

A man with a full, dark beard is shown from the chest up, wearing a white t-shirt. He is touching his beard with his right hand. The background is a solid light orange color.

My Enemy's Resolution List

Be nicer to her. ✓

LYNN DARE

My Enemy's
Resolution
List

A DENVER BROTHERS NOVEL

My Enemy's Resolution List

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About the Author

VERA

New Year's resolutions were an age-old tradition for most people. Lose weight. Be kinder. Make more money. Get that promotion.

Despite the toxicity that could come with the tradition, they were meant to be positive, something that said, "This year will be better than the last."

Hope.

They represented hope.

Like I said... for most people.

Not for me.

I didn't believe in resolutions, didn't think wishing for something could make it come true. Living the life we wanted took hard work and determination with a little bit of humility. And even then, no amount of sunshine and rainbow bullshit could prepare us for when it all came crashing to a halt.

Crashing. What a choice of word for me. It fit like a woman in a horror film letting out a blood-curdling scream moments before her blood stopped pumping through her body.

Like a werewolf howling in pain when he stubbed his toe in human form.

Word choice mattered.

Crash. Accident.

Drunk.

I sat in the deliciously broken-in and oversized chair facing the couch in my living room, staring at the little girl who'd fallen asleep as we watched a movie I couldn't now recall. A movie that hadn't been able to erase reality from our minds or make me forget the world that no longer existed.

Melody murmured something in her sleep, but I didn't go to her, couldn't. I sipped the glass of wine that had seemed much fuller a few minutes ago. The sun was just coming up, but the only time I'd moved from this chair all night was to get a new bottle.

My mother slept in the spare room, as she had since the night our family shrank to just the three of us. Really, it had been the three of us for a long time. My sister chose to no longer be a part of my life when she slept with my husband and eventually married him.

Melody was the product of that, but she was so much more. She was my best friend, the one person I wanted to see every day. From the moment I saw those tiny blue eyes, I hadn't cared how she came into this world.

Only that she was mine to protect. From my sister and ex-husband. From myself.

Yet, I'd failed. Despite their faults, Abby and Michael were Mel's parents, and now they were gone, and she was hurting.

And I was no good to her.

There was a noise outside, but I couldn't make it out at first. Some kind of hammering. It stopped, and I relaxed back into the chair.

Soon, we'd have to try to return our lives to normal, to forget rushing to the hospital on New Year's Eve, right after midnight, to see if I'd lost the most important person in the world to me. I wanted to hate my sister for endangering her daughter, but I was exhausted.

Mom would eventually go back to her life as a high-end designer in a penthouse apartment, surrounded by models and glamorous things. I'd return to work at the company I thought

I loved with all my heart before I realized it was just a job. Even if I had created *Only Friends*—an app designed to help women find female friends—with my two best friends, it no longer meant as much to me.

And Mel? What would happen to her? She would probably melt into my mom's life, taking her guest bedroom, and be raised in that world. But at least she'd be safe, something she had never been with my sister.

Why couldn't I hate Abby? Was it because she was dead? Something else?

At least my sister had a will. Today was the day we'd hear her final wishes, but I didn't expect any surprises.

That incessant banging started up again, and this time I knew who it was.

Waylen Denver. The bane of my entire existence.

My two best friends were dating his brothers, but the brothers were different. Kind, funny, light.

Waylen was none of those things. There was an anger in him, almost a darkness. And apparently a lack of common decency when it came to... I didn't know... not waking up the entire neighborhood at such an ungodly hour.

I drained the rest of my wine and set the glass on the coffee table. When I stood, my legs wanted to fly out from under me as if my body screamed at my mind to let it lie down, soak in its cabernet misery.

Not today, wine. Not today.

I was a pro at remaining upright when I had no business doing so. I edged my way across the living room and passed the small dinette to the sliding double doors. My back deck was a wreck with broken stairs, a slanted railing, and rusted nails sticking out of the decking. It had been that way since I bought the house, but who had time to actually fix things?

Studying the stairs, I realized there was no way I'd make it down without falling. But there was another option. I toed the

corner with my bare foot, careful to avoid a nail that would most likely kill me, and leaped.

I landed in the grass and stumbled to my knees. It was only then that I realized I had a deep red stain sat on my shirt right where my nipple was. When had I last brushed my hair? Was it yesterday? God, I hoped so.

We'd all been a mess, but really, my mother was the one keeping Mel alive.

The noise grew louder as if it was Waylen's greatest goal in life to aggravate me. Our backyards connected by a small fence with a gate in it—definitely installed by the prior owners. His woodshop sat behind his house, and I knew the path well.

It wasn't the first time I'd had to go banging on his door.

The last time I saw him had been different. That night. The one where everything changed. At my party, none of us had been sober enough to drive, so Sebastian and Shea thought I should ask their brother.

And he'd agreed. Taking me to the hospital. Sitting with me until I had news of Melody and my sister. We'd barely spoken then and hadn't said a word to each other since. I'd never admit it to him, but his presence had been the only thing keeping me from falling apart.

I was halfway across the yard when I felt something bite my foot. And then another one did.

Fire ants.

Fuck.

I took off running, picking my feet up high with each step. I was sure I looked like I'd lost my mind, but this was Florida. I knew how awful fire ants could be.

The door to the shop was open, and I skidded to a halt once the ground transformed from grass to concrete. Once I saw him.

Waylen stood with his back to me, a very naked back. He wore sweatpants hung low on his hips and no shirt. Sweat

slicked down his spine, despite the chill in the January air. He was a god, beating the wood into submission.

It only fueled my anger.

He reached behind him for his circular saw, but I hit his hand away from it. He stiffened, his back going straight as he turned. The hard hazel eyes grew colder the moment he saw me. His already serious face dimmed.

That gaze of his slaked down my body, taking in my ripped sweatpants, stained shirt, and overall “I don’t give two fucks” appearance. Because I hadn’t until I faced him.

I folded my arms across my chest to try to hide some of the messiness. “You’re loud.” Shit, I sounded like a child.

One solitary eyebrow quirked. “And?”

“It’s early.”

He lifted his arm to check his watch. I definitely didn’t track the movement, didn’t imagine feeling the muscles honed with years of labor.

“It’s eight.”

Oh. Eight in the morning.

On a Monday, a workday.

“That can’t be right.” Without thinking, I grabbed his wrist to see for myself. “The last time I looked, it was...” Eight. He was right. How much wine had I drunk last night? Or this morning?

I stumbled forward, and he caught me, his large hands wrapping around my upper arms.

“Did you need something, or is it time for another wine rant aimed in my direction?”

I shoved away from him. “I don’t care what time it is, asshole; I have a sleeping child in that house.” I pointed back to the direction I’d come from. “If you wake her up, I swear —”

“You’ll what?” His gaze hardened. “What will you do to me, princess?”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Then stop acting like one.”

A part of me wanted to fight, to have someone yell at me like Waylen used to. Right now, he didn’t look at me with pity like everyone else in my life. There was no change at all in the way he spoke to me.

It was so... normal.

“Do you know how insufferable you are?” My voice rose, and I was sure some of the neighbors would be able to hear if they listened closely. But they were used to our rows. “You stay in this”—I gestured around us—“box and bang away on your projects as if the rest of us are just dying to have saws and hammers be the symphony we live our lives to.”

“This is my job,” he growled. I didn’t know men actually did that. Growl. Like a wild animal. None of the ones I knew had ever been particularly wild or animalistic.

I stepped closer to him. “I. Don’t. Care. It’s obnoxious, and tolerating you as a neighbor is getting harder by the day.”

“Like you’re a peach? I have to look at that eyesore you call a deck, hear you blasting Taylor Swift with your friends, and deal with these angry outbursts way too fucking often.”

“Oh, I’m sorry I have a life and can’t hammer away on wood all day.” Yes, I knew how that sounded and would have laughed at the innuendo if I wasn’t so angry.

And hot. God, why was it so hot in here?

His eyes narrowed. “And I’m sorry I can’t spend my career sitting in a stuffy office playing on a computer. Now, if you’re finished, I need to get back to work.”

“I’m not even close to being finished.”

“Yes, you are.” He turned back to his project, done with me. “You can see yourself out and return to your wine.”

The sound of the circular saw cut through anything further I had to say, so I did the only thing I could. I stole his phone.

I wasn't sure what made me take it, but causing him any kind of inconvenience felt good in the moment. Maybe when the wine wore off that would change.

Running back to my house, I stopped when I saw what awaited me. My mom and Mel stood in the doorway, watching me.

“Again, Vera?” Mom knew my history with Mr. Obnoxious Neighbor.

“I don't need a lecture.” I stripped off my shirt as I walked inside and headed for the bathroom for a long shower.

It was Melody who stopped me. Wordlessly—as she'd remained since the accident—she held up one finger and disappeared into the spare room, returning a moment later with a folded towel. Mom must have done laundry.

I knelt in front of her in just my sports bra and pants and looked into her eyes. One day, she'd speak to me again, to any of us.

Maybe today. Maybe next week or a year from now. But no matter what happened with the lawyer today, she was still the sweet girl I'd always protected and loved. I brushed her hair away from her face and felt more sober than I had all night. “Love you, kiddo.”

She didn't say it back nor did she hug me. Instead, she only nodded and stepped away. Like the very thought of love burned her.

I know the feeling, kid.

When you loved someone, you got hurt in the end.

WAYLEN

The fuck just happened? I'd lived next door to Vera for... I couldn't remember how long. This was my shop, the place I ran my business. It wasn't like all of the sudden I got a hobby and started being noisy. I'd been doing this for years. First as an apprentice, then I worked for a company before starting my own business. One I was proud of. I couldn't help it that sound carried to my neighbor. The family on the other side of me never complained because I didn't work loudly when they were sleeping or when they had a party. I paid attention. But at eight in the morning on a Monday, Vera could kiss my ass.

She had to come over here with wine stains on her shirt and started ranting about how loud I was. It was like she couldn't hear the cars driving down the road or the lawn maintenance people across the street. With her, I always wore a target on my back.

I wasn't a heartless bastard. She went through hell and was still reeling. It didn't seem like there was a lot of love between her and her sister, but losing her the way she did, that wouldn't be easy on anyone. I had plenty of sympathy for Vera. Hell, I sat with her in the hospital, worried about her. That had been two weeks ago. I had a job to do, money to make. My sympathy only went so far when she wouldn't stop railing at me for earning a living.

I stared down at my project. I was a cabinet maker, though my family called me a carpenter. I stopped correcting them a while ago. My brothers didn't bother to get to know me well as an adult. Sure, as children we got along. Now? I only saw

them at family dinners. My parents liked to brag that I was a carpenter to their friends. I guess it sounded better than cabinet maker. Whatever. I made enough doing what I did to pay for my house, my shop, and my truck. They could call me what they wanted.

My brothers thought I was a grumpy fucker who was unapproachable. The truth was, I just liked keeping to myself. Sebastian and Shea were more social than me. We didn't have much in common. Sebastian worked in IT and was living with his girlfriend, Kinsey. My brother Shea was retiring from modeling, where he was pretty in demand, and he was dating Kinsey's best friend Eliana. Eliana and Shea had also been high school sweethearts, but that didn't work out at the time. Thinking about it now made my head spin. Eliana and Kinsey's other best friend was Vera. Of course. My neighbor who hated me with the fire of a thousand suns.

That left me, the lone single Denver sibling as the focus of my mom's attention. She'd tried to set me up on dates in the past and none of them succeeded. So she stopped. But that didn't mean she didn't point out when she met a new woman she thought I'd like. She just didn't invite me over for dinner with the woman anymore, which I appreciated greatly.

My brothers were coupled up, so I should be too, according to her. It wasn't that I didn't want to date or settle down. I didn't have the time to put into it, and the few times I thought I could make the effort, the women I dated didn't get me. They only saw my full beard and my short hair, my muscles, which sometimes stretched my shirt depending on how I stood. I was broad with pierced nipples. Said piercings would show through my shirt if it was thin. It was the kind of thing women liked me for, until I opened my mouth and they realized I wasn't super friendly and outgoing. I wasn't a teddy bear or whatever.

What was that saying? There was someone out there for everyone? Yeah, screw that. There was no one for me. I wasn't willing to change who I was to fit some stereotype women had of a lumberjack. I wasn't one. Sure, I worked with my hands, wore flannel when the weather got cooler, and had steel toe

boots I could live in. I didn't chop down trees or carry an ax. I wasn't anyone's drool-worthy hero.

I tried to be a good guy though and help others. Where did it get me? Screamed at by my buzzed neighbor while I attempted to work. I made sure not to think about how I still found her attractive, which only served to piss me off more. I'd always thought Vera was good looking. Until she opened her mouth and threw hatred at me. She didn't have to come out and say the words for me to know how much she despised me. I wasn't about to try and change her mind. She could think what she wanted. She could join the long list of people who never bothered to get to know the real me.

Sighing, I sat down and stared at the calluses on my hands as my mind worked through things. It was my own fault people didn't like me. I wasn't an open book who shared my feelings. I had to give my brothers credit. They were trying to reconnect with me after so long of us only talking over shared meals, and even then, it was stilted. They seemed to be getting along better, which hurt a bit. Or was that jealousy? How did they mend things between them but leave me out? Why didn't they include me?

Jesus, I had to stop feeling sorry for myself. Damn Vera. I blamed her for my morose mood.

A scrap of paper sat on the shelf in front of me. I reached for it and unfolded it. I made the list after I got back from bringing Vera to the hospital. It was a spur of the moment New Year's decision. A resolution list. I made it for a reason; maybe it was time to finally start doing the things I'd listed.

- 1. Try to be nicer to Vera.*

I snorted a laugh. Sure, while she yelled at me.

- 2. Expand my business.*

I'd thought about this before, about taking on more jobs. My work kept me busy, but I could be busier.

- 3. Take an interest in my brothers' lives.*

This went back to me being closed off and not getting as involved in their lives as I should. Also, the whole jealousy

thing with how they got along now and I wasn't part of it.

4. Go on a date.

How long had it been since I went on one of those? Years if I wasn't counting the dinner setups my mom had, which I wasn't. This meant trying to open up.

A big neon sign flashed in my mind. *Abort!*

5. Be nicer overall.

Okay, so this I could do. If people were nice to me too. I wasn't about to smile and let Vera rant at me, taking her vitriol. But being prickly and closed off meant I didn't get close to anyone, which left me lonely. I sighed. This list was depressing.

6. Have fun.

I snorted another laugh. Fun? What the hell was that? I couldn't remember the last time I actually went out and had a good time. I didn't count sitting on my couch and watching hockey. My house was close enough to the coast that I should spend time on the beach. I didn't have to swim, but I could go for walks on the sand. Though, how many bearded lumberjack-ish guys showed their pasty white skin on the beach?

7. Go to more family dinners.

Fuck my life. What the hell was I thinking when I wrote this? Sure, I wanted to get closer to my brothers, but family dinners weren't the only way to do that. My parents would be elated to see me more. Maybe I could find a happy medium and take care of two things on my list at the same time.

8. Fix Vera's deck.

I lifted my gaze toward her house but couldn't see the deck in question with the way my shop door was open. The deck was a disaster. If anyone stepped on it, they'd need a tetanus shot. I also worried about her niece getting hurt on it. How it didn't spontaneously collapse was anyone's guess. No, building decks wasn't my thing, but I could offer to take care

of it. If she was nicer to me. If she didn't yell at me all the time. If, if, if.

9. Stop being so hard on myself.

I knew I wasn't the only person out there who did this. It was something I could change though. It didn't serve me to constantly criticize myself. It really didn't help when Vera drove the nail home, voicing things I'd already thought. But this number wasn't about her. It was about me. I could work on this one.

10. Hire help.

If I wanted to expand my business and take on more work, this was a given. I couldn't do it on my own. Like I'd thought before, this would require letting someone in, an apprentice of my own. Someone I had to be able to trust. That was a difficult and scary thing, but the reward outweighed the risk. A bigger business meant more income. More income meant I could do other things outside of work. Having an apprentice, while time consuming, would also allow me to hand off some of my tasks.

The list was doable. Mostly. Things I could work on at the very least. It wouldn't be easy. Then again, nothing in life was.

I folded the list and put it back on the shelf. I'd tack it to the wall if I thought no one would see it. But with the way Vera barged in here, I knew her eyes would eventually fall to it. Another way for her to criticize me. Another way I'd feel open and vulnerable. Nope. Hard pass. I reached over and put a tin box on top of it to hide it further.

Instead of going back to what I was working on, I decided to grab the broom and start sweeping the floor. When I was done with that, I tidied up the shelves, put my tools back where they belonged, and did an overall clean of the space. My mind ran the entire time, partly with nerves about putting those resolutions into action. I had to do something though. While I loved what I did for a living, the rest of my life was lacking. I had a lot to offer a friend or a lover if I only opened up myself to the possibility of letting someone get to know me.

I could do this.

Maybe.

Maybe not.

I could also go into the house and make breakfast to avoid getting started on that list.

I already knew which plan would win.

As I sat at the table a bit later, with a steaming plate of eggs and bacon in front of me, I made a list of what I needed to get done today, excluding my resolution list because it made my stomach do this weird flip thing I hated.

Maybe I'd start doing them some other time, working on the resolutions. I could get work done this morning and tackle part of the list after. That felt like more of a solid plan. One I could put into action. Or keep putting off. Only time would tell because, apparently, I was a disaster, even though I wasn't trying to be.

Lovely. My inner monologue was on point today. At least Vera hadn't made an encore and showed up again. The day was young, and I had more hammering and sawing to annoy her with.

VERA

V, are you okay?

We know what today is.

Please let us be there for you.

I stared at the texts from my two best friends before shutting off my phone entirely. It wasn't their fault they couldn't understand.

The guilt.

Oh, the guilt.

How I left my sister to her problems and stopped trying to help her. How I'd abandoned her after she betrayed me. She did me a favor by falling for my husband, helped me get out of that relationship before he ruined me like he'd ruined her.

She was my sister, and I'd let her spiral.

Now she was dead.

Kinsey and Eliana would have sympathy written all over their faces, in their every word, and I couldn't handle it. I hadn't been to work since the accident, hadn't let them come see me since the funeral.

"Vera, you're doing it again." Mom's hand rested on my knee to keep it from shaking. She was right. I couldn't sit still.

Across from us, Mel was lost in a coloring book, looking much calmer than I felt.

The waiting room closed in around us, drawing the air from my lungs. I bent forward to catch my breath. This was it. Abby's last words, her final wishes. When a lawyer had called us last week, I'd been surprised my sister prepared for life after her. She wasn't exactly the responsible type. Hadn't been. I kept forgetting it was past tense now. She was gone.

We all knew what the will would say. Mel would go live with Mom when she eventually went back to her penthouse. That was all that mattered. Melody had to be cared for, loved. I looked up at the kid who'd stolen my heart the first day I met her. She'd been almost six months old, and I'd wanted to resent her, but she didn't let me.

I wasn't a kid person, hadn't wanted them. My life wasn't conducive to school drop-offs and soccer games. But for Mel, I could be different. Responsible. Caring. She brought out the best in me, and being an aunt became the most important part of my life.

It still would be. One day, I would be able to stop seeing my failures when I looked at her, I'd stop feeling so damn guilty.

"Ms. Hart." The woman's voice was loud, and I hadn't been expecting it.

"Shit." I clutched my rapidly beating heart. "Give a girl a moment before you yell at her."

It was only then that I realized Mom was already standing. She sighed. "She said your name three times. Come on." She grabbed my arm and pulled me up. "Mel will be fine out here while we talk to Mrs. Shelby."

I ruffled the kid's hair on the way by, and she didn't even lift her gaze. That was how it had been with her over the last two weeks. Sometimes, it was like she wasn't there. I brushed imaginary crumbs off my shirt before remembering I'd showered and changed to come here. At least I did something right.

The door closing behind us cut us off from Melody. The logical part of my mind knew the secretary had an eye on her,

but what if she needed us? What if she finally looked up and realized we'd abandoned her?

"She's fine." Mom led me to one of two leather chairs that sat across the desk from where Mrs. Shelby lowered herself.

"But what if she's not?"

It had been this way for weeks. My mom, calm and collected. Me, a wreck. I didn't know how she hadn't fallen apart too. During the early days, she said she had to keep it together for me and Melody, but was that fair to her? Was it fair that she stayed in a house that wasn't hers just to keep an eye on me?

Mrs. Shelby smiled, pushing a pair of designer glasses up her narrow nose. "Did Beth offer you coffee? Tea?"

I nodded, gripping the arms of the chair. "I don't think I could..." I cleared my throat. "We're okay." The truth was, I was so nervous that I was sure anything I put into my stomach would come right back up.

Mom smiled. "What my daughter means to say is thank you, but we'd rather just get started."

Mrs. Shelby nodded, understanding in her gaze. "Will readings are a large part of my job, so you don't need to worry about keeping it together in here. There are tissues on the desk." She pushed a box toward us. "And any time you need a break, you just let me know. Though this one is quite short."

"They didn't have much to pass along other than debt." I laughed, but there was no humor in it. "I'm sorry... that just came out. I'm... I don't really know how to do all of this."

"No need to apologize," Mrs. Shelby said. "You and your sister must have been close."

A harsh laugh barked out of me before I clapped a hand over my mouth. I was such a wreck. "Not exactly, no."

Her lips pursed. "That is surprising. I was your sister's attorney. She wrote her will after Melody was born. I hadn't spoken to her in recent years, but she told me of you prior to that."

I couldn't imagine what she'd said. That she'd stolen my husband and had a baby with him? That she hadn't let me meet my niece for months? I could still remember her words on that day. *Don't expect to be a big part of her life. She doesn't need an influence like you.*

She was probably right.

But then, Abby realized it was much easier if she could dump her kid whenever she wanted and that I'd never say no. Not to Mel.

Mrs. Shelby opened a folder on her desk and pulled out an envelope. "Abigail wrote this when she made her will. It will explain the decisions we are about to discuss." She slid the envelope across the dark mahogany. It had my name written in a familiar, loopy scrawl. When we were younger, Abby loved calligraphy. It bled into her everyday handwriting.

I didn't reach for the letter, afraid it would burn a hole right through my hand.

On a certain level, I knew these were not words from beyond the grave. Abby wrote them many years ago when there might have been some hope of still mending things between us.

A hand held mine, and I looked over at Mom to find tears in her eyes. "I don't want it," I whispered. "You take the letter."

She shook her head. "I loved Abby, as any mother would, but you were her sister. That is a different kind of bond. Even when you hated each other, you loved each other."

At least, I loved her. I'd never been sure if the feeling was reciprocated. She frustrated me, angered me, saddened me. But she was my sister.

Mrs. Shelby smiled, a sad tilt to it. "You really should read the letter before we continue. It will help you understand."

"Have you read it?" I asked.

She nodded. "Abigail asked me to. She worried it didn't accurately reveal herself to you, but I assured her it did. Please

open it. Don't do it for your sister. Do it for yourself."

My fingers found the edge of the worn envelope, and before I knew it, I had it open in my lap.

It started with the name she'd called me when we were kids.

Sissy V,

I wiped a tear from my cheek to keep it from dropping onto the page.

I know you probably hate me. I've made mistakes. Big ones. And betraying you was probably the worst. Yet, I can't regret it, and I don't want to feel guilty anymore. That betrayal created the most wonderful human. Melody. She is music brought back to my darkness. Soon, I will work up the courage to introduce her to you, and I know the moment you hold her, there will be no turning back.

If you're reading this, it means Michael and I are dead and Mel isn't yet eighteen. I don't like thinking about that, but what gives me comfort is knowing she'll still have you. And Mom. But mostly you.

You are everything I could never be. Kind. Loyal. Smart. You deserved better than what you had. I won't say that's the reason I slept with Michael. That would be cruel to you. The truth is, I was jealous.

Now, there is no more room for jealousy because I have one last thing to ask of you.

Give Melody the life I couldn't.

I stopped reading, unable to see through my tears as realization hit me. The letter would explain the will?

"No." I stood, shoving the chair back.

Give Melody the life I couldn't.

"Fucking no." I wanted to scream, to curse my dead sister. "I'm not the one to raise her."

I couldn't. My life was a mess. The only stable thing I had was my job, and I hadn't been there in weeks.

“It has to be my mom.”

Mrs. Shelby stood to face me. “Abby has made you Melody’s guardian. Now that both parents are gone, custody will go to you.”

No shit. I’d already figured that out. But it wasn’t right.

There were no more tears, only anger. Abby knew what she was doing when she wrote this. I could picture her years later, shoving a four-year-old Melody at me. *You wanted my daughter? She’s yours.*

I hadn’t been sure she was going to come back the next day, but she did.

You wanted my daughter? She’s yours.

Sure, I wanted to be her aunt. To protect her. But I wasn’t mother material.

Mom’s arms came around me, pulling me into a hug that didn’t feel right, not when I was ready to burst out of my skin. “Breathe, V. You’ve always been more of a mother to that girl than your sister was.”

I shook my head against her, tears flooding back. “I can’t. You’re her grandmother, Mom. She’s supposed to go live with you. You will do better for her than I could.”

“Abby didn’t think so.” She pushed me away and held me at arm’s length, staring at me. “You’ve never been able to see yourself the way the rest of us do. You can do this. Abby knew it. I know it. It’s only you who has to figure that out.”

I broke away from her, looking from Mom to Mrs. Shelby. There was much more of the will to read, but this was what we’d come here for. To hear Abby’s wishes for Mel. Yet, they were wrong.

“No.” I backed toward the door. “Melody doesn’t need me to mess her up. She’s had enough of that in her life. So, my answer is no.”

I reached behind me and slipped out the door, stopping in the waiting room when Melody looked up at me. Long bangs

fell into her eyes, and a puff of air blew them back. She didn't speak, but I'd stopped expecting her to.

See? I couldn't even help her through her grief, get her to speak again. Leaning down, I pressed a kiss to her forehead.

Her brow scrunched in that adorable way she had when she thought I was being weird. Which had been a lot over the years. I looked away.

Once I was out the door, I could finally breathe again.

"Abby." I looked toward the sky. "What were you thinking?"

WAYLEN

If the list had been in my pocket, it would have burned a hole in it. All day I'd been thinking about it. Ever since I held it in my hand this morning, the items on it kept rattling around my head, especially the first, which admittedly was one of the hardest. Not because I didn't know how to be nice to Vera, but because she wasn't nice to me. Ever. Okay, so I wasn't a saint and all sweet to her either. But that was what happened when I got yelled at for simply doing my job.

It was almost dinner time. I stood at my kitchen counter, staring down at the ingredients I'd pulled out. Not for a meal but for a cake. One I was going to make for Vera as an *I'm not so awful after all* kind of offering. Maybe she'd stop treating me like I was personally out to get her. My luck, she'd smash it in my face.

Everyone liked coffee cake, right? With the cinnamon and those sweet sugary crumbles on top, how could they not? Unless Vera was diabetic. She could be, for all I knew. Was I really going to serve cake to someone with diabetes?

I gave myself an internal shake. This was another way of me trying to talk myself out of doing something nice, out of extending an olive branch.

Screw it; I was making the cake. The worst that could happen was she wouldn't eat it, but at least the offer was there. She could see I wasn't a complete asshole. Besides, I loved to bake. It was no hardship for me to do this.

As I started putting the ingredients into the bowl, I thought back to when I was younger and debated going to culinary school. It was a toss-up back then between cabinet making or cooking. The cabinets won because of the detail needed to go into it. Not that preparing food wasn't detailed, but there was something about working with my hands, creating something beautiful from what was once a tree, which would be in someone's home for decades, that had me going that way.

My mom taught me a lot in the kitchen, but she didn't know I'd thought about going down that path for my future. It was something I kept to myself. I didn't make anything for anyone but me. My mom loved to cook, so bringing a dish to our family dinners would probably be looked at as more of an insult than anything.

I got lost in what I was doing, my mind checking out as I went through the motions. It was a great way for me to destress. Given how I was yelled at this morning, I needed it. While working in my shop fed something deep in my soul, baking right now did as well. It gave me the time I needed to relax, to let everything go.

While the cake baked in the oven, I made quick work of the cleanup and checked on a few things with my business. In reality, I was avoiding the fact that, pretty soon, I'd have to walk the cake next door and face Vera for the second time today. This one by my own choice.

Every minute that passed, my nerves kicked higher, which was something I wasn't used to feeling. I usually gave zero fucks what people thought about me, but in the name of my resolutions, I was trying to be better.

There I stood, staring at the completely cooled cake on the counter with its beautiful crumb topping and a drizzle of icing over it. How long had I been watching the cake like it held all the answers in the world?

This was ridiculous. The worst she could do was tell me to go fuck myself, then I'd return home and enjoy this delicious sugary masterpiece. In the comfort of my own living room. I'd

probably work out after because it was lot of what was bad for me though.

With gentle hands, I placed the cake in a container and put the lid over it so as not to mess up the top, which I probably spent too much effort on. I got my shoes on and ignored that I was in sweatpants right now and a shirt that was too tight across my chest, but it was old and so damn comfortable. I was going next door to be friendly, to try to work on my resolution list. I wasn't going over there to impress Vera. I didn't think anything I could do would make that happen. Not that I wanted to impress her anyway. She yelled too much. Drank too much. I wasn't a ray of sunshine, but I wasn't always hollering at her either.

The chilly January air hit me when I stepped outside, seeping into my bones, making goosebumps break out across my skin. Luckily, I only had a short walk.

Soft light bled through the curtains of Vera's home out onto the front porch. I didn't knock at first. Instead, I listened like a creeper to make sure there was some noise inside and I wouldn't get yelled at for waking anyone up. Even though the lights were on, they could be asleep. The soft sound of the television filtered through the closed windows as well as a female voice, but it was quiet. Hopefully Vera was in a good mood.

Balancing the cake in one hand, I lifted the other to ring the doorbell. There was shuffling inside, someone moving around, then the door opened, revealing who I guessed was Vera's mother. She had dirty blonde hair that was pulled up neatly. Her clothes were much too nice for someone staying home all day. I'd heard rumblings that she was a clothing designer, but I didn't know much about that shit outside of the little I knew from Shea's modeling career.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"Right. Sorry. I'm Waylen, Vera's neighbor."

She smiled. "I know who you are." Her gaze raked me from head to toe and back up again. "Have you ever considered modeling like your brother? You two are very

different in terms of... ruggedness, but I could definitely do something with you.”

“That would be a hell no. I want nothing to do with that life. No offense.”

“None taken. Did you come to see my daughter?”

“I brought this for her.” I held out the container. “It’s a coffee cake I made. A peace offering, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Listen, I’m going to level with you. I’m tired of being screamed at by her. If this cake puts us on better terms, where I don’t have her stomping into my yard to chew my ass out about me doing my job, all the better.”

She raised a perfect eyebrow. “Is that all?”

I sighed. What the hell was I doing? “Is she home?”

“No, but I’ll make sure to give this to her and drop the part about her chewing out your ass.” Her lips twitched but didn’t fully lift into a smile.

Jesus, what was wrong with me? I handed the cake to Vera’s mom and turned on my heel, getting the hell out of there. This was why I didn’t have a girlfriend—or friends, for that matter. I said whatever I thought without debating if I should. Vera’s mom probably thought I was an asshole.

And the way she appraised me... Outside of the good looks running in the family, I was nothing like Shea. Sure, we both had hazel eyes, chestnut hair, and were muscular, but that was where the similarities ended. I was three inches shorter than him. My hair was buzzed short, and I had a full beard. Shea had perfectly styled hair and was clean shaven.

I packed on more muscle than him. His was born from lifting weights, eating a good diet, and looking his best so they could plaster his bare chest and stomach on billboards. I was broad with muscles from working with my hands all day. I had a treadmill and weights, which I did use to stay in shape, but I wasn’t religious about it like my brother. Hell, even Sebastian

had a gym membership and swam regularly. Another thing they had in common without me.

Then, there were my piercings. Shea was as clean cut as he could get. So, why Vera's mom thought I'd fit on one of the magazine covers or various other ads was beyond me. Maybe she wanted to put me in flannel and build up the whole lumberjack thing. Either way, I was no model and didn't want to be one.

At least I was back inside my sanctuary now. The one place I could spend day in and out and never tire of it.

When I bought this place, it was in need of some serious TLC. I spent a lot of time working on it to make it what it was today.

With three bedrooms and two full bathrooms, it had the bones I wanted but not the updates. I worked room by room, repairing the Craftsman bungalow. I kept as much of the original molding along the walls and ceilings as I could, then made more to match the original, so it flowed well. There was a spacious living room, a decent-sized dining room with a round table for four. I debated on making a bigger table, but no one ate here with me, so why bother? I had to knock down some non-load-bearing walls to make it more spacious and not feel closed in. In the kitchen were cabinets I made myself and stained to keep their natural color along with dark granite along the counters where lights cast down from the cabinets to showcase the space. The appliances were professional grade since I loved to cook.

One of the bedrooms sat downstairs with a bathroom while the other two were upstairs and shared a bath. It wasn't like I had guests often, so it didn't matter that there was no ensuite.

My favorite part was the back deck, where I could sit and enjoy the quiet and look out over the yard with the pond and my workshop. And also look at the eyesore of a deck next door, but I wasn't trying to think about its owner right now.

A sigh slipped past my lips as I pushed off from where I was leaning against the closed door. Time to move on from

number one on my list. Obviously, it wasn't a stellar accomplishment. There was no reason to dwell on it.

Number two was to expand my business. Grabbing a notebook and a pen, I sat at the table and started a list of things I'd like to add to what I already did. No matter how much I listed, I'd need an apprentice. There was the son of one of my clients who'd said he was interested in what I was doing a few months ago. He was old enough, definitely had the curiosity. It was something to file away for when I tackled that part.

It was easy to let the ideas flow. Bullet point after bullet point, once I started, I couldn't stop. Though, a noise outside did draw me up short. A car door closing. From the direction of Vera's house. I cringed, wondering what her mother would tell her. Would she say how much of an idiot I was? Or would she tell her how she asked me about modeling? Either way, I couldn't change what I'd done.

With my luck, Vera would throw the cake out and still yell at me whenever she saw fit. My olive branch would be stripped of its leaves, stepped on, broken, then lit on fire. In my front yard. While I watched.

Whatever. At least I'd tried. Nobody could accuse me of ignoring that number on my list and moving on to the rest. It was a valiant effort; though one I had no doubt would go nowhere.

VERA

Welcome to the longest day known to woman.

Okay, exaggeration. Only this woman.

I was a coward, a fraud. Aunt of the year, I definitely was not. Only weeks ago, I hadn't thought myself capable of letting down the two people I loved most in this world. Mom and Melody would be in the right to never look at me the same way.

I'd walked out. I left.

And I hadn't yet been able to make myself go back.

The sky above the Cape Kismet beach I'd driven an hour to grumbled, fueled by the anger I had for myself. Or maybe my anger was fueled by the dark skies. Whatever. Something was angry, and it was making something else angry.

And I had lost my fucking mind.

I dug my hands into the sand as the first fat raindrop hit my cheek. Perfect. Just great. All I needed was a hurricane to come up the coast out of season and pull me into the sea.

