I lived in a big city for too long.”

“I’m too old to sleep in a tent for that long.”

“And too ugly,” he added.

I punched him in the arm.

“What’s her name?” Ian asked, still rubbing his arm as I turned the corner onto the driveway.

“I didn’t read Greer’s text. She sent me an entire novel.”

Ian sighed and snagged my phone. “No wonder she always takes the

meetings.”

The house came into view, and I studied the lines of the roof, the large windows, and the porch—which sagged a bit to the left. I’d always loved this house. It was huge, set on a generous piece of property, not quite as large as my parents’, but easily held about five acres, with a barn set back from the house. They must have owned horses at one time because rotted-out fencing lined an overgrown field.

“Ivy,” Ian said.

My gaze snapped over to him. “What’d you say?”

He gave me a strange look. “Her name. It’s Ivy Lynch.”

My heart thudded uncomfortably.

It was impossible.

There had to be hundreds of Ivys in Oregon.

In the wide concrete driveway next to the house was a low-slung black Mercedes coupe, and I pulled my truck around, parking to face the front of her vehicle.

There was movement inside the car, and as the door opened, my breath snagged in my throat.

Gold hair.

Toned shoulders covered by the thick straps of a black dress.

A sharp jaw and perfectly pink lips.

Big black sunglasses covering her eyes.

But I knew the moment they met mine through the windshield because those lips fell open in obvious shock.

“Fuck me,” I breathed.

Chapter 6

Ivy

“This has got to be a joke,” I hissed under my breath, head down so I could shove my cell phone angrily into my purse.

Once.

I have a freak-out once, get stuck in an elevator once, let my guard down with a handsome stranger *once*, and his tall ass is the one climbing out of a Wilder Homes truck so big that I’d normally think the driver was compensating for something.

Except he wasn’t.

He wasn’t compensating for shit because I sat on his lap and felt exactly what he was packing underneath his work jeans.

My heart hammered wildly, and I felt very much like an animal backed into a corner.

I kept my sunglasses firmly in place because hell, if I looked that man in the eyes in the harsh light of day, I’d do something crazy.

Cameron waited by the hood of his truck, another man with him—just as tall, just as handsome, but with long dark hair and one of those trimmed beards that made all the hipster-fetishizing women lose their collective minds.

I wasn’t losing *my* mind, thank you very much.

My mind stayed right where it needed to be. My stomach was not flipping upside down as I gave Cameron a quick once-over behind the safety of my aviators, taking my sweet-ass time to get out of the car.

Looking didn’t help. At all.

It would have been so much better if he looked worse than I remembered. If he had a weak chin and soft belly and limp noodle arms.

But no.

There was no weak. No soft. No limp anything.

His chest—wide and sculpted—was covered in a dark gray shirt with the company’s logo over his chest. His arms pressed the limit of the shirtsleeves, and his waist tapered to slim hips, long legs. And ugh, that was just from the neck down.

The neck up?

Who gave him the right to look like that? With the piercing eyes and sharp jaw and firm lips and dark golden hair that *shone in the sun*.

“Ridiculous,” I muttered. Whose jaw looked like that? What point was he trying to prove?

Then he clenched it when I still hadn’t gotten out of the car.

Because of course he did.

It had that muscle. The one that popped out in a weirdly effective display of power. Nothing pissed me off faster than that muscle on a man who knew exactly how to wield it.

It conveyed annoyance.

Stress.

A perilous lack of control.

And, I thought with absolute disdain, they managed it in a way that was inherently dangerous to the state of my La Perla lace thongs.

Those were staying right where they needed to as well.

I blew out a slow breath, my heart returning to a semblance of a normal rhythm.

When I was quite sure my legs weren’t Jell-O, I pushed the door open and straightened. Both men watched me approach.

One looked neutral. Polite, but just toeing the line of friendly.

The other?

He watched me with anticipation screaming from his eyes, and that simply would not do.

There wasn’t a single *thing* Cameron had a right to anticipate.

In that damn elevator, he met a version of me that was very much like an electrical wire with the casing scraped off—who spilled stories to strangers and admitted things she’d never otherwise say out loud. Who let him kiss her and touch her and beg for more.

I wouldn’t say she was weak because I knew damn well I’d made the right decision by running. She was vulnerable, though.

And vulnerability was a curse in my upbringing. It was a flaw to be removed, something to be cut out with the neat clip of a blade.

I kept my stride steady and tried desperately to detach my brain, sever the stream of racing thoughts from my body as his eyes tracked from my head to the pointed toe of my black patent shoes. The thoughts slowed somewhere around my lips, and with an unsteady thud of my heart, I kept my mouth unsmiling.

Out of necessity, I had to keep my smile buried so very, very deep.

A warning siren rattled underneath my ribs, that wild animal again, because the look in his eyes was dangerous. Something that could cause great harm, and I doubted he realized it.

Because paired with that look was the ghost of a smile on his firm, beautiful lips.

My heels crunched on some loose rocks on the driveway as I reached the two men. I stuck my hand out to the dark-haired one first.

“Ivy Lynch,” I told him.

“Ian Wilder,” he said, his handshake firm. “This is my brother —”

“She knows my name,” Cameron said. He kept his gaze steady and unblinking on mine even though he couldn’t see a damn thing through my sunglasses except his own stupidly handsome reflection.

My stomach froze. My hands tingled.

All I could think in my head was that I’d straddled his lap, sucked on his tongue, and tried to shove his big, big hand between my legs.

Lynches are above reproach.

“I’m sorry, I don’t believe I know you,” I said. I said it before I even realized the implications, a misstep I didn’t normally make.

His eyes narrowed.

Fuck.

It was too late to take back the words now, and they hung between us like a hatchet about to sever an important body part.

Cameron tilted his head, studying me with a sharp look in his eye that I absolutely detested.

“Strange. I met an Ivy in Portland last week, and she looked just like you,” he drawled.

It was awful, how some invisible being wrapped a giant, massive hand around my midsection and squeezed. My lungs pressed hard, trying to pull in enough air.

Ian glanced between me and his brother, dark eyebrows raised. “Okay then.”

Cameron’s jaw worked back and forth, and I held my breath, wondering if he’d push the issue with an audience.

Then he held his hand out, and I exhaled quietly.

“Cameron Wilder. I’m the owner of Wilder Homes.”

It was a fucking miracle that my hands didn’t shake as I slid my palm over his. The rough catch of his skin on mine caused a fractured burst of heat through my ice-cold insides, which I ignored.

Ignored everything tapping ominously on the periphery of this interaction.

That shit could be dealt with later. Much, much later, and preferably with a giant glass of wine.

“I must have spoken to your sister yesterday?” I asked, slowly pulling my hand out of his. He watched me let it hang loose at my side.

Then he nodded. “Greer typically takes these initial meetings, but her daughter is sick.”

“So this is your place?” Ian asked.

I turned slightly, my attention finally pulled from the inconvenient man in front of me to the inconvenient house that I had to deal with.

“Apparently.”

The men traded a quick look, probably noting the distinct lack of enthusiasm in my voice.

Not that I couldn’t appreciate the potential.

This was not an area for lush emerald lawns. Everything was punctuated by trees reaching to the blue skies, giving the whole area a slightly desolate feel that was foreign from what I was used to seeing in Seattle.

The house was nothing extraordinary—a big two-story farmhouse with a faded appearance and a sagging front porch. The landscaping surrounding it was vastly overgrown, and the yard around the house in the midst of endless, tall trees was unkempt and overrun.

But the land ... I did enough research on the flight over to know that I could sell it as is and make more than half a million dollars.

“It’s been sitting empty for years,” Cameron said.

“You knew about it?” I asked.

He hummed. “Our parents’ land is just down the road. If you cut through those woods and head west, you’d run into my house after about seven acres

or so.”

Oh good, he was the fucking neighbor.

I raised an eyebrow. “Small world,” I muttered.

“Isn’t it, though?” he asked, smile spreading so that I had no choice but to glare at the expanse of straight white teeth and the fucking dimple that appeared to the left of his mouth.

Ian pushed his tongue into the side of his cheek as he watched us, and I pulled in a deep breath, mentally grappling for control.

Of anything really.

My thoughts.

My traitorous reaction.

This entire exchange felt like a car careening wildly into oncoming traffic, wheels falling off, brakes failing. I could practically hear the ear-splitting crash of our two worlds colliding.

If a *single* other builder had been available to meet on short notice, I would have already asked him to leave.

“Greer mentioned in her text that you just found out about the house?” Ian asked.

I gave him a brisk nod. “It belonged to my grandparents. When they passed, they left everything to my mother, and she left everything to me. It was part of the dispersal of my trust that I received on my twenty-fifth birthday.”

Ian whistled. “You get better presents than me. I think I got an Amazon gift card and chocolate cake. I’d sure as hell know if I was going to get a house.”

Cameron elbowed his brother. Hard.

“What?” he whispered.

Cameron closed his eyes, like he was praying for patience. “Forgive my brother’s manners. We don’t usually let him around ... people.”

I sniffed. “Understandable.”

Ian’s brows lowered. “Sorry, didn’t realize I was being rude.”

“No, I’m sure you didn’t.”

Cameron’s gaze was heavy, weighted with curious study, and for just a moment, I allowed myself to wonder what he was thinking.

Then I pinched off the thought, crushed it under my proverbial heel, like the head of a snake.

“What’s the state of the house?” Cameron asked. “Have you walked

through it yet?”

“No.”

“Shall we? I can take some notes, work up an estimate tonight based on what you want to do.”

The house in front of me was the only thing big enough—scary enough—to keep my focus off the man standing next to me.

I had no recollection of ever being here, though our housekeeper Ruth told me I visited a few times as a baby. The front porch was big enough to hold chairs, and I had to swallow a gritty, cottony mess of questions.

What had she hated about this place? This town? Why did she leave and leave so thoroughly?

It didn't look bad, considering how long it had been vacant. There was no evil vibe, no sense of discomfort that emanated off the skeleton of this family home.

The thought of walking inside felt an awful lot like someone would unsheathe a knife and slice it straight through my ribs, opening up all the most tender parts of what I kept inside.

There was absolutely no way I could do this with him walking by my side.

“No,” I said. “If you'd like to look, go ahead.”

Cameron set his hands on his hips and pinned me with a look overflowing with incredulous curiosity. “You don't want to look inside?”

“Eventually, I'll have to, won't I?” I replied icily. Ian whistled under his breath, and I ignored it. “For now, I'd rather go to my hotel and get settled in.”

That muscle jumped in his jaw, and I wanted to slap him for using it on me.

Men who looked like Cameron should not be able to use their muscle-ticcing jaws like a weapon of mass destruction.

If it wasn't him, I'd go in. I'd walk through the door and see what awaited me in this husk of a place.

Maybe.

But maybe not.

“My father told me everything was left untouched, so unless it's been burglarized, I expect you'll find dusty couches and faded walls.”

Cameron tore his gaze off my face and studied the house again, his own racing thoughts clear behind the deep brown of his eyes. “And what would

you like me to work up for an estimate? Are you renovating it to live here?"

I could hardly resist a snort, but somehow, I did.

"God no. I hope to be done with this entire mess in less than a month." I folded my hands in front of me and stared across the wide expanse of land, the tall trees and mountain peaks in the distance. "Someone will find this place just to their liking, but I can promise you it's not me."

So far, I'd driven from the airport in my rented car to this house, and I was ready to go back home. On a short detour through downtown to find a place with coffee, I'd garnered enough stares to know that I'd be the recipient of small-town gossip whether I wanted to be or not.

Ian glanced around the land. "Oh, it's not so bad here."

"I'm sure everyone who lives in places like this says that," I answered coolly.

He met my gaze unflinchingly, and now it wasn't so polite. "Considering I've called London home the last eight years, I'd say I'm fairly unbiased in my opinions, but what do I know?"

I sighed, conceding that with a brief arch of my brow. London was one of my favorite places in the world, but I had a feeling he didn't want to hear that, considering the slight edge of friendliness was completely gone from his expression.

Cameron still watched me with understandable wariness, like I was a chained up dog he wasn't sure if he could trust not to bite his face off.

"What brought you back from jolly old England?" I asked with delicate precision.

"My dying father," he said. There was a bold dare in that answer.

I didn't meet his challenge, finally deciding to slide my sunglasses up into my hair. The armor didn't feel so necessary at that moment, only made me feel like an asshole. A lump of regret lodged in my throat, but I swallowed it down.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I told him.

"Yeah, you sound like it," he muttered.

Cameron swiped a hand over his mouth, pinning his brother with a warning glance. "Why don't you go wait in the truck while I finish this up?"

Ian jerked his chin in a nod and walked away. I watched him with narrowed eyes. "He's friendly."

"Cut the shit, Ivy."

My eyebrows arched slowly, and I managed a glacially slow pivot to face

him. “*Excuse me?*”

Cameron took a step closer, and dammit, I had to lift my chin to meet him in the eye. Why the hell was he so tall?

“I don’t know why you’re lying, but we both know it was you. I won’t pretend otherwise.”

My stomach trembled at his nearness, and that same muzzle I used with my father—to subdue everything in me that needed subduing snapped neatly back into place.

“You don’t know me, Cameron. And I don’t know you.” I held his gaze, which was fierce and bright and focused. “I won’t be pretending otherwise because you met me during a weak moment. That girl in the elevator wasn’t me.”

He searched my face, finally nodding slowly. “So this is you. The real you,” he added.

“It is.” My cheeks felt warm, but I refused to concede this little eye-contact pissing match.

He had no clue how well-prepared I was to remain unbowed in situations like this. My whole life, I imagined someone using a giant metal hook on the edge of my chin, hoisting it sky high so I had no choice but to keep it where it belonged.

This man met someone unrecognizable. If I faced her in a mirror, she’d be a stranger.

Had to be a stranger. The alternative was impossible.

“All right then,” he said easily, crossing his arms over his chest. “Wilder Homes is happy to help you with whatever you need.”

I sniffed. The sarcasm wasn’t appreciated, even if he kept it skating just under the thin line of civility.

“Work up an estimate for a minor remodel,” I told him. “Gut what’s not working, new floors, new light fixtures and hardware if necessary. If the windows and roof are in good shape, even better.” I pulled a key from my purse and held it out. He took it carefully enough that our fingers didn’t brush.

He turned his attention to the house. “Furnished in there?”

“I believe so.”

“What are you going to do with that?” he asked.

“Nothing. Have it moved to a storage unit and I’ll sell it as a lot, or have someone hold an estate sale as soon as I’m done. All I need to know is that

it's on the market and I can get back to my life," I said. "I'll be back in a few hours to meet with a local real estate agent, so just leave the key inside. I trust the residents of Sisters won't gut the place in such a short window of time."

"Doubt it," he said easily. "We really like to take our time with looting abandoned properties."

"Funny."

"Don't worry, Ivy. All you'll find here is friendly curiosity and more offers to help than you'll know what to do with. Give it a couple of weeks, and I bet you won't want to leave."

I snorted. My dad would stroke out.

Wouldn't that be a fitting end to this entire inane banishment?

This *test*. That was all it was. A fucking test.

My skin crawled whenever I thought of my dad's coldly delivered directive.

I'd never felt like I had to earn his love before. But I did now. And the road to get there looked like a dusty old house covered in profit potential.

Everything in me—my bones and my heart and my freaking sanity—creaked ominously, like one stiff push would send me scattering into a million pieces.

Cameron studying me like a puzzle sure as hell didn't help.

I didn't need him trying to figure me out.

Not now.

Not ever.

He was a blip. Who I was with him was even less than a blip.

"So that's it?" he said.

I sighed, giving him an arched look. "Isn't that enough? Unless you can't handle the idea of working for me. Tell me now, because I'll call someone else."

Please. It was a pointless bluff that he had every right to call me on. There was no one else for me to call. They were the only company able to take me on immediately, and based on the knowing glint in his eyes, he knew it too.

And good Lord why did he have such nice, long eyelashes?

Ridiculous.

"Oh I can handle it," he said smoothly. "Once you meet Greer, you'll understand just how comfortable I am with a confident woman running things. My sister would kick my ass with a smile on her face, and I've been running a business with her for ten years. I wouldn't know what to do with

any female who was too sweet and accommodating.”

Cameron didn't say it to be cute or clever.

He meant it, and somehow, that was so much worse. Made him even more dangerous.

Naturally, I decided to ignore that too, even though he dangled the statement over me like it was bait on a hook, and he knew it would get a reaction out of me.

“Will you have an estimate ready tomorrow?” I asked.

“I'll get right on it, boss.” Then he grinned. “And just think, now I have all this time to get to know the real you.”

I clenched my jaw, and somehow, I just knew it didn't have the same effect on him as when he did it to me.

Fucking sexist, that jaw was.

Slowly, I exhaled, then dipped into my purse for a business card. It was heavy black cardstock, my name embossed in a glossy, sleek white font. He took it, then tapped it against his thigh.

“I'll take some measurements before I leave, email you the estimate and a contract when I'm done.” His eyes lingered on my face. “I guess I'll talk to you soon, Ivy Lynch.”

When he said my name, I felt a prophetic rumbling deep under my chest. Tectonic plate movements had less of an impact when they triggered something deep under the earth's surface, and that shit caused earthquakes and tsunamis.

Somehow, Cameron Wilder had even greater power than that.

I didn't want to think about why that felt like a portent of great doom—the lift of the hairs on the back of my neck when he said my name.

So I ignored that too, pivoting on my heel and striding quickly back to the car.

Chapter 7

Cameron

“What the hell was that?”

My brother’s incredulous statement went unanswered as Ivy’s very nice car pulled out onto the road and out of view.

My head was spinning. There weren’t enough deep breathing exercises in the world for this, and no matter how many I tried to take, she’d still completely knocked me off my axis.

When I met her, I had a feeling she was well-off—with discussions of family businesses and marriages to keep things contained within those families.

Ivy was *Wealthy*, with a capital W.

She stepped out of that car, with her tailored black dress and shining heels and sleek hair and black sunglasses and carved features, and it felt like someone parked a truck on my chest.

That was only one of the revelations from her first visit, and my brain couldn’t stagger through any more of them with my stupid brother bearing witness.

“Not now, Ian,” I said, digging my measuring tape and my iPad out of the back of the truck. “Get your shit and come help me measure rooms.”

“Did you sleep with her?”

“No.”

“Good. Your dick would probably fall off from frostbite.”

“Hey,” I barked, “don’t say shit like that about her.”

My brother’s movements slowed, then his expression changed instantly. Fucking hell.

“Holy shit,” he breathed.

I wrenched my tool belt around my waist and tightened it, keeping my eyes on the ground.

“You check the perimeter and the state of the exterior. I’ll start measuring interior rooms.”

“I would’ve been nicer to her if I knew you *wanted* to sleep with her.”

I snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“So you do want to sleep with her?”

My eyes narrowed in his direction. “She’s a *client*. I don’t sleep with clients.”

“Is that in the Wilder Homes handbook?” He pursed his lips, staring up at the house. “She’s not my usual type, but she’s hot. Scary but hot. I guess I’ve always liked that in a woman. Maybe she softens up with a warmer approach.”

She didn’t need to soften up, was my first traitorous thought. And my second thought, far more violent, came on the heels of imagining my brother attempting that warmer approach.

I took a step closer. “Don’t flirt with her.”

At the warning tone in my voice, a smug smile spread over Ian’s face. “I cannot *wait* to tell Greer about this.”

“Shut up, Ian.”

He hooted with glee. “This is the best day of my life. I am so glad I moved home.”

“Shut *up*, Ian.”

Fucked.

I was *fucked*.

Spending an hour and a half in an elevator with Ivy ended with my hand up her skirt and my tongue in her mouth.

Now I was looking at working with her.

Working *for* her.

As I passed, I shoved at Ian’s shoulder. “Greer was right, you’re not nice enough to come on these meetings. I’m gonna banish you to grunt work if you pull that again.”

But my asshole brother simply smiled. “Worth it, just to see you knocked on your ass by a woman for the first time in your entire life.”

I started snapping pictures of the front porch. “I wasn’t knocked on my ass.”

“You’re right,” he said. “You only drooled a little when she got out of her

car. I'm sure she didn't notice. It's perfect, actually. Half the single female population of Sisters has planned your imaginary wedding, so it's nice to see your ego checked by someone who was so keen to avoid such a fate that she lied about knowing you." Ian hummed contentedly. "What a beautiful day this is."

Wearily, I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Go. Away."

He whistled as he did, and I ascended the front porch, eyes skimming the face of the house. Windows were in good shape, with nothing rotting around the edges.

With the twist of a key, I was inside, and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust. The furniture was covered with white sheets, which gave the place an eerie, haunted look.

Slowly, I tugged at the corner of a sheet covering a chair, and it slid off in a slight cloud of dust.

Uncovering that one piece of furniture made the house seem more real. Like someone actually lived there.

I wandered the rooms, taking measurements and pictures, pulling sheets and piling them at the entrances to the spaces where I'd found them.

Ian joined me after about fifteen minutes, and we worked our way through the second level, tugging off sheets as we went.

"Why are we uncovering all this?" he asked. "Isn't that her job?"

"I'm curious." I ran a hand over the footboard of the bed in the primary bedroom. "It's all in pretty good shape, isn't it? Even though it's been sitting here for so many years."

He hummed. "Big kitchen. Good sized rooms, too. Wonder what she'll sell it for."

"This much land? Even with basic upgrades, she could turn this for maybe seven, eight hundred thousand?"

"Happy birthday to her," he drawled. "Must be nice."

Why was she here? I wondered. She clearly didn't want to be.

"You're thinking hard over there," my brother said.

I blinked.

None of my thoughts needed to be up for public consumption. I hardly knew how I felt about any of this. His opinions wouldn't help me in the slightest.

"We've got a lot of work to do tonight," I told him. "I need you to go to the township and pull the original blueprints to the house if they've got them."

I'll get working on this estimate."

"How long do you think it'll take?" he asked.

Regret clogged my throat before I answered, even though she'd be thrilled.

It was a strange reaction, nothing that made sense, because clearly what had happened between us meant a hell of a lot more to me than it did to her.

Meant nothing to her, by the looks of it.

"Not long." I tucked the measuring tape back into my tool belt. "The house doesn't need much. We'll clear it out and start pulling up all the floors as soon as she gives us the green light. I'll call the guys tomorrow and give them the option of taking this job or just staying laid off until something bigger comes. We can handle a smaller crew on this."

"You gonna pull up the dusty old carpets if they say no?" Ian asked with a raised brow.

"Yup." I gave him a level look. "There's not a piece of this process I haven't done before and won't do in the future if it needs to be done."

He held up his hands.

"You're not making fancy-ass furniture for the rich Brits anymore," I said easily. "Get used to doing the dirty work again, brother."

"I know why I'm here," he answered with an edge. "And I'm not too good for it."

"Great to hear." I jerked my chin toward the door leading out to the porch. "Let's get moving."



Ivy

"I saw sunglasses like that at the drugstore in Redmond last week," the girl at the front desk whispered. "Don't you just love them?"

With a glance at where I'd set them down, I tapped a manicured nail against the front desk counter, a nondescript laminate in a beige color. "My favorite pair."

Mine were Dior, so I highly doubted she found them at any drugstore, but it wasn't helpful to say that.

She stared at the glasses wistfully, then straightened, shifting her attention back to the computer.

As she clicked her long pink nails on the keyboard, I gave her a surreptitious once-over.

I'd seen her type my entire life. She had style. It was obvious in the choices she'd made in coming to work at a small town inn on the outskirts of town. Her jewelry was on trend, if not cheaply made, and the colors she chose favored her rich dark hair and pale skin. Either she stayed out of the sun completely or she wore spf 100 every time she walked out the door.

Her brows lowered as she clicked to another screen. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't have anything else. Is the room not to your liking?"

"It's fine," I said. "You're sure you don't have any suites? Having a place to work while I'm here would be helpful, and there's no table in my room." I peered at the name tag pinned to her shirt. Amanda. "I appreciate anything you can do, Amanda."

"We only have one larger room, and it's booked all week," she said. "I really am sorry."

I gave her a closed-mouth smile. "Nothing to apologize for."

"You could work at the library," she said. "Or the coffee shop downtown. I heard you stopped there this morning. My best friend works at the counter every morning and she told me all about your dress and your shoes."

The beginnings of a headache bloomed behind my eyes. "Did she?"

Amanda nodded furiously. "You're kinda hard to miss."

Notoriety was an ill-fitting look for me, but I was afraid it was something I wouldn't be able to avoid.

Lynches are above reproach.

I gave her another smile, the slightest degree warmer this time. Amanda and her excellent taste in sunglasses would get all my niceness because she wasn't a giant-sized builder with giant-sized hands that had been two inches from making my toes curl up in my Louboutins.

Not that I'd been wearing them that day, but it was entirely beside the point.

"I'll make sure to say hi when I go in for my coffee tomorrow morning."

Amanda beamed. "Her name is Farrah. She makes the best cinnamon lattes in town."

The pride in her friend had something softening in my chest.

Just a little.

“I’ll make sure to try one of those,” I told her. “Thank you for checking on a different room.”

Her cheeks flushed pink. “You’re welcome.”

I set my folder down on the counter while I adjusted my purse and set the sunglasses back on the top of my head. Her eyes lingered on the Wilder Homes contract.

“Oh, you’re working with the Wilders?” she asked, eyes bright and cheeks lifted in a smile.

“You know them?”

“Everyone knows everyone in Sisters,” Amanda said. “They’re a great family. Farrah’s had a crush on, well, every single Wilder boy the last ten years. Every time Cameron comes in for his coffee, he tips her five bucks on a three-dollar drink. She can hardly talk when he comes in.” Amanda’s cheekbones were a sweet red color as she talked about her friend’s crush. “He’s so hot.”

“So it seems,” I said levelly. “And you don’t have a crush on him?”

She grinned. “He’s a bit ... male to be my type.”

“Ahh.”

“I’ll still look, though,” Amanda added with a laugh. Then she waved her hands. “It’s silly, I know. Farrah is so much younger than him. We’re only twenty.”

Only twenty.

Five years off from me, but standing on the other side of the nondescript laminate desk, it felt like three times that much.

I swallowed. “I better get going,” I told her. “I have a meeting with a real estate agent.”

“Who are you working with for that?”

With a short sigh, I opened my leather portfolio and found the name I’d scrawled down. “Marcy Jenkins.”

“She’s so nice,” Amanda gushed. “Now that is someone I’d crush on. You’ll see when you meet her.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I suppose I will.”

My phone dinged with a text as I approached my car, and good God, something in my stomach fluttered when I saw who it was from.

Unknown number: It’s Cameron Wilder.

No.

No.

Not happening.

That fluttering bullshit was a weed, and I yanked it out with ruthless precision. I saved his number, with *no fluttering*, and returned back to the text thread.

Cameron: Overall, house is in great shape. Estimate will be in your inbox first thing tomorrow morning, and Greer will reach out to schedule a design meeting.

Me: Thank you for the update.

Cameron: Anything you need, boss.

Two very different reactions warred in my head. First, the obvious eye roll because his sarcasm was loud and clear. And maybe there were still roots of that weed left behind because it curled up, winding around the bottom of my ribs.

My lips tugged up in a smile.

Then I blew out a harsh breath, wiping it away with the exhale. The drive back to the house was quick, but I slowed as I drove through downtown this time, studying the businesses stacked neatly along Main Street.

Everything was clean and well-kept, the people all smiling and friendly and waving.

At me.

People waved *at me*.

“What the hell,” I whispered under my breath, lifting my hand off the steering wheel because it felt like a total asshole thing not to wave back. “Who *are* these people?”

My conversation with Amanda set me back a few minutes, and when I pulled back into the driveway a few hours after I’d last left it, a dirt-coated Jeep was parked in front of the garage, and a short, curvy woman with shockingly red hair snapped pictures of the house.

There was no helping the slight furrow to my brow when I noticed she wore jeans and hiking boots and a T-shirt tucked into the front of the jeans. At the sound of my car, she turned, settling her camera around her neck. Her red hair was barely contained in a thick braid falling down her back, and her smile was so sunny and bright, I almost locked my car door and slid down in my seat.

Why was she so damn happy to see me?

She didn't know me.

I could be a serial killer for all she knew.

Stowing the cynicism for a moment, I blew out a slow breath and fixed my lips in a polite, close-mouthed smile. Showing teeth in a smile was reserved for very specific situations, and this did not qualify.

I could hear my etiquette teacher's nasally voice in my head. *Unless you're in a dentist chair, no stranger needs a front-row seat to your oral hygiene, Ivy.*

When I exited the car, she approached with quick, energetic strides.

"You must be Ivy. It is so nice to meet you," she gushed.

Then she opened her arms. Like she was going to *hug* me.

I reared back with a quick clearing of my throat, and she paused.

Then I stuck my hand out. "Pleasure to meet you," I said.

She exhaled a laugh, eyes assessing me from head to toe.

Felt a bit different from when Cameron did it, I can tell you that much.

"Marcy Jenkins," she said with a grin and a pleasantly firm handshake.

"This house is fantastic. I was thrilled to get your message. I've always been curious about how it held up all these years."

I hummed, giving the house in question another look. "My builder looked at it today and said it's in surprisingly great shape."

"Who are you working with?" she asked.

"Wilder Homes."

Her cheeks flushed red, and that smile came back. So big. So many teeth.

"Cameron?" she asked. Marcy swallowed, her eyelashes fluttering. "He's great."

For *fuck's sake*.

I gave her a long look. "Friend of yours?"

"I guess," she said. "We've gone hiking before, out for coffee once, not that he has much free time. He's so busy with his family, you know. Every time I try to plan something with him, he's swamped."

It was so uncharitable to view her now in the light of whether Cameron would want her.

But come on, I was human, and he'd kissed the soul straight out of my body in that elevator. Of course I'd make some comparisons.

She was pretty. Wholesome and fresh-faced.

Smiled too much, but that was hardly something to be held against her.

Her legs were toned, her cleavage generous underneath the V of her simple cotton shirt.

“I don’t know him well,” I said honestly.

“They’re the best,” she proclaimed with widened eyes. “Honestly, you’re so lucky they had an opening in their schedule. I heard he backed out of a massive job with some billionaire out of Portland because he refused to do business with someone with his reputation. Apparently, he broke a bunch of laws or something.”

Interest curled through me, insidious and warm. “Really?”

She nodded. “He’s a great person. The best.”

“So it seems.” I sniffed. “Now, if you want to look around, I’ll wait out here.”

Her face creased in confusion. “You don’t want to come in?”

“It’s just a house,” I said easily. “I’m only interested in what you think it’ll be worth once we do some basic cosmetic upgrades.”

Marcy studied me curiously, and I tried not to fidget under the weight of it. Maybe Smiley was a bit more intuitive than I gave her credit for.

But I wasn’t walking in that house with an audience, not if I could help it.

The thought left me feeling brittle and breakable.

I’d never let anyone see me that way. Not if I could help it.

Marcy nodded. “Okay. Give me a few minutes to check out the inside. I’ll take some before pictures.”

“Thank you,” I told her.

When she disappeared into the house, I exhaled. My whole body was locked tight with all the tension held captive in my muscles.

It appeared right around the time I sat down in my dad’s office and ratcheted up a thousand percent when Cameron ‘don’t I have such great arms and such a great jaw’ Wilder stepped out of that damn truck.

I’d need two hours on a massage table to rid myself of half of it. And not one of those wussy massages where they used hot rocks and soft touches. I needed someone to unleash hell on my back and shoulders and neck.

Or I just needed out of this town, away from this house.

I needed something.

I just wasn’t sure I knew what.

Chapter 8

Cameron

If I sat still long enough, I could fall asleep anywhere. That was why most of my day was spent not sitting.

Especially the last few months. There was always something to be taken care of.

Always moving.

Always doing.

Except for the time I sat with my dad.

Even though his energy waned as the days went on, he still wanted to sit on the front porch every morning. Whenever I got the chance, I joined him.

He wasn't drinking coffee, but he said he liked smelling mine, so I let it sit untouched on the table between our chairs.

"Did your mom tell you about the leak in the roof?" Dad asked. His eyes were locked on the eastern sky, only half open, like he could fall back asleep at any time. He slept more and more of the day now, so it wouldn't have surprised me if he did.

"Yeah, she told me." I stretched my legs out and settled my head against the back of the chair. "I'll fix it after dinner."

"Shingles are in the barn."

I glanced over at him. "I know, Dad."

He nodded. "Whole thing probably needs to be replaced next year, though. Maybe two if she's lucky. You'll want to keep an eye on it for her. She never thinks about that roof until water is dripping on her head."

My chest hollowed out, just like it always did when he made casual mentions like that, referencing a future we all knew he wouldn't be around for.

“I will,” I promised.

His eyes closed, and he sighed. “You’re a good boy, Cameron. I’m glad you’re here to take care of your mom.”

“We’ll all take care of her.”

“She’ll pretend she doesn’t need you to,” Dad said, eyes still closed. “Or that she doesn’t need to talk about it. Don’t let her get away with that, okay?”

“You think I can tell Mom what to do?” I said.

The side of his mouth hooked up in a grin. “Not easily, no. Where do you think you kids get all your stubbornness?”

The fact that Sheila wasn’t my biological mom made no difference. She’d been the mother who loved me since I was ten years old.

“I always thought we got it from you,” I told him.

He laughed, but the sound was a weak approximation of what it used to be. “Are you kidding? I’m a saint. That’s why God wants me to come home earlier than most. I’m too pure for this world.”

My shoulders shook as I laughed. “Yeah, that sounds about right.”

“Don’t you need to be off to work?” he asked.

“Soon.” I glanced at my watch. “Not much for me to do over there. Ian and Wade are doing some haul-out, but most of the crew for this starts tomorrow. I gave ’em one more day since they weren’t expecting this job. I need to check some of the wiring and plumbing before we start tearing into everything. I forgot to do that yesterday.”

“That’s not like you not to check those things,” Dad said.

No shit.

My good sense was probably sitting on the ground in front of that house, roughly in the spot where I saw her get out of the car.

Thankfully, I’d worked some basic upgrades into the estimate before realizing my mistake, so if nothing else, Ivy wouldn’t be surprised if we got too far and the whole house needed new pipes.

This new version of her probably didn’t like expensive surprises any more than she liked ... any of this, apparently.

“Ian told me about her,” Dad said. Then he glanced over knowingly. “Said you were all flustered.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Ian is full of shit.”

“Said she was real pretty. One of those intimidating types.”

I snorted. “He did not say those words.”

“No,” Dad agreed, “he said something a little bit less charitable, and if

he'd been standing closer, I would've smacked him upside the head. Your brother's always been kind of a dick."

Wide-eyed, I swung my head in Dad's direction.

"What?" he asked, settling further into his chair. "A dad always knows when their kids are assholes. All of you have your moments, but I have to admit, you have less of them than your brothers."

I swiped a hand over my mouth. "I really wish we could've recorded this so I could play it for them when I wanted to ruin their day."

"Why do you think I said it when no one is listening? You can't prove anything, Cameron, and I'll deny it with my last breath." He gave me a knowing look. "Which will happen sooner than you think, so don't test me."

It was unsettling to converse with someone so casually about the end of their life.

He'd been making those comments for almost an entire year, and they poked at the tenderest parts of my skin—sharp and clawing and uncomfortable. My dad wasn't uncomfortable with it. He'd made peace, and it was clear.

So we never guilted him for saying it. Never changed the subject when something hard or difficult came up. We just let it be what it was—one of the hard things in life that you couldn't avoid no matter how badly you wanted to.

"What else are you doing today? Just working at the house?"

I sighed. "For part of the day. I doubt Ivy will be there. She didn't seem keen on looking at the house."

Dad made a thoughtful noise. "Her grandparents were nice people. I remember her mom."

"Do you?"

"A bit. Your mother probably does too. We didn't cross paths much before she left town. Pretty. Smart. A lot of ambition. More than this town could handle." He pushed on the arm of his seat and sat up further, waving me away when I got up to help. "And that's okay too, you know? Not everyone's cut out to live in a small town."

"I think Ivy takes after her mother in that regard," I said.

Dad nodded. "Maybe so. I'm sure it's still hard for her to be here. Just because this place isn't an anchor for her past doesn't mean it's not heavy to carry."

My dad always had this way about him—thoughtfully considering the

way people carried their struggles, never judging them for it.

I'd tried not to think about Ivy too hard as I worked on her estimate until my eyes were gritty and red, and I planted face-first into bed well after midnight. Tried not to think about the real version of her that got out of that car.

But I could only compartmentalize so much. Whatever she'd shown me when we first met was her too.

She just didn't want it to be. And I had to decide what I wanted to do with that.

When we stood in front of that house, her staunch refusal to go inside told me everything I needed to know.

"Remember that dog Poppy found in the woods when she was like ... five?"

Dad nodded, a smile ghosting over his lips. "Marvin was a menace. To everyone except your sister, of course."

He sat rigid in the corner of the barn for the first week we had him. Whenever someone approached too closely, he'd growl deep in his throat. Never bared his teeth. Never bit anyone. But he held his body in perfect stillness, never relaxing, never settling down.

Poppy used to sit in that barn and watch him, as calm as we'd ever seen her at that age. She'd toss chunks of food and wait patiently for him to eat.

It took two weeks for the dog to seek out the smallest piece of affection. By that point, she'd named him Marvin, for reasons none of us understood. Marvin took a few steps toward Poppy and me, as she sat next to me and told me to hold really still. I kept my hand steady, and he finally pressed his head against my fingertips.

We had him for seven years, and he slept in Poppy's bed every single night once we knew he'd be okay in the house.

"What made you think about him?"

"Thinking about fear, I guess," I admitted. "How we all react a bit differently when something scares us."

Dad leaned over and patted my hand. "Once you get old like me, you'll realize there's very little in this world that we should truly be afraid of. Most of it is self-induced, or someone else's issues taking up space in our head."

"What are you afraid of, Dad?" I asked.

He looked over at me and smiled. "Nothing, son." Then he nodded at my coffee mug, still sitting between us. "Now drink your coffee. Don't think I

don't know what you're doing."

I laughed under my breath. "Yes, sir."

Mom returned from her doctor's appointment while we sat and talked, waving us off when we tried to ask her how it went. "Heavens," she said. "They squished my boobs and told me I have high blood pressure. What else do you want to know?"

I pinched my eyes closed. "Nothing, honestly."

"I can tell you about the leak in the roof?" she asked.

I nodded, picking up the mug and transferring the coffee to a travel cup. "Yup. I'll fix it after dinner."

She patted my cheek. "Have a good day at work. Be nice to your scary new client."

"Fucking Ian," I muttered.

"I'm sure she's much nicer than your brother says."

I exhaled heavily. "I don't know, Mom. I'll have to let you know after a couple more days."

"Maybe I'll bring her some cookies or something," Mom said.

My eyebrows rose skeptically. "Not sure she'd want a welcome basket."

Mom waved it off. "Everyone likes to feel wanted in a new place."

Everyone except Ivy, sure.

"You look tired, Cameron."

"I am tired, Mom." I swiped a hand over my face and gave her a quick hug. Worry creased her face when she pulled back to study mine. "What?"

"I don't usually lose sleep thinking about you, Cameron. Is it time I start?"

I patted her shoulder. "No. I'll be fine."

"You taken your bike out lately?" she asked. "You used to do that a lot more."

"Haven't had time," I admitted. "These days, if I have the time to sit, I'm over here with you."

She hummed. "Well, maybe make some time for yourself, all right?"

By the time I arrived at the jobsite, the barn doors were open, and a few pieces of the furniture were already moved into the open space, along with stacks of framed photos plucked from the wall. And Ivy was leaning against the hood of her car, watching them work with a stony expression on her face.

If she registered the sound of my truck pulling next to her car, she did an incredible job of hiding it.

Today was another black dress, this one with white pinstripes and little cap sleeves. Her hair was back, and her lips were red. I watched while Wade left the house and gave her a quick, nervous glance, scurrying a box of items out to the barn and then marching back inside.

Ian came out with an end table in each hand, narrowing his eyes in her direction when she slowly crossed her arms over her stomach. I shook my head, getting out of the truck and walking toward her.

She didn't turn her head, but she inhaled slowly when I joined her in leaning on the hood of her car.

"Riveting stuff," I said. "How long you been standing here?"

"Not too long."

Ivy smelled clean but not soft or flowery. It was citrusy and sharp, and I tried not to make it obvious that I was filling my lungs with whatever clung to her skin.

One of our younger employees came out, tripping on his own feet when he looked in her direction.

"You're scaring the crew," I told her with a smile.

She finally turned her head toward me, and even knowing the exact shade of her eyes, I wasn't quite braced for the impact.

Would they ever not do that to me? Parker accidentally hit me in the stomach with a steel bat once, and it felt an awful lot like that.

"If I'm scaring them by sitting here, they need to get out more."

Those navy blue eyes—ringed with a dark circle on the edges—sparked with challenge.

Sit still, I thought. Don't make any sudden movements.

She'd snap my hand off if I shifted too quickly. Maybe it wasn't the nicest comparison, but all I could think of when I looked at Ivy was that terrified dog, sitting like a statue in the corner of our barn.

Even though it was the last thing I wanted to do, I dropped her gaze and looked back at the house. "You gone in yet?"

"That's none of your business."

"I'll take that as a no," I answered easily. "It's nice in there. Big rooms. Lots of potential."

"Good, it'll sell very quickly then."

"No doubt about that."

She hummed. "Speaking of which, I met your friend yesterday."

"Which friend would that be? I've got a couple." I tilted my head to the

side. “Might have counted you as one but you’d rather pretend you don’t know me so that makes things a little uncomfortable.”

She exhaled, slow and steady.

I fought a smile.

“Marcy Jenkins,” she said in a clipped tone.

Shit.

I tried to hide my grimace but couldn’t quite manage it. “Marcy’s a nice woman.”

And she was. For someone else.

But Marcy also very much wanted in my pants and a ring on her finger, and I wasn’t particularly interested in either option.

Or not from her, at least, I thought, recognizing instantly that the woman next to me could ask for the former, and I’d happily oblige.

“She thinks you’re a very nice man,” Ivy said. “A living saint, really. And in case you didn’t know, she’d love to schedule some quality time with you once you’ve got an opening in your very, very busy schedule.”

Her voice was as smooth as glass. Not a ripple in sight.

“That’s nice of her to speak highly of me.”

“You must have trouble telling women you’re not interested.”

I scoffed, turning to pin her with a look. “That’s a stretch, considering you don’t know me, Ivy.” Her cheeks turned the slightest shade of pink, and fuck if I didn’t find that fascinating. “I don’t string people along if that’s what you’re insinuating.”

“I said nothing of the sort. Please don’t put words in my mouth.”

Ian came out onto the porch, holding one end of a faded blue sofa. Wade, our longtime foreman, held the other.

In Wade’s mouth was an unlit cigarette.

Ivy’s eyes narrowed slightly on that couch, but then she pulled her gaze down to the ground.

“Almost done with the downstairs?” I asked them.

“Just about,” Ian said. “Feel free to come get the rest of the heavy shit, though, since you decided to sleep in this morning.”

I laughed. “Please, I was up before dawn, and you know it.”

“You talk to Mom about the roof?” he asked. He and Wade set the couch down.

I sighed. “I’ll fix it after dinner. You’re welcome to help.”

“Sure thing. I’ll hold the ladder as you climb up. I’d hate for you to fall

and injure yourself because then I'd have to take over all the stuff you're responsible for."

If Ivy hadn't been sitting next to me, I might've told him to fuck off.

Instead, I just glared in his direction, and he hid his smile by taking a swig from his water jug.

"Ian being friendlier today?" I asked quietly.

She exhaled a short laugh. "Ian is about as friendly as an ice pick."

"Well, it's good to know you two are getting along. I'd wager he'd say the same thing about you."

It took a moment for what I'd said to sink in.

"You have some nerve," she said under her breath.

I stood from the hood of the car. "Just calling a spade a spade, Ivy. You don't want to be here. We all get it. But they aren't the ones you're mad at," I said, pointing at the crew. "Remember that."

Her lips tightened, her eyes locked on the house, and a deeper flush crawled up her neck into her face.

"Wanna come inside and see the downstairs now that it's empty? We'll probably do the rest tomorrow."

She didn't answer at first, simply stared at the house like it would answer for her.

I wondered what would happen if I laid a hand on her shoulder. How tight her muscles would feel under my hands.

She'd bolt if I tried.

Sit still, I reminded myself. Be patient.

"No thank you," she answered, all smooth and polite and *fuck off, will you?*

I nodded. "There's a chair in the back of my truck if you want to sit somewhere more comfortable."

She straightened, swiping her hands down the front of her dress. "I'm heading back to my hotel. Your sister sent me a list of things I'll need to finalize this week."

"Yeah, she has an annoying tendency to send everyone lists of what they need to do."

Her gaze locked onto mine, and for one stupid moment, I found myself holding my breath to see if she'd smile.

She didn't.

But her eyes searched mine, then her brows lowered a fraction of an inch.

What was she trying to figure out?

“Cameron,” she said, the dismissal clear in her tone.

My chin rose. “Ivy.”

She didn’t look at me again as she got back into the car and pushed those big dark glasses over her face.

Once she was out of sight, I scratched the back of my neck.

“You gonna help us or not, asshole?” Ian yelled.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m coming.”

Chapter 9

Ivy

When I was a freshman in high school, I was already enrolled in AP classes. In one of those, the teacher paired me with a senior athlete struggling to keep his place in the class.

He played basketball, if memory served.

And he was an idiot. No AP class in the world was the right place for that man because he had the intelligence of a fence post. Either way, we were working on a paper together in the kitchen at my house, and right as I was trying to explain what a dangling participle was, he tried to shove his hand up my skirt and his tongue down my throat.

“You’re so fucking hot,” he whispered right before he moved in for the sloppy, ill-advised attempt.

Despite my bully-punching background, I froze because it was my first kiss and it was *terrible*. I remember thinking two things—why is his tongue so wet (maybe he has a medical issue) and *Oh gawd, this is what I’ll have to think about whenever I think about my first kiss?*

The second thought was enough to snap me out of my frozen state, and I shoved my hands at his chest to push him back, but he didn’t go anywhere.

There was hardly enough time to feel the icy grip of panic because our housekeeper Ruth walked into the kitchen, yanked him by the back of the shirt, and told him to get his ass out of the house before she called the cops.

He failed his paper, leaving the AP class shortly after.

And me?

I walked into the school the next day and found myself the unwilling recipient of whispers and stares down every single hallway of that building. His athlete buddies snickered when I passed, someone making an under-their-

breath comment about having a stick up my ass, and maybe someone needed to fuck it out of me.

It was the first time in my life that attention, en masse, made me feel sick to my stomach. I never told my father that he'd spread stories about me because it would have done nothing except give them more fuel.

So I did what my father taught me to do.

As I passed, I looked them right in the eye, put a firm, mental hand underneath my chin and pushed it up. Just a little bit.

I'd be damned if pencil-dick little boys like that would ever cause me to drop my gaze and scurry around the school like I didn't deserve to be there.

Then I ignored it.

Ignored the eyes following me all day, and the day after that.

Hid it behind a barricade, something in my own mind that looked a lot like a giant steel wall.

They could say whatever they wanted, but I knew it wasn't true.

Even at fifteen, I knew that his reaction said a lot more about his insecurities than it did about me as a person. If those idiots wanted to snicker to themselves that I was a prude and a bitch, then it meant they'd leave me alone.

Until I showed up in Sisters, I didn't think about that time of my life much at all. It wasn't like it planted some deep-seated hatred of men, other than a strict avoidance of the douchebags and Neanderthals who couldn't think their way out of a paper sack.

My brain remembered, though, what it was like to have every single eye swivel to point in my direction.

I blame Amanda at the front desk, really. She told me the burgers at this place were "stupid good," and when a second call to my dad's cell phone, and then his office, went unanswered, I honestly just couldn't sit in that quiet hotel room for another second.

Stupid good red meat covered in gooey cheese on a giant piece of bread sounded just about right. Considering my last two meals had been a take-out salad delivered to my room, consumed while I sat at the foot of my bed, it sounded necessary. If it was the worst type of coping mechanism I could come up with, then I'd like to see a single person judge me for that.

The restaurant sat just across the parking lot from the hotel, with a big black-and-white-striped awning over the bright red door. The front of the building had a big line of windows stretching from end to end, so anyone

sitting in the booths facing that direction had a front-row seat to whoever was about to enter.