Damn, even I knew I was too dramatic.

My friends had been telling me that for years. My mom perfected her eye roll the moment I became a teenager. Had I ever really left that stage? Feeling rebellious and wholly inadequate at the same time.

How was I supposed to just step into my sister's tiny shoes? She'd always had freakishly small feet, so it made

sense that I couldn't fit into them even in my metaphors. She'd died the same way she lived. Selfishly.

Drunk.

Fast.

Uncaring.

"Told you she'd be here," a familiar voice said behind me as rain fell onto the sand surrounding my hands.

Kinsey sighed, not usually as vocal as Eliana. She said nothing, and I waited.

For what I knew would come. For the questions and the encouragement. I wasn't supposed to be the one needing the boost. That had always been my job. To give Kinsey confidence as she explored her own desires. To cool Eliana down when she went on one of her famous tirades.

Tirades I seemed to be stealing from her lately. I was just so... hurt.

Feet stopped on one side of me, and I could sense Kinsey's hesitation. Eliana plunked down on my other side. "Fancy a beach day?" she asked.

I pulled my knees in and rested my chin on them. "How did you guys find me?"

Kinsey lowered herself carefully. "Aunt D called." Aunt D, my mom. Right, this was Kinsey's family too. Her only family. I couldn't imagine how much she was hurting after Abigail's death, and I'd shut her out, abandoned her. There was a time both Abigail and I were close to Kinsey, as close as cousins could be.

Eliana bumped my shoulder, sending me knocking into Kinsey. "We checked a few spots in Tampa, but then Kins thought you'd go somewhere not even we would look for you."

"And yet, you did." I closed my eyes, letting the drizzling rain cool my heated cheeks. Salt sprayed into the air from the churning waves. Why did it all feel so right?

“Cape Kismet has become something of a haven for us.”
Eliana shrugged. “We sort of just knew we’d find you.”

Kinsey shook her head. “What Ana means to say is that Gray saw you sitting in your car in the parking lot when he drove by. He called her to make sure everything was okay.”

Of course. Grayson Amore, the lawyer for *Only Friends* had become something of a friend to us through all the legal issues he’d navigated on our behalf. Now, he was a traitor.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” All I wanted to do was stare out at the sea.

“Too bad.” Eliana crossed her arms, shivering as a damp gust of wind blew the hair back from around her face. “It’s us, V. You don’t get to disappear in a way that makes your mom call us and then tell us you don’t want to talk about it. We’re here for you. Always.” She shrugged. “Plus, if you don’t spill, I won’t hug you and tell you everything will be okay.”

I stared at her for a long moment and sniffed. “I really could use that hug.” Eliana may not have been the cheerleader of the group; that was my job. But her belief was powerful. When she gave it to you, it could make you into a whole new person.

I wanted to be new. The rain came harder, and I didn’t speak.

“Can we do this inside? Maybe at that taco place?” Kinsey asked.

“No.” Eliana and I said at the same time. It was here. Now.

Or never.

“Abby gave me guardianship of Melody.”

Neither of them reacted.

Nothing.

Until finally, Eliana reared back. “Oh no! We completely did not expect such a development.”

I looked from her to Kinsey and back again. “Did you hear me? I can’t be a mom to a little girl.”

“Wasn’t this what we were expecting?” Kinsey asked, looking genuinely confused. “You and Mel... She isn’t just any kid. You’re her favorite person.”

They didn’t get it. I pushed to my feet, brushing wet sand from my butt. The rain came harder now, dripping from my bangs into my eyes. I wiped it away. “I can’t do it!” I yelled.

They both stood to face me, their expressions identical portrayals of best friends. Yet, if they were my supportive best friends, they’d see what I said was the truth. I wasn’t a mom for a reason.

Eliana gripped both of my shoulders before yanking me into a bone-crushing hug. I couldn’t breathe, yet I didn’t want her to let go. My arms came up around her back and I held on, scared that the moment we parted, they’d both see how terrible I truly was.

“Vera, you are the most dependable person I know,” she said over the rain.

I snorted, trying to hide my tears. “Dependable for entertainment maybe.”

Kinsey reached for my hand, where it still gripped Eliana, and took it in hers. “We wouldn’t have a company without your organization, the uncanny ability you have to always know when something is wrong with us or an employee.”

I let go of both of them and stepped back, shaking my head. “That doesn’t mean—”

“We count on you,” Eliana cut me off. “To support us, keep us on track. You tell us we can be better, that we have to be.”

“But that’s just—”

Kinsey’s eyes were sad when she looked at me. “Sometimes, I wonder if anyone is doing those things for you,” she said. Her voice was quiet, yet somehow, I still heard it above the pattering of the rain. “Will you let us?”

I couldn’t do anything but nod as I continued to cry.

Kinsey smiled. “You can do anything, V, be anything. That includes being whatever Mel needs from you. I don’t think you know this about yourself, but you’re kind of my hero.”

“I’m not a—”

“But you are. Everything you’ve been through with Abby and Michael—the divorce, the baby, the accident. Some days, I wonder how you’re still standing when I would have crumbled like a sack of dog poo set on fire.”

Eliana groaned. “You’re spending too much time with the boys.”

“Like you aren’t,” Kinsey shot back. They were dating brothers, something that wouldn’t seem so weird if the third brother wasn’t currently the bane of my existence named Waylen Denver.

Kinsey continued. “As I was saying, I wish you could see yourself the way we do. The way Melody does. That kid needs you in her life, but I think you need her too. Abby obviously thought so.”

“Yeah, well she was on drugs most of the time.” Pain erupted on the side of my head. “Hey!” I swatted Eliana away as she tried to hit me again. “Stop it!”

“I’ll stop when you quit saying stupid fucking things. Naming you as Mel’s guardian was the only intelligent thing Abby ever did. Now, get your cute butt over here because I’m going to wrap my arms around you and squeeze until you believe what we’re telling you.”

I didn’t have to move far before I was in Eliana’s arms again. She reached out and snagged Kinsey to us. For once, Kinsey didn’t shy away from the hug, letting herself melt into it until I could finally breathe again.

“Can I ask you a question?” Kinsey started.

I nodded against her.

“Do you want to raise Mel? Do you want her around?”

I didn’t even have to think about the answer. Yes. Melody was my constant, my soul. We were meant to be together since

the day her tiny eyes met mine. I just didn't think it was the best thing for her.

"I'll take the non-answer as a yes." Kinsey shifted so she could meet my gaze. "You never know what you're capable of until you try."

"Mel isn't an experiment."

"No. She's a kid who loves you. You aren't perfect, V, and you'll make mistakes, but you two need each other."

They were right. Both of them. As I'd sat here alone, pondering how I'd failed at everything, Mel was at my house with my mom, waiting for me. Maybe worrying.

"I have to get home."

My best friends smiled. "About time you stopped being a whiny bitch." Eliana slapped my butt. "Go get 'er, tiger."

"Stop being weird." I pointed a finger at her. "Even though I love you for it. And you, Kins." I stopped. "Thank you."

Without another word, I ran back up the beach, reaching my car just as the rain started to let up. It was a long drive back to Tampa, and even longer with sopping-wet clothes and broken heat. I'd never bothered to get it fixed.

By the time I got home, the sun had begun to set, and my hair was partially dry in frizzy waves.

I got out of my car and walked around back, where I took the broken steps two at a time and barged through the screen door.

Inside, Mom was cutting something in the kitchen. She waved as I walked by, but it was the kid lying on her stomach in front of the couch that caught my attention. I kneeled down beside her and smiled. "Hey, pretty girl."

She looked up at me but didn't speak.

My heart ached for her. How had I not seen it before? I had been just like my sister. Selfish. None of this was about me.

"What are you drawing?" I asked.

Mel passed over a page with a picture of a dog. She'd wanted one since she was a toddler, but Abby never thought her daughter's happiness was worth the money.

I slid the paper back toward her. "Mel, would you like to live here? Like, for good?"

She issued one short nod and went back to drawing.

It was all so simple for her. This was where she wanted to be, whether I could handle the job or not.

I stood and walked into the kitchen. "Coffee cake?" I eyed the pastry on the counter. "When did you have time to bake that?" I hugged my mom from behind. It was my way of apologizing.

She placed a hand over mine. "I didn't. That neighbor of yours brought it over."

I picked up a crumb and popped it into my mouth. It was heavenly. "Oh shit, that's good. Which neighbor brought it?" We'd accepted food from a number of people since the funeral.

"Tall. Handsome in a rugged way. Apparently gets yelled at by you quite a bit."

"Waylen?" I stopped, my hand halfway to another bite. "Is it poisoned?"

"Melody is still alive."

"You fed this to Mel, knowing who it came from?"

She sighed. "Honestly, Vera, I don't know why you dislike that man so much. He was just being nice."

"Waylen Denver has never been nice a day in his life." I narrowed my eyes, still staring at the coffee cake. "He's up to something." Pity. That had to be it. This was a pity pastry.

And I refused to be pitied.

So, on the night I decided to become a mom, I also chose to commit murder.

For the good of my family, of course.

WAYLEN

I had settled in for the night in a new pair of sweats and a clean T-shirt. I wasn't sure when my pajamas resembled what I wore during the day, but there was a distinct set for each. I was losing it. That was the only way to look at it. Different sweats for different times of day? Jesus.

The TV was on, though I wasn't really paying attention to it. I was too busy peeling the label off the glass beer bottle in my hand. Alcohol wasn't my go-to when I had a rough day or got stressed. Tonight, I needed something. I would have preferred sex, but going out and finding someone to bring home sounded like too much work. Besides, didn't I want to date? Dating didn't mean sleeping with a woman on the first meeting and never seeing her again. Dating implied more than one encounter. Hopefully. Then again, I wasn't even close to being a master at dating.

The scent of the cake I'd baked still hung lightly in the air. It was slightly masked by the chicken and potatoes I made for dinner, but the cinnamon remained. A reminder of what I'd done and couldn't undo. I wondered if she'd thrown the cake out or actually decided to try a piece of it.

I was thinking about this far too much. It was a cake. Neighbors brought each other baked goods all the time. I mean, I didn't, but I'd seen others do it. Since Vera's sister passed, people had been stopping by to bring food. That wasn't why I did it, though now that I thought about it, I felt like a jerk for not bringing her something sooner. I should

have. Today's delivery was a peace offering. One I hoped she took and didn't destroy.

The beer was halfway to my lips when there was a knock on the door. More like a pounding. Relentless.

I placed my beer on the coffee table and stood to flip on the porch light before opening the door so I could see who was on the other side. I didn't have a peephole. If someone wanted to come onto my property to mess with me, they wouldn't like the results.

When the door swung wide, I saw my neighbor there. At least she didn't have wine on her shirt this time. The look of pure malice, however, was the same as it was earlier today. Lucky me.

Leaning against the frame, I folded my arms, preparing myself to hear about what I'd done wrong. "Was my TV too loud? Did you not like the way I sipped my beer?"

"A pity pastry!" she shouted.

"What?"

"You brought me a pity pastry. You think you can just come over and shove cake in our faces because you feel sorry for us?"

I scrubbed a hand over my mouth, trying to bite back the words I immediately wanted to say. It wasn't that they weren't valid, I just had to calm down before we ended up having a screaming match that brought the rest of the neighborhood out to see what was going on. Of course, Vera took it as me being guilty and that she was right in her assumption.

"I knew it." Her arms crossed. "You couldn't leave us alone, could you?"

"First, it wasn't a pity pastry. I told your mom it was so we could try to be on better terms. There was no pity about it. You come stomping into my yard to yell at me often. I'd rather we get along since we have to live next door to each other."

Her eyes narrowed. "Lies. You were at the hospital with me that night. You saw what I went through. You feel sorry for

us, admit it.”

“I honestly—”

“Waylen Denver, always the asshole, is trying to be the good guy?” She scoffed. “I don’t buy it for one second.”

“If you’d just let—”

“Your brothers put you up to it, didn’t they? Their girlfriends found me on the beach tonight. I’m sure they told their boyfriends, who called you.”

“My brothers don’t even—”

“No,” she cut me off again. “I don’t want your pity. I’m doing just fine on my own.”

“I didn’t—”

“Don’t bring me any more cakes.”

“Would you shut up already?” I yelled, knowing damn well at least my neighbor on the other side heard me, if not more of them. “Jesus, don’t you stop? You won’t even let me try to explain.”

I swore she turned five different shades of red, each one angrier than the one before it. She opened her mouth to throw more vitriol my way, but instead of listening to her criticism, I leaned forward and pressed my lips to hers. Hard. Because she really needed to stop yelling at me. I could only take so much. I had to do something to shut her up. Words weren’t working.

But then, reality came crashing down fast and brutally. I was kissing Vera.

Quickly, I pulled back with my eyes wide, wondering what the hell I’d just done. I’d never spontaneously kissed someone before. And Vera? Why her? The woman despised me, as evidenced by the last few minutes. My solution was to press my lips to hers? How much did I drink tonight?

I stared at Vera for a few seconds before pulling myself back into my home and shutting the door in her face. Like a coward. Because I didn’t know what else to do. Apologizing

was out of the question. Now, I was left with mortification and a heavy dose of shock at my own actions.

Turning, I leaned heavily against the door, suddenly grateful I had decided to go with steel when I picked this out and not one with a glass insert. If I had, Vera would be staring at my back right now, which would somehow be way worse.

With my luck, she was going to start pounding on the door again so I would open it and she could punch me in the face. I deserved it. She didn't ask me to kiss her. I shouldn't have taken what I did. Shit, did I need to bake another cake? A *sorry I kissed you* cake. One that said I wasn't a total asshole. Though, wasn't I for what I did?

Going back over to the couch, I sat down and grabbed my beer, downing it as fast as I could, hoping it would erase what I'd done. It didn't. It wouldn't. Maybe I should apologize. I was already embarrassed. It wasn't like I could feel worse, though anything was possible where Vera was concerned.

I stayed seated for a solid hour, debating what to do before finally getting to my feet and putting my shoes on so I could go next door again. I got about halfway there before I stopped. The lights were off downstairs, which meant they were probably going to bed or relaxing for the night. I shouldn't interrupt them.

It was for the best. Vera had to hate me more now than she did prior to her pounding on my door. Nothing good would come from an apology. She'd say it wasn't genuine, that I was only doing it because I felt sorry for her. A pity kiss, she'd probably call it. She'd also probably not let me explain that pity had nothing to do with it. It was solely because of the way she was yelling at me, and I didn't know how to get her to stop.

Looking back, I could have done things differently. I could have closed the door in her face instead of using my lips. Sure, it would have pissed her off further, but at least she wouldn't have had me kissing her. Something she clearly didn't want. She didn't pull away, but that wasn't a sure sign of consent.

I was awful. A terrible person.

Back inside my house, I locked the door and shut the TV off. There was no reason to try and watch anything, not with the way my mind was spinning. I wouldn't blame Vera if she never talked to me again.

When I finally collapsed into bed, I kept replaying that kiss in my mind. It was on one of those replays that I remembered something. A feeling, a slight... touch.

Sitting up fast, my heart racing, I knew what that was. Her tongue had touched my bottom lip. She'd parted her lips. For me. She was going to kiss me back before I leaned away, removing myself from her.

It didn't make what I did any better, but it eased a bit of my guilt.

Vera's tongue would have been in my mouth had I opened up for her. Holy hell.

This couldn't be real. Her wanting to kiss me back wasn't plausible. Yet, something had happened between us. Something I couldn't begin to explain.

This was how people were driven mad. Poor communication, or in our case, none at all about this particular subject.

I fell back onto the pillow, not sure which way was up any longer. This whole day had been off from start to finish. Of course, it had to end with a bang, just like it started. It wouldn't have been a Monday if it hadn't. At least I got some work done today and made progress on my list. The list was secondary to my job. It was a good way to give me a break from what I was doing so I could focus on something else. Things could get repetitive when I worked on bigger projects.

No matter how hard I tried to focus on work right now, how hard I tried to make a mental list of the things I needed to accomplish tomorrow, my mind kept drifting back to Vera. I didn't like her. At all. How could I with the way she treated me? I wasn't any better. I was worse. Yet... that kiss. One that shouldn't have happened. What would she have done if I hadn't moved away? Would she have deepened the kiss?

Would she have slapped me, then punched me? I would have deserved it, but thinking about it now, I would've preferred to have found out more about the kiss.

My phone vibrated on the nightstand, pulling my attention away from everything else. I didn't have a lot of friends, so I wasn't sure who was texting me. I lifted the phone and unlocked it.

Mom: Don't think you can avoid me forever.

Why was she like this? I knew she loved us, but I wasn't avoiding her. I was busy with work and... other things.

Me: I was trying to sleep.

Mom: It's too early for you to be sleeping.

Me: I get up with the sun for work.

I didn't, but it was close. I also tended to be a bit of a night owl, staying awake longer than I should, playing games on my phone or getting caught up in my head about work. I had a never-ending list of tasks to complete.

Mom: We expect you for dinner soon.

Soon could mean anything from tomorrow to two weeks from now. Either way, I'd go because I had to get out of this house and away from my neighbor. Shea and Sebastian hardly brought their girlfriends to family dinner nights. They probably didn't want to subject them to our insanity. So, it was usually just us.

Me: I'll be there.

I typed *Just tell me when*, then decided to delete it. If I said that, I would definitely be expected to show up tomorrow and every other night she deemed necessary.

I loved my mom. I really did, but she could be a lot. My brothers could attest to it considering all the butting-in she

liked to do in their lives. It came from a place of love and affection. We'd just appreciate it more if it weren't so intrusive.

Sighing, I put the phone back on the nightstand. I'd read whatever else she texted me tomorrow. After I was caffeinated.

VERA

Three weeks. That was how long a person was allowed to grieve before they had to return to their real life.

Apparently.

I stood outside the building that had become like a second home since I started an app with my two best friends. Yet, it seemed colder than before. More of an obligation than a place I actually wanted to be. That was new.

A tiny hand rested in mine, not fully holding it, but also not letting go.

Melody wasn't ready to go back to school. Not like she voiced that sentiment to me when she hadn't said a word since the accident. But I knew. Just like I knew the two of us needed to be together right now.

So, here we were. At work.

Smiles greeted me as I entered the lobby. *Only Friends* was one of a number of businesses that had offices in the tower. The top three floors were taken by the tech company that owned the building. Below that was us, our app, and then various other tech startups and financial companies that preferred Tampa's calmer business atmosphere to the intensity of Silicon Valley.

Most of the people I came across were familiar. I'd become friendly with many who worked in the building. Unlike Kinsey and Eliana, I didn't like to keep to myself, to our company. Usually, I talked to everyone I saw, held full philosophical conversations in the space of an elevator ride,

and was generally well known as someone who talked too much.

Now, those words had left me.

Except when I was yelling at neighbors, apparently.

I'd tried so hard not to think about last Monday night, about the ingenious way Waylen shut me up, but then I saw his brother walking toward me.

"Mel," Sebastian beamed. "It's about time you came back to work."

That brought a tiny smile to her face, and I was grateful to Sebastian for it. He ruffled her hair. "I'm about to go grab coffee for Kinsey and me. I heard the cart has fresh donuts today. Want to join me?"

She nodded, and I let them go, mouthing a thank-you to him. I had to face my office, and it was best I did so alone at first. My friends and their men all adored Mel. I knew how lucky I was to have them in my life.

Drawing in a breath, I headed for the elevator. Inside, the head of a company that shared our floor nodded to me. I could only offer a tense smile in return. The gods graced me with a quiet ride, so I could collect my thoughts before facing an entire office of people who'd been worried about me.

I loved each of our employees, but their texts over the last few weeks only made me more hesitant to come back and deal with all of that... sympathy. I left the elevator on our floor and turned toward the wide-open door. Chatter spilled out into the hall. Our crew was close, and we valued togetherness. Which meant we started the mornings catching up and touching base.

I stood in the doorway, thankful no one noticed me at first. Normally, I'd be the center of the laughter and talk while Eliana grumbled about needing to get to work and Kinsey watched everyone with a quiet smile on her face.

I didn't feel like that version of myself. Not anymore.

"V!" Eliana was the first to see me. She rushed toward me, wrapping her strong, toned arms around my back. "When

Kinsey said you were coming in today, I didn't believe her."

I returned the hug, grateful for my friends, who'd kept me from making the biggest mistake of my life last week. "Had to get back to you girls at some point. Preferably before you sent all our investors running for the hills."

She laughed, pulling back. "You know Kinsey doesn't let me talk to them, so we did survive without you." She paused. "But they'll be so happy you're back."

As the head of the customer relations team, I was the front-facing part of the business. Our investors seemed to like me, be confused by Kinsey, and be scared of Eliana.

"Vera's here!" I heard someone yell. It could only have been one person. Gabby. With a voice as loud as her blazing red hair, she was my favorite. If I were allowed to have favorite employees, that was.

She was a mid-sized queen, who was amazing with our customers but even better with her co-workers. Everyone loved her.

Seeing her hustling across the room finally brought a smile to my face. "What took you so long?" she demanded.

Eliana sighed. "Gabs, that wasn't cool."

"No, it's fine." I knew Gabby didn't mean anything by her bluntness. Most of the time, I loved that about her. "Just needed to sort some things out."

"Well, I hope they're sorted now because we need you."

"She's right." Kinsey walked up behind her. "Especially tonight. We have an investors dinner and—"

Eliana clamped a hand over her mouth. "What she means to say is, welcome back. Are you ready to return to work?"

I stared at my three friends, feeling lighter than I had in ages. "Yes, definitely. Gabby, I'll need you to bring me up to speed. I've been watching the app and noticed Eliana has made some interface changes. Have you been keeping track of any issues arising? I have a few data sets I need from you."

Gabby crossed her arms. “I was really hoping we could catch up first. The entire team was.”

“I’d prefer to just get to work.” I walked by them to find my desk. It was covered in flowers and sympathy cards.

“You asked us to stop letting the team send them.” Kinsey had followed me. “So, they didn’t know what else to do with them.”

“Have someone remove it all.” Before Melody got up here with Sebastian. I turned to Kinsey. “Tell me about the investors dinner.”

The restaurant she’d chosen was nice, fancy. I’d have to ask my mom to bring me something to wear to it when she came to pick up Melody. Going out was the last thing I wanted to do, but it was important, and I couldn’t let our business down more than I already had.

“Eliana isn’t coming, is she?” I asked, letting my finger smooth down the petal of a half-dead orchid.

“Absolutely not.” Kinsey laughed. “We couldn’t drag her to the meeting if it meant saving the world.” She waved her assistant, Charlotte, over. “Can you please clear off Vera’s desk? She needs to get to work.”

Ever efficient, Charlotte had it cleaned by the time Sebastian walked in with Mel at his side. He held a drink carrier with four coffees in it, and a smile crooked his mouth as he approached us, reminding me of his brother, the one I refused to think about. I was still too angry about that kiss.

“Morning, ladies.” Sebastian held out a cup for Kinsey first and then me. I could have kissed the man.

Ugh, no. Why did my mind go there? To Denver brothers and kisses. I shifted my eyes to my niece, who had chocolate frosting coating her upper lip. “Good donut?”

She didn’t respond.

“It was delicious,” Sebastian said. “I got one too so we could match.”

Kinsey looked like she was about ready to drop from swooning too much, so I rolled my eyes.

“Thanks for the coffee. I’m going to get started on my work.”

Kinsey saw Sebastian out of the office and then returned to me, pulling me away from Melody. “You really think she wants to spend the day in a stuffy office surrounded by strangers?” There was no judgment in her tone.

I shrugged. “I asked her if she was ready to enroll in a new school yet, and the answer was no. What can I do? I won’t force her. We made a deal that she will go back soon.”

Kinsey sighed. “You two are going to be trouble together.”

“Oh, absolutely.”

I returned to Melody. Charlotte had found an extra chair and pulled it up to my desk, where Melody was now removing a coloring book from her backpack. I kissed the top of her head and took a seat.

Whispers closed in around me, and when I looked up at my employees, their eyes held a sadness in them. Sympathy. For me and Melody.

I didn’t want it. The pity in their eyes, the way they didn’t approach me to chat like they normally would have. I just wanted some damn normalcy. Was that so much to ask for?

Maybe that was why I kept going to Waylen’s to fight. When he yelled at me, it felt like someone still saw the old Vera. The one who hadn’t lost a sister and had to take in a niece. When I yelled back, I didn’t have to keep my anger at the world in check.

It was normal for us to fight, for him to hate me.

The kiss though... that was new. Even if it had just been a way to shut me up, even if he hadn’t meant to do it.

Was I wrong to want it to happen again?

Yes, absolutely. I’d lost my damn mind.

Gabby came over and perched on the edge of my long desk. Our offices were open, so we were never far from each other, and her sitting here to chat wasn't new. Yet, now, it felt like an intrusion.

"I sent over the data sets you asked for." She paused as if she wasn't sure of her next words. "I'd told everyone that leaving those cards and flowers on your desk was a shit idea, but no one listens to the chubby redhead."

Her lips parted into a smile. Gabby was always making fun of herself but not in a self-conscious way. I knew for a fact she loved her curves. She said they brought her the kinds of men who knew what they were doing in bed.

"How is the redesign of the help button going?" I asked. Our app's most unique feature was a button users could press if they were out on a date or just out and got themselves into a bad situation. It alerted users nearby that someone needed help. Our customers were mostly women, and they looked out for each other.

Gabby rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "You really aren't going to tell me why you could barely look at Sebastian this morning?" Not even Kinsey and Eliana had noticed. If they had, I'd have heard about it.

"No. I'm not."

That made her chuckle. "I have never known you to be a closed book. There is something juicy there, and I need to know it. Just please don't let it be that you and Sebastian—"

"Fuck no." I cringed at my use of the word, but when I looked to Mel, she wasn't paying us any attention. "Not my cousin's boyfriend. Never."

"Thank the great lord above." She grinned. "But there is someone. I can tell... Doesn't he have another brother who isn't dating one of your friends?"

How did she...? That was it. I was declaring Gabby Stephens a witch. I mimed zipping my lips and then pointed to work area. If she was only going to distract me, I'd have to get the information I needed from the data.

She was still laughing when she reached her desk.

I groaned and rested my forehead on mine. Someone tapped my shoulder and when I looked at Melody, I could sense her question without her having to voice the words.

“I’m okay, Mel.” We both would be. I’d do anything in my power to make it true.

WAYLEN

Dinner smelled amazing. Not that I was cocky. I was, but only with myself when it came to what I could do with my hands. Food or wood, I was good at both. Wait, that sounded dirty, and I wasn't one to usually make jokes. Whatever. It was true. I wouldn't go bragging to others about what I made; however, I was proud of it.

On the TV was one of the reality shows my brother Sebastian liked to watch. I had no idea what he enjoyed about them, but I figured I'd give one a try so I'd have something to bring up the next time I saw him. It wasn't like I could talk to him about my job. He didn't understand what I did, which was both of our faults. He didn't ask, and I didn't offer. But this, a crappy show about people and their crazy drama, I could watch it and be more informed when I spoke to him next.

The garlic, oregano, basil, and other spices all blended well in the red sauce, tantalizing the senses and making me moan when I took the first bite of the pasta. I wanted to indulge tonight with a comfort meal, which meant pasta and freshly made garlic bread. There wasn't much better than a garlic butter spread on thick, toasted slices of bread.

The next bite was on its way to my mouth when there was a knock on the door. I froze because no one knocked on my door except my neighbor. I'd literally done nothing to rile her up unless she could smell the spaghetti sauce from her house—and if she could, she'd be asking for a bite because, holy hell, I'd outdone myself. Too bad I kept this secret locked away where my family didn't know. If they did, they'd look at

me differently. Now that Vera had the cake, I had to wonder if she'd tell Kinsey and Eliana, who'd tell my brothers. They'd be floored that I was baking and have a lot of questions. Ones I wouldn't want to answer.

Another reason the cake hadn't been the best idea. No more bringing food of any sort to my neighbors.

I got up to answer the door, swinging it open, revealing Vera's mom and niece.

"Hi," I said quietly. What did one say when your neighbor's family was on your doorstep? Especially when you knew said family was aware of the hatred between you?

"Waylen, I'm glad you're home. I have to leave and can't watch Melody. Vera's at an investors dinner, so I can't pull her away. It's important that she's there. Plus, today was her first day back at work since... Well, you know. Anyway, can you watch Mel for me?"

I blinked. And blinked some more. She wasn't serious. Couldn't be. What the hell did I know about children? "What?"

She rolled her eyes. "Honestly. I can see why you irritate V. This is Melody. She's in need of adult supervision because I have to leave. Can you be that adult? I'm in a hurry. She doesn't have any allergies. She's not on any medication. There's nothing you have to worry about."

"She's a child." Way to state the obvious. If I had to guess, I'd say she was seven or eight. She could be older. I had nothing to base my guess on.

"Yes, she is," she said slowly.

"What do I have to do?"

"Keep her alive and well."

"When will Vera be back?"

"Soon."

I wanted to sarcastically thank her for being so specific. "Fine."

I could keep a person alive. I'd kept myself breathing this long. Plus, it was another olive branch. Here I'd thought I wouldn't extend a second one. Looking at Vera's mom and niece, even if I didn't want to make peace with my neighbor, I'd offer my help. It was what decent people did.

Vera's mom handed me a small bag as well as a sticky note. "This is Vera's number. If you have any issues, call her."

"I thought she was in a meeting."

"She is, but I'm going to be unavailable." If I wasn't mistaken, I saw a little twinkle of mischief in her eyes. "Thanks again!" She turned and breezed away in an air of a lightly scented perfume.

I stared down at Melody, who was peering up at me with curiosity. At least she wasn't afraid of me. "Would you like to come inside? It's a bit chilly out there."

Instead of answering, she walked in, under my arm that was still braced on the side of the door. Okay then.

Melody stepped into my living room and sat down on the couch. I quickly realized the show I had on might not be kid appropriate. There was a decent amount of skin showing—they were on an island—and the topics were of an adult nature. I grabbed the remote and went back to the home screen where the streaming apps I subscribed to were located.

"Do you want to put something on?" I asked.

She nodded, so I handed over control of the TV.

"Did you have dinner? I have more spaghetti if you'd like some."

Melody shrugged, her eyes glued to the TV, where she was scrolling.

"I'll get you a bowl, and you can eat or not."

In the kitchen, I braced my hands on the edge on the counter and hung my head. I had no idea what to do with a child. Not even the slightest. It was a good thing she was older and not a baby or a toddler. Then, I'd really have been screwed.

My phone sat on the counter in front of me, its dark screen coaxing me to pick it up and use it. Ask for help. My mom would drive right over and love on Melody. I didn't think the girl could handle the whirlwind though.

The TV came to life, the sound traveling. She must have found something to watch.

I got busy making a bowl of spaghetti for her and brought it into the living room. I should have asked her to eat at the table. The thought of sauce stains on my furniture made me cringe. Melody had been through enough though. Plus, she just got shuffled over to a near stranger's house. If she ate and spilled, I'd deal.

Melody leaned over the bowl and peered into its contents, assessing whether she wanted to try it or not. In the end, she put some on her fork and ate. I hadn't realized I was waiting to see if she would. My nerves kicked in. She wouldn't be here long, but I at least wanted to tell Vera I wasn't a complete waste of a person and fed her niece.

Lifting my bowl, I sat back and ate. It had gotten cold, though I didn't mind. I settled in for a show I had never heard of. There was a lot of teen drama and something about a ghost rock band. What the hell was this?

By the third episode, I was leaning closer to the TV, really hoping Julie would fall in love with Luke. I liked him best. The band's story was tragic, but it seemed like they were doing okay... as ghosts.

Fuck, what was wrong with me that I was getting into this?

During the fourth episode, I glanced over and saw Melody curled up on the couch, fast asleep. As quietly as I could, I grabbed our bowls and brought them into the kitchen. I'd wash them later. I didn't want the sound of dishes clattering and running water to wake her up.

Would it be okay to move Melody? Would she get scared if I tried to pick her up and put her in one of the spare bedrooms so she could sleep? I was way out of my depth.

Grabbing my phone, I opened a text message to my brother.

Me: What do you know about kids?

Sebastian: ...

Sebastian: I'm not sure how to answer that.

Sebastian: I know they exist.

I rolled my eyes.

Me: If one falls asleep on the couch, do you move her to a spare bedroom? Or do you leave her be?

Sebastian: You're starting to worry me, Way. Whose kid is at your house?

Telling Sebastian would mean him telling Kinsey, and it would be a whole thing. Though, if Vera was at dinner, that meant the rest of her friends would be too.

Me: Don't tell Kinsey.

Sebastian: I feel like I should be debating if the police need to be involved in this conversation.

Me: Vera's mom dropped Melody off at my house.

Sebastian: On purpose?

Me: No, she thought it would be fun to hide her here. Yes, on purpose!

Sebastian: Does Vera know?

Me: I have no clue.

Sebastian: Wow, this is juicy. I'd like to be there when Vera comes home and has to go to your house to get Melody. She's going to flip her shit! *laughing emoji*

The phone was in danger of cracking due to how tightly I was holding it. Only my brother would turn this into a reason to tease me.

Me: *middle finger emoji*

Me: Can you help me or what?

Sebastian: I'm not sure what you'd like me to do. Move Mel for you?

Me: No, but do you think I should?

Sebastian: She'd probably be more comfortable in a bed. I'm not sure if she's sleeping well or not since everything happened.

Me: Okay, I'll move her.

Sebastian: Don't forget to support her head!

Me: She's not an infant!

Sebastian: *laughing emoji* *baby emoji*

For fuck's sake. This was what I got for texting my brother. I placed my phone onto the counter, then went into the spare bedroom to make sure it was neat enough for Melody. At least I wouldn't have to walk her up the stairs. I drew the quilt back along with the sheet and fluffed the pillow. I couldn't remember the last time someone slept in here. Probably never. I didn't throw parties or have friends who would crash. Chances were no one had ever slept in this bed. But I did wash the sheets occasionally, so they were clean.

Melody looked so peaceful on the couch. Her light blonde hair was spread out, her hand cradling her head. Her legs were

brought up into a fetal position. I slipped one arm behind her shoulders and the other under her legs to lift her. She sighed against me, resting her head on my chest as her arms loosely looped around my neck.

I didn't move right away, afraid I'd wake her. When she didn't rouse, I walked with her to the bedroom and gently placed her on the bed, pulling the sheet and quilt over her.

Vera hadn't filled me in on everything that happened with her sister and brother-in-law, but I heard enough when I was in the hospital with her. This little girl had been through a lot. More than any child should. Constantly being shuffled around when her parents were alive, relying heavily on Vera, her aunt, to be there for her. Then, Melody lost her parents in a horrible accident. Now, Vera and Vera's mom were all she had left.

I vowed then and there that no matter what hell Vera and I put each other through, I'd be here if Melody needed anything. I'd babysit, cook her meals, let her watch the koi in the pond in my backyard. Anything to give her a little more stability.

Back in the kitchen, I was about to start on the dishes now that Melody was in another room with the door pulled closed when my phone lit up.

Sebastian: Well?

Me: She's asleep in the spare bedroom.

Sebastian: Good job! A for effort!

Me: Are you done?

Sebastian: Never! Besides, you messaged me, not the other way around.

It was a stark reminder that I barely talked to my brothers. Something I needed to fix. That didn't mean I had to suddenly change who I was. Sebastian wouldn't expect me to.

Me: Don't get used to it.

Sebastian: I'd hug you if I were there. You're such a teddy bear deep down, aren't you?

Me: Go to hell.

Sebastian: *heart emoji*

Sebastian: *bear face emoji*

Sebastian: *heart emoji*

Idiot.

I couldn't fight the smile that tugged at my lips.

VERA

I wasn't sure how I'd survived the day.

Most of my employees left me alone, thankfully, letting me catch up on everything I'd missed. I'd tried to avoid talking with too many people, but everyone wanted to see Mel. Eventually, I'd hidden away with her in one of the meeting rooms to get some work done in quiet while she read a book.

But there was no getting out of this meeting. It had been scheduled for months and already pushed back two weeks. Our investors were a group of mostly women who wanted to feel involved in the business. When we'd first brought the beta version of our app to them, they jumped in with two feet, offering us whatever funding we needed. We'd hand-picked each person we approached for capital.

They stuck by us months ago when an error with the help button resulted in some settlements. And now, they wanted to know our future plans for growth.

Making any kind of future plans at the moment was nearly impossible for me, but luckily, Kinsey and I had already done the work. We had printouts for them that we had designed back in December, projections of costs, growth, and possible changes to the app.

They were impressed.

Of course they were.

Kinsey and I were damn impressive.

As was Eliana, but she wasn't good with the investors. Mostly just the coding.

I stood outside the restaurant, my people-pleasing mask still in place. Normally, it was natural for me to revert into business mode, where I could woo people like a lover with a big bank account. Today, I felt like a lover trying to hide their broke ass, multiple felonies, and unbearable personality behind a fresh veneer.

Basically, I struggled. And it was exhausting.

Mindy Fleischman, our top investor, held a hand out to me. I took it, giving her a warm smile. "I hope you know we're grateful for everything you continue to do for us."

It was true. She and the others made our dream possible.

Perfect white teeth flashed. "I knew this was a good opportunity the moment I met you ladies." She let go of my hand. "And tell Eliana we missed her. She always provides a bit of... entertainment to these meetings. When you two allow her to come." She winked before sliding into the backseat of a black town car.

Kinsey and I stared at each other for a second before we both laughed. For a moment, I felt like my old self. Kicking ass in business, taking on the world with my cousin.

I lifted a hand, and she slapped her palm against it.

"Hart girls for the win!" she said.

If I didn't love her so much, I'd laugh at her awkwardness. I didn't tell her I'd been about to brush the hair out of my face. A high five worked too.

"I don't know about you, cos, but I could use a long bath and my bed." My shoulders dropped with the weight of exhaustion. Had our jobs always been this tiring, or was tired just my new set point?

She met my gaze, her eyes narrowing. I knew that look. She was reading me in the way only someone who'd known me since childhood could. "Thank you for coming tonight. I know it was the last thing you wanted to do."

I sighed. “Owning a company means sacrifice, right?”

We started walking toward the lot where I’d parked. I drove her here, so I would drop her off on my way back.

“Has Aunt D moved home yet?”

“She’s planning on it soon. We have to return to normal.”

Kinsey bumped my shoulder. “Does that mean we get you back too?”

I hadn’t thought of that. For weeks, I’d pushed my friends away, kept them from seeing just how much I was changing. “It won’t be the same.”

Even in the dark, I could tell she rolled her eyes. “It’s not just the three of us anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mel. We’ve always loved her, but now she’s one of us. She isn’t only a permanent part of your life now; she’s part of ours.”

Tears welled in my eyes, but instead of letting them fall, I slipped my arm through Kinsey’s. “Good. Because we both need you.”

For once, she didn’t shy away from the touch. Instead, she leaned into me. I hadn’t realized how much I truly needed my cousin. When Abby decided to stop being a real sister to me, Kinsey had been there. Always. Most good memories I had included her. Other than my mom, she’d been the one constant in my life since I was a kid.

“I love you.” I rested my head on her shoulder as we walked.

“V?”

“Yeah?”

“I think we need to have a talk. You know I’m with Sebastian, right?”

“Duh.” I was so confused.

“Well, he might be willing to try the whole throuple thing, but I kind of draw the line at incest.”

A surprised laugh choked out of me. It was the kind of joke the old Vera would have made, not her innocent cousin. I shoved her away from me. “Nasty mind.”

She cackled.

Then, I stopped. “Would Sebastian really try a throuple?” I had new respect for him if he would. I’d never been above experimenting with my relationships. I didn’t call myself straight. There’d been times in my life where I leaned into my bi-curiosity. But a throuple? Not even I had gone there.

She shrugged. “I’ve never asked. I imagine if I did, he’d laugh me out of the room.”

“Because it’s ridiculous?”

She shook her head. “Because it’d be me asking.”

We were both laughing when we got in the car. I dropped her off at her place before heading toward my own. By the time I reached my darkened house, all I wanted was to collapse into bed and sleep. For a week. Or a year.

I sighed as I got out of the car. The front door was locked, meaning Mom had probably gone to sleep. Unlocking it, I stepped inside and dropped my purse on the table by the door. The place was silent as I walked through the kitchen and into the living room, kicking off my heels as I went.

Heading for the spare bedroom, I expected to find Mom and Melody curled up together, but the bed was empty. It was made with the kind of precision only my mother could accomplish. Next, I looked in my room, but my messier bed held no Melody.

Panic clawed at my throat. What if something happened and I’d been too busy with work? I checked my phone, but there were no texts. They had to be here somewhere. I hurried back to the kitchen, but it didn’t look like anyone had been in here all night.

Then, I saw it.

There was a note scrawled on the whiteboard attached to the fridge. It said *Fashion Emergency. Flew to NYC. Melody with Waylen.*

Waylen.

“Fucking Mom.”

What was she playing at? She could have called me home from the meeting. Could have called Eliana and Shea. Instead, she went to the one Denver brother I wanted to stab on sight. Great, now I had to see him when there was no more energy left in my body.

I looked down at the dress Mom had brought me for the meeting. It was a black scrap of clothing that hugged every bit of my curves. She'd known it wasn't my style, that it showed much more skin than I preferred. The low neckline, high slit up the side. Sure, it wasn't out of place with the investors group, but it wasn't me.

And she'd brought it anyway. Sometimes, I wondered if Mom approved of anything in my life. Certainly not my desire for more comfortable clothing, nor my disdain for a certain neighbor. Did he even like kids? What if he forgot to feed her or let her watch something like... like I didn't know what. But I was sure he was into inappropriate things.

I charged toward the back door and down my wobbly steps. Mel didn't belong in his house, with a man I barely knew, let alone trusted. Sure, he was a Denver. The rest of the family were good people. I knew that. Mom knew that. But surely Jeffrey Dahmer had good people in his family too.

I sped up, crossing from my yard into his, barefoot like before. The burning started when I was halfway across his yard. Ants crawled over my feet, and I started running, not stopping until I reached his deck. I could see the lights from the TV through a window near the door as I brushed the remaining ants off my feet.

Drawing in a deep breath did nothing to calm my irritation. At my mom. At the possible serial killer living next door to

me. I didn't knock before pushing the door open and stepping inside.

There was no one here. On the TV, a group of teenagers sang something about standing tall, so I straightened my spine, ready to face whatever I found here.

What I hadn't expected to see was Waylen walking out of the kitchen carrying a bowl of spaghetti. He glanced at me but didn't look surprised. "I saw you running across the yard."

I grunted. "You really should deal with those fire ants."

He shrugged, holding the bowl toward me. "You probably didn't get to eat much at your fancy dinner. I warmed you up some leftovers."

I stared at the bowl and then lifted my eyes to his. "What did you do to it?"

He arched an eyebrow. "It's not poisoned."

"How do I know that?"

"Fine." He retracted the bowl. "Starve for all I care." Lifting the fork to his own mouth, he took a bite.

It smelled amazing. My stomach rumbled, telling me I should have accepted the kind gesture. He'd been right. I'd spent most of the dinner chatting and presenting. There hadn't been much time for me to eat.

"Where's Melody?" I asked.

"In the guest room." He gestured down the hall. "Still breathing, in case you're wondering. I do know how to keep a living being alive."

"She's not a pet."

"Hush now." He pointed to the TV. "This is the last episode, and it's almost over."

I rolled my eyes and headed down the hall, where he said I'd find Melody. Only one door was open, and I went toward it.

Mel was curled up under a soft quilt, her face buried in the pillow. I wasn't sure what made me do it, but I checked her pulse. Alive. Thank God. If anything happened to this kid, they'd have to bury me right along with her.

I sat beside her on the bed and brushed a hand down her arm. "Mel," I whispered.

She mumbled in her sleep but didn't wake.

I smiled as I pushed her bangs out of her face. "Melody, you need to wake up."

Her eyes opened slowly, and it took her a moment to realize I was there, but when she did, she reached for me. I obliged, leaning down for a soul-healing hug.

"I'm sorry I had to work tonight, kiddo," I said. "That won't happen a lot. I promise."

She nodded. I wished she'd say something, anything to let me know how she was feeling.

Someone cleared their throat from the doorway, and I turned to find Waylen leaning on the frame, still eating the pasta. "You're welcome." Not a single emotion flickered in his voice.

"What?" I turned to him.

"I believe the correct words are 'thank you.'"

"If you think—"

"I saved your ass tonight."

I looked to Melody, thankful to see she'd fallen back asleep. Standing, I faced Waylen. "You did nothing of the sort. I'm sorry my mom asked this of you, but it won't happen again."

"Why can't you admit you needed someone for once in your life? Is it that difficult?"

Needed someone. It wasn't the first time I'd needed him, but that night at the hospital, he could have been anyone. Except he wasn't. He was Waylen Denver.

“Thank you for taking care of her.”

My words seemed to stun him, and his mouth shut. I didn't think I'd ever seen him speechless, but it felt good. Damn good.

When a slow smile curved his lips, I wanted to slap it off. “That wasn't so hard, was it?”

Closing my eyes, I counted to three to try to stop the anger from surfacing. I didn't have the energy for this tonight. When I opened them, I'd calmed.

“Goodnight, Waylen.” I hefted Mel into my arms. She was heavy, but there was no way I was asking for help.

He watched us walk across the yard from his back door. “Night, Vera.”

WAYLEN

The last time I saw my surly neighbor was Monday night, and she wasn't so surly after all. She wanted to be, that much was clear. She'd thanked me though. I nearly rocked back on my heels when she did. I was just busting on her, not truly thinking she'd actually say the words. But she surprised me and did.

As I walked across my yard after eating dinner, I glanced down at my boots and saw a lone fire ant illuminated by the lights I had out here. I shook my boot, trying to get it off. I knew I had to deal with them, but I always wore boots or some other kind of footwear. The only one who seemed to have a problem with my annoying visitors was Vera, who liked to come over here barefoot.

I was looking at the ants all wrong. They weren't a nuisance. They were a security system to keep out neighbors who wanted to scream at me and rail about what I was doing to annoy them. The ants were staying until Vera was nicer to me. They were the only barrier between her and me. The fence obviously wasn't a deterrent. If there weren't a gate on it, I wouldn't put it past her to leap over the thing.

Inside my shop, I quickly got lost in the project I was working on. So lost that time flew by. I was about to start cleaning up when a familiar, pissed-off woman came storming into my shop. Her dirty blonde hair, which was normally tamer than it was now, was mussed and had this sort of sexy appeal to it. Short on the sides and longer on top, it fit her well. Not that I'd ever say that to her. As it was, thinking it was sexy

was bizarre as hell. I blamed the black dress she'd worn when she came stomping over here Monday night. I'd never seen her so dressed up. It was hard to breathe at the sight of her. Of course, she went and ruined the entire thing with her hatred of me.

Her chocolate eyes were narrowed now. If she could breathe fire, she would. Vera bent down and flicked an ant off her foot, her *bare* foot. The black leggings she wore were tight and showcased her slender legs. The long light gray T-shirt was easily two sizes too big. At least it wasn't covered in wine.

She was about to unleash on me when I moved close to her, causing her to back up a step. I kept doing it until she was outside on the grass, then I closed my shop door. In her face. Because I wasn't in the mood to deal with her attitude.

This song and dance was getting really damn old. It took a lot to rile me up to the point I was truly angry. Vera was quickly pushing me in that direction. I didn't want to go there. I wasn't a guy with a temper. This was bordering on insanity though.

The door wrenched open, an even more pissed-off Vera revealed on the other side. "Mel is sleeping, you jackass. I'm so tired of coming over here and having the same fight with you."

"The solution is to stop, then," I replied. "Just stop walking over here. I'm working. I can't help it that I get loud at times, but you are the only one who ever complains about it. In case you haven't realized, the Abrams on the other side of me have two young children. Do you see them over here coming for my throat for the noise? No, because this is a you problem, not me." I was shocked she let me get that out.

She let out this half-scream, half-irritated noise that I thought only animals made, then bent down and flicked another ant from her foot. "The ants, do something about the damn ants!"

I crossed my arms. "No. I like them. They provide a certain flair to my yard. Besides, I feed them to the koi." I

didn't, but Vera didn't need to know that. "Saves me money on food for them."

Her feet carried her closer as her finger pointed in my direction. "I'm sick of this. I have a kid to take care of and don't have time or energy for this. I need sleep, and so does she."

"If you don't have time, feel free to scurry your ass back to your house. I'm not keeping you here. In fact, this is private property, and you're trespassing. Be sure to close the gate on your way out."

Oh, the shades of red were happening. Each one got darker and angrier in appearance. Well, it had worked before, so it was time to see if it would again.

I erased the small distance between us and leaned down to press my lips to hers. She definitely went quiet. She also moaned. Like porn-worthy moan. Like this was the best kiss she ever had, except without tongue because I wasn't going to be the first to do that.

Her tongue touched my lip just as it had the first time. Now, I opened for her. I'd be damned if I wasn't going to see how this played out.

The moment my lips parted, she swooped in and tasted me. My dick went from mildly interested to "let's do this!" I had to slow him down. I didn't think we'd be going that far. Then again, I didn't think Vera's hands would ever grip my ass, yet here we were.

I reached up, one hand gently holding the side of her neck while the other wove into her hair. We started grappling for dominance. When her hands moved to my chest to shove me to the nearest wall, I spun us around and pushed her against it. She tried changing our position, but I was bigger and stronger. Though, if she wanted to put a stop to this, I'd immediately let her go.

Vera's hand drifted over my chest to my stomach and kept going south until she was at the waist of my sweatpants. This

was the deciding moment. How far were we going to take this? How much was she willing to do?

Her hand slipped inside, her soft fingers immediately wrapping around my dick. I hissed through my teeth as I pulled away only far enough where I could drop my forehead to hers.

It had been so long since a hand other than my own had touched me. I had to fight not to explode on contact.

Vera moved her body like a wave. First, her pelvis ground against me. Her stomach was next, followed by her chest. I couldn't resist and slid the hand I had at her neck down to palm her breast, which was sans bra. Another moan worked its way past her lips a second before her mouth was on mine again, devouring me like I was her last meal and she wanted to savor it.

Shit, I needed more of this, more of *her*. I got my hand under her shirt and went back to her breast, finding her nipple and pinching it. The little bite of pain caused Vera to rub against me again. She liked that, huh?

If I thought about this too much, about whose nipple I was currently playing with, I might shut the whole thing down. But since she seemed as game as I was, I wasn't going deep into the thought process.

When my other hand dropped down to pull her shirt off, Vera broke our kiss and lifted it for me. That was all I needed as the sign that we were truly doing this—going further—so I dropped my pants and boxer briefs, kicking them off, and ripped my shirt over my head. With my clothes gone, I was able to pay attention to stripping Vera out of hers. Only, she was staring at me, at my body. Her eyes raked over my flesh, settling at my waist. Her pink tongue came out and licked along her bottom lip. My dick bobbed in response. I didn't need to look to know a drop of precum formed at the tip.

She hooked her fingers into her waistband, taking the rest of her clothes off while not looking away from my dick.

With her finally naked, I stepped forward, gripped her by the backs of her thighs, and lifted her. Her legs quickly wrapped around my waist as her arms went behind my neck to hold on. We were lined up so nicely. I could glide my dick along her folds, feel her wetness coating me. It was all I could do not to lean back enough to sink inside of her. But I wouldn't do that to Vera bare. I didn't know her intimately, and she didn't know me.

My discarded shirt sat on the work bench, so I held Vera with one hand while I spread it out, not wanting her to get dust on her ass. I was courteous like that.

When I dropped her down, her legs stayed as they were, her body writhing against mine, causing chills to break out over my flesh at how close I was to the edge of orgasm.

“Condom,” she panted out between kisses. It was good to know we were on the same page.

I patted around on the shelf on the wall behind her, looking for that little tin I put my resolution list under. Once, I'd hooked up with a woman who loved the idea of me working with my hands. She had wanted to have sex out here. Since then, I had kept condoms on the shelf as a just-in-case measure. I'd never needed them again and would need to swap them out when they expired. Now, I was grateful for the overly prepared side of myself. It meant this moment didn't have to end with cum spilling anywhere but in the condom while I was buried inside of Vera.

Carefully, I slid it on to make sure there was minimal chance it would break. The last thing I needed was to procreate with the woman in front of me.

I met her eyes, needing to voice this one question. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “Hurry the hell up.” The Vera I knew was still in there somewhere.

Gripping her hips, I moved her as close to the edge of the bench as I could. I lined up, shifting her once more, and slowly

slid inside. Every inch had my body drawing tighter. She was so hot and slick. She gripped me perfectly.

Her legs tightened around my waist; her fingers dug into my shoulders. I held her close and started thrusting. At first, I was worried I was going too hard and too fast, but Vera kept assuring me I was doing something right with her breathy, “yes,” and, “deeper,” and, “more.”

I kept the punishing pace, trying my best not to come before she did. I could only imagine what she'd throw my way if that happened. Instead, I reached down and fit my hand between the nearly non-existent space of our bodies and started rubbing her. She cried out against my lips in no time. That was the only signal I needed to drive faster, harder, until I couldn't hold back any longer and flooded the condom as a long, loud moan of pleasure left my lips.

While my mind blissfully checked out, my body languidly pushed in and pulled out, not wanting to leave her heat. It wasn't until she went fully lax against me that I slowed to a stop. We panted, sharing breaths. The scent of the nighttime air mixed with sawdust.

I wouldn't admit it out loud, but that had been the single hottest encounter of my life.

VERA

Days.

It had been days, and I could still feel his hands on me, could still feel him inside me.

I wasn't inexperienced by any measure. Sudden fucks weren't new to me. I couldn't help it. I was a sexual creature. But the way we'd gone from arguing to grappling so quickly turned my blood to molten lava. It was fast and dirty. No foreplay. No reveling in the afterglow. Once my feet had been firmly planted on the ground again, I pulled my clothes on and left without a word.

He didn't wake us up this morning with any early work in his shop. Maybe it was to avoid another confrontation with me, avoid confronting what we'd done.

I wasn't embarrassed. Sex was natural, especially when tension was high. I didn't shy away from talking about it. Something told me Waylen wasn't quite as free with himself as I was.

"Vera." Fingers snapped in front of my face, and I looked up to find all four of my friends staring at me. We were at brunch out in St. Pete, at our favorite spot featuring bottomless mimosas. Kinsey and Sebastian sat on one side of the table with Eliana and Shea on the other. As the perpetual fifth wheel, I was at the end.

"What?" I glanced from Kinsey to Eliana, trying to avoid looking at their boyfriends. They reminded me too much of their brother, whom I'd climbed like a jungle gym.

Eliana stifled a laugh. “Who is he?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” My face heated, and I was sure I looked as red as the tomatoes in my caprese salad.

“Ana is right.” My cousin grinned. “Isn’t she? There’s a guy. That’s why you keep zoning out on us.”

I shook my head. “No guy. I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Bullshit.” Eliana crossed her arms. “Come on, V, you tell us everything. Who is he?”

I finally let my eyes rest on the Denver at her side.

Understanding dawned on her face. “Babe.” She nudged Shea. “Why don’t you and Sebastian go smoke a cigarette or something?”

His brow furrowed. “Neither of us smokes.”

One dangerous brow lifted as she scowled. “Then start.”

Sebastian sighed. “Let me apologize for my baby brother.” He reached across the table and swatted him. “He can’t take a hint. We’ll go sit at the bar until you tell us to come back.”

“What?” Shea looked from his brother to his girlfriend. “Why? I’m comfortable here.”

Sebastian slid from the booth and grabbed Shea’s arm, pulling him out. “Get moving, Santa. They want to talk without us in hearing range.”

Shea would soon retire from modeling, but it would take a while for his family to stop razzing him about some of the shoots he’d done, like as a recent sexy Santa.

When they were out of earshot, both of my friends leaned in. “You got laid.” Eliana’s words were more of a statement than a question.

Kinsey’s eyes widened. “She’s right. You totally did.”

It had been an abnormally long time, about six months, for me, but I wasn’t sure how they could tell the drought was over. “Are you two following me?”

They both smiled, but it was Kinsey who answered. “I’m sure that would be highly entertaining.”

“Like our very own porno,” Eliana agreed.

“I hate you both.” I leaned back, arms crossed over my chest.

I wasn’t sure why I hesitated to tell them what I’d done. What we’d done. It was angry sex, hate sex. Possibly the best kind, not like I’d known that before.

“What I want to know,” Eliana started, “is how?”

I stared at her. “You want to know how I had sex? Well, it’s really quite simple. You see, when a man feels attraction, his dick—”

“Asshole.” She pinched me. “You know that’s not what I meant. You’ve been kind of a hermit since New Year’s. And now, with Mel... How did you meet someone?”

“It wasn’t a hookup app, was it?” Kinsey dropped her voice. “You deserve better than those.”

I rolled my eyes. “No, it wasn’t an app, but if it was, that would be my business. I just... Fine. Yes, I got laid. By the last person I ever expected to see that way.”

“You had sex with Waylen!” Eliana clapped a hand over her mouth as people at surrounding tables turned to look at us.

“How the hell...” I shook my head. “Ana, are you a witch?”

A giggle escaped her. “Oh my God. Do you know what this means?”

I shook my head.

“The three of us are dating brothers.”

“Whoa there.” I raised a hand. “Absolutely not. It was a one-time desperation fuck. I do not plan to ever let Waylen do that to me again.”

“Do it to you?” Kinsey smirked. “Do what, exactly?”

“Make me lose control.” The truth was, I never had control of myself when dealing with my grumpy neighbor. I saw him and just started yelling. I was mean, the kind of person I never wanted to be. But there was something about him that turned me into an ogre stomping across his ant-riddled yard.

And I didn't like not being in control.

Kinsey laughed. “This whole brunch was about checking in and seeing what you needed from us, how you and Mel were doing. I guess you're finally starting to heal.”

“How do you figure?” Healing was never the intention of whatever that was with Waylen. There hadn't been *any* intention.

“This is the first time you finally seem like yourself since everything happened. V, I don't know if you realize it, but just the idea of you being lost in thought about something not related to your family would have seemed far-fetched only a week ago.”

She was right. I'd felt myself slipping away over the weeks. I'd always been easy to smile, the first to laugh. I believed life was to be enjoyed, not merely endured. Yet, I hadn't been able to summon those feelings. Not when I had Melody to worry about, not when I hadn't been able to stop thinking about my sister.

“You guys really think sex is the answer to my problems?” I blinked back tears. Maybe I should get on one of those apps if this was what brought me back to life. I certainly wouldn't go back to Waylen.

My friends looked at each other and burst out laughing.

Eliana wheezed. “I'm sorry. That was such a Vera thought. No, sex isn't the answer to any problems. Don't go screwing every man and woman you can find, thinking it will make you feel better.”

Kinsey drew in a breath, trying to regain control of herself. “I don't think it was the sex. Not entirely. That's more of a result of you letting the world in again. When Abby died, V, we lost you too. For a little while. We always knew you'd

return to us and were willing to help in any way you needed. Seeing you flustered over a guy just gives me hope it's happening."

"I'm not flustered." I pressed my lips into a flat line. "Not one bit." I wanted to push Waylen to the depths of my mind, to put him in his place as only my obnoxious neighbor. But he was out of the box now, so to speak.

I was done with this conversation. I loved my friends, but us being so close also meant we were always in each other's business. Next, they'd tell me I needed a list. Which, granted, had been my idea in the first place. I basically made Kinsey write a list of things she wanted to accomplish before dating again. Not so innocent things.

And then, Eliana had her red flag list.

But there was no reason for me to write one. I wasn't looking to add the complications of a relationship to my life. Not right now.

Before they could stop me, I waved the guys back over to the table.

"Done talking about us?" Shea asked as he slid in beside Eliana.

"You wish." I laughed. It felt good to be with the four of them, to see my two favorite people so happy with guys I genuinely liked.

Yet, something bitter rested on my tongue. A knowledge that they moved to the future while I tried to hold my life together with duct tape and prayers.

Sebastian gave me a kind smile. "Are you okay, Vera? Really?" He paused. "Waylen told me he watched Melody the other night. I'm glad he's there in case you need anything."

Kinsey choked on a sip of mimosa, descending into a coughing fit.

Eliana bit her fist to keep from laughing.

"What is wrong with you two?" Sebastian asked.

“Oh, nothing.” Eliana cleared her throat. “We’re just glad your brother is there for her too.”

“Really glad.” Kinsey nodded.

I kicked each of them under the table.

“Ow!” Shea jerked back. “Who kicked me? That was hard.”

Whoops.

Kinsey saved me. “I felt it too. Sebastian, keep your big feet to yourself.”

Sebastian started to protest, but the words ended in a grunt of pain. He glared at his brother. “Jerk.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Shea stared him straight in the eyes. “I didn’t realize your leg was there.”

Boys.

Dammit, I loved them.

By the time we finished brunch and were piled into Sebastian’s car to head across the bridge to Tampa, I was ready to be in the quiet of my house. Mom had returned from her trip and decided to move back to her penthouse, taking Melody with her for the weekend.

Mel started school on Monday, and I was nervous, but I tried not to think about it today. Instead, maybe I’d read a book or work on a puzzle. It had been ages since I slowed down enough to do that.

Sebastian had drawn the short straw for our mimosa brunch, having to remain sober. So, he dropped me off right in front of my house. I realized as he drove away that I’d forgotten my house key since I hadn’t taken my car.

“Shit.”

Guess it was the back door for me. I never locked it; another thing Waylen would tell me I inevitably did wrong. Maybe with Mel here, I should start making the house more secure. It was her home too, and the last thing I wanted to do was fail her.

That thought brought to mind a million other things I was surely doing wrong. I'd never been mother material, yet here I was. With a kid who still wouldn't talk to me or anyone else. How was she supposed to deal with school when her voice was gone?

I tried to shove down those fears as my heels dug into the soft lawn of my side yard. "Damn things," I groaned, trying not to fall over. I was still a little tipsy from brunch, but that didn't explain what I saw when I finally reached my backyard.

Waylen stood shirtless next door, holding some kind of spray that he spread across his grass.

The fire ants.

He'd listened to me.

A smile wound from one side of my lips to the other as I watched him, sweat glistening off his chest. A chest I knew all too well now. I hadn't spent much time exploring him, but I knew how it felt pressed against me, all hard lines and warm body, those piercings biting into my skin.

Heat pooled within me, and I knew I needed to shut it down. Right. Fucking. Now.

I hobbled toward my dilapidated deck and managed to avoid the more broken parts to reach the door. With one more look at Waylen, I went inside, promising myself that I'd never stop arguing with him.

Because what was the fun in that?

WAYLEN

Sunday was the one day I allowed myself to sleep in. The one day I said screw you to my alarm and slept until my body woke on its own, which was usually around ten—a solid three and a half hours later than I normally slept. I guess I made up for the lack of sleep during the week.

But here I was, slapping around my nightstand for my phone because the damn thing was ringing and vibrating, jarring me out of sleep. The phone read eight when I finally lifted it. I also saw Shea's name on the screen. He never called me. Ever.

"Yeah?" I asked when I answered, a thread of panic in my sleep-roughened voice. Something must have happened for him to call me.

"The pipe in the bathroom at the shelter is leaking badly. Carol called me in a panic, but I don't know anything about this stuff."

I knew Shea was buying the shelter from her but wasn't sure when the deal would be done. "So, you called me?"

"You're handy."

"I make cabinets, Shea. I'm not a plumber."

"Way," he groaned. "Can you at least try? I called an emergency plumbing service, but today must be the day to break shit because we're fifth on the list."

"Jesus," I muttered and swung my legs out of bed. "Did you shut off the main valve?"

“The what?”

“Find the main water valve. It’s the place the water comes into the building. It might be in a room with other maintenance equipment like the water heater or it could be somewhere else. You have to shut that off to stop the water from leaving the pipe.”

“Okay, I’ll ask Carol. She might know. She’s not handy at all though. I’m not sure why she called me.”

“I’m not either. I gotta get dressed, then I’ll head over.”

“Thank you, Way. Thank you so much.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I hung up and dropped my phone back on the nightstand. The bedroom was still bathed in darkness thanks to the heavy curtains over the windows. I stood and went over to open them, squinting as the bright sunlight flooded into the room, burning my eyes.

The one day I could sleep in.

Sighing, I grabbed the sweatpants on the end of my bed and changed into them. There was no point in putting jeans on only to ruin them by whatever repair I had to try to make. No, I wasn’t a plumber, but I’d fixed enough around my home that maybe I could help Shea and Carol.

It didn’t take me long to get onto the road heading toward the shelter. I was pretty low maintenance, so once I’d dressed and took care of my morning routine to clean up, I grabbed a granola bar, a travel mug full of coffee, and was out the door.

Sunglasses were needed to fend off a potential headache from being woken early and the sun trying to singe my eyeballs. By the time I pulled into the parking lot, I at least had caffeine and food in my stomach. Feeling more awake was a plus.

Shea came out the door before I exited my truck. His jeans were damp at the bottom, no doubt a designer brand. My brother got clothes from a lot of different labels, none of them cheap. His navy Henley had the sleeves rolled up. His hair was

a mess, and his eyes were panicked. “I got the valve shut off,” he said when I got out of my truck.

“Good.”

“Carol’s currently getting the water out of there with a shop vac. Luckily, it wasn’t a massive leak where the building flooded, but it had been coming out for a while.”

I grabbed my toolbox from the bed of my F-250. I had it strapped in there so it didn’t slide around. I needed it yesterday when my mom called about a creaky floorboard in their upstairs. Between that and today, apparently, I should be charging for my services. Not that I would, but damn, I needed a break.

Inside the shelter, a grateful Carol greeted me, talking so fast I only caught every few words as she led me to the bathroom where the leak was. It turned out she hired someone to install a new toilet and sink since the old ones were having too many issues. The new ones weren’t installed properly, causing the leak, which was actually leaks—one from the sink plumbing and another from the toilet. I was able to fix them fairly quickly, which was good. I turned the water back on and the repairs held. Even with my brother buying the place, the shelter didn’t have a lot of money. This was probably one of many upgrades that needed to happen in here.

With that done, I cleaned up, grateful I didn’t get much water on me. If the leaks had been bigger, this could have been disastrous. At least the water wasn’t high. If it was, mold would become a concern.

Carol offered me a donut and some coffee when I emerged, neither of which I turned down. My stomach growled from lack of a proper breakfast. She told me Shea was with the dogs, cleaning out their kennels. I decided to stick around. This was a good time to connect with Shea, which was also on my resolution list. This place meant a lot to my brother. The least I could do was learn more about it.

With a wave of her hand, Carol told me where I could find him while she busied herself cleaning the rest of the bathroom. The sound of dogs barking greeted me before I opened the

door to the kennel runs. Some of the dogs wagged their tails when they saw me, their butts moving too. Most of them barked like it was some kind of communication that there was a new guy in the place. It could have been for all I knew. Dogs weren't my specialty.

Shea was inside one of the runs near the far end, the door open but the one leading to the outside was closed to keep the dog out there. "Hey," he greeted with a smile when he saw me. "Did you want to help clean?"

"If you need me to."

His eyes went big. "I don't, but wow. You'd really do that?"

"What, you think I'm above hard work?" I couldn't help the bite in my tone. What the hell did my brothers think of me? I worked with my hands all day. Cleaning up after dogs wasn't a big deal.

"No, it's not that." He stood and exited the space. "I just figured you had something else to do."

"I don't." I could sleep, but that ship had sailed.

Shea closed the door and latched it before raising the panel at the back to allow the dog inside. It was a small black-and-tan thing, with one ear that stood up and the other flopped over. He came right over to the chain-linked door and sat down, peering at us with big brown, sad-as-hell eyes.

"Why's he still here?" I asked. "I thought puppies got adopted fast."

"Buddy was rescued from the side of the road. His fur was a mess of fleas. Once we got him bathed and safely in one of the kennels, we realized it wasn't just the flea bites bothering him. He has bad allergies. The vet gave us a medicated shampoo to bathe him in, but he needs to see a specialist. I got him an appointment, but it's not for a couple weeks."

"No one wants to adopt him?"

Shea shook his head. "The vet we use said depending on the results from the skin test, he might need allergy shots,

which the owner would administer. Most people want a cute puppy without any health issues. The thought of countless specialist appointments combined with needing to have shots, plus what I imagine will be high vet bills, is a huge deterrent. We've also had to change his food. Apparently, it's not just a skin allergy but also a digestive issue."

I looked at the dog again, at his sweet face and those eyes that were practically begging me to reach in there and rescue him. "Can I pet him?"

"Sure," my brother said enthusiastically. He opened the door and lifted the puppy into his arms. "Let's go into one of the rooms where it will be quiet. If the other dogs see him running around in here, it's only going to rile them up."

I nodded and followed him out of the big, long room. I didn't realize how loud it was in there until we were tucked behind the closed door of a smaller room. White walls and a gray linoleum floor gave the room a cold feel. I guess it was needed for easy cleaning. I couldn't help but think it should be more welcoming though. "What is this room?"

"It's where we have people sit and visit with a pet they are thinking of adopting."

"Why not liven it up? It's depressing."

The smile my brother gave me had me ducking my head. I wasn't used to so much one-on-one time with him. Now, it felt like he was seeing me more than he did at dinners. He was, and this was what I wanted, but I didn't like feeling so exposed.

"When I fully take over, once I'm retired from modeling, I'm going to need a hand in here if you'd like to help. If you have the time," he rushed to add.

"I do."

Buddy started squirming in Shea's arms, so he put him on the floor. I thought the little guy would start sniffing the place. There had to be a bunch of other animal scents in here, even if it was cleaned often. But no, the puppy came right to me and found my boots fascinating.

Crouching on the floor, I ran my hand over his fur. It was fluffy and softer than I imagined it would be. He loved the attention, spinning this way and that so I could get all the spots he wanted scratched.

“He likes you,” my brother said.

“He’d probably like anyone given how much time he spends locked away.”