That was when the muscle memory kicked in, unlocking some hidden trauma of an entire room full of people staring at me.

Above the door was a little gold bell, and when it heralded my arrival with a whimsical little chime, it took less than three seconds for every person in the place to turn and stare. The single exception was a tiny old man hunched at a nearby table, staring down at a chess board.

Two women at a booth by the front leaned closer, one of them whispering to the other, with a quick glance at my shoes and the cream dress I'd worn. It was one of my favorites, with a crisp collar, buttons running all the way down the front where it landed at my knees, and black piping along the edges.

It was the whisper that pulled the trigger.

My chest went heavy, some giant invisible fist pressing down on my sternum.

My throat felt tight, the second giant fist closing, closing, closing over my windpipe.

And immediately, I wanted to pivot and flee. Ditch the heels and sprint my ass back to the hotel.

I didn't even need to ditch the heels, actually. And the fact I was willing to run in stilettos should tell you how powerful that instant slice of panic was.

Wasn't that the weird part about anxieties you didn't know you had? They could lie dormant for years until one single thing brought them clawing and scratching to the surface.

Consider my surface officially scratched open, because I darted my eyes around, looking for a hostess to seat me. There was a little chalk sign by the entrance—*please seat yourself*.

Around the big open room were plenty of options—booths toward the back, high top tables along the left of the room, stools at the counter facing the open kitchen, and scattered options throughout the middle.

I chose the closest fucking one because the thought of walking through that room with heads swiveling to follow made me feel like that fifteen-year-old girl again.

Except the arrogant tilt of the chin wouldn't work quite the same here. Challenging stares wouldn't help either.

In fact, all I could hear as I picked the closest table and slid into a chair

with my back facing the line of windows was Cameron fucking Wilder telling me that Ian would probably say the same things about me that I was saying about him.

As friendly as an ice pick.

The words echoed in my brain on an endless, obnoxious loop.

God.

Just what I needed was an emotionally intuitive man who'd seen me at my very worst.

Now he thought he could *say* things. Make *observations*.

It was so much worse that his observations were true.

Honestly, I was just lucky that Cameron didn't press on why I'd shown up at the house at all. There was a good chance I wouldn't have been able to answer.

A pretty, smiling server with blue-tipped braids came to the table. "Hi, what can I get you to drink?"

"Iced tea, please," I said.

Her dark eyes were heavily lashed, and she had a tiny diamond winking from the side of her nose. Those eyes did a quick skim of my face and clothes, then she nodded. "Of course. Here's your menu. I'll give you a couple of minutes to look it over."

Even though my heart still hammered relentlessly against the inside of my ribs, I managed a polite smile.

The menu sat untouched because if there was even the slightest chance I'd talk myself out of the cheeseburger, that chance was long gone.

At the table next to me, the old man moved a hand to one of his pawns, then paused, pulling it back and settling it back into his lap.

My brows lowered, and I found myself watching with interest as he studied the board with cloudy dark eyes. The short curls of his white hair stood out in stark contrast to his dark, wrinkled skin, and after a minute, he finally moved a bishop to the far side of the board.

Then he sat back.

My stare must have caught his attention because he glanced over, gaze locking with mine.

Then he smiled. "You play?" he asked.

"Not as much anymore, but I used to."

He nodded. "Game teaches you a lot about life," he said, then he tapped his temple. "Keeps you sharp. And patient. Always thinking a few steps

ahead of your opponent, if you have any chance of winning.”

That was exactly what my father used to tell me and why he'd required that I learn how to play. We used to spend hours sitting across a board from each other in the study.

Instead of telling the stranger that, though, I simply smiled. “It does.”

The server returned to my table with an iced tea and left with my order.

While I waited, I realized just how poorly I'd thought this through. Take-out delivery was created for situations like this, and eating my food on the foot of my bed was a perfectly fine life choice I'd be returning to shortly.

My fingers fidgeted restlessly, and I blew out a quick breath as I stretched them out, a meek attempt at stowing the impulse to pull out my phone just so I had something to focus on.

The restaurant was neat and clean, black and white and red decor to match the exterior, and even though it was past the lunch rush, there was still a solid hum of noise from the filled tables.

I took a sip of my iced tea and sighed.

The server returned with a smile. “Your burger will be out soon. Anything else I can get for you while you wait?”

The man at the table next to me smiled again, and I wondered how often he sat here—alone and playing chess by himself, just to be in a room full of people.

I thought about what drove me here too, sitting at the foot of the bed, staring down at my phone to see if my dad texted. Called. Anything.

Sitting here alone didn't help anything.

It certainly didn't distract me from the shit tangling up my head, the giant knotted mess that it was. If I could find a single thread to pull on, maybe I'd be able to figure out what was pissing me off the most about this entire thing.

Everything in this place, everything about the reason I was there was like shoving a giant spotlight on the things I didn't want to see.

Didn't want to remember. Or admit out loud.

“Can I get my burger to go?” I asked the server.

If she was surprised by the request, she did a damn good job of hiding it. “Of course.”

“Thank you.”

She paused at the table next to mine. “Need anything else, Rog?”

“No, thank you, hun. I'm about ready to head home. Time for my afternoon nap, you know.”

The server smiled, then patted his shoulder and walked back toward the kitchen.

Within a couple of minutes, he'd slowly stood from the table and waved across the restaurant, calling out a friendly goodbye to someone. He smiled, shuffling out as other patrons waved in his direction too.

The familiarity between them had me watching underneath my lashes, desperately hoping they didn't realize I was watching. Then I glanced around the room and noticed it at other tables too.

Two elderly women stood next to a table seating a young family, the group of them chatting and laughing.

In the back corner, a group of four middle-aged men spoke to a pair of guys in their twenties seated across the aisle.

As my eyes tracked around the row of tables lining the windows, I noticed only one table studying mine. Two women sat with emptied plates, off to the corner from where my table was located. The older one had short, sensible gray hair and pretty eyes, while the younger woman across from her had deep chesnut-brown hair and envy-inducing eyebrows.

They both stared at me.

The older woman smiled, as did the younger one—questioning smiles, like I had any idea what they were thinking, certainly not enough that I'd be able to give them an answer.

My lips lifted a fraction, enough that I wasn't being rude, but my stomach flipped unsteadily when the older woman stood and started walking in my direction.

Maybe if I started wearing jeans and T-shirts and flip-flops, no one would pay attention to my comings and goings, but gawd, I wasn't sure I could use that as a justification.

Jeans were a prison for the wearer, if you asked me. A punishment derived from the casual fashion industry to make us think we were dressed down. *Nothing* about them was more comfortable than a nice dress, and I'd die on that hill.

Leggings, I could understand. Even I wore them on occasion.

Denim? Absolutely fucking not.

But at that moment, as the two women walked in my direction, I'd take the Levis and be perfectly happy.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt," the older woman said. "But are you Ivy Lynch?"

There was something particularly ominous about the fact that she knew my name. But she had kind eyes, and she wasn't flashing every single tooth in her mouth with that smile, so I felt a tad more inclined to trust her than Marcy *I'm in love with Cameron Wilder Jenkins*.

"I am."

She smiled. "I thought you might be."

Since they were both staring down at me, it felt odd to remain in my seat, so I stood slowly, adjusting the belt on my shirt-dress, fighting the urge to check my hair.

"My goodness, I wish I could pull off a dress like that."

The younger woman next to her smiled wide, and there was a small ping of recognition in the very back of my head. Why did she look so familiar?

"You look like your mother," the older woman said.

I froze. "You knew her?"

"A bit," she answered. "We don't live too far down the road from your grandparents' house, and I remember your mom from before she left even though she was younger than me and my husband, Tim." Then she tilted her chin in a vague gesture. "She worked here, actually."

"She did?"

The woman hummed. "Waited tables here and at the bar right downtown on the weekends. Just about anyone in town who lived here then would remember her, I'm sure."

Indecision sliced through me, a clean cut right down the middle.

I wanted to know everything.

And I didn't want to know anything.

Some part of my brain corralled itself from getting too curious, the very same reason I felt an impossibly strong urge to stay out of that house. I couldn't miss what I didn't know. My dad hardly ever talked about her beyond how they met and what they'd both wanted. He bottled up his grief so effectively that I'd had no choice but to do the same. And when you didn't remember anything, didn't know anything, it was easier to keep that bottle closed tight.

Knowing this side of my mom was very much like opening Pandora's box. It was a side of her that took up nineteen years of her life, unfiltered through my father and his own biases.

"I'll keep that in mind, thank you," I told her. Something in her eyes told me she knew I had no intention of going to the bar downtown and fishing for

good ole days stories. “I’m sorry, I don’t believe I caught your name.”

The younger woman laughed. “My mom is used to everyone knowing who she is. I keep telling her to keep her ego in check.”

The older woman clucked her tongue, giving her daughter a warm, affectionate look that had my insides sharp and cold, the loneliness of the entire day hitting me in an entirely unwelcome way.

“This smart-ass is my daughter, Poppy.”

Poppy held out her hand, and I took it, pleasantly surprised at her firm handshake.

“And I’m Sheila. Sheila Wilder.”

A sudden rush of my pulse thundered in my ears, my hand hanging limply by my side when everything rushed into startling clarity.

Oh God.

This was his mother and his sister, and that was why her big, wide smile looked so familiar.

“You’re ... Cameron’s mother?” I asked weakly.

Her eyes gleamed—knowing and brimming with maternal curiosity, and suddenly, I wanted to sprint away again.

“Most days, I’ll claim him, yes.” She opened up her arms. “Do you accept hugs for hellos?”

I swallowed, fighting the urge to shrink away from the nuclear blast of warm, maternal energy she emitted. I swear, I didn’t know how the hell to people at all, and it had never, ever been more clear.

Poppy nudged her with her elbow. “Mom, not everyone wants hugs.”

Sheila sighed. “I suppose.”

Instead, she shook my hand, but my fingers felt weak because holy hells bells, I made out with her son seven seconds after meeting him. It felt like my face was going to melt off from embarrassment because I swear she could read everything going on in my brain while she stood smiling at me the way she was.

Happy.

Excited.

Welcoming.

Right on the heels of that thought, Sheila gave me an appraising look.

“Do you have any plans for dinner tonight? We’d love to have you over, get you a home-cooked meal.”

I blinked. Then blinked again. My plans consisted of a deathly quiet hotel

room and staring at the ceiling for hours before I finally fell asleep. Maybe a hot shower with inadequate water pressure just to break up the monotony. “I ... I don’t, but —”

“Wonderful,” she gushed. “Cameron can give you the address.”

I smiled. Sort of. It might have come out like a grimace because the thought of sitting across the dinner table from that man while his mother watched every interaction made me want to hook up an IV of pinot noir. “I appreciate the offer, but I really need to get some work done,” I finished lamely.

Poppy gave me a sympathetic smile, and I was ready to climb under the damn table. I’d pity me too, because honestly, who felt off-kilter at a friendly offer for a home-cooked meal?

Ivy freaking Lynch, apparently.

“Maybe she’s had enough of the boys on the jobsite and doesn’t want to see them any more than she has to, Mom,” Poppy interjected. “I can only guess how much of an ass Ian was.”

I wanted to laugh, but I swallowed it down. “He was fine.”

Sheila raised an eyebrow. “You’ve got a good poker face, young lady.”

Yeah, I’d been told that a time or two.

But what did people really mean when they said that?

It was uncomfortable not to know what someone was thinking just by looking at them. Wasn’t it so much easier when they were expressive—when their eyes showed excitement or wonder or worry or aggravation?

Hard to read was a nice way to say it.

Frigid was another.

It wasn’t like I wanted to be viewed that way. Of course, the world would always want the Sheila and Poppy Wilders, with their big smiles and kind offers.

I just wasn’t sure how to climb past the gates that had been firmly entrenched my entire life, rooted so far deep into who I am that I couldn’t fathom who I was without them.

I took a deep breath and dredged up as warm of a smile as I could manage. “Your offer is very kind. But I really do need to work tonight.”

She eyed me again. “All right. Maybe another time,” she said softly.

I didn’t answer.

Poppy’s attention snagged on the server approaching with my to-go bag. I saw glimpses of Cameron in her face—the shape of her mouth, something

about the line of her nose. She was beautiful, the effortless, welcoming kind of beauty that I'd never quite mastered.

"It was lovely to meet you," I told them.

Poppy hooked her arm through her mom's. "Don't worry, she'll keep inviting you. She's relentless that way."

Sheila sighed, but she didn't sound all that put out. It was an affectionate sound, and something in my chest rumbled dangerously at the sight of it.

With the to-go bag clutched tightly in my hands, I gave them a small smile and left with quick, long steps. The man at the table next to mine winked, and I thought about that wink, their smiles, as I finished my burger and got ready for bed. While I showered, I thought about small-town bars and strangers who knew my mom better than I did. Cell phones with no missed calls. Poker faces and what they hid underneath.

I lay in bed that night, staring up at the ceiling, the hours passing slowly until my eyes finally started to lower.

As my body sank into the mattress, tension easing incrementally from my frame, that's when the shrill sound of the fire alarms started screaming.

"For fuck's sake," I muttered, flinging the blankets off. I ripped a cashmere cardigan from my closet and tugged it around my silk pajama set, slipping my feet into my slippers, and grabbing my purse before I ripped open the door leading out to the hallway.

"Please tell me the hotel isn't on fire," I told Amanda when I saw her in the parking lot.

She grimaced, a phone pressed tight against her ear. "It's not. But we can't figure out why the alarms are going off."

"Excellent," I muttered. "Can we go back in and get our things?"

Slowly, she shook her head. "Not until we know for sure it's safe. I don't think it's carbon monoxide either, but the fire department has to clear the building before anyone can go back in." Before I could respond, she held up a finger and nodded at whatever someone said on the other end of the phone. Then her eyes closed, and she sighed. "Got it," she said, then hung up.

When her gaze met mine, I felt a sinking in my gut.

Amanda's features were grim when she spoke. "No one can stay here tonight, unfortunately. We're going to need to find a new place for everyone to stay until they get this fixed."

I stared at her for a moment, then pinched my eyes shut.

Of course.

Chapter 10

Ivy

“Okay, Ivy,” I whispered, “don’t be a fucking pansy. Just go in the damn house.”

It looked a thousand times creepier at night, the trees like tall, spindly skeletons reaching up into the inky sky. From the safety of my car, I questioned how horrible it would be to just sleep right where I was. Lean the seat back and wedge my purse under my head as a pillow.

I’d already run from one thing tonight, and I was getting a little sick of this version of me who did things like avoid restaurants and old houses carrying someone else’s history and builders with angular jaws covered with just the right amount of stubble.

So I wasn’t going to run anymore.

One look at Amanda’s face as she realized the magnitude of having to find new hotel accommodations for every single guest at the hotel, and I found myself doing the absolute strangest thing.

I offered something to make her life a little bit easier, and my night infinitely worse.

“You don’t have to find me a place,” I told her. The words just came out of me. No forethought. Definitely no compassion for the future me who’d have to deal with the ramifications.

“I don’t?” She had this odd dazed look on her face, staring at the parking lot full of tired, cranky people who’d been dragged from their bedrooms by malfunctioning smoke alarms that they couldn’t get turned off. Something about an unexplained electrical glitch.

I seemed to have a lot of those when Cameron Wilder was in the vicinity, like he could single-handedly short-circuit the grid just by existing.

“I have someplace I can stay.” Then I did something even more strange. I set my hand on her arm. Like we were friends who casually touched each other, and then I *patted. Consolingly.* “Good luck.”

The relief on her face was the only reason I didn’t back the hell out of my offer because the second I got in my car and drove over to the house, I felt the early quakings of a panic attack.

I’m telling you, the momentary release of the pressure valve was *never worth it.*

I wanted to drive right back into that parking lot and demand the best hotel in Redmond, but I heard enough people around me calling around, and not having any luck that I tightened my grip on the steering wheel and just kept driving.

What was I *doing?* I didn’t want to go into this house in the daylight, and now it was pitch fucking black outside and the whole place looked like I was about to get murdered the moment I stepped out of my car.

In my slippers.

In my pajamas.

Wearing a cashmere cardigan and no robe.

I whimpered.

“You can do this,” I repeated. “You’re a fucking Lynch.”

I grabbed my purse, yanking out my cell phone until I could turn on the flashlight with trembling hands.

My ribs squeezed so tight I could hardly take a full breath, but I did my very best, sucking in oxygen as I kept my eyes firmly planted on the circle of light from my phone. I made it up the porch and inside the house, fumbling frantically for a switch on the wall.

When I flipped it on, weak yellow light filled the empty room, and I exhaled in a quick, relieved rush.

The carpet was faded from where the couch sat untouched for years, stains spotting the middle of the room. The wallpaper was peeling from the corners—a pale blue pattern with little white flowers, a matching border stretching around the whole room.

My throat was tight as I stared at those flowers, and I notched my chin up. I didn’t make it this far to be undone by some peeling wallpaper. All I needed was a bed, and I’d be just fine.

It was just a house. I wouldn’t pay attention to any of the details.

Laughter threatened—hysterical and unhinged as it tried to claw up my

throat, but I wouldn't let it.

As far as I knew, the furniture upstairs was untouched, if not a little dusty, and now that I'd made it this far, I could do this.

I was not backing out now.

My dad wanted to test me?

Well, he'd never imagined this. I'd never gone camping. Backpacking. Nothing. My idea of roughing it was no wi-fi and low thread count sheets.

I hitched my bag over my shoulder and tightened the cardigan around my body as I crept up the stairs, deciding to leave the downstairs light on.

Murderers avoided houses with lots of lights on. Everyone knew that.

The stairs creaked ominously, and I made it up to the clearing of the stairs without like, falling through any rotted wood.

Good start.

The first bedroom to the right was already empty, and I said a quick prayer that I hadn't heard Cameron wrong. Wouldn't that serve me right? Do something nice for someone, and end up sleeping on the dirty carpet because all the furniture was already moved out. And I tell you where my own personal line was—sleeping on said furniture in the barn.

I found the switch for the hallway light and flipped that on, but because they'd started pulling light fixtures, some of them were just bulbs hanging from the ceiling.

A little crack-house-chic, but I could manage it for one night.

The second bedroom was bigger than the first room, and I exhaled a quick sigh of relief when I saw the bed sitting in the middle of the room. Cautiously, I swept my finger over the ornate carved footboard, but it came up clean, which meant the coverings had worked all those years.

Cautiously, I edged around the bed and glanced out of the large windows flanking either side of it. The view overlooked the back of the house, which was nothing but black. No stars. No trees. Just ... nothing.

Me and the house and, oh please, dear Lord, no ghostly visitors.

I sat on the edge of the bed and pressed a hand over my still racing heart when the mattress didn't sink from my weight. There were faded marks on the wall where artwork had been hanging, and I couldn't help but wonder whose room it was.

Was it hers?

Was this the place she'd lain awake and planned all the things she'd do when she left this town? Did she stare out the window and wish to see other

lights, to see buildings and neighbors and life?

On the edge of the doorframe, I caught a glimpse of pencil marks, lining from about three feet off the ground, to about three quarters of the way to the top.

Don't look, the voice in my head screamed. Ignore everything and just get some sleep.

But the same instinct that drove me over to this house, that had me patting Amanda's arm and doing oddly kind things, had me standing to study the marks on the wall.

My head tilted, and as I moved another step closer, I heard the first sound. A light scratching.

I paused, the hairs lifted on the back of my neck.

The scratching began again. A little bit louder.

"I can do this," I whispered. There was a quaver to my voice that I ruthlessly ignored. "I can do this."

I'd tell you what, though, you could say something until you were blue in the face and still know that you were absolutely full of shit. Because when the scratching got louder, followed by a plaintive wail that seemed to echo through the upstairs, I fucking bolted.

That's it, I thought as I raced down the stairs. I was burning this place to the ground.

Maybe it was the cold grip of terror or the way I pounded down those steps, but my ass did not hear the sound of anyone—man or vehicle—approaching the house, so when I ripped open the door, and the first thing I saw was a tall silhouette of a man on the front porch, I *screamed*.

"It's me," he shouted, hands raised. "It's Cameron."

I sank against the door, my shaking hands speared into my hair, and I struggled for breath, heaving like I'd just run a fucking marathon.

"Holy *shit*, Cameron," I gasped. My heart battered wildly against my chest, and my legs could hardly hold me up. "I thought you were a murderer."

"Despite coming very close with my brothers sometimes, I'm not. At least not the last time I checked," he said.

"Your sarcasm is helpful right now, thank you."

"What happened? I heard you running down the steps."

Running? Yeah right. I sounded like a hippo bearing down on that front door with the way I made my exit. There was no grace involved in what just

happened.

His eyes tracked from the top of my head down to my bare legs, ending with a lip-twitching grin at the sight of my slippers. My fist gripped the front of the cardigan because the last thing this situation needed was my bra-less state to be proclaimed to the world.

I straight up ignored his question. “What are you doing here?”

“I was out for a ride on my bike,” he said. “Saw the commotion at the hotel and stopped to see if you were okay.”

I ruthlessly ignored the thoughtfulness of him stopping to check on me and focused in on his mode of transportation.

A bike.

Not that I knew much about them, but the machine parked next to my car was sexy AF—sleek and shining and black, with a brown leather seat. If I wanted to imagine such things, I could so easily see him straddling it, long legs forward, strong arms spread out as he gripped the handlebars. Someone of the female variety perched behind, her arms wrapped tight around his waist and legs pressed tight around his hips.

Nope, that didn’t do anything for me *at all*.

“What made you come here?” I asked, still annoyingly breathy.

“Amanda told me you had a place to stay,” he said, glancing inside the house. “I figured you came here. You shouldn’t stay here, though. We don’t even have the plumbing on.”

Right.

As my death grip tightened on the cardigan, it occurred to me that I was at a bit of a disadvantage here.

He struts in—windblown and saving the day and needing a shave and wearing a long-sleeved black Henley like he’s God’s gift to the cotton shirt industry.

Then there was me. One flight of stairs had me wheezing like a pack-a-day smoker, wearing fuzzy slippers, my hair in a tangled mess, and I had to face the truth that there was no way to exit this situation with my composure intact.

“I didn’t think of that,” I admitted primly. Then I arched an eyebrow. “So you were, what? Coming to warn me not to flush the toilet?”

I swept a hand over the tangled hair falling into my face, attempting a graceful motion, but failing when the knot fell right back down.

His lips twitched again. “I was going to offer you a place to stay,

actually.”

“If you say your bed, I swear...” I said, eyes narrowing dangerously.

Cameron’s eyes traced quickly over my face, irritating fondness warming his gaze. “Do you think I have a death wish?”

“Honestly, I have no idea anymore.” I sighed. “Where is it?”

“I told you I live on my parents’ property, right? They have fifteen acres just on the other side of those trees.”

“Which ones?” I hissed. “There are trees in every direction. All you can see is trees.”

“Yeah, it’s miserable, I know.”

I gave him a long look.

Cameron held up his hands in concession. “To the left side of the property, that’s where my parents live. But they have another smaller house that no one uses unless my brother and his wife are in town from Seattle.”

“Three houses, huh? They building a little Wilder family commune over there?”

His eyes gleamed with amusement, and I wanted to smack the shit out of him.

“I always knew you were smarter than me,” he said, all smooth and easy and so unruffled it was obnoxious.

I sniffed. “So there’s an extra one lying around for weary travelers like myself?”

He hummed, leaning his shoulder against the house while we regarded each other in that open doorway. “Something like that. It’s yours if you want it.”

Gawd, what a choice.

Briefly, I glanced behind me at the faded blue wallpaper and stained carpet. Then, up the stairs, thinking about the marked-up wall that I didn’t have a chance to study, and the *absolutely-the-hell-not* sounds that were coming from somewhere on that second floor.

No, this choice was remarkably easy.

The grip on my cardigan loosened a touch, and I straightened, trying to salvage something about how I must look to him.

His eyes lingered on my face, and my cheeks warmed.

“This isn’t going to be one of those cheesy romcom moments where you *accidentally* lose the key and oops I’m forced to sleep in your bed but you swear you won’t touch me at night because the bed’s big enough?”

Cameron didn't answer right away, his gaze turning speculative, then that firm, delicious mouth of his curled up in a wry grin. "Wasn't planning on taking it in that direction, no."

"Good to know."

"You have a very active imagination," he said.

Like I was going to tell him just how active it could be. Ruth snuck me one of her romance books once, because she didn't trust my dad to have a frank conversation about the birds and the bees.

At fourteen, I knew the mechanics, but that book had me glued to the pages. I didn't know stories like that existed. There was a hot priest and a forbidden affair with a younger woman stuck on a sheep farm that stretched decades.

I *learned* things in that book, and I promised Ruth I'd take it to my grave that she passed it along because I wasn't entirely sure my dad wouldn't fire her if he found out.

"Do you have anything upstairs?"

Shit.

"My purse." I swallowed. "I, umm, must have left it when I..."

Fled the upstairs like a giant chickenshit?

"Do you want me to go get it?" he asked, eyes gleaming again. His mouth fought another smile.

"I'm glad you think this is so funny," I hissed. "I heard something, okay? And it was loud, and there was moaning, and it was probably a ghost because this place is fucking haunted."

"Moaning?" His brows raised. "Well, now I have to go check it out. Aren't you curious?"

"No."

He started past me, and my hand shot out, wrapping around his bicep. Cameron stilled, eyes meeting mine as he towered over me.

"Can we just ... go? I mean, grab the purse and get out of here." I swallowed around the stubborn lump in my throat. "You can investigate in the morning."

His face softened, gaze lingering in a way that made me feel like I was standing naked in that doorway.

It was awful.

The muscle underneath my hand was warm and solid, and I slowly pulled my hand away.

Something flickered in his gaze.

“Yeah, I’ll be right back,” he said softly.

Once the purse was safely back in my possession, he used the flashlight on his phone to walk me to my car. The fluffy pink tops of my slippers shifted in and out of the light as we walked side by side, and I was eternally grateful that he kept his mouth shut about my attire.

“Just follow me, all right?” he said.

I slid into the driver’s seat and nodded, not at all watching from the corner of my eye as he lifted one long leg to settle his weight onto the machine parked next to me.

And I did *not* watch while he cranked over the engine, the muscles in his forearms tightening as his hands gripped the handles along the front.

My thighs tightened.

I looked down. “Traitors.”

Cameron pulled his bike in a tight loop, turning around to head back down the driveway. I blew out a quick breath and shifted my car into reverse.

The drive to his parents was quick, and for that, I was thankful.

I’d talk myself out of it if there was too much time to think about this.

I’d recognize the way this blurred all the firmly held lines of the past couple of days.

But the night was too much. The day that preceded it didn’t help.

I couldn’t keep existing the way I had been when I first arrived. It was too much to carry. Too heavy of a weight.

All of it.

My dad’s expectations.

The family name.

Trying to avoid knowing anything about my mom’s experience here.

All I wanted was to lay down somewhere soft and warm and be able to rest. I hadn’t had that in a long time.

Cameron’s bike eased into the driveway, and while it was similar to my own piece of property, the driveway stretched farther back and curved more with the land. It was hard to see anything beyond the sharp beam of his headlight, then my own slicing through the dark trees a fraction later.

The shadows coming off the fir trees were tall and thin and eerie, shifting along with the movement of our headlights.

“If I survive this without tree PTSD, it’ll be a miracle,” I uttered as Cameron slowed, turning his bike into a small break in the towering specters.

When he finished his turn, the house came into view. It was a small one story, with a cute porch and windows flanking the front door. Perched on the front stoop was a big square planter overflowing with purple and white flowers.

Cameron cut off his bike as I parked next to him. Before exiting the car, I glanced at my silky green pajama set. Were the shorts always this short, and I just never noticed because I wasn't used to parading around with my ass cheeks one inch away from public consumption?

I tugged at the lacy hem and quickly glanced in the rearview mirror.

“Dear God,” I breathed.

My hair.

I sank back in my seat. There was no salvaging any of this.

But damn if I wasn't going to try.

I shoved my fingers through the tangled mess, slicking it back off my face. In the front pocket of my purse was a hair tie, and I looped it around the makeshift bun at the nape of my neck. I swept my thumb underneath my eyes, and pinched my cheeks, cursing that streak of vanity that had me not wanting to look like a crazy person.

Cameron unlocked the door, and warm light flooded the windows when he stepped inside. I blew out a short breath and hooked my purse up over my shoulder.

Before I ascended the steps, I took a quick look down at my bare legs. Even with the cardigan pulled shut, I looked naked underneath.

Always look like you're in charge of the room, Ivy. People will respect you more when you walk in looking like the boss.

“Get out of my head,” I hissed under my breath.

This was not the time because I looked—and felt—like the boss of absolutely nothing.

It was easier to look like the boss, to strut in somewhere confidently, when you're not in a vulnerable position. But I needed help, and he knew it. He knew it and didn't hesitate to do something about it.

There was only one way for this to play out—I was exposed and humbled, and all I could do was trust that he wouldn't take advantage.

I must have hesitated too long before entering the house because Cameron's broad frame was silhouetted against the backdrop of the light behind him.

Just enough light came from the house that I got a searing flashback of

studying his chiseled profile in the elevator. Something tight and hard unspooled in my chest when I registered the way he was watching me. It was the same way he looked at me then too.

Curious.

Kind.

And interested.

“You know,” he said easily, “it makes it easier when you come inside the house.”

I arched an eyebrow. “You don’t say.”

He grinned, stepping back as I approached the front door. A wave of warm, spicy scent enveloped me as I brushed past Cameron, and I only inhaled a little bit of it.

Maybe more than a little, but there was no need to dwell on it. Everyone needed to breathe.

The inside of the house was bright and clean and nicely decorated. The kitchen had crisp white cabinets and bold black handles, a small island holding a walnut tray with short, fat candles and a round vase full of long green stems.

There was a round table off to the side and a dark gray sofa with big cushions pressed against the far wall. Furry blankets draped over leather armchairs that faced the sofa.

Off to the other side of the house were two bedrooms and a bathroom.

“This house feels like a hug,” I said quietly. Then my eyes pinched shut for a moment because I hadn’t meant to say it out loud.

Cameron tucked his hands into his jeans, rocking back on his heels while his eyes stayed locked on my face. “Everyone needs one of those sometimes.”

I tore my gaze away because this emotional subtext was about to choke me, and I wanted no part in it.

“Bit more inviting than the last one, if nothing else.”

He smiled. “At least you went in.”

“Of course I went in,” I said breezily. “It’s just a house.”

Why was he staring at me like that?

I could not be that interesting. Why I didn’t want to go in the house could not be that interesting to him.

Naturally, it made me swipe at him a little, just because all the warm and soft and kind was making me feel restless and edgy.

“So everyone in the family lives within walking distance, huh? No wonder you never settled down. Must be hell on your dating life when Mom can bring your supper over every night.”

He didn't take the bait.

“Nah, I prefer to go to their place for supper.” He shrugged one big shoulder. “That way, she can do my laundry too.”

I narrowed my eyes.

He laughed. “I'm kidding. I do my own laundry.” Then he arched an eyebrow. “Can you say the same, duchess?”

At the sly twinkle in his eye when he said that name, I slicked a tongue over my teeth. He dangled bait of his own, and I refused to snap at it. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Cameron's smile deepened, that fucking dimple appearing again.

It was a purely biological response, I told myself. My lizard brain had a deep recognition of the purely masculine being next to me.

Because he was big and strong and handsome, and he'd done a nice thing to make me feel safe. It wasn't like I could fight how that made me feel.

But damn if I wouldn't try.

“I should go to bed,” I told him.

He nodded.

Then his jaw clenched.

Why?

Why did it make my stomach flip that way?

“Your mom invited me over for dinner tonight,” I heard myself say. “I met her earlier.”

His eyes warmed. “She has a tendency to do that.”

“I said no.”

“It would seem so, given your lack of presence tonight. Having you at the table would've made dinner a whole lot more interesting, though.”

I refused to be charmed by him.

Cameron licked at his lower lip, which stopped his smile from spreading.

“Clean towels are in the closet in the bathroom,” he said. “There's coffee in the cabinet above the sink. No creamer, though.”

“Horrible hospitality,” I drawled.

He grinned.

His chest expanded on a deep breath, then his gaze dropped down to where I still clutched the cardigan. Then he dipped his chin.

“Sleep well, duchess.”

With horror, I realized that I didn't hate the nickname. On the contrary, it sent a sweet curl of hunger through my veins.

He was almost out of the door, and I took a quick step forward.

“Thank you,” I said. “For checking up on me.”

Cameron paused, his eyes tracing over my face. “Call me if you need anything.”

I swallowed, managing a short nod.

He closed the door behind him, and I expelled a hard puff of air.

“Not complicated at all,” I muttered. “I'm sure this won't change anything.”

Chapter 11

Ivy

The spare Wilder house had some magic sleep juju.

I'd slept in five-star hotels that didn't deliver sleep that satisfying. Or maybe it was the trauma response from the creepy house and the creepy house ghost trying to kill me.

When the knock came at the front door, I snapped up in bed, heart racing when I couldn't remember where the hell I was.

My hand shoved at my hair, and I blinked as my surroundings pierced the sleep-like the dead brain fog still lingering in my head. Morning light made the room soft and blue, and I realized I never closed the curtains when I shoved the pillows to the side and crawled straight underneath the fluffy duvet.

When I looked down, there was an epic drool mark on the pillow. With a sigh, I flipped the pillow over so I wouldn't have to stare at it, thereby envisioning how I must have looked.

Another knock came from the door, and I scrambled for the cardigan, flipping my hair tie back into my hair. A large full-length mirror leaned against the wall, and I exhaled through puffed-out cheeks when I saw my reflection.

Lovely.

I shoved my feet into my slippers and shuffled to the door, praying to any deity that would listen that it wasn't Cameron.

Knowing my luck, he'd be freshly showered, smelling like Hot Man and wearing some fitted flannel shirt, looking like you could order him straight from a fantasy catalog.

But when I peeked through the peephole, I realized I'd maybe prayed for

the wrong thing.

Sheila Wilder stood on the front porch, with a basket in her hand, and—my head tilted to the side—my suitcase?

I pulled the door open, blinking at the sunlight. I stepped aside to let her in. “Good morning, Mrs. Wilder,” I said.

“Oh honey, call me Sheila.” She bustled in, dragging my suitcase behind her. “I stopped and got this for you while I was running some errands this morning.”

I thought about all the cosmetic items I’d left out on the bathroom counter and the few things hung in the closet. “Thank you,” I told her. “You really didn’t need to do that.”

She waved that off. “I was driving right past. And Amanda took care of most of it. She had some housekeeping staff help her with her favorite guests,” she said with a kind smile.

My cheeks heated. “Were the alarms still going off?”

“They cut the wires, but it sounds like they’ll have to do some work the next few days to figure out what’s going on.”

Disappointment sat like a rock. “If you know of any hotels in town, or Redmond, I’d take some recommendations.”

Her eyes widened. “Nonsense. You can stay here as long as you like. Besides, the closer we get to the fall festival, the harder it’ll be to find a place to stay.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that,” I protested immediately.

“Why not?”

I blinked. “I...”

But I came up blank. The location couldn’t be beat. Any closer and I’d have to camp in the front yard, and that wasn’t happening.

It was definitely a better space than any hotel room I’d find. In that I actually *had* space to work. A place to sit and relax that wasn’t the bed.

But it still felt like I was doing something wrong. Crossing some invisible boundary meant to keep me sane.

Beecause I almost boinked your son less than an hour after meeting him didn’t seem like a great answer. Besides, it wasn’t like I was staying in Cameron’s house.

Just as my mind wandered, wondering what his house might look like, she interrupted.

“Exactly,” she said. Sheila set the basket down on the kitchen table,

pulling items out like she was Mary friggin Poppins with her endless bag of goodies. “I hope I didn’t wake you, but I wanted to make sure you had everything you needed. Creamer, if you like that with your coffee. Some oatmeal, fruit, I made these blueberry muffins this morning, so they’re still fresh, and some new shampoo and conditioner for the shower because that crap my son uses makes my hair feel like a brillo pad. A dish of lasagna from dinner last night, so if you don’t feel like going out, you can just heat it up.” She tapped the aluminum foil covering the dish. “Wrote some instructions right on top here. You could microwave it, but personally I think that’s a crime against leftovers to warm it that way.”

Scrawled on the top of the silver lining was swooping cursive.

325 for 20 minutes, heat until cheese is bubbling, then enjoy!

Next to her cell phone number was a little heart.

“Who *are* you?” I breathed. My head was spinning. “Who does this for people they don’t know?”

I hadn’t really meant to ask it out loud, but honest to God, I didn’t think people like this existed unless they were being paid to be so hospitable.

Sheila’s face softened, her hand still resting on the basket handle.

“I do,” she said simply. Then she studied my face like she wanted to say something, but wasn’t sure if she should. “Our home has always been open to anyone who needs a place to feel safe and loved,” she said. “Sometimes our kids needed that feeling, even after they’ve left home. Sometimes it’s their friends. Or their partners. A neighbor going through a hard time.” She smiled. Not a big toothy smile, but something small and genuine that pulled on a crank in my chest, tightening the space between my ribs. “Everyone needs a place like that from time to time, Ivy. I like knowing we can give that to people, no matter who they are or what they’ve been through.”

To my absolute horror, the bridge of my nose tickled. Pressure built behind my eyes.

I clenched my teeth and tamped down whatever icky, *horrible* feeling was sliding up my throat.

“It’s a lovely place,” I told her. “But I insist on paying you whatever I’d pay the hotel.”

She laughed. “Honey, I’d like to see you try.”

My brows lowered. “I insist. It’s only fair.”

Sheila sighed. “Fairness has nothing to do with it. We’ve never charged someone to stay here before, and I won’t start simply because you’re richer

than God.” She cocked an eyebrow, daring me to disagree.

I swallowed, giving her a short nod. “If you’re sure there’s nothing I can do to change your mind.”

Sheila’s eyes gleamed. “You can repay me by coming over for dinner while you’re still here. Or just sit on the porch and have some tea with me, maybe.” She tucked the now empty basket up against her body again. “I’d like to get to know you more, Ivy Lynch.”

It was a direct command, and it did strange things to my chest.

Tight achy things.

Heavy pressure things.

Inexplicably, I wanted to run and hide from all of the above feelings.

My chin rose an inch, and I nodded. “I can do that. I like tea.”

“Good.” Then she grinned at my hair. “I think Amanda packed your brush in the front of your suitcase.”

My cheeks burned. “Thank you,” I said primly.

She gave me one last lingering smile. “You promise to let me know if you need anything else or feel like walking down to the main house for dinner, all right?”

“I will.”

Satisfied with that small promise, she took her leave, and after the door closed behind her, I sank slowly into one of the stools tucked up against the island.

Something about her reminded me of our housekeeper, Ruth. The nonsense energy was strangely comforting, even if I still didn’t know what the hell to do with all this ... niceness.

I wasn’t sure I deserved it.

The longer I sat there, staring at the pile on the table, a cloying sense of shame stuck firm and hard to my insides.

I *didn’t* deserve it.

And maybe that was what made these random acts of benevolence so hard to understand when you weren’t used to them. The person delivering it wasn’t thinking about who deserved it and who didn’t.

In my world, niceness like this was typically bought and paid for.

But sitting there and stewing over it wouldn’t help anything, especially now that I could wash the grime of my evening away and change into something fresh and clean.

Once the leftovers were settled in the fridge with the cream, and a pot of

coffee was brewing on the counter, I pulled the suitcase into the bedroom and unzipped the sides.

Stuck on top of my cosmetic bags was a small handwritten note from Amanda.

I hope you can forgive me for packing your things, I didn't want to make you come back into the hotel in your pajamas.

I swear, mind-boggling thoughtfulness was a plague in this town, and I did not know how to react to that. As I hung up a few of my dresses, I tried to reconcile how to stay in this place without driving away people like Sheila or her daughter simply by being the version of myself that I'd been raised to be.

My dad didn't teach me how to make friends. My etiquette teacher taught me how to speak properly and which Emily Post guidelines were worthy of memorization. How to fold my legs demurely and which fucking fork to use when setting a table for my guests.

I'd spent so many years of my life being taught how to own a situation, how to maintain control and seize it tightly enough that no one could wrench it from my grasp. I was taught how to keep the mask in place, the shiny, polite veneer that allowed for the least mistakes and the best showing.

But in all that teaching, I wasn't sure how to find a middle ground. Letting go of those lessons felt like a recipe for failure when I was back into my world, and out of this one.

There was a suspicious lump in my throat as I finished half a blueberry muffin. I couldn't help but stare at it in wonder.

"How are you so light and fluffy?" I whispered.

The muffin did not answer, but I snagged one more bite and sighed when it practically melted on my tongue.

Carefully covering the rest, I set the container on the counter and moved into the bathroom. The water heated up quickly, and as I shed my pajamas and stood under the spray, I let the gloriously hot water and perfect water pressure beat down on my shoulders until my skin was pink, my muscles putty.

With my robe wrapped around me, I took my time getting ready for the day—moisturizing my legs and arms with my favorite lotion, sliding on a light floaty mint green dress that belted around my waist with a thin gold chain. I braided my hair off my face, anchoring it at the nape of my neck before I swiped some mascara over my lashes, slicking a nude gloss over my lips and some blush over my cheeks.

There.

When I stood back and studied the mirror, I finally felt like me again.

Except my eyes.

Something about being in this place knocked loose a capstone piece of the wall I'd built when arriving in Sisters. Everything above it wobbled tremulously.

Hotel managers carefully packing my things.

Homemade muffins and cream in my coffee.

A soft bed with even softer sheets.

Men on motorcycles who showed up in the dark, just to make sure I was okay.

Big baskets filled with comforts of home.

Not *my* home, though. And never, ever delivered from the person who'd raised me.

I steeled my expression, practicing that chilled exterior that worked so well the first couple of days. But it felt heavier. Harder to hold in place.

So I let it drop with a sigh.

My phone rang, and I flipped it over, heart jolting with the possibility that it might be my dad.

Cameron Wilder. At the sight of his name, my heart jolted for an entirely different reason.

"This is Ivy," I said.

"You answer that way even when you know who it is?"

There was a smile in that deep, smooth voice, and if I closed my eyes, I could picture it perfectly.

"Depends on who's calling," I told him airily. "This is a work phone call, no?"

"Oh, I suppose it is."

Sure. Tell that to the way my belly rolled with fluttering nerves, just by hearing him talk directly into my ear.

"What can I do for you?" I asked, adjusting the belt on my dress.

"You sleep okay last night?"

"Is that your business now?"

He laughed. "Considering I delivered you to that very comfortable bed, I'm going to say yes."

I sighed. Fair enough. "I slept just fine, thank you."

"Good." His voice deepened as he said it, and a chill slipped up and over

my spine before I could stop it. “Are you able to come over here?”

My brows lowered. “What’s up?”

He paused, and I heard male voices in the background. “I think I found your ghost. But I’m going to need your help.”

For fuck’s sake.

I blew out a slow breath. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

Chapter 12

Cameron

My goals for the day were fairly simple. I wasn't asking for much in the grand scheme of things.

1- Not obsess over what Ivy was wearing underneath that cardigan the night before.

I'd failed miserably in that one. My traitor brain conjured countless options. When I laid in bed when I returned home the night before. When I woke up. When I showered (before I got too far there, I viciously cranked the water temperature to ball-shriveling cold).

And still ... I wondered. I didn't get a single clue. Not a strap out of place to satisfy the blood-heating curiosity.

Lace. Silk. Satin. Hell, even basic cotton, and my mouth went dry at every single option as they flipped through my brain in tantalizing rotation.

Turns out, that was the easiest of my goals to achieve.

2- Get through the work day without any of my relatives giving me shit.

I thought I'd be able to achieve it since Ian was working at the shop today, starting on a custom dining table for a customer we'd built a home for a couple of years earlier. With his grumpy ass off-site, I was convinced the day would be smooth sailing.

I'd called Ivy because I genuinely needed her help.

And it was blown to shit at the sound of a car (which I thought was Ivy), and instead, I saw my sister Greer—grinning widely when I glowered at her through her windshield.

Someone wasn't scheduled to be at the jobsite today.

Someone hadn't given me a heads-up that she'd be joining, and that same someone would be an absolute nightmare the moment Ivy showed up. Which

would be any second.

“The hell,” I muttered.

I glared as she exited her car and shoved her sunglasses to the top of her head. With a troubling gleam in her eye, she slowly sipped from her travel coffee mug as I snatched my own cup from the hood of my truck.

“I can’t tell you how much it warms my heart when my brothers are happy to see me,” Greer said.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“It’s amazing how much motivation one feels when starting a new job,” she mused, eyes lingering on the house. “Sometimes you just need to see it for yourself, you know?”

“Cut the crap, Greer. You told me you’d do jobsite visits only when Beckett was home, and they were strictly necessary. I know he’s out of town for an away game. Did Ian call you?”

The evil glint in her eye and the curl of satisfaction to her lips were all the answers I needed.

“You know you can’t believe a word out of his mouth,” I said.

“I cannot *wait* to meet this woman face-to-face,” Greer replied. “We’ve done most of our communication via email, but I really like her already.”

That made one of my coworkers.

“Fucking hell,” I mumbled under my breath, then stalked around to the back of my truck to unhook the trailer with all the equipment we’d need once the last of the furniture was out. “What exactly is your purpose for being here? If you get in our way to satisfy some sick curiosity, I’ll send your ass back home. Go visit Mom or Dad while you’re here.”

Greer ignored me. “Did a little research on your mystery woman last night.”

I yanked harder on the trailer chains than necessary.

“She’s gorgeous. Didn’t think she’d be your type, but what do I know?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I barked. “You know nothing, Greer. I met her once, and ... you know nothing, and this is not interesting, and you need to drop it.”

Greer tapped the side of her coffee cup. “She’s like ... Barbie. But Heiress/Brainiac Barbie, you know? There was a write-up about her in the *Wall Street Journal* when she finished her master’s degrees,” she said with a lift of her eyebrows. “That’s impressive. Way more impressive than you deserve, that’s for sure.”

“You are the biggest pain in my ass.” With the trailer unlocked, I yanked open the back door and started rifling through the tools until I found my tool belt. “Ian is the second biggest pain in my ass, and if I could, I’d fire both of you.”

She simply smiled. “You can’t fire me. I own forty percent, same as you.” Then she patted my cheek. Hard. “Thanks for making this job so much more fun, Cameron.”

Swear words flowed out of my mouth in a steady stream that would have had Mom cuffing me in the ear, and Greer did nothing but laugh.

Wade and one of our younger guys came out of the house, carrying one of the last pieces of furniture. He jerked his chin in a nod at Greer.

“Morning, sunshine,” Greer called out. Wade rolled his eyes, and with a grin, my sister’s attention swiveled back to me. “Just these two out here today?”

“Yup.”

“Jax still off?” she asked.

I nodded. “I think he’s camping on the side of a mountain somewhere. Occasionally he’ll text me to let me know he’s alive.”

“Thoughtful of him,” Greer said. “Poppy asked, very subtly, if I thought he’d be back soon.”

I blew out a harsh breath. “Poppy needs to fawn over someone her own age.”

“She’s not fawning,” Greer argued. I cut her a dry look, and she raised her hands in concession. “Okay. A little bit of fawning. But she’ll get over it eventually.”

“I can’t help but wonder if people with less siblings are also less stressed out.”

“Excellent question.” She shrugged. “Look how exciting this is, though. *You’re* the one fawning for once in your life, and I feel like we should make this a national holiday.”

I pushed my tongue into the side of my cheek.

I wasn’t *fawning*. I was attracted. Two totally different things.

“You making your tongue bleed by how hard you’re biting it right now?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“Mom told me she’s at Erik’s place?”

I grunted.

“I like her,” Greer continued.

That drew a curious look from me. “That mean she’s being nice to you?”

“Of course she is.” Greer’s eyes sharpened. “She’s *not* being nice to you?” Then she waved her hand. “I already talked to Ian, but I assumed he was being ... Ian. You know how he’s skeptical of anyone new. That’s gotta be tiring, don’t you think?”

“Uh-huh. Aren’t you going to visit Mom and Dad?”

“Soon,” she said, staring up at the house.

Maybe if I got rid of Greer quickly enough, Ivy would pass her on the road, and I could avoid the entire thing.

“I’m sure you’ll get the full report on Ivy staying at the guesthouse from Mom,” I said, shooing her back toward her car. “Why don’t you head that direction and leave me alone?”