Shea sighed and sat on the bench in the room. “One of the things I want to do is more social media stories about the dogs and cats here. I want to dedicate time to each one and bring awareness. When you group them all together, they don’t seem to get the same attention. One on one, with a story about them, draws people in. I’ve seen it done on other shelter pages.” That made sense. You could forge a connection better with more details about a specific animal.

“What kind of dog is he?”

Buddy put his feet on my knee so he could get closer to my face. I rubbed my fingers along the fur on his head.

“He’s got some German Shepherd in him, but we’re not sure what else. He should be bigger. The best guess is he’s mixed with a smaller breed. We’d have to do a DNA test to know for certain.”

I turned my attention to my brother. “They have DNA tests for dogs?”

“Sure do. It helps to know what you’re getting into. Like Buddy, Shepherds are known for developing allergies. If he didn’t have them already, a potential adopter could research the breed and find out what they’re prone to.”

“Has anyone even looked at him?”

“Yeah, but once they hear about the possible medical cost, they move on.”

In that moment, I knew what I had to do, what I *wanted* to do. “I’ll take him.”

“What?” Shea asked, eyes back to being wide.

“Buddy. I want him. I have the money to handle the bills. I live by myself, work for myself. I can take time off needed for the vet visits. I can change his name though, right?” He didn’t seem like a Buddy to me.

“Absolutely. It was the name we gave him when he got here.”

It was an easy decision. This little guy needed a home, and my house had been quiet for far too long. It would be nice to have a companion. Plus, I finally got rid of the fire ants. The yard was safe. At least, it would be once it rained and the pesticide I used washed away. Maybe I should hose down the yard to be on the safe side and read the back of the packaging of the spray I used.

What would Vera think of me getting a dog?

“How loud is he?” I asked.

“He barks, but no more than the other dogs. Shepherds are protective though. They guard their owners.”

I grinned. “Perfect.”

VERA

“How was school, kiddo?” I asked as I wiped down the kitchen table. I’d spent the entire day nervous about Melody going to a new school that might or might not be able to handle her aversion to words.

When I didn’t get an answer—not like I’d expected one—I looked back at where Mel was sitting on the edge of the couch, leaning toward whatever show she had on the TV. She looked like she was ready to pounce with unspent energy, right into the screen and whatever adventure the characters were embarking on.

I really needed to make our lives more interesting.

Dropping the rag on the table, I turned to regard her fully. “Your new teacher, Mrs. Rivera, sent home a note. Says there was a math test today. She told you that you didn’t have to take it before you got caught up, but you chose to anyway.”

That elicited a shrug from the kid. At least it was something.

I walked closer. “And you aced it.” I hadn’t paid attention to Melody’s schooling before, other than to sometimes pick her up at the end of the day. I didn’t know what she was like in the classroom or if that beautiful brain I knew was appreciated by other people.

She was smart. Much smarter than me and her mother had been at that age.

I walked over to the couch and perched on the arm. Picking up the remote, I turned off the TV. She glared at me,

but I didn't care. We were going to be a normal family, dammit. No eating in front of the television or ignoring each other over our plates of frozen pizza.

It was one of the few things I didn't burn. That, and I was a master at macaroni and cheese. The Kraft kind. It was a main food group in my house, though I wanted to do better now. The microwave beeped, and I gave myself an internal pat of support. That microwaved zucchini I'd slather in butter and parmesan cheese meant I was an adult, and fuck anyone who said otherwise.

"Dinner will be ready soon. You have just a few minutes."

Melody nodded.

I walked back into the kitchen, where the timer was counting down to pizza heaven. As the beep sounded, I pulled it out and went in search of my pizza cutter. I dug through disorganized drawers, vowing to myself I'd get this kitchen in shape.

And maybe get a cookbook.

Who knew how much there was to this whole parenting gig? Well, parents. I guess they knew.

By the time I found the cutter, the pizza was cool enough for me to slice through without pulling all the cheese off. I then stuffed my hand into a hot pad and pulled out the zucchini, doctoring it up. With my dad not around much when I was young, and Mom a designing diva, there hadn't always been a parent making full food-pyramid friendly meals.

Instead, it was three teenage girls experimenting with whatever was in the fridge. Kinsey and Abby had always been better at it than me, but Mom made sure I'd always had zucchini. It was a favorite.

I didn't even know if Melody liked it. God, now I was even second-guessing every meal I made her. I'd half-raised the kid since she was a toddler, but it felt like I didn't know her at all, didn't know her needs or wants.

The phone rang, and I answered it without looking at the screen. Only a handful of people would call me after work

hours. “What’s up?”

“Vera Mae, is that any way to answer your phone?” Mom sounded as tired as I felt.

“Hello, Mother. What a pleasure it is to hear your voice.” I smiled, knowing how much the patronizing tone bothered her. For all the critiques about my laid-back appearance and behaviors, Mom and I were close. Really close.

Which is how I knew she was smiling, even as she sighed.

“How did our girl do today?”

I peeked out into the living room, but I couldn’t see her over the back of the couch. “Good. I think.”

Mom took a moment to respond. “She’ll speak to you eventually.”

“What if she doesn’t?” It was the fear I hadn’t spoken aloud. If Melody chose to remain silent, I’d do whatever I needed to for her. Get her in to see a doctor, adapt our lives to her new situation. But still, the thought of never hearing her calling my name in that sweet way she once had, it tore me up.

“V, we can’t think like that.”

“I know.” Positive thoughts only. That was sort of Mom’s thing. She manifested the good in her life and pushed through the bad. Me... I expected the bad and was pleasantly surprised by the good.

“Are you two having pizza tonight?” she asked.

I looked down at the baking sheet. “No. I’ll have you know I made a gourmet dinner with lots and lots of un-buttered vegetables.”

She laughed. “Pepperoni or cheese?”

“I’m not as irresponsible as you seem to think.” I paused. “We’d never eat plain cheese pizza.”

“I’ll order you some food from my meal service. Even my daughter of the picky palate will enjoy it.”

“Just make sure there are no—”

“Mushrooms?”

I pictured her lifting one brow. “Or—”

“Seafood. Honey, you still have the tastes of a five-year-old. I think I can handle it.”

“I absolutely do not.” Okay, maybe I did.

I heard the back door open, but I didn’t think anything of it until another sound reached me.

Giggling.

Real, childish giggling.

It was the best sound to reach my ears since the day I learned *Only Friends* had secured investors.

“Hold on, Mom.” I walked toward the back door and stood looking toward the source of the sound. Melody had wandered into Waylen’s yard, where she laughed as she ran after what looked to be a puppy.

What would grumpy personified be doing with the most adorable creature on Earth?

I wanted to join them, to find out what was going on, but I stayed rooted to the spot, watching her. A grin spread slowly across her face as the puppy turned and jumped at her with a sharp yap. She bent down to catch it in her arms. And there was that sound again.

Joy. Coming from Melody.

“V,” Mom said. “Are you there? What’s happening?”

I lifted the phone back to my ear. “I’m not really sure, but I think Melody is... having fun?”

“Oh, that’s wonderful. Listen, I’d love to have her with me again this weekend. We’ll chat later to make arrangements. You go feed that girl.”

“Sure, Mom. Love you.”

“Love you, baby girl.”

I hung up and slipped the phone into my pocket, my gaze never leaving Melody.

Waylen walked toward her, and his voice carried across our yards.

“Be careful with him,” he said. “He’s very young, and I don’t want the sharp puppy teeth to hurt you.”

She pointed to the dog, and he seemed to understand her.

“I haven’t named him yet.” He crouched down to scratch the dog’s head and look Melody in the eye. “A name is a big deal, don’t you think? If I give him the wrong one, it’ll stick with him for the rest of his life. Decisions this big need to be thought over carefully, looked at from every angle.”

She nodded along with him, her expression serious, as if she knew exactly what he was saying.

I couldn’t take my eyes off the trio. Waylen and Melody. This unnamed dog.

Leaning in the doorway, I crossed my arms. It didn’t matter that dinner was getting cold or that Melody undoubtedly had homework and needed her rest before another big day of school.

Not when she looked happy. Content.

She sat in the grass, and the puppy immediately climbed into her lap, lunging to lick her face.

A loud laugh escaped her as she wiped her cheeks.

Waylen had wanted me to thank him for watching her, and while I had been grateful, that didn’t compare to right now, this moment he gifted me. To this lightness. My chest expanded as I drew in a breath and settled my eyes on him, on his short hair, full beard, and strong jaw. On the way his eyes crinkled in the corners as he shared a smile with my niece.

He laughed with his entire body, shaking from his chest, all the way down his legs. It was as if the energy flowed through him, out of him. I realized I hadn’t seen him laugh before, truly laugh. Not like this.

I wasn’t sure how long I watched the two of them before Waylen looked up, his eyes connecting with mine. For once, there was no annoyance in his expression, nor anger in the

way his eyes darkened. Waylen hated the very ground I walked on, but for a moment, I could pretend he didn't.

That what we'd done in his workshop wasn't a hate-fuck that ruined any possible route to a truce.

Just one moment. Just one look.

Melody finally spotted me and came running over, making me tear my eyes from Waylen and breaking our connection. She pointed at the dog, bouncing on her toes.

"I see, Mel." I gave her a smile. "We have a new puppy next door." One who didn't know what they were in for with Waylen as an owner. Or maybe I was wrong, and he was exactly what this dog needed.

Only time would tell. Right now, all I knew was I needed to get out of his orbit and back into my own world. "Dinner is ready." I guided Melody back toward the janky steps. She tried to protest, wanting to go to the dog, but I urged her forward.

Frozen pizza waited for no man. Or woman. Or kid.

I brought the food to the table and set a plate in front of her, but she didn't touch it. All the joy I'd seen outside had faded from her eyes, leaving behind the version of Melody that had barely existed in this world since the accident.

I sighed in frustration, reminding myself it wasn't her fault, that I'd do whatever I needed to get her some help.

Biting into the pizza, I realized it was cold.

The zucchini was even worse.

All because Waylen decided to have a heart and adopt a puppy.

What. An. Ass.

WAYLEN

Julien sat on one of the metal stools I had in my workshop. He was twenty-two years old and had already completed his education to go into this field. If I had spent more time talking to him when I was working on a job for his father, I would have learned this. At least he was here with me now. I told him this was an interview to see if I could take him on as an apprentice. Really, I already knew I wanted to since I trusted very few and his father was a good guy.

While Julien could have gone to a construction company, a millwork, or a number of other routes to get his apprentice hours in, he wanted to do so for me. It worked out in my favor. With him already having experience by going to a local technical school and getting classroom hours in, he was just who I needed.

Dark blond hair fell over his forehead as he ducked down after I asked a question. Julien was shy when it was just the two of us. He answered all my questions as he should, knew the answers, the tools I used. But he remained shy. That was okay. It wasn't like I was social and talked to people all day. It was nice to have someone else here with me, even if he didn't say much.

A noise from outside drew my attention through the open shop doors. The puppy was running around the small fence I put around the koi pond. He ended up face first in it yesterday, scaring the hell out of every animal involved, including himself. Luckily, I had some wire mesh fence roll that I wrapped over stakes of wood. Now, he couldn't get near the

koi, which irritated him. That puppy bark as he paced around it was telling.

“Oy!” I shouted out to him. I didn’t like his given name at all but hadn’t thought of a new one to give him. I was stuck with general names like “hey, you,” “puppy,” and “dog.”

Julien followed my line of sight. “I’ll get him.”

He stood, tall and lean. The kid needed to eat more. I bet he burned through whatever nutrition he got fast at his age. I saw him inhale a breakfast burrito this morning like nobody’s business. I wondered if he even chewed it before he swallowed.

Lifting the puppy into his arms, Julien got a face wash from the overeager dog. Julien laughed as he walked back into the shop and put him down on the floor. The puppy would only be held for so long before he started squirming, demanding to be let down. He went to work sniffing every corner of my shop while we continued talking.

The day wore on, Julien staying for it. I made him lunch and officially offered him a job, laying out the hourly pay, how many hours I expected him to put in each week, and other details. The pay wasn’t much, but it was on par with others at his level in the field. I made sure to do my research so I could pay him fairly. Once he gained more skills, more hands-on experience, I would increase his salary. Hopefully, he would enjoy working for me and stay on permanently if he did well. I hadn’t seen him do much yet. I was here to teach him what he didn’t learn in a classroom, and I’d do just that.

A little growl pulled me away from what I was showing Julien. The dog was having a tug-of-war with a weed in the yard. I thought I got them all when I was getting rid of the fire ants. Apparently not. I shook my head and went back to the task at hand. Julien was proving to be very attentive, taking notes as we went, focused on what I showed him.

We were about to start a project when a high-pitched scream wrenched through the air. I jumped, literally fucking jumped, and spun to rush out the door, where I saw Melody running around the pond with the dog on her heels, chasing

her but not quite able to keep up. She smiled and laughed this cute little giggle. It was the most I'd heard her say if I counted it as actual words. Yesterday she laughed, but today it went on for much longer.

I crossed my arms and leaned against the open door. Julien stood beside me as we watched the two run in circles. Melody was like a ninja when she came over here. I hadn't heard the gate creak open like I usually did. Yesterday, she hadn't spooked me like she did today. My heart was still racing from the scare.

As I watched the puppy run, I thought back to last night when he'd decided to shred the area rug in my living room. I was in the kitchen making dinner when I heard his little growl. I put the spoon down and walked into the room to find his small furry body surrounded by carpet fibers, ones that had once been woven into a rug that now had frayed edges. He was a terror, one who itched himself too much.

I had an appointment with a local vet on Thursday for a checkup. I knew Shea had covered his bases and got him in front of their vet, but I needed to find one for the dog's future care. I was keeping the specialist appointment though. It was obvious the dog had allergies. I hated to see him itch. As long as he was occupied or sleeping, it didn't seem to bother him. Unfortunately, occupied meant destroying shit or chasing my neighbor's niece around the yard.

The fact that Vera hadn't made her way over here yet was surprising. What was even more surprising was that I wanted her to. When she wasn't raging at me about some problem that really wasn't a problem but she wanted to make a big deal about it, she was actually kind of nice. Mildly not annoying.

And fine, when she wasn't screaming at me, she was kind of pretty. Okay, she was beautiful. However, I wasn't admitting that to her face. No way. I had a reputation to keep as her neighbor who could do nothing right. Complimenting her didn't go along with that.

The sex, well, that had been earth-shattering. Another thing I wouldn't admit to Vera. I'd be down for a repeat

though.

Another scream erupted from Melody as the dog chased her closer to the workshop, effectively pulling me from my thoughts, which I shouldn't have been thinking anyway.

Melody stopped in front of me, panted breaths leaving her from the exertion of running with the puppy. She pointed at him, where he collapsed beside her, his tongue hanging out. Julien disappeared into the shop and returned with the puppy's bowl of water. I kept it in there so it was out of the sun. It wasn't hot by any means, but I'd rather keep it inside away from bugs and from getting too warm.

I crouched down so I could be more level with her. "What is it?"

She whispered something, but it was so quiet I couldn't hear her.

"Say it again, sweetie. I didn't catch it." I leaned close so I wouldn't miss it this time. It was the first she'd spoken to me.

"Luke." It was so hushed, a whisper on the wind, I almost didn't hear it.

Pulling back, I looked her in the eyes. "You think we should name him Luke?"

She nodded, smiling.

"Isn't that the name of the guy on the *Julie and the Phantoms* show you were watching?" Fuck, yes, I knew the name of the show and all the characters in it. I'd never tell anyone this, however, I watched the rest of the season after Melody got me hooked on it.

She nodded again.

I glanced down at the puppy, who had his face buried in the bowl of water, making a giant mess. One of his paws joined the party, hitting the lip of the bowl, and upending it over his head. I chuckled and pulled it off him. "Luke it is."

Melody lit up when I looked at her again. She smiled big and started running, Luke quickly jumped to his now wet feet to continue their game.

Then, I saw her, Miss Evil Eye herself, glaring at me over the fence. It only lasted for a moment before her gaze shifted to Melody and she immediately softened. Vera opened the gate to step into the yard, closing it behind her. I was glad I had the fence already in place. Luke couldn't escape. Damn, it felt good to give him a name.

Luke nipped at Melody's heels when he finally caught up to her.

"Luke," I chastised. "Don't." I didn't want it to become a habit, though the Shepherd in him probably drove the instinct.

"Luke?" Vera asked.

"He has a name. Melody picked it out."

She gasped. "Mel... she spoke?"

I nodded. "Just the name, nothing else." I went over to Vera. "It was a whisper, and I had to be close to hear it. Luke is his name now."

Vera's gaze went back to Melody, tears building in her eyes. "I can't believe she spoke. She hasn't since..." She shook her head.

I was taken aback by her statement. The girl hadn't spoken to Vera at all? It was no doubt traumatic what she went through, but not one word? "Maybe the puppy is helping her open up."

"Maybe."

What the hell did I know about it? Nothing, but something had unlocked in Melody. Something drew her a bit from her shell.

This overwhelming urge came over me. I didn't want this to end. Not Vera softened. Not Melody happy. "Stay for dinner," I blurted out.

"What?"

"I always make more than I need to. I have plenty of food. Dinner could be ready within the hour." I turned to Julien. "You can stay too if you like."

“I appreciate it,” he said, “But I should get going. Tomorrow?”

I nodded. “Tomorrow. Be here by eight.”

“Will do. Thanks again.” He waved and went through the yard to the gate near the front of the house.

“Who was that?” She was being nosey, though I felt like indulging her, not wanting to break this little bubble of ours, if that was even what it was.

“My new apprentice. He’s going to work with me from now on. His name is Julien.” I wanted to tack on, *in case you wanted to yell at him for being loud*, but I refrained. There was no reason to start a fight with her now, not when things were civil between us. Knowing my fiery neighbor, that could stop at any minute.

“Dinner?” I asked again since she didn’t respond the first time.

Vera sighed. “I guess. I don’t want to pull Mel away yet. I didn’t make anything either.”

“Hang out back here. I’ll get the food going.”

Before she could say anything else, I went into the house and started on dinner. I had a pork tenderloin in the fridge and a cooker on my counter that would make it fast while still retaining its juiciness.

While I prepared the dish, I kept looking out in the yard, watching Luke and Melody, even Vera off to the side. She was smiling more, unable to keep her eyes off her niece and the puppy. Kids had endless energy. Melody was proof of it. If only I had a fraction of what she did, I could get a lot more done.

Now to hope Vera and I didn’t lunge across the table when dinner was laid out and we were sitting down for a meal. Anything was possible where she was concerned, but I had to hope things could stay as they currently were while Melody sat with us.

VERA

I lowered myself into a chair on Waylen's back deck to watch Melody and Luke in the yard. There was a new lightness to her, and each smile she gave the dog broke my heart a little. Part of me wondered why I couldn't bring that out of her while the other part was so relieved just to see it.

A kid shouldn't live with a constant cloud over her head.

I looked around me at the well-built deck and instantly knew it was Waylen's hands that crafted it. He made sure it was stable, that each board was in the right place. Unlike whoever built the one at my house. I wasn't jealous of how he seemed to have his entire life put together.

Not at all.

Except, maybe I was.

When I was younger, we laughed at thirty-somethings as if they were ancient adults out of touch. Now, I was one of those ancients, and I didn't feel old. Instead, I found myself wondering when I'd finally learn how to be an adult. When I'd have a deck that wasn't a danger to the kid who took the stairs two at a time with her boundless energy.

When I'd learn to cook, or at least order healthier takeout.

I helped run a massive company, had created an app that grew in popularity every day. Yet, the moment I left those offices at the end of each afternoon, I was back to being this version of myself. Lost.

Only a screen separated the deck from the kitchen since the back door was left open, and I could hear the sounds of Waylen preparing some kind of meal. I couldn't fathom why he'd wanted us to stay so badly, but also, I could. Before taking Mel in, I'd lived alone. Sure, I spent a lot of time with my mom or my girls, but also a lot of time on my own.

Eating in front of the television got old. Being alone sometimes felt too loud.

Melody was gasping for breath as she collapsed into the grass to let Luke crawl over her. It was like I could see the connection they'd already created, a tether tying the two of them together. I wasn't a pet person, but I could see the appeal.

He made her happy.

Giving her one more glance, I stood and tentatively walked inside. I hadn't taken a good look at Waylen's place when I picked Melody up last week. I'd been in too big of a hurry to get to her. Now, as I stood near the back door, the first thing I noticed was that it was... clean. Not only free of dirt or dog hair I was sure Luke shed, but also clutter. Where I had items shoved onto every free shelf and counter space, Waylen was more of a minimalist.

It was also impersonal. No family pictures or anything that told me of who Waylen was. I found myself wanting to see his bedroom, to see if that space told me anything about him. I knew the man intimately, knew how his hands felt on me, the taste of his lips.

And yet, I didn't know anything real. His brothers didn't speak about him much, which always made me wonder... why was he such a mystery?

"Need any help?" I asked, approaching Waylen. He was clearing off a cutting board into the trash. His shoulders tensed at the sound of my voice. Would that ever stop happening?

Slowly, he turned, a long knife pointed at me. "Do you even know how to cook?"

I should have been offended at the question, but I suppressed the annoyance. "Does mac and cheese count?"

His expression transformed into disbelief. “I’m guessing you mean from a box.”

I shrugged.

“I shouldn’t be surprised you eat that, but no. Dinner will be done soon. Want something to drink?”

“God, yes.”

To my disappointment, he pulled out a pitcher of iced tea.

“That is not what I was hoping for,” I groaned.

Taking pity on me, he laughed and put it back. “Just kidding.” He tossed me a beer, and I cracked it open without even looking at what kind it was. At the moment, I didn’t care. I just needed something. But when I took a sip, I almost spit it out.

The asshole laughed again.

“Of course you’d drink IPA.” I glared at him and forced myself to take another drink. It was better than nothing when dealing with him.

He rolled his eyes and walked to the screen door. “Melody, why don’t you bring Luke inside?” He looked back over his shoulders at me. “I have the salads ready. We can eat those first.”

“That kid isn’t going to eat salad.” I wasn’t sure why I took such pleasure in his miscalculation.

He stalked toward me. “Care to wager a bet?” His head dipped so our eyes met. “You’ve never had my salad.”

Salad, indeed. I wasn’t sure how he could make that sound so dirty, but warmth clenched inside me. I wanted to climb this man like a fireman’s pole, have a repeat of the other day. Quick. Dirty. So damn hot. I’d never known angry sex was like that.

I swallowed. “I don’t care how good this salad is.” That was a lie, depending on what exactly we were talking about. I wasn’t sure anymore.

He inched closer, his lips going to my ear. “Make the bet, Vera.”

I swallowed, knowing exactly why he wanted a stupid bet like that. We were best when we played against each other, sat on opposite sides. It was electric. “Fine. If she refuses, you have to tell me what you truly think of me.” The words came out before I could stop them. Waylen and I were supposed to hate each other. It was written in the neighborhood charter. Or it should have been. But I didn’t think he did.

His lips curled into a smile as he pulled back. “And if she eats it, you can’t stop letting Mel come over here to play with Luke.”

That was... What was in it for him? Despite how much I wanted to be annoyed at the insinuation I’d keep her from coming here, I also knew he may have been right. I kind of liked that he wanted Mel around.

I nodded, holding out a hand to shake on it. His palm slid against mine, warm and firm. I tried to pull away, but he gripped my fingers, his thumb caressing the back of my hand. How could hands be so erotic? Fuck, I wanted him.

The screen door opening jolted me out of my stupor, and I yanked my hand back.

Melody came in, Luke bounding at her heels.

Waylen somehow carried three large bowls at once to the table, a table that was actually set with multiple pieces of flatware, water glasses, napkins, and even milk for Mel. Was this what real people did? They set their tables?

I took the farthest seat I could from Waylen. When he put the napkin in his lap, I followed suit.

Melody stared down into her bowl and shook her head. Her little nose scrunched, and I almost cheered in victory.

Waylen offered her a kind smile, much kinder than he’d ever given me. “Tell you what. In this house, I have a rule. You don’t have to eat anything you don’t enjoy, but you do have to taste it first before making that decision.”

The way his eyes flicked to mine when he said taste had me staring anywhere but at him.

It wasn't fair, the way he could send heatwaves under my skin with a single look.

Melody sighed and picked up her fork. If I'd tried to make her eat anything she didn't want to at my house, she would probably get up and leave the table. Her fork stabbed into the salad, and she brought it to her lips.

I held my breath as she chewed. This was silly. It was just salad, just a stupid bet. And yet, I hated the thought of Waylen beating me at anything.

When Mel's eyes brightened, I scowled. She liked it, I could tell.

I stared down into the supposedly magic salad. On top of romaine lettuce was mozzarella and parmesan cheese, candied pecans, and dried cranberries along with some kind of dressing. I took a bite and almost moaned.

"It's all in the dressing." Waylen laughed. "My mother's recipe."

Homemade freaking dressing.

I hated him.

He finished his salad and left to get the rest of dinner out of the cooker. I left Melody practically licking her bowl clean and followed him into the kitchen.

"Fine." I crossed my arms. "You win. But you cheated with your mom's dressing."

"How is that cheating?" He opened the cooker and started plating the meat and veggies. It smelled amazing.

"I know Mama Denver. No one can resist her food. Not even a picky kid."

His expression softened, and I assumed it was because of the talk of his mom. It was no secret how much all three of her sons adored her, despite her meddling nature.

We were silent for a few moments as he finished arranging the vegetables on the plates. Then, he turned to me. “I was surprised to hear Melody speak to me today.”

“No one was more surprised she did that than me.” I realized how that sounded and sighed. “Not because it was you. Just... she...”

“Hasn’t spoken since the accident. I know. That must be hard.”

Hard didn’t begin to describe it. “She wasn’t hurt in the accident, and the doctor’s assured me there was no head injury. I don’t know if it’s the shock of losing her parents and being thrust into my care or...”

“Do you think she needs to see a therapist?”

“Probably. But do you know how hard it is to get into a child therapist as a new patient right now? I’ve tried. Every person I’ve called isn’t taking anyone new.”

“That can’t be true. There has to be someone.”

My hackles went up, and my eyes snapped to his. “You don’t think I’m trying hard enough, do you?” I stepped closer to him. “Between my mom and me, we are always there for her. We’ve put her in the best school. My entire life has been rearranged to help her. So, don’t you dare look at me like it’s not enough. I don’t know what else there is to do but wait.”

“I didn’t mean... I know you’re trying. I see it, hear it in the way you come yell at me for being too loud.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t need to if you didn’t start in your shop at the asscrack of dawn.”

He pushed a hand through his hair. “I did a bit of research.”

“Research?” That word was dangerous. So was my tone.

“Into what could be keeping her from speaking.”

And he didn’t think I’d done the same? Did he think he deserved a party for knowing how to Google? I knew I should

be grateful he even cared, but at the moment, gratitude was the last thing on my mind.

“And what did this research tell you?” My question was a dare, one he took.

“That what she needs most is stability and time.”

“Ah.” I almost laughed. “Stability. Why didn’t I think of that? I’m so glad I had you around to mansplain exactly how to raise a kid who lost both her parents. You’re so kind to help me.”

“Why do I think you don’t really mean that?”

“See.” My eyes narrowed. “You’re not as big of an idiot as you appear.” I looked at my wrist, my non-existent watch. “Oh, look at the time. I should be getting Melody home.”

“Vera,” he called after me as I marched into the dining room where Melody was now sitting on the floor with Luke.

“Hey, Mel, how does pizza sound tonight?”

She perked up. Pizza was the way to this kid’s heart.

Waylen didn’t stop us as I pulled her out of the house, and I looked back once more to see his bewildered expression.

Part of me wondered if I enjoyed fighting with him too much, or if this time, I was actually justified.

Stability.

As if I wasn’t trying my damndest to give Melody every single thing she needed. There was a reason Waylen and I could never be friends.

More than one.

WAYLEN

What was that phrase? Gaping like a fish?

That was me, standing at my back door while Vera and Melody went into their yard, Vera closing the gate with more force than necessary, rattling the fence, while Luke looked up at it like his world had just gotten smaller. I guess it had since Melody left. Luke obviously loved her.

I went over the conversation Vera and I'd just had. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. I didn't mean anything negative by what I mentioned. I was genuinely trying to help, and she jumped down my throat.

And what the fuck was mansplaining? Jesus, I needed a search bar when I talked to her so I could figure out what the hell was happening.

I wasn't like Vera. I didn't work in tech or use the internet a lot. I worked with my hands, in my shop, sans computer. Sure, I had my phone, but it wasn't like I spent hours on it. It was there to serve a need for communication, nothing more. I had my laptop for business-related things. I didn't spend time on social media or anywhere else.

Turning around, I stomped over to the counter where I had dinner waiting, already plated, still steaming from when I pulled it out of the cooker. All this food meant leftovers for me, as I originally intended it to be. Before Vera came over. Before I invited them to dinner. A mistake I wouldn't make twice. I might not be as smart as my brothers, but I knew when to stop something. No more dinner invites for my neighbor. I'd

feed her niece, not Vera. She could drink her dinner next door from a box for all I cared.

With practiced ease, I sliced into the meat, plated it for myself, as well as the sides I'd prepared, and brought it into the living room, trying not to look at the dining table I'd have to clean up. A very empty table that was supposed to have people sitting at it.

Whatever. I didn't need them. I didn't need anyone.

A small bark from the back door told me Luke was ready to come inside. At least I had him.

IF IT WASN'T for Julien, I probably wouldn't have accomplished much today. For some reason, I was still fixated on angry Vera from last night, to the point I almost hurt myself while working—something I rarely did. I prided myself on my ability to concentrate when I was in the shop. How I could tune everything out and focus on the task at hand.

Julien gave me quizzical looks throughout the day but didn't ask what was going on with me. I was grateful for it. He found my lack of focus amusing, though he tried to cover his mouth when I glared at him. I didn't miss his small smiles. Too bad I didn't know him well enough to tell him to knock it the hell off. I'd probably scare him if I did that. Julien needed to return here daily, not get frightened away on his first full day working for me.

It was early still, not quite my usual quitting time. I thanked Julien for his help today. He had been more productive than me. He also knew enough that once I gave him his job for the day, he was off running. I told him he could go home early. When he opened his mouth presumably to ask if I was sure, I told him to take advantage of it. This wouldn't happen often. Or maybe it would since Vera still lived next door. I doubted this would be the only time she'd distract me without even being in front of me.

After grabbing a beer, I sat down on my deck, peering out into the backyard, where Luke ran around the koi pond. I was starting to think the fish were taunting him. They knew he couldn't get them and would splash around on purpose, making a big show of it. I could also be losing my mind, which was a distinct possibility.

Lifting the beer to my lips, I took a long sip, reveling in the cool liquid as it slid down my throat. When had I gotten so old? It wasn't like I was over forty yet. I was in my mid-thirties, still had plenty of life to live. Yet, here I sat by myself with a sad beer, looking out at the only friend I had, my dog.

Damn Vera. I blamed her. Being depressed wasn't me. I wasn't really depressed, I didn't think. Just down about my life and where it currently was.

The resolution list sat on a shelf in my shop, taunting me from across the yard. I had accomplished hiring an apprentice and was looking into ways to expand my business. That was something. I hung out with Shea, learned more about the shelter. It wasn't in the way I'd hoped, but it still happened. I had tried to be nicer to Vera, tried to be nicer overall, and look where that got me. On my deck. By myself, with a beer in hand. It wasn't too terrible. I was fortunate enough to have what I did. A house. A business. A reliable truck. Things could definitely be worse.

Sighing, I took another sip as a bug dove into the screen I had around my deck. I'd lost count of how many times I'd been thankful for it. Many bugs had tried, but few had succeeded at getting inside. It was why I could sit out here and not be eaten alive, especially in the summer when the bugs were at their worst.

The old porch had been in bad shape when I moved in. The wood was splintering, the stain faded, some of the boards had started to lift. Although, it hadn't been as bad as Vera's deck.

My eyes drifted over to the monstrosity. How she didn't fall through it was anyone's guess. There were stairs down from it to the grass, one of them completely missing. The railing looked like it was one broken, rusted nail away from

falling off completely. The screen was torn in multiple spots. And that was only what I could see from here. I was sure up close, through the screen door that was hanging on by a bolt and a prayer, the deck was far worse off.

If only she was somewhat receptive to me speaking to her, I'd give her recommendations for fixing it. Now, with Melody living with her, it was more of a hazard. Vera would probably tell me to go fuck myself though. I'd never met a person who hated me so much. My brothers despised me off and on when we were growing up, and even as adults, but we were siblings. That was par for the course. Vera was my ornery neighbor who'd drive a screwdriver through my eye if given the chance.

The longer I looked at the deck, the more I was beginning to not give a shit what she thought. She had to do something about it before someone got injured. A rusted nail through the foot would not be pleasant. In the morning, when Melody was on the bus, I'd confront Vera. Hell, I was going to offer to help her fix it. It wasn't because I liked her. Not as a person. She was too angry for me. Hate-fucking only went so far.

I had to wait until Melody was on the bus though. Knowing Vera, she'd be ready for round thirty-five with me. Melody didn't need to witness us at each other's throats. Again. She'd been through enough already. Though who was I to make the decision about what she should and shouldn't witness? No one really.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, wrenching me from my thoughts, which I desperately needed rescuing from. I pulled it out and saw Sebastian's name on the screen, quickly followed by Shea's. Apparently, I was in a group chat with my brothers now.

Sebastian: How is it I'm hearing about Way getting a puppy from Mom? Shouldn't that be something brothers share?

Shea: Maybe if we had a group chat prior to this second.

Sebastian: You could have started one.

Shea: Sure. I'm not busy at all. *eye roll emoji*

Sebastian: I want a picture of this puppy. Kinsey does too. Proof or it doesn't exist.

I sat there, letting them go back and forth for a bit before walking out to the yard and taking a video of Luke running around the pond. I was waiting for him to fall over from being dizzy. He did that sometimes. I sent the twenty-second video through.

Sebastian: Gasp! Look how cute he is! What's his name?

Me: Luke.

Sebastian: That's not a dog name.

Shea: *laughing emoji* That's a great name.

Me: Melody named him.

Sebastian: She talked? I haven't been able to get her to say a thing when I've seen her. Kinsey said she hasn't spoken since the accident.

Me: Just that one word.

Sebastian: Vera must be over the moon that she said something.

I didn't reply. I didn't want to talk about Vera. She pissed me off too much. Thinking about her reminded me of her yelling and storming out of my house, away from a balanced, home-cooked meal, to eat pizza. Not that there was anything wrong with pizza, but I had a good meal here. I definitely wasn't going to think about how sad and lonely it felt to clean up the empty place settings after I'd finished eating by myself.

Shea: I'm glad Luke is having a positive impact.

Thank you, Shea, for saving me from having to talk about Vera.

Me: He is, except on my rug. And my couch. And the leg of my dining room chair. I swear he has gator teeth in his mouth.

Shea: Have you tried teething toys or a frozen washcloth?

Sebastian: I thought they were for human babies.

Shea: They make them for puppies too. A frozen washcloth you don't even have to buy. Knot one, wet it, freeze it. I'd suggest some other things, but since we don't know what Luke is allergic to yet, I'm leery of introducing new foods.

Sebastian: Look at you. So knowledgeable about dogs. You're going to make a great shelter owner.

Shea: Thanks, Seb.

I felt like I was on the outside of the conversation, not sure where I fit. But these were my brothers. They would judge me so they could tease me. When push came to shove, if I needed them, I'd like to think they'd be there.

Shea: Way, stop by the shelter tomorrow after you're done working. I'll be there. We can run out to the pet store together. I can recommend some things to buy for him to help ease his teething. If you want, that is. If he has a toy or washcloth to chew on, and you're exercising him enough, he should leave your furniture alone. At least, I hope.

Me: Melody likes to run around the yard with him. He passes out after she leaves.

Shea: Good. Now, you need teethers.

Me: I'll stop by tomorrow.

Sebastian: I'm feeling left out. I want to spend time with you both, but going to the pet store isn't my idea of fun.

Shea: Come to the shelter, and I'll add to your family.

Sebastian: We're good with Kinsey's grumpy cat. Besides, I can barely handle Kins. Adding more to the mix might be a recipe for disaster. Also, if we got a dog, I'd have to pick up and hide all of our very adult... toys.

Shea: And that's the end of this conversation for me.

Me: Me too. TMI, Seb.

Did people still say TMI? I had no damn clue.

Sebastian: Sorry you two don't know how to have a good time.

I slid my phone back into my pocket. It kept vibrating, but I chose not to look at it. Wasn't having fun on my list? Did using sex toys count toward that? The most I had in my house was a Fleshlight and some lube. It got lonely in here, and I needed more than my hand on occasion.

Groaning, I dropped my head back onto the chair. Fuck, I was a mess.

VERA

I wasn't sure I'd ever get used to the sight of Melody riding away from me on the bus. It wasn't that I didn't trust someone else to get her to school, the driver seemed plenty nice and responsible, but anyone taking her away from me was beginning to feel like a violation.

I hadn't wanted to be her guardian, assuming it would be my mom. Yet, we fit together. We always had. Even without her words, I knew she relied on me being here for her. Always. I sighed, still convinced I'd let her down one day. Wasn't that what I did? Disappoint people?

Just ask my enemy, the neighbor.

I walked the block back from the bus stop and glanced over at Waylen's manicured front lawn. Even his gardens, simple as they were, held a kind of perfect beauty. Mine did not. I paid a kid to keep the lawn mowed. No one wanted to be that neighbor others were embarrassed about. But just like cooking, gardening was not a skill I'd obtained growing up in my mom's high flying fashion world. I'd been surrounded by people who paid others to get their hands dirty for them, not actually do it themselves.

It taught me not to really care. And I wanted to. Badly. I wanted to look at the simple bushes lining the front of the house and decide it was time for a trim, to go get whatever one cut them with and definitely know where it was.

I wanted to be capable.

Instead, I was just me. Vera, good with people, bad with life. Well, I wasn't good with everyone. I spared one final glance at Waylen's front door. From out here, I could hear the cacophony of tools coming from his workshop in back. I needed to get to work, and yet, the urgency just wasn't there.

Over the last two weeks, I'd started working from home early in the morning so I could be around to get Mel to school. Then, I'd finish up work at night when she went to bed since I left the office early to be here when she got home.

It paid to own the company.

I walked around the side of the house, examining my minimal plantings. Eliana had spent the day burying bulbs here last year, and in spring, colorful flowers sprouted from the ground. Sure, they were kind of choked by the weeds, but weren't we all?

I laughed at the fact that I compared myself to a plant. It was me. I was the problem.

Crouching down, I started clearing some of the weeds, pulling them right from the ground. I'd only managed to get a few when Luke came barreling at me, knocking me to the ground. I yelped in surprise as a warm tongue slid across my cheek.

God dammit. He was too adorable to be annoyed with. Even when he shouldn't have been in my yard. Waylen and I needed to have some words. I pushed to my feet and gathered the dog into my arms. "You're putting on weight by the day, bro." He tried to wiggle free, issuing sharp yips.

I laughed and set him down. "Run free, little dude. Run free." He sprinted back through the open gate between our yards as Waylen came out of his shop. I didn't have time to deal with him. Even though I wanted to. Deal with him, that was.

Arguing with Waylen had become the highlight of my day, and I wasn't so sure what that said about me. But I really needed to get to the office. I headed for my back deck,

skipping over where the missing step should have been to reach the ratty screen door.

As soon as I entered, the mudroom was on my left and the hall that led to the kitchen on my right. Already dressed in a comfortable pair of stretchy black pants and a rose silk top for work, all I needed was to find my shoes. Flats today. I had to be really motivated for heels.

Something Mom and Kinsey both never understood. Their love for the latest fashions, for expensive clothing, hadn't extended to me.

"We need to talk." The hard voice came from behind me.

I turned to see Waylen standing on the opposite side of the screen door from me, scowl fixed firmly in place.

"I need a drink." I left him there, and he didn't follow me. It was like he was a vampire waiting for an invitation. I'd have barged right into his house, but that was the difference between us.

He was a real person, and I was... me.

I retrieved a tumbler from the cabinet and filled it at the sink, taking a large gulp of water. "Don't come in," I called, knowing he wouldn't.

"Vera, you're acting like a child." His sigh was so patronizing I wanted to slap him.

Slamming the cup on the counter, I marched back into the mudroom. "Don't you think I know that? Don't you think I wish I could look at my *neighbor* without wanting to rip his throat out?" Or rip his clothes off. That too.

His eyes narrowed. "You yell at me. For everything. I can't do anything right with you. I've tried being nice, being neighborly. Every single time, you throw it back in my face. This has to stop."

I opened the screen door, not like it had proved much of a barrier. "And if I can't?"

He huffed in irritation. "Then you're just as angry and sad as I thought you were."

“I’m not sad.” I used my foot to prop the door open and stared at him in defiance.

“Oh yeah? Let’s see, you get mad when I do my job. Mad when I bring you a peace cake, which is decidedly different than a pity cake. And mad when I cook you and Mel dinner. What is it about me that you hate so much?”

“Don’t ask me that.” My voice had lowered to a whisper.

“Why not? I need some kind of answer.”

My eyes darkened as I took in the stubborn tilt of his chin, the way his bearded jaw seemed to tighten as he looked at me. His eyes swirled with irritation, a hint of anger.

“Yell at me.” I hadn’t realized how husky my voice had gotten, just a low rasp. “Please.” Delicious heat pooled within me.

“You’re such a brat.”

That would have to be enough. I reached out, my fingers curling into his soft cotton shirt. Pulling back, I stepped further into the mudroom, not letting go. “Tell me how much you hate me.”

His eyes were hooded now as his chest pressed against mine. The screen door slammed shut behind him, but neither of us took much notice. “I despise you.”

“Perfect,” I whispered, drawing his lips down to mine.

There was nothing perfect about this kiss. It was messy and desperate, both of us grappling for supremacy.

“Fuck,” he growled. “This is so messed up.”

It was, but our anger fueled us, taking us into new territory. “Just go with it,” I breathed.

His hands came underneath my butt, and he picked me up. I twisted my legs around him as he set me on a low cabinet. “I don’t have a lot of time.”

I almost sensed regret in his tone. Gripping his chin, I forced him to look at me. “Waylen, I’m not asking for slow and sweet here. Do you understand me?”

He swallowed hard and nodded. Then, it was like a switch in him flipped, and he yanked my work pants down my legs in one movement. I kicked them onto the ground and lifted up so he could remove my underwear.

One finger dipped between my legs. “Already wet for me?” He raised a brow. “Perfect.”

“Less talking.” I gasped as he brushed a knuckle over the bundle of nerves. “Unless you want to berate me. That, I will allow.”

He stepped back from me, and I almost protested before I saw it was to remove his own pants. “You, Vera Hart, are probably the most infuriating person I have ever met.”

His words sent a thrill through me.

“Don’t stop.” I reached out to grip him, letting my hand slide down his length once before using it to pull him forward. “Tell me you hate me.”

“Hate doesn’t begin to describe it.” His lips hovered inches from mine, and a slow smile parted them. “You’re abhorrent. The ogre next door.”

“Ogre is a little strong.” I frowned.

“But you said—”

“At least say I’m a hot ogre.”

He pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “The sexiest ogre I have ever known.”

I slid my legs around his waist again and used my heels to pull him closer. “Just so you know... I hate you more.”

“Always have to one-up me.” A low growl emanated from his throat, making my insides clench.

“It’s just so easy.” I smirked. “Are you going to do something about it?”

He slammed into me without warning, and I cried out as waves of pleasure and pain crashed over each other.

“Asshole,” I breathed.

“Vera?”

“Yeah?” I arched up to take more of him. We bucked against each other for our own pleasure.

“I didn’t bring a condom over here.”

I dug my hands into his shirt, my nails sinking into his chest. “That was an idiot move.”

“It’s not like I expected—”

I held him there with my legs, not letting him leave me yet. “Always expect. From now on, be prepared.” I moved, then, letting the fullness settle in as my orgasm built. And built.

His lips crashed into mine. “Please tell me you’re on birth control,” he murmured against them.

“And if I said no? Would it make you curse my name? Fuel your hatred?” If he said yes, there was no way I wouldn’t come right there on the spot.

Instead, he groaned. “Thank fuck.”

“I didn’t say—” He cut me off by pulling back and then crashing forward with such force the cabinet slammed against the wall. And again.

Thank fuck was right.

I’d never been more thankful for those annoying little pills that made my hormones a mess.

“Don’t stop.” I reached forward, sliding my hands under his shirt. My nails scraped down his back. “I’m going to—” Pleasure spasmed through me, and Waylen tensed, his entire body jerking against mine.

By the time we could both move again, we were panting. His eyes found mine as he slid out of me, something other than hatred in them.

That... I couldn’t take.

I dropped my legs and made him step back so I could climb off the cabinet. Reaching for my underwear, I slid them

on before gathering up his discarded pants. I stretched them out toward him. “Thank you for your service.”

He looked from the pants to me, his brow furrowing. “You’re kicking me out?”

“What? You expected breakfast?” I rolled my eyes. “I really need to get to work.”

With a huff, he got dressed, yanking up his pants, and stormed out the back door. I watched him go, this time the ache a bit higher.

Heading for my room, I dressed in fresh clothing and went into the bathroom to fix my hair. I stared in the mirror at my thoroughly fucked-looking self, embarrassment settling into the pit of my stomach.

Not because I’d had sex with Waylen. Again.

But because now, I wanted to do it again. And again. That man was like a drug, our dueling anger the plunger pushing it into me.

This wouldn’t end badly at all.

WAYLEN

So, maybe I never got to bring up the atrocious deck on Vera's house. I never got to confront her about what a hazard it was for her and Melody. Instead, I'd buried my bare dick inside her and hoped with all hope she was on birth control. I didn't need a child. Especially with Vera. What a nightmare that would be.

Infuriating, made-me-want-to-rip-out-my-hair, crazy-ass woman. To imagine her as the mother of my child? No. Definitely not.

On the flip side...

Hands down the best sex I'd ever had. Probably the fastest too, but quick didn't equal bad. Especially not with Vera.

Now, it was Saturday, and I still couldn't stop thinking about her. I woke up hard, with visions of fucking her dancing around my head as her cabinet moved with every thrust.

Jesus, I needed to get a grip. I grabbed a mug from the shelf and filled it with coffee. I should be outside working in my shop. I usually did on Saturdays. Though, Julien only worked with me during the week. I wouldn't ask him to mimic my insane hours at night and on weekends.

I went out to the deck and looked over the yard. Luke was lying on his side, tongue lolled out, basking in the sun as it warmed his fur. He'd grown since I'd gotten him. I didn't think he'd be as big as a regular Shepherd would, at least not from what Shea had said, but he was definitely growing.

My eyes tracked over my yard to Vera's, to that eyesore of a tetanus-filled deck of hers. I was supposed to be in the

workshop, yet... that damn deck.

Today was the day I was going to start fixing it. She'd never let me do it if I asked. I knew it was her property and not my place to repair that pile of tinder, but something had to be done. Now, I could say it was for my safety too since I had to step on the rickety structure when I went into her mudroom. That was the story I was sticking with.

I stood outside a bit longer, finishing my coffee, waiting to see if Vera was awake and if she'd come outside. They could still be sleeping or awake and eating a breakfast of cold pizza.

The urge to make them something balanced was there, but I had to push it aside. Vera seemed to only want me for sex, not food or polite conversation like two civilized people. Apparently, we were both primal with our need to get off. That was the only way we could tolerate each other. As much as I loved being with her that way, I had a feeling I'd eventually get attached to her and Melody, which would only end in heartbreak for me. Not that I loved Vera. Fuck no. I could see where this was going though. Sex led to a connection, which we were already forging, at least when we were naked. A connection led to feelings, and feelings led to much bigger shit.

Nope, I needed to focus on other things. Like the deck. I had no room in my life for a bleeding heart, especially for Vera. She'd probably scent the blood like a shark would chum and come in for the kill shot.

No feelings.

Ever with Vera.

Which meant no sex.

At least not today.

I was already trying to talk myself out of keeping my hands off her. What was wrong with me? How had I become addicted to her? I didn't want that. I didn't want to get hard every time I thought about her.

I needed to redirect my mind. Get back in the hate zone so I could focus on the task at hand. The deck that needed to be

fixed. Or torched. If it weren't attached to her house, I'd probably make a bonfire out of it. Instead, the thing needed to be repaired, and I was going to do it.

Inside the house, I changed into work clothes that I wouldn't mind getting dirty. I shoved my phone into my pocket and went out back to grab the tools I would need. Luke followed me throughout the yard and tried to come over to Vera's side with me. I made sure to close him in so he didn't accidentally get hurt over here. He let out a little whimper when I shut the gate, which made me feel guilty. But I'd feel even worse if something inadvertently happened to him.

First, I took my life in my hands by standing on the decking to assess if it was a total loss or if I could salvage some of it. There were boards that needed to be replaced, but luckily not all of them. I'd have to go to the lumberyard to buy what I needed, but at least it wasn't a total redo. Some of the wood appeared better than others. Some was warped beyond compare. The wood looked like it hadn't been treated in a decade, left to the elements and every bug who could get close to it.

Next, I started stripping away everything I couldn't salvage. The screen had to go and was easily ripped out, the nails popping with it like the rust couldn't hold them in any longer. I carefully pulled up the boards that needed to go, throwing them into the backyard. I wouldn't leave them there out of fear Melody would get hurt. I'd bring them with me when I was done. Then, with one swift kick, the railing beside the stairs was no more—not that it had served a purpose the way it was to begin with.

I stood on the grass, looking over what was left. Nothing but the bare bones of salvageable wood. There were two stairs remaining. I couldn't remove them completely in case Vera and Melody needed to make an exit during a fire or another emergency. But I was going to put caution tape over them as a reminder to be careful if they had to use them. The same with the door leading to the deck. They should avoid this area until I was done with it.

I took a quick break to check on Luke to make sure he didn't get in any trouble, which he hadn't. He was resting on the cement floor of my shop. I'd left the doors open and his bowl inside. Earlier in the week, I'd picked up everything on the floor that could be a hazard for him. He liked to lie on his belly in there, with his back legs wide, letting the coolness of the cement seep into his body.

His head perked up when he saw me, so I quickly walked away, not wanting to bother him. If he noticed me staring at him for too long, it would be a signal I wanted to play. That was something I'd quickly learned about him. Too much eye contact meant play. Too much talking meant play. Too much anything but sitting on my ass meant I needed to run around with him. I was not a runner. The teething toys Shea had helped me pick out were a hit though. Every morning and night, I took them out of the freezer and gave them to Luke. I bought half a dozen so I could rotate them to ensure at least one was always cold.

I remembered I had some lumber in my garage. Why I hadn't thought of it earlier was probably attributed to my dick trying to run the show before I stepped over there. I went through Vera's yard to my front door, which I had left unlocked, knowing I'd need to go in that way. The neighborhood was safe, but I'd also hear it if someone pulled up to the front of my house.

In the garage, I found enough to fix the steps and the railing today. No need to buy the materials. The deck itself was a different story. I didn't have big enough pieces or the right width for that.

Back in Vera's yard, I measured the steps and went into my shop to cut the exact length. I wasn't about to bring my electric tools over when I had a perfectly good workshop next door. Though, this also meant I had to pause to play with Luke for a few minutes. He'd had a short nap and was back to tornado level in terms of energy.

With Luke passed out again and the boards cut to precision, I headed to Vera's and grabbed my hammer and

nails to put these into place. I was almost done with the second step with the back door wrenched open, drawing my gaze to it.

“Stop,” I said firmly, not wanting Vera to fall through the holes in the deck. “Watch where you walk.” The remaining boards were good but needed to be sanded down to get rid of the splintered pieces.

“What in the hell are you doing?” she seethed, not leaving the doorway.

“Fixing this disaster you call a deck.”

“Don’t.”

I tried so hard not to let my eyes rake her over but failed. From the way she only wore a long, oversized shirt to how smooth her bare legs looked. Her hair was a mess, reminding me of how it had looked after I’d roughly run my fingers through it. Her eyes sparkled with hatred, just how I was used to them. Of course, my dick took all of these as signs it was time to party. Damn Vera.

“You and your hammering woke me up,” she bit out.

“What about Mel?”

“She was already awake. That’s not important.”

“I think it is. I didn’t want to wake her. You, I don’t really care if I do or not.” I shrugged. Apparently, I was in the mood to goad her today, just like every other day I saw her. It was our thing. Our foreplay. Which we weren’t doing. Not today. Not with Melody inside. No matter how much my dick strained against my pants, wanting to be set free.

“You’re such an asshole.”

“Yeah, well, you’re no ray of fucking sunshine. Now, let me fix this so I can get on with my life.”

“I don’t need you fixing my problems. I can handle it myself.”

I cocked an eyebrow at her. “Really? That’s why it’s been sitting like this for as long as you’ve lived here, every day falling a bit further into disrepair?”

“I can call someone to handle it. I don’t need you coming over here like God’s gift to women, trying to save the day with your manly ways. I don’t need a hero, Waylen.”

“I’m not sure what the hell you’re going on about, but I was thinking about the safety of you and Mel when I started this. You can say you’re going to fix it all you want. The proof is right in front of me. No repairs. Nothing but a hazard.”

She leaned forward, hands braced on the doorframe. “I’ve made it this far without you butting into my life. I think I’ll be fine.”

“You know what, screw you. I’m so tired of trying to do nice things for you only to have it thrown in my face like I have an ulterior motive for doing them. You can’t just fucking say ‘thank you’ or ‘I appreciate you thinking of me’? Damn, Vera.” I sighed and rubbed my hand through my buzzed hair. “I’ll clean up and be out of your way.”

I couldn’t do this anymore. I thought I could come over here and fix this, try to be nice, but look where it got me. Yelled at once again. I got that we had this game we played, where yelling was our thing, but I was getting tired of it. And yeah, it was my fault. She didn’t ask for help, and I inserted myself into her life. Wrong move on my part. Just another in a list of things I should have thought through before putting them into action.

VERA

I heard the hammer before I got out of the car, and I wanted to be mad. Wanted to but couldn't.

He'd come back. I'd been kicking myself since I basically tore his head off yesterday. He was trying to do a nice thing, but I'd known so few guys to be kind without some ulterior motive. And maybe he'd had one. I had slept with him, after all. Twice.

But Melody was there. He had to have known that wasn't going to happen. And still, he came.

Today, we hadn't even been there. Mel spent last night with my mom, and I met them for breakfast. It was nice, being a real family outside of our grief. Melody hadn't spoken, but she had seemed content. Almost... happy.

She jumped out of the car before I could stop her and went running through the side yard. I didn't need to ask where she was going or whom she was running to. Slowly, I followed. By the time I reached the back, she had already shucked her shoes and was playing tug-of-war with a very adorable-looking Luke. Even I couldn't resist him, and that was saying a lot, considering who he belonged to.

But apparently, I couldn't resist his owner either.

The sun was intense today, and when I glanced toward the deck, I caught sight of what I'd been hoping for. Waylen, sans shirt. He didn't stop working to say hello, and I knew he expected something biting from me, but for once, I had nothing. My mouth ran dry, and words escaped me. His back

was a work of art, muscles straining with each movement. He was tanned from the Florida sun, except for a few light patches I assumed were scars. I guessed when one worked with tools for a living, they were bound to leave a mark.

He had a Tampa Bay Lightning cap shielding his eyes and aviators perched on his nose. I looked at him in profile view, wondering how such a man was still single. Oh, right. He was an asshole.

Only girls like me fell for men like him.

Which was why I didn't date. I had sex, but that was different. No attachments. The last time I let myself fall, he slept with my sister and left me.

Then, he died and made me the mother of their child. What kind of irony was that? I watched Mel with a soft smile on my face. When I was younger, I'd wanted a child of my own. Back when I thought my marriage would last a lifetime.

"You look lost in thought."

I hadn't realized Waylen had stopped working, and the sound of his voice made me jump. "Warn a girl before you creep up on her."

A wry smile twisted his lips, but there was something dim about it. "I've been trying to get your attention."

"Oh." I cleared my throat. "Sorry. I was just thinking about my ex-husband." I wasn't sure why the honesty spilled out. It had been a long time since I spoke to anyone about him and me.

Waylen's eyes widened. "Husband." He coughed. "Huh. You mean there's someone out there who can take that scalding wit of yours day in and day out?"

"Ha ha." I shoved him lightly. "I'm not that bad." I cringed. "Okay, I can be. But it would be more accurate to say was. He *was* out there. Now, he's hopefully rotting in hell."

A surprised laugh barked out of him. "I'm sorry. It's not funny. I just wasn't expecting that."

I shrugged. “He was not exactly what you or I would call a good man.” I looked back over my shoulder at Melody. If it wasn’t for my trauma, she wouldn’t exist. And she was the best part of that man, the best part of that family. “Everything happens for a reason.”

He followed my gaze. “Why do I feel like there’s a story here that would make me want to hurt someone?”

“Have you heard the one about the girl who was betrayed by her husband and her sister and then fell in love with the product of that betrayal?” It was a fairy tale, or whatever the opposite of that was.

“You mean...”

“That Melody’s father was my husband. Yup.” I popped the P. “You get back to work, mister.” I winked. “Someone told me that deck was dangerous. Not to mention an eyesore.”

His chuckle followed me, deep and raspy. I went to where Melody sat cross-legged in the grass, trying to force Luke to give her a high five. He cocked his head and looked at her like he didn’t know why humans were so strange.

“He may be a little young for tricks, girly.” I lowered myself to the grass. I wasn’t sure what made me let Waylen continue. In a few minutes, I’d go over there and help him, and that thought didn’t feel the same as it would have days ago.

Lying in the grass, I looked at the clear blue sky. There was only a single cloud in sight. Melody leaned back beside me, and Luke wedged between us, rolling onto his back and lifting his paws.

Smiling, I rubbed his belly. “Your human treating you well, buddy?”

He barked.

Melody giggled, and I would never get used to the sound. I rolled my head to look at her, at the smile stretching her lips. Reaching over Luke, I grabbed her hand. She gave me one squeeze and then rolled to her feet, sprinting away.

I sat up to see where she'd gone and found her standing next to Waylen. He'd stopped working and was trying to understand her gestures. Finally, she grabbed his arm and pulled. He came willingly, and I recognized the same look on his face I probably had. Resisting her was impossible.

Warmth seeped into me, this time not from the sun. I liked seeing them together, even when I didn't like him. Yet, something Mom had said this morning had stuck with me.

There are still good people in the world, V. Maybe this neighbor of yours recognizes himself in you.

How, Mom? We're nothing alike.

From what I can tell... you're both stubborn, obstinate, and looking for any kind of connection.

Connection. I'd told her she was wrong, that all I needed was her and Mel and my friends. For so long, I'd been content with what I had. And then, my sister died. The world became a whole lot smaller.

Melody pointed to the grass next to Luke. When Waylen didn't respond, she pointed again.

"Only for a moment." He sighed. "There's a lot of work to do."

"Do you ever stop working?" I asked. It was ironic coming from me. Before taking Mel in, I'd done little else but work. I got on Eliana's case for not delegating, but I was just as bad. I'd had this belief that no one else could do what I did, that everything would fall apart if I took time to breathe.

That hadn't happened. Work was just work. It wasn't who we were, and it would keep going if we let ourselves have hot morning sex or take a moment to stare at the sky.

Waylen settled in, his spine cracking as he reclined. He groaned. From this angle, I could easily make out the little bars in his nipples.

"Old man." I chuckled. The truth was, the fear of trying to stand up gracefully would keep me here a while.

Melody sat next to Waylen and picked at the grass. It was basically a siren call to Luke. He rushed toward her, leaving the space between me and Waylen very empty. I felt every bit of it, could see his chest rise and fall.

“To answer your question,” he said, “I don’t always work.”

“Yeah?” I rolled onto my side. “And what does the enemy neighbor do when he isn’t working or being yelled at by the sexy-as-hell woman next door?”

“You really want to know?” His brow furrowed as if I’d confused him. “I don’t understand you, Vera. You hate me most of the time. And others, you seem to... trust me? Yeah, I think that’s it. You trust me, and you don’t want to.”

“I do *not* trust you.” I settled onto my back once more and crossed my arms. “That’s preposterous.”

“What’s preposterous is that word.”

“Something wrong with my word? Don’t tell me you don’t know what it means. Do I need to use simpler words?”

“Shut up.”

“You shut up.”

A true, genuine smile curved his lips. It put every smirk, every half smile I’d seen from him to shame. I wanted to live in it. “We’re so mature.”

“You’re a doodoo head.”

That laugh, the one that wouldn’t stop rolling out of him in waves, it did things to me. Deep, dirty things. His eyes met mine and held, the dark pupils like black holes I could lose myself in. “It’s amazing,” he said.

“What is?” My voice was equally low.

“That we can exist side by side without you yelling at me.”

“Or you insulting me.”

We were both smiling now.

Melody started cackling uncontrollably, and I looked up to find Luke sitting in her lap, straight up like a little kid would.

Waylen rubbed his eyes. “You two are going to make my dog weird, aren’t you?” He pushed to his feet. “Come on, Mel. Want to learn how to use a hammer?”

Her face brightened, which sent a pang through me. I doubted her father taught her much of anything or took the time to get to know her. I watched them return to work. She hung on his every word, and he let her handle the tools, even tying a tool belt around her waist.

I bit back a smile at the sight. Maybe for today, just one day, I didn’t have to hate him.

I heard a car in the driveway and told them I’d be just a moment. What I didn’t expect was to see Kinsey, Eliana, and their boyfriends piling out.

“Did we have plans?” I asked.

Kinsey rocked back on her heels, and I noticed all of them were wearing outdoor clothing. Kinsey’s overalls were adorable.

“Waylen call you?”

It was Sebastian who answered. “Not exactly.”

“Don’t be evasive.” Shea pushed by him. “He told us he was going to work on your deck today. He doesn’t know we’re coming, but, uh...” He scratched the crown of his head and looked over his shoulder at Eliana. “We sure this was such a good idea, babe?”

I laughed at their reluctance. It seemed I wasn’t the only one who had to deal with Waylen’s temperament. “He’s around back.”

The boys both issued a one-fingered salute and headed that way.

Eliana slid her arm through mine, and Kinsey walked on the other side.

“Since when is the grumpy Waylen Denver at your beck and call for building a deck?” Eliana laughed at the absurdity of it all.

Really, I didn't think it was all that absurd. "I didn't have much of a choice. He kind of does what he wants."

"Saucy."

Kinsey rolled her eyes. "Not everything is a way to get into her pants, Ana."

She was right. At least this time, I didn't think that was why he was doing this. "He's worried it's a danger to Mel."

And it was. Once I got my head above water, I'd planned to find a contractor.

"He obviously cares a lot about... Melody." Kinsey gave me a look.

Eliana grinned. "Yes... Melody. He can't seem to stay away."

I stopped, exasperated. "You two obviously have something you want to say. Just say it."

They looked at each other and then at me before Kinsey spoke. "Be careful. These Denver brothers... it's all a trap."

I laughed at that. "I'll be sure to let them know you think that."

"A very pleasant, sexy trap." Eliana squeezed my arm. "They're annoying."

"Absolutely infuriating," Kinsey agreed.

I groaned. "And too damn hard to stay away from."

WAYLEN

Sunday dinner.

With my family.

Which meant we'd been neglecting our duties as brothers by not showing up for meals with our parents. Which meant fancy dinner. If Mom felt like we were drifting too far from them and each other, she dragged us to their home for Sunday dinner, knowing full well we didn't work that day and couldn't use it as an excuse. The only one who'd ever gotten out of it was Shea, and that was when he was traveling all the time for modeling. Now, he wasn't. He'd be fully retired soon. Only local jobs held his interest these days.

Fancy Sunday dinner.

Fuck my life.

I should make Vera come with me just to torture her. My luck, my mom would fall even more in love with her, because they'd met a long time ago thanks to Kinsey. Vera and my mom would get along great, then they'd both gang up on me. So, that was a no to that idea.

My brothers wouldn't bring their girlfriends. Not for this dinner, though they rarely did for others either.

I pulled at the crotch of my slacks, hating the way they bunched everything up. My button-down was a pale blue, tucked into my black pants. I wore a black belt I'd made sure to clean up before putting it on. My shoes were shined and ready to go when I slipped them on.

Now, the only problem I had outside of wearing this was relocating Luke for the evening. He'd gotten used to me being home all the time.

Well, he wasn't a problem. Melody had been over this afternoon, Vera trailing after her. I'd asked if they could watch Luke for me tonight. Vera had said yes—on the condition that she could see me dressed up. For a second, I thought it was because she appreciated how I'd look. Then I reconsidered. She was going to make fun of me, no doubt. That was Vera's way.

I still couldn't get over how nice she was to me the day her friends and my brothers showed up. It was a different side of Vera, one I actually liked.

Looking around, I found Luke's collar and leash. He was still getting used to them. I tried taking him for walks at night when the sun started to set. He needed to be leash trained to make visits to the vet and elsewhere easier. That didn't mean he sat and let me slip the collar over his head without trouble. He ran like a bat out of hell for the spare bedroom and ducked under the bed. There was no way I was getting on my hands and knees to drag him out. My mom would throw a fit if I showed up to our fancy dinner covered in dog hair from the floor. Instead, I took his favorite teether out of the freezer, making sure to slowly open and close the freezer door so he'd hear it. I dropped it on the floor. Man, he came running out. I let him grab his reward, then I put the collar on him. He could take the toy with him.

We walked next door, Luke carrying his toy instead of fighting me about the leash. Melody answered, quickly ushering Luke inside. Vera came from the kitchen, looking like she always did when she was home, relaxed, comfortable. And damn if her eyes didn't widen when she saw me.

“What?” I asked. “No comment?”

“You can see your nipple piercings through your shirt.”

“That's all you're going to say? I thought for sure you'd mock the hell out of me.” I turned in a circle, waiting for the comments.

When I faced Vera again, she licked her lips. “You, uh, you look nice.”

That pulled me up short. “Was that... Was that a compliment? Hold on. I need to get my phone out and record this moment.”

She flipped me off and went back into the kitchen.

I chuckled. “Thanks for watching Luke!”

“Don’t be late. We have work and school tomorrow.”

“I’ll be sure to tell my mom I have to leave on time.”

As I walked to my F-250, I realized that had been a lot less painful than I’d anticipated. Maybe Vera and I had turned a corner. Or maybe she was just feeling happy for once and didn’t want to rip my head off my shoulders. Either way, I wasn’t going to incite an argument with her.

I was the last one to arrive at my parents’. Shea’s Mercedes coupe was in the driveway, with Sebastian’s Hyundai sedan behind it. I parked on the street. There wasn’t enough room in the driveway, but also, from there I could make a fast getaway if needed. If my brothers and I started fighting. If my mom started bothering me about dating. If Dad tried to suck me into repairing something.

My brothers were helping bring dishes to the dining room table when I got inside.

Sebastian glared at me. “This is all your fault.”

“What the hell did I do?”

“You haven’t been here for dinner in a while, and now we all have to suffer.”

“No way are you putting this solely on me. If you and Shea had shown up more often, this wouldn’t be happening. Don’t even get me started on how many times I was here when you two were absent.”

“Waylen, is that you?” Mom called from the kitchen.

“Yeah, I’m here.”

Mom looked like she always did, well put together. Dark blonde hair that was short and styled without a hair out of place. Her pants were navy blue tonight. God forbid one of us ever catches her in something comfortable. Hell, I didn't know if she owned anything that was like the leggings Vera wore or cotton shorts or a host of other options. Mom's white blouse was tucked into her pants, and she even wore navy shoes while in the house.

We didn't have to do that when we were growing up. Fancy dinner, remember?

Shea gave me an up-nod as he passed by, holding two bowls of steamed vegetables. I could smell the light use of butter and garlic on them, causing my mouth to water.

"What's for dinner?" I asked.

"Duck," Mom said. "I had to buy a bunch to feed all of us, but it came out perfect, if I do say so myself."

"I'm sure it's amazing, as everything is that you make."

"Kiss-ass," Sebastian said under his breath as he came into the kitchen to grab the rolls. I had to resist sticking my leg out to trip him.

This was how it was between us when we had dinner together. My brothers and I descended back in time to when we were kids and picked on each other incessantly. Something about being in this house brought it out in us, no matter how old we were now. Honestly, I liked it. I wouldn't admit that to them though.

Dad sat at the head of the table. He had the same chestnut hair and hazel eyes as my brothers and me. "Boys, how are things?"

Sebastian launched into what was going on with him and Kinsey, trying to get it out of the way, like it would help him from getting numerous questions from Mom. His tactic was different than mine. I liked to stay quiet, keep eating, so I couldn't answer questions. It worked, but only for so long. Mom would wait me out. She had a lot of patience that way.

Her eyes flicked to me when Sebastian finally took a breath. He'd spoken about work, Kinsey, and anything else he could think of except anything truly personal.

"Way, how's the puppy?" Mom asked. "Did you name him yet?"

I mumbled around a mouthful of food, grateful I timed the bite the way I did. I didn't mind talking about Luke, but that would lead to her asking if he was home in a crate or where he was, which would lead to Vera and Melody.

She changed directions and asked Shea how he and Eliana were doing. He gave the briefest of updates about the two of them before talking about what was going on with the shelter. He had a firm diversion in place. Mom loved hearing about it too. Now that she had Shea home almost full-time, she was glad to hear about the shelter, which was keeping him here along with Eliana.

Then, it was my turn again.

"Way, I hear you're helping fix Vera's deck." She raised her eyebrows as she took a bite of the duck.

I was done chewing and couldn't delay swallowing with her eyes on me. "Yeah, just being neighborly."

Sebastian snorted. "Is that what you're calling it?"

My legs were long enough to reach him under the table so I could kick his shin. Too bad I didn't have my boots on. They'd hurt worse. He glared at me again, his eyes narrowing.

"How's Melody?" Mom asked. "That poor girl has been through so much."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say it wasn't only her who'd been through a lot, but it wasn't my place to bring up Vera's ex who left her for her sister. I was still shocked by that revelation. I told Mom about Luke and how his name came to be. How Melody loved to play with him. Basically, it was a bit about Melody, then Luke, Luke, Luke.