Greer sighed. “Leaving you alone is what you want, though. I have to make you suffer a little bit before I do that. Want to show me the house?”

“No. Go look at it yourself.”

She snorted. “I hope you’re nicer than this to Ivy.”

Somehow, I swallowed a scathing response.

It doesn’t take long in a big family to learn that the bigger your reaction, the nosier everyone gets.

Greer started toward the house, only managing two steps before Ivy’s sleek rental car pulled into the driveway.

She turned a slow pivot, eyebrows arched in obnoxious, gleeful surprise. “*Well* now, you failed to mention she was coming here.”

“Did I?” I muttered.

“I am so very glad I made the drive,” she said. “This is going to be the *best* part of my day.”

Shit.

If I thought it was bad having Ian and Ivy in the same place, it was a thousand times worse that Greer was the sole witness. Even though she drove me to drink half the time, my stepsister was one of my closest friends. We’d worked together for a decade, and she was probably the only person in my family I could own a business with.

The reason it worked so well is because we weren’t afraid to call each other out on our shit, but it was never done in a cruel way or with malicious intent. We were so close in age when our parents got married, both the middle of our respective siblings, it was a natural alliance out of all the chaos

of growing up in such a big family.

And she was the one who'd see right through whatever confusing feelings I had for Ivy, which is why I needed her the hell out of there.

Once she knew, Poppy would know. Once Poppy knew, Mom would know. If Mom knew, Dad would know, and I might as well just sit the entire family down to avoid a nightmare version of Wilder Family Telephone.

When Ivy's car eased to a stop behind Greer's vehicle, no big sunglasses in sight, something unlocked in my chest. A release of tension I didn't realize I'd been holding.

Whether it was my imagination or not, those sunglasses always felt a bit like armor.

I hated the idea that Ivy felt the need for that kind of protection because she certainly didn't need to be protected from me.

Through the windshield, I saw her notice of Greer and the fortifying breath that expanded her frame. But once she'd done that, she smiled.

"Good Lord," Greer breathed. "She's too smart *and* too pretty for you."

I ignored her.

It was easy too, because I just had to fight to stay standing at the sight of that smile. Had to fight to suck in sufficient oxygen because of that smile.

It wasn't aimed at me, of course, it was meant for my sister—the one she'd been emailing and talking to on the phone the last two days.

Smiles like that—the kind I'd only gotten glimpses of in the dim light of the elevator—had me wondering if I'd really seen them at all.

"She doesn't like hugs," I heard myself say. "Don't try to hug her when she gets out of the car."

Greer's lips pursed thoughtfully. "I have questions about how you'd know that."

I rolled my eyes, even though how I'd learned certain things about Ivy was the kind of story my sister would never, *ever* know. "Don't get too excited. Mom and Poppy ran into her at the restaurant."

"A much less interesting story than the one currently unfolding in my head, but noted all the same."

My sister, quick learner that she was, approached Ivy as soon as she was out of the car. Her stride was confident, and she shook Ivy's outstretched hand firmly.

"It is so great to meet you in person," Greer said.

Ivy's gaze darted between us before she gave my sister a quick smile.

“You as well. I wasn’t expecting to see you today.”

“That’s because I love surprising my brother.” Then she slapped my back. I hid my wince. Barely. I cut her a look, and she grinned. “Keeps him on his toes.”

“Don’t give her any ideas now,” I told Greer.

The responding arch of Ivy’s brow was graceful and haughty and so fucking hot that all the blood rushed to my stupid groin.

“I heard you’re just around the corner now,” Greer said, folding her arms over her middle.

Ivy nodded, and I watched the shift on her face carefully. “Your mother is a wonderful host,” she said. Her guard was still up—it was clear in her eyes and the stiff way she clutched the strap of her purse, but it wasn’t quite the same as it had been the first couple of days.

An opening, maybe.

I just wasn’t sure how much she’d allow me to walk through it.

Greer and Ivy chatted about the house, what happened at the hotel, and how she’d fled the house behind us in the middle of the night. Greer was laughing, Ivy was smiling a small little smile, and it was astonishing that despite the razor-sharp interest I felt for this woman, I was content to watch them interact with an ease I hadn’t seen from her since she got into town.

Maybe my sister could show up on occasion, and I wouldn’t chase her off immediately.

“Your brother claims he’s found the culprit,” Ivy said, cutting a dry look in my direction. I felt it in my gut, something devastating and visceral.

Dry was different from closed off. It wasn’t cold.

Fuck, it was as close to playful as I’d ever seen her.

I whistled. “Claims? I know exactly what’s going on up there.”

She hummed disbelievingly. “And you needed my help?”

“Your hands are smaller than mine.” I held up my own, and when her eyes cut over, lingering on my palm and fingers, two spots of pink bloomed on her cheeks.

“If you think I’m sticking my hand into some dark, creepy crevice, you are dreaming.”

I let my smile spread. “You think I’d play a prank on you like that?”

She arched an eyebrow again.

“Yes,” Greer said.

“No way,” I insisted. “You didn’t see her last night. I don’t have a death

wish.”

Ivy sniffed. “If you purposely scare me when my hand is underneath some creepy-ass bed, I’ll jam my heel right between your legs.”

Greer threw her head back and laughed.

I gestured toward the house, letting the two women precede me up the front porch.

Following them, I could study Ivy a bit more closely as she approached the door. A big part of me wished that I’d been here the first time she walked into the house.

Something about this place made her need to do it alone. Face this piece of her past alone.

I couldn’t quite imagine how it must’ve felt.

I didn’t remember much of my mom either, but I knew her through my dad’s stories, things my oldest brother Ian told me. Knew that she was funny and kind, that she liked breakfast for dinner and let us eat ice cream for breakfast during the summer because Ian remembered it.

What did Ivy think when she walked into this place?

I didn’t have a home where my mother used to live. It would be difficult to pass by walls that held a lifetime of her memories.

When I heard her storming down those stairs the night before, when she flung open the door and screamed at the sight of me, I knew that Ivy was as exposed as I’d ever seen her. If I’d tried to slide my hands up her arms and hold my palm against the racing pulse in the sensitive juncture of her neck, she might have even let me.

But I had a feeling that she’d retreat again, especially in the harsh light of day. She’d overcorrect, yanking the wheel too far in the other direction if I tried to meet her where she’d been last night.

I didn’t want that. I wanted her to step out beyond that door she’d closed, but do it of her own volition. Make that choice independently, if that was what she wanted.

Damn, how I wanted her to want it too.

It was an entirely new level of powerlessness that I’d never experienced. I’d always been able to do something when the people I cared for needed something. But I couldn’t do anything about this.

“Where are we going?” Greer asked.

“Upstairs,” I said with a tilt of my head. “Primary bathroom.”

Ivy paused at the bottom of the steps, staring up like she was about to

face the executioner. I lifted my hand, hovering it just above the small of her back, and leaned closer.

“Nothing to be scared of, duchess.”

Her jaw clenched at the nickname, and her eyes flashed dangerously as she glanced over her shoulder.

“I’m not scared,” she said with a regal tilt of her chin.

I wanted to kiss her. My whole body fought the urge to sway forward and stamp my mouth over hers, but I kept every aching muscle in check while our eyes held.

Then she marched up the stairs in her four inch heels, the skirt of her dress floating around her knees.

I blew out a slow breath, glancing back at my sister, who’d just seen the entire fricken exchange.

Greer rolled her lips together, fighting against a burgeoning smile.

“I do not want to hear it,” I told her under my breath.

She mimed a zipping motion across her mouth, then threw away the imaginary key.

When we joined Ivy on the second floor, the sounds were coming from the bathroom again. With all the furniture emptied from the rooms, it echoed.

Mew.

At the pathetic little sound, Ivy stared into the bathroom wide-eyed, as Wade stood scratching the back of his neck, the cigarette hanging from his lips.

Greer stood next to me, her head tilted. “Why didn’t you guys pull it out already?” she asked.

Wade shrugged. “We can’t get our big hands in that little hole in the wall, and we didn’t want to risk scaring it further into the wall if we tried to cut it.” He looked down at Ivy’s hands. “That should do it though.”

Ivy made a tiny noise, not quite a whimper, not quite a cough.

Greer stepped forward. “I’ll do it,” she said. “You don’t have to if you’re uncomfortable.”

My gaze darted to Ivy because I wanted her to try. I kept my mouth shut, though, because if I tried to push, it would backfire.

But Ivy took a deep breath and shook her shoulders out. “I can do it.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “You sure?”

Her eyes narrowed in my direction. “Nothing to be scared of, right?”

“Nothing at all.” I slapped Wade on the shoulder as he moved out of the

bathroom. “Right, Wade?”

“Hell if I know,” he muttered.

Ivy was not amused.

Greer covered her laugh with a cough.

Ivy walked slowly into the bathroom, crouching carefully in front of the wall just next to the bathtub. Her eyes were laser focused, and her chest rose and fell in shallow, short breaths. I watched her carefully and could see when she decided to stick her hand forward.

The hole in the drywall was small, and her brows furrowed as she got her hand through to her knuckles, then she froze.

Mew.

“Dear *God*, it’s furry,” she said in a low voice. Her head pivoted sharply, and she gave me a fierce look. “If this thing bites me, I’m suing you.”

I grinned, and her glare intensified.

Ivy grimaced, twisting her hand behind the wall, and then sucked in a deep breath as she pulled it back.

Greer inhaled sharply when Ivy’s fingers clung to the small little body, and she slowly stood, pinching behind the nape of its neck. Its little legs stuck straight out, the black fur covering almost everything except its two front paws and the tip of its tail.

Mew.

The pathetic little meowing made Greer slap a hand over her mouth to contain a laugh.

Ivy swallowed, staring down at that tiny little kitten like it might explode in her face.

“Holy shit,” she whispered. “*You* were the one making all that noise?”

Mew.

Even Wade cracked a smile.

Ivy turned, eyes huge in her face. “What do I do with it?”

I shrugged. “Looks like you got yourself a pet, duchess.”

“What? Why is it mine?” She blinked a few times, and the cat’s blue-gray eyes stared up at her.

“He was camping out in your house,” I answered, shrugging one shoulder. “Already tried having a sleepover with you last night, and you ran off too quickly.”

She gave me an annoyed look.

“Try holding it under its butt,” I told her, softening my voice a touch.

Carefully, Ivy brought it in closer, tucking her other hand underneath the kitten. Immediately, it relaxed into her hold.

“It’s probably dehydrated,” Greer said. “I wonder where the momma is.”

“Nothing we’ve seen around,” I answered.

Ivy stood frozen, staring at the kitten curled up in her hands. She lifted her head, giving me a panicked look. “Now what?”

“I think we better take her back home and get her squared away, don’t you think?”

“We?”

She looked terrified. Because of a kitten. Something about the look in her eye wrenched my rib cage wide open, allowing her to slide right inside.

Maybe I was being stupid, letting myself step further into this fixation.

But I wasn’t sure I could stop it. Not after last night, not after this.

There was more to her. So much more. And I wanted to know it all. Maybe I’d only have her here for a little while. A little while was better than nothing. It was something.

And I could work with something.

“Come on,” I told her. “I’ll drive.”

Chapter 13

Ivy

As I gripped the bar to hoist myself up into the cab of Cameron Wilder's truck, I thought about dominoes.

One of my favorite things to do when I was younger was to line them up in my room, winding paths and circular patterns that could intersect with each other as they fell. Something was interesting about watching the way they knocked each other over and which path ended up diverging, toppling in a way that I didn't anticipate.

There's something addicting about the sound of them falling, and the mess left over when the last one gets knocked down. Especially when you were the one in control of setting them up.

I had to make peace with something once I got in that truck.

It smelled good—like him. It was clean. And I was voluntarily sitting in the passenger seat, with a *kitten* in my lap, because past me knocked over the wrong fricken domino. Somewhere along the way, whatever choices I'd made, they'd led me to that exact place. I tried desperately to figure out which one, but it was pointless.

Cameron hopped into the driver's seat (without help from the bar, because life was unfair and I was destined to feel at a disadvantage when this man was around), and he studied me with an amused grin on his handsome face.

"I fail to see what's so funny," I said loftily.

The cat took that moment to arch his back and nuzzle against the side of my thigh, where it had curled up the moment I sat down.

"He likes you," Cameron replied.

"Of course he likes me. He's been stuck in a wall for who knows how

many days.” I sniffed. “It’s hardly personal.”

“I don’t know,” he murmured as he put the truck into reverse. “Ever have any pets before?”

I emitted a short puff of air, just shy of an actual laugh. “No. My dad used to call them an overly-sentimental waste of time and money.”

Cameron’s lips twisted in a thoughtful frown, but he didn’t say anything.

“What are we doing with it?” I asked, eyeing the animal skeptically, because its little paws were kneading on the side of my leg.

“We always have barn cats, so I think as long as we get it some food and water, a warm place to sleep, it’ll be fine. I’ll have our vet come out and check it as soon as she’s able.” He glanced at the critter. “Doesn’t look like it’s got fleas or anything.”

“Oh gawd,” I muttered, my lips twisting into a grimace.

He smiled. “You’ll be all right, duchess. He won’t infect you with anything.”

“Easy for you to say, sitting there at a safe distance.” Then I eyed him. “Why do you insist on calling me that?”

“Because it fits,” he answered easily.

He seemed to do that a lot. Easy answers. Easy smiles. Easy charm.

It was aggravating.

Cameron pulled his truck into the small drive that led beyond a beautiful log cabin toward a big red barn with the main doors pulled open. Laying in the sun outside the doors were two cats—one with orange-and-white fur and another with black-and-gray stripes. Their tails flipped lazily, and one stood with a stretch when Cameron’s truck pulled up.

The kitten in my lap pushed his back against my leg again, nuzzling further into the warmth of my body. He was so little.

“How old do you think he is?” I asked.

Cameron put the truck in park and then nodded at my lap. “May I?”

Carefully, I picked him up from where he was sleeping and handed him over to the man next to me. My fingers brushed his when I shifted the kitten’s weight, and I ignored the quick zip of electricity up my arm.

God, get with the program, I chastised my weak-ass nervous system. He was just a person. We didn’t need zaps or sparks or flutters or anything of the sort.

Cameron dragged the tip of his middle finger over the top of the kitten’s head, and when it closed its eyes and purred, I had to swallow against the

sudden flash of heat at the back-and-forth movement.

Yeah, I'd probably purr too if he used his finger on me like that when I was in his lap.

The kitten protested with a loud, disgruntled meow when Cameron lifted it to study its underbelly.

"Maybe six weeks," he guessed.

I blew out a slow breath and glanced toward the barn. "He'll stay out there?" I asked. "He won't be alone, will he?"

Gawd, Ivy, I thought. Why don't you just go ahead and project your own issues onto a kitten?

His eyes sharpened.

I glanced away because nope, we were not going there, thank you very much.

"He?" Cameron asked.

"Only a male would make such a nuisance of itself like that."

He laughed, soft and deep, and I swear, my nipples perked up. "Those two older cats will teach him what he needs to know," he said. "I can't imagine they'd cause any issues."

My heart thudded uncomfortably, and I desperately tried to ignore it.

He was just so little. There was no telling those cats would be nice to him.

"Right," I said. My voice was reed thin, and I hated how transparent I was being. There was no dredging my mask into place right now. "But you won't know for sure that he'll be okay in there?"

Cameron's study of my face was a weighted thing. "No, we won't."

He handed the kitten back, and it settled immediately. I swallowed, skimming my fingertips along the kitten's back.

"We don't have to leave him in the barn," Cameron said slowly. My eyes met his. "He's old enough to use a litter box," he continued. "He could stay in the guesthouse with you."

A sharp-edged rock was wedged in my throat, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't swallow past it.

"Why on earth would you think I want him with me?" I asked.

And I tried to sound flippant. To sound like the idea was preposterous, but failed miserably.

It came out differently than I wanted it to in my head.

Resigned.

Relieved.

“Maybe your grandparents sent him to the house so you’d have some company.”

My eyes darted to his, but any snappish reply got stuck in my throat.

The cat in question stretched again, blinking its big blue-gray eyes up in my direction. My fingers twitched on my lap, but I resisted the temptation to pet him again. To test how fluffy the hair was on the top of his tiny little head.

It would be the fluffiest thing I’d ever touched. Dammit.

It was human nature, not indicative of some underlying desire to be a cat mom. He was cute. Cuddly. Soft.

I was biologically wired to find him endearing.

In my silence, Cameron eased the truck into reverse, and my heart raced inside my chest.

But I didn’t argue.

There was more than enough time for me to protest, and every single possible protestation stuck at the base of my throat, underneath that sharp-edged rock.

The deafening silence revealed something I wasn’t quite ready to reveal, and it left me feeling exceptionally naked in front of this man. Again.

Cameron pulled the truck in front of the guesthouse. “Why don’t you bring him inside? I’ll be back in a few minutes with some stuff.”

Panic gripped my chest. “What am I going to do with this thing?”

His smile was wide and unaffected, that fucking dimple popping again. “It’s five minutes, Ivy. You’ll be all right.”

I sighed. “Fine.”

As he’d instructed me to, I scooped my hand underneath the cat’s backside and carefully stepped down out of the truck and closed the door behind me.

“Five minutes?” I asked.

Through the open window, he nodded. “Maybe you can find a name for him before I get back.”

I blew out a slow breath while the truck eased back, then headed toward the barn.

Mew.

Glancing down, I arched an eyebrow at the nameless little beast in question.

“Well?” I said. “You heard the man. If you’re so intuitive about where

you need to end up, maybe you should tell me your name.”

He wiggled in my hand, and I placed him down on the grass to see what he'd do. The kitten plopped his butt down on the grass and stared up at me with a tilt of his head.

When the edge of my skirt fluttered in the breeze, he stood, his tail twitching lightly. He pounced toward a tall blade of grass, and I felt the edge of my lips tug up in an unwitting smile. When I took a step toward the house, he paused and watched me, trotting after dutifully.

The front steps proved no problem at all, and he stood just behind my legs as I opened the door to the inside.

“Don't get shy now,” I told him. “You're already well versed in breaking and entering.”

I swear, that cat could understand me because after poking his head around me, he ambled into the house with a careless twitch of his skinny hips.

With my arms crossed over my middle, I followed as he sniffed around. My slippers were right where I'd left them, next to the kitchen table, and he batted at the top before flopping to the floor and stretching out onto his back.

My phone dinged, and I slid it out of my purse.

Greer: Are you coming back to the house?

Me: I'm not sure I have a reason to, unless there's something you want to discuss.

Greer: I had an idea for a new railing for the stairs, but I can send you a link. Do you want me to drive your car back over there when I'm done? I'll be heading to my parents when I finish up with some stuff here.

Me: If you don't mind, that would be great. Keys are in the console. Cameron will be back soon. He's just grabbing some cat stuff from the barn, whatever that means.

Greer: No rush! We don't need him here. At all. He's useless most of the time, anyway. So really ... he can take his time.

“Subtle,” I murmured, tucking my phone away again.

Mew.

I glanced down, an eyebrow raised. He was sitting at the base of one of the planters, carefully lifting up on his back paws to sniff at the leaves of the massive plant Sheila had framed in the front window. He smacked at the

closest leaf with his paw and then toppled backward.

With a sigh, I bent down and scooped him up. “No ruining the plants. Those aren’t mine, you know.”

Cameron’s truck pulled back up to the house, and I fought a ridiculous flutter in my stomach. It was so much worse when I knew I was going to be alone with him. The unexpected times were somehow much better for my nerves.

When I knew it was going to happen, I paid attention to everything. How far apart we stood. His body language. Mine, too.

How was he looking at me?

Or worse, how was I looking at him?

It would be awful if I was looking at him in a way that might hint to any of my thoughts when it came to him.

For the first time in my life, I had to think things like ... *could he see in my eyes just how badly I want him to screw me through the wall?*

Because I did.

And Cameron knowing that would only lead to bad, unprofessional, naked things.

I steeled my expression before he gave a polite knock and pushed open the door.

“Everyone getting along in here?” he asked. The cat meowed, trotting over to Cameron to sniff at his big work boots. He smiled. “He’s friendly.”

“Apparently,” I drawled.

Cameron set down two small bowls and then a big plastic tub.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Litter box. We can stick it in the laundry room by the bathroom.”

“Litter box?” I asked weakly.

“Yup. We had one cat who made its way into the house a few years ago, and my dad liked it enough to let it stay. We kept this just in case it happened again.” He smiled a little. “He’s been too sick for them to think about taking on another pet, but I know he’d love one.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Is that your way of saying I can’t bring him to your mom’s for shared custody?”

Cameron laughed. “Doubtful. Though my dad would love it, I’m sure. He always believed that more chaos in the house was never a bad thing. Just meant more love filling the rooms.”

What must that be like?

He wasn't sharing it to make me feel any sort of way about my own upbringing, but it still served to trigger an itch under the skin. An uncomfortable comparison that left me feeling a very particular reaction.

I cleared my throat. "Fine. I can handle a litter box."

"Not a cat person?" he asked as he filled the small bowl with cool water. When he set it down, the cat wandered over, lapping into the bowl immediately. My heart churned uncomfortably. How come I hadn't thought to give him water right away?

"I don't know if I am or not," I answered honestly. "No pets, remember?"

Cameron made a small noise, deep from the back of his throat, and I crossed my arms because if that sound made my chest perk up in visible ways, I'd never, ever forgive myself.

"How old were you when you asked for one?" He yanked open a can of wet cat food and scooped some of it into another small bowl. My little roommate moved right to that next, devouring the tiny portion almost immediately.

"You're not giving him more?" I asked, ignoring his question entirely.

"Not yet. If he's gone a few days without eating or drinking, I don't want to make him sick. If he does all right the next few hours, then give him another helping that size later tonight."

I nodded.

"You didn't answer my question," he said smoothly. "Unless you did that on purpose."

My jaw clenched briefly, but I forced myself to relax because hell, what if me clenching my jaw had the same effect Cameron had on me when he clenched his? We were probably screwed already in this entire endeavor as it was, but if jaw clenching was the thing that would obliterate the professional boundaries between us, I would not be the one to send us spiraling.

And you know why I clenched in the first place? The words were hard to say.

It wasn't like I sat around and dwelled on the ways that my childhood might look sad to an outsider.

I had nothing to complain about. Not a single thing.

I had every advantage given to me. Every privilege.

We could always afford clothes, and food and great schools. My father always pushed and encouraged me to do my very best.

So what if he didn't give me a puppy?

I was hardly abused.

But I made a mistake in glancing up at Cameron, and the look in his eye was so patient, so steady, so curious, I found myself answering.

“I was ten,” I said, with a lift of my chin. “And I wanted a dog. I did all my research, found a list of hypoallergenic dogs because I knew he’d object to having something that shed hair all over the house. Made a spreadsheet of shelters and breeders in the area, cost breakdowns, and drafted a contract of what my responsibilities would be.”

His lips quirked. “At ten?”

I nodded. “Every life situation becomes an opportunity to learn,” I said, repeating what I’d heard my entire life. “And if I didn’t present myself professionally, the chances of him saying yes dropped by about fifty percent. I started tracking that when I was eight.”

Cameron let out a shocked gust of laughter. “You’re joking.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Okay,” he said slowly, “you’re not joking.”

The cat, done eating and his eyes already getting drowsy, wandered over toward the couch and stretched himself in a patch of sunlight coming through the window.

My heart churned with something sweet and warm.

“I was alone a lot,” I said quietly. “He traveled often for work. I thought maybe having a companion would be beneficial.”

I’d have someone to take care of. Someone to play with. Someone who’d always be excited to see me when I walked in the door.

“He disagreed,” Cameron said.

Keeping my eyes on the sleeping cat, I nodded, and my ribs ached, pulling in tight on themselves. Unwanted memories transformed into thick emotion, crawling sluggishly up my throat, and I shoved it back down.

How did that even work? I hadn’t thought about that in years. I didn’t lay around and pine for the dog I never got. But the moment the memory resurfaced, it was like I’d held a beach ball underwater for a bit too long, and it pushed above the water in a great big loud *whoosh*.

“He did.”

He also told me that our housekeeper was enough companionship, and how could I possibly ask him to upset the balance of the household like that?

I didn’t tell Cameron that because if I saw pity in his eyes, I’d lose the threadbare hold on my control.

I stopped asking my dad for things like that.

“You picked out your favorite from that list of dogs, didn’t you?”
Cameron asked.

My eyes burned, but I refused to look at him.

If I looked at him, I’d cry, and Lynches didn’t cry. Certainly not in front of anyone.

I never had.

Tears show weakness, my dad told me. That your sphere of control doesn’t even include yourself.

“I did,” I whispered.

“What was its name?”

I smiled, just a little. “Neville.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

A soft laugh escaped my mouth, and I finally felt clear-headed enough to face him. “It was. He looked like a very distinguished gentleman.”

Slowly, I walked over toward the cat and perched on the edge of the couch, watching him while he slept.

As I did that, Cameron watched me.

I was used to men doing that. They’d done it my whole life.

Sometimes they watched out of curiosity because of my family.

Sometimes they watched with thinly veiled desire.

Sometimes it was heavy with judgment, or derision, times when my sex and my background made me something to despise.

The way he watched me was different, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to dive too deeply into why.

Wasn’t ready to, at least.

Cameron’s phone rang, and he tugged it up to his ear. “Hey, Mom.” His eyes cut over to mine as he listened, and his mouth curled into a smile. “I will. Okay, see you later.” He paused. “Love you too.”

My eyes pinched shut, and I had to look away.

“My mom wanted me to invite you over for dinner,” he said. “If you’re interested.”

Of course she did.

I felt a little too raw to sit at a table with this lovely, kind family and pretend I had any business being there.

I swallowed. “I have some work I planned to do tonight,” I said breezily. “But thank her for me.”

He was quiet for a moment. “Okay. I’ll, uh, go get this litter box set up for you. He may take some time to figure out what it’s for, but I’ll let you know when the vet can get out here, and she can give you some tips.”

I nodded, keeping my eyes trained on the black-and-white fluffball in question.

It only took a couple of minutes for Cameron to get the box set up, and I stood when he entered the room again. His eyes lingered on my face, but I felt steady again, in control after a momentary lapse.

I kept my expression even. “Thank you for setting that up. I still don’t know what the hell I’m doing, but how hard can it be, right?”

“Oh, don’t say that out loud,” Cameron said with a wry grin. “He’ll do his damndest to prove you wrong. Cats have a way of doing that.”

I smiled.

“Do you need anything else while I’m here?”

I shook my head. “Greer is bringing my car back later.”

“Ahh. Didn’t think about that,” he admitted.

“I’m not going anywhere, so it’s fine.” I glanced around the small house. “It’s a lot easier to seclude myself here than the hotel.”

Cameron’s head pulled back, his eyes sharpening on my face.

“Why do you need to do that?” he asked. “I can think of a healthy list of people who’d like to spend time with you.”

He said it so smoothly, hardly blinking as he delivered the words.

Did he know what it did to the building pressure under my ribs? My reaction was anything but smooth.

I swallowed. “It’s easier,” I said. “For when I leave.”

His jaw clenched, and my heart stuttered, wondering what words he held back when he did that.

Finally, Cameron nodded, giving me one last loaded look before he left through the door.

When it closed with a quiet click, I exhaled slowly. A tiny furry head nudged against my ankle, and I looked down to find him staring at me.

I leaned down, picking him up and holding his body away from me so I could study him. He was so serious, his eyes so big and sweet and attentive.

Distinguished.

“Well, Neville,” I said, “it looks like it’s just you and me. Now what?”

Mew.

I allowed myself a tiny smile, refusing to think about what this tiny little

development meant for my inevitable exit from this town. I certainly couldn't take him home, not into the house where I'd been raised.

But for now, he was mine to take care of. And that was enough.

Chapter 14

Cameron

Ian stared at me from across the table, his eyes narrowed in a thoughtful glare.

“A cat,” he said. “In the wall of the house.”

Greer nodded. “Cute little thing too.”

“And he didn’t hiss the moment she grabbed him? If I were a cat, I’d hiss at her.”

I snapped my foot forward, the tip of my boot connecting with his shin.

“*Ouch*,” he yelled. “What the hell was that for?”

“Don’t be a dick.”

Poppy rolled her eyes. “He literally can’t help himself.”

Ian’s mouth fell open. “What? She’s the least friendly person I’ve ever met in my life. You’re only defensive of her because you want to...”

“Finish that sentence, and I’ll knock your teeth out,” I growled.

My mom sighed. “Good Lord, this is why we can never have guests.”

“Yeah, because Ian is a total hypocrite,” said Poppy.

His eyes widened. “How am I a hypocrite?”

She pointed her fork at him. “Because you are the worst kind of grump, Ian Wilder. You have been rude to every single new person who comes into this family —”

“I haven’t *met* everyone that’s come into this family,” he said incredulously.

“For that, we are thankful,” Greer added. “But you’ll love my husband. Everyone does.”

“Wasn’t he a stranger when you married him?” Ian asked with a tilt of his head.

Greer's smile fell, her eyes narrowing.

"Can I leave the table now?" I asked under my breath.

"No," Mom and Dad said in unison.

I blew out a slow breath.

Poppy ignored everyone, keeping her focus on Ian. "Because you're a man with good hair and a passable face—" I snorted. Ian made an affronted noise, but Poppy kept rolling as if neither of us made a sound. "Society is more forgiving if you act like an ass. But when a woman is reserved and closed-off, she's a bitch. We pass it off as a personality flaw when, in reality, she probably has every reason to be closed off, and we just don't know what her story is." She stabbed the grilled chicken on her plate. My chest clenched at the truth of her words. "You could kick puppies, and everyone would swoon because you're so *damaged* and *broody*."

"Only in fiction," Greer pointed out. She eyed our baby sister meaningfully. "Real-life men who kick puppies are *giant* walking red flags. Please run away from someone like that."

"Obviously," she said. "Not that anyone is kicking puppies for the chance at me, but still ... I do know better than that."

My dad shook his head, poking at his meal. "This entire conversation is the perfect way to ruin a man's appetite," he said.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and sighed.

Poppy didn't get riled up often, but when she did ... we all knew to take cover.

"What's your point, Poppy?" Ian asked.

"My point is you're a dick to people all the time, and you say things like, *I just don't trust people*," she mimicked his deep voice.

"That's not what I sound like," he grumbled. "And what's wrong with not trusting people? People are assholes."

She gestured toward him like *thank you for proving my point*.

"You assume people are assholes," Greer said. "There's a difference."

"I like you guys."

"Which is so apparent by how nice you always are," I said.

He gave me a long, dry look, then raised his middle finger to scratch his nose. "We can't all be a saint like you," he added.

There was an edge to his words that had my hackles up. "What are you trying to say?"

Mom held her hands up. "All right, enough."

“Not trying to say anything,” Ian said. “Just stating a fact. You’ve always had a touch of White Knight syndrome, and you know it. You’re always the first one to swoop in when someone needs saving or defending. You don’t give anyone else a chance to step up.”

My eyebrows arched slowly. “You ever think about therapy, Ian? You could use it. Of course I stepped up. I live half a mile away, not hours away like Parker and Erik, or half a world away like you. Am I supposed to wait for you to hop a plane to fix the damn roof?”

“Boys,” Mom said, her voice firmer.

Greer and Poppy traded a look, but I refused to drop Ian’s stare.

He’d always been the brother with an edge. A sharpness that came with our upbringing.

“No, and that’s not what I’m saying,” Ian continued. “Come on, Cameron, you’ve got this woman you’ve known for ten minutes, and you’re already defending her like it’s your own personal mission to fix whatever daddy issues made her such a bi —”

I leaned forward, eyes locked on his. “*Don’t* call her that,” I warned.

He held his hands out. “I’m your brother. You going to defend me the same way?”

“I did when she told me you were about as friendly as an ice pick, so how about you stow the martyr routine.” I stood from the table, tossing my napkin down onto the table. “You want to talk about behavioral patterns, Ian? Every time you come home, you have to find someone in this family to pick a fight with. You did it with Erik when you came home last time, and you’re doing it with me now.”

Poppy sighed. “Go pick a fight with Parker,” she muttered. “He’s the one you should be mad at.”

Ian’s eyes cut to Poppy, then me. “You ever think Parker doesn’t feel like he’s needed here, and that’s why he doesn’t come home?”

“Bullshit,” I snapped. “He’s not coming home because it’s hard, and I get it, but don’t project your own issues onto him as a way to make excuses.”

Ian’s gaze darkened, but when his mouth opened to argue, Dad hit his open palm on the table.

“Enough,” he said.

He didn’t yell.

Didn’t raise his voice. Maybe because he couldn’t.

The single word was hardly more than a whisper, but silence fell at the

table as if he'd screamed it.

Shame had my eyes falling closed.

"Sorry," I said, swiping a hand over my face when I opened my eyes and looked at Dad and then Mom. "I apologize for ruining dinner."

Ian's jaw clenched. "Me too."

But my brother didn't look at me.

So I didn't look at him either.

"It's all right," Dad said wearily. "Lord knows you boys used to fight like cats and dogs growing up. We should be used to it."

Greer's gaze caught mine and held, and I could see the concern buried there.

I shook my head slightly.

I didn't want to talk about it with her.

Mom pushed back from her seat, then stood and laid a hand on Ian's shoulder. "I love you," she said, then dropped a kiss on the top of his head. She walked over to me and took my face in her hands. "And I love you."

"Love you too," I told her.

Her eyes were smiling, even as her mouth stayed in a firm line. "You're both stubborn as hell in your own way," she said. "All you kids are. It's why you've turned out so well, because no one can tell you what to do."

Poppy rolled her eyes. "Don't encourage them, Mom. I'd like to note for the record that us three girls never fought like that."

Greer grinned. "Nope. We're angels."

Ian snorted. "Do we practice delusions at the dinner table now?"

"With regularity," Dad said in a tired voice.

Mom squeezed my arm. "You still planning on working on the coop tomorrow?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "I'll be here first thing, and Poppy is very excited to help me."

My sister rolled her eyes.

Mom laughed. "Great. Can you do me a favor?"

"Of course," I said immediately. Ian's words flashed through my head, and I cut my gaze over to his, where he looked a bit too smug.

"Can you bring a plate of this food over to Ivy? I hate thinking about the girl going hungry over there."

"Mom, you brought her half a dozen muffins this morning," Ian said. "And I know this because they were the last half a dozen muffins."

Mom gave him a sharp, quelling look, and Ian swallowed, shrinking down in his chair.

I exhaled heavily. "I doubt Ivy is going hungry, Mom."

Then she gave *me* a sharp, quelling look, and I swear to all things holy, sweat started to bead on my forehead. Professional interrogators could learn a thing or two from Sheila Wilder.

"I'll bring it," Poppy said. "She seems lonely, if you ask me. I'd love to make friends with her."

Mom's gaze didn't waver from mine, and she slowly arched an eyebrow.

A lonely Ivy.

Why did the thought of that feel like someone shoved a knife straight between my ribs?

"I'll do it," I said in a gruff voice.

Her smile turned knowing, and I barely managed not to roll my eyes.

"Can I come with you?" Poppy asked.

"No," Mom and Greer said in unison.

Poppy exhaled loudly. "Fine."

Ian watched me carefully while I cleared my dishes and loaded them into the dishwasher. Mom packed up a leftover container of some grilled chicken and corn and mashed potatoes. It was enough to feed three people, but I kept my mouth shut because I had a healthy sense of self-preservation. Greer snorted when Mom added some cookies, then paused to consider the last half of the pie she'd made.

"Mom," Poppy admonished. "She's *one* person."

Mom tutted. "I know, I know. I just can't help myself. I already told her I'd love for her to come over for some tea, so I can always give her more if she does."

"Make sure I'm gone," Ian muttered.

Mom pivoted slowly, her eyebrows raised. "Oh, I will," she said in a warning tone.

Poppy threw a roll at Ian's head, and he snatched it out of the air, eating half of it in one bite. She rolled her eyes.

Greer stood, kissing Dad on the head. "I need to head back home. I promised Olive I'd be home before Beckett tucked her into bed."

"Bring her with you next time," Dad said. "I like my granddaughters more than I like the rest of you." He gave me, Ian, and Poppy a pointed stare. "And that's not an invitation to spring some children on me just because I'm

dying. Only have kids when you're ready."

Ian held his hands up. "I'm not getting married, so you're fine there."

"It's tough when no one wants you," I told him consolingly.

He slicked his tongue over his teeth while Poppy laughed. "Poppy won't either because she's too in love with Jax to consider anyone else, and he'll never think of her that way."

Poppy's cheeks turned red. "When are you moving back to London again?"

I gave Ian a hard stare.

He smiled back. "And Cameron won't because all the women in Sisters have much better taste than that."

"When are you moving back to London again?" I asked.

His grin was smug, and I wanted to punch him in the throat.

Greer smacked the back of his head when she passed. "Quit being a dick. Your firstborn bully tendencies are showing, and it's not cute." She gave me a hug. "Ignore him," she said quietly.

"I make it a point to."

She smiled. "At least you have your very well-adjusted, easy-to-love sisters."

I cocked an eyebrow. "They're humble too, which always helps."

Greer whacked me in the stomach.

After Mom loaded up a reusable grocery bag and handed it over to me, Poppy left the table with her dishes in hand and walked closer so she could say something to me out of earshot.

"Ask her if she wants to play chess," Poppy said.

My eyebrows shot up. "What?"

She tapped my chest. "Trust me."

"I haven't played chess since I was like, ten," I admitted in a whisper.

Poppy's eyes gleamed. "Do you want to spend time with her?"

The instant affirmation got stuck in my throat, but she saw it clearly on my face.

My little sister grinned. "Then it won't matter, trust me."

Then she walked away.

"Everyone is losing their minds in this house," I muttered.

With the bag in hand, I decided to walk down to the guesthouse, knowing that the sound of my truck might set her on edge.

It was a beautiful night, the sky clear and the breeze cool. The smell of

fall was in the air, even if the leaves hadn't started changing.

Even when the natural cycle of the seasons was built into the trees, they seemed to resist change when summer was on its way out.

We all did that a bit, I guess. I'd always liked keeping things the same, knowing what to expect, and it was only with the arrival of Ivy that had my head spinning in a way that I didn't hate.

Maybe that's the thing about meeting someone. And not just anyone.

But meeting someone who lights a spark.

My entire life, I'd wanted it, and trusted that eventually I'd feel it—feel something that resembled the kind of love I'd seen between my dad and Sheila, but seeking it out sounded too exhausting, required too much effort when my entire life had naturally built around my family and what they needed on any given day.

But what did I need?

I approached the small house and asked myself that question, willing to look in the proverbial mirror and provide a harsh answer.

I might not need Ivy. But I wanted her.

And the spark I felt hadn't sputtered and died simply because she was hiding behind a giant iron wall of her own making.

Warm light spilled from the windows of the house, and I took a deep breath, wondering exactly how hard I should push.

I lifted my hand and knocked softly on the door.

Chapter 15

Ivy

I was probably going to die sitting on that couch.

Movement was impossible because there was a snoring black furball on my lap, and he was so stupid cute and content that I wasn't sure that I'd ever forgive myself if I woke his ass up.

This was how it started.

One minute, you were past the childhood trauma of not getting a puppy, and the next thing you knew, you were lying on the couch with a crick in your neck because your feral kitten was asleep on top of you, and you'd rather mess up your spinal alignment than wake him up.

At least I knew he wasn't carrying any diseases, thanks to a visit from the vet earlier. He was skinny and a little dehydrated, but all in all, a healthy, sweet kitten.

I closed my eyes and sighed.

That was when I heard the knock on the door.

"Shit," I whispered.

The cat shifted, his little head burrowing against me where he was curled up.

Cameron's voice came from the other side of the door. "Ivy?"

My chest warmed imperceptibly.

Dammit.

No.

Not helpful, I scolded my chest. We were supposed to be in recluse mode. Not *Oh good, the hot, thoughtful man is here* mode.

I snatched my phone from the couch and tapped out a text.

Me: I'm stuck underneath the cat. Door is unlocked.

Instead of answering, the door opened only a few seconds later, and he poked his head inside.

And dammit, my entire body melted. Melted *more*, because I was already having kitten melting.

The melting came from Cameron's smile.

When his warm golden eyes landed on Neville and me on the couch, that smile spread over his handsome face like nothing in the universe would dare stop it.

"Looks like you're acclimating well," he said. In his hand was a big bag.

"What's that?" I asked. "Holy shit, did she send more food?"

Cameron's grin widened. "Maybe."

My head sank back on the couch, and I sighed. "Does your mom have this obsession with feeding everyone, or am I just special?"

Cameron didn't answer right away, and when I lifted my head, his eyes were locked on my face.

"A little bit of both, I'd say," he answered smoothly, only looking away when he unpacked a large container and set it in the fridge. "Chicken, corn, and mashed potatoes. And some chocolate chip cookies."

I sniffed. "Passable, I suppose."

Yeah, right. Who was I kidding?

It sounded—and smelled—amazing, and if my sleeping beauty cat wasn't comatose on my lap, I would've snatched one of those cookies out of the bag before he set it down.

Maybe the quiet was getting to me. It was the only thing I could think of.

I'd emailed my dad earlier, thinking maybe I'd have a better chance of a response that way.

Still nothing.

It was feeling more and more petulant as my time in Sisters shifted from hours to days. Never once had I considered my dad a petulant man.

But you know who wasn't petulant?

Cameron Wilder.

He just kept showing up. And I wasn't sure what to do with that.

He studied me carefully, gaze tracking over the petal pink cashmere pants and matching tank top. My hair was twisted into a messy knot on top of my head, my face scrubbed clean of makeup.

Cameron's eyes gleamed, and I tried to pinpoint what felt different

tonight.

He moved around the kitchen island and settled in the chair opposite the couch, his long legs sprawled out in front of him, his big hands clasped loosely over his flat stomach.

“It’s gonna be a long night if you plan on sleeping like that.”

I arched an eyebrow. “I don’t sleep on couches.”

“You said you don’t have pets either, yet here you are.”

My mouth turned into a frown, which only served to have his golden, dimpled smile spread even further.

With how starkly naked that whole topic made me feel earlier, there was no chance I was touching it again, so I latched onto the first thing I could think of.

“How was dinner?” I asked.

Cameron’s eyes sharpened. “We having a conversation here?”

“Maybe.”

He licked at his lower lip. “Food was good. Company was mostly good.”

My interest rose in a sharp curl, very much against my will. “Mostly?”

“Argued with Ian. But that happens every time he comes home.”

Later, I’d blame the warm, slight weight of the cat, and the way he was looking at me—like he had nowhere else he’d rather be.

“I don’t understand the sibling dynamic,” I admitted. “You can argue with him one minute, and the next...”

“The next, he’s one of my best friends.”

I nodded slightly. “Makes no sense.”

He grinned. “Well, it’s the shared experience, right? No one in the world understands what it’s like to grow up in our family,” he said. “Except my brothers and sisters.”

My chest felt hollow at the perfect sense it made. I continued watching Cameron, and words hovered on the tip of my tongue.

If I didn’t speak them, would he leave?

The hollow morphed into something colder. Something vastly more uncomfortable.

“Your family is obnoxiously large,” I said.

There was a beat of silence, his mouth opening slightly like he couldn’t quite believe I said it.

Join the fucking club.

My throat went tight, and I wished I could yank the words back into my

mouth. But then he tipped his head back and laughed, the warm booming sound curling through my veins.

Until I met him, I wasn't aware that a sound could do that—warm you up from the inside out. The little girl in me, who thrived on praise for a job well done, couldn't help but stand a little straighter and feel a bolt of pride that I'd done something to make him laugh.

If that didn't show a screaming need for weekly therapy sessions, I didn't know what did.

"It is," he said, eyes wrinkling attractively as he smiled. He swiped a thumb under his eye and shook his head. "It really, really is."

My lips twitched like they wanted to join him in that easy smiling, but they weren't sure how. And because he owned some secret blueprint for reading my facial expressions, Cameron noticed my hesitancy.

"What's going on in that brain of yours?" he asked quietly. "I'd love to know."

My throat bobbed on a swallow, and his eyes tracked the movement. He couldn't know what it was like, feeling the bubbling curiosity for a normal life. The desire to understand what it's like because it was completely foreign.

I didn't understand fighting with siblings and meddling moms and baskets of giant food and patient men with kind eyes and strong bodies and big hearts.

Words crowded my tight throat, but I couldn't push them up and out.

They'd give too much away, and I didn't know how to overcome the fear that if I spoke them out loud, they'd be used against me.

"It's just me," he said. "I'm not going to judge you or pity you, Ivy."

I sucked in a sharp breath, mirroring the sharp way his words bit through my hefty reserve.

"I don't understand your family," I said slowly. "I don't have ... there's no shared experience for me. And even if I did, I don't understand how they're like this all the time. They're just nice ... for the sake of being nice. They don't want anything, or expect anything."

His eyes seared into me while he listened, only the slightest nod as he did.

"Except Ian," I added. "What happened with him?"

Cameron's lips pulled to the side in a crooked grin, and it caused a dangerous weightlessness under my ribs.

"How much time do you have?"

I almost closed my eyes when he asked it, because it so closely mirrored our conversation in the elevator that the overwhelming relief of setting down the armor had my body feeling weak.

But despite that weakness, I held his gaze. “A lot, apparently,” then I gestured at the cat.

A dimple appeared in his cheek as he grinned.

Before he could answer, the cat decided it was time to be social.

He stood on my lap and arched his back, doing that weird kneading thing with his paws against my leg.

“Good morning,” I said.

Mew.

Lightly, he hopped off my lap and then onto the floor, padding over to where Cameron sat. Cameron leaned forward, bracing his forearms on the tops of his thighs, and dangled his fingers down so the cat could jump at them. His smile was kind and warm and sweet and made my insides go dangerously soft.

“He should go in by that litter box,” Cameron stated. “Anytime he wakes up, I’d bring him in there.”

“Oh, right. I read that,” I said. “I did some research after you left.”

Cameron stood, unfolding all that great big height with ease, leaning down to fold his hand underneath Neville’s tiny body.

And oh *boy*, seeing him with a kitten tucked up against his broad chest was a sight.

A thigh-clenching sight, too. I slowly sat up on the couch, running a hand over the top of my head to smooth any stray hairs.

Cameron walked to the back of the house, disappearing into the small laundry room. I glanced down and adjusted the front of my cashmere sleep tank to make sure I wasn’t showing ... anything.

His phone rang, and he spoke quietly enough that I couldn’t hear what he said.

A couple of minutes later, he returned with Neville following dutifully.

“Smart cat,” he said. “He knew exactly what to do.”

As the words hung there, Neville got a dangerous gleam in his eye and tore off toward the giant potted plant, hopping immediately into the dirt to bat at the leaves.

“Neville,” I sighed, walking over to snatch him out of the planter. “What is the plant obsession?”

“Neville?” Cameron asked, brows raised and his eyes glinting with humor.

I hugged the squirming cat to my chest and notched my chin up an inch. “Yes.”

His lips twitched as he fought a smile.

My eyes narrowed. “What’s so funny about that?”

“Nothing. I love it.”

“You do not.”

Cameron took a step closer, and my heart did a wild somersault when I caught a whiff of his scent. Then he scratched the top of Neville’s head, and maybe I was imagining heat, but the tip of his finger hardly brushed the cashmere top and it was enough to tug at the hairs on the nape of my neck.

“I like whatever you named him,” Cameron said in a low, intimate voice.

The way we stood was intimate too.

Close enough that I could lean into him if I wanted. Close enough that I could lift my chin, lock eyes and push up on the balls of my feet for a kiss.

So I kept my eyes on the base of his throat, watched it move in a slow swallow.

“I was going to ask you if you’re up for a game of chess...” When he paused, my heart skipped a beat, but then he said, “I have to go.”

My gaze snapped up to his. “Why?”

Oh, he liked that.

The look on his face sharpened to something intense and pleased.

“Wade needs something at the shop, and I have the key,” he answered.

“Poppy left hers inside because we don’t normally lock up every night, but Ian didn’t know that when he finished.”

I nodded, my throat tight with what I’d just let escape.

I might as well scream it—*please don’t leave, I like having you here.*

Cameron took a step back, his thumb tapping on the side of his thigh.

“I’m going to say something that might really piss you off,” he said, “but I think I’m willing to risk that.”

Slowly, I arched an eyebrow. “Well, now you’ve got to say it,” I drawled.

“I think this is the real you, Ivy. Who won’t move all night to let a stray kitten sleep because it’s comfortable. I think it’s you in these moments when you let your guard down enough to ask what you want to ask and say what you want to say.” His chest expanded on a deep breath. “And I think it’s gotta be exhausting to hold up that wall. The one someone taught you was

necessary. I know you wanted me to think the woman I first met wasn't real, but I disagree. I'm not sure what you're protecting yourself from because no one here wants to hurt you or use you. We just want to get to know you." Not once did his eyes waver from mine, and I felt it all the way down to my toes. "I wish you'd let us."

Of all the things I imagined him saying, this was the absolute worst.

I wanted to snap back, wanted to say something cool and clever and meant to put him in his place, but those words got stuck in my throat too. They were prickly and painful, but I swallowed them back down because I'd rather cause myself some discomfort doing that than cause him pain by letting them be said.

So all I did was stare up at him in complete bewilderment.

"What do you want from me?" I asked, and a hushed whisper was all I could manage.

Then Cameron smiled, a little crooked smile that landed its hook right underneath my ribs. "Show us who you are, Ivy Lynch. That's all."

I emitted a short puff of air. "That's all."

"Yup." He tucked his hands into his front pockets, and the bulge of his muscles was honestly just a little obnoxious. "What would you be like if you weren't afraid to show that side of you?"

"I'm not afraid," I snapped.

And inexplicably, he smiled.

"Prove it."

With my mouth hanging open, Cameron gave me one last lingering look and then walked out of the house.

Chapter 16

Cameron

The morning dawned clear and promised to be hot, which meant work on Mom and Dad's property began after breakfast. Even with the cool breeze that would disappear after lunch, my shirt was soaked through after just a couple of hours.

Poppy, my unwilling volunteer, lay in the bed of my truck. "I can't do any more. My hands are going to fall off."

"Not for a few more hours at least," I promised, then pressed the nail gun up to the wood and pressed the trigger.

Bam.

"Come on," I told her. "I promised Mom we'd have this done by the end of the week."

Poppy groaned. "Can't Ian help you with this? He's the other builder in the family."

"Ian had two new furniture commissions come in," I told her. "So he's busy for a while." I marked a piece of wood where it needed to be cut and handed it to her. "Here, you can handle cutting that one."

She sighed dramatically, then pulled herself up and hopped out of the bed of my truck. She took the piece of wood and walked over to the table saw, pushing her safety glasses into place before she lined the wood up.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her, just to make sure she wasn't accidentally going to saw her fingers off. But she did it exactly like she was supposed to.

"Good," I told her. "Maybe you can start framing in houses for us."

"Ha," she said. "Yeah right. Like you guys would ever let me step foot on an actual jobsite. I can't even stop for a visit without your face doing that

pinched, annoyed older brother thing.” Poppy pointed at me. “See? You’re doing it right now.”

I gave her a steady look. “That’s because you know exactly why I’m acting like a *protective* older brother when you come visit us at work.”

Poppy studiously avoided my eyes. “I’m quite sure I don’t.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Poppy, as much as I have never wanted to verbalize this ... you have got to get over this crush on Jax. He’s not fit for any woman, let alone you. Even if he wanted to, he doesn’t know how to share his life. He comes and goes as he pleases, and as much as I trust him with my life...” I paused, making sure she was listening. Her eyes briefly flickered to mine. “I would never trust him with *you*.”

My sister stood there, her throat working on a swallow, eyes locked on the small framed-in building, a two-by-four clutched in her hand. And her brows were furrowed as she carefully processed what I was saying.

“Why not?” she asked.

It was as close as she’d ever come to admitting it to me, and all it did was add another weight to my shoulders. Sometimes it felt like I was carrying a million pounds of rocks on my back. Every member of my family were responsible for a few, but Poppy seemed to have more than her fair share.

I shook my head. “He doesn’t know how to love a woman the way you want him to. You think Ian is bad about trusting people? Jax is ten times worse.”

Her chest heaved on a great big breath. “Maybe he just hasn’t trusted the right woman yet.”

I decided that being blunt was the best gift I could give her. “He doesn’t give them enough time to figure out if he can trust them, Poppy. One night is what they get. *All they get*.”

“Maybe...” But she paused before she could say anything else.

My sister had the biggest heart, and all I wanted was for it to stay that way.

“If he hurt you like that,” I told her quietly. “I’d have to kill him, and I’d hate to kill my best friend. But I would because you’re my *sister*.”

When she looked up at me, her eyes were shining. “I know you would. But that doesn’t mean it’s easy to stop wanting something, even if it’s not good for you.”

“I know, Pops,” I said. “I’d hug you, but ...” I plucked at my sweat-soaked shirt, and she wrinkled her nose.

“Please don’t.”

With a smile, she handed me the cut piece of wood and asked what she could help with next. We got back to work, Poppy’s words pressing on a bruise I wasn’t aware of before she said it.

All morning, I’d wondered if my visit to Ivy’s the night before ended up doing more harm than good, but sometimes there was no stopping it when something needed to be said.

I’d know one way or the other when I finally saw her.

Poppy held the framing up while I set it in place with the nail gun and then stood back with a smile. “It’s so cute.”

I tugged my hat off and wiped my arm over my forehead. After I took a drink from my water jug, I pulled my shirt off and tossed it into the bed of my truck.

“It’s not cute,” I said. “It’s big and masculine and sturdy.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay.”

“Good morning.”

At the sound of Ivy’s voice, I stilled.

“Oh my *gosh*,” Poppy squealed. “Is that the cat?”

I turned slowly and bit down on a smile when I did.

Ivy wore black leggings today, laced-up leather combat boots over her ankles, and a pale purple top tight to her upper body. This might have been her dressed casually, but she still managed to scream money.

And attached to her hand was the cat. On a leash.

Her cheeks were only the slightest shade of pink as she met my stare with a raised brow, and I finally let my smile grow.

“Neville likes a morning walk, does he?”

Poppy glanced up from where she was crouched on the ground petting the cat. “Neville? That’s adorable.”

Ivy’s smile turned smug as she aimed it at me. “I thought so too.”

“Where’d you get the leash? Because I know that wasn’t in the bag I brought over last night.”

Her eyes were clear and direct and interested, and with an uneven thump of my heart, I realized that there was no mask today. No wall.

“Went downtown this morning after breakfast. They told me it was meant for a dog, but I think it’s horribly unfair that cats don’t get to go on walks too.”

“Undoubtedly. Glad to see you’re rectifying this on behalf of Neville.”

Her gaze dropped briefly down my chest and lingered, and if you think I didn't flex a little bit, you'd be dead wrong. The pink deepened in her cheeks, and I wanted to snatch her face in my hands and kiss her until we couldn't breathe.

"What are you building?" she asked.

Poppy glanced up. "A chicken coop."

She studied the frame of the building. "It's cute."

Poppy tipped her head back and laughed.

"What?" Ivy asked.

"Nothing," I assured her.

"Cameron objects to such descriptions when it comes to his building plans." After giving Neville one last scratch on his back, she stood and gave Ivy a knowing look. "We could have bought something premade, but he thinks he can do better."

"I *can* make something better. It's literally my job to make something better," I told her. "That premade thing didn't have any of the stuff I'm adding."

Poppy patted my shoulder and gave me a condescending smile. "We know. We've heard all about it." She smiled at Ivy. "He's been working on these plans for a solid week, and even though it's about twice the size Mom asked for, he keeps coming up with other ideas."

Ivy's eyes were bright as she gave me a considering glance, and damned if that brightness didn't hit my bloodstream like a punch.

"Want to help?" I asked. "Poppy's an average assistant, but she just told me she'd love a break."

Poppy's brow furrowed. "No, I didn't."

I gave her a look. "*I think my hands are about to fall off?*"

"Oh. I didn't think you'd actually let me stop," she said. Then to Ivy she said, "He comes off as the nice brother, but he's miserable when he's not in charge of everything and telling everyone what to do."

"I can see that about him," she answered seriously.

I rolled my eyes, and Poppy laughed.

"Here," she said. "I'll take the leash. He can show you what to do. It's really easy."

"Oh, I don't know if Ivy wants to get her hands dirty," I said smoothly.

Challenge sparked in her eyes, exactly like I hoped it would.

When I told her I wanted to see more of her, God, I meant it.

“How about you worry about your own hands,” Ivy said, brushing past me so that I got that slight whiff of something sweet and clean. “I’m a quick study.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I told her. I picked up a spare piece of wood and handed it over. “Let’s practice on this first.”

She held my gaze as she took it.

I tilted my head toward the saw. “Now we cut it in half. You want Poppy’s safety glasses?”

Ivy pulled her black sunglasses out of a side pocket of her leggings and slid them on her face. “I’m assuming these will work.”

Even with the giant frames on her face, she didn’t look nearly as closed off as she had that first day and a half. It was something about her mouth, the way a smile hovered just on the edges.

“Want me to show you first?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Just tell me what to do.”

A thousand wildly inappropriate thoughts careened through my head, and I cleared them out with a vicious mental swipe of my hand.

“Set the wood on the edge of the table, then clamp it down with this. Once it’s locked in place, you’ll run the saw right along the edge of the overhang. You’ll always push the saw away from you, okay?”

She nodded, adjusting the metal clamp on the piece of wood, and then studied the saw. “Grab it on the front here?”

“Yup.” I stood behind her and gently touched the side of her arm. “Left hand here,” I said. The top of her head barely brushed my chin. “Right hand here.”

My chest was only an inch or two away from her back, and she glanced briefly over her shoulder up into my face. I couldn’t see her eyes because of the glasses.

“Got the clamp tight?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm.”

I leaned past her and checked it. The bare skin of her shoulder brushed my chest, and she sucked in a quick breath.

I made the mistake of glancing over at Poppy, who watched with wide-eyed interest. When I glowered in her direction, she grinned, redirecting her attention to the cat, who was batting away at a weed.

“When you’ve got the saw lined up, go ahead and squeeze on the handle here, and slowly push it forward.”

She exhaled. "You'll be right here?"

It was a simple question. And maybe no one else would read into it the things that I would. I didn't even know Ivy well enough to sift through the deeper meanings of her making sure I was staying close by in case she needed help.

But she was out here, with me and my sister, and she was trying.

I didn't need her to be something she wasn't, but I couldn't handle the idea of her hiding who she really was either.

"I'm not going anywhere," I promised.

Ivy took a deep breath and pressed down on the trigger for the saw, the loud sharp buzz filling the air. She pushed it forward, and the piece cut neatly in half, leaving a chunk on the ground.

Her hand came off the saw, and the whirring stopped. She blinked down at it, then pushed her sunglasses onto the top of her head.

"That was so easy," she said.

I smiled. "That mean you're going to help me build this now?"

She snorted. "Hardly. One cut does not a builder make, and I think you bossing me around all day is the quickest way to drive me mad."

I held her gaze unflinchingly. "I don't know about that," I said. "I think you'd like it just fine, duchess."

The pulse in the base of her neck fluttered, and then she tore her eyes away, focusing on the framed-out chicken coop. I wondered if she was thinking about my hand around her throat, the first place she'd asked me to touch her body.

She cleared her throat. "Is your mother home today?" she asked.

I didn't answer right away because I was too busy reciting algebra facts in my head to rid myself of an inconvenient hard-on. "I think so," I said gruffly. "She'll be thrilled if you need more food."

Ivy laughed, a soft, husky sound, and if my sister wasn't standing four feet away, I was tempted to lick that sound straight out of her mouth into mine.

Maybe asking her to drop the wall was a terrible idea. Because now I wanted to kiss her again. I wanted a lot more than that.

And the wall ... the mask ... that had been the biggest barrier.

Now it was just Ivy. And me.

And the terribly inconvenient, out-of-control *desire* I had for her.

"I definitely don't need more food," she said. "But I did promise to have

a cup of tea with her someday.”

My ribs squeezed. “She’d love that.”

Ivy cleared her throat. “Thank you for showing me that. Maybe I’ll cut some more wood if I get bored later.”

“Plenty of that around here,” I murmured.

Her eyes widened.

I grinned.

Ivy scoffed. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

My smile widened.

“You’re impossible,” she whispered fiercely.

“Don’t pretend you don’t like it.”

She held her chin high and turned back toward my sister. “I’ll take Neville back to my place, thank you for watching him.”

“Of course. I’d rather watch anything than see my brother’s horrible attempts at flirting, so it was a win-win for me.”

I glared at Poppy.

Ivy stared at the cat, color climbing up her neck.

“I’ll just ... head back,” she said.

Her eyes darted over to mine before she walked away, her tiny little kitten trotting after.

“Smooth,” Poppy said. “No wonder you’re single.”

“Shut up.” I ruffled her hair. “Come on, back to work.”

Chapter 17

Ivy

The flowers had felt like a great idea until the moment I had to juggle the vase and knock on the Wilders' front door.

Objectively, I knew I'd built a bouquet the size of a toddler, but when Sheila opened the door, and her mouth fell open, I felt a cold zap of panic.

Too much, Ivy. Definitely too much.

But it was also too late because she'd seen me, and there was no going back.

"My word," she breathed. "What's all this?"

I shifted the vase in my arm, pretending I didn't just get smacked in the face with one of the iris stems. "A thank-you," I told her.

Then I held it out, fighting the flush of heat crawling up my cheeks when she studied me, not the really expensive flowers.

Sheila's smile hit my chest like a notched arrow, embedding somewhere deep and soft.

"Come in," she said and held open the door.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything important. I can come back later if you're busy."

Hell, even as I said it, I was ready to dart back out the door.

"Not at all," she said. Then she nodded into the family room. "My husband, Tim, was just trying to con me into making some cinnamon rolls."

"Like I can con you into anything you don't want to do," a tired voice came from a big leather recliner in the room off the kitchen.

Now my chest hurt for an entirely different reason.

With a single glance at the man who'd spoken, I knew Tim Wilder was *really* sick.

Cameron had told me that in the elevator, of course, and Ian made a comment as well, but seeing it for myself was different.

He had that gaunt look about him, where it hurt to watch him try to shift up higher in his chair. But his smile—it was warm and welcoming—and in the spread of it across his face, I saw a glimpse of his son.

“You must be Ivy,” he said. “I wish I could show better manners and get up to greet you, but my legs don’t feel so agreeable these days.”

I smiled, walking over to him and holding out my hand. “Please don’t worry about standing on ceremony,” I told him. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

His handshake was still firm, his eyes clear. “You’ve caused quite a stir since your arrival, young lady.”

I cleared my throat but was saved from replying when Sheila tutted from the kitchen.

“Lord, Tim, don’t scare her away. I finally got her here.”

He winked. “I don’t think this one scares easily, honey.”

I smiled, but I couldn’t help but feel like a giant coward. All of this scared me beyond belief. Nothing more terrifying than the kind of home I’d never experienced.

Showing up on their doorstep was the scariest shit I’d done in a long time.

The welcome in this home was tangible, and I tried to recall a time in my entire life when I’d ever felt its equal.

“Your home is beautiful,” I told them, and I meant it.

Everything about it was warm and comfortable, the craftsmanship in the two-story log cabin was evident. The furniture was all overstuffed, a mix of soft materials and inviting colors, big, squishy pillows and lush blankets. The rugs on the floor had vivid patterns, and the art hanging on the wall was eclectic—a mix of family photos and paintings with a distinct Pacific Northwest feel to it.

“Thank you, dear,” Tim said. “Built it with my own two hands.”

“He had a little help. Don’t let him fool you,” Sheila added.

I smiled. “It’s a great skill to build a home.”

He sighed, his eyes closing slightly as he set his hands on his stomach. “Only thing I ever wanted to do. Good thing I had a couple of kids who wanted to follow me because now my wife gets a fancy-ass chicken coop.”

Sheila laughed. “Cameron can’t do anything halfway,” she said. “But don’t you blame me for all the bells and whistles he’s putting on that thing.”

“They’ve got *skylights*, Sheila.”

As she laughed again, she motioned me into the dining area, where she set down two small tea plates and some linen napkins. “Ignore him. Even chickens need a nice view.” She set the vase of flowers, a bright explosion of pinks and purples with glossy green leaves, down and smiled happily when she stepped back. “So beautiful. I’ve never seen these spiky flowers, and I usually know my way around a garden.”

“It’s called a Veldt Fire,” I told her. “When I was younger, I had to take flower arranging classes. I thought they were from an alien planet.”

After she laughed, Sheila reached out to touch one of the soft pink petals that encased the yellow protrusions. When I was taking my classes, they were my favorite flowers to include in an arrangement. They looked sharp and fierce, balancing out all the soft curves of the rest of the flowers.

“You did this?” she asked. “Goodness, you’ve got a gift.”

“Thank you,” I told her. “I don’t know if they’ll ever let me back into the floral shop in Redmond though.”

Her eyebrows rose on her forehead. “Why ever not?”

I took a deep breath and thought about what Cameron said.

What would you be like if you weren’t afraid to show that side of you?

I’d say something true, even if there’d be a quick admonishment for my honesty.

“I terrified the girl working behind the counter. She wanted carnations and *baby’s breath*, and ...” I paused, arching an eyebrow. “I may have been a bit too assertive in asking to help myself to their cooler of flowers.”

Sheila’s lips twitched as she fought a smile. “Whatever you did, it was worth it. That’s the prettiest bouquet I’ve ever seen.”

“I’m sure she’ll sue me for emotional damages later.”

She laughed.

Probably because she thought I was kidding.

I took a deep breath. “I don’t really ... I’m not good at making small talk with strangers,” I admitted. “I’m bossy when I know what I want.”

Sheila didn’t answer right away. She just studied me with a knowing gleam in her eyes.

“And I’m not very friendly,” I added. The quiet was making me really twitchy. The way she watched me—all understanding and kind and perceptive—made me want to hide under the table. “I feel like everyone in this town is almost scarily nice, and I don’t understand it. I’m not like that.”

“No?” she asked innocently. Then she gave a pointed look at the flowers.

I exhaled quietly. “No. I know how to be polite and respectful, but whatever mix of my DNA came from my parents, I think the friendly gene skipped me.”

From the couch, Tim made a soft laughing noise. “I like you, Ivy.”

I blinked. “Why?”

“Life’s too short for bullshitters and fakes,” he said. “Anyone who knows themselves well enough to be able to admit what you just did, out loud, is all right with me.”

My mouth fell open. How did these people make everything seem so simple?

Sheila held up a small box of tea. “Earl Grey all right with you? I think I’ve got some peppermint too, if you prefer that.”

My head spun a little from the pivot, but I took a deep breath, smoothing my hands over the front of my navy plaid skirt. “Whatever you’re having is great.”

“Does this mean no cinnamon rolls?” Tim asked.

Sheila rolled her eyes, smiling at me like we shared a secret. “You’ll be just fine without them for a couple more hours.”

“Will I?” he muttered.

While Sheila busied herself in the kitchen getting the water to boiling, I studied some of the pictures on the wall. My eyes naturally sought out Cameron in the snapshots, and I found myself smiling at his younger self—skinny shoulders, lanky build, and a massive smile.

“My wife tells me your grandparents used to be our neighbors,” Tim said.

I walked over toward the couch, taking a seat as I nodded. “I didn’t know them, but yes.”

He hummed. “They were nice. Kept to themselves, but a lot of folks who live out in the country do.”

Curiosity niggled at the back of my brain, an itch that I couldn’t stop from blooming. “What did you know about them?” I asked, despite the insistent mental guardrails I’d had up since I arrived in town.

Sheila handed me a small mug of steaming water, the tea bag tucked into the mug while it steeped. I took it with a small smile. “Thank you.”

“Your grandma made wonderful strawberry pie,” she said. “I remember her bringing some over when we first moved into the house.” Her eyes were clouded over as she set her tea down on the coffee table. “Your grandpa was quiet. Not sure I ever talked to him much beyond a hello if I saw him in

town.”

The only images in my head were a few faded pictures in a photo album I found in my dad’s office. He was tall and thin, wire-rimmed glasses on a stern face. My grandma was short, with curly hair cut tight to her head.

At the time, I remember wishing that I felt something when I looked at their picture. But I didn’t.

There was a curious blank spot in my brain, a distinct lack of reaction in my chest, when I thought of them, and I couldn’t quite figure out why.

“Strawberry pie,” I said quietly.

Sheila nodded. “She put the most delicious layer of chocolate on the crust and I’d never had that before. I might actually have the recipe buried in a box in that kitchen somewhere if you’d like me to pass it along to you.”

My eyebrows lowered immediately. “Oh God, no.” When Sheila laughed, my eyes pinched shut for a moment. “That was horribly rude, I’m so sorry. I just...” I paused, taking a deep breath and going with the naked truth. “I wouldn’t know how to make pie even if I wanted to, and I really don’t feel much connection to my past here.” I raised my chin. “I’m not sure a strawberry pie would do the trick.”

Her laughter gentled to an understanding smile. “Well, that may be, but it feels good to make something delicious for others to enjoy.” She leaned forward and patted my hand gently. “Why do you think I spend so much time in the kitchen?”

I busied myself with my tea, pulling the bag out and setting it carefully onto the saucer. It was a little weak yet, but I took a few sips while Sheila stood to adjust Tim’s oxygen cannula under his nose.

“It was fine,” he insisted.

“You need it going in your nose, not onto your cheek, you stubborn ass.” She sighed. “Good thing you listen to your nurses better than you listen to me.”

“They’re nicer than you,” he said, then winked in my direction. “You have any other family, Ivy?”

Here we go.

I straightened my shoulders. “I don’t. It’s just me and my father. My mom passed when I was young.”

His eyes, so kind and understanding, shot straight through me, and I fought the urge to fidget. “Tough to lose a parent young.”

“I don’t really remember her,” I answered. “Sometimes I think that’s

easier.”

They shared a look, one of those wordless conversations that only the truly connected relationships could master.

“Your son told me he was sorry,” I added quietly. “The first time I met him. And I told him he didn’t need to be because I didn’t have many memories of her.” I kept my eyes down on the saucer holding my tea. “Then he said that he was still sorry I lost something, even if I don’t remember it.”

Sheila’s eyes were glossed over when I risked a glance up.

“Sounds like him,” Tim said.

I sucked in a deep breath as I carefully set down the tea. “Thank you for the tea,” I told Sheila. “I should go.”

Her disappointment was clear, and I did my best not to let guilt tug my ass back down onto the couch. When I stood, I noticed the end table on the other side of Tim’s chair held a chess set, the pieces clearly in the middle of a game.

“You play?” I asked him.

He nodded. “Keeps the mind sharp. I used to meet a friend of mine for a game just about every day, but I can’t get out too easily anymore.”

I thought about the man at the restaurant.

Tim arched an eyebrow. “Do you?”

I nodded. “My father taught me.”

“You’re probably ruthless,” he said.

I smiled.

Tim chuckled. “Tell you what, if you come back, I want you to show me what you’ve got. See if you can keep an old man on his toes.”

Sheila stood. “Our youngest son Parker has a game on tonight, so we plan to watch it together. We’re doing breakfast for dinner,” she said. “Bacon and eggs and —”

“You better say cinnamon rolls,” Tim interjected.

“—and cinnamon rolls,” she finished with a grin. “I’d love to have you here for a meal, Ivy. And I promise no one will pester you with questions this time. It’s too chaotic with kids around that table, and football on in the background.”

“Those kids are in their thirties,” Tim pointed out.

Sheila waved a hand. “Still kids to me.”

My brow furrowed while I stared at them.

“You look confused, honey,” Sheila said.

“Ian won’t want me here,” I told her.

Tim chuckled. “I think you can handle him.”

“You *want* me to?” I asked. Because yeah, I fucking could.

“Sure. I’ll charge his siblings for the price of admission. That’ll be more fun than watching football.” Then he nodded to the chess set. “Besides, now you owe me a game, young lady.”

I took a deep breath.

I didn’t really want to sit back at the house by myself.

I wanted to play chess with Tim.

I wanted bacon and cinnamon rolls, and if I was being honest, I wanted to sit across the dinner table from Cameron and watch him with his parents and his siblings.

“You might regret inviting me,” I warned them.

Sheila laughed. “Oh honey, you haven’t even met half our kids yet. Even if you’re at your worst,” she set a hand on my arm and smiled, “we can take it. Why don’t you let us decide if it’s too much.”

Chapter 18

Cameron

Ivy: Please give your parents my regrets for missing dinner tonight. Something came up.

I fought a frown, but Ian saw my face anyway.

“She’s bailing, isn’t she,” he said. “I told you she’d bail.”

Mom sighed. “I’m sure she’s got a good reason.”

Ian opened his mouth, then caught sight of my glare and snapped his mouth shut.

Dad was in his chair, watching Parker and Beckett’s game. “What happened?”

I rolled my neck. “I haven’t asked yet.”

We paused while the Portland Voyagers offense took the field and the camera panned in on my youngest brother.

“Parker Wilder has been a critical part of this blistering Voyagers offense,” the announcer said. “He’s been absolutely unstoppable in the red zone this season, hasn’t he?”

“Absolutely. No one has been able to stop him. He’s faster than last season. Blocks like a linebacker when he needs to, and did you see that two point conversion last week? No one should have been able to catch that ball like he did. Amazing.”

The other announcer nodded. “I expect some more of those fireworks tonight too. Voyagers play their best when they’re coming from behind, and this ten point deficit should be easy for them to overcome with Parker lining up to the right there. Beckett Coleman is on the left, but Parker’s been the favorite target all season, and you can understand why.”

My brother needed a haircut, his eyes looked hard, and I wished he came

home more, but something in my chest clenched at the sight of him, just like it always did when I realized just how fucking great he was doing.

Dad smiled. “He looks good, doesn’t he?”

Mom walked over to the chair and set her hand on Dad’s shoulder. “He does. He sent you a text earlier while you were sleeping. Said he’d score one for you.”

Dad closed his eyes and sighed. “That’s good. I won’t let him come back home unless he does.”

Poppy snorted.

I tapped out a reply on my phone.

Me: Is everything okay over there?

Ivy: Yes.

Me: Are you sure? If you’re not feeling well, just let me know if you need anything.

Ivy: I’m fine. Just had a mishap, and I’m not in any state to come over.

My eyebrows bent in a frown. A mishap?

That could mean anything.

Immediately, my brain conjured images of her injured or something. Knowing her, she’d be too damn stubborn to ask for help, even if she’d fallen.

“I’m going to go see if she’s all right,” I said.

Ian gave me a knowing look. “Of course you are.”

I flipped him off.

Dad pushed himself up a bit in his chair when the Portland QB lined up behind the center, and Parker lined up to the right. Beckett, Greer’s husband and the other tight end for the Voyagers, lined up on the left.

The center snapped the ball, every one of us leaning forward while we watched, the quarterback dropped back, dancing lightly on the balls of his feet. Parker took off down the sidelines, pushing off the defender and creating some distance.

“Get open,” I murmured as the quarterback snapped his arm back and heaved the ball straight down the middle of the field.

Then Parker cut inside, sprinting into a wide open stretch of green grass, stretched his long arm out and snagged the ball one-handed and tucked it into

his chest. He pivoted on a dime, avoiding the first sack, then the second with a stiff-arm that knocked over the third defender.

“Come on,” Ian yelled.

Another defender wrapped his arms around Parker’s middle, and the absolute beast that he was, he still didn’t go down, dragging the guy with him as he stretched his long body past the end zone for a touchdown.

Mom exhaled loudly, and Dad closed his eyes in relief. “Oh good, he can come back home now.”

I laughed, tucking my phone in my pocket with a shake of my head.

Like Dad would ever keep any of us from coming home, no matter what we’d done.

“I’ll be back,” I told them.

Mom gave me a knowing smile. “You tell her it’s just fine if she’s not up for it tonight, don’t you coerce that girl into anything.”

“Like I could if I wanted to,” I told her. “Pretty sure she’d chop my balls off before she let that happen.”

“A man can dream,” Ian said.

I rolled my eyes, pulling the door shut behind me.

I hopped into the UTV that I’d driven over from my place and cranked it on, driving down the driveway where it curved off to the guesthouse. There were lights on inside the house, and I wondered just how many times I’d do this—seek her out because I couldn’t help myself.

“Probably a few more times, at least,” I murmured. “Like a fucking chump.”

I stopped short just before knocking on the door, because I heard her walking toward the door, and it swung open while my fist was raised in the air.

My jaw dropped open.

“What happened?” I asked.

Her eyes narrowed. “What are you *doing* here?”

Mine did too. “Is that ... chocolate in your hair?”

Ivy’s cheeks flushed pink. “No. Maybe.” Then she huffed. “Yes.”

Then she stalked away from the door.

I walked in, assuming the fact that she didn’t slam it in my face meant that I was welcome to come in.

Neville approached with a happily twitching tail. “Hello, young man. Could you shed some light on what’s happening in here?” I asked.

Ivy made an annoyed growling sound that had me chuckling under my breath.

The kitchen was a mess. I scratched the side of my jaw and tried to come to grips with what I was seeing—chocolate and powder and mounds of strawberries and a tub of something white and fluffy, half of which was on the counter.

Ivy busied herself by the island, slamming down a bowl of something brown, then snatching a glass from the counter and dumping its contents into the sink. In the sink was a second bowl of something brown.

I fought a smile because there was chocolate on her shirt. Her hands. Her face. And yup, definitely in her hair.

Slung across her shoulder was a messy towel, and even though she was wearing a sleek navy blue dress, she'd pulled an apron from the laundry room, because I recognized it as one of my mom's. That had chocolate on it too.

"Duchess," I said slowly, "did you try to bake something for tonight?"

"Give the man a medal," she snapped. "You're even quicker than I thought."

I ambled up to the island, studying the absolute carnage in front of me. I whistled. "What is it?"

She exhaled through her nose, eyes locked on the mess, and I got the sense she refused to make eye contact.

"It was *supposed* to be chocolate mousse," she said, her words clipped, and her cheeks flushed a pretty pink. "The article said it was easy. They said it was perfect for beginners, but whoever wrote that article is full of horseshit because look at this."

I set my hands on the island and nodded my head. "Yeah, we've got a mess here, sure enough." I studied her face. "Why is there so much of it?"

"The first batch was liquid. Completely unacceptable."

"Uh-huh." I eyed the pile of dishes. "I didn't realize you enjoyed cooking."

"I don't." Ivy ripped at the apron and slung it onto the counter behind her. "I was never allowed to learn because why would I *ever* need to do something normal and useful like make a fucking chocolate mousse, right?"

There was a different bite to her words, and my eyebrows climbed up my forehead slowly.

"Well," I said, setting my hands on my hips. "How'd you do?"

Ivy gave me an exasperated look. “What does it look like? I couldn’t even get it into the glasses without making a huge mess. It was pointless to try. Should’ve just bought the fucking wine like I planned.”

I smothered a smile. “I meant, how does it taste? If it still tastes good, it’s salvageable.”

She shrugged a shoulder. “I don’t know. I didn’t dare check it. And then when I realized I didn’t dare eat it, I started thinking about how stupid it is to bring a dessert to someone’s home if you don’t even know if it tastes good.”

Damn if my chest hadn’t cracked wide open for this woman.

I wanted to hug her.

I wanted to kiss her.

Press her up against the counter and lick every stray bit of that chocolate off her skin, and God, I was probably crazy for that too.

“Did you tell my mom you’d make something for dessert?” I asked carefully.

It was like walking through a minefield, and the only kind of explosion I wanted between Ivy and me was the mutual orgasm kind, not the *she’s going to castrate me* kind.

“No. I wanted ...” She paused, her eyes finally flicking up to mine. She looked miserable. “I wanted to surprise her.” Then her chin rose a notch. “She’s been so kind to me, and ... and I thought that maybe I could see if I liked making things for people too. She said it’s good for the soul to make something delicious that people enjoy, but I don’t find *any* of this enjoyable, and it looks awful, and I can’t do it. I don’t even know *why* I tried.”

Her voice trembled ominously at the end, and God help me, I’d probably fall in love with this woman before I could talk myself out of it.

Maybe that was why I smiled.

Because I didn’t think I could stop it.

And that smile widened when Ivy glared at my smile like it was doing her personal harm.

“What is so fucking funny?” she whispered fiercely.

“You are adorable.”

Her mouth dropped open. “I am *not*.”

“Why do you sound so offended?”

She made a spluttering sound. “No one’s ever called me adorable in my entire life.”

I took a step closer around the island, and she sucked in a sharp breath. I

moved slowly enough that she could back away if she wanted.

Ivy didn't budge.

"Maybe they didn't see you like I do," I told her, keeping my gaze steady on hers.

Did Ivy hear the added layer of meaning to my words?

I hoped so.

I wasn't trying to change who she was; I just wanted her to trust me with the parts she kept hidden. Under my ribs, my heart pounded like a jackhammer because we were tiptoeing a line, her and I.

I wanted that line *gone*.

Her eyebrow arched—regal and haughty, and damn if that didn't turn me on even more. "Maybe you're delusional."

When I leaned past Ivy, she stayed perfectly still. And while I peered at the mess on the counter, my chest brushed along her side.

I leaned forward, my arm against her shoulder, and I dipped my finger into the bowl of chocolate. "I don't think I am," I said, low and deliberate, ducking my mouth so that it came closer to her ear before backing away.

Her eyes were cagey, her face watchful as I tasted the mousse.

I hummed deep in my throat. It was sweet and smooth and rich. But I stayed silent, letting the quiet stretch between us.

Her shoulders shifted restlessly, her navy eyes flickering dangerously. "Well?" she snapped. "If you're just going to stand here making sex noises, you're no help to me."

I grinned, licking at my bottom lip.

All of this was so fucking risky, but it was also real. And I wouldn't turn down the opportunity for more of that real, not when it was close enough to touch.

And I wanted to touch. Had wanted to touch since the moment I saw her again.

Who knew what it said about me that I was hard as a rock when she snipped and snapped at me like she was. But there was no fighting it in my head anymore.

I'd take her any way I could get her, even if it was just for a little while.

So I dipped my finger into the chocolate again and held it up in front of her.

"Try it," I told her.

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "I do have utensils, you know."

“Then get one.” I raised my eyebrow in a dare. “Ivy Lynch doesn’t run scared, does she?”

The regal tilt to her chin had my muscles tense in anticipation. “At some point in time, your red challenge flag will lose its effectiveness.”

“Is that day today?” I asked quietly.

She was nervous. If her pulse was anything like mine, then her blood was racing wildly through her veins.

There was something incredible about watching her mind work, like I could peel back the inner workings of her mind and see neatly stacked gears in a shiny, gleaming gold. This woman was fiercely intelligent, deliberate and guarded and she’d never do anything unless she’d looked five steps ahead to know the possible outcomes.

My throat was dry with a rotating mental image of what those outcomes could be—and all of them ended with my tongue in her mouth and my hands on her body. Then she stepped forward, and my heart stopped as she wrapped her delicate fingers around my wrist.

How was it possible to continue breathing when your heart wasn’t pumping blood anymore? Somehow I stayed standing, stayed *conscious* while she slid that pink tongue past her lips and sucked the tip of my finger into the wet heat of her mouth.

Her eyes locked on mine, her pupils were blown wide and her cheeks even brighter than before.

Then her tongue slid against the pad of my finger, and she hummed. I felt the vibration of it straight down to my raging hard-on.

I snagged her wrist and tugged, pulling my finger from her mouth before sliding my hands up into her hair and crowding her body against the island as I sealed my mouth over hers with a relieved groan.

Her hands were tight in my shirt the moment our mouths touched, like she’d rip the fabric to shreds if I dared to back away.

I’d let her.

I’d let her do so many things.

My hands tightened in her hair while I tilted my head, licking deeper into her mouth. Ivy whimpered, and God, I wanted to live on that sound for the rest of my fucking life.

It was sharp and fierce, instant heat that swallowed every inch of my skin, molding our bodies together.

My hips rocked restlessly, and the softness of her stomach was the perfect

cradle for the friction I sought. Ivy released her hold on my shirt, sliding her hands over my chest and behind my neck, anchoring me to her when I broke off to suck in a deep breath.

“Tell me what you want, duchess,” I begged, a rasping, desperate edge to my voice that I couldn’t hide.

Her eyes held mine, and that clever, clever hand of hers tracked deliberately down my chest and stomach until she reached the buckle on my belt.

“I’m sick of pretending I don’t want you,” she said, her eyes clear and her cheeks flushed and her lips pink from the hard kisses. “So I think I’d like to stop now.”

The bottom curve of that lip was impossible to ignore, so I dragged the pad of my thumb over it, back and forth and back and forth. Then I looked over at the mess on the kitchen counter and slid the tip of my pinky finger into the chocolate, brushing it over the spot my thumb had just memorized.

Her eyes flared when I drew a thin line of that sweet, rich chocolate over her mouth. I dipped down and sucked her bottom lip into my mouth. She let out a ragged exhale, her hand scrambling at my belt. My hands slid down the lithe line of her back, curving around her waist to the gentle curve of her hips and around her backside, where I tugged her tight against me while I took her mouth in another savage kiss.

She pulled at the hem of my shirt, sliding her hands over my stomach while our tongues dueled and danced and sucked. My teeth scraped her lips, and she returned the favor, a biting kiss that tugged goose bumps along my arms while I tried to find the zipper on the back of her dress.

Where the hell was the zipper?

I growled in frustration, and she laughed into my mouth. “There’s no zipper,” she said against my mouth. “It just slides on.”

“We’re not doing this here,” I said between breathless kisses. I slid my hands underneath the skirt of her dress, pushing it up over her waist and boosting her up so she could slide her legs around my waist while I carried her to the bedroom.

“Wait.”

I froze, my chest heaving and my hands on her ass and my heart breaking if she was about to stop this. It might kill me, but I would.

“What about the cat?” she asked, eyes wide.

I blinked.

Then I looked around. Neville was sound asleep on the couch.

“He’ll be fine.” I nipped at her bottom lip. “Maybe you need to stay quiet so you don’t wake him up,” I whispered, soothing the spot I’d just abused with my teeth with a slow swipe of my tongue.

She rolled her hips. “If I can stay that quiet,” she said with an unblinking challenge in her stare, “you’re probably doing something wrong.”

My chest roared hot and loud, and holy hell, I’d make her scream this house down before I let her out of the bed. I’d have her legs shaking around my sides and her throat hoarse and her body soaked in sweat before this was done.

I strode into the room and kicked the door shut behind us.

She tugged the strands of my hair tight in her fists as I devoured her mouth, only stopping the kiss to drop her unceremoniously onto the bed.

Ivy still had chocolate in her hair and a streak of Cool Whip on her cheek, and I studied her with a tilt of my head.

Beautiful. Messy. Imperfect and open and sweeter than she wanted anyone to know.

Mine.

“Why don’t you show me what’s under that dress,” I said, a low, urgent command.

She told me she’d done this once—something unsatisfying.

It was unfathomable that anyone could have this perfect woman naked underneath them and not want to rip her world apart from back-snapping pleasure.

I’d give her that.

I’d give her that if it was the last fucking thing I did.

She pushed at the straps, baring her upper body. Her breasts were firm and high, tilted up and a perfect delectable mouthful. My throat went dry seeing them encased in white lace.

The dress went down over her arched hips, revealing a high-cut pair of white lace there too. I tore my shirt off when she kicked the dress off and watched her throat bob in a swallow when I pushed my jeans and boxer briefs straight off.

Her chest heaved as she studied me.

“At the risk of sounding ridiculous,” she started, her voice prim and the color in her cheeks high. “I do not see how that will fit *anywhere*.”

I grinned, prowling over her sweet, lace-covered body and stealing a

heart-crushing kiss while she arched underneath my weight.

“Let me show you how,” I whispered against the sharp line of her jaw.

She slid her hands over my back and shoulders and arms, sighing happily when she trailed her fingertips over my biceps.

I slid a hand down the soft skin of her sternum, coasting over the lace covering her chest. Then I ducked my head and sucked her fully into my mouth, tonguing the lace as she moaned deep from her throat.

I tugged the bra down and used my teeth, then my tongue, then blew cool air over the tight flesh.

“So sweet,” I told her. “I knew you would be.”

“No one calls me that either,” she said in a quivering tone.

I lifted my head. “But you’ll let me, won’t you?” I asked.

I removed her panties and tossed them to the floor, then moved my body slightly to the side and slid my hand between her legs, grunting in pleasure at just how badly she wanted me. Her eyes rolled back in her head when I used one finger, then two.

“Yes,” she gasped. “Yes.”

Her hand clutched at my arm while she fought the rising wave of pleasure pushing her body into a helpless arch. Her teeth clenched, and she sucked in deep, seeking breaths.

“Let go,” I told her. I kissed her, hot and messy, and found the soft, wet part of her that I wanted most.

One, two, three swipes of my thumb and a curl of my wrist, and she snapped, her whole body shaking as she spiked, the crest long and slow while she sobbed into my mouth.

I slid between her legs, hiking her thigh up against my side, and pushed inside her while I could still feel the aftershocks, and she quivered around me.

My jaw was tight, my head spinning, because nothing, nothing had ever felt this good, this right, this hot or wet or perfect.

She opened her eyes, tilting her head back. I nipped her jaw while I pushed forward, slow rolls of my hips, back and then forward more, steady and sure.

Ivy sighed my name, and I felt it down to my toes.

“So good,” she whispered. “More.”

I gripped her chin with my hand until she had no choice but to look at me. “You want it all, sweetness?”

She nodded, her eyes bright and feverish.

I took her mouth and snapped my hips forward until I couldn't go further or deeper or harder.

The sound I made was desperate and pained because sometimes pleasure felt a bit like that. Your body didn't know whether to run into it, pull back from it, or fight the way it spooled through your muscles to seek its release.

I wanted to chase it. I wanted to live inside her for the rest of my life.

No more work or eating or sleeping, just Ivy's body sheathed snug around mine like a perfect tight fist.

The way my body moved was past thought, and I hardly took a moment to decide the pace that my hips set. But it was brutal. Her muscles were firm under my hands, and I couldn't touch enough, feel enough, kiss enough. All I wanted was more, more, more.

She sobbed into the kiss after my body locked tight with hers, and I tilted her hips, then I pulled back, moving in steady, deep strokes that had her thighs trembling around me.

I tugged on her hands until I had her wrists gripped tight over her head.

Ivy liked that.

Her body arched against mine, and she moaned my name when I tightened my grip on her hands, slamming them down onto the bed so that her breasts pressed tight to my chest.

"Next time," I said through gritted teeth, "next time I see you above me, duchess. I want to see everything."

Her body shook, fighting the wave that threatened to crash over us both.

"Cameron," she begged, "I can't, it's too much, it's too..."

She was helpless to this, same as me, this whipping storm of feverish heat that had my hips snapping into hers. I tore my mouth from hers and sucked on the curve of her neck hard. Ivy gasped, her whole body seizing, the grip of pleasure tight around my lungs while I chased the thing we'd both wanted.

The headboard rocked loudly into the wall, and she sought my mouth with hers, her tongue winding with mine while I took us higher and higher and higher.

There was a spiral just out of reach, and when she bit down on my bottom lip, I snapped my hips forward in a brutal thrust.

It was enough for her, and she broke on a low, disbelieving moan. I followed shortly after, my mouth open and panting against hers.

It was a burst of heat and light, and I closed my eyes as I bit down on the

curve of her sweat-soaked shoulder and let the splintering pleasure soak into my bones.

She was soft and warm underneath me. My movements slowed, milking that sweet, warm wave as it slid through my spent muscles. When it receded, I slumped against her and exhaled a wondrous, relieved sort of breath.

She curled into my side when I pulled out, her chin resting on my chest while I slid my hand up her back. I pulled her wrists up to my mouth and kissed where I'd held her down.

“You were right,” she whispered.

Her hair was a disaster. Her mouth puffy. Gently, I tugged on a strand of her hair, pushing it behind her ear.

“Was I?”

She nodded, her eyes locked on my mouth. “You promised me it would be good with us,” she said.

I closed my eyes and memorized the weight of her against my side. “I did.”

Even though she allowed me to coast my hands along her back and waist, I felt the slow return of tension into her frame.

Then she sighed, sitting up on the bed and giving my torso a lingering look with guarded eyes.

Already, I was losing her again.

Chapter 19

Ivy

All my thoughts were jumbled and cloudy, probably the ramifications of two really spectacular orgasms.

Talk about a pressure valve being released.

But instead of falling into a dead sleep with Cameron's very nice, muscled arms wrapped tight around me, I stood from the bed and plucked my underwear off the floor, stepping into them with as much dignity as I could muster.

His eyes lingered on every inch of my body, and my skin buzzed pleasantly when I caught him looking at my chest while I slid the bra into place and hooked it in the back.

No doubt about it, I'd go to my grave remembering what it felt like to have his stubbled mouth right there, sucking just shy of too deeply, his teeth scraping almost too hard.

My face was flaming, but I could hardly stand the thought of him being the one to get up and bolt.

So I cleared my throat and faced him. "You know we shouldn't do that again, right?"

And damn him, Cameron looked me in the eyes, refusing to drop my gaze. My ribs were screwed in too tight, my lungs crushing under the pressure of what I saw in his face.

"Says who?" he asked.

Then he wedged a hand underneath his head like he had all the time in the fricken world.

Weren't men like him supposed to run once they'd had their conquest?

The charming handsome men with big smiles and bigger hands, who

conversed easily and built chicken coops for their moms and kissed like it was their divine purpose on earth.

They had the sex and then left. He'd mounted the wild mustang, or whatever stupid country analogy one wanted to use.

He should be *bolting*.

Edging out of the room to avoid a clingy woman with hearts in her eyes because he'd just rearranged every particle in my body with that giant weapon he kept tucked away behind his pants.

Honestly, it was just unfair, because he looked like he looked, and knew what he was doing, and was the most gorgeously proportional man in existence.

There was probably a replica of his penis somewhere in a sex toy shop, so women like me could live out the rest of our days with a poor, plastic substitute that would bring a tepid version of what he was capable of.

No. I would not get clingy. Not because of a couple of orgasms. I mean sure, I didn't know how to do any of this, but I could pretend I was worldly and wise and it would roll off my back and not ruffle a single feather in the process.

"Says me," I managed, infusing what little strength I had left in my voice. "Now we know what it was like, and ..." I stuttered, fishing back in the pile of clothes for my dress before tugging it up over my hips. "And now we can go about our lives."

He stared at my chest like he hadn't just licked every inch of what was hidden behind the innocuous white lace. Actually, he stared at it like he wanted to lick it all over again.

I snapped my fingers. "Eyes up here, Wilder."

That dimple appeared, and my gaze narrowed dangerously.

"Don't try to grin your way out of this. Get your clothes on and *go*."

Cameron licked at his bottom lip, and I swear, my thighs clenched as a reflex.

"Whatever you say, duchess."

Gawd, I wanted to smack him when he called me that.

But I also wanted to kiss him.

And ... I sort of wanted to sit on his lap and ride him until his eyes rolled back in his head.

Or worse. I wanted to set that hand on my throat again and have him tell me what to do.

Get on your knees, duchess.

Oh, how I wanted him to say it. To bend my body to his will and allow me those sweet moments of release where I didn't have to think about anything but how good he felt. How good we felt together.

My skin flared hot as I imagined him growling it into my ear, and I darted my eyes away when he rolled off the bed and fished for a pair of charcoal-gray boxer briefs. He moved slowly, the muscles in his arms and stomach flexing while he tugged them on, then rearranged ... everything ... underneath.

I'd feel the phantom aches of that thing between my legs for days. Already, my body was sore in entirely unfamiliar places.

Instead of pulling my dress back on, I reached into my open suitcase and tugged on some silk sleep shorts and a matching camisole in a soft lilac color.

When I turned, he watched me with a smile hovering on his perfect, beautiful lips.

"What?" I snapped. My pulse skittered wildly when he looked at me like that, and it had me lashing out like a hissing cat who'd been cornered.

Maybe he scrambled my brain cells.

The worst part, though, was the deepest corners of my head—my heart—that didn't want to hiss and snap and snarl.

What would happen if I melted back into him and let him take care of me? Just for a night.

What would happen if I didn't push him away right now?

Even thinking it shook my foundations, rattling at some unseen lock and an unseen cage.

Don't let me push you away.

Grab my face in your hands again and kiss me. Kiss me again and again and again.

Everything was so simple when he did that.

But when it was over, when the bright, sparkling lights of bliss faded from behind my eyes, it was then that I ran through all the reasons it was selfish and stupid and too complicated.

Cameron tugged his shirt over his head, all those glorious golden muscles covered in cotton now, the light dusting of hair on his chest gone from view.