"Where is Luke tonight?" Shea asked. It was innocent, I thought, until he smirked. The bastard.

“Melody is babysitting him.” I wasn’t falling for his trap. He and Sebastian both knew something was going on with me and Vera. Whether they had the details of what that was, I wasn’t sure. Either way, I wasn’t going to get sucked into a conversation about my once-hateful, now-I-didn’t-know-what-she-was neighbor.

“And Vera?” Mom asked.

It was my turn to narrow my eyes at my brothers. What had they said to Mom?

I brought a green bean to my lips on my fork. It accidentally fell onto my shirt and lap, tumbling as it went. Accidentally on purpose. “Oh no.” I pushed my chair back. “I need to go clean this before it stains my nice shirt.”

I hightailed it out of there. No way was I going down the rabbit hole that was my relationship with Vera. I’d been saving the spilled-green-bean act all evening, figuring this was going to happen. *Always have an escape route.* That was my motto for any family gathering. If I didn’t use the route for me, I saved someone else with it, like the time I got Sebastian and Kinsey out of the house during Mom’s Halloween party. That time, I had been planning for myself, not in the same way though. I easily modified it for my brother.

The downstairs bathroom was so clean I could have eaten off the floor. Mom probably scrubbed it before we got here. I closed the door and locked it. If my mom could get in here to clean my shirt for me, she would. She didn’t smother us per se. More like she was intrusive if we let her be, which none of us did. We had to set boundaries with her, or she’d be too much. The thing was, we loved her and Dad. They would do anything for us, just like we would for them and each other. That love could get overbearing though. With both my brothers coupled off and moving on with their lives, that left me in the spotlight, which I despised.

I stayed holed up in the bathroom until I heard the table being cleared. That was my cue to leave my hiding place. We were moving on to dessert, which usually meant lighter

conversation. No deep dives into our lives during the pie round.

Sebastian and Shea both gave me the evil eye when I returned to the table at the perfect time. I smirked. It was small, just a twitch of my lips. My beard hid it. My brothers would have to do better if they wanted to one-up me.

VERA

I stared at the time on my computer, willing it to go slower. For once, I was able to stay at the office until the end of the workday, with Mom picking Melody up and doing “grandma things.” Whatever those were. It probably should have scared me, but going home to where I knew I’d find my ravishing neighbor was more terrifying.

Ravishing. Who the hell even said that, let alone thought it? I was losing my goddamn mind.

“She’s doing it again.” Gabby thought she was being quiet, but that girl was too much like me. She didn’t truly know how.

“Do you think I should get her attention?” The quiver in Charlotte’s voice almost made me smile. Almost.

I suppressed it and looked to where the two of them stood, watching me. “You guys need something?”

“Not really.” Charlotte clasped her hands behind her back.

Gabby rolled her eyes, pushing a lock of bright red hair over one shoulder. “Oh, it’s nothing. She’s only been standing here, trying to get your attention for the last five minutes. Really, V, you look like you need some sleep.”

Sleep was definitely not what I needed. I felt like all I’d done besides work lately was sleep. Whenever Mel didn’t need me and Waylen didn’t distract me... I was so damn tired.

“I’m fine.” I scrubbed my hands over my eyes and slapped myself.

Gabby started laughing so hard I could have slapped *her*. “You really just hit yourself? Wow, girl, you’ve lost it more than we already assumed you had.”

“Leave her alone, Gabby.” Charlotte elbowed her. “She’s been through a lot.”

My distractions lately weren’t about what I’d been through. Well, they were, in a way. But not the tragedy of my family. Instead, I couldn’t stop thinking about how the person I’d hated most had somehow started bringing both me and Mel back to life, though in different ways, obviously.

“Can I help you with something?” I looked expectantly at Kinsey’s assistant.

Charlotte nodded. “Kinsey said to come over here and tell you to go home.”

Of course she did. I glanced across the offices to where Kinsey was meeting with our social media manager, Nevaeh. They looked deep in conversation, so I kept my frustration to myself. My friends meant well, but they didn’t need to keep babying me. I was one third of the management team, and I needed to pull my weight.

Plus, I wasn’t ready to go home to an empty house and the hammering I knew would be coming from my deck. It was too dangerous.

“I’ll take care of it, ladies.” Eliana pushed between them and set a plastic cup down on my desk.

I shifted my gaze from the cup to her. “Boba? The nearest place is like twenty minutes away.”

She shrugged. “That’s what men who are obsessed with your besties are good for.”

“This is from Shea?” I laughed. I shouldn’t have been surprised. He struck me as the boba hipster type. And I loved that about him because it was the one drink that soothed my nerves better than coffee. “Did he go willingly or…”

She crossed her arms. “How much control do you and Kins think I have over that man?”

“All of it?”

A small smile appeared on her lips. “It’s not control, babe. He likes to do things for me and for my family, which includes you. That’s called dating a legitimately nice person. You should try it sometime.”

“Sounds boring.” It didn’t. Not really. But I needed more than nice gestures and gifts. Being single suited me, so it would take passion and declarations. It would take a person who was willing to fight past every barrier I created.

“I’m not going to dump that Thai tea on your head right now only because I know you don’t really mean it, but I am leaving for the day. Walk out with me?” When I hesitated, she continued, “You can’t avoid home forever.”

I could try. Grabbing my jacket and my boba, I followed her to the door, sending Kinsey a wave.

Once we were in the elevator, Eliana turned to me. “Look, V, I know life has gotten complicated for you lately, but if you need to talk about anything, you know we’re here for you, right? Even if the subject is a certain brother to the weirdos we’re dating.”

I wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “You’re the best.” She truly was. But I wasn’t ready. Things with Waylen... I didn’t know what I was doing or what he was doing. If it was just neighbors being neighborly. Though, I didn’t want to bang old Mrs. Walsh on the other side. Scratch the whole neighbors being neighborly thing.

Shea was waiting for Eliana outside in his way-too-fancy car. I didn’t know how he managed to drive it on the highway without being a total wreck. If I got behind the wheel, I’d think of what would happen if I crashed every moment.

Then again, that sounded fun. I did like to go fast.

My phone rang as I got into my car. I had to swipe out of the text I’d gotten from Waylen an hour ago to answer it. He’d gotten my number from one of his brothers, no doubt.

Waylen: Working on the deck today. Don’t murder me, please.

His words were still in my head when I heard my mom's voice.

"Vera? You there?"

"Yeah, yup. Here." I pressed my face to the steering wheel. "What's up?"

"Just calling to let you know I won't have Mel home until late."

"Sure." I sat up. "Just remember she has school tomorrow."

"Why don't I just keep her for the night, then? We're going clothes shopping anyway, so she'll have something to wear. I can take her to school."

I sighed. A night alone in the house should sound wonderful, but instead, a sudden bout of loneliness crept in. "If she wants to stay, that's fine. Just touch base in the morning."

We hung up, and I started toward home.

When I got there, I heard the sounds immediately. It was a saw coming from my yard, not Waylen's shop. He was still there.

Hesitating on the front stoop, I debated going right around back, but instead, I went inside. The house was eerily quiet, the only sounds coming from out back. High yips punctuated the sawing. And then, it stopped, and it was him.

"Chill out, Luke." Waylen sounded irritated. "No, don't you dare shit in her yard. Vera will have my head, and I didn't bring the little baggies with me."

I headed for the rear door and opened it so only the screen stood between me and the deck. Waylen had his back to me, hands on his hips as he looked down at Luke. "Do you always have to be so destructive? Honestly, I don't understand you."

I craned my neck to see around him to the shredded flowers at Luke's feet. Roses, to be exact. Roses that did not grow in my yard.

Oh, shit.

Last year, I'd had a party and one of the guys an employee brought got drunk and stumbled through Mrs. Walsh's rose bed between our houses. It was a beautiful array of red and pink roses, her pride and joy.

Let's just say... there had been consequences. And she hadn't trusted me since.

I looked at her house over the fence, just as her side door opened. "Waylen," I hissed.

He snapped around, and I waved him toward the door.

"Get in here. Bring Luke."

He didn't move.

"For roses' sake, you idiot. Listen to me for once. I promise it's for your own good."

He swiped Luke off the ground and bounded up onto the nearly completed deck. I held the door open. His chest brushed mine as he slid by.

I shut the door and drew the blinds down before moving to each window and closing them as well, cutting off all natural light.

"What's going on?" Waylen still held a squirming Luke in his arms.

"Your dog may have just gotten us all in trouble with the mafia." I peeked through the blinds. Last time this happened, after the party, the guy who showed up at my door claiming to be Mrs. Walsh's son looked like he belonged in a villa in Naples, working for the don. I still remembered the steely look in his eyes and the way his wide shoulders spanned the doorway.

Waylen laughed, suddenly and loudly.

I rushed to him and clapped a hand over his mouth. "I'm serious. Those roses are sacred in this neighborhood. How could you not explain that to Luke?"

"He's a dog," he mumbled against my hand.

“We all have to do our part to keep the neighborhood safe.”

Pushing my hands away, he stepped back and set Luke down. “You do realize how ridiculous this sounds, right?”

A knock sounded at the front door, more like a heavy thump. I recognized the sound and froze. “That’s him.”

“Who?” Waylen had finally started looking as hesitant as he should.

I ignored his question and shoved him toward my bedroom. “Hide in there and don’t come out. Even if you hear something... bad... stay there. You must protect Luke.”

He tried to protest, but I gave him one final shove and shut the door in his face. It was time to face the music.

Taking my steps slowly, I drew in a deep breath and reached for the doorknob. When I pulled it open, I was face to face with the man himself. “Stefano, hello.”

His eyebrows drew in, his thick jaw clenching. “Vera. Wish I could say this was a social call.”

“I know.” My hand gripped the edge of the door so tightly my knuckles started to change color. “Look, I remember all too well how much those flowers mean to your mother, but this time you can’t blame me.”

“It is always you.” His shoulders lifted in a shrug. “Can you blame her for assuming?”

“What do you want as repayment? A finger? Please take my ring finger. It’s the most useless. Anything but the middle finger. Or is that not enough? Do you need my firstborn? Done. Though that might be in the land of never.”

“Hello?” Waylen walked up behind me, and I groaned.

“I told you to stay hidden,” I whispered.

“Since when do I listen to you?” He held a hand out toward the other man. “Waylen Denver. I’m sorry about your mom’s flowers.”

I sighed. “Way, this is Stefano.”

Stefano laughed. “She means Stephen. I’m not sure why she’s always called me Stefano.” He took Waylen’s hand. “I just need to be seen chastising Vera here so my mom thinks I care about her flowers.”

Luke ran between my legs, barking at Stephen.

“Who’s this?” Stephen crouched down to pet him, and Luke immediately leaned in for the attention. Traitor. He apparently belonged to the mafia now.

“That’s Luke,” Waylen said. “The destroyer of flowers himself.”

Stephen looked up. “Really? It wasn’t Vera, then? Mom loves dogs. She won’t be so mad once she finds out who the real culprit was.” He stood. “See you around, Waylen.” He sent me a dimpled smile. “Vera, always a pleasure.”

I shut the door and leaned against it. “Whew, that was a close one.”

A real smile formed on Waylen’s lips, for once directed at me. And I couldn’t look away. I wanted to taste his smile, to feel whatever it was that made him give it to me. Stopping myself, I walked by him into the kitchen and pulled a bottle of wine from the fridge.

Not bothering with a glass, I uncorked it and took a swig. All this mafia business put a need inside of me. For control. For safety.

Nothing the wine could provide. That was for sure.

“I should get Luke home.”

I hadn’t seen Waylen moving toward the mudroom.

“You probably should.” If he didn’t leave now, I wouldn’t let him out that door.

I heard it shut and took another drink from the bottle, barely tasting the wine. It was cold and wet, that was all that mattered.

Making myself a quick frozen dinner, I carried that and the wine into the living room. Darkness grew outside as I turned

on a reality show and tried to eat. But nothing sat right. Not the food, not the wine. It didn't throw my world back into focus.

Sleep. Maybe Charlotte was right. I'd been sleeping a lot, but how much of that was a true, deep sleep? I cleaned up from my dinner, brushed my teeth, washed the makeup from my face, and changed into a pair of fuzzy pajama pants and a tank top.

As I lay in bed, looking at the dark ceiling, images and feelings flashed through me. Strong arms, the sight of muscles rippling in a back. A beard scratching across my cheek. How would that feel... elsewhere?

"Dammit!" I yelled into the dark as I kicked off my comforter and stormed toward the back door. I didn't bother with shoes or a robe.

This time, there was no sting of fire ants, nothing to keep me from crossing the gate into Waylen's yard. There was no hesitation when I knocked on his door.

It took him a moment to answer, and when he did, he looked like he too had been trying to sleep. His hair was damp, as if from a shower, and flattened on one side, like he'd been lying on it. He wore no shirt, only low-hanging sweats that left little to the imagination. Sleepy eyes locked onto mine, suddenly becoming more alert.

"Vera, what—"

I put a hand on his chest and shoved him back into the house. "I will never stop hating you."

"Thank God." His mouth crashed into mine, the minty taste of his toothpaste mixing with mine. One of these days, I'd have to admit that I didn't hate him, not at all. But today was not that day.

His hands came under my butt, and he lifted. I wrapped my legs around his waist, leaving no more space between us.

"Tonight," he murmured against my lips, "I'm going to take my time with you. Taste every inch, every dip and curve." He squeezed my ass. "For tonight, you're mine."

“Yes,” I hissed. There was nothing else to say to such a declaration. Nothing other than please. *Yes. Take me. I’m yours.*

Maybe for tonight, that last one could be true.

He carried me into a bedroom, kicking the door shut behind him, and I knew.

This was more than sex. More than being neighborly.

For now.

WAYLEN

Blinking my eyes open, I glanced toward the nightstand and tapped my phone to check the time. I had a pretty good internal clock, so I knew it had to have been close to six in the morning. The phone read five forty-five. One day, I was going to predict it down to the minute.

When I rolled back over, determined not to get out of bed until six, hair tickled my face. I brushed it away, confused as to what it was. Luke slept in a crate at night. He'd been good about not going to the bathroom in it. Little Houdini couldn't escape it though. He wasn't that smart. At least, not yet.

Which meant...

Holy shit, Vera had spent the night. My next-door neighbor, Vera. The one who came over late yesterday. Who woke me up so she could get into my pants, not that I was complaining one bit. If she did that every night, I'd be thrilled.

And she stayed. All night.

I didn't picture her as the cuddle-up-and-not-leave type, yet here she was. The other times we were together, it was a quick get off and go. There had been no exit strategy last night. No rush to put our clothes back on so one of us could flee like a burglar who'd been caught.

We'd both been so happy, sated, when we were done neither of us moved. I could have asked her to leave, but I didn't want to. I could have also trudged my ass downstairs and slept in the guest bedroom. Instead, I wrapped her in my arms, waiting for her to lash out like a feral cat. She didn't,

thankfully. She snuggled against me. *Snuggled!* I held on for all I was worth. I would have been damned to let that opportunity pass me by.

With her in my arms was how I finally fell asleep. It was a good sleep too. No tossing and turning. No waking up and feeling restless because a certain neighbor was on my mind. She was there, in my bed, and I was... fuck, I was happy. I fell asleep with a smile on my face.

Everything had changed. We might not have meant for it to, but her seeking me out, her staying all night, it shifted the relationship we had, if I could even call it that. What did we have? Sex, obviously. Damn good sex. What else? I didn't think we were reduced just to that. Not after the way we were warming up to each other. The hatred wasn't like it used to be. It had evolved into something like... I almost gasped. Were Vera and I friends?

Or was this more than that?

Was I developing feelings, the big kind of feelings, more than friendship, for Vera? I'd felt something before. This warming in my chest. This feeling of absolute rightness when I was with her.

It took everything in me not to throw the covers back and flee. Not because I was one of those anti-attachment people. The thought of a committed relationship didn't send me running. It was who the person in question was.

Vera! Vera fucking Hart!

Jesus, I cared about her. More than as a friend.

I did a quick internal check to see just how freaked out I was. I mean, it was a hell of a revelation. I hadn't had feelings for a woman in a long time. I couldn't even remember when the last time was. And here was Vera, sneaking in under my radar like some stealth fighter trying to infiltrate all my senses.

Even now, her scent surrounded me. This sweet, delicate scent that worked its way into my lungs, increasing my need to hold her again.

If Vera knew, she'd deck me. I couldn't open my mouth and tell her what was going on in my head or my chest. But I could ask her on a date. Yeah, that sounded good. A date. A real one, not this thing where we fucked and said goodnight or gave each other the finger. We were evolving, and as such, we should do what other people who caught feelings did.

Vera stirred beside me. She was no longer tucked close to my chest. Instead, she faced the windows, which had the curtains closed to block out the new day. She groaned and smacked her lips before rolling onto her back.

I propped myself up on my arm and smiled. In the dark, I could make out the shape of her face, the way her hair was spread out on the pillow. I wanted to brush my fingers through it.

She slowly blinked her eyes open. They widened when they landed on me.

Grinning, I said, "Morning."

Vera grabbed for the blanket, pulling it up to her neck. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Hate to break your dream of me sneaking into your house, but it was the other way around. Minus the sneaking."

"What?" She stared at me, blinked again. I could see the pieces clicking into place. "Oh my God. I slept in your bed last night."

"That, you did."

"I'm still naked."

"As am I." I was hard too, but she didn't need to know that. She was too freaked out. No way was I going to push for anything with her like this.

"I have to go." Vera tried to roll out of the bed with the blanket attached to her, so I tugged on it, reeling her back in.

"Vera."

"Don't look at me."

I chuckled. "What are you embarrassed about?"

“I’m not embarrassed. Just not at my best. You don’t know me.”

“I think I do.”

“Waylen,” she groaned. “Can’t you allow me a hasty walk of shame in peace?”

That pulled me up short. “You’re ashamed of what we did?” I tried to keep the hurt out of my tone but failed. Maybe I’d read things all wrong. My feelings were one-sided. She didn’t care about me, about what we did. I was next door, nothing more than a convenience.

“No,” she said softly. “It’s not that. We don’t do this though. We don’t stay.”

“You did.”

“And now, I’m going to leave.” She sat up. I gave in and let her have the blanket while keeping the sheet over my waist. My dick took its exit when she mentioned the walk of shame.

I had to try to ask her out. If I didn’t, I’d regret it. “Go out with me, Vera. On a date. Let me take you somewhere. Let’s get out of our houses, out of here, and have fun.”

She turned. I couldn’t see her eyes, not in the dark of the room. She wasn’t close like she was before. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

I nodded. What could I say? I wasn’t about to beg her. There was only so much I was willing to put out there. This was my limit. She didn’t want me like I did her. Message received.

“I’m sor—”

“Don’t,” I said, cutting her off. I’d be damned if she was going to pity me or point out how her sleeping here was a mistake. “Just go, Vera.”

I stayed on my side, facing the windows, as she stood and walked around the bed, out of sight. I could hear her moving through the house. It was eerily quiet, not even Luke was up whimpering yet. That was, until she walked past his crate. His little whines reached me, as did her whispering something to

him. I didn't move until I heard my back door shut. Even then, I went in slow motion.

My sweats were discarded on the floor. I put them on and went to the bathroom. When I came out, enough time had passed where it was safe to get Luke out of his crate and let him outside. He danced around me, his little nails tapping away on the hardwood.

We went out onto the deck, then I let him into the yard. I refused to let my eyes drift over to Vera's house. I shouldn't have gotten attached, shouldn't have let this develop into more. Now, I was the one who felt like an idiot.

God, what would she tell Kinsey and Eliana? I was sure she'd say something. The three of them were so close nothing could get between them, not that anyone ever tried. They were best friends, something I never had the privilege of having.

I scrubbed a hand over my face and seriously contemplated going into my workshop, grabbing my list, and burning the thing. Sure, I was getting along better with my brothers, but where Vera was concerned, it was a disaster. It was all my fault. There was nothing to blame her for. She knew the score and followed it. I misinterpreted her staying the night as her trusting me.

Luke started rolling around in the grass.

"Do you want to eat?" I asked him. He was food motivated. Any mention of a treat or a meal and he'd do whatever I asked.

His ears lifted; his tail starting wagging as he sprung to his feet and ran over to me.

"Come on. There's gross dog food waiting for you inside." It never ceased to amaze me how he ate the same thing day in and day out and still got excited for it. I even gave him food as treats since it was safe for him to have.

The first step back inside and Vera's scent wrapped around me. It wasn't strong. More like a faint hint in the air. When did I become so tuned in to her?

I busied myself with feeding Luke and starting my own breakfast. Cooking would keep my mind off her. It would keep my mind off everything but what I was currently doing. The crack of the eggs, the scrape of the whisk hitting the edges of the glass bowl. I added milk and got the pan heated, the butter melting as the temperature rose.

This was what I knew, what I was used to. It didn't involve anyone else, nor would it. The one time I tried to put myself out there, and it ended with a no. I shouldn't have been so hard on myself, but I knew me. I wasn't outgoing. I didn't go to bars or clubs. I didn't do much of anything but hang out in my home and work. No matter how many things I put on my resolution list, it didn't magically make them happen. That was on me. I was the only one who could put things into motion.

Right now, I wanted to go back to the way things were before I knew what Vera tasted and felt like. Who knew I could get my heart hurt so easily? Not broken. I wasn't in love her. Not yet. A little longer and I could see myself getting there though. Underneath all her fire and hatred was a woman who deserved to be loved and cared for. Just not by me.

Luke barked, his adorable eyes peering up at me.

"No eggs for you. You've had your food." I walked to the door and let him back outside so I could eat in peace. He made me feel guilty when he begged.

At least I had him. He was the only friend I needed. He wouldn't hurt me or push me away. Dogs were always happy to see their owners. Except when he was shredding the area rug. What the hell was that anyway? Why did he gravitate toward it like it personally offended him?

I shook my head and dug into my eggs. It was a new day. One where I had to focus on work and the growth of my business. That, I could do. I was grateful I loved my job.

VERA

A date? What the hell?

I marched into my silent house. Why did Waylen have to go and ruin what we had by making it anything more than it was?

Gah, I hated him for it.

I suddenly missed Melody fiercely, missed getting her ready for school and sending her off on the bus. The morning was too still without her whirlwind. We talked incessantly. Well, I talked, and she nodded along. One of these days, I'd hear her say something back to me. Until then, I just had to keep going.

She wasn't here though. No one was. Maybe I needed a dog like Waylen had.

I'd never hated the quiet before, had always preferred being alone. Yet, right now, it was deafening.

Checking the time on my phone, I realized it was early. Really early. I wouldn't have to leave for work for about an hour, so I headed to the bathroom for a long shower to wash the night off me. I'd stayed. In his bed. That wasn't something I did. It was cliché, but I normally loved them and left them. Vera Hart's *modus operandi*.

Last night fucked everything up.

As I stepped under the water, I was deliciously sore. Images of the night came back to me. Waylen's rough hands

on my chest, the way he met my gaze as he slid down my body, settling between my legs.

I practically moaned from the thought of it. The man was talented. With his tongue, his hands, his... every part of him. His body was a goddamn wonderland, as certain Taylor Swift exes would say.

The shower washed away the last traces of him from my skin, but my thoughts were still on that stupid smirk that came out when he knew he had me on the edge.

Leaning my head against the shower wall, I tried to forget. Forget the sight of him talking to Melody as if it was perfectly normal that she didn't talk back. Forget how freaking adorable he was with that dog.

Forget that there were times I'd thought I got a glimpse of the real Waylen Denver and I wasn't sure I hated him at all.

Turning off the shower, I stepped out and dried myself, wrapping the towel around me. In my room, I didn't bother getting dressed yet, instead grabbing my phone and lying on my stomach on my bed.

I'd kept so much from my friends since New Year's. Everything I felt about the accident, how scared I'd been. They accused me of pushing them away, and they were right. I hadn't wanted them to see what a mess I was, despite knowing they'd love me anyway.

I was lucky to have Kinsey and Eliana. Most people didn't get friends like them, and I'd lost sight of that. I started a conference call on FaceTime.

Kinsey answered first, as always. "V, everything okay?"

"Yeah, just wanted to talk." We used to call each other all the time, but I'd stopped doing that.

Eliana's face showed up a moment later. She always had to search for her phone, so it took a few rings. "Morning, ladies."

Her chipper smile kind of freaked me out, but it had become more normal for her since she'd fallen for Shea. Eliana was happy.

“I spent the night at Waylen’s,” I blurted before clapping a hand over my mouth. “I meant for that to come out more naturally.”

Both of them stared at me, saying nothing.

“Guys,” I pleaded. “I need some kind of chastisement. You’re good at that. Tell me how much I screwed up.” I focused on my cousin. “Kins? I’m a giant fuckup, aren’t I?”

“Is that why you’re not wearing any clothes?” Eliana laughed, leaning closer to the camera. “Are you still there?”

“No! I showered.” I held the phone out. “See, I’m in a towel.”

“Was Mel home?” Kinsey asked, looking concerned.

“Oh my gosh, no.” I shook my head vehemently. “She spent the night with Mom.”

Kinsey looked confused. “Then why are you a fuckup? You used protection, right?”

Eliana laughed. “That is such an unsexy question. I want to know how large his—”

“Ana.” Kinsey sighed, shaking her head. “He’s Shea’s brother.”

“And? I was going to say house. How big is the inside of his house?”

I could hardly follow their conversation. Rolling onto my back, I held the phone above me. “You guys are no help.”

Kinsey frowned. “I just fail to see what the problem is. So what? You like Waylen.”

“Take that back!” I sat up so suddenly my towel slipped.

Both of them screamed as one of my boobs popped out.

“Prudes.” I tucked it back in. I’d never been shy about my body, even around my girlfriends. On our last trip together, they’d both changed in the hotel bathroom while I stripped right out in our room. They were just boobs, and mine were pretty magnificent.

Eliana looked like she wanted to laugh but stopped herself. “I agree with Kinsey. This wouldn’t be such a big deal to you if he was just another guy.”

“Of course, he’s not just a guy. He’s my neighbor.” I thought for a moment. “I wouldn’t have to deal with him if I got my mafia neighbor to take him out.”

Kinsey lifted one brow. “When are you going to believe Mrs. Walsh and her son are not mafia?”

“Never.” It would make the neighborhood so much more boring. Plus, there had to be a reason she was so protective of her flowers. They were hiding something. “But that’s not the matter at hand. Waylen trapped me.”

Eliana laughed. “How? Did he lock you in his house and not let you leave?”

“Because if he did, you won’t need the mafia to take him out,” Kinsey added. “You have us.”

I fucking loved their willingness to go to war for me. “No, not like that. He’s a more subtle criminal than outright abduction. First, he kissed me when I yelled at him. And I was so surprised I let him. That made me associate my anger toward him with his lips and hands. So, then, every time I wanted to rip his head off, I always wanted him to... you know.” I took a breath. “That’s just sex. You see, then, he had to go and get this dog. I don’t even like pets, but Mel does. Not only does she love Luke, but she seems to like Waylen too. And he’s so damn nice to her.”

“Vera...” Kinsey was smiling.

I couldn’t stop. “And then, the deck. Do you know he didn’t even ask me if I wanted his help fixing it? He just did it. Now, I have to walk out my back door without nearly dying. What if I liked the danger? Not to mention the fire ants.”

“Oh no, what did he do with those?” Eliana was laughing now.

“He got rid of them! All because I told him to. Who does that?”

They were both grinning at me now.

“What?” I snapped.

“I never thought I’d see the day.” Kinsey pretended to wipe a tear away.

“What are you talking about?”

“We’ve known the Denver boys for a long time. Sebastian is the nice one. Shea, the charming one. But Waylen... he’s always been untouchable. Never letting people truly know him, even his brothers. Yet he can’t seem to stay away from you.”

“That’s not true.”

“Oh, honey, it is. Waylen feels things for you.”

Eliana nodded. “Big things, and he’s obviously not the only one.”

They were wrong, and I opened my mouth to say that. Instead, what came out was, “What do I do?”

Kinsey’s smile was softer now. “Tell him, V. Talk to him.”

“Just stop being an idiot,” Eliana added. “Since the accident—even before that—you’ve been letting the past keep you from seeing the good in front of you. Waylen isn’t Michael.”

“I have to go.”

Kinsey said something, but I didn’t hear her as I hung up the phone. They were right. Waylen and I needed to talk. He’d tried this morning, but I was an idiot, as Eliana claimed.

Waylen Denver was an asshole—an asshole who was great in bed—but I loved that side of him. The one that looked at me like I’d lost my mind, had no problem yelling back at me, and used that to fuel whatever this was between us.

It wasn’t until I reached my backyard that I realized I was still in a towel. A throat cleared nearby, and I turned to find Mrs. Walsh watering her roses.

“Morning, ma’am.” I grinned nervously. “It’s a beautiful one, yeah?”

The look she sent me was only fit for the streets of Naples, and it sent a shiver down my spine. My friends were wrong. There was no way she wasn’t mafia, and I really had to stop annoying her. Now was not the time.

I refocused on my task and pushed through the gate that connected my yard to Waylen’s. Luke came barreling toward me, and I couldn’t stop him before he jumped, his paws catching on the towel and yanking it away from me.

“Sei Fuori!”

I whirled around at the Italian words. “I knew it!”

Luke’s bark brought me back to myself, and I lunged for him, but he ran toward the house, dragging my towel with him. Well, I guess this was how it would go. Steadying my breath, I headed for Waylen’s back door and knocked.

There was no answer, so I pulled it open. Cursing came from the hall over the sound of a vacuum? No, it was a carpet cleaner. I found Waylen on his hands and knees, cleaning a spot on the floor.

Watching him, my embarrassment over Luke taking the towel faded away. The traitorous dog ran inside, past me, and to Waylen.

He stopped cleaning. “Where did you get a towel, ya beast?”

I cleared my throat. “From me.”

Waylen turned slowly, his eyes widening as he took me in and stood. “Did you just...”

“Walk over here completely nude? I didn’t plan to, but if I’m hit by the mafia after Mrs. Walsh got an eyeful, blame Luke.”

“She isn’t—”

“Not the point.”

“Right.” He rubbed the back of his neck, his gaze traveling the length of me, sending warmth across my skin. “So, what is the point?”

I stepped closer to him and watched him swallow, internally dancing at the fact that I could still have this effect on him. “I was wrong before.”

One corner of his mouth lifted. “When? There have been so many times.”

I scowled and reached for his shirt, pulling him closer. “Do you really want to date me?”

“Careful.” He laughed. “I’ve been cleaning up dog puke. My hands may not be exactly clean.”

“Answer the question, Waylen.” I met his gaze, wanting to see the truth there. “We don’t have to date just because we sleep together.”

“I know.” He pushed out a breath. “God, Vera, of course I know that. But you...” His voice dropped. “I can’t get you out of my head.”

“Why won’t this go away?” I whispered, and I moved even closer, my lips inches from his.

“Do you want it to?”

“Yes.” I sighed. “No.” The truth was, I’d felt so little since the accident, for years before that. “I’ll go on a date with you, but I have a condition.”

His laugh vibrated through me. “Of course you do.”

“No matter what happens, you can’t stop arguing with me. Even if I admit I don’t really hate you, I want you to yell at me. I want to yell back.”

He jerked me against him. “You have yourself a deal.”

His head dipped, his lips brushing mine. I deepened the kiss, wondering when I’d started needing this man, needing everything he made me feel. “I have a few minutes before I have to get dressed for work.”

“Perfect.” He walked me toward his bedroom, never loosening his grip. Luke let out a sharp bark when the door shut in his face.

This time, when Waylen told me he wanted me, I let myself believe it.

A date. I could do that.

WAYLEN

There wasn't much time to plan the date, but I got an idea right away and ran with it. The Tampa Bay Lightning was home tonight. It was no secret I loved hockey. I wasn't a diehard who never missed a game; however, if it was on, I watched it. Seeing it on TV wasn't the same as live though. Tonight would be great for many reasons.

I hadn't been to a game in years. In fact, the last time I went was with Sebastian about five years ago when he got tickets. I couldn't even remember how or why now. I cheered, and my brother looked woefully out of place. If I hadn't been there, he probably wouldn't have made it through the first period. With me there, having a good time, dragging him along to get snacks and drinks, cheering, he stayed through the whole game. He even celebrated loudly when they won.

And then, we never spoke of it again because my brother didn't care about hockey.

When I needed an idea for the date with Vera, I recalled seeing a Lightning mug on an end table in her living room. It could have been left over from some guy she dated, or she liked the team. Could have been a gag gift too.

I had texted her to tell her what time I was going to show up at her door, and she asked me where we were going. I wanted to surprise her, but knowing Vera, that would only piss her off, so I told her about the tickets I got for the game.

One of my clients had season tickets. I called him first, saying I'd buy them if he wasn't using them tonight. He said

he couldn't go due to his in-laws being in town. Needless to say, I got free tickets, and my client was miserable at home with family. I didn't gloat. Not one bit.

In my bedroom, I put on a long-sleeved navy shirt and a pair of jeans that fit me well and didn't make me look like I'd been working with them on. These were family dinner jeans on nights when it wasn't fancy dress.

Luke whimpered and walked between my legs, almost tripping me. "I'm sorry, buddy, but you can't come with us tonight. You're going to have to stay here. There's no one to babysit you. I won't be gone too long though. You're in your crate longer when we sleep."

He had no clue what I was saying, so he merely sat down and stared up at me with those huge brown eyes.

After giving him a snack and making sure he got a drink, I let him outside one more time, then ushered him into his crate. I'd made the mistake of leaving water in there once and had come home from running errands to a dog that looked like he'd literally dived into the bowl and gone for a swim. So much for hoping he'd have a drink. He'd had a bath instead.

The guilt I felt at closing him into his little home ate at me. Not bad enough for me to cancel my date, but it was there. Luke cried as I walked away. I put the TV on low in hopes the sound of one of the nature channels would soothe him a bit.

With my boots laced, I made sure I had the tickets and the other things I'd need and went next door. It only took one knock for Vera to answer. A Lightning jersey sat a little big on her shoulders. Her smile was what held my attention though.

"I dressed for the game," she said and spun in a slow circle. She wore jeans, making me suddenly wish the jersey wasn't big, so I could see the way the denim hugged her ass. I knew it did too. And what an ass she had.

"I wasn't sure if you were a fan."

"So, you offered to take me to a game to figure it out?"

"I didn't know what else to do. You don't seem like the typical dinner date person."

Vera put a hand on her hip. “Maybe I like dinner. Maybe I wanted you to take me to an expensive restaurant so I could order the biggest piece of beef they had, just so you’d pay for it.”

“I would.”

“Dammit, Waylen! You’re supposed to argue with me!”

“Right.” I cleared my throat and used my best fake-irritated voice. “For fuck’s sake, Vera. I don’t make that much money in my shop.”

She dropped her head back and groaned. “The moment’s passed. You failed the test, by the way.”

“I hadn’t realized I was being graded.”

“I said I wanted us to still argue.”

I grinned. “Yeah, but I figured natural arguments, not fabricated ones. What the hell kind of fun is that?”