I didn't touch it enough, I thought desperately. I didn't memorize it.

I didn't kiss my way down his stomach or lick his biceps or drive him insane with my mouth and hands.

What if I'd just had the best sex of my *entire life*, and I'd never experience it again?

My chest caved in, and I fought to keep my breathing steady when he approached with steady eyes and that ghost of a smile. He used his thumb and forefinger to grip my chin lightly, then he ducked down, his mouth whispering a kiss over my lips.

"I don't scare very easily, Ivy," he said quietly, his lips brushing over mine. "But I'll go because you're asking me to."

My stupid traitor eyelids fluttered—*fluttered!*—closed, and it's possible that my body swayed toward his. Then he backed away, and I planted my feet in place so I didn't do something ridiculous like jump on his back and wrangle him back into bed for another round.

I stood there, speechless and desperately turned on, while he walked out of the bedroom. Neville sat at the door when he opened it, staring up at him with a tilted head and pervy little cat eyes. That little shit knew exactly what had just happened in here.

Mew.

He chuckled, leaning down to pick up the cat.

Something churned uncomfortably behind my breastbone while he cuddled it to his big chest.

"Go easy on her tonight," he whispered. "She might be walking a little slow."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," I muttered.

Cameron scratched the cat under his chin, then set him back on the floor. "Want any help cleaning up the kitchen?" he asked.

I cleared my throat. "No, thank you. I think it's best if you just ... go."

He took one last look toward the bed, then at me, and then his lips hooked up in a crooked grin that made my stomach flip weightlessly.

"Good night," he said. "Maybe I'll see you tomorrow. You should come check out the house."

I didn't answer because I felt inconvenient words clawing their way up my throat.

Well, one word, really.

Stay.

Just ... *stay.*

Instead, I said nothing. And watched him leave.

I refused to think about him again while I cleaned up the disaster in the

kitchen.

I didn't think about what he said while I dried the bowls. When my mind replayed the part where he held my hands down, my drying got a bit too vigorous, and the bowl slipped from my hands, falling with a loud clatter.

Never did I ever realize I liked to be held down, but I couldn't help but think it was a Cameron thing, not an *any man* thing.

If certain men in my life had ever tried to restrain me, they would've ended up with a broken nose and a stiletto up their ass. I put the last of the dishes away and let that little bomb of knowledge settle.

Trust made you do strange things, didn't it?

If pressed, I couldn't give a concrete list of why I seemed to trust Cameron so implicitly. But I did. I never would've let him touch me if I didn't.

Even my first blah experience in school—I knew the guy wasn't a raging douchebag. No, he wasn't particularly skilled in the bedroom, but he was nice. And he was respectful.

It was easy enough to justify that one.

But Cameron—that wasn't easy at all.

The most effective way to let my thoughts get too fanciful, my fantasies too strong, was to steer them in the direction of home. I was still here with a job to do and a hurdle to overcome with my father.

Once the house reached a certain level of done, I could hand everything over to a capable Marcy Jenkins and let her take her pretty pictures and make me a pretty sum of money.

And then what?

I sat on the floor, dragging a small piece of string along the carpet, and laughed as Neville tumbled over himself, trying to grab it.

My dad would lose his mind if I brought a cat home with me, and the thought made me grin, just a little bigger than it should have.

“At least you match the house,” I told Neville. “Maybe that'll gain you some brownie points.”

The cat flipped onto his back, paws tangling in the string.

I didn't want to leave him here, I knew that much. Maybe this was the perfect catalyst to finally get my own place. Living with Dad had always been the easiest option, especially for him. The convenience of having me close by made me that much easier to influence, and I was realizing that now with the gift of some space.

Not in a malicious way, anything with ill-intent, but simply because it was how he was wired.

For a moment, I thought about sending him a picture of Neville, just to see if that would elicit a reaction, but it felt petty. And even if he deserved some of my petty, I couldn't fight that crawling sensation of what it was like to disappoint him.

With the cat occupied with the end of the string, I pulled out my phone and brought up my text thread with my dad.

Me: Forgot to tell you yesterday, but I've moved locations and am no longer at the hotel.

I sent him the address and chewed on my bottom lip before tapping out another message.

Me: House is progressing on schedule. Real estate agent is optimistic for a quick sale given the size of the property and the good bones.

I watched while the text showed it was read. Then nothing.

It was amazing what your body could handle on any given day, the wide swing arc of emotions, and nothing changed on the outside. It very much felt like I should've had a hole punched in my chest from that conspicuous silence on the other end of my phone.

My throat was tight when I tried to swallow that down, and I stood, deciding it was past bedtime.

After washing my face and ensuring Neville used the litter box, I slowly tugged the comforter down and crawled into bed. I pressed my face into the pillow, seeking out a remnant of Cameron's scent, but nothing was there.

We'd stayed on top of the covers, and it was my head thrashing wildly on those pillows, not his.

I spread my hand out over my stomach and tried to will myself to sleep without thinking about beds and Cameron Wilder.

Tonight had been a miscalculation. A mistake I wouldn't make again.

As my eyes drifted closed, I think I already knew that I was lying to myself.

Chapter 20

Cameron

Sex always complicated things.

Didn't matter if it was good or bad or mind-blowing, there were always tangles that came on the heels of that sort of intimacy.

Even though I got some smirking looks and knowing glances from my family when I came back to the main house for the rest of Parker's football game, no one said anything.

I managed to sleep, but it was uneasy.

Maybe it was a mistake was my first thought when I woke up.

Maybe it ruined whatever was left of her time in Sisters because if there was anything I knew to be true, it was that.

Her time here was short.

I still couldn't get a clear read on her—so much was held back, but whether by necessity or choice, I wasn't sure.

Was it the mystery that had me so interested? I didn't think it was.

And it wasn't because I wanted to fix her or save her or any of the stupid shit my brother hinted at. It was just her.

Everything in my world made sense, and I liked it that way. My days, while varied, existed in a framework of predictability. Something I'd built over a lifetime, with purpose and intention.

I never sought out a relationship to complicate that framework, something that might press against the edges of my life's structure until sacrifices had to be made. There'd never been anyone to tempt me either. And never had there been sex that spun my head around so badly that I started questioning things.

Questioning everything.

Because nothing about Ivy made sense. Not why I wanted her so badly or

why I couldn't just leave well enough alone when she acted as if she wanted nothing to do with any of us.

All morning, I felt edgy, like my fuse was about half its normal length, and the slightest bit of incorrect friction would set me off.

Of course, that was part of the problem. She'd set me off so easily. I could hardly believe it happened at all—if not for the presence of unusually sore muscles in my abs and my quads, and the visceral memory of how incredible she felt underneath me.

Not just how fiercely she kissed when her body was soft and pliant under my hands, or how tightly wound she was, seeming to fight the way the pleasure ripped through her impressive reserve. From start to end, it was the best—and most complicated—sexual experience of my life, and I didn't know what the hell to do with that.

I spent my morning working on Mom's chicken coop because I needed quiet and a place to clear my head, but it didn't work. I caught a glimpse of the car leaving the guesthouse, the sleek black paint reflecting the sun, but never actually saw her, and somehow that made it worse.

I didn't know where she was going, and I wanted to.

I wanted to fall asleep next to her, anchor my arms around the line of her ribs and feel her hands curl around mine while she let the tension ebb from her frame.

I wanted to know what she looked like in sleep and what she looked like when she woke up.

I wanted to know how she took her coffee. I wanted to see her laugh. Really laugh. Where her eyes crinkled up and her head tossed back and she clutched her belly, if she ever let herself laugh that way.

I wanted to know everything. And I didn't know if she felt the same. If I thought too hard about it, I felt certain of only a few things when it came to Ivy:

She hid behind something, only allowing brief glimpses of who she was.

She wanted me.

She trusted me enough to let her guard down, even if it was only that once.

It wasn't much, but it was enough to drive me out of my fucking mind as I turned our encounter over and over and over in my mind.

By the time I got to the jobsite, I was restless, my muscles tense, my mind working overtime, and I didn't know how to shut it the hell off.

The guys sensed it too, giving me a wide berth as I walked through the house and silently checked the progress. Wade barked out orders, and I noticed just how disconnected I felt to the quick progress on the house as I walked through the rooms.

In just a few days, a tremendous amount of progress had been made.

The walls were a fresh coat of white—something Greer obsessed over and looked exactly like every other shade of white I'd ever seen—and the trim was a creamy warm color that would set off nicely from the floors when they started installing them in the morning. Electricians were working around my crew to install light fixtures, and the kitchen counters were getting installed about a week later.

It wouldn't take long.

She wouldn't be here long.

My teeth clenched.

"Looks good, guys," I told them.

"Greer told me she's got a new build in the hopper," Wade said.

I nodded absently. "Yeah, she mentioned something the other day. Unless my mom's chicken coop gets a major upgrade, you might have a few more weeks laid off before we can start."

His mouth flattened out. "I heard there were swings," he muttered.

"Ian," I yelled.

My brother's head popped out of the kitchen. "What?"

"Why are you talking shit about my chicken coop?" I barked.

He jammed his measuring tape back into his tool belt and crossed his arms over his chest. "Have you seen that thing? It's nicer than my first flat in London."

I rolled my eyes.

Wade made a coughing sort of laugh sound.

"You guys wrapping up in there today?" I asked my brother.

He nodded. "Painters dropped off the sprayed doors. We've got about half of them installed. Drawers are in."

I set my hands on my hips and looked at the space. "It's big," I said. "Looks better with the painted cabinets."

Greer and Ivy picked a slightly deeper color than what was on the trim.

Ian blew out a slow breath. "Still think it needs an island in here. Or a big round table." His eyes narrowed like they always did when he was envisioning something particular. "With a turned pedestal base."

I grunted.

He studied my face for a second. “You’re not usually the one in a pissy mood.”

“I know, that’s your job.”

Ian rolled his eyes as Wade chuckled under his breath.

He leaned his shoulder up against the wall and studied me carefully. “I’d say you need to get laid, but...” He let his voice trail off meaningfully. “Somehow I don’t think that’s your problem.”

All the work in the room seemed to stop at the same time, and I levelled Ian with a not-very-amused look. The guys looked at me from the corner of their eyes. Everyone in there knew I didn’t sleep around and usually had a bit more female attention than I wanted in town.

They were never worth the complication, though.

Ivy, however, was the most complicated of all, and I’d wrap my life in knots with a smile on my face if she told me she wanted more.

“Tell you what,” Ian continued, “why don’t we go out for drinks tonight?”

My eyebrows rose slowly. “Just you and me.”

“Didn’t you think Jax was coming back into town today?”

I glanced at my phone again, checking the text I’d had from him earlier in the day.

Jax: I’m alive. Calm the fuck down.

Jax: Let me know when you want to grab a drink.

I nodded. “Yeah, looks like it.”

“Tell him to bring his grumpy ass too. I haven’t seen him in years. We can talk about your lady woes.” Then he walked past me and slapped my back hard. “It’s about time this happened to you. You’ve always had it a bit too easy, if you asked me.”

Then he walked away.

Whistling. Like an asshole.

“I don’t have lady woes,” I yelled.

Everyone was staring now.

I swore under my breath. Wade could hardly stifle his spreading grin.

I eyed the foreman. “What are you laughing at? If he’s making me go out for drinks, then you’re coming too.”

Wade snorted. "Can't."

"Why not?" I asked.

His cheeks turned the slightest shade of red. "Just can't. Sometimes a man's got other plans, okay?"

I turned slowly. "Wade, do you have a date?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Maybe I do."

"No shit," I breathed. "Who is it?"

"Like I'm telling you. The second anyone gets laid around here, shit like this happens." Then he gestured at me.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Look at you," he barked. "You can't even keep your head on straight. What'd she do to you?"

I frowned. "How about you get back to work?"

"No problem," he muttered, then ambled off.

Ian popped his head back into the house. "What time do you want to get those drinks?"

For a long moment, I just glared at him. Then I exhaled slowly. I was getting too old for any of this shit.

"Eight?" I said on a sigh.

He nodded. "Sounds good."

The younger guys on the crew were still watching me. "Get back to work," I told them. "Nothing to see here."

Chapter 21

Ivy

With a slow, deep breath, I reached over to the passenger seat of my car and unbuckled the seat belt. The glass dish had remained unmoved on the short drive to Tim and Sheila's cabin, and even though I knew it would be fine, I gave a warning glare to that perfectly layered chocolate mousse as I picked it up and transferred it carefully into my lap.

"If you move so much as a centimeter, I'll never forgive you," I whispered.

The stripes of white cream and deep chocolate were perfectly even, and the neatly sliced strawberries between them looked amazing against the glass, if I did say so myself. YouTube, as it turned out, had videos for quite literally everything. Even how to make a good mousse for beginners.

I watched it seven times before making this third and final attempt—my peace offering to Tim and Sheila for yet again bailing on their generous offer for a meal. The sticky coat of embarrassment had clung to me all morning until I decided it was stupid to sit in that feeling when I could do something very clear about it.

So I put that damn apron back on and conquered the fucking mousse.

I didn't tell them I was coming over, and no small part of me prayed for an empty house, so I could leave the mousse on the porch along with a handwritten note of apology.

But when I eased myself carefully out of the car, mousse clutched against my chest, I locked eyes with a smiling Tim Wilder, sitting contentedly in one of the rocking chairs, his small oxygen tank on the porch next to him.

"Well now," he said, "my wife is going to be very upset when she hears about this."

My heart stalled in my chest, hands tightening on the glass dish. “She will?”

His eyes were kind, though, and warm, and he nodded as I took the steps up onto the porch. “She’s running a few errands in town, and when she finds out you were here with chocolate, it just might break her heart to know she missed you.”

A quick, relieved exhale slipped out of my mouth. “Oh.”

Tim chuckled, nodding his head toward the rocking chair next to him. “You’ll join me, though, won’t you?”

“I don’t want to interrupt if you’re enjoying the solitude.”

He studied my face for a moment. “I’d be happy if you did, Ivy.”

“All right.” I tilted my chin down at the mousse. “I brought this to apologize to you and your wife for missing dinner last night. Shall I set it in your fridge?”

“Should be able to find some room,” he answered. “Looks delicious. Did you make that yourself?”

“I did.”

A note of obvious pride had crept into my response. *Tell me you’re an overachiever without telling me you’re an overachiever.* As my cheeks heated tellingly, his smile deepened.

“Sure is pretty,” he said. “I might have to be rude and ask if you’d be willing to dish up a little bit for us to share.”

With a wry arch of my eyebrow, I said, “I have a feeling you couldn’t be rude if you tried, Mr. Wilder.”

“Tim,” he corrected gently. “And I have my moments. Just ask my kids. There are bowls in the cupboard just to the left of the sink. Silverware is in the first drawer on the right in the island. But only if you’ll enjoy some with me.”

Slowly, I nodded. “Okay.”

With Tim’s gaze heavy on my back, I let myself into the quiet house and set the mousse on the island, then found the bowls and utensils exactly where he’d instructed. With two servings balanced in my hands, I joined him on the porch again. The air was so pleasant and warm, but he still had his lap covered by a crocheted blanket.

I handed him the larger of the two servings, and he tucked in immediately, closing his eyes and making a happy humming sound. “This is delicious, young lady.”

My chest warmed as I watched his obvious enjoyment. Maybe Sheila was onto something because this whole making food for someone felt pretty damn amazing.

“Thank you,” I told him. Then I took a bite and sighed when the bright burst of strawberry mixed with the cream and the rich, silky chocolate. He was watching me, and I allowed a small smile as I finished my first bite. “It’s not terrible.”

He chuckled. “No need for false modesty, Ivy. I think you know it’s far from not terrible.”

“I suppose I do.” I took another bite and relaxed into the rocking chair. This mousse was fucking amazing, and I’d live off the high all damn week that I’d made it with my own two hands. A smile tugged at my lips when I thought about how much I wish Ruth could’ve seen it. It was easier to stare into the endless stretch of trees when I allowed for a small admission. “We have a housekeeper named Ruth. She makes delicious things all the time. It’s so natural for her, I always imagined that she didn’t even think much of it. But if I could manage to make the things she and your wife do, I’d be obnoxious about it.”

He laughed easily. “Did you tell Ruth about your mousse?”

“No.” That would’ve been a great time to admit that I’d snapped no less than ten influencer-worthy photos, though, and barely stopped myself from sending them to her as soon as I’d finished my sugar-laden masterpiece. Like a little kid who wants to hang their crappy artwork on the fridge. And knowing Ruth, she would have too.

Tim nodded. “You should. Always good to have someone we love tell us they’re proud of us.”

“How do you know I love Ruth?” I asked dryly.

“Written all over your face when you say her name,” he said.

Was it? I felt the slight pinch in my brows as I pondered that. I’d never thought of myself as easy to read.

Under his breath, Tim laughed softly. “It bothers you that I can see it, doesn’t it?”

I gave him an incredulous look. “How on earth could you possibly know that?”

Tim took his time finishing another bite of the mousse, then set his bowl on the table between us. He didn’t answer right away, simply stared out into the trees much like I had.

“I have a lot of kids, Ivy. You learn real fast how to read the things they don’t say. It’s the only way you can survive the adolescent years without losing your mind.” He closed his eyes, sighing contentedly when a gentle breeze picked up. “Kids always go through a phase where their parents are the last people they want to talk to about anything. But they still need help dealing with things, even if they’re not saying so out loud.”

Before I came to this place, I’d never given much thought to different parenting styles. Kids only know what they know. And the type of parenting I’d known was not that of Tim and Sheila Wilder. Even the times I’d felt frustration with my dad, I didn’t bemoan the way he parented me because it was my only experience.

But there was the slightest whisper of curiosity about what it might have been to have parents like these two people, who sought to understand their kids for who they were. Not who they might be molded into with the right instruction.

It was a pointless train of thought, something I ruthlessly ignored, taking another bite of the mousse before setting it aside like Tim had.

“Thank you for the mousse, Ivy,” he said. “It was a very thoughtful thing to do.”

It didn’t feel much like I deserved his praise, but I smiled politely anyway. “My first attempt at it was a bit less impressive. But I shouldn’t have let it scare me away. I have a terrible tendency to only want to do things if I can do them perfectly.”

He chuckled. “I have a couple of kids like that,” he said. “I bet you got straight As, didn’t you?”

“I did.” Except for the two A minuses my junior year of high school and a B fucking plus the first year of undergrad that just about had me spiraling. Maybe in a decade, I’d let that one go.

Tim hummed. “Figured so. But I promise you one thing, Ivy. We would’ve loved that unimpressive attempt just as much, no matter how messy it was. The result is never quite as important to me as knowing someone tried. I always had to remind my straight A kiddos of that because they’re always the first to forget it.”

My heart beat sluggishly, trying to imagine what that kind of grace and understanding felt like as a child. I tore my gaze away from the trees and studied the tired lines of his face. “You really mean that, don’t you?”

He gave me a soft smile. “Of course. If I expected all my kids to be

perfect, that's the surest way to end up disappointed in this life. Just like they better not expect perfection out of me. I've messed up my fair share, lost my temper, and said things I shouldn't have said when my frustration gets the best of me. At the end of the day, I want them to be happy and feel loved. To be good, kind, loving people."

"I think you've managed that quite successfully," I told him, only the slightest tremble in my voice.

Tim reached across the table and gently patted my hand. "Thank you, dear. Most of the time, they're pretty good kids. I think I'll keep 'em."

I know he wanted me to laugh, but my insides were so twisted up from the emotional whiplash this place gave me, I couldn't quite manage it. The door to the house opened, and Poppy joined us, settling herself on the porch railing opposite our chairs. "When did you get here?" she asked with a smile on her pretty face.

"Not too long ago," I said.

"She brought me some chocolate," Tim said. "I'd share it, but Ivy said it's just for me." He winked in my direction.

Poppy snorted. "I bet she did." Then she directed her gaze toward me. "Actually, I'm glad you're here."

"Oh?"

"I'm feeling cooped up. Want to go get a drink with me tonight?"

"I'm feeling cooped up, too," Tim said. "Does that mean I can come?"

Poppy grinned. "Oh sure, I bet Mom would happily wheel your ass into the bar."

They both laughed, and I studied Poppy's facial expression. "You want to get a drink with me?" I clarified. "Why?"

Poppy fought a smile. "Are you always this skeptical when someone tries to befriend you?"

"Honestly? Yes."

At my frank answer, Tim coughed to cover up his laughter, and my cheeks heated.

Poppy nodded, like my response gave her all the information she needed to know. "I'll pick you up at seven. Sound good?"

I swallowed around a tight fist in my throat. I had no excuse not to go with her, and the whole reason I was on the front porch to begin with was trying to overcome this ridiculous apprehension of spending time with people who'd been nothing but welcoming and kind and wonderful.

Even if a fear was irrational, it was still fear. And I was finally ready to face it head-on because I was no chickenshit.

My brows lowered. “Is it ... casual? Dressy?”

Poppy smiled. “You wear whatever you feel most comfortable in. I’ll probably be wearing a cute top and some jeans.”

My nose wrinkled, and Poppy laughed in delight.

I sniffed. “Well, as long as jeans aren’t required, then yes, seven is perfect.”

Tim glanced between us, a smile hovering on his lips. “Now that that’s settled,” he said, “how about a game of chess? I hear you might like to play, young lady.”

I squared my shoulders and turned in my chair to face him. “I do,” I said cautiously.

Tim nodded succinctly. “Good. Poppy, can you go grab the board for us?”

She hopped off the railing and went back into the house.

I gave him an appraising look. “I won’t go easy on you because you’re being so nice to me.”

Tim’s eyes glowed with some happy, amused light, something that would be impossible to recreate in a photo or a painting, and I felt it down to the tips of my toes.

“Glad to hear it, sweetheart. And I won’t go easy on you because I like you. Deal?”

He held out his hand, and I took it.

“Deal.”

Chapter 22

Cameron

“You’re full of shit.”

Ian sat back in his chair, pinning Jax with a glare. “I’m not. He walked back into the house, his shirt was all wrinkled, the top button on his jeans was undone, and on his golden boy face was that dopey fucking smile that only means one thing.”

I sighed because I was already regretting saying yes to this. I finished my first beer and stared hard at the empty bottle, debating a second, when I’d promised myself I’d only have one.

“He’d never sleep with a client,” Jax said. Then he glanced at me. “You’d never sleep with a client. I’ve known you since we were ten.”

Two beers it was, then. I raised my hand, flagging down the server and motioning to my beer bottle. In the midst of the busy bar, she nodded.

Jax kicked at my foot under the table. “You’re avoiding. Please don’t tell me he’s right.”

Slowly, I pushed my tongue into the side of my cheek and held his eyes, finally looking away when his gaze narrowed.

“No way,” he breathed.

There was no point lying about it.

“We’re not dissecting this,” I said firmly. “You two pricks are the absolute last people I’d take advice from.”

“You don’t take advice from anyone,” Ian pointed out. “But I think decision by committee is a smart move for you, given how far your head is up your ass for this woman.”

“Oh please, you’re one to talk. Your entire high school experience was trailing Harlow like she had you on a leash, and when she moved, you got so

drunk on Captain Morgan that Dad made you sleep on the front porch so you didn't puke all over the bathroom."

Ian's eyes went glacial, and Jax laughed quietly into his beer.

"Maybe that's why I'm sensitive to it," he pointed out. "You ever think about that?"

"Where is she now?" I asked. "You ever talk to her?"

"No," Ian said. "Don't change the subject."

"I don't know what you want me to say." I sat back on the stool and held my hands up. "Yeah, I have some shit to work out when it comes to her, but I'll be fine. I'll get it handled."

Ian shook his head.

"I can already hear what you two would say," I continued. "Jax—with his emotional range of a teaspoon—would tell me to fuck her and move on." Jax tipped his beer bottle in a salute, wisely not arguing. "And you don't get a vote, Ian."

"Why not?"

"Because you see what you want to see when it comes to her." I held his eyes, letting the brotherly challenge linger in the air between us. "Imagine if all of us did that with you. If we didn't push past all your bullshit and remember that underneath all that cynicism is a guy who's a great brother and good friend. We don't simply tolerate you because we're related to you, Ian. We just know what you're hiding, so we love you through your crap. Just like we loved Erik through his before he met Lydia. And how we love Parker through his shit with Dad right now."

He didn't argue.

The sound in the bar was just loud enough that no one around our table could hear what we were saying, but we didn't have to yell.

"You don't know Ivy," I told him.

"Neither do you," he pointed out.

"Better than anyone else in this town. I'm a big boy. I know she doesn't want to stay, but I won't sit here and have you vote on whether you think I'm being stupid."

"Never said you were being stupid," Ian interjected.

Jax raised his eyebrows slowly. "You told him he had his head up his ass."

"Thank you," I said. "And I don't. Trust me, my eyes are wide open."

"So she's rich," Jax said.

“Her dad’s a billionaire,” Ian added helpfully.

Jax whistled softly. “Never pegged you for a rich girl type.”

“Everyone keeps saying that.” The server set down another round of beers, and I picked mine up. “I’ve hardly dated the last few years, so why is everyone so certain of what’s *not* my type?”

“Marcy Jenkins wants to be your type,” Ian muttered. “She keeps looking over here like she wants to eat you alive.”

I grimaced. I’d noticed the same thing when I walked into the back entrance of the bar, and she lit up at the sight of me like I was walking her way stark-ass naked. “She’s nice, but...”

“But you don’t want to bang her while our whole family waits during a football game we were supposed to watch together?”

Slicking my tongue over my teeth, I gave Ian a long look. “No.”

Ian tapped the table with his thumb as he thought. “I should tell Parker about this. He should know where his games rate on your priority list.”

He pulled out his phone and started typing. I tried to grab his phone, and he sat back, thumbs flying over the screen. Then he gave me a smug look when he sent whatever bullshit message he sent to our youngest brother.

I flipped him off.

“I’d take sex over football any day,” Jax said.

“We know,” Ian and I answered in tandem.

Jax glowered. “You two act like I sleep around constantly.”

“Don’t you?”

“No.” He glanced around the bar. “When there’s no one new, you know I stay far, far away. And I know everyone in this town.” Then his eyes sharpened. “Except her.”

The clear interest in his voice had Ian and me turning in our chairs.

The bar was busy. It always was on the nights when there was live music. The lights were low, the tables and the bar full, hardly an empty seat in the entire place. A few couples swayed on the dance floor in front of the stage, and I had to scan the faces to see who he might be talking about.

A group of guys shifted as they stood to leave their table, and when they cleared out, my throat went dry.

Ivy sat at the bar, a glass of white wine in front of her.

Her hair was down in soft waves tonight, but even from behind, I knew it was her. It was the way she held herself, the poise in her shoulders, the long, graceful line of her back. The tilt of her head as she took a slow sip of her

wine.

The ivory dress skimmed her upper body, nipped in tight to the waist, and when she shifted on the stool, it stopped somewhere above her knees, based on the bare leg underneath the bar. On her feet were wicked-looking heels in black.

Ian chuckled under his breath. “Jax, I think you should go buy that one a drink,” he said smoothly.

My head snapped toward his, and I felt a growl building in my throat before I could stop it.

But he held up a finger. *Relax*, he mouthed. Then he nodded back to the bar.

Jax was half out of his chair when one of the servers moved, and we all saw who she was sitting with. Poppy sat next to Ivy, gesturing wildly with her hands as she told a story.

“Fuck,” Jax said under his breath. “Never mind.”

We never talked about it, but my best friend was just as aware of Poppy’s crush on him as anyone else, which was why he kept very clear of her when he could manage it.

“That’s her,” I said.

“Who?”

“Ivy.”

Jax’s eyebrows shot up on his forehead. Then he glared at Ian. “What the hell?”

He grinned. “Thought it would be fun to see Cameron’s head explode.”

“I take back what I said about tolerating you.”

What were they doing here together?

From the corner where we sat, it was easy to watch them. Ivy listened attentively to what Poppy was saying and occasionally said something back.

Poppy smiled, even laughed a few times at whatever Ivy said, and it was like someone jerked a knotted rope on my spine and pulled because it was almost impossible not to follow the tug I felt toward her.

I wanted those stories and smiles and laughs too.

It was selfish and undeniably greedy, but the small pieces I’d had of Ivy weren’t enough. I wanted more.

When had I ever wanted more of something that was just mine?

It wasn’t about my family or my job.

This was something I wanted for no other reason than it made me happy.

The wanting of her, knowing what it was like between us, was imprinted on some dark, secret part of me that I couldn't carve out.

Didn't want to either.

When I realized the table was quiet, I tore my gaze away from the two women at the bar and realized both Jax and Ian stared at me.

Jax was stunned. Ian had a shit-eating grin on his face.

"Not a word out of you," I said. "I just wasn't expecting to see her here."

"Holy shit," Jax breathed. "You're looking at her like Marcy Jenkins looks at you."

My grimace was uncontrollable because that was not a great comparison for me.

"You had sex with a client—who has more money than God," Jax continued, "and you are staring at her like you'd let her snack on your heart."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "That's ... disgusting."

And accurate.

"I wasn't gone that long," Jax continued. "How did this even happen? What's she like? Do I get to meet her?"

"When did you get so verbose?" I snapped. "I've been friends with you since grade school, and you've literally never asked this many questions about anything ever."

Ian whistled. "Oooh, he's touchy. This is getting even better."

As I opened my mouth to snap at both of them, a tall, barrel-chested guy in a backward cap approached the bar, his eyes locked on Poppy and Ivy. The three of us went quiet.

He set his hands on the back of their respective stools, and I narrowed my gaze on that meaty fist. Then he gestured toward a table not far away, where another guy sat.

The idiot at the table waved. It was a stupid wave too.

Like he was guileless and not trying to get laid.

"Do we know them?" Ian asked.

"No," Jax and I answered at the same time.

I glanced back at my friend, and he watched with a hard expression in his eyes too.

"Why do *you* look so pissed off?" I asked.

"Well, who the fuck do these guys think they are? They don't know her." He clenched his jaw. "Them," he corrected. "They don't know either of them."

I raised my eyebrows. “So they’re exactly like you?”

He exhaled slowly, wisely choosing not to argue.

I couldn’t see Poppy because of where the dude-bro with the backward hat stood, but Ivy glanced over her shoulder at the man’s hand on her chair and she raised an eyebrow slowly, then shifted forward so he wasn’t touching her.

My mouth had just started stretching into a grin when he settled that hand on her shoulder.

I was out of my chair before I registered the decision to move.

With long strides, I made my way across the bar, only pausing once to let a server pass with a tray full of pint glasses.

Just as I approached, Ivy had turned sideways in her seat. She opened her mouth to say something—something good too, based on the glacial look on her face—when her eyes caught on mine over his shoulder.

It was a jolt to my entire body—immediate and hot.

How did she do that?

“Excuse me,” I said, clapping my hand on his shoulder. Hard. He turned. “I don’t think they’ll be joining you tonight.”

His demeanor shifted, and he held his hands up. “Sorry, man, I didn’t know they were with anyone. Just trying to make some new friends while we’re in town.”

I held his gaze. “Make different friends.”

At my tone, he took a moment to size me up.

He was big. I was bigger.

Wisely, he must have thought better of it because he gave me a slow nod and then walked back to his table.

Poppy sighed, sinking down in her chair. “Of *course* you guys came here. I literally cannot escape my brothers, no matter what I do.”

“Ian and Jax are in the back corner,” I told her, but kept my gaze locked on Ivy. “Why don’t you go find them, Poppy.”

She stared at Ivy and me for a moment, then blew out a slow breath. “Definitely don’t want to stay here,” she muttered.

My sister slid out of her stool, wine in hand, and left.

Ivy’s eyes hadn’t left mine. “You don’t strike me as the territorial type.”

“I’m not usually.” I set my hands on the back of her chair and leaned in. Her pulse fluttered at the base of her throat, and I wanted to suck the skin right there. “So it must just be you,” I said.

“I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not.”

“It is,” I assured her.

Her eyebrow rose slowly. “I have very little experience with men, Cameron, as you know.” Satisfaction poured hot and slow through my veins because her only good experience was with me. “If you’re going to pull that caveman bullshit every time a man looks at me in this town, you and I might have an issue.”

My jaw clenched, and her eyes narrowed in on it.

“Are we?” I asked. “What’s that?”

“I have no problem telling some meathead with a death wish that if he puts his hand anywhere on my body, he’ll lose that hand before he can blink.” She licked her lips, and I made a sound deep in the back of my throat. “I don’t need you stepping in because you feel like you have some claim on me.”

“I do have a claim on you,” I said in a low voice. “Because you know what you said to me last night, Ivy? You said we *shouldn’t* do it again. Not that you didn’t want to. Not that you regretted it.” Her eyes flared, the color rising in her cheeks. “So we can sit here and pretend we’re just friends. We can drink over at that table in the corner and trade stories all night, and I’ll keep my hands off you like a good boy, and you can lie to yourself that that’s all it is.” I leaned closer, and she lifted her chin like she couldn’t stop herself, like she had to bring her lips closer to mine, even if it gave her away. “We’re not just friends, and I don’t want to pretend we are. I know what you feel like from the inside, and I think if you’re being honest with yourself, you want me there again.” I dipped my head down and spoke against the shell of her ear. She shivered. “Say the word, duchess, and I’ll make you scream.”

She let out a harsh puff of air. I heard so much in that one tiny exhale.

Annoyance.

Shock.

And pure fucking lust.

Because her pupils were wide and black, her chest heaved, and her hands clutched the back of the stool like it was the only thing keeping her tethered to her seat.

Ivy turned suddenly, facing away from me to down the rest of her wine, then she dug in a tiny, expensive-looking purse, slammed a twenty down onto the bar, and stood from the stool.

Her heels brought her lips closer to mine, and I had to breathe through the

clawing desire to dig my hands into her hair and lick into her mouth in front of the whole damn town. Already, I'd made far more of a statement than she likely realized.

By morning, every person in Sisters would know about this, and I couldn't find it in myself to give a single solitary fuck.

Ivy's eyes sparked hot when I didn't concede an inch. "That's a big promise, Wilder."

My chest expanded when I took a deep breath, the front of her breasts just barely touching my shirt.

"You need to be clearer than that if you're asking me to deliver on it."

We both knew I could, too. The only question in my mind was whether I could wait until we got back to my house, or if I'd need to pull off the road and find a sturdy tree out of view.

No.

I wanted Ivy in *my* bed.

I wouldn't be the one walking away this time. Just like I would stand here all night and wait until she said the words.

Thankfully, I didn't have to wait long.

Her throat moved in a swallow. "Take me home, Cameron."

Chapter 23

Ivy

I was on a motorcycle.

In a dress.

I was on a motorcycle, in a dress, my arms wrapped tight around a very impressive set of muscles, and my skirt shoved up far enough so my thighs could bracket Cameron's body as he drove us to his place.

I can't say it was as sexy as they made it out to be in books and movies because I sort of thought I might die as the night wind rushed over my body, and my arms had a death grip on the big, strong man driving the giant hunk of metal.

There was no discussion of my place versus his place, and I couldn't find it in myself to care as the bike hooked around the back of a previously unseen drive before the driveway curved, then slowed when a seriously impressive home came into view.

All my bravado at the bar was long gone—which was his fault, really, because what else was I supposed to do when he told me he'd make me scream.

And! He *whispered* it. Against my ear. Maybe there was a certain type of man who got special instructions on how to make a woman's legs all quivery and the instruction manual started with something like: *gently place your lips against the shell of her ear and whisper.*

Cameron was that sort of man.

But he'd just been all territorial. He'd gotten jealous, and holy shit, did I like that.

Being completely honest with myself, if the roles had been reversed, and I saw Marcy Jenkins slide a hand over Cameron's shoulder, I might have

ripped her hair out. Which meant that before any whispering in ears had happened, I was *primed*.

If anyone else had done it, they would've gotten a jabbed fist to the throat, but there I stood in the middle of the bar, ready to divest myself of my panties because he'd whispered that one little sentence.

I wanted him to make me scream.

I wanted another night with him because now I knew. I knew things that I didn't know before, and I wanted to make the absolute most out of that.

If this man could deliver on all bed-type activities, and manage to get me on a motorcycle without kidnapping me—then he damn well deserved a second night.

My hands tightened imperceptibly around the flat planes of his stomach as the rumbling bike pulled in front of a large A-frame cabin. The whole front was a sharp, impressive triangle made up of windows, warm golden light showcasing an open family room and big kitchen, and a staircase to the far right leading up to a loft-style second floor.

It was stunning.

The sound of the bike cut off, and as gracefully as I could manage, I tugged the helmet off my head.

Cameron swung his long leg off first, then studied the damage to my hair with a wry grin.

“Oh shut up,” I said without heat. “I know you get some kind of sick pleasure from me being at my worst.”

He took the helmet and carefully set it on the handlebars, then turned, wordlessly gripping the back of my neck before he claimed my mouth in a searing kiss.

The kiss ended almost as quickly as it began, and my head spun as I registered the way my hand fisted the material of his shirt.

“I get pleasure from you all the time, Ivy,” he said, voice low and rough, something that drew a shiver down my spine. “Maybe someday you'll believe it.”

They were simple words that set off a very complex reaction.

Didn't he know that was the most impossible thing of all for me to believe?

Love almost always came with a performance of some sort. Something with a clear metric, data that could be shown and weighed. A grade. A paper. A title given.

It was a good thing my eyes were already closed from the kiss, because if I'd seen the look in his eyes when he said it, I might have done something horrible like cry or ask him to hold me while I was fully clothed.

He stepped back and held out a hand to help me off the bike.

I took a second to gather myself before I swung my leg over, tugging my skirt down once I had two feet on the ground.

"You built this," I said as he preceded me up the large deck that surrounded the front of the house. In the dim lights coming from the house, I saw comfortable, oversized deck furniture and a table.

"My dad and Wade helped. But it was my design." Then he smiled over his shoulder. "If you want to see Greer's head explode, go ahead and remind her of that. She hates that I wouldn't let her help me."

The inside was gorgeous. More modern than I expected, with sleek lines and warm wood tones interspersed with leather and clean white walls and hardwood floors laid in a herringbone pattern.

I exhaled a quiet laugh. "I imagined something very, very different," I admitted.

He watched me wander through the kitchen as I trailed my fingers along the edge of the massive rectangular island.

"A shitty bachelor pad?"

"No." Then I glanced over my shoulder. "Maybe a little."

Cameron kept his eyes on me as he spoke. "I know what I like. And since I was the one in charge, it made it easy to do exactly what I wanted."

A big, sticky ball of cotton stuck in my throat at the way he phrased that.

Wasn't that why I was here?

Quite inexplicably, Cameron Wilder liked me, and even if he was pretending to let me do what I wanted right now, we both knew who would be in charge the moment he got his hands on me.

I shivered because I wanted those hands in a few different places.

"It's so clean." Dammit, my voice came out a little breathy, like I wasn't quite in control of what I was saying.

"I'm not around much to make it messy," he admitted. His arms were crossed over his chest while I circled the island, then peered into the stainless steel fridge, smiling when I found it less than half full. "Most of the time, I don't get back here until I'm ready to fall straight into bed."

When I faced him again, one eyebrow arched, he stared at the small ribbon that held my dress together around my waist.

“That’s still true now, isn’t it?” I asked lightly. I mimicked his posture, leaning up against the edge of the island and folding my arms over my middle. His eyes dipped to the V of my dress. “Ready to fall straight into bed.”

He dropped his arms and prowled closer. I sucked in a breath at his unnerving ability to make my blood race just by walking. And breathing. And looking.

Not only that, but why did he smell so good?

He smelled exactly like a *man* should. They probably taught him that in the same lesson as the whisper in the ear trick. It was like he’d just lathered up in the shower with something masculine and sexy and crisp, embedding it into his skin so that all he had to do was walk past and I was a helpless pile of hormonal goo.

I was never a helpless pile of *anything*, and it didn’t seem fair that Cameron wasn’t turning into mush right alongside me.

That simply wouldn’t do.

“Not straight into bed,” he murmured, studying my face as I tilted my chin to look up at him.

I licked at my bottom lip, curious if it had the same effect on him as it did on me.

Judging by the flare of heat in his eyes, it really, really did.

Then I moved my hands to the top button of his white button-down shirt, carefully plucking each little white disk through the opening until more and more and more of his hard, golden skin was revealed. The crisp little hairs tickled the back of my fingers, and his gaze took on a hazy, heavy-lidded quality when I finished unbuttoning his shirt and pushed it over the corded muscles of his shoulders.

“Why did you go out with my sister?” he asked.

I blinked, the question unexpected. “She asked.”

Cameron laughed, the straight white teeth and tiny dimple making my skin tight and hot. “That’s it?” he asked. Lazily, he tugged his shirt off, messing with the rolled sleeves until he could drop it in a pile on the floor.

My eyes coasted over the endless stretch of smooth skin, roped muscles honed from hard fucking work, and the masculine dusting of hair. I slid my hands up the stacks of muscles on his stomach, and he hissed in a breath.

“Yes,” I said simply. “She’s sweet. And she asked me nicely, so I said yes.”

His large, nimble fingers plucked at the ribbon holding my dress together, and I struggled to keep my breathing even. This wasn't a headlong rush past my reserves, where I knew I shouldn't be doing it. Not like the first time.

We were clear-headed, staring the thick, heady desire straight in the eyes. I certainly wasn't going to look anywhere else when I wanted him so badly.

Until Cameron, I'd never realized that desire—the acute craving for another person—could have teeth, something sharp and visceral, like it would snap off your skin if you didn't indulge it.

But this did.

Whatever built between us with these whispering touches grew fangs, sharp, sharp claws, a ragged heartbeat that I heard echoing in my chest.

His eyes held mine, full of heat and intent, and he slowly pulled the front of my dress away. “So I only have to ask if I want something from you,” he said in a rasping, ragged voice.

The backs of his fingers brushed against my quivering stomach, and then his mouth curled in a smile when my breath hitched. “M-maybe. Depends on what it is.”

Cameron slid the tips of his fingers up the sides of my arms, then pulled at the edges of my dress where it hung open across my front. Today I wore black silk underneath, and he liked it very much, based on the tightness in his jaw, the slight narrowing of his eyes when the dress dropped behind me on the floor, pooling around my feet.

I started toeing off the shoes, but he shook his head, unable to tear his gaze away from the front of my body. “Leave them on,” he commanded.

Then his hands roamed around my hips, boldly assertive, and he filled those big palms with the flesh of my backside, tugging me tight to the front of him.

The proof of how badly he wanted me pressed against my stomach, and my eyes fluttered shut. I felt empty and aching between my legs, and still, I didn't know what to touch first. If I wanted the dirty words as he whispered them in my ear, or if I wanted his mouth for kissing—for wet tongues and sharp teeth and demanding lips.

All I knew for sure was that he'd take care of me.

That he wanted to send me soaring, and he'd keep me safe while he did it. “Where's your bedroom?” I whispered.

Tonight, I could be the version of myself that I wanted. The version of myself that felt real and sexy and free. I trusted him with it, and that trust held

a screaming edge to the way my heart raced in my chest.

Cameron slid his hand over my chest, then curled his hand around the side of my throat, tilting my chin up with a simple press of his thumb. My breath was coming in short pants now, and I could do nothing to stop it.

If he pushed a hand between my legs, I'd come instantly. The lightest touch, and I'd shatter.

But that hand around my throat, the easy way he asserted himself, it rewired things in my brain, scrambled the way my blood coursed through my veins.

Instead of kissing me, like I thought he would, Cameron bent slightly at the knees, then boosted me into his arms easily. My legs wrapped immediately around his waist, my arms slung around his shoulders so my fingers could dig into the silky length of his hair.

He walked down a dark hallway, eyes never wavering from mine.

I ducked forward and sucked at the spot of skin under his ear, and his hands tightened dangerously. One hand plucked at the back of my bra, and the satin loosened. It was heady, that he was strong enough to carry me with one hand.

The way he could manhandle me was wildly arousing, and I'd probably never admit that out loud, but my mind raced with possibilities.

Wall sex.

Shower sex.

All the things that sounded very, very sexy but, in reality, left a bit to be desired, simply from a logistical standpoint.

There'd be no logistical problems with Cameron.

The thought of it had me sucking harder on his delicious skin, and he pushed his hand underneath the edge of my underwear, gripping tightly.

"Ivy," he warned.

I licked at the edge of his ear, and he hissed.

The room was dark, the only light coming from the hallway, and I hardly had any sense of what it looked like, but when he lowered me back down, the long column of his throat worked on a swallow when I rolled my hips against his stomach before I unwound my legs.

He could see me just fine, based on the way his eyes roved.

When my feet touched the ground, I kept my hands behind his neck and tugged gently, until his lips came closer to mine.

Then he stopped.

“Are you going to make me ask for everything?” I whispered.

“Maybe.” His lips brushed mine. “It’s good for you.”

My skin trembled, and I exhaled a short, incredulous laugh. “Is it now?”

I curled my hand around the obscene display in the front of his pants, and he tipped his head back and groaned.

“Do I have to ask for this?” I asked, nipping at the edge of his throat. Once I’d tugged the zipper down on his jeans, I slipped my hand inside and pushed underneath the boxer briefs, and he bit out a harsh curse.

He was so big and hot and hard in my hand, my stomach flipped weightlessly.

“Ivy,” he rasped.

When he brought his head back down, he had a slightly dazed quality to his eyes that had me grinning.

“So you want me to beg?” I asked. “Is that it?”

He weaved his hand into my hair and gripped the strands tight, and good Lord, I was going to detonate before he touched any of my good parts.

“Just tell me what you want,” he commanded. “Tell me, and I’ll give it to you.”

I want you to keep me.

I want to feel like this forever, but only if it’s you.

The thought was so immediate—bright and harsh in the way it appeared in my head without permission. My heart cracked a little with the truth of it, something I hadn’t dared think, because it didn’t make sense, and would never make sense.

There was no saying that out loud, so I pushed up on the balls of my feet and groaned when he met me halfway, the hard, demanding kiss a sweet relief after all this buildup.

His tongue swept into my mouth, his hands tightening on my body as he wrenched off what was left of my lingerie.

I wrangled with his jeans and shoved, and just like that, we were hurried again, tugging off clothes as quickly as possible. Rushing into the mind-melting heat that only seemed to exist between me and him.

There was no conceivable way this was normal, I thought as he tilted his head and deepened the kiss, crowding all that impressive height over mine until I had no choice but to arch my back and let him kiss me and kiss me and kiss me.

I’d let him do anything.

I broke away on a gasp. “I just want you,” I gasped. “Please, *please*.”

The words flipped a switch, his hands going from sure and intentional to dominant and greedy.

He clutched me to him. There was no space between us, my hips writhing but my body still craving his.

We fell back onto the bed, and he licked and sucked and bit down the front of my body, and I could hardly breathe when he pushed my legs open and wasted no time with wedging his big shoulders between my thighs.

“I promised myself something,” he said, kissing along the inside of my thighs. “That if I got you in a bed again, I’d start right here. I went to bed last night, furious because I didn’t know how you tasted.”

His teeth nipped at the sensitive skin where he’d kissed, and my stomach started trembling.

I looked down, and from where his body was framed between my thighs, his eyes met mine.

My heart stopped.

A long, decadent swipe of his tongue, golden brown gaze still locked on mine, and my breath tangled in my throat when he made a delicious sound deep from his throat. His eyes fluttered shut, and then so did mine.

I clutched his hair and moaned, shameless and low and disbelieving when he used his tongue, then his fingers. Cameron groaned when I tightened my fist in his hair while he devoured me, and my hips rocked mindlessly, seeking friction while his hands held my thighs tight. I wanted bruises there in the shape of his fingers.

“Please,” I begged.

I was so close.

But I wanted *him*.

I wanted his mouth on mine, and I wanted to see his face when he shattered me into a million pieces. I pulled at his shoulders, frantic for him to come closer when a coil tightened low under my belly button.

It spiraled and spiraled again, a crackling blanket of lightning rolling in under my skin.

It was too big, and I tried to slide up the bed to escape it. He followed, relentless in his assault.

“Cameron,” I sobbed. “Please, I want you with me.”

I want you, I thought again.

I want *you*.

Don't make me feel this alone.

He lifted his head, his eyes feral as he prowled over me and braced his hands on either side of my head. My body shook with the need for release, and when he kissed me—messy and hard and delicious, I almost toppled over the edge.

He wrenched my leg up against his chest, and the angle had me gasping when I felt him between my legs.

Cameron wasted no time. He took pity on us both because we'd stretched this foreplay out longer than either of us could handle.

With his eyes locked on mine, his jaw tight and his brow pinched in a slight furrow, he wrenched his hips forward in one endless, savage thrust.

That was all it took.

This pleasure—brutally delivered after a slow, steady, tease—was sharp and hot and dangerous, sliced at my body and splintered like a piece of dropped glass. A million little cuts all over my skin, something that grew and grew, until my back arched and my legs tightened and I couldn't breathe.

When it broke, a tight spiral unfurled in a fierce pulse over my skin, and I tipped my head back and screamed like he promised.

And as the sound echoed through his room, the sound of our bodies chasing it, I realized just how impossible it would be to ever move on from him.

Chapter 24

Cameron

“If you could eat one meal for the rest of your life, what would it be?”

Still trying to catch her breath, Ivy cracked open her eyes and regarded me warily.

“*That’s* the first thing you ask after sex?”

With a grin, I reached my hand out, coasting it along the sleek line of her waist until it rested on her hip. My thumb brushed back and forth, and her eyes fluttered shut. When her body subtly arched into my touch, I wondered if she realized she was doing it.

She’d rolled onto her side, hands tucked underneath my pillow, and I pulled the comforter over our lower bodies. Her arms covered most of her chest, but the bottom curve of her breast was visible under her forearm. Because I couldn’t help myself, my hand trailed from her hip back up to her waist until I could graze my knuckles on that soft curve.

Her eyes stayed shut, her breathing uneven at the light touch.

She wasn’t running, wasn’t tugging her clothes on and disappearing, and I found myself wanting to take advantage of that.

“Come on,” I coaxed. “I know you’ve got an answer.”

When she opened her eyes, it was after a long exhale, and they landed unerringly on mine.

What I saw there made my skin heat.

The wariness was gone, and in its place was affection.

“Your mom’s blueberry muffins,” she said wryly.

I laughed. “You’re not going to let me tell her that, are you?”

“What does she put in them?” Ivy asked. “Drugs, right? It has to be laced with something.”

“Wouldn’t put it past her,” I answered. “Sheila always wants us coming back for food.”

“Sometimes you call her Mom,” she pointed out. “Sometimes you call her Sheila.”

I hummed. “She always left it up to us. Ian calls her Sheila more often than not. Parker always calls her Mom.”

She stared into my face for a while, then reached her own hand forward, gently tracing the bottom curve of my lip while my heart hammered unsteadily in my chest.

“I used to wish my dad had remarried,” she said. Her eyes stayed locked on my mouth.

The admission had my heart stalling for a moment, then restarting quick and fierce. Because it was freely given, something that hadn’t happened since her reappearance in my life.

I kept my face even when I answered. “Maybe you would’ve had a Sheila too.”

Ivy exhaled a disbelieving laugh. “Not likely.”

“Why do you say that?”

“My dad’s not nice enough to bag a Sheila.”

My chest shook with laughter, and her cheeks lifted, even as she hid a smile into the pillow.

Then her eyes took on a thoughtful quality.

“What?” I asked.

“It’s weird to think about,” she admitted. “How my life might be different if he’d remarried someone kind and loving and sweet.” With a wry lift to her eyebrows, she said, “Maybe I’d be nicer.”

Now I couldn’t help myself. I slid my hand around her waist and tugged her closer, so I could wrap my arm around her back while I kissed her soundly. My tongue teased at the seam of her lips, and she opened immediately, on a soft, sweet sound that had my body reacting instantly.

Reluctantly, I pulled back.

“You don’t need to be anything other than you are,” I said against her mouth. Then I nipped at her bottom lip. “I like your sharp edges.”

Her eyes were serious when I pulled back. “Even if you cut yourself on them?”

“Do I look hurt to you?” I asked.

Ivy leaned up on her elbow, her golden hair sliding gently over her

shoulder as she leaned in and made a show of studying my face, running her hands over my chest and arms. “No,” she said simply. “You don’t.”

“So then why are you worried about it?” I eased her closer until she laid one arm over my chest, her breasts pressed tight to my skin.

“I’m not, I just ... I don’t know how to be some soft, sweet woman any more than you know how to be an asshole.” Ivy’s fingertips danced lightly over my chest, and she pressed a kiss over one of my pecs, pulling away before I could ease her onto her back and do more kissing and more touching and find new positions to try. “Knowing my luck, my dad would’ve remarried some cliché gold digger with a pea brain and a bad dye job.”

Subject officially changed. We managed to get a bit too close, so she danced us away from that topic.

I decided to let her, so I smiled. “You would’ve run her out of there in no time.”

Ivy laughed quietly. “I think you give me more credit than I deserve. I don’t have that kind of power over my father’s decisions.”

When I thought about lying in bed and asking Ivy questions, I’d meant to keep them light and easy, so as not to scare her away.

But maybe light and easy wasn’t possible for us.

Maybe the attraction between us burned too hot and fierce for it ever to settle into something normal and mundane. Maybe the wild nature of it, something lush and untamed, meant that it would burn out quickly.

No.

I refused to believe that.

Something more was here, and I think she knew it too. I turned the direction again, thinking it would bring us back to the light and easy.

“Best Christmas present you’ve ever gotten?” I asked.

Ivy pulled her hand back and shook her head, smiling slightly as her gaze tracked over my face.

“Why are you asking these things?” she whispered.

I could kiss her. We were close enough.

But I didn’t. Instead, I studied every inch of her face and committed it to memory.

“Tells me something about you. And like I said before, I want to know you.”

Her brow pinched slightly in a furrow. “Simple as that, huh?”

Instead of answering, because we both damn well knew it wasn’t simple,

I simply waited for her to answer, my hand resting over her ribs.

She pressed her face deeper into my pillow and inhaled slowly. “Best Christmas present I ever got was a doll from my housekeeper,” she said quietly. “I was eight.”

“Was it a surprise?”

Ivy got lost in thought for a moment. “It was. She saw me looking at it through a shop window one day. We were shopping for a dress for my dad’s Christmas party. It wore this green velvet dress with a black bow and little white buttons. She had dark brown hair and big brown eyes. When my dad got home from work that day, I told him about it...” The furrow deepened, and she swallowed roughly. “Ruth gave it to me a couple of days before Christmas. I think she knew I wouldn’t get it otherwise.”

“Why not?”

Her eyes landed on mine. “No matter how my dad may have been an imperfect parent, because God knows he didn’t really know how to parent me on his own, he never spoiled me. Just because I asked for something didn’t mean I got it.” Her lips softened into a tiny grin. “Ruth was the one who spoiled me. She’d sneak me extra desserts and let me watch soap operas with her after school when she knew my dad would be furious.”

I didn’t like her dad much.

But getting mad on her behalf would only push her away. Her life was exactly that—hers. No matter how much I wish she’d had something different, none of us could wish away the hard things that the people in our lives experienced.

Maybe her hard came with a bigger bank account, but it was as clear as a blinking sign above her head—earning love, to Ivy, meant fitting into a very specific role defined by someone else. It’s what she had been taught her entire life. And the only way to unlearn that lesson would take patience and time.

One, I had in spades.

The other was rapidly disappearing.

“He still coming for a visit soon?” I asked.

She was quiet, tension seeping into her frame. I wasn’t sure if she even realized it.

“I have no reason to believe otherwise. I haven’t spoken to him since I got here, but he hasn’t said he’s *not* coming anymore.”

I tried to imagine a world where I went more than a week without

speaking to my parents.

“Say it,” she said dryly.

I smiled. “What?”

“You’re judging. I can feel it.”

I exhaled, tilting slightly to my side so I could see her face again. “He’s punishing you, isn’t he? By not talking to you.”

She swallowed. “Maybe a little.”

“It shouldn’t be like that,” I told her in a gentle voice.

“What should it be like then?” she asked. Her eyes held a warning edge to them, but her voice was still soft, her body language unchanged.

I sighed. “Parents aren’t supposed to punish their adult kids for making choices. Especially not the one you made.”

She searched my face but stayed silent.

“I know you’re used to something different than I am,” I continued carefully. “But it still has to hurt.”

“You don’t know what it’s like in my world,” she said. “I’m *fine*. He taught me how to handle things like this. And that’s what I’m doing.”

She was lying. But I had a feeling she was lying to herself more than anything.

Ivy had been strong her entire life because she’d had to be.

“Bullshit,” I said gently. “I call bullshit on that.”

Ivy pinched her eyes shut.

“I’m not saying that to hurt your feelings, Ivy.”

“I know.” She clutched a fist tight to her chest, the skin of her knuckles white. She was holding so much inside. “It’s not that.”

“What is it?”

She inhaled shakily. “Do you know how hard it is to talk to you about things like this when your family is perfect?”

Gently, I gripped her chin and tilted it up, waiting to speak until she opened her eyes.

“My family is not perfect,” I told her. “If you’d been around the last few years, you would’ve seen plenty of examples of distance, siblings not speaking, disagreements. It’s getting better, but we’re all screwed up in different ways from the things we’ve experienced that got us here.”

“You’re not,” she said, sounding so petulant about it that I couldn’t help but laugh. “Honestly, give me a list of your flaws, and I’ll frame it on my wall under a spotlight. It might make me feel better.”

With a laugh, I gathered her tight against my chest and kissed the top of her head. Eventually, she relaxed into my embrace.

“Tell you what,” I said, mouth brushing the silk of her hair. “All my siblings are coming in for the fall festival next weekend. If you want to know my flaws, they are the experts. I bet you’d walk away with a list as long as your arm.”

“Appealing,” she murmured. “What exactly does a weekend like that entail?”

“Oh, I don’t know. The usual.” I kissed her temple, dragging my nose along her skin. “Eating. Games. Socializing.”

She let out a disgruntled sigh. “You’re going to make me people, aren’t you?”

I smiled. “Maybe.”

“Shall I expect any more chest-thumping displays of testosterone? That might be a deal-breaker for me.”

“I don’t have any plans for that at the moment.”

Her fingertips wandered delicately across my chest, and I closed my eyes at the fact that she allowed herself those small touches.

“Dear Lord, a small-town festival,” she muttered. “Let me guess, baked goods out the ying-yang and booths with crafts, and everyone will be wearing jeans and holding hands and singing.”

“So close.” I ducked my head down and kissed the tip of her nose. She eyed me with suspicion. “You better come and find out.”

She swallowed when I licked along the edge of her jaw. “That means I’ll have to do like ... a big family dinner.”

I kissed her bottom lip. “Yes. Think of all the blueberry muffins my mom would make for you if you finally show up for dinner.”

“That’s blackmail. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

My hand inched down toward the dimples above the curve of her backside. “You’d be surprised, duchess.”

I paused. “You may have to temporarily move out of your lodgings while Erik and Lydia are here. They need the extra space because of their daughter, Isla.”

Ivy kept her eyes locked on my mouth. “Hmm. I suppose I could check to see if Amanda has any available rooms.”

“You could,” I said easily. “Or you could stay here.”

Her eyes snapped up to mine and held. “Could I?”

I ducked my head down and dragged my nose over the edge of her jaw, lightly tugging on the edge of her earlobe. Her frame shivered slightly. “If you’d like. I wouldn’t hate having you here.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said airily. I grinned against her skin.

My thumb traced over the edge of her nipple, and she shivered.

“So if I come to this fall festival thing, I can interview your siblings for all the ways you drive them crazy?”

Under my breath, I laughed. “Yes.”

She sighed happily. “That might be the best offer I’ve had since I got here.”

I pulled my head back, eyebrow cocked. “Is it now?”

My hand snuck down and smacked her on the backside. Hard. She yelped, pinching my stomach. “Sir, we did not discuss spanking beforehand.”

I stared down at her mouth. “Can we discuss it now?”

She swallowed. “I might be ... amenable.”

My voice was rough when I answered. “Good. That mean you’re staying tonight?”

Her eyes were hazy.

I wanted her to stay. I wanted to have at least one memory of her in this bed. Wanted to know how soft and sweet she was in sleep, what she looked like when she woke.

I wanted.

Slowly, I turned Ivy to her stomach, then kissed down the gentle bumps on her spine. She arched her backside up, and my hands tugged up on her hips while I positioned myself behind her.

“You didn’t answer me,” I said evenly. I pushed her hair over her shoulder so I had an unobstructed view of her back and shoulders and neck while I was behind her. With a gentle nudge, I widened the space between her knees, and she complied instantly.

My lips curled in a slight smile.

“I could be convinced of that too,” she sighed, pressing her forearms into the mattress while I slid my hand between her legs. “Just for tonight.”

I didn’t respond.

Not verbally, at least.

I took myself in hand, teasing her for a few moments, sliding back and forth between her legs until her back arched in frustration and her hands balled into fists on the sheets.

She aimed a fierce glare over her shoulder, eyes narrowing even further when I grinned.

“Ask nicely,” I whispered.

“Oh, fuck you, Cam —”

I cut her off with a crack of my hand against her backside.

She melted into the mattress with a whimper.

“I think I will,” I said between gritted teeth. So I did, with a brutal drive of my hips. Her whimper turned into a keening moan.

That was what Ivy didn't understand.

Her sharp edges weren't something that I tolerated because I wanted her.

Hers honed mine. Her hard let me be hard in return.

She could handle the sides of me that no one else saw, and I didn't have to worry about being good and perfect while I was with her.

It didn't take long like this, my hands gripping her hips with bruising strength, the relentless smack of my hips against her backside, before she seized tight around me, her body shaking with jolts of pleasure that had my brain short-circuiting.

I came with a shout, slumping over her sweat-soaked back once we'd melted into the mattress. Her chest heaved on deep, sucking breaths, and I tugged her tight against my chest, curling my body around her back with my arms firmly under her breasts.

As her body melted further, her fingers tangled with mine, and I buried my nose into her hair and inhaled deeply.

I could love her so easily, I thought as I succumbed to sleep. Maybe I already did.

Yet if I told her now, she'd run.

So I kept the words locked in my chest and held her close, wondering if the pounding of my heart against her back gave me away.

Chapter 25

Ivy

“I’m telling you, if it wasn’t my brother, that would’ve been the hottest thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

It wasn’t like I didn’t love reliving it either. I’d been reliving the entire night since I woke up alone in his giant man bed, with a note by my pillow telling me he’d had to leave for work but to help myself to whatever I could find in the fridge.

I didn’t linger, though, because the temptation to root through drawers and closets was dangerously high. Instead, I slipped my dress on and walked very carefully through the woods until I got back to my place.

Thankfully, the trees could keep secrets very well because no one saw my ass trip over more than one stick or rock or whatever littered the ground.

Stilettos and outdoors did not go together. If I stayed too much longer, I would have to ask him to put in a paved sidewalk.

“Do we have to keep discussing this?” I asked Poppy.

“Yes.”

She’d shown up at my door with a feather toy for Neville and a small container of cinnamon streusel muffins because Sheila Wilder was determined to bump me up a dress size.

With a resigned sigh, I popped the rest of the muffin in my mouth, and my eyes fluttered shut when it melted in my mouth. “I swear, she could take over the world with baked goods, and no one would bat an eye.”

Poppy laughed.

“Please don’t tell me you’re really good at this too. Because I swear, if you show up here with perfect croissants or something, I’ll lose my shit.”

There was only so much one could take with this family. They had to

have flaws somewhere.

She shook her head. “No way. Adaline and Greer are hopeless too. Mom tried to teach us, and we’re terrible at baking.”

I studied one of the muffins, mouth pursing in thought. “I asked my housekeeper to teach me how to bake once. We got in trouble when my dad found out, so I never made it past the first recipe.”

“Baking is no joke,” Poppy said. “I hate measuring things precisely, so I was doomed from the start.”

Unable to help myself, I plucked some of the cinnamon crumble off the top of another muffin. “So this fall festival,” I said. “Cameron made it sound like it was a really big deal.”

Poppy folded herself onto the ground, legs crossed over each other while she played with Neville. “It’s a tradition more than anything,” she said. “Normally it’s impossible to have the whole family here for it, but because my dad isn’t doing well...” She gave me a sad smile. “Everyone’s making a point to get back here for it.”

Neville batted at the fluffy white feather, and Poppy smiled.

“I’m sorry it’s for such a terrible reason,” I told her.

I wanted to tell her I was sorry about losing her dad, but it felt wrong, considering he was still here.

She swallowed, her eyes shiny when she looked back up at me.

“Oh crap,” I said, “are you going to cry?”

Poppy emitted a watery laugh. “Maybe?”

I blew out a slow breath. “Okay.” I motioned vaguely between us. “Go ahead. I’m ready.”

“It’s weird, you know. My brothers and sisters have all lost so much; it’s literally what built our family, but sometimes I think they look at me like I’m naive, or too sheltered or something.” She tucked her dark hair behind her ears. “This is the third time my dad has had cancer. It never gets easier. Not ever.” A tear slid down her cheek, and she didn’t wipe it away. “I’ve had a lot of practice imagining what my life will be like without him. That’s still loss. It’s still grief, even if they’re right in front of you.”

Words stalled in my throat because everything that came to my mind felt trite or too simple. I didn’t know how to comfort anyone. My skills in that area were pathetic.

I’d never had to, and my complete ineptitude paralyzed me.

So I took a deep breath and imagined what I’d want someone to say if I

were in Poppy's shoes.

"Want me to bitch them out for you?" I asked.

She blinked. "My siblings?"

"Yeah."

Her mouth fell open. "I..."

"Because I can. Ian already hates me. The others don't know me. Greer might be shocked, but she'll get over it. And Cameron would forgive me because we had really great sex last night. So if you want me to tell them to fuck off for treating you like a kid, I totally can."

For a moment, I worried that I'd lost her, my one tenuous friendship in this strange little place that I didn't really hate anymore.

Then she laughed.

Poppy held her stomach, back against the side of the couch, and laughed hard. My lips curled in a smile, and something in my chest unclenched.

Poppy's laughter faded after a minute, and as she wiped underneath her eye, she shook her head. "Thank you," she said. "I needed that."

"Anytime."

Maybe this was what it felt like to have a real friend. Poppy wasn't the naive, sheltered one. That was me. For all the lessons I'd learned, and all the things I'd been taught, my experience in peer interactions was disgustingly inadequate.

"I'm nervous to meet your family," I admitted. "But your brother really wants me there."

"I'm sure he does."

At her loaded tone, I gave her a dry look, which had her laughing again.

"I don't know how to do the family thing," I said, the lightness of my words skipping over the heavy way they came out of my throat. "But he promised me I could ask all his siblings about his flaws if I met everyone."

Her face creased in confusion. "Why?"

"So I can make a list. Have you seen him? It's ridiculous. No one should be that perfect, it pisses me off."

Poppy grinned. "Trust me, he's not perfect. He's stubborn, and he works too hard, and he never takes time for himself."

"Oh yes, please, tell me how selfless he is. I'll feel so much better."

"He's a know-it-all," she added.

"True." I ate another bite of muffin. "Keep going."

Again, she laughed.

By the time Poppy left, I was ready for a nap—something I never did. But as soon as I crawled under the covers, my eyes refused to shut.

They were gritty from lack of sleep, my muscles sore from two—three?—rounds in Cameron’s bed the night before.

Definitely three, I thought as I covered my overheated face. The last round, we’d both been half asleep, and he stayed behind me while we lay on our sides.

For the first time in my entire life, I walked into a situation without any clear indication of how things would end, without knowing my purpose.

I didn’t want to hurt Cameron when I left, but that was still the plan. I didn’t know how to do that, though. The thought of leaving this place—these people—left my chest feeling hollowed out, achy, and bruised.

It wasn’t like I suddenly wanted to stay home and pop out seventeen babies. That might never be me.

I wanted to work.

I wanted to build something with pride and know I had something to do with its success.

My dad had a legacy created from the ground up. And I could continue it with ease. It was a well-oiled machine, and the cogs would continue turning whether he was at the helm, or I was. Even though that was the future I’d always known was mine, the thought of it didn’t sit quite as naturally anymore. I wasn’t sure I wanted someone else’s path, the one I’d been raised to follow, where the outcome was easily predictable and absent of big risk.

I wanted a family, too.

Maybe not a big one, but one of my own.

In the quiet moments, when I allowed myself to think of a future that I created for myself—one that hadn’t been created for me—I saw a business I could dig my hands into and build from pieces that meant something. I saw one, maybe two kids. I laid my hand over my stomach and breathed deeply.

Why, when I slammed my eyes shut, did one of those kids have golden brown hair and a big, dimple smile?

“For fuck’s sake,” I whispered.

I rolled over, snatching my phone from the nightstand when I knew the nap was pointless.

A text on my phone pulled an unwitting smile onto my face.

Cameron: If you never hear from me again, it’s because I’ve been buried alive in paperwork at the shop. Come save me?

He attached a picture of a monstrously disorganized desk, half his face cut off in the frame.

Me: Your selfie skills are terrible. I'm adding that to your list.

Cameron: Does that mean you're not coming to help me?

Me: Do you think we'd get much work done if I was there?

Cameron: No. The desk would get cleared off pretty quickly though.

Me: I'm sure it would.

Cameron: Can I see you later?

Me: I might drop by the house. You said the floors are done?

Cameron: Almost. Siding started today too. I like the color you picked.

Me: Thank you.

Cameron: It's moody. A little dramatic. Reminds me of someone...

Me: I refuse to be baited like this.

Cameron: I was going to say Ian, but if you feel like it applies to you, not much I can do about that.

I smothered a smile.

Cameron: What are you doing?

Flipping the camera around, I took a picture of myself laying in bed. There was nothing salacious about it, but my stomach still fluttered with nerves when I sent it off. My hand rested on the soft rise and fall of my stomach, and I bit down on my bottom lip while he tapped out a response, wondering just how long I could play with these flames before I was irreparably burned.

Cameron: I refuse to be baited like this.

I laughed out loud when my phone started ringing. I slid my thumb across the screen and answered.

“Yes?”

I was grinning like a lunatic, and I wondered if he could hear it.

“You win. What are you wearing?”

“Dear Lord, is that your best opening line?”

Cameron made a growling sound that had my toes curling. “Tell me. Or I’m coming over there and finding out myself.”

“You have to work,” I informed him primly. “You should be ashamed of that desk.”

He sighed. “Fine. You lying in bed all day?”

“I *was* going to nap because someone tired me out last night.”

Cameron made a low, chuckling sound. “Yeah?”

“Don’t sound so smug. It’s not cute.”

“I don’t know, duchess, I think you found me plenty cute last night.”

That damn nickname. I was so glad he couldn’t see me.

I didn’t know what to do with these giddy, winged feelings.

They were horrible. They felt dangerous and undeniably reckless. Something about them being let loose in my body, after one single night, made *me* feel dangerous and undeniably reckless.

“I did,” I acknowledged quietly.

Cameron let out a shocked exhale on the other end of the phone. “You’re admitting it?”

“Well, there’s hardly any point in denying it, is there?” I sniffed. “You had your mouth between my legs, and I almost plucked every hair out of your head while you considered moving in permanently. If I didn’t find you cute, we’d have a much bigger problem.”

He laughed. “I do love the way you say things, Ivy Lynch.” Then he sighed. “I have another call coming in. Greer found another client for us starting in about a month, and I need to talk to her about their plans.”

“Go,” I told him. “I’ll talk to you later.”

He hung up, and I tossed the phone onto the bed. Somehow, the call managed to relax me enough that I was able to sleep for a couple of hours.

I woke groggy and disoriented, then made my way into the kitchen for my third muffin of the day.

“How are they so good?” I muttered. Neville came out of the bedroom, stretching lazily as he crossed the threshold. “How about a walk? I think I need to get some fresh air.”

After changing my clothes, I clipped him to his harness and then the

matching leash, and we made our way outside.

I had a fairly good sense of direction on their property now, and I followed the driveway toward the road, then wound through the trees on our way back. Neville was a meandering companion, darting toward sticks and rocks, occasionally meowing at my feet until I picked him up and carried him for a while.

By the time we got back to my place, my heart thrummed and my chest warmed with the last half a mile of a faster pace.

I checked my phone but had nothing else from Cameron.

I spent some time on my computer, filtering through real estate listings in the area, simply because I couldn't help myself. I bookmarked a few, including a killer piece of land adjacent to the downtown area. I checked my email, and when there was nothing from my dad, I found myself getting restless with the lack of information about his visit.

Between him and Cameron's family, reality was about to intrude on our little non-labeled sex bubble, and I did not do very well when things were so unclear.

If his family was games and eating and laughing, then my dad's visit would be financial outlooks, profit projections, and head trips.

My heart hurt when I thought about Tim sitting on that front porch, the look on his face when he talked about the way he loved his kids.

No. It didn't just hurt.

It was a deep, bone-piercing ache.

I pressed a hand against my chest, hoping I could make it stop. When it didn't, I knew I needed some sort of action, so I wasn't just sitting there like a wet mop.

I called my dad's cell phone, and he didn't pick up.

Without pause, I hung up and called his office's direct line. He didn't pick up there either. When I rang through to his assistant, she answered in her usual clipped tones.

"It's Ivy," I told her.

"He's unavailable," she answered.

My eyes narrowed. "I didn't ask if he was or wasn't."

Awkward silence ticked across the phone.

She cleared her throat. "What can I do for you, Miss Lynch?"

"What's his itinerary for his Portland visit tomorrow? I know he's got a morning meeting downtown, but I'd like to know when I can expect him

here.”

She was quiet for a few moments. “I don’t believe he’ll be making his way to Sisters. His plans changed.”

My chest went cold, and I forced a swallow past the brick suddenly lodged in my throat.

“What do you mean? He told me he’d come so he could see my progress.”

“Maybe emailing him would be best, Ivy.”

It was the careful way she answered that had the ache in my chest growing. It had long, curling, ghost-like fingers, spreading through my lungs, down my arms, and into my suddenly cold hands.

I stood from the couch and paced the room. I was so sick of begging for scraps of his attention. I heard Cameron’s voice in my head.

It shouldn’t be like that, Ivy.

It shouldn’t be like this.

“I know he’s in that office,” I snapped. “You tell him to quit being a coward and talk to me, or I’m on the next flight out to Seattle.”

“Ivy, if you —”

“No, you tell him to talk to me *right* now. I deserve five minutes, don’t I? Because I promise, if I have to drag my ass across state lines to get his attention, he will not like it very much.”

She sighed. “Give me a moment.”

I pinched my eyes shut, my heart racing.

When the phone picked up again, I heard his sigh before he spoke a single word.

“Ivy.”

“Father.”

“What is it? I’m right in the middle of something.”

At the collected way he spoke, my eyes slammed shut.

I hadn’t talked to him in well over a week, and I still felt the sting of disapproval from the last time I was at home. But I kept my voice even, wrangling in the emotions that threatened to choke me.

Lynches are above reproach, and I refused to come to him like a beggar.

I felt like one, though.

“I know you’re busy, but I was hoping I’d still be able to see you tomorrow after your meeting in Portland.” I exhaled slowly, feeling that damned hook underneath my chin again as I forced it an inch higher. “I’d like

to show you where I've been spending my time."

He was quiet. "My schedule changed, Ivy. I won't be making the trip to Sisters anymore."

For a moment, I waited to see if he'd say anything else. If he'd ask me anything else.

Anything. A single question would be the kind of crumb that I could live on, knowing there was a way for us to move past this. The kind of questions he used to ask me about school. About my classes. My projects. My groups and committees.

No matter what happened between us, he'd always wanted to know what I was doing to get better, smarter, to improve.

But silence bloomed thick, both of us quiet for very different reasons.

Mine was anchored in the agony of waiting.

His was wielded like a weapon.

When I sucked in a breath, I tasted that silence on my tongue—bitter and acrid.

This must be what it felt like to be of no use to someone. Not just someone—to the person who was supposed to love me no matter what.

My throat was blocked tight with a thousand things I wanted to say. There was only one thing that edged past all the others.

"Don't you want to see me?" I asked quietly. "I'm ... I'm trying, Dad. I'm here, even though I didn't want to be."

"Ivy," he admonished.

"Answer the question," I said.

"Don't get hysterical."

"I'm not hysterical," I snapped. "I'm fucking pissed off, Dad."

Even that wasn't true.

But I couldn't allow that particular thought any oxygen. It would set fire to something that I wasn't prepared to contain.

I wasn't angry.

Anger was the easiest emotion to grab at first because it was safer. Safer than the real thing crawling up my throat.

"What on earth could you be angry about?" he said, so calm, so collected, so very cold. "You're practically on vacation, Ivy. You get to do whatever the hell you want for a couple of weeks in the middle of nowhere. Not all of us have that luxury."

My throat was raw and hot, my eyes burning. Neville wound through my

ankles, bumping his head against my legs.

“I don’t have time for this,” he said.

“For your daughter,” I added, my voice firm. “Finish that sentence appropriately if you’re going to have the balls to say it out loud. You don’t have the time for your daughter.”

He was quiet. “Not at the moment. My schedule is packed, Ivy. I have a million people who need a million things from me, and I can’t take time for this when there are other things of greater value pressing on my time.” Then he paused, and I heard a quiet sigh. “I’ll see you when you get home.”

He said it gently. Like that counted as an apology.

I was still holding the phone up to my ear when he hung up. When I tried to suck in a breath, it tangled deep in my lungs, a stuttering inhale that had my fingers tingling dangerously.

I was out of the house before I knew what I was doing, the door slamming shut behind me so hard that the entire house shook.

I stared up at the trees and felt my chin tremble dangerously.

A broken heart could come from so many places, and there was usually no warning of it.

It wasn’t just love or sex that caused the most damage. It was moments like this, when you were forced to rearrange an entire lifetime of what you thought was true.

I pressed my hands to my quaking ribs, and they felt like such a flimsy cage for what they were meant to protect.

A noise escaped my mouth, and I slapped a hand over that too, desperately trying to keep it in.

I’d never felt so alone, and I wanted ... I wanted...

The pressure inside my stomach and chest and throat was too tight for me to breathe through it, and for a second, I wondered what would happen if I tipped my head back and screamed up into the trees.

“Ivy?”

I blinked, my eyes dangerously wet when I registered the sight of Cameron getting out of his truck. He must have been driving by when he saw me because the engine was still running, and he strode toward me, leaving the driver’s side door open behind him.

“What happened?” he asked. His eyes frantically searched my face, his hands cupping my cheeks. “Are you hurt?”

I nodded, my chin trembling.

The first tear hit my cheek before I could stop it, a hot strike that made my ribs quake dangerously.

Then the second.

His brow furrowed as he stared down at me. His thumb brushed underneath my eyes, but there was no stopping the flow of tears.

I didn't even try.

Without my hand at my mouth to stop it, a sob crawled out of my throat—the first creak of the pressure valve. Then another, louder, and I swayed toward him. With a soft whisper of my name, he folded me into his arms, holding me so tightly that I knew I could release anything, and he'd keep me steady.

I gripped his waist, clutching at his back while I cried.

Chapter 26

Cameron

Ivy might not have cried for long, but she cried *hard*. I swept her up in my arms and walked her back into her house, the small sniffling noises she made against my neck causing an uncomfortable shredding sensation inside my chest.

When I settled onto the couch, her still in my lap, she took a deep, shuddering breath and tightened her arms around my neck. My hand moved in soothing circles on her back while she eventually quieted.

“You carried me,” she whispered. Her hand touched the edge of my chin.

I hummed, kissing the top of her head. “Good to know you’re still sharp as a tack.”

She exhaled a soft laugh. “Crying doesn’t mean my legs don’t work. Is it a man thing?”

“Oh yeah,” I said. With her legs arranged on the other side of my body, I could touch her there too. I laid my head against hers and breathed deeply. “Makes me feel useful in moments when I can’t actually fix anything.”

When Ivy lifted her head, her eyes were red-rimmed, her cheeks splotchy and pink. Gently, I cupped her face and pushed some of her hair behind her ears.

“Want to talk about it?” I asked.

She didn’t answer right away, simply stared up at me like she wasn’t sure I was real. Heartbreak was stamped all over that severe, beautiful face—raw and agonizing.

“No,” she whispered.

I’d never felt so helpless, so desperate to draw out whatever was making her feel that way. And I couldn’t.

I couldn't fix this.

I nodded slowly. "Okay. We don't have to."

For a moment, her brow pinched, maybe gauging how much I actually meant that. Eventually, her brow smoothed out, and her rib cage expanded on a deep inhale, then a slow exhale.

"Where were you driving?" she asked.

"Shit," I muttered. "My truck is still running." She started to get up, and I held her in place. "Just sit," I told her. "The engine shuts off eventually once you open the door. I think."

Ivy didn't argue, which was a miracle in and of itself, finally setting her head against my shoulder with a deep sigh. She picked up my hand where it rested on her thigh, tangling her fingers with mine as she held them against her middle. Neville hopped up onto the edge of the couch, and she laughed quietly when he made his way onto her lap, curling up next to our entwined hands.

We sat there for a few minutes, my nose against the top of her head.

"I was driving to your house," I said. "Guys are gone for the day, and I wanted to see how it looked with the floors done."

She nodded.

"Want to come with me?" I asked.

There was a moment of silence after I asked, and I held my breath, waiting for her to say no.

But then Ivy sniffled, momentarily tucking her face closer to mine. "Sure."

She picked up Neville first, and I watched with a tight chest as she let the cat bump his face against hers while he purred loudly. Ivy kissed the tip of his nose and set him on the ground. Then she slowly extricated herself from my lap.

The truck was still running when we went outside. Before she followed me out of the door, Ivy slipped on a large black sweatshirt that fell below her hips, swamping her frame completely, the hem of her shorts almost disappearing.

Under normal circumstances, I'd make a joke about it or try to slide my hand along the inside of her thighs while she sat next to me in the truck, but the silence was heavy in the wake of her emotional storm.

Ivy paused when she got in the passenger seat, glancing for a moment at the space between us on the bench. Then she took a deep breath, pushing up

the console so she could slide right against my side, wrapping her arm around mine and laying her head on my shoulder.

My eyes closed as I settled my hand on the bare skin of her thigh. The moment was almost too big to be contained in that small space, and the warmth spread through my body, better than just about anything I'd ever felt.

I wasn't sure what to call it. What name to give it.

It wasn't peace because that was too settled. Too sure.

No, there was no peace when it came to what I felt for Ivy because even with her pressed tight against my side, her body warm and soft on mine, I didn't feel like I could hold her and never let go.

The drive was too short, and I set the truck in park. It was a place transformed, and I wondered what she thought about that. A few more of my own crew had joined us the last couple of days, along with the subcontractors we used for siding and windows. The siding she'd picked was almost black, the shutters a warm wood tone.

I wondered if she noticed how similar it was to the colors I'd chosen for my own house.

She took a few moments to stare up at the house with loaded silence.

Her voice was thick when she spoke. "It doesn't look the same anymore."

"A lot has happened since the last time you were here."

We got out of the truck in silence, and I tucked my hands into my pockets while we ascended the newly fixed porch. No more leaning—fresh support beams in a squared-off style.

We stepped inside, and she took it all in with wide eyes. The floors were finished, and tomorrow, they'd be covered with rosin paper to protect them while the last of the work happened.

Even though a hefty layer of dust covered them, the transformation was pretty incredible.

Ivy walked through the kitchen and gently touched the newly painted cabinets.

I followed her through the primary bedroom at the back of the house, and the attached bathroom. All the choices she made were budget conscious, but elevated the house far past what it had been before.

She didn't spend long there, ascending the stairs after taking a deep breath. The new railing drew a small smile as her hand coasted along the top.

It wasn't until she reached the bedroom upstairs that used to be her mom's that she stopped in the doorway, gripping the trim with one hand.

Then she turned suddenly, yanking on the door and staring at the freshly painted wall behind it. Her shoulders slumped.

“What?” I asked.

“There was something here,” she said. “I didn’t ... I meant to see what it was. The night I stayed here.”

I pulled in a quick breath. “It was height marks.”

Her eyes snapped to mine. “What?”

Gently, I touched her arm. “Ian noticed it while he emptied out this room.” I drew her toward the closet and opened the door. On the top shelf of the closet were two neatly trimmed pieces, the smaller stacked on top of the larger. “He asked if I thought we should cut it out.”

“He did? Why?” she asked. But her hands reached up for the pieces, even as she asked.

I didn’t answer right away, just let her pull both pieces down.

The handwriting was the same on both. The first was labeled with years consistent with Ivy’s mom’s age. The last year she was marked would’ve been a few years before Ivy was born. Elizabeth Ivy was scrawled neatly on the shortest of the marks. When she moved it aside to look at the small piece, her chin trembled again.

There were only two marks.

Ivy Anne was written near the first, the handwriting much shakier than on the large piece.

“I don’t remember being here,” she whispered. “I don’t remember...”

Carefully, I stepped behind her and set my hands on her shoulders, dropping my nose into the top of her hair.

“I hate him,” she whispered.

My eyes closed. I kissed the crown of her head.

“Would it hurt so much if you did?” I asked quietly.

Her shoulders shook, and I knew she was crying again. I wrapped an arm around the front of her chest and held her from behind.

“He’s the only person I’ve had my entire life,” she said, “and I am just now realizing that he doesn’t actually know how to love anyone besides himself.”

I exhaled in a hard puff.

She kissed the edge of my arm, softening the blow when she pulled out of my embrace. Ivy set the pieces of drywall back in the closet and let out a trembling sigh. When she turned, her eyes were wide and terrified.

“*That’s* who I learned my lessons from,” she said, pointing at some imaginary person I couldn’t see. “That’s why I don’t know how to take care of anyone. Hell, I can hardly take care of *myself*, but I had straight As and was on the dean’s list and can write the hell out of a master’s thesis.” She swiped angrily at her face. “I don’t know if I would’ve been any different if she was still here, because I don’t remember her. Or my grandparents. Maybe I would’ve come here every summer because they wanted me to, and I would’ve met you a different way. Maybe I would’ve been a completely different person if I’d had a different sort of love than the one he gave me.”

My chest hurt. My heart hurt beyond words or definition.

I wanted to kiss her. Hold her. Anything, just to make her feel better.

“You don’t even know me, Cameron,” she said through her tears. “You don’t know my birthday or my favorite movie or why I got in trouble in grade school. It doesn’t make sense ... that you’re here and you’re doing exactly what I need.” Her voice caught on the words, eyes welling up again. She pressed a hand tight to her chest. “Do you know how scary this is? Someone taking this tiny, breakable part of you, and it’s just out for anyone to see, and anyone to hurt, and...” She stopped again, breathing choppy and short while she tried to force out the words. “You could hurt me so badly.”

Tears streamed down her face, and she dropped her chin to her chest and sighed raggedly.

“I don’t know how to *just* have sex and not...” She shook her head when the right words weren’t coming. “I don’t know how to do any of this.”

“I do know you,” I told her, taking one step closer.

Her eyes met mine and held.

“All those things? They’re bullshit details.” I shrugged even though my heart raced, and I was anything but calm. “I know the important things.”

She scoffed. “Like what?”

I tilted my head and studied the absolute disaster in front of me.

She was perfect. Every inch of her.

“You’re smart. You’re brave when it matters, you don’t take any shit, and I cannot tell you how attractive that is to me.” My hands moved slowly, sliding around the side of her neck and into her hair. My thumbs brushed the edge of her jaw. “You bought a leash for your cat even though you’ve never had a pet because you know he’d like to go for walks. You’re thoughtful but you hide it, because you think it’s ingrained in you to do things like bring flowers to my mom and have tea with her, or play chess with my dad. It’s

not. No one taught you to do those things. And you're terrified of my family—which I get, we're a little overwhelming—because you know that this is a place where you don't have to be anything in order for us to want you here. You don't have to earn your spot."

Her eyes never moved from mine, and I swear, I saw her heart just like she'd laid it out on the floor in front of me.

"That's ridiculous," she whispered. "Why would anyone be afraid of that?"

I smiled.

She sighed, her shoulders slumping as she deflated into my chest, her forehead resting right over my heart.

"I'm a mess," she whispered.

"No, you're not." I tilted her face up. "But I think I'll wait to kiss you until there's less snot on your face."

Ivy laughed, digging her fingers into the front of my shirt, fisting the material like I might disappear.

Then she lifted her head. "I don't know what's going to happen when I go back home. And I have to go back to Seattle at some point." She glanced around the bedroom. "I'm still selling this house. It's not meant for me, and I think you know that."

My throat was tight when I nodded. "I do."

She used the edge of her sleeve to wipe her nose, grimacing when she pulled it away.

"So what does that mean for us?" she asked.

I skimmed my hand over her forehead, pushing the hair out of her face, then cupped the back of her head. "We don't have to label anything, Ivy. We don't have to make some big declaration right now if that doesn't feel right."

"You would, though, wouldn't you?" she asked.

Fearless.

My girl was fearless for asking.

I gave her a little smile. "Maybe."

She gave a frustrated huff. "All you emotionally stable men who aren't afraid to say what you feel. What a crock of shit."

I laughed deep in my chest, and finally, she cracked a smile.

I leaned down and kissed her gently.

"Want to go back to my place?" I asked. "Just for tonight."

She quirked an eyebrow. "That's what I said last night."

“I think we can make our own rules, can’t we?”

Ivy stared up into my face, then finally nodded. “I suppose.”

I took her hand and started out of the bedroom when she paused. I glanced over my shoulder.

She bit down on her bottom lip before asking, “Can we get the cat? I don’t want him to feel neglected if I’m gone too much.”

My heart rolled over in my chest, bearing her name with every single aching beat.

“Yeah, we can get the cat.”

Chapter 27

Ivy

If I thought sleeping with Cameron Wilder was a bizarre turn of events, then dating him was fucking bananas.

I woke up the next morning—in his bed, wearing one of his T-shirts—and found him in the kitchen making scrambled eggs. He was shirtless and whisking things, and it was so much morning stimulation that I almost turned right around and crawled back in bed with the cat.

The cat wasn't privy to my crying rampage the day before, and the way I'd basically sliced open my insides and dropped all my emotional baggage for public consumption.

Hesitation wasn't an emotion I was familiar with, but I hesitated all the same.

How would it be different now?

But he saw me hovering awkwardly at the entrance to the room and grinned.

“Come here,” he said.

I crossed my arms. “Why can't you come here?”

God, leave it to me to make a ten-foot stretch of his kitchen into some symbolic war zone.

He raised a fancy-looking wooden spoon thing in the air and pointed at the eggs. “Unless you want breakfast to be overcooked, then I have to stay right where I am.”

“Fine,” I sighed. He held out an arm, and I tucked myself into his side, hand sliding easily over his stomach. The trail of dark hair that disappeared underneath his gym shorts felt particularly important, so I trailed my finger over it, back and forth.

He ducked down, stealing a heated kiss. “None of that.”

I grinned, pulling away to find a mug in the endless row of cabinets.

It was so natural.

And it was so freaking weird that it felt so natural that I was doing my best not to overthink the entire thing.

Was it really that easy?

We’d just *be*. No labels. No promises.

Enjoy each other’s company without the angst and drama of trying to pretend we didn’t want to be naked together all the time.

Not only that, but he’d handled my emotional hurricane like an absolute champ.

All we did the night before was kiss and cuddle because I was too emotionally spent to do anything else. In fact, my body was sore from the emotions wrenched from each muscle, as if someone wrung me out like a dish rag.

Crying hangover was real, and I’d never experienced one before. My head had a thick, cottony feel to it, and my eyes were still coated in sticky sandpaper.

Oddly enough, though, I felt better despite the stripped-down vulnerability I’d shoved in his face the day before.

I felt lighter.

Eventually, I’d have to deal with my dad.

Eventually, I’d have to figure out what all of this meant in the bigger picture.

I poured some of the steaming hot coffee and watched him slide the perfectly scrambled eggs onto two plates. He added salt, and then some pepper, and then sprinkled some shredded cheese on top.

I hopped up onto the island, crossing my legs slowly, because I liked the way he looked at me when I did.

“I do have furniture,” he said.

“This feels like a much more rebellious way to eat breakfast, though.” I took the plate with a smile, moaning when I took my first bite of eggs. As I finished chewing, I eyed him skeptically. “You did not make these.”

“You see anyone else in here?” He finished his eggs in about three wolfish bites, which should not have been attractive. Then he set down the plate and gently uncrossed my legs, stepping between them and sliding his hands up the outside of my thighs. “I’ll show you all my tricks.”

I snorted. “I’ll bet.”

I set the plate down and ran my hands over his chest, up over his shoulders, and down the thick muscular line of his arms. He gave me a lingering kiss, rubbing his nose against mine before he pulled away.

What must I look like right now?

Because in my mind, I stared up at him like some dopey lovesick puppy.

The man was feeding me, for fuck’s sake. He held me when I cried. Didn’t mansplain the situation with my dad, and he handed out orgasms like candy.

The only thing I could find wrong with him was his zip code.

“What are you up to today?” he asked.

“I told Poppy I’d go shopping with her. She wanted to find a dress for the festival.” I shivered when the tips of his fingers tracked over the edge of my underwear. “And I need to meet with Marcy about the estate sale for all the furniture.”

He dropped his head onto my shoulder and curled his massive arms around my backside, tugging me closer to the edge of the island in one rough movement.

“Were you listening to anything I said?” I asked in mock exasperation.

“Yes.” His voice was muffled because he was gently mouthing at my neck. “But it’s really, really hard to concentrate when you’re sitting here in my shirt.”

I bit down on my grin. I pushed at his shoulder, arching a brow. “Would it help if I took it off?”

Cameron growled under his breath and scooped me up over his shoulder.

With a breathless laugh, I gripped the waistband of his shorts as he clamped a hand over the back of my thighs and walked us down the hall toward his bedroom.

He left for work a little late, but with a smug-ass smile on his face that I thought about all morning.



“What about this?” Poppy asked. I wrinkled my nose, and she laughed.

“Okay, no floral prints for you.”

“Florals are fine,” I amended. “Those are sunflowers. I am not a sunflower dress girl.”

“Pretty sure you could wear anything, but...” She set the hanger back on the display.

“We’re here for you, remember?” I flipped through some options on the rack, tugging out a light purple wrap number that would look killer with her dark hair. I held it up, and she nodded. I added it to the stack on the chair behind her. “I didn’t realize the festival required sexy dresses.”

Poppy sighed. “They don’t. I just want to look nice. It’s a big weekend, having everyone in town for the first time in”—she stopped, doing some mental calculations—“years. Probably since Erik brought Lydia home for my parents’ anniversary party. He was sick then too.”

“How long ago was that?”

She sighed. “Maybe four years? I can’t even remember anymore. It kinda blurs together. It’s hard with all their schedules. Parker is insanely busy during the regular season, Erik and Lydia live up in Seattle, so do Adaline and her fiancé Emmett—who also plays football, but for a different team. And the team he plays for is the team Lydia’s family owns.”

My eyebrows shot up. “The Washington Wolves?”

She nodded.

“I’ve met Lydia, I think,” I said. “At a charity event for her mom’s foundation. She probably doesn’t even remember me.”

“I’m sure she will,” Poppy said. Then she brightened. “You guys can trade Ian stories. He was a total dick when she came home with Erik the first time.”

“Something to look forward to,” I said dryly.

We wandered the shop. Poppy forced the awful dress into my hands and said she deserved to see it after gaining knowledge of my sex life with her brother. Honestly, there was no arguing that, so I caved, and with a horrified twist of my lips, ripped the curtain back so she could see the sunflower monstrosity for herself.

She grimaced.

I nodded wordlessly, yanking the curtains closed and slipping back into my own clothes.

A few girls walked past the front of the shop while Poppy made her purchases, waving at Poppy and then giving me curious smiles.

I blew out a slow breath. “How likely is it that the incident at the bar was told around town?”

“A hundred percent,” Poppy answered easily. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Will I, though?”

She ignored my question since it was rhetorical.

“Everyone knows everything,” she said with a sigh. “Even if you don’t want them to.” Then Poppy leaned back, eyeing someone else walking outside the shop. “Speaking of which...”

I turned, noticing a woman with dark hair standing on the sidewalk, a phone pressed up to her ear.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

Poppy narrowed her eyes. “I can’t tell if it’s Harlow or not.”

The woman was stunning, with big dark eyes, heavily lined around thick dark lashes.

“She was Ian’s ... best friend, I guess. They were inseparable for, man, fifteen years? We always thought they’d get married, but he insists nothing happened. I haven’t seen her since she moved away after high school.”

“You think he knows she’s back?” I asked. “If that’s her, at least.”