Stepping closer, she ran a finger down my chest before dragging it over my nipple to flick the piercing through my shirt. “The kind that ends with us in bed.”

My dick twitched. “We could skip the game and—”

“No way. I’m dressed. We’re going.” She grabbed her purse and locked the door behind her. “It’s a good thing Mom’s in town so she could watch Mel.”

“We didn’t have to go tonight.”

She turned and placed a hand on my arm. “Stop. I get that you’re this gentle soul beneath all that gruff exterior, but you don’t need to worry about this. I want to go out with you tonight. Let’s have all this fun you keep talking about.”

I rubbed the back of my neck, not sure how much fun I was. At least I was giving it a shot. That had to count for something.

The drive to the arena was as expected—full of traffic. We obviously weren’t the only ones heading to the game. After parking and getting inside, we found our seats and checked out

the area. We were right behind the opposing team's bench. The New Jersey Devils, to be precise.

Vera got a wicked gleam in her eyes. "You didn't tell me you got amazing tickets. This *is* going to be fun."

"You're going to heckle them all night, aren't you?"

"You bet your ass I am. Now, come on, I want snacks. I need protein if I'm going to have enough energy to yell at them for hours."

The lines weren't too bad. We ended up getting a beer each and walked around until we found Havana Nights with the most mouthwatering scents coming from it. I got garlic fries since I wasn't too hungry and wanted something to soak up the beer. Vera got a shrimp po'boy, telling me it was a substitute for the steak she would have gotten elsewhere.

We were able to finish our food and our beer before the game started. It was nonstop entertainment from that point on. The Devils scored, which elicited a lot of boos. Vera held true to form and was one of the loudest in our section. She also made friends with the couple next to us, who joined in on the fun.

My favorite part was seeing Vera let go. She wasn't pent up, angry, waiting for something to set her off. She was free here, without a care in the world. As I sat and watched her, I realized I'd do just about anything to see her look like that more often. It was how she should be. Happy. Full of this radiant joy that spread to those around her. This was the Vera I wanted to spend my days and nights with. Not that there was anything wrong with the other side of her. Hell, I loved her fire. Her happiness was contagious though.

Multiple times, Vera had leaned against me, wrapping her hand around my arm, pulling me close. She'd say something in my ear so I could hear her. Point out a player who she thought was doing well or a call that should have gone the other way.

"Want another drink?" I asked her in between periods. The crowd would be bigger, but the thought of missing Vera's

energy while the game was being played had me waiting until now.

“Water. I’m afraid if I drink any more beer, you’re going to have to throw me over your shoulder to get me out of here.” She had a few, but nothing to get her drunk on. “Although, I wouldn’t mind if you did that, just saying.”

Leaning in, I gave her a quick kiss. “Noted.”

I people watched while I waited in line. It was easy to do given how many there were. There was the guy trying to carry too many things at once. If Vera had been next to me, I’d make a bet on how far he got before he dropped something. Then, there was the teenager who was on a date. It was damn cute, although I could see how nervous he was. I didn’t miss those days when everything I did felt like I’d chase away the girl I was interested in. There was also the executive who spent more time on his phone chastising whoever was on the other end rather than moving up in line. Eventually, we started walking around him. He could take his call elsewhere. I had a date to return to.

Vera had her head tipped back and was laughing when I finally returned to my seat. I almost stumbled and tripped from watching her, not paying attention to where I was going. She grinned when she saw me and grabbed the bottle of water. I settled in beside her in time for the announcer to come on and the Jumbotron to light up with a view of people in the stands.

The kiss cam popped up. Vera gripped my arm like, at any moment, we were going to be next. I found I didn’t mind if we were. I wasn’t about to search out big displays of affection, but if it came our way, I wouldn’t deny Vera. Hell, I wouldn’t deny her at home, so why would I here? I’d kiss her for all to see. She was mine for the evening, after all.

Vera and I started talking, her making comments about how sweet the people on the screen were. One of the couples was older, probably my parents’ age. Both had their Lightning jerseys on. Their kiss was so damn cute I couldn’t help but smile. I’d love to have that. Someone to grow old with, whom I could keep by my side through good times and bad. Someone

who didn't judge me when my hair would eventually fall out or when I'd stop being as fit as I was now. Man, I sounded like a real treat as I aged.

The screen changed, now with a *Marry Me?* written over the top as it panned the crowd. Oh, this was going to be good. It was sweet to see the kisses. A proposal had the potential to go really well or really badly. I'd like to think whoever told them about this was pretty certain of the outcome. I had to give them props; this wasn't something I'd have the balls big enough to do. I'd be mortified if it went the wrong way.

But then...

Then, the fucking camera landed on Vera and me. I knew for certain my ass wasn't here to propose to her. I liked her, caught some pretty big feelings for her, but marriage? No.

When I lifted my arm to wave them off, about to yell how it was a huge mistake, Vera grabbed it with one hand and turned my face to hers with the other.

She grinned. "We're so playing along with this."

"What? Are you insane?"

"Little bit." She said louder, "Oh my God, I can't believe this is happening!"

VERA

“Oh my God, I can’t believe this is happening!” I practically screamed the words, trying not to laugh at the terrified widening of Waylen’s eyes.

There were awws and catcalls around us, the entire arena cheering us on. So, I did what I did best. I pretended. Pasted on the biggest smile I could muster and gripped Waylen’s hand. Tears built in my eyes. I’d always been a fantastic crier.

“Waylen Denver,” I said, loud enough for those around us to hear. “It would be the greatest honor of my life to be your wife. Yes! So much yes.” And then, I kissed him, long and hard, laughing against his lips.

“You’re insane,” he murmured. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“Because it’s oh so much fun.”

The cheering didn’t stop right away when the camera panned to something else. Even the players of both teams looked behind the benches toward us. The ones on the ice banged their sticks in applause.

I patted Waylen’s cheek as the game resumed. The couple beside us issued excited congratulations.

“It’s a dream come true,” I said to them. “Waylen here knows everything about me, knows that I’ve always wanted his proposal to be big and public and somehow related to hockey.” I was only a casual hockey fan, but I never did anything halfway. If I went to a game, I was going to be rabid. I leaned my head on his shoulder, taking in the tenseness of his

body. “Really, he’s such a sweetheart. Big gestures are kind of his thing.”

I lifted my head, leaning closer to them, and dropped my voice. “For our first date, he rented out an entire skating rink.”

“That’s so sweet,” the woman said. She slapped her boyfriend on the arm. “Why don’t you do that for me?”

He laughed. “I can’t skate worth a damn.”

I smiled at them. “Not Waylen. He’s a brilliant skater. Took figure skating lessons until he was sixteen years old. You should see his triple axel. It’s so beautiful it’ll bring tears to your eyes.”

A sharp pain hit me, and I realized it was Waylen. He’d pinched me.

The couple returned their attention to the game. I laughed and wiped away nonexistent tears. “This is the best date of my life.”

Waylen’s lips brushed my ear. “Someone is going to be very upset we got their big proposal.”

“Their loss.” I turned my head to kiss him. “Fiancé.”

“Don’t say that word,” he groaned. “Have I told you yet today how ridiculous I find you?”

“Why, Mr. Denver, I do believe that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

I couldn’t stop smiling as I leaned sideways against him, as he wrapped his arm around me. An unfamiliar feeling fluttered in my chest, like the return of an old friend I no longer recognized.

Happiness.

Tonight, I hadn’t thought about how hard life had become or my responsibilities. Instead, there was just me and my enemy neighbor boy, the same one I couldn’t stand not too long ago. Away from our real lives, we could just be us. It made me wonder what would have happened if we’d gotten to

know each other months ago. Before I became this bitter person, before I lost myself.

My smile faltered, but I made sure it didn't disappear entirely. Waylen's arm tightened around me. "You owe me for that," he whispered.

"I'll make it up to you." I had ideas. Many of them. All of them.

The second period came to a close, and I needed to stand up, to move. An idea hit me. "I need a snack," I said, standing and pulling him with me. "Come on."

We followed the crowd into the concourse of Amalie Arena. The stairs led to a wide-open area full of food and beer stands. I didn't loosen my grip on Waylen's hand as I hurried toward the far side of the concourse and pushed into a stairwell.

"Wait, Vera." He tugged me to a stop. "Where are we going?"

I didn't answer him. Instead, I started walking again, not stopping until I reached the club level doors. It was a floor that sat between the upper and lower bowls of the arena. There were a limited number of seats here, so it wasn't nearly as crowded.

"Vera."

I whirled on my heel, my chest slamming into his. "You want me to make all this up to you, right?"

"What? No. You didn't make them put us on camera by accident. I wasn't being serious when I said you owed me."

"I don't care." Sitting there with him, letting the entire hockey world see us—it did something to me. Something only anger and hatred had brought forth with him before. I wanted him. Needed him in a way I couldn't explain. Right. Fucking. Now.

Heat coursed through me as I searched for an open door. An office would do. Finally, I tried the handle of a storage room, and it clicked. "Perfect."

Pushing open the door, I yanked him inside and shut it behind us.

My lips were on his before he could ask me what was happening. His kiss, his touch, let me breathe, reminded me every bit of myself that had returned to me was real. The girl who never let anything get to her, the strong one, the ridiculous one. That was finally me again. And I wanted to show him just whom he'd brought to this game.

Waylen's back hit the door, and he put a hand on each of my shoulders to stop me. "Is something wrong?"

I shook my head, cursing the tears that threatened to spill.

"Vera." He dipped his head to meet my gaze. "Talk to me."

"We don't talk." I regretted the words the moment they were out. "I mean, I don't know how to..." Stepping back, I pushed a hand through my hair. "Tonight is perfect, Waylen."

"But?"

"No but. Not this time. I'm just..." How did I tell him so much of this was foreign to me? That since my ex-husband crushed me, I hadn't let anyone get close enough to see me cry, to kiss me in public. And I was terrified.

"Hey." He put a finger under my chin and tilted my face up so our gazes connected. "I'm just too." He didn't need me to complete my sentence because he understood.

"I think... God help me, I think I really like you."

He pressed a grin to my lips, taking his time with the delicious kiss. "That's good."

I reached for the front of his jeans, dipping my fingers behind the waistband. "I brought you up here to show you just how much."

His hand covered mine, stopping me. He stalked toward me, backing me up until I hit the far wall. A mop crashed to the floor, but I paid it no mind as Waylen's eyes devoured me, trapping me in their depths.

His fingers worked the button of my pants deftly. “Promise me this isn’t our last date.” His hands slid into the rear of my pants, grazing over my bare ass.

I sucked in a breath, arching toward him. “I promise.”

“Good girl.” He pushed my pants down over my hips, and I kicked them off, waiting for him to remove his. But he didn’t. Instead, his lips traveled over my jaw as a hungry growl rose in his throat.

“What are you—”

“Shhh.” He shut me up with a kiss. “Don’t move.” He dropped down to his knees, as if in worship, staring up at me. “Dammit, Vera. I’ve wanted this all evening.”

His breath blew across me, ruffling the soft hairs at the apex of my thighs. “What are you waiting for?”

“Pushy pushy.” He didn’t give me a chance to respond before diving in, his tongue darting out to part my lips.

I bit my fist to muffle a sudden cry as he brushed over the sensitive nerves. Wetness seeped out of me, but he didn’t seem to mind as he lifted one of my legs and brought it over his shoulder. Then, the other, until the only things holding me up were him and the wall.

He lapped hungrily, his moans echoing my own.

My hands dug into his hair, nails scraping his scalp as his strong shoulders kept me from collapsing to the floor in a puddle of want. Of need.

“Waylen,” I moaned. “Fuck.”

His chuckles vibrated against me, sending every nerve ending firing.

When his tongue dipped inside me, I almost unraveled completely. Managing to hold onto him, to reality, I pushed harder against his mouth, wanting to take everything he was willing to give.

It started at my toes, the tingling curling them against my will as I dug my heels into Waylen’s back. The sensation

traveled up my legs, past where his tongue was still dancing against me, until it settled right into my heart.

And I lost control. My body spasmed before going rigid. I could hardly breathe, barely think. It was like time itself suspended.

Waylen looked up at me with glazed eyes. His lips glistened, but he didn't set me down. Not yet.

“You're fucking beautiful.”

I leaned my head back against the wall. “And you're fucking talented.”

He laughed as he set one of my legs down and then the other. Getting to his feet, he pressed a kiss to my lips. I tasted myself but also his want for me.

It was the best damn combination.

“That was the most delicious meal I've ever eaten.” He grinned, a newfound light to his eyes. Tonight, we weren't arguing neighbors with nothing better to do than berate each other. We'd been searching for something and resisting it at the same time.

“Tell me you hate me,” I whispered, wondering if we were past the point of those lies.

He buried his face in my neck. “I hate you.”

“You're lying.”

“Yeah.” He bit my earlobe. “Vera Hart, you're a fucking disaster, and most days I want to growl at you like I'm my damn dog. But I also want you to be my disaster. It doesn't make sense to me, but I can't seem to stay away from you.”

Stepping back from him, I pulled my pants on. “We should return to the game. The third period has probably started.”

He grabbed my wrist and spun me to face him. “Tell me you want me.”

I closed my eyes for a brief moment. “I want you.”

This time, the kiss was rough, desperate. When he pulled away, he looked like he was in physical pain. “Don’t let your past ruin this. Please.”

My past. Only a husband who had left me for my sister. The same sister and husband who had a daughter and then died, leaving said daughter to me.

But Waylen was right. It was the past. I couldn’t keep distrusting everyone who came into my life. Especially when they looked at me with as much kindness as Waylen was doing now. Kind wasn’t a word I’d attach to him, but there it was.

And I didn’t want to ruin it.

WAYLEN

The one Saturday I allowed myself to stay in bed, and there was someone banging on my door at... nine in the morning. I couldn't believe my internal clock hadn't woken me up. Maybe it knew how much I needed and deserved this extra bit of sleep. I stretched, feeling well rested for once.

Last night, fuck, I didn't know how to describe it. Vera had been so different, so light. It was great to witness.

Plus, I had fun.

Me. Waylen Denver.

And I liked it. Wanted to do it again.

Grinning, I pulled on a pair of sweats and went to let Luke out of his crate before I got the door. He danced around me, clearly having to go outside, not used to me sleeping in. I let him out back before seeing whom I had to murder for their incessant knocking. It wasn't as if Luke was a good guard dog or anything. He liked to bark at everything under the sun, including leaves, blades of grass, Mrs. Walsh's car, the koi. Trying to defend me against burglars, he would not. At least, not yet. The jury was still out on how big he'd get.

I wrenched the door open, ready to lay into whoever was on the other side, even Vera. Though, if it were Vera, that anger would be met with fire of her own, causing us to wind up pressed to the nearest wall for explosive sex.

How we'd gone from hate-fucking to falling in love was beyond me. Well, I knew exactly how it happened. I wouldn't

say it to Vera though. Any inkling of love and... Yeah, no. She admitted she liked me. I was taking that for the win it was.

Only, it wasn't Vera standing outside. Any twitch of interest my dick had given at the thought quickly withered at the sight of my brothers in front of me. Before I could even get a word out, they came into my home and stood in the living room, holding pieces of paper in their hands.

Using my foot, I pushed the door shut and faced them.

"I, Sebastian Denver, am the right choice for best man and here's why," my brother began. "I'm funnier than Shea. My toast will be a hell of a lot better than anything he would say. Plus, you don't have to worry about me needing expensive clothes and running up a budget for the photographer. I don't care how I look. Though, maybe that's not the best checkmark in the pro column."

What the hell was going on right now? I couldn't wrap my mind around what he was saying, except I latched on to the words "best man," rolling them around in my head. They teased a memory I couldn't grasp.

"I, Shea Denver," my other brother cut in, "am the right choice for best man because I know what it's going to take to prepare this wedding. Not only will you need your brother by your side who knows how to multitask with the best of them, but I already get along famously with Vera's mother. You won't have to worry about the wedding attire if you choose me. Unlike Seb, I know what it means to be tastefully dressed. Unless you want to show up to your wedding in a flannel shirt, I'm your man."

Sebastian's mouth hung open. "Are you saying I don't know how to dress myself? For your information, I've been doing it most of my life and got by just fine."

"Got by? That's what you're going with. You can help Way get by with his wedding too. Like it's not a memorable affair or anything." Shea rolled his eyes.

Oh my God. The Jumbotron! I'd completely forgotten about it. How could I not with Vera's taste on my lips the

whole way home and the kiss goodnight we shared before parting ways? I went to bed with a smile on my face because we had a good time. A great time. But that damn *Marry Me*? was coming back to bite me in the ass.

“No,” I said firmly.

They both stopped and stared at me.

“What do you mean *no*?” Sebastian asked.

“You’re not going to be my best man, neither of you.”

Shea crossed his arms. “Well, that’s just cruel. After we spent all this time preparing how we’d be right for the role, you dismiss us so easily.”

“Do you have a best friend we don’t know about?” Seb asked, narrowing his eyes. “Who snuck into the top spot with our brother? I need to meet this asshole.”

I ignored his ridiculous question and asked, “Who else knows?”

My phone hadn’t rung yet which meant my mom didn’t know. Oh my God. I was in for it with her. She was either going to yell at me for not telling her I was seeing Vera, or she was going to be so happy one of her sons was getting married that she was currently on the phone with a wedding planner and already picking out different shades of pink for the wedding like in *Steel Magnolias*. Blush and bashful. We weren’t going to talk about how I knew about that movie or how many times I’d seen it. Plus, I hated pink. Though, it did look good in Shelby’s wedding.

And I wasn’t actually getting married. Although, I could go for one of those bleeding armadillo cakes right about now. Some sugar might take the edge off the headache I felt brewing thanks to my brothers standing in my living room and getting faux pissed off about something that wasn’t going to happen.

“We know,” Sebastian said.

“Everyone who follows the Tampa Bay Lightning knows too,” Shea added. “It was on their social media pages. They

even zoomed in on your faces. I don't think I've ever seen Vera smile like that."

I thought back to last night and how much her smile meant to me. Every time I looked over and saw it light up her face, I got warm inside. It was a new sensation, one I liked.

"Look at him grinning," Sebastian whispered.

My eyes latched onto his.

"You're thinking about it, aren't you? Where did you get the ring from anyway?" he continued. "Not that I'm asking for me. Kins and I aren't there yet, but it's always good to be prepared."

"If you really want a nice ring, I know an amazing jeweler," Shea said.

"Of course you do."

"You don't have to be an asshole, Seb. I was just trying to help."

Sebastian turned toward Shea, putting his hands on his hips, crinkling his paper in the process. "Don't accuse me of being an asshole. You know damn well I can't afford any jewelry you would hook me up with. I don't make the kind of money you do."

"*Did*," Shea emphasized. "I have a cushion in my savings account, but barely. I put an official offer on the shelter, and what I'll have left won't be much after the sale goes through."

Sebastian's face relaxed, and a slow grin lifted the corners of his lips. "You did? That's great. I'm really happy for you."

I didn't know whether to interrupt them or let them continue. It was odd seeing them in my living room at the same time. In fact, I couldn't remember the last time they were both here together. Not even when they showed up as I was working on Vera's deck. We didn't come into my house, rather we stayed in hers for drinks and snacks.

Here were my brothers, arguing, making up like nothing happened, in my home.

A whimpering and scratching from the back pulled my attention to Luke. I'd forgotten he was still outside. Though, if he had been in here, Shea would have loved all over him.

While they were hashing out whatever craziness they brought with them, I went and let Luke in. He flew past me to the other voices in the house like I didn't exist. That was about right. Why hang out with me when there were new people here? Not brand new but not overly familiar.

"Luke!" I heard Shea yell before I got back into the living room. When I did, I saw him sitting on the floor in his jeans that probably cost more than my new saw. He didn't seem to care that Luke was shedding puppy-sized pieces of fur all over him. Shea was in his element with Luke in his lap.

I leaned against the wall separating the kitchen and the living room and watched them. I really liked having people in my home.

Sebastian came over to stand beside me. "You didn't get to hear the rest of my speech. I have multiple bullet points lined up for why you should choose me."

Glancing at him, I asked, "You know it was fake, right?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, hell hasn't frozen over, and I don't remember seeing pigs fly. It was still fun making a list. I think mine's better than Shea's."

"It doesn't matter. I'm not getting married."

"Yet," Shea said from the floor.

"We went on one date."

"You've been sleeping together for longer."

I lifted an eyebrow at him.

"Come on. You know the three of them talk, and then they talk to Seb and me."

"Yeah, that tracks."

Shea lifted Luke in his arms as he stood. "He looks good."

I nodded. “The allergist appointment went well. He’s got allergies like we suspected, and he started him on medicine. We’re seeing how it goes, but he’s going to need to get shots eventually.”

“He couldn’t have found a better home.”

“Thanks.” I almost blushed. I felt the heat rising but cleared my throat in hopes it would keep it away. “Have you two eaten yet?” I didn’t want them to leave. I liked having them here. It was weird and good. I loved the noise in the house. The sound of family.

“Does coffee count as a meal?” Sebastian asked.

“Have a seat,” I told them and turned to go into the kitchen. Luckily, I had everything here to make a big breakfast. I had gone grocery shopping the other night.

Instead of them staying in the living room, they followed me, propping themselves against the counter. Luke started bathing Shea’s face with kisses.

“You like her, don’t you?” Sebastian asked.

There was no point in asking whom he was referring to. “I do. I didn’t expect to. We hated each other, and that was that. But then, we turned it into something else and—”

“Sex. You turned it into sex.”

“Thank you for stating the obvious. Anyway... We went on our first date last night, and it was nice.”

“Of course it was. You got engaged.” My brother smiled at me.

“Except, I didn’t.”

“Do you want to, one day?” Shea asked.

I whisked the eggs and milk in the bowl. “I think I do.”

“Wow,” Sebastian said in awe. “This is next level. You’re actually confiding in us, Way. It’s monumental. We should mark it on the calendar, so we don’t forget this moment.”

“Idiot,” I muttered.

Shea put Luke on the floor, and the dog went over to stare at his empty bowl. I had forgotten to feed him. I'd do it as soon as the eggs were in the pan. Shea clapped me on the shoulder. "We're only giving you shit because we love you."

"I know." I did. No matter how much we fought, we didn't stop caring. For years, there was too much distance between us. I hoped that didn't happen again. I liked the way things were heading. I had Vera, at least I thought I did, and I was getting my brothers back too.

After I got the eggs going, I poured food for Luke. Sebastian and Shea talked and helped out with breakfast, though neither of them were good cooks. They tried, I'd give them that. I'd rather have a messy kitchen and my brothers here than a meal for one while I sat in front of the TV.

Yup, things were definitely looking up for me.

VERA

Well, I tried.

I stood in the kitchen, staring at the mess of eggs and burnt pancakes, wondering if I'd ever get this right. All I wanted was to give Melody a good Sunday morning. To stuff her full of sugary syrup and watch the smile settle on her face.

Yet... it was me. Why had I thought I could do it?

I looked to the back door. In a few seconds flat, I could be across the yard and over at Waylen's, begging him for his help, pleading for a cooking lesson. No. It wasn't in me to ask for that kind of help, to admit I couldn't figure it out.

Even if I knew he'd come without question. I was starting to realize that was who Waylen was. As infuriating as he could be, he was there. If anyone needed something, he should be the first call. He wasn't a guy who let people down. Instead, he fixed things before they asked him to, made sure the people around him had what they needed.

I wanted to be like him when I grew up.

Hell, I wanted to be *with* him.

“Shit.” I gripped the counter. “I'm fucked.”

So, so fucked.

And it kind of felt good.

Waylen had texted me a few times since our date, as had my friends who now knew about the fake proposal. It was all

so surreal. Waking up with something other than grief and pure terror on my mind.

Soft steps entered the kitchen, and I turned to find Melody watching me. She smiled just like I'd imagined she would have when she saw perfect fluffy pancakes. One eyebrow lifted as she looked past me to the plate full of blackened food instead.

"Sorry, kiddo." I gave her an apologetic shrug. "Your aunt isn't so great at taking care of you."

Her smile fell, and for a moment, she didn't move. No reaction. Nothing. Then, as if shaking off my words, she pointed to the pantry next to the refrigerator.

I nodded. "There are some Reese's Puffs in there."

Waylen would probably have something to say about the amount of sugary cereal I kept in the house, but if one couldn't eat Reese's Puffs, what was the point of living?

Melody retrieved the cereal and a bowl and went out to the table. I followed with the milk.

"I think I'd be adulting wrong if I didn't at least insist you have milk on your cereal." I brushed a hand over her head and poured the milk into her bowl. "Something nutritious." I winked.

I could practically hear my sister's voice in my head telling me cows' milk was unhealthy. She'd drank oat milk for a long time. But considering the amount of other *unhealthy* habits she'd had, I'd always ignored her nutritional advice.

I watched Melody eat, her crunching the only sound punctuating the silence. Unable to stand here and do nothing, I grabbed the box and dug some of the cereal out.

"What should we do today?" I asked.

Melody didn't respond, but I hadn't expected her to. I'd started wondering if I'd be able to reach her at all. I finally got her on a waitlist for a therapist, but it would be a while. Apparently, kids were messed up right now, and the therapists were all booked.

A bark had us both looking toward the back door. Melody pointed that way.

“Go ahead.” I laughed. Luke had become her best friend, the only being who could bring out the kid in her. I’d never keep them apart.

I followed her out and sat on the edge of the new deck Waylen had built. Searching for him, I didn’t see him in his yard. But then, I heard his voice from the house on the other side. Followed by... laughter?

Jerking my head around, I caught sight of Waylen standing with Mrs. Walsh near her rose beds. She was smiling as they chatted and laughed. Smiling! Damn woman never smiled at me.

Ugh, I really hated him.

A sudden cry came from where Mel had been playing with Luke. When I found her again, she was on the ground, her little body wracked with tears. I jumped to my feet, prepared to rush toward her and take all her pain away. But someone beat me to it.

Luke loped her way, stopping at her side. He sat down and lifted a paw to her leg, his eyes meeting hers. I couldn’t stop staring as her sobs quieted, and she sat up, leaning forward to hug him, burying her face in his fur.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?”

I hadn’t heard Waylen approaching, and his voice startled me. “Shit, announce yourself next time.”

I still didn’t take my eyes from Melody and Luke. She seemed okay now, unhurt, but I needed to be sure.

Waylen sat on the edge of the deck. “Did you ever read *His Dark Materials* growing up?”

My heart rate finally returned to normal, and I could breathe again. Mel was okay. Turning back to the deck, I sat beside Waylen. “I wasn’t much of a reader, but I’m sure Kinsey did.”

He bumped my shoulder. “The kids in those books had what they called daemons. Like familiars. Animals who were a piece of their soul.”

“You think Luke is a demon?”

He laughed. “Daemon. No, they’re fictional. But I do think they have a connection.”

I turned my head, placing my chin on his shoulder to look at him. “My fiancé is so weird.”

He winced.

And I laughed.

This was pure gold. “Getting cold feet, honey?” I asked.

To my surprise, his arm slid around me, pulling me against him. “No, I keep replaying it in my head.”

“Replaying what?”

“When you admitted you like me. You really like me.”

“Shut up.” I pinched him.

He pressed a kiss to my lips. “It’s okay, V. I won’t tell anyone you actually have a heart.”

“Thank you. I’d appreciate that.” Luke’s excited barking drew my attention back to him and Melody, and my smile faded. My shoulders fell.

And my entire body started to quake with unshed tears.

Tears I still didn’t let fall.

“Hey.” Waylen hugged me closer. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so nice to you.”

My head shook of its own accord. “It’s not that.” A fat teardrop rolled down my nose. “It’s... Do you think I’ll ever be able to reach her?” He didn’t ask whom I meant. “Even with therapy, what if I never get my Melody back? The one who loved nothing more than talking my ear off as we drove to nowhere in particular. The kid who begged me to take her with me wherever I went. I was her person, and she was mine, but now, each day I feel her slipping further away.”

I pulled away from him and turned so he couldn't see my tears. He shouldn't see me like this.

But he didn't let me go, latching on to my arm to keep me in place. "None of us can predict what's going to happen, but here's what I know. That kid loves you, Vera. Even if she can't say it right now, or ever, she knows you're the one person she never has to worry about abandoning her. She knows whether she talks or not, it won't change the way you feel about her."

"Does she really?" I hadn't said that to her, hadn't been able to. Unlike my mother, I couldn't tell people how I felt.

He nodded, one hand brushing through my hair. "Some words don't need to be spoken."

Like her trust. I heard everything he didn't say, the things I hadn't seen. Melody trusted me to keep her safe, and it was never something she needed to say out loud. I was a safe place for her to work through her grief silently.

"I hate that you're probably right." I sighed.

"No, you don't, but that's okay."

"I hate that you're turning out to be a way nicer person than me."

His fingers went to my chin, and he leaned in for a featherlight kiss, whispering against my lips. "I've always been a nicer person than you."

Shoving him, I laughed. "Not when you say things like that." I stood, and he caught me around the waist, pulling me onto his lap. "I hate that you make me face the things I feel." It was the most honest thing I'd said to him.

His lips brushed my neck right below my ear, but he didn't get a chance to respond before Luke went bonkers and ran to the side yard.

"There's the happily engaged couple." Eliana basically bounced into the yard while Kinsey bent to greet Luke.

Melody sprinted toward them and threw herself into Eliana's arms.

I quickly got out of Waylen's lap and straightened my clothes. It was only then that I realized I was still in my silk pajama bottoms and large T-shirt.

Apparently, Waylen brought out the awkwardly clothed side of me.

Eliana set Melody down and jumped up onto the deck to take a seat beside Waylen. "So, when's the wedding, and what color is my bridesmaid gown?"

Waylen deadpanned, "You have your choice of blush or bashful."

She blinked at him but said nothing.

He scrubbed a hand across his face. "My brothers were here yesterday morning to plead their cases for best man honors."

"Really?" Kinsey grinned. "That's so... ridiculous. It must have been Shea's idea."

"Hey." Eliana glared at her. "Sebastian is Mr. Let's Try Your Sex List himself. He can be ridiculous too."

"And who forced me to write that?" Kinsey put her hands on her hips, and they both turned to me.

My face heated. "There are little ears here." But Melody was already off running with Luke again.

Waylen looked way too intrigued. "Sex list? Vera, you never told me you have some kind of list."

"I don't." I glared at him. "Trust me, I don't need one. Unless you think there are things I could use practice with?"

He wisely mimed zipping his lips shut.

"Good choice."

Getting to his feet, Waylen clapped his hands together. "I think this is my cue to go find something else to do. Mrs. Walsh needs help fixing one of her trellises today."

I rolled my eyes. Why did he have to be so damn helpful? "Just please don't accidentally take a hit out on me."

He bit back a smile. “We’ll see.”

Once he was gone, I sat beside Eliana, and Kinsey joined us. “We want to steal Mel for the day,” Kinsey said.

“For what?” I wasn’t sure why my friends wanted her without me.

Eliana laughed. “Don’t worry, V. We won’t corrupt her. Not like Kinsey could.”

“Hey!” Kinsey protested. “Sex list, remember?” She pointed to herself.

We ignored her as Eliana explained, “It’s gorgeous out today. We were thinking of taking her down to Mote.”

“All the way to Sarasota?” I wasn’t so sure. Though, Mote Marine was an amazing aquarium and animal rescue. I’d never taken Melody there.

“It’s not that far.” Kinsey shrugged. “We’ll have her back by dinner. And you can spend time with your fiancé.”

“There it is.” Their true reason. “You know we aren’t engaged, right?”

“Duh.” Eliana poked me. “But you went on a date with him. That’s kind of big for you. Spending time with a romantic partner that wasn’t just about sex.”

I wouldn’t tell them about the storage closet at the arena. “It was just a hockey game.”

Eliana leaned her head on my shoulder. “Trust me. We know how these Denver boys charm us. If you went anywhere with him, it must mean you like him. More than that even. For so long, V, long before the accident, you didn’t let yourself get to that point. It’s like, once your marriage ended, you decided there was no reason to fall in love anymore.”

“There isn’t.” I cringed at my own words. Both of my friends were in love and happy.

Kinsey turned her body to face me. “There’s always a point. I’ve never been someone who thinks you need to have a partner to be happy. I still don’t. Being with someone does not

make you any more whole than you are on your own. Not everyone falls in love and not everyone needs to. But that doesn't mean you should run from it. It's wonderful, a kind of magic that can't be explained."

"Love isn't magic," I scoffed. "It's biology."

"No, that's lust. But when you find yourself thinking of someone when you wake, when you go to sleep, every moment. You don't only want their touch, the pleasure they can give your body. You want their mind, their words. The way they can bring a smile to your face with one look. That is—"

Eliana nodded in agreement. "Magic."

WAYLEN

When Kinsey, Eliana, and Vera started talking, I left to find Melody and Luke. It wouldn't be right for me to sit and listen to their conversation. Luke and Melody were much safer bets.

"Hi, Mel," I said, then took a seat where she was playing with Luke in the grass.

We were in Vera's yard. I was surprised Luke hadn't dragged Melody back over to mine so he could have a standoff with the koi. He used to love to run around the pond. Something changed this past week. His new favorite pastime was sitting at the small fence and staring them down. One in particular—I named him Ted—liked to stare back at Luke. As if he was daring him to break through the fence and come after him. I didn't know koi could do such a thing, and maybe they couldn't, but I swore Ted could.

"Do you know anything about koi?" I asked Melody. I'd started talking to her even though she didn't respond.

She pointed toward my backyard where the gate was open.

"Right, the koi. Ted doesn't like Luke."

Melody stared at me, waiting for me to say more.

"He's the big white one with the orange spot on his back."

She nodded, following along. I told her about the standoffs Luke and Ted had until she was laughing. I loved hearing it. Melody might not say anything, but she was very expressive in other ways. It was in the way her eyes would shift. In the way her mouth would open or close, tip up or down. It was in the

way she laughed or cried. She said more with those gestures than some did with words.

Melody suddenly stood and held her hand out for me. That was new. She hadn't done that before. I stood as well and clasped her small hand. With a quick tug, she pulled me over to my yard, right to the pond. Luke trailed after us, his tail wagging, tongue lolling out.

Pointing at the pond, I looked, and sure enough, there was Ted. He swam around before spotting Luke, then stayed in one spot, eyeing him. Man, I swore that koi was smarter than all the rest of them.

It wasn't long after that Vera found us and came over to get Melody, saying Kinsey and Eliana wanted to hang out with her for a bit. I stayed where I was, content to watch Luke lie on his side and stare at Ted.

“What's he doing?” Vera asked when she came back.

“Making a friend or an enemy. I'm not really sure yet.”

“He's a strange dog.”

“That he is.” I peered up at her from where I sat on the grass. “Everyone's gone?”

She nodded. “It's just you, me, and Luke.”

I stood and held my hand out for Vera's. The moment her palm touched mine, a current raced through me. This electrically charged moment that didn't have any electricity at all but sure as hell seemed like it. There was something special about Vera. Something I never wanted to let go of.

“Let's go inside,” I said. While I liked being out here, I wanted to get comfortable with her. Melody was elsewhere, which meant I got Vera to myself.