She shrugged. “If he does, he hasn’t said a word. And no one else in town has mentioned she was back.” Her eyes widened. “They would too.”

“Because everyone knows everything,” I said.

“Exactly.”

“Like your dating life?” I asked, a shamelessly digging question.

She snorted. “My nonexistent dating life. I was the youngest of a massive family who wreaked havoc over those schools. Only a few very brave souls ever attempted to ask me out. *Four* older brothers, and two sisters who are honestly just as terrifying as the boys.” Poppy paused. “Well, Adaline isn’t scary. She’s the nice one. Greer, though? She will mess someone *up* if they screw with her family.”

I smiled. “Who’s the nice brother?”

I hadn’t met Erik or Parker, but I had a feeling I knew the answer to that question.

“Cameron,” she said easily, and my chest warmed that I was right. “Don’t get me wrong, he’s protective, he just shows it in a different way. He takes care of people. Always has. He’s never done it with threats or glares or punching out some dude who got handsy on a date.”

My eyebrow lifted. “You’ve had that?”

“Once,” she sighed. Then her cheeks flushed a brilliant red. “I was young. Still in high school. A senior asked me out, I wasn’t interested, and he got a little forward when I tried to say no. I told Greer, she got in the guy’s face when she ran into him downtown, and Cameron saw it.”

“I thought you said Cameron wasn’t the violent type?”

Not that I wouldn’t find it terribly appealing if he punched someone. Only if they really deserved it.

Gawd, I was sick in the head for this man.

“Oh he’s not.” She swallowed, her eyes cutting to mine. “His best friend Jax, though…”

Ahh.

The feverish look in her eye, the bright red cheeks.

Everything was coming together. Looks like I wasn’t the only one harboring inconvenient fantasies about testosterone-fueled violence.

We got back in the car, our shopping bags safely tucked in the back seat of her car.

“Jax punched a guy for you?” I asked lightly.

She cleared her throat. “Never confirmed or denied. But Jax followed him out of school one day, and the guy showed up with a black eye. He’s”—she swallowed again—“Jax will never admit if he did it. He’s like, ten years older than me and has *no* people skills. He hardly looks at me when we’re in the same room.”

“And you want him to?”

Poppy didn’t answer right away.

“I’m ready for someone who *will* look at me when we’re in the same room,” she said firmly. “I want to feel wanted.”

“Well that purple dress should help,” I told her. “You have a good push-up bra?”

“Ugh, yes. I hate wearing it, though.”

“Who doesn’t?” I eyed a pink-and-white-striped awning a couple of blocks down from the clothing boutique. “Is Jax back at work with Cameron now?”

“I think so.” She gave me a strange look. “Why?”

I pointed at the bakery. “We’re bringing donuts to the house, and you’re coming with me.”

She opened her mouth.

“No arguments,” I told her. “You made me try on a sunflower dress,

Poppy.” I eyed her over the rim of my sunglasses. “And wasn’t I right?”

She sighed. “You were right. You looked like Pollyanna.”

I shuddered. “I know.”

Poppy laughed, and we walked to the bakery, exiting a short while later with three boxes of donuts. When we arrived at the house, it was buzzing with activity, a far cry from the last time I’d seen it, and I tried not to gape at the sheer chaos and noise in the small rooms. Electricians worked on the last couple of light fixtures, laughing and chatting with plumbers as they installed the champagne bronze faucet over the kitchen sink. Cameron’s crew mingled between them, everyone doing finishing touches on a space that was completely unrecognizable from the first night I’d walked in.

Poppy gave me a wry grin when the work continued despite us standing in the door with an arm full of sugary treats.

“Donuts,” she yelled. “Eat ’em now, or I’m taking ’em home.”

The work came to a halt.

Then we were swarmed, lots of smiles and thank yous, and the first two boxes emptied at an alarming pace. From the second floor, Cameron’s boots, then his long legs appeared as he came down the stairs, his eyes landing unerringly on mine when he reached the landing. Ian was following Cameron, and behind him, a tall, muscular man with dark hair and hard features appeared next, ink covering his arms underneath the black T-shirt stretched across his chest.

Cameron gave me a pleased smile. “This is a surprise.”

“I wanted to say thank you to everyone for working on this so quickly,” I said.

He snagged a chocolate-covered donut and ate about half of it in one bite. As I stared at his mouth, those talented lips of his stretched in a dangerous smirk. “Careful, duchess, you’re going to make me do something crazy if you keep looking at me like that.”

I glanced away, cheeks hot and my breath coming in embarrassing pants because now I fantasized about Cameron and chocolate and creative uses for sprinkles. He laughed as he backed away from the donuts.

“This is Jax,” Cameron said, gesturing to Tall, Dark, and Tatted behind him. “Don’t be surprised if he’s unable to form a single polite sentence.”

Jax shoved his shoulder against Cameron’s, giving me a short nod as he took a donut out of the box. “Thank you,” he said in a deep voice. I watched him carefully as I smiled, and just like Poppy predicted, he didn’t give her a

single glance before he turned and walked away. My eyes cut over to hers, and she arched an eyebrow.

I told you so, her facial expression screamed.

My lips rolled together to hide my smile, and she sighed audibly.

As I clutched the box in my hands, Ian approached slowly. I let out a slow breath and met his gaze.

“I heard you’re the one who built that new railing on the stairs,” I said. “It’s stunning.”

“Just part of the job,” he said humbly. “Glad you like it.” He snagged a donut and gave me a quick nod. “Thanks.”

Before he could turn away, I stepped forward. “I know you and I didn’t get off to a great start, and I think it’s because we’re fairly similar in how we approach new people.”

Ian’s eyes were wary, and mine probably looked similar. “Could be.”

“That’s why I wanted to thank you for something.”

He paused, dark eyes thoughtful. “For what?”

I closed the box and set it on a sawhorse next to me. “For cutting out those height marks that you found.” Carefully, I clasped my hands in front of me. “You didn’t have to do that, and I appreciate your thoughtfulness, because it would’ve been very easy for you to ignore it, based on our earlier interactions.”

Ian sighed, his frame softening slightly as he nodded. “I’d want that piece of my family, if I didn’t have much of them.” Then he looked around. “It’s a good house, you can tell they loved it in little pieces like that.”

My throat was unbearably tight, and I swallowed past the lingering emotion lodged there. “I think you’re right. I hope whoever lives here next loves it in the same way.”

His jaw worked, but he didn’t say anything. Then he gave me a thoughtful look, and lifted the donut. “Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome.”

Cameron’s chest brushed against my back, and he came to stand next to me. “What was that?” he asked, voice low and quiet as he spoke close to my ear.

I watched Ian walk back up the stairs, my chest feeling warm and happy and light. “A truce, I think.”

“A truce with Ian,” he murmured. “Now why does that terrify me?”

I laughed quietly. “Maybe because he’d give me the longest list of your

faults?”

Cameron sighed. “Probably.”

I turned and looked up into his face, fully knowing I couldn't kiss him in front of the crew like I might want to. “I decided something today,” I told him.

He was staring at my mouth like he was having similar thoughts. “What's that?”

My hand briefly toyed with the edge of his sleeve where it was rolled up on his forearms. “I think it does make sense for me to stay with you at your place.”

Cameron's eyebrows climbed in surprise. “Yeah?”

He sounded so very smug, and I narrowed my eyes in response. “Yes, but it has nothing to do with your bedroom skills.”

He stepped a bit closer, ducking his head down toward mine. “That so?”

“Yes.” I sighed like I was terribly put out. “If I stay at a hotel, I'd have to leave Neville with you, and I don't want him thinking he's part of a broken home where he only sees me half the time. It'll give him a complex, and I simply can't imagine the therapy bills for that.”

Cameron laughed, a booming, happy sound that came from deep in that big, strong chest. I wanted to wrap myself up in it like it was a fucking blanket.

“Whatever you say, duchess.” He looked down into my face like the desire to kiss me was almost impossible to ignore. “Whatever you say.”

Chapter 28

Cameron

“What do you mean you haven’t taken her out on a date yet?” Greer asked.

“I mean, we’ve been busy this week,” I told her. “We’re trying to keep this casual.”

I rolled the plans up and tucked them back in the tube for safekeeping, then handed it to her. I didn’t even see her whip it at me until she whacked me in the side of the head.

“*Ouch*. What the hell was that?”

Her eyes were doing that scary glaring thing that she usually reserved for her other brothers, it was never aimed at me. “So you’ve been sleeping with her for over a week, she’s basically moving in with you so Erik and Lydia can have the guesthouse when they get here tomorrow, and you haven’t taken the girl out to dinner?” She made a disgusted scoffing noise. “I can’t even stand to look at you.”

Defensiveness tasted an awful lot like bitter chalk, and I tried to swallow it down.

It wasn’t like I didn’t want to take Ivy out somewhere, but we always just seemed to stay in.

And then we stayed in bed. Didn’t think that would help the direction of the conversation with Greer.

So I did what any good brother would do and deflected right back at her.

“What was your first date with your husband again?” I asked, tapping my chin. “Oh that’s right, you were interviewing potential husband candidates.” When she tried to hit me with the tube again, I snatched it midair and gave it a good yank. “Quit hitting me.”

“Are you trying to lose her?” Greer asked.

That had me pausing, my heart squeezing tight and uncomfortable at the thought. “Of course not.”

“Then take her out for a nice dinner, you dumbass.” She clucked her tongue. “Gawd, where would you boys be without us telling you what to do?”

“You really want me to answer that question?”

Greer narrowed her eyes, and I ruffled her hair as I passed. She tried to punch my stomach, and I sidestepped with a short laugh.

Wade came into the shop, returning a broken air compressor that needed fixed. “We’re about done over at the house,” he said. “Boys are putting on final hardware, installing the locks and the doorknobs and such.” He glanced between me and Greer. “Just waiting on inspections from the township. Cleaning crew comes in Monday, siding on the barn will wrap up the day after that, and it’ll be done.”

Greer gave me a loaded look.

“Thanks, Wade,” I told him absently.

“Have a good night,” he said.

I finished tidying up my desk, and then sank back in the chair, wiping a hand wearily over my face. “A nice dinner, huh?” I said. “That gonna do it?”

She perched on the edge of a work table. “You want her to stay longer?” she asked carefully.

“Of course I *want* her to.”

“Fine, are you going to ask her to stay longer?”

I rolled a pencil between my fingers and stared at the dull point of the lead. “If I thought that’s what she wanted. But I don’t know that it is.” I glanced up at my sister. “Her entire life is in Seattle.”

Greer exhaled slowly, and I could tell by the look in her eye that I wasn’t going to like what she had to say. “So what?”

My brow pinched in a frown. “So? That’s it?”

She shrugged. “We have these crazy contraptions called planes now.”

“It’s more than the flights and you know it.”

Her smile was sad. “I know. It’s impossible for you to do casual, isn’t it? No matter what you say.”

“With Ivy?” I asked. “Yeah. It’s impossible.”

“You Wilder boys,” she said fondly. “Once you fall, you fall hard, and there’s no stopping it, is there?”

I gave her a look. “Like you were any different with Beckett.”

She snorted. “Fair enough.”

“Speaking of Beckett, when does he get in tomorrow?”

“Just in time for dinner. He and Parker chartered a plane from Portland right after a team meeting they can’t miss.”

“Big weekend,” I said quietly.

Greer nodded. “Big weekend.” Then she stood and picked up her bag. “I’m going to head back to the house. Mom and Dad were watching a movie with Olive when I left, and I promised Mom I’d help her make dinner.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Think you’ll be joining us tonight?” she asked.

“No. I think I might listen to my really smart sister, but don’t tell her I said that. She’s obnoxious when she’s right.”

Greer laughed. “Deal.” Then she gave me a pointed look. “Have fun.”

After she left the shop, I pulled out my phone and sent a quick text.

Me: I’m picking you up in an hour. Wear something nice.



I tried to figure out what was wrong with my stomach when I pulled up to the guesthouse and took a final glance in the rearview mirror.

I didn’t think I was sick, but as I grabbed the small bouquet of wildflowers that I’d cut from Mom’s garden and straightened the neck of my dress shirt, I sort of felt like I might pass out.

I’d run out of time to shave. It was hard enough to wrap up my work and get a quick shower before changing my clothes and getting over to Ivy’s in time.

The dangerous flip-flopping in my belly only increased when I got out of the truck and approached the door.

God, I was so out of practice.

My last first date was ... I stopped, brow furrowing as I tried to remember.

I couldn’t.

The hard puff of air that came out of my mouth was harsh and loud, and it hit me like that stupid tube Greer whipped at my head.

I was *nervous*.

Immediately, I exhaled a quiet laugh because Ivy would fucking love it if I told her that.

There was nothing to be nervous about, I told myself, because all week, I'd gotten more than enough familiarity with Ivy Lynch in all sorts of new ways.

She liked morning sex and long showers doing God knows what in there for like thirty minutes. She hogged the blankets and cuddled in her sleep. She was ruthless about how she made the bed, and I'd had three tutorials already on how to fold the corners at the foot of the mattress. I still couldn't get it right. She watched the stock market while she drank her coffee and did crossword puzzles at a speed that was intimidating as hell.

She kicked my ass at chess but was never smug about it.

And all of that felt casual and easy, because it was knowledge gained one tiny piece at a time.

This felt purposeful.

Big and risky.

And my sister was right—it was stupid that I hadn't done it yet, because I wanted to do purposeful, risky things for this woman.

I slid a hand down the front of my shirt and knocked on the door.

"Come on in," she called from the inside.

When I walked in, she was facing away from me, putting in her earrings with the help of the large mirror leaning up against the wall.

Her eyes met mine in the mirror, and I settled a hand over my heart, humming slightly at the sight of her.

"You are so beautiful," I told her.

Ivy's smile was small, just the tiniest tug at the corner of her mouth, and when she finished with her earring, she turned slowly, studying me from head to toe.

She wore a deep green dress that skimmed her figure, a deep V in the front and back. Her hair was curled again, but pulled back off her face. Her lashes were darker tonight, her eyes lined with heavier makeup, and the long gold chain she'd been wearing the first day I saw her dipped low in the V of the dress, a tiny gold leaf dangling at the end, nestled against the mouthwatering hint of cleavage.

She approached slowly, her hand tracking lightly up the lapels of my deep charcoal suit jacket. Her eyes lingered on the base of my throat where I had

one button undone on the white dress shirt.

“So are you,” she said simply. Then she pushed up on the balls of her feet and laid a gentle kiss on my lips. “I do like you in a suit,” she whispered.

I smiled, rolling my forehead against hers while I fought the urge to rip the damn thing off and do the same with her pretty green dress. “I have one. I wear it for weddings and funerals,” I paused, “and first dates with beautiful women.”

Ivy’s eyes danced with laughter as she pulled back. “Well, you wear it well even if you don’t wear it often.” She hummed, sliding her hand over my shoulders. “It fits you perfectly.”

I curled my hand over her hip, dropping a kiss on her forehead. “These are for you,” I said, and handed her the dahlias.

“Thank you.” After a quick appreciative inhale, she pulled a glass out of the cupboard and set the flowers in water, placing them on the center of the island. “I’m ready if you are.”

Our eyes met and held when I opened the door for her—like neither of us could believe we were doing this after such a backward start to whatever this relationship was.

The nerves were gone as soon as we walked out, my hand resting lightly on her lower back while I opened the passenger door for her.

Once inside the truck, I caught her closing the passenger side mirror as she cleared her throat. Her hands clasped tightly in her lap, and she shifted her shoulders like she was about to meet a firing squad.

“You’re not nervous, are you, Ivy Lynch?” I teased.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said in a lofty tone. “I woke up this morning with your mouth between my legs. What on earth would I have to be nervous about?”

I laughed heartily, then settled my hand on her thigh, my heart rate settling into a normal rhythm when she slid her fingers between mine for the drive.

“I was,” I admitted.

Her head snapped in my direction. “You were?”

“A little.” I lifted her hand up and gently brushed my mouth against the skin on her knuckles. “I should’ve asked you to do this the moment you arrived in town.”

Her throat worked on a long swallow. “I would’ve said no then.”

I smiled. “I know. But I still should’ve asked.”

I'd picked the nicest restaurant I could think of in Redmond, exposed brick walls and soft romantic lighting, and requested a table in the back corner when we arrived.

Because it was a weeknight, it was fairly quiet, and we were able to sit next to each other in the booth they'd selected for us.

The conversation was easy while we got our drinks and perused the menu. We had similar tastes in music, and neither of us spent much time watching movies or TV.

She liked historical fiction or biographies if she read a book.

I liked war memoirs and the occasional mystery.

We both ordered steak—but she preferred a medium rare filet and I got the rib eye.

Her manners were impeccable, and I watched her cut her steak with a smile hovering over my lips.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she said evenly.

“I can't help it. You're so prim and proper. Makes me think about all the ways you're not.”

Ivy sighed, like she was terribly put out. But her lips curled up when she placed another bite of steak in her mouth.

Ivy tilted her legs toward me underneath the table as she sipped on her wine. “Ugh, I can't believe I'm sitting like this voluntarily.” Her nose wrinkled, then she gave me a sidelong look. “It's your fault.”

I laughed quietly, setting down the glass of whiskey I'd ordered to study her more openly. “Yeah?”

“Please. You know exactly what that suit does for your upper body.” She sniffed, a haughty tilt to her chin that had me half hard already. “If you're on the opposite side of the table, I can't touch you inappropriately when the mood strikes.” She arched a brow. “Unacceptable date practice.”

My arm settled easily behind her back along the top of the booth, and she angled into my side even further. Much more of that, and she'd be on my lap.

“I'll have to agree with you there, duchess,” I told her easily. With a quick glance around the restaurant to make sure no one was watching, I ducked in and teased her lips with my own. She softened immediately, opening her mouth to lightly touch her tongue to mine.

The wine was what I tasted first, and I forced myself to pull back, unwilling to make a scene at the restaurant.

We decided to order dessert to go, a slice of rich chocolate cake that we

could share while she sat on my kitchen island, and I stood between her legs. We did most of our eating that way all week, and it was rapidly becoming my favorite way to have breakfast.

“Why do you still call me that?” she asked.

“Does it bother you?”

“No,” she said on a sigh. “Even when I pretended it did, it didn’t.”

I smiled. “You told me in the elevator that no one ever teased you. I probably liked knowing that a little too much.”

She hummed, taking the last sip of her wine. “I know, I could see it in your eyes every time you said that. I was convinced you were part sadist because you wanted me to haul off and slap you.”

With a laugh, I watched while she picked up my hand in her own, turned it and slid her fingers along the inside of mine.

“Everything in my life was so serious,” she said quietly. “Serious and scripted.” Ivy wasn’t holding my hand. She simply traced the lines in my palm, dragging her fingertips over the calluses there. “And I’m trying to figure out if this—you and me—feels like a rebellion, or an emancipation.”

It was natural that this date might edge us closer to a conversation we’d never planned on having, and Ivy avoided eye contact while she made those admissions she probably didn’t intend to make.

And I had a feeling that if it was her intention, she wasn’t looking for me to help her make up her mind.

“Doesn’t the first sometimes lead to the second?” I asked.

“I suppose it does.” Her eyes finally met mine.

The server left the bill on the table, and I shifted forward to pull my wallet out of my back pocket, tucking my credit card into the sleek leather portfolio.

“Thank you for dinner,” she told me. “It was delicious.” Then she eyed my face. “Company was passable, too.”

I eyed her mouth, fighting a grin. “Passable,” I murmured. “I wonder what it takes to truly impress Ivy Lynch?”

She inhaled slowly, eyes glancing around the restaurant as I slid my hand down the bare skin of her back until my fingers danced inside the edge of her dress where it met her rib cage. “You’re an intelligent man. You’ll think of something before we get home.”

It was good she didn’t see me, because my eyes slammed shut at her casual use of the word.

I didn't think she meant it that way, but God, I wanted her to.

I cradled her jaw with my other hand and brushed my lips over hers before sinking deeper into the kiss with a low groan. Gently, she carded her fingers through the hair on the back of my head and teased her tongue along mine.

We pulled back, both breathing heavily when the server approached with a deferential clearing of her throat.

"Your dessert," she said, setting down a small bag with a knowing grin.

"Thank you," I told her.

"Have a wonderful evening."

I held my hand out to Ivy after I stood from the booth, and she twined her fingers through mine as we left the restaurant. Eyes followed us as we walked, but it wasn't because they knew me or her. I couldn't help but think it was simply because we looked very much like a young couple desperately in love with each other.

The air was cool when we strolled down the sidewalk. Downtown Redmond was larger than Sisters; brick building facades, big planters spilling over with brightly colored flowers, and a tall wrought-iron arch kept the charm that I'd always loved about a small town.

Ivy was quiet as we walked, studying the quaint street with a sharp look in her eye.

"Your wheels are turning," I said.

She quirked her eyebrow and glanced up at me. "How can you tell?"

I reached up to smooth the edge of my thumb right between her brows. "You get a cute little pinch right here when you're thinking hard."

"I'll blame that one on my father," she said. "He gets that same one."

I didn't say anything, just tightened my grip on her hand as we walked, because I'd take her lead when it came to that subject.

"My whole life, he raised me for one purpose. To step into his shoes someday." She paused her steps, staring up at a storefront with floor-to-ceiling windows and a bright red front door flanked by black planters filled with glossy green leaves. "My bedtime stories were board reports. Our vacations weren't really vacations. They were always about market research. He'd point out pros and cons of any given location he was thinking about purchasing. Why he could charge more. Why he'd charge less. Why he'd split it into multiple spaces. Why he'd buy land and build something from scratch. I find myself wondering what he'd do every time I see a space for

sale. Save it before I even know why.”

I tried to figure out why this particular storefront caught her attention, but I listened attentively all the same.

“And I soaked up every single word,” she said. “It was the way he related to me, I think, or tried to. But I remember seeing little stores like this and wondering how the hell he was able to detach himself from whatever went into those spaces that he bought.” Ivy moved forward and gently touched her free hand to the glass. Shoes and sleek leather bags were on display behind the glass. Big, bold paintings and a faceless mannequin wearing a scarlet-red dress. “Wouldn’t he want to know that they’d succeed?” Then she looked up at me. “Wouldn’t *you*?”

I managed a nod, unable to speak.

Behind my ribs, something big and terrifying started to build, pushing insistently on the confines of that small space until I couldn’t ignore it anymore.

I didn’t want to pretend there wasn’t this giant gaping hole in my future if she wasn’t a part of it because there would be.

“Is that what you want too?” I asked, and my voice came out ragged and raw, like someone dropped a cactus in my throat and forced me to speak around it.

Ivy didn’t answer right away, her chest rising and falling on rapid breaths that belied the calm, steady look on her face. It was only that slight furrow in her brow that gave her away.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. Then she glanced up at me, her eyes pleading for some unnamed thing. “But I think my dad detached from me too. Right now, to him, I look like an investment that didn’t pay off. I’m like all these big empty buildings that he can turn into whatever they need to be. It doesn’t matter what’s inside them, you know? And shouldn’t it?”

“Yes.” I cupped her face. “Yes.”

God, it mattered to me.

It mattered so fucking much that if she really wanted to fly back to Seattle and make a billion dollars off all those empty buildings, I’d probably tear my life inside out to keep her in it.

Ivy stepped into my chest, wrapping her arms around my waist underneath my jacket. When I folded my arms around her and set my chin on the top of her head, she exhaled slowly.

We stayed like that for a long moment, just breathing each other in.

Then she looked up. “What was the best Christmas present you ever got?”

Warmth radiated through my chest at the look in her eyes. It almost hurt because it felt so good.

That was probably the scariest part about shifting from *I could love this person* to the fall itself. It wasn't messy or painful or loud. It was quiet moments like this, when you saw the moment that what you're feeling was anchored in something real, and it was built in a hundred different exchanges that all felt small at the time.

“Poppy,” I answered easily. “She was born on Christmas Eve, and when we all went into the hospital to meet her, Sheila had put this big red bow on top of the blanket they'd wrapped her in.” I smiled. “It was just ... chaos in that hospital room with all us kids. Loud and noisy and we were all fighting about who got to hold her first. But I remember looking down on her sound asleep in that plastic bassinet with the red ribbon and thinking, there won't ever be a Christmas present to top this.” I shrugged. “And there wasn't.”

Ivy shook her head slowly, gaze tracing fondly over my face. “Unbelievable.”

“What?”

Her eyes shimmered. “That's such a perfect answer, it makes me sick.”

With a deep laugh, I tightened my arms, and then kissed her.

Her lips were so sweet, the sounds she made so perfect. Her body arched into mine, and I wished for nothing more than the power to freeze time.

Ivy's hands clutched at my back, and she wouldn't let me pull away, even when I broke the kiss to try to steady my breathing.

Eventually, she stepped back, and wrapped her hand through the crook of my elbow when I offered it to her. We walked the rest of the way to my truck like that, and she still looked deep in thought when I opened the door for her and gave her my hand to help her into the truck.

Our drive home was comfortably quiet, her hand tight in mine.

Back at my house, we undressed each other slowly, trading long, luxurious kisses and wandering hands. For the first time, Ivy wanted to be in control, and God, I was so far gone for her that there was no argument from me. She pushed me back on the bed and anchored her hands on my chest as she swung her leg over my lap.

With her breasts brushing against my chest, we kissed and kissed until my hands gripped her hips with barely leashed strength.

“Ivy,” I begged.

She sat up, arching her back like a cat, eyes locked on mine and a smile teasing her lips, and only broke the gaze as she tipped her head back and sank down over me with a satisfied hiss.

Heaven.

Somehow, it only got better. My craving for her was never satisfied.

This only ever made me want more and more and more.

Slowly, she rocked back and forth, and I fought the urge to increase the pace and snap my hips up from underneath her. So I lay back and watched her chase her pleasure, gritting my teeth when she dragged her nails along my chest and stomach as her hips began to move faster, as she ground down against my stomach and found just the right angle.

Her brow pinched when my fingers tightened around her backside.

She came with a slow, soft moan, and I sat up, slanting my mouth over hers in a searing kiss. We turned, and she hitched her hip up my side, kissing me with lazy, tongue-tangling kisses when it was my turn to chase.

And I did.

It hit me like a freight train, barreling down along my spine when she tilted her hips up in time with my thrusting hips.

“That’s it,” I told her, then kissed her sweet, sweet lips. “That’s it.”

We turned onto our sides, legs and arms entangled. I kissed her forehead, and she tucked her arms between us while I held her tight to my chest. I’d hold her there forever if she’d let me, and that was the scariest part of falling in love with someone.

There was no guarantee that she felt anything close to the same.

My arms tightened, and I pressed a kiss to the top of her head while she caught her breath.

“That was the best first date I’ve ever had,” she whispered.

I smiled. “Me too.”

Ivy fell asleep quickly after that, and while I memorized the rise and fall of her ribs while she breathed deep and even, I tried not to think about sleeping in this bed without her in it.

Chapter 29

Ivy

Everything inside Tim and Sheila Wilder's home looked like a fucking Norman Rockwell painting, and a massive part of me was still trying to figure out how the hell I ended up right in the middle of it.

It wasn't even cold out, but a roaring fire in the massive rock fireplace served as the anchor to the middle of the house.

I was on the couch with a book of crossword puzzles perched on a pillow in my lap.

Poppy sat on the opposite side of the couch, her Kindle sitting in a similar position.

Ian was in the kitchen with Sheila, helping her with something that smelled borderline narcotic.

Cameron watched football with his dad, and if I was being honest, it sounded like they were speaking a different language.

"Why would you run it on fourth and fifteen?" Cameron asked.

Tim motioned for his water, and Cameron leaned over to hand it to him. "Because their offensive coordinator is an idiot."

The game played out quietly in the background, and I watched the bodies scrambling around. It didn't look like there was any plan to what they were doing, just scrambling like ants on that emerald-green field.

Ever since Cameron pointed it out, I could feel that damn furrow in my brow when I was thinking.

I'd probably wrinkle there first.

"What?" Cameron asked. He wasn't sitting by me. We'd decided that copious displays of physical affection in front of his family was a bad idea. Mainly because we couldn't keep our hands off each other when we were

within touching distance and mounting him on the couch might make meeting the rest of his family a little uncomfortable. “I can see you thinking over there.”

Tim smiled. “Isn’t she always thinking?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” I agreed. Except when I was having brain-altering sex with his son but I decided to keep that to myself. “Just trying to figure out how anyone can make sense of what’s happening on that field.”

“I take it you don’t watch much football at home with your dad?” Tim asked. He was clear-eyed and more energetic than I’d ever seen him, clearly anticipating the arrival of the rest of his kids, who’d begin descending on the home at any moment. I only sort of felt like I was going to puke, hence the death grip on my crossword puzzle book.

“None,” I told him. My head tilted slightly as the talking heads behind the desk switched to a different game replay. “Their pants are nice, though.”

Cameron gave me a heated look, and I smiled sweetly.

Poppy snorted.

Greer came inside with her daughter Olive in tow. In Olive’s hand was a wilted bunch of wildflowers, and she skipped over to Tim, shoving them toward him without a word. Her eyes were big, and her expectant smile made my heart clench.

“My goodness, are these for me?” he asked. Then he held open his arms, and she carefully climbed up into his lap, minding his oxygen tube. “Beautiful flowers from a beautiful girl,” he said, then kissed the top of her head. “I bet Grandma Sheila would get some water for these if you go ask.”

Her eyes shined with pleasure, and she hopped off his lap with a happy smile on her face. Sheila was working on something in the kitchen with Ian, but paused to lean over when Olive asked her something so quietly I could hardly hear her. Sheila set her hand on the little girl’s back and whispered by her ear, following up with an encouraging smile.

Olive glanced up at Ian a little nervously.

Couldn’t blame her there. Even with our tentative peace, from a young girl’s perspective, he probably looked terrifying—big and tall and bearded, with a bear-like presence and a gruff demeanor. Which was why it shocked the absolute hell out of me when he motioned her closer and gently lifted her up in his arms and opened a cabinet door above the fridge. She leaned up, tongue tucked between her lips, flowers pressed so tightly against her chest that she was crushing them, and grabbed a small vase with her other hand.

He took it from her with a tiny wink, and then set her on the kitchen counter while he filled it with cold water. I watched over the edge of my book, feeling like some voyeur peeping through a crack in the wall. She was a quiet girl, and they all treated her with infinite patience.

And over the next couple of hours, the house would double with the amount of Wilders.

Insert the sound of my panicked laughter that I couldn't quite lock down in my mind.

My stomach tipped dangerously with nerves. I'd woken with a tight chest, taking infinite care to get ready that morning. Cameron was out the door long before I was awake, helping Ian split wood or chop down trees, I wasn't even sure. It all sounded very outdoorsy and out of my wheelhouse.

Which meant I spent the morning alone with my thoughts, staring at my clothing options with a growing sense of dread.

Had you ever tried to pick an outfit to impress your non-boyfriend's family when he sort of felt like your boyfriend and you sort of felt like you might be falling in love with him even though it was a horrible idea and you had no idea how to act around his big, scary, loving family?

It was *hard*.

Add into that mix that I was about to walk into a cheesy movie small-town festival when I'd never attended one of those in my *life*, and it felt an awful lot like I'd want to start day drinking shortly after finishing my second cup of coffee.

I didn't, but I sure as hell thought about it.

Ultimately, I settled on a pale pink floaty skirt that felt about as casual as I could manage, a pair of Italian leather sandals with straps that wrapped around my ankles, and a white tank top. When I walked into the house, Cameron looked at me like he wanted to eat me alive, so I figured I'd chosen well.

Then again, he was a terrible judge of whether I'd chosen well because I was quickly realizing that he always looked at me that way.

Greer plopped onto the couch between Poppy and me, and I watched with the slightest pang of envy when Poppy immediately repositioned herself to lay her head down on Greer's thigh. Greer absently played with her sister's hair while she watched the football replays with Tim and Cameron.

"When are they getting here?" Poppy asked.

Greer glanced at the clock on the wall. "Adaline texted me when they left

Seattle. They should be here any minute.”

“They flew, right?” Cameron asked.

Greer nodded. “Lydia chartered a flight, so she and Erik and the baby are with them too. Beckett and Parker will get here in about an hour.” Then she looked at me. “You ready for all this?”

“Not even a little,” I admitted.

She laughed. “You’ll be fine.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, but I appreciated her vote of confidence all the same.

“Everyone under one roof,” Tim sighed happily. “It’s been too long.”

Sheila made her way over to the family room, perching on the arm of Tim’s chair. “You sure you’re up for a visit downtown?”

“Wife, you’ve asked me that seventeen times in the last six hours, and my answer hasn’t changed once. I told you I’m going to do it, and I will.” He patted her arm. “I’m fine. This is why we have wheelchairs.”

She sighed, but her nerves were clearly stamped on her face.

Cameron watched his parents carefully, and I watched Cameron.

My body practically vibrated with the urge to shift closer to him. Hold his hand, just in case it made him feel better.

It was *weird* and horrible and helpless, to care for someone like this. Objectively, I knew I couldn’t actually make him feel better but I couldn’t stop myself from wanting to try. The sensations growing steadily in my chest were foreign, with sharp, fixed edges rolling closer and closer to something permanent, even if it managed to defy definition.

Tim picked up Sheila’s hand and gave it a sweet kiss, and then he nodded to Cameron. “Help me up, won’t you? I want to be in my wheelchair outside when they get here. If I don’t get first dibs on that baby, I’m going to be cranky.”

“What about me?” Ian asked. “I’ve never even met her, why do you get to hold her first?”

Tim eyed his son over the rim of his glasses. “Don’t make me pull the cancer card because you know I will.”

Ian rolled his eyes, but his mouth was soft with a rare smile. He went to get the wheelchair, folded and kept out of the way in Sheila and Tim’s bedroom. Cameron stood and gripped Tim under both arms, Sheila helping from behind, and he stood with a slight grimace.

“Got it?” Cameron asked, watching his dad’s face carefully as he got his

weight under his feet.

Tim nodded. “Can’t be here for long, but I’m all right.”

Poppy sat up, closing the cover on her Kindle. “Do you need an extra blanket, Dad?”

Even though it was perfect outside—sunny and warm with only the slightest of breeze—Tim was painfully thin and always cold.

“Thank you, sweetheart.” Tim kept a tight grip on Cameron and Sheila’s hand while Ian parked the wheelchair behind where he stood. Once it was locked, Ian eased his dad back into the chair with his hands under his arms from behind.

Olive scooped up the biggest, fluffiest blanket from a pile tucked neatly in a basket next to the couch, and even though it was practically bigger than she was, she tried to hand it off to Poppy and almost tripped on the hem in the process.

Poppy leaned down with a smile. “Why don’t you go help him with it? I think he’d like it better from you anyway.”

Olive scooped up the long ends and walked carefully over to the wheelchair, stuffing the blanket in one giant wad onto Tim’s lap. Cameron smothered his smile, but the way he watched his sister’s stepdaughter was *lethal*.

It made me think about babies with dimples and his warm, dark eyes.

Good Lord, he was infecting my brain with thoughts of procreation.

How much worse could this possibly get?

With the blanket settled as well as could be expected, and the portable oxygen tank hooked up in place of his larger permanent one, Ian pushed Tim’s wheelchair out of the living room and onto the massive wraparound porch.

It seemed that there was a silent decision for everyone to shift locations while we waited for the Seattle group to arrive, and I eyed my security blanket/crossword puzzle book longingly before setting it down on the table closest to my seat.

Cameron came up behind me and anchored his big hand briefly on my hip while he leaned down to whisper in my ear. “Stop worrying.”

He brushed a quick kiss to my temple, and I gave him a dry look. “Sure thing, boss.”

Under his breath, he chuckled and the sound of it—deep and amused—warmed me down to my fucking toes.

Ugh. It was the best feeling ever.

I hated it.

He dropped his hand from my side to hold open the front door for me, and I walked out onto the front porch just as an expensive-looking black SUV with dark tinted windows pulled down the long drive.

“Is that Daddy?” Olive asked.

Greer scooped Olive up onto her lap. “Not yet, sweetpea. He’s coming with Uncle Parker in a different car. They’ll be here after lunch.”

I stepped back to observe, and for the first time in my life, I wished for a camera in my hand because I knew I was witnessing something poignant, beautiful, and heartbreaking this weekend. It was a family gathering one last time because they all knew what was around the corner.

I glanced up at Cameron, studying the stoic, tight-jawed expression on his face as the car pulled to a stop in front of the house. He kept telling me he was fine, but *I* didn’t feel fine, and this wasn’t even my family. His eyes were so conflicted, and unwilling to stop myself, I reached down and wove my fingers through his.

His chest expanded on an inhale, and even though he didn’t tear his eyes away from the car, he squeezed my hand.

The first person out of the car was Adaline Wilder—I knew it was her from the stunning similarity she held to Greer and Poppy.

She hopped up the front porch and flung herself in Ian’s waiting arms. When she leaned back, she cupped his face in her hands, studying him with her face split in a massive grin. “Holy shit, you need a haircut,” she said, then kissed his cheeks.

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” he grumbled as she moved to Tim and Sheila for hugs and kisses.

Next was a tall, muscular man with golden good looks and a jaw that *almost* rivaled Cameron’s. He greeted the family with easy smiles and hugs, and then held his hand out to me. “Emmett Ward,” he said, then tipped his head toward Adaline. “I tag along with this one.”

On her left hand, I noticed a gorgeous vintage set diamond.

“Ivy,” I told him. “Nice to meet you.”

A gorgeous blonde got out of the car—I was right, I’d met her years ago at an event—pausing to wait for her tall, dark-haired husband, who quickly unhooked an adorable little girl with a shock of dark hair, setting her on his hip as they walked toward the porch.

“For fuck’s sake,” I mumbled under my breath.

Cameron looked down. “What?”

I studied Erik Wilder—just as tall and imposing and gorgeous as the rest of them. “What is with your family’s gene pool? This is not normal.”

He laughed.

Erik and Lydia traded hugs with Greer and Poppy, and Lydia smacked Ian in the stomach as she passed to greet Tim and Sheila. Erik and Ian shook hands—a more reserved greeting than I’d seen between any of the siblings—but Ian softened when he took in the little girl in Erik’s arms. He smiled when she ducked away shyly.

“Isla must be your daughter,” he said cryptically. “She already doesn’t like me.”

Erik rolled his eyes. “She’ll get over that. We all do.” He moved past Ian and crouched down in front of Tim, kissing the top of his daughter’s head. “Want to go sit on Grandpa’s lap?” he whispered.

The happy chatter quieted down, and Adaline gave me a tiny wave from across the porch. Her eyes darted quickly down to my hand in Cameron’s, and her smile spread. She elbowed her fiancé, and he whispered something in her ear before kissing her temple.

Adaline’s attention moved from me and Cameron back to Tim and the baby.

Erik set her carefully on his dad’s lap, and we all laughed when she immediately tried to grab at the oxygen tubes snaked around his ears.

“Take that stupid thing off,” he said to Sheila without taking his eyes from his granddaughter. “Just for a few minutes.”

She sighed. “Stubborn man,” she said fondly, but she complied. Gently, she unhooked Isla’s chubby hands from around the tube and pulled it from around his head.

“There we go,” he said contentedly. “Aren’t you the prettiest girl in the world?” he whispered, then he gathered her body close to his chest and pressed a soft kiss to the top of her hair. “Yes, you are.”

Lydia snapped a few pictures, her eyes visibly shining. Her husband stood, wrapping his big arm around her shoulders.

Everyone on the porch watched the family’s youngest member bounce happily in her grandpa’s lap, and I heard a couple of sniffles.

Sheila discreetly wiped a tear from her cheek.

Poppy laid her head on Adaline’s shoulder, her other arm hooked around

Ian's waist.

It was such a heavy, private moment, and I felt like I was intruding.

Tim looked up, a tiny smile on his lips while he glanced at his family. "Oh come on now, I'm not dead yet. We better not blubber through every single moment this weekend, or I'll go to the festival by myself." He looked up at his wife with a wink. "You ready for her?"

Sheila approached eagerly. "Always." Then she scooped the baby up in her arms and cuddled her tight. "Who's hungry?"

Erik, Ian, Adaline, and Cameron all raised their hands immediately. Adaline's fiancé laughed at the eager expression on her face.

Sheila raised her brows and tilted her head toward the house. "Great. You know how to feed yourselves. I have a baby to cuddle."

When the laughter faded, Erik Wilder finally noticed me standing next to Cameron, and he narrowed his eyes. "Who's this?"

All eyes swung to me, silence falling for an entirely different reason. I kept my chin level and imagined a giant fucking spotlight sweeping across a stage, the hot circle of light falling right onto me and Cameron.

Tim spoke up first. "She's Cameron's..." He took in the way I was pressed to his side, our hands clasped tightly. "Client," he finished lamely. "Friend?" He gave the son holding my hand a wide-eyed look for help.

Cameron squeezed my hand, laughing quietly under his breath. "This is Ivy," he said.

The skin of my cheeks was approaching surface of the sun level heat, even with his simple, no-frills announcement.

Poppy gave me an encouraging wink. "You'll love her," she proclaimed. "She offered to cuss everyone out when I was bitching about how you still treat me like a child sometimes."

More than a few eyebrows shot up, and Greer had to cover her mouth to keep from laughing out loud. My eyes slammed shut, and I wondered how easy it would be to vault over the railing on the porch and hide in the woods.

"Thank you, Poppy," I said. "This is exactly the kind of introduction I envisioned this morning."

Greer lost her battle, snorting into her hand.

Cameron disentangled his hand from mine, sliding his arm immediately around my shoulder. "Well, that should tell you how great she'll fit in," he said easily.

I gave him a long look, which had his grin spreading.

“True,” Erik said, his eyes weighing me from across the porch as his lips curled into a small smile. “But she’s got a long way to go if she wants to keep up with the rest of us in that category.”

Sheila sighed. “What every mother wants to hear. Come on, let’s get your bags inside and get some lunch.”

Chapter 30

Cameron

Dad asked to eat his lunch out on the front porch.

Ian and I traded a look because we knew he was waiting for Parker to arrive, and once he was back in that leather recliner, the old man always fell asleep if he managed to eat something.

Mom didn't fuss over his request, simply squeezing his shoulder.

Emmett and Adaline unloaded their suitcase from the SUV, bringing it in after they'd greeted everyone. Erik and Lydia left the baby—Poppy had already snagged her from Mom under the pretense of youngest aunt privileges—and drove the car back to the guesthouse where they could unload their things.

Ivy watched them drive off with a thoughtful twist of her lips.

"What is it?" I asked.

I thought maybe her eyes would dart up to mine, but she kept her gaze trained on the vehicle as it took the small curve toward my oldest stepbrother's former house. "So if Erik hadn't moved away, you all would've just ... lived on the same property."

"I guess."

"On purpose."

With a grin, I nodded. "Yes."

"But you don't feel like one of those families who'd have a big, weird commune thing." Finally, she looked up at me. "You're all so normal. Other than the freakishly good looks," she added. "*That* is not normal."

My shoulders shook with repressed laughter. "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say to that one, duchess."

She sighed heavily. "Just trying to figure all of you out." She looked into

my face. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Poppy had little Isla cuddled in her arms, Olive studied her new cousin with a shy smile on her face. Dad watched them with a contented smile on his gaunt face, and I already knew that this weekend would decimate whatever limited amount of energy he still possessed. Ian hovered behind him, and I could tell on his face we were worried about the same thing.

“Fine,” I told her.

She arched an eyebrow. “Mm-hmm.”

“I am,” I insisted.

That furrow appeared in her brow. Ivy didn’t believe me. Which was fair, because I wasn’t sure I believed myself.

After swiping a weary hand over my face, I settled my weight on the railing of the porch, widening my legs so I could sit and face her. It meant dropping her hand, but I liked watching her face when she puzzled through something.

“Brain’s working awfully hard over there?” I asked her.

Before she could answer, the door opened, and Adaline popped her head out. She marched up to us and set her hands on her hips, studying Ivy with a frank look in her eyes. “Hi. I’m stealing you.”

Ivy’s mouth fell open. “I ... okay?”

I laughed quietly at the slightly panicked look in her eye. “Easy, Adaline. No interrogations.”

She blinked innocently. “*Why* would I interrogate your client slash friend?”

Fucking Dad and his fumbled answer. I narrowed my eyes in a warning glare. “Excellent question.”

Adaline grinned, hooking a friendly arm through Ivy’s and gently steering her inside the house. “Okay, so explain this *cussing us out* offer,” she said. “Normally, Greer is the scary one, but we could probably make room for one more.”

“Good Lord,” I mumbled under my breath. Forget worrying about any mistakes I might make; my sisters were going to send her running before I could ever screw this up.

I joined Ian as he leaned up against the house behind Dad’s chair. He watched Isla.

“Erik has a baby,” he stated.

“Indeed he does.”

“Like ... a mini version of him,” he continued. “Do you think she’ll be an obnoxious know-it-all like he was? Or is there enough Lydia in there to temper the worst parts of his personality?”

I gave him a wry glance. “I can’t help but notice that you’re intelligent enough to ask these questions when Erik isn’t here to smack the shit out of you for insinuating it would be a negative thing that his child would end up like him.”

He snorted, but the look in his eyes was fond when he studied the baby. “Weird to think about all this, isn’t it? How we’ve all changed. The way our lives are different now.”

Dad glanced back at Ian. “Except you and Parker. If it wasn’t for Ivy, I’d be oh for three with my boys finding someone who’d put up with their shit.” As I laughed, Ian shook his head. But Dad’s face was stern. “And quit talking crap about your older brother. I’ll have no insinuations that my granddaughters are anything but perfect.”

Poppy blew a raspberry into the baby’s neck, and she giggled. “This is half our problem, Isla,” she said to the little girl even though she couldn’t understand. “Dad has given us girls an almost reckless amount of confidence because he thinks we’re just the best thing ever created.”

“That’s because you are,” Dad insisted.

Ian rolled his eyes.

The sound of a car had all of us pausing because it wasn’t the dark SUV that Erik and Lydia left in.

It was Parker.

Ian and I traded a loaded look, and Poppy took the cue immediately. “Olive, why don’t we go see if Grandma Sheila has a sandwich ready for you, okay?”

She took one last lingering glance at the approaching car, and then gave me an encouraging smile before she hustled the girls inside the house.

“Want us to go in too?” I asked Dad, settling my hand on his frail shoulder.

His chest rose and fell in a slow breath.

Finally, he shook his head. “He’s your brother. You’re my sons. I want a moment with the three of you.” Then he paused, only the slightest tremble visible in his chin. The car pulled up to the front of the house, and Dad inhaled slowly, not speaking again until the tremble was gone. “Don’t be hard on him,” Dad said firmly, looking first at Ian, then at me. “I mean it.”

Ian tucked his chin into his chest, but managed a short nod.

I did too.

Dad lifted his chin. “I want to be standing,” he told us. “I’m gonna hug my son without being in this stupid chair.”

“Dad.” Ian sounded unsure.

I gave him a look. “Just help him up. I’m gonna go out to the car.”

Ian blew out a slow, measured breath, but nodded slowly. My brother had been gone for so many years, so much of Parker becoming the man he was now happened while Ian was across an ocean.

Ivy had asked me if I was okay, and as I walked down the front porch steps, my eyes meeting Parker’s through the windshield of the car, I didn’t feel okay.

I thought about the framing of a house as I came closer and watched my little brother study our father on the front porch. You had to build it intentionally, with correct angles, the right spacing and proper load bearing capacity, if you expected it to hold up everything it needed to hold.

For months, I’d kept that frame intact because there was no other option when the people around me needed everything to stay upright.

Needed me to stay upright.

Parker’s eyes stayed on Dad, and his jaw tightened. Greer’s husband Beckett—privy to just about every level of subtext currently weighing on our family—got out of the vehicle immediately, and only paused to give me a firm handshake before going off in search of his wife and daughter. I waited by the front of the car while Parker turned off the engine and slowly opened the door.

We didn’t say anything at first, just stared at each other. Parker hardly even looked like the same person who moved away to college with a determined gleam in his eye, desperate to make his mark on the football field, hungry to prove himself.

He was taller than me now, with the effortlessly strong build of a professional athlete. When I thought about Parker, who he used to be, it was easy charm and a quick smile. The one who teased his sisters and laughed often.

The man in front of me had a haunted edge to his eyes. Like he wasn’t sleeping well and hadn’t laughed or smiled in months.

Part of me wanted to ball up my fist and smash it into his face because it wasn’t easy for any of us. But the bigger part of me still saw him as a little

kid who cried himself to sleep for weeks after our mom died.

When he didn't speak right away, I set my hand on his shoulder and squeezed. Finally, he pulled his eyes from Dad and met mine. What I saw there erased any fist-clenching desire to unload my frustration over the distance he'd kept.

The hand on his shoulder tightened, and I tugged him in for an embrace. My little brother held me so tightly that for a moment I almost pulled away, because I was afraid he'd splinter the framework that had help me up this entire time.

"I don't know how to do this, Cameron."

It sounded like he hadn't spoken in days, maybe weeks. It didn't sound like my little brother, but I knew it was him.

I pulled back and set my hand on the side of his face. "None of us do, Parker. That's why we do it together."

Eventually, he nodded, then took a deep breath and started walking toward the house. In the windows, I saw the rest of the family watching. Greer and Adaline flanked Sheila, their arms tight around her, and she didn't even attempt to wipe the tears off her face.

Dad was standing, his eyes clear and so damn proud that I felt an ominous creak in my chest, like something was about to split open.

Ian was just behind him, watching Dad's balance carefully.

I dropped my hand off Parker's shoulder as he slowly ascended the steps. He stopped in front of Dad, a tear sliding down the side of his face. "I'm sorry it took me so long," he said in a broken voice.

"No apologies between you and me, kid," Dad said. "You're here, and that's what matters to me. Okay?"

Parker's eyes were red, his jaw so tight it looked like it might crack.

My dad took a shuffling step, pulling Parker in for a hug. He looked so small with Parker's arms wrapped around him, and I had to stare down at the floor when Parker's first sob broke open from his throat.

Parker shifted, allowing room for Ian when he wrapped his arms around both of them. Dad held his hand out to me, and it was impossible to breathe with the way someone had their fist tight around my throat. I clapped my hand around Parker's shoulder, felt Ian's on mine. Dad's arm, thin and not nearly as strong as it used to be, anchored around my waist.

Are you okay? I heard her voice in my head while my brothers and I stood there holding my dad.

No.

No, I wasn't.

Ian was the first one to pull back, and I met his eyes over Parker's head. He nodded.

Parker drew back, swiping a hand underneath his eye.

When he exhaled, his shoulders dropped two inches. He'd been carrying that weight for months, a different kind than the one I took on, but it was still heavy.

I helped Dad ease back down into his wheelchair.

He smiled up at Parker and Ian sharing a tight hug. "All my kids home," he said on a happy sigh. "It's about damn time."

Parker eyed Ian, then shoved his shoulder. "You need a haircut. You look like shit."

Dad and I laughed, and the burst of sound was such a relief that the heavy tension surrounding Parker's arrival disappeared in a quick burst.

Ian shoved him back, but Parker hardly moved.

"I'm bigger than you now," Parker said, lips edging up in a smirk.

Ian grimaced. "How much time you spend in that fucking weight room?"

"A lot." Parker looked toward the house, shaking his head when he saw everyone in the windows. "How bad is it going to be when I go in there?"

"Bad," Ian and I said in unison.

Dad smiled. "If she's feeling generous, your mom might save you from the worst of it with your sisters. But on the plus side, you can meet Cameron's ... friend."

Parker's eyebrows rose slowly. "No shit?"

I shoved at his shoulder. "Go inside. I'm waiting out here until the dust settles. Raise a white flag if they let you through alive."

Ian laughed, Parker flipped me off, and Dad shook his head. "There goes my sweet moment with my sons," he muttered.

"You'll get a few more," I told him. "You're not going anywhere just yet, Dad."

He gripped my hand, then nodded jerkily. "You're right, son. You're right."

Chapter 31

Cameron

The rest of the day and into the next was so perfect, it felt scripted.

With warm breezes, sunny, bright blue skies, and energy that we hadn't seen out of him in weeks, we were able to take Dad down to the festival and enjoy the kind of time our family hadn't had together in years.

Olive jumped from one adult to the next, realizing quickly that she had us all wrapped around her finger, dragging one aunt or uncle after another to a booth with baked goods she wanted to devour, homemade crafts she desperately wanted to buy.

"Oh my gosh, who bought her the donuts?" Greer hissed. "Ian just gave her some of that cake!"

Olive happily munched on a cinnamon sugar donut, a second one gripped tight in her hand.

Parker's eyes went wide, and he tucked the telltale brown bag behind his back. "Wasn't me."

Greer rolled her eyes. "Well you two can deal with her tonight when she never goes to sleep because she's so hopped up on sugar."

Ivy was at an artisan's stall with Poppy, pointing out some of the watercolors she liked. Even though we'd been careful not to touch through lunch, and I allowed her the space to get to know Adaline and Lydia, we never went more than a few minutes without a quick jolt of eye contact.

I'm right here.

That was what each one felt like. A small reminder that she was still checking in with me.

Erik and Lydia left the picnic table where Mom and Dad were parked. Dad soaked in the sun, chatting with friends and neighbors that he hadn't

seen in a while. He looked tired but good.

Parker was occasionally approached by someone who wanted a picture or autograph, as was Greer's husband, Beckett. They handled each interaction with grace even though all of our attention was fixed firmly on Dad having a good weekend.

Ivy finished purchasing a piece of art and tucked it under her arm while she approached. I studied her face, my muscles aching with the desire to slide my hands over her back and kiss her pink mouth, the one currently in a soft, almost-smile.

"What?" I asked quietly. Our shoulders brushed as she pulled the painting out to show me. It was a bold watercolor, slashes of greens and blacks and browns that formed the peaks of the mountains and trees. "I like that."

She pushed it back into the bag. "I find myself in a strange predicament, Cameron."

"What's that?"

Her eyes traveled over the line of vendor tents, the brightly colored banners stretched from post to post, the people milling around the bright green field and through the shops along Main Street. "This is entirely wholesome and delightful."

I smothered a smile. "It is."

"Everyone is happy."

She said it like it was a question.

I laughed. "Hard not to be on a day like this." No one in my family was watching, so I gently nudged her toward a large tree off to our left. When we were out of sight, I pressed her against the tree trunk and cupped her face, stealing a soft, lingering kiss. "Does that mean you're happy too?" I asked against her mouth.

Her eyes were still closed, her fists tight in the front of my shirt, and her chest heaved on great gulping breaths. "Maybe." Then her eyes opened, those great long lashes around the deep, deep blue, and I felt that look like a dart through my ribs, landing unerringly on one of the few places she hadn't already gutted me thoroughly. "What the hell am I supposed to do with that?" she whispered.

I dragged my thumb over the bottom curve of her lip. "I don't think I can answer that for you."

Her heart was in her eyes, shining out so fiercely that it yanked the breath from my lungs.

“When I watched you with your brothers and your dad, I had tears, Cameron.” She tightened her grip on my shirt. “Actual tears,” she said accusingly.

I leaned down and kissed her again, my mouth fighting a smile as I did. My tongue teased the seam of her lips, and she opened them on a sigh.

Gently, I pulled the painting she still had clutched against her side and dipped at the knees to lean it against the tree, tugging her more fully into my arms.

A throat cleared to our right.

I pulled back, and Parker was watching us with a shit-eating grin.

“Sorry to interrupt.”

I glared at him. “No, you’re not.”

“Dad wants a couple of family pictures while we’re all here.”

I blew out a slow breath and stepped back from Ivy. “I’ll be right there.”

Ivy watched him walk away with a thoughtful look on her face.

“You weren’t mad at him when he arrived,” she said. “I was watching you.”

“No.” My hands coasted up and down her upper arms. “I never was.”

“Why not?”

No one had ever asked that.

“Remember the day we met?” I asked. “I told you I only remember a few things about my mom.”

She nodded.

“I don’t remember much about her,” I started. “But everything *after* is really clear in my memory. It was hard. Parker, Ian and I were so sad. Dad was sad. Our family was incomplete, you know? We were missing something anchoring the middle of it, and we all felt that. Dad did an amazing job talking us through it, but even as a young kid, you don’t forget what it’s like. All you’re trying to do is breathe, go to school, play with your friends, do your chores, and all of it’s happening with a giant hole in your chest.” I inhaled slowly. “It doesn’t go away, but you kind of grow around it. *You* get bigger. You age. The hole stays the same. But you learn to function with it there. And we did.”

Ivy stayed quiet, the earnest look in her eyes almost my undoing.

“When my dad met Sheila,” I continued. “And when we met the other three—Erik, Greer and Adaline—they had their own hole in their chest from when Sheila’s husband left.” I stopped and shook my head. “We all grew

together. Those big empty spaces in our life ... they didn't define us quite like they did at first."

I looked beyond the tree that shielded us, at my entire family—sitting on blankets in the sun and eating too many donuts. Trading stories. Taking pictures. Laughing.

"We never got back what we lost," I said. "But this new family ... we became each other's anchors. Staying close didn't feel like a hard choice to be made, because everything hard we've all faced in this life—we've done it together." That invisible fist was wrenched tight around my throat again. "Parker doesn't really remember saying goodbye to our mom. I think he was grateful for that for a long time. But he'll remember this. And he didn't know how to deal with it. I'm not going to get angry because his grief looks different from anyone else's."

At first, she didn't say anything, just stared up into my face with that slight furrow in her brow. Then she pulled in a quick, fortifying breath.

"I'm very tempted to make some snarky comment," she admitted quietly. "Because I don't know how to comprehend a family like this. I don't know how to look at things the way you do."

My chest ached for her. "I know you don't."

"And you don't hold that against me," she added.

I shook my head. "No, I don't."

Ivy stared up into my face, as open as I'd ever seen her. She opened her mouth to say something, and Parker yelled my name from past the tree.

"Cameron, quit making out with your client slash friend."

Ivy exhaled a laugh, pinching her eyes shut as color climbed into her cheeks.

"Fucking brothers," I muttered.

"Go," she said quietly.

She followed me, though, ignoring the pointed looks from my mom and the smug grin on Poppy's face. And she gamely handled taking the photos while we shifted into place around my dad. Olive and Isla both fit onto his lap on the wheelchair, Olive carefully holding the baby into place with a heartbreakingly serious expression on her face. I don't think she smiled in a single picture, she was so concerned with Isla face-planting forward.

When we were done, my dad motioned Ivy forward. "Your turn, sweetheart. I need a picture with my chess buddy."

Her eyes widened. "Oh no, I couldn't."

My mom leaned in. “Remember what my kids said about how it was pointless to refuse my invitations for dinner because I’d wear you down eventually?”

Ivy sighed. “Yes.”

Mom nodded toward Dad. “Sit.”

She did, her chin held high and her shoulders squared in my direction. Dad took one of her hands and held it in his own. “Thank you, sweetheart,” he said. “We need to remember these things, you know. All of a sudden, the little moments become big ones, and we don’t always know when that will happen.” He patted her hand. “Easy to forget that sometimes.”

Ivy’s eyes snapped to mine, and I wondered what she saw when she looked into my face.

If she saw just how hard I’d fallen for her. If she was thinking about all the little moments—the ones that didn’t feel big at the time—the ones that now loomed large in my mind.

Ivy blinked, redirecting her attention to my mom. Her lips curled in a restrained, closed-mouth smile. But the smile was real; her eyes were sincere and a little sad, her fingers firmly closed around my dad’s.

“There,” my mom said softly. “That’s a good one.”

Ivy was quiet for the rest of the afternoon, and quiet as we eventually made our way back to my parents’ house.

Olive’s eyes were heavy as she was curled up on the couch between Greer and Beckett.

“We should get her to bed,” Beckett said, gently pushing his daughter’s hair off her face.

“I’m not tired,” Olive protested.

Dad laughed quietly from his chair. “I’m not tired either, Olive. But Grandma Sheila will make me go to bed soon too.”

Mom was at the kitchen table playing cards with Lydia, Erik, Emmett, and Adaline. She eyed my dad firmly. “That’s right.”

Emmett had his arm around Adaline’s shoulders, and he leaned in to kiss the side of her head. Lydia tugged her cards away when Erik tried to see her hand. “Quit cheating,” she said. “You know I’m going to win anyway.”

My brother sighed at his wife. “You always do.”

Ivy wasn’t sitting by me, she was in the kitchen with Poppy, but her eyes met mine briefly. Parker and Ian played chess in the middle of the family room. Ian was getting flustered as Parker kept making moves he wasn’t

expecting.

Ivy wandered closer, peering over Ian's shoulder. He gave her a quick, surprised glance when she asked, "May I?"

"Uh, sure."

She studied the board, her brow furrowing slightly, then moved one of his pieces.

Parker sat up. "Oh shit."

Ian grinned. "That's check, asshole."

"*Shit.*" He gave Ivy an incredulous look. "I didn't even see that."

She smiled, small and mysterious, and when my dad held out his fist as she passed his chair, she tapped it with her own.

I stood before I knew what I was doing. Ivy glanced up in surprise when I tugged her around to face me, as I cradled her jaw in my hands and kissed her soundly on the lips to the sounds of my family whistling and yelling.

Little moments that felt big.

I pressed my forehead to hers. "Sorry," I said against her mouth. "But I had to do that."

She sagged against my chest. "Liar."

Ivy gave me a secret smile and wandered back into the kitchen again. My dad sighed, settling his hands on his chest. When I glanced down at him, he winked.

"'Bout time," he said quietly. "You and your brothers take so damn long to figure everything out." He waved my mom over. "I'm ready for bed now. That's about enough excitement for one day, I think."

Chapter 32

Ivy

By the time we got back to Cameron's house, the full moon was high above the trees, giving enough muted yellow light that we didn't need a flashlight for our walk back.

Even though Tim and Sheila had gone to bed hours before, the siblings stayed up. A couple of bottles of wine were opened—split between Adaline, Greer, and me. Lydia decided not to drink, because she said Isla would wake her up at dawn. Poppy had a beer with her brothers.

I beat Erik in a surprisingly aggressive game of chess, followed by a swift match against Ian—who also lost—because he rarely took the time to think through all his possible moves, or mine.

Cameron watched from across the room, his eyes steady and heated on mine through the whole evening. The way he looked at me had me feeling a slow, deliberate thread unspooling just below my belly button.

A winding tension that yanked my skin tighter every time I thought about the way he kissed me in front of his family. The way he looked at me when no one else paid attention.

It wasn't simply sexual tension either.

Everything about this weekend—the date he took me on, meeting the rest of his family—was forward motion. Momentum that didn't seem like it could be easily stopped.

Cameron preceded me into the house, and Neville greeted us with a loud meow. I scooped him up and kissed the top of his head. “Do you feel ignored?” I asked. He bumped his face against mine, and I laughed.

Off to the corner, I saw a pile of dirt and a stray leaf that looked like it had already gone ten rounds with some small, clawed being.

“Neville,” I sighed. “Enough with the plants already.”

He squirmed in my arms, and I set him down. He pounced on the leaf and flipped to his back.

“Where’s the broom?” I asked.

“I’ll take care of it,” he said. “You go get ready for bed. I know you’re tired.”

“No, I can do it. Your plants would’ve been perfectly safe if it wasn’t for him.”

He dropped a kiss on top of my head. “I’ll take that trade to have you here.”

My heart squeezed at the simple gesture after a not-very-simple day.

No matter what happened, Cameron never made me feel like an inconvenience. Nothing about this imposed on him, and it only served to reinforce that feeling that he couldn’t possibly be real.

But I knew he was. He wasn’t putting on an act to impress me—because the way he treated me was an extension of the way he treated his entire family. To his core, he was selfless and caring, and it was incredible to witness the way he anchored that family with ease, even if he didn’t see it that way.

As he toed his shoes off and tossed his phone onto the kitchen counter, Cameron watched me pluck the leaf from the cat’s grasp. He perched his hip against the island and wiped a hand over his mouth.

He looked exhausted.

“You okay?” I asked. I’d asked it earlier too, because it seemed impossible to believe that he wasn’t feeling the weight of the day. It wasn’t even my family, and I’d been on the verge of ugly tears for a solid two hours.

Cameron sighed, eventually nodding. “Just wiped. I think I’m going to take a shower.”

“Okay.”

He walked down the hall toward his room, and while I swept up the dirt and emptied the pan into the trash, I heard the water turn on.

I played with Neville for a couple of minutes, dragging the feather toy from Poppy on the ground, and watched him dart after it. Eventually he tired, stretching out on the kitchen floor and twitching his tail when he gave up following the toy.

My feet ached from walking around in sandals all day, and I removed them with a groan, digging my thumbs into the arch of my feet before

padding down the hallway. One small lamp was turned on in the bedroom, on Cameron's side of the bed.

He had a side.

I had a side.

It was so painfully domestic, so stunningly easy that I had to fight the sudden swell of cold, prickly panic at how domestic, how easy it was to incorporate into this man's life.

I could hear him moving around in the shower, and when I glanced into the bathroom, I felt a painful clench in my chest.

He had his hands braced on the tile wall, his head hung down underneath the steaming spray that came from the showerhead he'd mounted on the wall.

On any other day, in any other moment, it would've been the sexiest fucking thing I'd ever seen in my life—the absolute artwork of his strong body underneath all that cascading water.

But what I saw was someone caught in the crosshairs of the grief in his mind, the reality of his dad still being here, his family's expectations, struggling to keep his heartbreak contained.

Slowly, I pulled my shirt off, then my skirt. My bra and underwear came next, and I wound my hair into a knot on the top of my head before I slowly pulled open the glass door.

His whole frame trembled, and I ducked underneath his arms, twining my arms around his waist and pressing my face into his chest.

Cameron's arms curled around me immediately, and he held me so tightly, burying his head into my hair while he took great, gulping breaths.

He didn't speak.

Neither did I.

But tears pricked my eyes when he finally let out a shuddering exhale. Minutes passed while we stood there holding each other, I wasn't even sure how many. I didn't know if he was crying, or if he'd even let himself.

It didn't matter to me. There was no need for Cameron to make a big display for me to know that he didn't usually lean on anyone in the moments when he carried the biggest weight.

The water slowly cooled, and the tension in his body eventually ebbed. When he lifted his head, his eyes found mine—the sincerity in them enough to wrench my heart into a million pieces.

He slid his hand against the side of my neck, dragging that thumb under my chin. And he kissed me sweetly.

When he pulled back, he rolled his forehead along mine. I found his hand, slipping my fingers between his as we left the shower. We dried off with big, fluffy white towels, wordlessly trading tiny touches as he pulled on his boxer briefs and I slid on my favorite pink pajama set.

Cameron pulled back the covers on his king-sized bed, and I crawled in before him. He turned off the light in the bathroom but left on the bedside lamp as he climbed in next to me.

We still didn't speak as I burrowed into his chest, one of his arms underneath my neck, the other tight around my back.

I'd been taught my entire life to use the right words in the right situation, what the right thing was to say to achieve specific goals. But I didn't think words were needed in this one, because nothing I could say would make him feel better.

He just needed to know I was there.

Just like I'd needed him there when he showed up for me.

Maybe that was why *falling in love* sounded like a sudden, sharp point of action.

There was a moment before—the swing of a hinge, a drop into weightlessness—and an abrupt snap when you hit your new reality.

All this time, there'd been a trapdoor waiting underneath my feet, and it just took the right press of a button, the pressing of a cork against the mouth of a stopped-up bottle, and the *whoosh* that came next was inevitable. The after was inevitable too.

And I was the one who'd need to make a decision about what came in that after.

His breathing evened out, his body lax in sleep after a few minutes, but I was wide awake. My mind refused to shut down, a tangled knot of thoughts that took me hours to sift through.

Eventually, he rolled onto his back, and I stared at his profile, unable to pretend anymore that this wasn't a life-altering sort of relationship.

There was no going back from him, and I didn't want to.

I eased out of bed and grabbed my phone, only crawling back into bed when I had a tentative plan in place. I slept fitfully for a couple of hours, waking long before Cameron.

While he continued to rest, I made coffee and changed, moving through the bathroom quietly as I put on a single coat of mascara and tried to tame my hair into something presentable.

My phone dinged.

Ruth: You sure about this?

Me: Absolutely.

Ruth: Okay. But if I get fired because of this, you better give me a job, young lady.

Me: Deal.

I stared down at the bed where he slept and thought about waking him. He'd insist on coming with me. And if I thought about it too long, I might let him.

So instead, I took the note I'd written after drinking my coffee and tucked it firmly underneath his phone where I knew he'd see it.

Then I glanced at Neville, who was watching me from a pile of pillows at the foot of the bed, and gave him a narrow-eyed look.

"I don't trust you not to eat that paper," I whispered, and he twitched his ears and burrowed back into the pillows. I went to hunt down some tape from Cameron's kitchen. Once the note was taped onto his phone, I felt a bit safer to leave.

It was eerily quiet when I left the house and drove to the airfield. The flight to Seattle was quick and uneventful, and I couldn't help but wonder what he'd think when he woke up. If he'd worry.

No, he wouldn't worry.

At the private airfield, a driver waited, just as Ruth promised there would be.

"Miss Lynch," he said with a tip of his hat.

"My father's house, please," I instructed him.

With the press of a button, he closed the window between us, and I set my head back on the seat rest. As I thought it would, my phone dinged with a text from Cameron. Then another.

My eyes slammed shut, and I clicked the button on the side to turn off the sounds on my phone.

Arriving at our house set off a clanging, clumsy sort of reaction under my ribs. It didn't feel wrong. But it didn't feel right either.

Ruth opened the door before I could even reach for the doorknob, sizing me up with a quick glance from the top of my head to my feet. I couldn't help but wonder what she saw, if I looked as different to her as I felt. I'd only been

gone a couple of weeks, but my entire life—from top to bottom—had been upended as thoroughly as my heart.

All she did was shake her head, clucked her tongue, and pulled me in for a quick hug.

She smelled like cinnamon and coffee, and I sank into her familiar embrace.

“Your father is going to have my hide for this,” she said, brushing a quick kiss to my cheek.

“No he won’t,” I promised. The look she gave me had me grinning. “Calm down, Ruth. If he hasn’t fired you yet, he never will. Remember when you let me skip school that day even though you knew I was faking sick? That vein in his forehead almost burst.”

She eyed me firmly over the rim of her glasses. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I shook my head with a wry grin. “Where is he?”

“Waiting very impatiently for his breakfast,” she whispered as we turned the corner from the foyer toward the dining room. “You have ten minutes, young lady, and I’m coming in with his omelette whether you’re done or not.”

“Ten minutes.” I nodded. “Got it.”

I let out a deep, steadying breath, pulling the manila folder from my laptop bag and clutching it in my hand.

“Don’t be a chickenshit, Ivy,” I whispered. The last time I told myself something similar, I’d been staring down an empty house that felt so much more symbolic than it actually was. In that way, it was a lot like this one.

Life happened in the walls of a house, people made decisions to grow and change, sometimes pushing past the confines of how they’d been raised. My mom had done that.

I didn’t remember her, and I had no way of knowing that if she was around, how she might advise me.

But it didn’t matter.

I pushed open the door and took great pleasure in my father’s double take over the edge of his newspaper.

“Good morning,” I told him. I pulled out my usual chair, across from his, and I sat down, crossing my legs and settling my manila folder onto the glossy surface of the table.

The vein in his temple throbbed, and his eye twitched.

“I didn’t like how we ended things on our phone call. And chasing you through voicemails and messages doesn’t hold much appeal to me right now.”

Carefully, he folded his newspaper and set it down on the table without a sound. “What is this?”

“A reckoning, I think you’d call it.”

His sigh was loud and overflowing with annoyance. It made me want to scream, but I kept my face even. “Ivy,” he started. “I don’t have —”

“Time,” I interrupted. “Yes, I’m aware. Which is why I came now while your breakfast is”—I glanced down at my watch—“about seven minutes later than normal, am I right? Ruth should be in here any minute, so I’ll make this quick.”

“I didn’t say you could come home,” he snapped.

I met his gaze unflinchingly. “Then it’s a good thing I didn’t ask to.”

His eyes narrowed. “What?”

“I didn’t ask to come home,” I repeated calmly. “I’m staying in Oregon for...” I blew out a slow breath. “I don’t know how long.”

My dad’s head reared back as if I’d slapped him. “Excuse me?”

“I’m staying in Sisters for the foreseeable future.” I nodded to the folder. “That’s for you, if you’re interested. With the sale of the house and Mom’s trust, I can turn around and invest in at least five other buildings if I wanted to. I don’t know if I do or not, but I have more than enough capital to start my own business. Invest in whatever the hell I want to. I can live a happy, successful life, even if I never see another dime from you.”

Numbly, he leaned forward and plucked the folder off the table, flipping through the real estate listings I’d printed off. They weren’t necessary. Not for me.

“You ...” His voice trailed off. “I don’t understand.”

“I met someone,” I told him.

He rolled his eyes. “Oh for God’s sake, Ivy.”

“No,” I said firmly. “I’m telling you this as a courtesy and nothing more. Even if I hadn’t met him, I wouldn’t be ready to come back here right now.” I held his gaze and let him see exactly how much he’d hurt me. “I am your *daughter*. I am not your employee, and I should matter more to you than your investment in my schooling and upbringing. So if you want any chance of a future where you and I can coexist, you’ll listen to what I’m saying.”

And just like that, my dad sat back, a slight furrow in his brow, and he

kept his mouth shut.

When a thousand words crowded my throat, I realized that maybe I should have practiced this part. I'd only gotten so far as the dramatic, boss-bitch entrance. Briefly, I closed my eyes and pulled only the most important words from the safest little corner of my heart.

"He didn't ask me to stay. He didn't ask me to choose." I licked my suddenly dry lips. "And he wouldn't force me to give up something if it made me happy. If I told him that this life was what I wanted, he'd be the first person to support me. So I'm asking you to have the same respect for me, Dad."

His throat worked on a swallow, but he stayed quiet.

"I deserve the chance to figure out what I want. So does he. And I want to do that in a place where it feels safe for both of us," I said firmly. "I know you loved me the best way you know how, but that doesn't mean you haven't hurt me. And I hope we can get past that hurt someday, especially if this makes you lose even more trust in me, but I'm not giving up any more of my life to gain that trust back."

His jaw clenched briefly. "Are you punishing me for sending you away?"

"No," I answered easily. "This isn't about you. For once," I added. "It's not about you at all."

"So you're choosing a man over the future you have here," he said, the slightest edge of disappointment cutting through his words.

"I'm choosing *me*, Dad. Whether you believe that or not is not my responsibility. You of all people should understand why I want the chance to build a life that wasn't scripted by someone else."

I shook my head, my shoulders slumping as the weight of what was happening pressed down, so much heavier than I thought it would be. More than anything, I wanted him to tell me he'd love me no matter what I chose. No matter where I lived. Where I worked. Who I loved. I thought about what Tim Wilder told me he wanted for his kids, and desperately wanted to hear from my own father that all he wanted for me was to be happy and loved.

When he still sat in stunned silence, that stupid furrow in the same spot on his forehead where I got mine, I tried to decide whether more words would help or if trying to get him to understand made me Sisyphus trying to roll the boulder up the damn hill.

"You taught me well in a lot of things, Dad." Slowly, I stood from the chair. "And if I've learned anything the last couple of weeks, it's that little

things can add to something big, if you're willing to see them for what they are. I don't want to erase the good because you want something different than I do. I'm willing to build on the foundation we've got, if you can handle letting me make those decisions for myself. I've earned that right, and I think you know that if you're being honest with yourself."

He stared at me like he'd never seen me before, and I took that as my cue, my throat clogging with bittersweet emotions.

From just beyond the dining room doors, I saw Ruth swipe suspiciously underneath her eyes. My heart clenched.

"Enjoy your breakfast, Dad."

He pushed his chair back, mouth agape. "You're actually doing this? Ivy."

"I understand if you need some time to process it." I imagined that hook under my chin, the one I'd always thought was rigged up by him. But really, all of this was me—even if the thickest of my walls came from the way I'd been raised. So I let my chin notch up an inch, not with arrogance or as a flimsy defense, but because I was really fucking proud of myself. "But yeah, I'm doing this." I paused before I left the room and glanced over my shoulder. "I love you, Dad."

When I cleared the doorway, I practically fell into Ruth's tight embrace.

"I'm proud of you," she whispered fiercely. Then she kissed my cheek and pulled back, grabbing his omelette from the table where she'd set it. Tears pricked my eyes as she disappeared through the doors with his breakfast.

I sagged against the wall and stared up at the ceiling.

Waiting by the front door was a large suitcase, the one Ruth promised she'd pack for me.

The car and driver were still in the driveway, and he greeted me with a deferential smile, opening the back door and taking the suitcase out of my grasp.

Once he pulled away from the house and began driving back to the airfield, I finally took my phone out of my purse and smiled as I read through the texts I'd missed from Cameron.

Cameron: Neville is absolutely useless at explaining why he let you walk out that door.

Cameron: I wish you'd woken me.

Cameron: Call me if you need to talk.

Cameron: He ate another plant, what is wrong with this cat?

Cameron: I hated waking up without you next to me.

Cameron: Why does it feel like you're a million miles away right now? Ivy, just fucking call me when you're done with whatever you're doing.

Slowly, I typed out a response, pressed send and closed my eyes.



When I pulled my car behind his truck, Cameron was waiting for me on the deck in front of his house. Those deep brown eyes of his watched me carefully, his facial features giving nothing away.

My stomach was a riot of winged nerves, tickling bubbles coursing through my veins as I pulled my sunglasses off and opened the car door. Instead of going straight onto the deck, I walked to the trunk and pulled out the big black suitcase.

Cameron's eyes sharpened immediately, his chest expanding on a deep breath, and he unfolded his big body out of the chair and leaned on the deck railing with both hands.

I left the suitcase on the yard and walked up the single step until I was within arm's reach of him.

My eyes watered dangerously before either of us said a single word.

When he tightened his jaw, the first tear spilled over. I didn't wipe it away, because I wanted him to see every single one—visible proof of how I felt about him, something so big that my body literally couldn't hold it inside. I wanted to spill it everywhere, messy and wonderful and imperfect.

He swallowed as he watched that tear fall, pulling his phone out and glancing at the screen. "So you meant this?"

I exhaled slowly. "Yes."

If I looked, I knew what I'd see.

I'm on my way home.

"I'd never ask you to give up your life, Ivy," he said fiercely.

"I know. And I'm not giving up anything. I'm choosing the life that I want." I closed the remaining distance between us and carefully set my hands

on the broad expanse of his chest. Underneath my palm and the solid heat of his skin and muscle and bone, his heart hammered wildly. “I’ve never had a person before,” I whispered. “Someone who’s mine. That I get to love and take care of. And God, you’ll probably regret it because I don’t even know if I’m good at having one, but you’re it, Cameron Wilder.”

I gripped his shirt tight in my fists and sighed when he curled his hands around my waist and set his forehead against mine. I tilted my chin so I could see his face, his eyes searing with the same thing that made my blood sing.

Love.

I love you, I love you, *I love you*, I thought.

“I’m never going to be easy,” I told him. “I’m bossy, and I’ll hog the covers, and I’ll never be a good cook, and I’ll probably scare half the locals before the next month is out. I’ll mess up sometimes,” I said, my voice trembling. “I’ll work too much, and you’ll have to tell me to stop. You’ll go crazy when I start moving all my shit into your house, especially because you haven’t even asked me yet. Because if you haven’t figured it out, I am relentless when I know what I want.”

Before I could say anything else, Cameron slanted his mouth over mine in a fearsome kiss. His arms anchored me to his chest, wrapped firmly around my shoulders, and the sound he made—wrenched deep from his chest—warmed every inch of my heart, because all those sounds were mine now.

He broke off the kiss and panted against my mouth for a moment.

“You are mine, Ivy,” he rasped. “All the little moments and the big ones, they’re ours. I’m yours as much as you’re mine, and I don’t want any kind of life if you’re not in it.” His mouth brushed mine again, full of longing and aching sweetness. I’d get a million kisses like that from him. “I’ve known that I loved you all week, and I planned to tell you that today. Of course, you had to steal my thunder.”

I laughed against his mouth. “Sorry.”

He sucked at my bottom lip, then the top. “Liar,” he whispered.

Cameron wrapped me in his arms again, and we stayed like that for a while underneath the sweet sun and the tall trees, and I was safe and loved.

Even better than that, so was he.

I didn’t know exactly what my future looked like—a year down the road, or five or ten. But standing there in Cameron’s embrace, I knew he’d be by my side.

Pulling away from where I was tucked against the warm expanse of his

chest, I looked up into his face and smiled, with teeth and everything. He ducked down and kissed me again, sweet and slow, his hands roaming my back.

When the kiss ended, my stomach emitted a disgruntled rumbling. Cameron laughed, the sound echoing through the trees.

“Let me guess, you haven’t eaten yet today?” he asked.

I peeked up at him through my lashes. “No. Do you think your mom has any muffins at the house?”

Cameron grinned, his eyes tracing my face, full of love and adoration. “That’s really why you came back, isn’t it?”

I pushed up on the balls of my feet and kissed him quickly. “You’re a close second, Wilder.”

He hooked his arm around my shoulder and ushered me toward the house after he picked up my suitcase with ease. “You know what? I think I can live with that.”

Chapter 33

Cameron

My dad died on a Tuesday morning before the sun rose. I couldn't help but think that he'd planned it that way. Once the excitement of the fall festival was past, and he had his chance to give clear-eyed goodbyes to all his kids, to their partners, to tell them he loved them and was proud of them, his body could finally stop fighting so hard.

Parker was the last to leave the house, and while I sat on the front porch with my dad, I saw the way his body sank into the chair when the car pulled away.

"It was a good weekend, son," he told me. His eyes closed.

"It was, Dad." I patted his hand where it sat on top of mine. "It was."

We moved him back into the house, and he slept almost the entire day. The hospice nurse visited and told my mom that it could be any time, especially now that he'd gotten through this big thing he'd been holding on for.

For the next week, he hardly ate a thing, and we all knew that it would happen soon. Greer and Adaline both came back one more time during that next week, staying at home for a couple more nights. Just to be there.

There were no more big conversations to be had. No final goodbyes because he'd lived so well the last couple of years, there was nothing left unsaid in our family. In typical fashion for my dad, he didn't want us all gathered around, watching him with tears in our eyes.

He wanted us living our lives, so that was what we did.

In the end, it was just him and my mom in their bedroom, and when she told us about it later that morning, she said it was quiet and peaceful, and the last thing he said was that he loved her.

I held it together while Ian and Poppy and I took turns holding her, before we sat in the quiet kitchen and let Mom cry. We made the necessary calls and made sure my mom got some food in her. Poppy clung to me and wept while the funeral home came and moved Dad's body out of the house. I held it together then too. But the whole time, I wanted Ivy with me.

Ian could tell I was torn, so he set his hand on my shoulder and told me to go to her. I'd left my house as soon as I got Mom's call and told Ivy I'd be back as soon as I could. She was hazy with sleep when I woke her, but she nodded, giving me a soft kiss and telling me again that she loved me, and she'd be waiting.

I hugged my brother, and we both had reddened eyes when I pulled away. "Thank you," I told him.

"I got this," he said. "Let me handle things for a while, okay?"

When I walked back through the door a couple of hours later—my chest hollow and my throat gritty from all the things I was holding in—she was waiting in the kitchen with sad eyes, a big pot of coffee brewing, and a bowl of cereal ready if I was hungry, because that was about the extent of her cooking skills.

I bypassed both and just let her hold me while I wept. Ivy's arms were strong and firm, her heartbeat steady while I wrapped my body around hers. She didn't say anything while I cried, and it was exactly what I needed.

Every day, it seemed, she was exactly what I needed.

She stepped up in the gaps over the next couple weeks, seeing exactly what needed to be done when the rest of us were bleary-eyed with the sting of grief.

She commandeered a meal schedule when half the damn town wanted to bring casseroles, wielding a spreadsheet like a weapon to anyone who approached the house.

She brought Olive out for walks with Neville when Greer needed a moment to collect herself and played chess with me and Ian, even when we didn't want to be distracted. Still, she always kicked our ass.

She helped my mom organize photos and said she'd take over creating programs for the memorial service. Poppy and Adaline worked on the photo slideshow for hours with Ivy's help, crying and laughing over the images they'd settled on.

Every night, she'd tuck her body next to mine, the weight of her against my chest, and I finally felt like I could let the pressure of the day go because,

for the first time in my life, I had someone to help me set it down.

Some nights we fell asleep like that, a few soft kisses and a whispered I love you. Some nights, I'd slide between her legs after undressing her in the dark, and she'd hold me then too. Her neck arched, her body bare, and her gasping moans in my ear were my favorite sounds of the day.

I knew I could have survived all those days and nights if Ivy hadn't been there. But instead of just surviving, I had a partner who held my hand and didn't let me face my grief alone. She made me think about the future and how we might build a life as beautiful as my dad and Sheila's.

My dad's plans had been set years before, so we honored his wishes to be cremated and planned a memorial service.

We did it on a Tuesday, two weeks after he died, because Parker and Beckett and Emmett could all sneak away from their regular season duties for a day back at home.

It seemed like the entire town turned out for his memorial service, and I was relieved that it wasn't the somber affair I'd always pictured in my mind. People told stories, laughed about things my dad had done over the years, the way he parented an insane group of kids with such ease.

Those first few weeks after Ivy showed back up at my house passed in a blur—the dichotomy between the loss of my dad and her unexpected, sweet presence in my life made my head spin when I thought too deeply on it.

Once the memorial service was over and my family dispersed again, our new normal was a little bit quieter and a little bit more settled.

She worked with Marcy Jenkins on the estate sale of her grandparents' things and decided not to keep anything. Tucked behind a big frame and hung in the guest room of my place were the height marks cut from the wall. She'd turned that space into her office, and I found her staring at those pieces often.

On one of those occasions, I walked into the office and eased my hands over her shoulders, digging my thumbs into the tense muscles of her neck. She glanced up with a grateful smile. "I didn't hear you come in."

"That's because our guard cat sucks," I told her, leaning down to sneak a kiss from her upturned lips. Neville stretched out on the bed she'd added into the corner of the room that got the most sun. "Had to get something from the shop and decided to say hi."

She sighed happily when I pulled back. "Do you have to go back?"

I glanced at the clock. "Yeah, but I have a little time."

Ivy turned, slowly uncrossing her legs with a sly grin. "Define *a little*

time?”

Bracing my arms on the chair where she sat, I took her mouth in another slow, tongue-brushing kiss. “Not long enough, duchess,” I said against her lips and then kissed her again.

She pouted, and I stood with a laugh.

“Italian for dinner tonight?” she asked.

My eyebrows arched. “You finally going to break in my kitchen?”

“Don’t be absurd. I’m ordering takeout, which you will be picking up on your way home.”

I laughed, ducking down for one more kiss. “Perfect. I should be done around five. Foundation got poured today, so I want to be there just in case.”

Our new build was underway, managed on the front end by Wade and Jax when Greer and I needed to take the time for Dad’s memorial service.

I nodded toward her laptop. “Will you be done by then?”

She’d been fiddling with the listing photos for a day and a half, making sure everything was perfect before the house went live. Ivy waited to put the house on the market until after the memorial service, and she took Greer up on her offer to stage the house with a few items to help with the listing. It looked incredible, and during the estate sale, half the town asked her for a private showing simply because they were curious.

“Should be.” She sighed. “I’ve got a call with the guy who’s listing the land adjacent to downtown Sisters. I’m curious if he’s willing to budge on the price at all.”

“My little mogul,” I whispered, easing my hand along the side of her neck while she grinned. I used my thumb to tilt her chin up. Her lips were soft and sweet when I kissed her one more time. “What will you put there?”

She licked at her bottom lip and watched my face carefully. “I was thinking about something Greer said when we were staging the house next door.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“How you used to talk about doing a division of Wilder Homes with custom furniture, home decor, something that could branch you further than Western Oregon.”

My eyes narrowed. “We did, years ago. But we never had the time or energy to even consider something like that once Dad got sick. We’d need someone full time for something of that magnitude.”

“You would,” she purred. “Someone with a vested interest in seeing it

succeed and might have the business acumen and the funds to back it.”

I sank down in front of her and studied her face while I slid my hands over her thighs. “Ivy, this is a big deal,” I said slowly.

She nodded, her eyes focused and clear and excited. “I know.”

I laughed softly. “We moved in together a couple of weeks after we started dating, and now you’re ready to start a business with my sister and me?”

“I don’t do anything half-ass, Cameron Wilder,” she stated, tugging her chair closer so she could drape her arms over my shoulders. My hands tightened on her thighs. “I know a good idea when I hear one, and I want to put my time and energy into building something important, something impactful. Not just something successful.”

My eyes searched hers. “You’ve been thinking about this for a few days, haven’t you?”

She tilted her head toward her laptop. “You should see the millions of tabs I have open. Did you know there’s an incredible market right now for family-owned, small-town-based businesses like this? With my contacts, your reputation, Ian’s design skills, and the *ridiculous* good looks in this family”—she leaned in for another kiss against my smiling mouth—“it’s a home run.” She paused, cradling the line of my jaw in her hand. “I think your dad would’ve liked it, wouldn’t he?”

My throat went tight as I nodded. “Yeah,” I said gruffly, “he would’ve loved it.” I pulled on her hands as I stood, tugging her into my arms. Mouth brushing against the top of her head, I added carefully, “Maybe your dad would too, if he had some time to think about it.”

She sighed, looking up at me with a wry grin hovering over her lips. “Maybe. We’ve emailed this week. It’s ... a little bit better. I promised Ruth that you and I would come up for dinner when the dust settles.”

“Good.” I smacked her ass and grinned when her eyes narrowed dangerously. “I need to get back to work unless you have any other bombs you’d like to drop on me.”

She sniffed haughtily. “Not at the moment.”

“Be home around five thirty, all right?”

With a nod, she followed me down the hallway to grab a snack, and I glanced over my shoulder before I left the house. As she sliced through an apple, she laughed while Neville wound through her ankles.

Her eyes met mine, her mouth softening into a sweet smile, and I found

myself striding back toward the island, cupping her face in my hands, and taking her mouth in another kiss. She was laughing breathlessly when we pulled apart.

“So many kisses today,” she said, her hands fisted in the front of my shirt.

“You better be okay with that,” I said, voice deepening into a growl. “I could kiss you a million times for a million days in a row, and I’ll never get sick of it.”

Her eyes were shining as she looked up at me. “Can I get that in writing?”

“Say the word, duchess,” I whispered, then kissed her again. “You say the word, and we’ll do it.”

Ivy laughed, falling against my chest while my arms curled tight around her waist.

What a sweet sort of life this had turned into, and I couldn’t wait to see where else it would lead us.

The End

Want to know what's next in the Wilder family? Keep reading for an exclusive sneak peek at Ian Wilder's story.

***** This excerpt has not been edited and is subject to change prior to release.***

The sound of a car door closing echoed through the woods surrounding my house, and despite my best effort not to, I found myself curious. Poppy's fingers flew across the screen of her phone, and as she hit send on the text, her eyes locked on mine through the glass of my front door.

Poppy: Trust me, you're going to want to unlock this door.

Me: Who's out there, Poppy?

Poppy: You owe me, big brother.

Then she tucked her phone away and turned her attention toward her unseen guest, and the curiosity, unwelcome thought it might be, sharpened into something more persistent. My legs moved before I gave them permission, and I stood for a brief moment in the middle of the family room.

From the windows flanking the front door, I could see all the way down my driveway, through the tall fir trees that dominated the stretch of land that separated me from the road. Whoever Poppy brought with her was out of view, but through the barrier of the home, there was an insistent tugging coming from the inside of my ribs.

Something—someone—important was waiting outside of that door. Poppy, even with her minor bouts of little sister annoyances, would never play a game like this if it wasn't important.

I swallowed around the block tightening my throat and moved toward the door. As I flipped the lock, my eyes moved past Poppy, and the breath snagged like flames in my lungs.

Harlow.

In a weaker moment, when I missed my friend and wasn't sure how to reach out to her after so much silence, I calculated once how many days it had been since I last saw her. At the time, it was something staggering like, three thousand nine hundred and four. Even further than that now.

In my head, that growing list of days was an insurmountable barrier that I didn't know how to hop over, even though a simple phone call or email or message would've opened up a door to the person who knew me best.

Time had been kind to her, but that didn't surprise me. I always knew it would be. Her face was still all high cheekbones and big, dark eyes, her body was softer curves now, and her expression held none of the surprise that mine likely did.

Fucking Poppy.

While I stood there and stared at my childhood best friend, time stretched out into something tactile. Whether I wanted it there or not, whether she'd admit its existence either, there was some invisible rope that had always tethered me and Harlow together. We'd both had to ignore it for a while, because the truth of it kept us from creating the futures we wanted.

And right now, I wanted to grab onto it and pull, just to see if it was still there. It was an anchor lodged next to my heart, this person who'd always been so important to me.

My hand gripped the frame next to the door as I pulled it open, and Harlow's mouth tugged to the side in a crooked smile.

The sight of that smile had something monstrously big brewing in my chest.

"I told her this was a terrible idea," Harlow said. "I know how much you hate surprises."

After so many years, the sound of her voice almost knocked me to my knees.

I stepped out onto the front porch, attempting to unlock all the tension I suddenly held in my jaw. "Poppy," I said under my breath, "it's time for you to go home."

Promise Me This, a childhood friends to lovers/roommates romance is coming May 9, 2024 to Amazon and KindleUnlimited. [Preorder now!](#)

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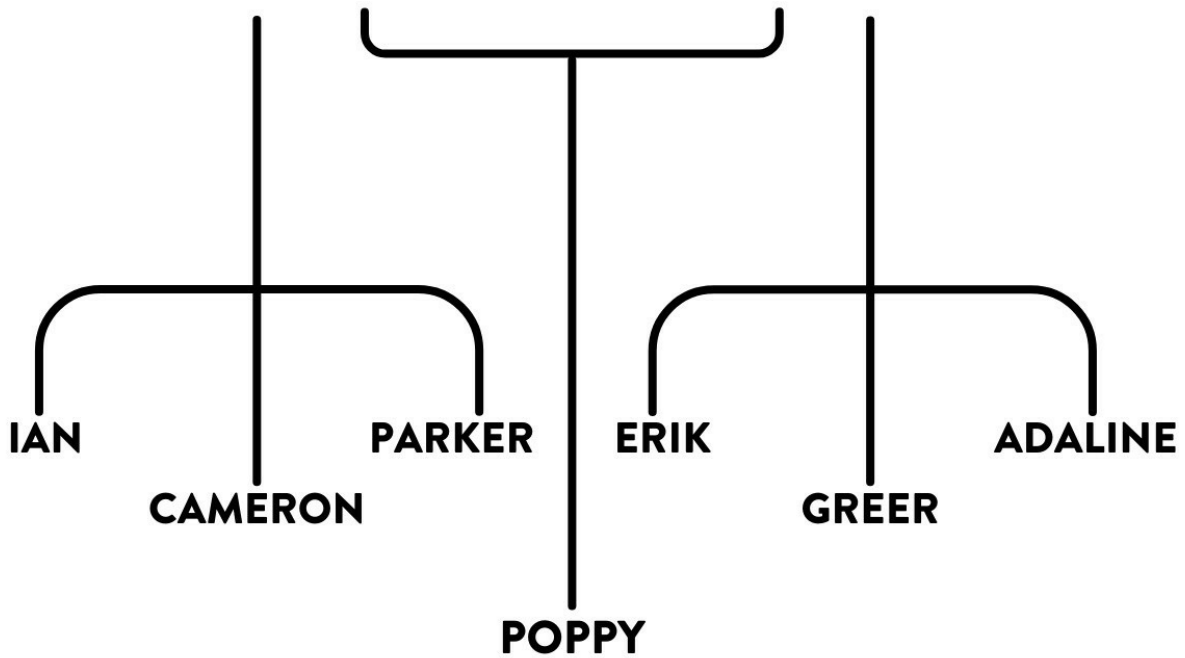


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*“Because of the Lord’s great love we are never consumed, for his
compassions never fail.”
Lamentations 3:22*

About the Author



Karla Sorensen is an Amazon top 10 bestselling author who refuses to read or write anything without a happily ever after. When she's not reading Dramione fanfiction or avoiding the laundry, you can find her watching football (British AND American), HGTV or listening to Enneagram podcasts so she can psychoanalyze everyone in her life, in no particular order of importance. With a degree in Advertising and Public Relations from Grand Valley State University, she made her living in senior healthcare prior to writing full time. Karla lives in Michigan with her husband, two boys and a big, shaggy rescue dog named Bear.