It felt a bit weird to go inside and lock up in the middle of the day. I even got Luke settled in his crate so he wouldn't bother us. I wanted this time alone with Vera. No interruptions. No other neighbors. No family, no friends. Just us. But in a different way than we'd been in the past. There was no hate

simmering through my veins. No need to fight with her. No, I wanted to love her the way she deserved.

We didn't stop until we were in my bedroom with the lights off, only the sun softly coming in through the windows. Vera didn't talk, seeming to know where this was headed. For once there was no urgency to strip our clothes off to sate our need as fast as possible.

She let me raise her shirt from her body. I trailed my fingers softly over her shoulder, down her arm until I reached her fingers. I lifted her hand to press a kiss to her palm before I skimmed my lips over her silky skin. I didn't stop touching her, kissing her. Where my fingers went, my lips and tongue followed.

I tongued her nipple once her bra was carefully removed. I caressed over her stomach, loving every inch of her bare skin I came in contact with. She tasted as good as ever. My thumbs hooked in the pajama bottoms she still had on, dragging them and her panties down.

Dropping to my knees, I pressed my nose to the juncture of her thighs and gave a slow lick. Vera had loved this the last time. We had been in a hurry then. We had all the time in the world now.

Her fingers rubbed along the short hair on my head. I had nothing for her to hold on to, but I enjoyed the way her nails dragged across my scalp, sending chills all over my body. I licked her, kissed her, sucked gently. Every breathy moan of hers encouraged me on. I wanted her to come apart, though not yet.

Standing, I pulled my shirt off, then bent to take my shorts and boxer briefs off as well. My heart raced. This was more than sex. This was *everything*.

I stepped to Vera until she backed up and sat on the bed. She moved to the center while I crawled over her, settling my waist down on hers, trapping my dick between us. I'd get to where I wanted to be, but first, I had something to tell her.

“You're amazing, do you know that?”

She closed her eyes and shook her head.

“Look at me.”

Her eyes fluttered open, latching on to mine.

“Everything about you makes me crave you more. It’s like you were made for me. You’re so strong, so loving. You give Mel everything you have. She knows how much you care.”

“Waylen,” she whispered as her eyes filled with tears.

“You should be told more often how perfect you are. I wouldn’t change a thing about you, Vera Hart. I... I didn’t think I could feel this way. This big emotion inside of me. I worried I’d never find someone who would make me want more. Yet, here you are. You proved I deserve this and that you do too. We deserve each other. We were made to be together. I love you with every part of me.”

She blinked, the tears slowly spilling over. “Why do you do this to me?”

I leaned down and kissed her softly. “Why do I love you? I couldn’t stop if I tried.”

“You always make me feel so much.”

“Tell me. I want to hear the words.”

“Way, you know I care about you.”

I nosed up her neck. “More.”

“I love the way you touch me.”

“Keep going.” My lips trailed over her chin to her other side where I teasingly bit her earlobe.

“I love the way you turn me on.”

“You’re getting there.” I knew she wanted to tell me she felt the same. It was in the way she looked at me when I said those words, but in typical Vera fashion, nothing was easy. I didn’t want it to be either.

“I love you, Waylen Denver.”

I stopped my slow tour of her body and lifted so I could peer into her eyes. “Say it again.”

“I love you,” she whispered.

Everything in me changed, like a switch flipped. I went from gentle caresses to pressing my lips to hers in a punishing kiss. To demanding she open to let my tongue in to taste her.

She quickly got with the change of things. Nails dug into the flesh on my back while she rubbed herself against my dick. I loved every side of her. Not one more than another. But there was something special when she let go. When she became uninhibited and did nothing but let me drive her out of her mind with lust.

Things got hot fast, which had me reaching into my nightstand for a condom.

Vera gripped my wrist. “I’m on the pill, remember?”

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

“I haven’t been with anyone in a while. I get tested regularly. I can still use a condom if—”

Her finger pressed to my lips. “I already said I trust you. That means in everything, including this. We don’t need the condom.”

I nodded, placing it back on the nightstand. The last time we had done this, it hadn’t been intentional. There hadn’t been words of love between us.

Her legs wrapped around my waist as I lined up and slowly slid home. Every inch she took of me had my body growing tauter. This endless feeling of pleasure. She really was made for me.

Moaning, I finally settled between her legs, buried as deep as I could go. Fuck, there was nothing better than this. She loved me even before she realized she was doing it. There was no other way to describe it. Because even when we were hate-fucking, there was a spark between us. This sense of rightness. I wouldn’t have admitted it back then, hell no. Now, I saw it for what it was.

Right.

Perfect.

Kismet.

Vera and I were meant to be together. I'd never been with a woman this way. Vera took my past experiences and blew them out of the water. No one compared to her. And I knew no one ever would. This woman was mine, and I wanted to stay like this forever.

I started a slow glide in and out of her. Every push of my hips brought me closer to the edge. My orgasm raced up on me fast. I worried I couldn't hang on for as long as she needed me to. Then, I hit that magic spot inside that had her arching her back, bowing off the bed. She brought her hands up to toy with her nipples. It was porn worthy. Hot as sin. I etched the moment into my mind, the whole time I'd spent with her.

"Right there," she panted out. "Don't stop."

I kept a punishing pace, hoping to hold on. It was only seconds later when she cried out as her body shook with release. I pushed in harder, rougher, chasing my climax, driving hers on.

Vera's name left my lips on a moan as wave after wave of ecstasy crashed over me and I succumbed to the sensations flooding my system.

I couldn't stop moving within her until there was nothing left in me, and even then, I kept going, not wanting this to end. Eventually, I had to stop before my arms gave out. I didn't want to put my full weight on her though.

Wrapping an arm around her, I stayed between her legs as I lowered down and rolled us to our sides. We traded lazy, lust-drunk kisses. I told her I loved her again. She repeated the words back, making my heart soar.

This woman, this amazing woman, loved me. Waylen Denver. A man who hoped he could find someone to date. One who'd accept me.

Who knew that woman would be my fiery next-door neighbor?

But she was more than that.

She was smart and successful. She was a great role model for Melody. Vera was so much more than she gave herself credit for. And I was the one who got to call her mine. That was who she was. Who she had been.

Vera Hart, the woman I loved with my entire being.

Yeah, I was sappy as hell and didn't give a solitary fuck about it.

VERA

I wasn't quite sure when the line blurred from hate to love, hadn't seen it coming. But maybe that was the point. The line was barely there. Passion and emotion existed in both. When one felt strongly enough to hate something, that meant they could feel strongly enough to love it too.

Or someone.

I sighed, enjoying the feel of Waylen curled around me. He was so different from anyone else I'd been with. Even my ex-husband. There'd been a time when sex was a chore. He would get off, roll over, and nod off.

Never turning me on.

God, Vera, enough with that.

That ass was gone.

I reached around Waylen, running a palm over his firm butt. And this ass was mine. I squeezed, and he groaned in his sleep, rocking toward me.

"Not so fast, needy boy." I lifted my head as his eyes slid open. "I need to get back to my place."

"No." His arms looped around my waist, locking me in place. "Request denied."

"Tell that to the kid who will get home soon to an empty house." I wiggled out of his hold and sat up, searching the ground for my clothes.

Waylen traced the ridges of my spine with his finger, and a shiver raced through me. I shook him off as I bent to reach for my pants and shimmied them on. Then, I froze and sighed, realizing something I'd forgotten most of the day.

“What’s wrong?” He sat up behind me.

“I don’t have time for you to feed me.” At home, I had mostly cereal and cereal. Plus, other random ingredients that went in dishes I’d told myself I was going to attempt to cook.

“I can whip something up fast.”

I shook my head as I caught sight of his alarm clock. Melody really would be back any minute. I finished getting dressed and stood, turning to face him. “I probably have a box of mac and cheese. I’ll go to the grocery store after work tomorrow.” Leaning down, I stopped with my lips inches from his. “You don’t have to take care of us, you know. That’s not what this is. I can handle my own life, as well as Melody’s.” And I’d learn to cook, if it was the last thing I did.

He closed the distance between us, kissing me in that slow way of his that left me dizzy. “I know.”

Giving him one final smile, I slipped from the bedroom and made my way to the backyard. The sun had just begun to set when I stepped through my glass slider. Just in time. The front door burst open.

“Hey, V!” Eliana yelled. “Melody is home safe, as promised. I have to jet to meet Shea. See you at work.”

And then, she was gone. I assumed Kinsey was in the car, but I only had eyes for the little girl in the Mote Marine T-shirt with a stuffed manatee in her arms.

“Hey, Mel.” I stepped toward her. “What do you have there?”

She held up the manatee.

I took it. “Does it have a name?”

She shook her head.

“Well, that won’t do. How about...” I tapped my chin. “Bubba.” He looked like a Bubba, all dopey eyed and blubbery.

Taking him back from me, she nodded and walked into the kitchen, immediately going for the cereal cabinet to get something to eat. I watched her, realizing how much I missed her when she wasn’t here. I’d always loved having Melody around. She grew up getting dropped on me whenever her mom needed a break.

Which was a lot.

But it was different now. Through our grief, our fear, it was like we’d bonded. We were in this new life together. Maybe we were meant to be together. That thought felt like a betrayal of my sister, but so did many other things.

How could I have ever questioned the will? Ever thought this wasn’t supposed to be my role in life?

Melody sat at the dining room table, and I walked up behind her to give her a hug around the chair. “Missed you today, kiddo. Did you have a good time?”

She nodded, taking a bite of cereal. But there was no smile, no indication that she’d just spent the day watching amazing animals do magnificent things. They trained sea turtles there, and still, there was no light in her eyes.

I sat beside her in silence for what felt like an eternity. There were no sounds save the steady hum of the refrigerator, the soft drip of the leaking faucet.

“Mel, what’s wrong?” I wasn’t sure how I could sense it when she hadn’t said anything, but I knew she wasn’t okay.

She set her spoon in the bowl, and her shoulders rose with a deep breath. “Vera?”

The sound of her voice shocked me into inaction. I wanted to scream, to dance, to hug her. I did none of those things. “Yeah, honey?” I tried to keep my voice calm.

She looked up at me with wide, glistening eyes. “Are you going to leave me too?”

My heart. It broke on those words, on the fact that she said them at all. I wanted to pull her into my arms and make the rest of this harsh world disappear. I wanted to erase all of her grief.

Turning in my chair, I locked my eyes on hers, wanting her to know the truth in every word I spoke. “I’m here, Mel. For good.” We could never imagine what was going to happen. Life was fickle. But for now, I could give her this. “You and me, we’re a packaged deal.” I reached for her, pushing her hair behind her ear. “I will never choose to leave you.”

From the moment I first laid eyes on this sweet baby, I’d known she was going to change my life. I just hadn’t expected it to be in this way. For years, she’d been my favorite person, the one who made me happiest. I only wanted to do the same for her.

“Come here.” I held my arms open, and she scooted from her chair into my lap. I rested my chin on her head. “You, me, Grandma, we’re family. And family sticks together.”

Melody sniffed, lifting her face. “But...” She paused.

“What is it?”

A tear rolled down her cheek. “It’s not only us, is it?”

Then, it hit me. What she meant. I couldn’t help it. I laughed. “Luke.”

Her tiny head bobbed as she nodded, a wry smile twisting her lips. “He’s a good dog. So good. And he loves me. Can he be family too?”

“Honey, Luke isn’t our...” I sighed. “Yes, he’s your family too.” There was no way I could tell her otherwise. And his owner... “I love that puppy too.” I wasn’t sure which puppy I meant. The cute little guy or the sexy big guy.

“Even if he pees on the carpet?” She looked up at me. “Puppies do that. You’ll still love him then, right?”

A laugh bubbled out of me as I’d still been thinking of Waylen, not Luke. “Peeing on the carpet is not a dealbreaker.” If it was the actual dog.

“What if he gets into Mrs. Walsh’s roses again? He really likes them, but I told him she’ll have her people dognap him if he does it again.”

“Thank you!” I wasn’t the only one getting the mafia vibe from that woman.

“For what?” Melody’s voice was so innocent, so pure. I’d have said anything just to hear her keep talking after all these weeks.

“For being my favorite kid.” Pressing a kiss to the top of her head, I smiled. “I love you, Mel.”

“Love you too, Aunt V.” She jumped out of my lap. “Can I go see if Luke will play before bed?”

“Go for it.”

I followed her to the back deck and watched as she ran to the gate and into Waylen’s yard. Waylen was nowhere in sight, but I heard noise coming from his shop. Melody disappeared inside, and I listened to the sound of their voices on the wind, wondering how it could leave such warmth inside of me.

Was this what it felt like to love someone? Two someones so completely that I wasn’t sure how I’d ever gotten by without seeing them every day? Or was I losing my mind?

Maybe a little of both.

Love was insanity. It went against every natural instinct to protect ourselves from pain, to keep our hearts safe. But in order to find our hearts, we had to lose our minds.

I never thought I’d want to do that again. Sometimes, I’d wondered if I still had a heart at all or if there was just a shriveled-up piece of flesh keeping the blood pumping through my body. I didn’t have to wonder anymore.

Waylen and Melody came out of the shop with Luke dancing around them. They both waved my way, but I didn’t go to them, couldn’t stop watching them.

I liked to believe my sister was watching us, that some part of her managed to have an ounce of happiness that her

daughter and I were healing from the trauma she'd inflicted on us, both before and after her death.

I'd go through it again, I realized.

I once thought Michael was the love of my life, but we'd only been placeholders for the people we were supposed to love. He found my replacement quickly in my sister. For me, it took some more time. I had to find myself before I could find Waylen.

There was still a lot of work to do, but I was ready. If it meant I got to spend my days arguing with my neighbor and my nights in his arms, I'd teach myself to trust. In him. In us.

In this life.

WAYLEN

For once, I wasn't irritated by dressing nice to go to Sunday dinner at my parents' house. Okay, so my pants were riding up in the crotch, driving me nuts, and I hated the nice shoes, but tonight would be different. Tonight, I was going to invite Vera and Melody to meet my parents as my girlfriend and niece of my girlfriend. No longer just a friend of Kinsey and Eliana. Vera was mine, and I wanted the world to know. As soon as my mom found out, she'd tell every one of her friends that her last single son was finally taken.

I patted my pockets to make sure I had my keys, wallet, and phone, then I grabbed Luke's leash. He'd been getting better about being on it, but I had to catch him first. He wasn't as fast as he was when I first brought him home. Plus, he'd gotten a bit bigger and didn't easily slide under the bed downstairs. He still managed to wiggle his little butt under there though. I had to reach down while on my hands and knees to drag him out.

"Don't you want to go for a ride? You like my truck. Yet, you still run away every time I try to put a leash on you." I'd done just about everything to get him to come to me when I held the leash out. For all his love of food, this was the one thing he wouldn't do when I wanted to give him a treat.

Luke wiggled in my hands, trying to get away. When I finally got him out and held him in front of my face, he started licking me.

"Thanks. I needed a bath from your tongue before seeing my parents."

I slipped the collar over his head. It already had the leash attached to it. I'd tried to leave the collar on him, but he hated it. Would scratch and scratch at it until it made me crazy and I took it off him.

"Come on. We're going to go surprise Mel and Vera. Take them to dinner with us."

I shut off the lights, leaving only the living room one on, and locked the door behind us. Now that we were outside, Luke trotted next to me like the leash didn't bother him one bit. Of course.

Lifting my hand, I knocked on Vera's door while Luke whimpered beside me. He knew who was on the other side. She was his best friend.

Vera opened the door. The long T-shirt she wore went halfway to her knees. Black leggings hugged her slender thighs tightly beneath. I wondered if there would ever be a time when I didn't drink this woman in when I saw her.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Dinner. And by the smell of whatever it is you're burning, you definitely need to come with me."

"You couldn't have given me a heads-up? I've been in here trying not to stick food to the bottom of the pan."

"Get dressed," I told her and leaned down to kiss her.

"Wait a second." She pulled back quickly, waving her hand up and down. "I know what this is. Fancy Sunday dinner at the Denvers. I'm not going to that. You know I hate dressing up. I'm comfortable like this."

"Mom made a roast, thick, buttery rolls, and probably a bunch of vegetables you won't want to like but will once you taste them."

"That does sound better than burnt stuff," she muttered. "Mel, what do you think?"

I peered around Vera to see Mel in the living room. Luke strained on the leash to try and get to her. We were teaching him manners. It was the reason Melody hadn't moved yet. He

couldn't visit with her until he sat nicely and I gave him the command that he could move forward. It was a slow process.

"I don't want burnt stuff," she replied. I was still getting used to her speaking. I loved hearing her voice. She didn't talk all the time, but it was getting better.

"Are your brothers going to be there?" Vera asked. "They don't usually bring my friends when they go, so I'd be the only woman outside of your mom."

"Can't handle the Denver men?"

She scoffed. "Please. I could handle all of you in my sleep."

I stepped forward to wrap my arm around her waist and pull her flush to me so I could lean down and whisper in her ear, "I better be the only man you're handling."

"I didn't peg you for the jealous type."

"There's still plenty for you to learn about me. I don't share," I growled low.

Vera shivered in my arm. "Fine," she said with a breathy rasp to her voice. "Let me go get dressed. But I'm not getting super fancy. I'll put on nice jeans and a decent shirt. That's as good as you're getting."

"Mom's going to love seeing you. She won't care what you wear." Vera opened her mouth to no doubt say she could just wear what she had on then, but I cut her off. "Within reason."

"Fine. You suck."

She turned on her heel and went into the living room. "C'mon, Mel. We have to look presentable if we want to eat without choking the food down."

"Can I pet Luke first?" she asked me.

"Only if you make him sit before you pet him."

Melody crouched down in front of him and used the hand command we'd taught him for sit. For some reason that was easier than putting the damn collar and leash on him. Hand

commands. Who knew? Well, apparently Shea did and taught it to me, but that was beside the point.

“Is Luke coming with us?” Melody asked as she ran her fingers over the top of his head.

“Yup. It’s his first visit to see his grandparents.” And they didn’t know he was coming, or Vera and Melody. It was going to be a surprise. I had to get back at them for making me dress like this any way I could. It was bad enough Mom guilted me into coming over because I hadn’t been since the last dinner when both my brothers were there.

Fifteen minutes later, we were in my truck, pulling out of the driveway. Vera didn’t need to put on makeup or make sure her hair was perfect. She knew she didn’t have to impress my parents. They’d known her for years and loved her just as long.

My parents knew about Vera and me being in a relationship. Mom had called me the day after the game once my brothers left. She asked me if Vera had any food allergies because the caterer wanted to know. I told her she didn’t and that I appreciated her help with the arrangements. My mom thought she could call me and be serious about the joke of the night before. Well, I had enough practice being a Denver to know how to dish it back to her. She yelled at me and told me to stop ruining her fun. She also dragged out of me how serious Vera and I were about each other. I could only speak for myself. Luckily, it was enough to satisfy my mom.

The ride to my parents’ was quiet. Melody sat in the back with Luke beside her. He had a harness that attached to the seat to keep him safe while we traveled. Another thing he easily took to. The way that dog picked and chose what he wanted to do made no sense.

I’d been giving some thought about what to do with Luke. Yes, he was a pet, but with the Shepherd in him, he was high energy. He needed a job. The more time he spent with Melody, the more I thought my idea could work.

“What do you think about Luke being an emotional support animal?” I asked Vera.

“For whom?”

“Mel. He soothes her when she’s upset. He always knows when to go to her. It’s this instinct in him that we didn’t teach him.”

“It’s an interesting idea. That would mean you’d have to stick around a while though. I wouldn’t want her to get even more attached to Luke only for you to pull away.”

“Vera...”

“I’m serious.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“You say that now.”

“I’m not him,” I reminded her. I didn’t need to say his name for her to know whom I was talking about. “I’m not leaving, especially after all the effort I put into finally getting you. I wouldn’t want to waste the time I’ve committed.”

She shoved my arm. “You’re a jerk.”

“A jerk you love.”

“Yeah, yeah. I see your point. I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I ask.”

We finally pulled up to the curb outside my parents’ house. Mel unhooked Luke and handed him to me so I could get him out. He still had a tendency to want to leap from my truck. It was high up, and I didn’t want him to get hurt. Melody had tried to do it herself before, but he was way too squirmy in her arms and wiggled his way out. We were working on his exit method. See, this he wouldn’t obey, but the seat harness he was fine with. Made no sense whatsoever.

My dad stood in the doorway as we approached. His eyes danced over all of us before settling on Luke. “Your mother’s going to have a fit.”

“That’s why I brought Vera and Mel. They’re my buffers to get Luke in the door.”

“Jerk,” Vera muttered, elbowing me to the side. “Hi, Mr. Denver. Thank you for having us for dinner.”

“No need with formalities. We’re happy—”

“Is Waylen here?” I heard my mom call out.

“He is.”

Dad clapped me on the shoulder. “Godspeed.” He moved out of the way so my mom could greet us.

“Vera!” she exclaimed and pulled Vera into her arms. “I’m so glad you came, and you brought Melody.” Mom released her to say hello to Melody too. But her eagle-eyed gaze didn’t skip over Luke. “You owe me two dinners this week for allowing him into my house.”

“I just bathed him. Smell him. He’s as fresh as a rose.”

“He’s a dog. In my house. Hair will be everywhere.”

I bent down and handed Luke to Melody, who peered up at my mom with those sweet kid eyes that no one could resist.

Mom huffed. “You play dirty, Way.”

“Whatever works.” I chuckled.

Melody happily carried Luke inside, Vera and I following her.

Dinner was already on the table. We took our seats while Luke went exploring. At least he had stopped peeing on the floor. Well, for the most part. Accidents couldn’t be completely ruled out. I just hoped he behaved, or I’d never hear the end of it. I also didn’t want to come to family dinners every week for the next year.

I sat at the table, passing the dishes around. It was very familiar, but at the same time, it wasn’t, since Vera and Melody were here. Mom didn’t bother giving me the third degree, instead talking to Vera and her niece. It was a nice change of pace. I could be quiet and soak this in.

Sitting here with my family, with the woman I loved, I felt good, happy. They were my future. No, we hadn’t made any plans. I hadn’t bought a ring or proposed, though I could see

us heading in that direction. I found I liked the way that road traveled. So much that I could picture our future together. All of us. Because there was no Vera without Melody. I wanted them both in my life for a long, long time.

My resolution list had started off as a pipe dream. Things I thought I could put in motion before some of the items became too difficult. Then... they got easy. I got way more out of the list than I bargained for. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

VERA

SIX MONTHS LATER

This was a disaster.

I strode through the backyard, weaving between tables and trying to avoid everyone who was vying for my attention. The fence between the two backyards had been removed, creating a much larger space for the event. My event. We most likely wouldn't put it back considering the newly engaged couple I was in the process of selling my house to.

To move in with my soon-to-be husband.

Shit.

My dress trailed behind me as I took in the vases full of roses on each table—courtesy of Mrs. Walsh. Waylen was apparently the mafia whisperer. She adored him. Which is why she sat at one of the tables, waiting for the ceremony to begin.

We'd opted to hold our wedding in our combined backyards, the place where it all began. The ceremony would happen in five minutes near Waylen's porch, with the guests sitting around the tables. It was unconventional, but dammit, so were we.

Which was why my soon-to-be husband had disappeared.

"Vera!" Melody ran toward me, a grin spreading her lips. "When are we getting married?"

I laughed at the insinuation. She knew she wasn't marrying anyone, but Waylen and I had been sure to let her know we were becoming a family. That he loved her just as much as I did.

“Just a few minutes, Mel.” I searched for Waylen’s mother, finding her already rushing toward us to steer Melody away. His parents loved her from the very first dinner at their house. She was now a granddaughter to them, and they got along famously with my mother. It was more than I could have imagined.

I’d known Waylen’s family, but I hadn’t *known* them, their hearts. His parents were almost the best part of this entire thing.

Almost.

But if my fiancé didn’t show up soon, he’d be knocked down below them.

Sebastian and Kinsey were just coming out of my house when I found them. Well, almost their house. I still couldn’t believe they were going to be our neighbors. If only Eliana weren’t leaving us.

She was taking a leave of absence from *Only Friends* to travel with Shea while Waylen kept an eye on the shelter and the manager Shea had recently hired. Melody was ecstatic. She thought it meant she’d get to spend every day there.

I looked back to where she was now sitting with Luke, wondering how hurt she’d be if it all fell apart.

“Have you seen Waylen?” I asked Sebastian as I approached.

He shook his head. “I thought he wasn’t supposed to see you before the wedding.”

“That’s antiquated bullshit. I’m more worried about the fact that he isn’t here.”

“What?” Eliana charged up behind me. “If that jackass stands you up on your wedding day, I’m going to find him and ___”

“We’ll go look for him.” Shea pulled her away, muttering something about how she couldn’t murder his brother.

Then, I heard it.

The sander.

“Oh, Ana won’t need to get her hands on him if I do it first.” I turned on my heel. My feet were bare. My hair was only half done. At least I’d put my dress on since the ceremony started soon. When I reached Waylen’s shop, I stood in the doorway, huffing and puffing like a dragon preparing to send fire raining down over the village.

“Waylen Denver.” I marched forward, hands on my hips.

He turned the sander off and looked up, his eyes wide as he realized he’d been caught.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? We have our family and friends out there waiting for us, probably thinking you were leaving me at the altar. And you’re here? Working?”

One corner of his mouth lifted. “You know I’d never leave you at the altar.”

“Do I? Do I know that?” I did on some level, but the thought had still come to me. Past heartbreaks and traumas never truly faded from our psyche.

He approached me. There was something in his hand, but I couldn’t tell what. “Are you mad at me, Vera?” The way his voice deepened on my name made me want to skip the ceremony altogether and head straight to the honeymoon in St. Croix.

His lips brushed mine. “Admit you’re angry.”

“I’m not.” I lifted my chin stubbornly.

He pressed a kiss just below my ear, sending a shiver across my skin. “Show me how mad you are,” he whispered.

I couldn’t handle it anymore. I kissed him, stealing his next words, biting his lip in punishment. He didn’t touch me with his hands, didn’t mess up my dress, but the kiss was enough to leave me panting. God, I loved this man so much.

Whistling and cheering drifted in from the doorway, and I came to my senses. We had a yard full of people waiting on us.

“I take it I don’t need to kill him?” Eliana said.

“Honey.” Shea scrubbed a hand across his face. “We talked about this.”

“You two finished sucking face and ready to be tied to each other for the rest of your lives?” Sebastian asked. “Never to be with another. Fighting day in and day out until you grow old and wrinkled.”

I met Waylen’s eyes, and we both smiled. “Hell, yeah,” I said.

“Sounds perfect,” he agreed. He lifted a hand, and in it, there was a piece of curved wood. “The pergola broke. I was fixing this so I could glue a piece back on.” He winced in apology. “I didn’t think.”

“You wanted it to be perfect.” It was so very Waylen; I couldn’t help laughing. “Well, fiancé, go fix your wood thingy, and I’ll meet you at the end of the aisle.”

His brothers joined him, walking across the lawn. Kinsey and Eliana both looped their arms through mine.

“Who’d have thought Vera would be the first of us to get married?” Kinsey asked.

Eliana laughed. “I was sure it would have been you. You’re a sucker for normal.”

“Hey,” I protested. “Normal can be nice.”

The three of us headed for the back door where my mom was waiting to walk me down the aisle. Melody stood near her in a yellow dress. She was our flower girl. Her dress matched Eliana’s and Kinsey’s, the three of them looking beautiful on this gorgeous and warm Florida day.

As we all lined up, Eliana pulled both me and Kinsey into a hug, not letting go. I almost felt like we were huddling before a football game. “Ever heard the story of the three best friends who started an app for women to find what they had?”

I laughed. “I think I know that one. They realized the connections women were really missing was with each other.” *Only Friends* had been a way to fight against the idea that a

woman only needed a man to be happy, that she needed a man at all. Friendships were important relationships as well.

“Weren’t they all single?” Kinsey said.

I nodded. “One by one, they fell in love.”

“With brothers.” Eliana’s shoulders shook with laughter. “What are the odds?”

“I’m not surprised.” I smiled. “These women... They were very different but alike in the ways that mattered. And they loved each other. It made sense for them to fall for men who respected them, respected their friendship.”

“Whatever happened to the women?” Kinsey asked.

I looked behind me to where an aisle wound through the tables to reach the man at the end, the one bent over fixing the pergola despite the fact that the music was starting. “They lived happily ever after.”

Thanks for reading My Enemy’s Resolution List! Want more by Lynn Dare? Check out the Perfect Man. Keep reading for a preview.

[Get it here!](#)

THE PERFECT MAN

A hot date? Try Five.

Every time a perfect man shows up at my door, I swoon the proper amount and do my best not to stare at his chiseled features and firm... jaw. Yes, definitely his jaw.

But I, Ellie Amore, have a problem. It's big, gigantic, and not in the good way.

None of these men are real. And that version of me? More fake than an author calling herself classy while drinking boxed wine in her yoga pants.

Me, that author is me.

I dream of hot men. Perfect men. Fictional men. These men go into my books, and it's all I need for my messy cat-lady-living-above-a-bookstore life. Really.

I don't need my brother's best friend checking up on me. The man who brings me tacos. The one who is decidedly not perfect—as his enemy cat would tell you—but somehow might just be perfect for me.

I'm not sure how it all started or when he decided I was more than a favor to his friend.

All I know is Cruz is not a man from my dreams. This time, it's different.

This time, he's real.

[Get it here!](#)

THE PERFECT MAN

CHAPTER ONE: ELLIE

This book was going to be the death of me.

I just knew it. “Come on, Ellie,” I groaned. “Think.”

It was like one of those projects that sounded good in the beginning, but by the middle it had me tearing my hair out.

Leaning back in my chair, I removed my glasses and rubbed my eyes. *The Perfect Man*. How could I have thought that was a good thing to take on? I was a romance writer, for Christ’s sake. A romance writer without a shred of romantic experience.

And now, my main character had to find what I had never been able to.

In other words, I was screwed.

And hungry.

And just so darn tired of staring at these same words. Words that weren’t getting me anywhere.

Settling my glasses back on my nose, I turned in my rolling desk chair to stare at my overflowing bookcase. What I really needed was to read a book that wasn’t by me.

Also, tacos.

I ran my fingers through my thick blonde hair, pulling it back and securing it with the pink hair tie I wore around my wrist. Bangs swept across my forehead, not really having any style to them other than “geek chic” just like my *Readers Rule the World* T-shirt. Slipping my feet into a worn pair of black

Converse sneakers, I draped my purse over one shoulder and grabbed my keys.

My stomach growled as if it knew I'd soon satisfy it with cheesy, gooey tacos and probably a new book or five.

I locked my door and ran down the outside staircase that took me right to the place of my dreams. Because I, Ellie Amore, lived above a bookstore that happened to have a taco stand inside instead of the usual coffee place. Lord, was this heaven?

Sometimes, I wondered if For the Love of Books was put on this earth just for me.

The bell above the front door jingled as I pushed my way in. "Ellie!" Lovern poked her head around the endcap she was working on. "Shouldn't you be writing more words for us, young lady?"

I stopped by the display that featured books by Cape Kismet's only author, showcasing the last two bestsellers. Yep, that was me, a woman who once knew how to write words. "I'm getting there."

Lovern ran a hand over her gray hair that was twisted into a tight bun. "Well, I'm not getting any younger."

"Ain't that the truth!" a voice came from nearby, where Cruz was writing his lunch special on a chalkboard before reaching behind him for a plate. More people walked through the door—it was always a busy place—but I only had eyes for the tacos Cruz plated with a tantalizing slowness, teasing me.

"Sorry, Lovern. Gotta run."

I'd had a few great loves in my life. Writing romance was number one, except on days like this. Bookstores were number two. And number three? Tacos.

Cruz grinned when I took the plate. "You're going to run me out of business if I don't start making you pay." There was a joke in his voice.

"That sounds like a you problem. Now, I need to eat these and peruse the romance section while Lovern has a heart

attack thinking I'm going to make a mess." I flashed Cruz a smile, meeting his hazel eyes. His dimple winked as he matched the smile. He'd been keeping me in tacos for years now, and he knew me more than I cared to admit.

I wasn't a loner, mostly, but I also didn't like people. I didn't like them in my apartment, looking at my belongings, or in the bookstore bumping into me while I was on a mission. People talked too much, they greeted perfect strangers—weird—and they expected me to fit in with them.

But Cruz... He wasn't nearly as annoying as the rest.

With a wave, I walked to the section I knew by heart. Romance. In all its forms, it boiled down to one thing: making the reader fall in love with the male main character. It was something I was good at... until now... until I decided he had to be the perfect man, not merely good.

Perfect.

There was a taunt to the word, an implication I'd fail.

I never failed.

The shell crunched when I bit into it, but holy heck, this taco right here was probably the cure for all heartbreak in the world.

It was certainly the right thing to get me out of my own head.

The romance section at For the Love of Books had always been a bit limited. Lovern loved her bodice rippers with half-naked Scotsmen on the covers. But when it came to contemporary stories, the kind that truly made readers feel something outside themselves, she, like many people, dismissed the entire genre. With the exception of my books, of course.

I read the spines as I took another bite, not looking where I was going. My taco was halfway to my mouth when I slammed into someone and it smashed against his navy blue shirt.

“I’m so sorry.” I tried to wipe the hot sauce and cheese with my hands before a strong grip pulled them away.

My eyes traveled up his chest to meet fathomless blue eyes under a mop of dark curls. He released me and stepped back.

“I really can’t believe I did that.” I chewed on my lip. “I mean, I really wanted to eat that taco. I didn’t plan on smearing it over someone’s shirt today. Though, I don’t know if anyone plans that. Maybe a psychopath. But why would a psychopath resort to smashing a taco on you? What did you do to the psychopath’s taco? It seems very strange you’d end up smashed with it when it’s so good it deserves to be eaten.”

His brow furrowed, and he didn’t say anything as he looked from me to the books on the closest shelf. Understanding dawned in his eyes. “You’re a romance reader.” His voice was deeper than I’d expected, but I didn’t miss the scorn in his words.

I glanced down at the remaining taco on my plate and took a bite while he waited for an answer. “Romance writer actually.”

His eyebrows shot toward his hairline, and his gaze slid from my messy hair to the probably stained T-shirt—why didn’t I check before I left?—and black yoga pants. “It fits.” He shrugged and walked by me without another word.

I turned on my heel and marched after him, setting my plate with the half-eaten final taco on a table near the front. “What do you mean it fits?”

He didn’t respond as his long strides took him toward the register.

“Hey.” I reached for his arm. “Stop walking and tell me what you meant.”

He turned so quickly I didn’t have time to back away, and my chest bumped his. “Romance isn’t a real genre.”

“Tell that to the millions of readers. It’s the fastest growing genre there is. Why do you hate love?”

“I don’t hate love.”

I crossed my arms, taking a step back. “Did someone break your heart? Is that why you’re so cynical?”

“I’m not cynical.” His lips pressed into a firm line.

“Romance is about more than love, guy I don’t know.”

He laughed at that. “Chase.”

“Well, Chase, the romance genre is about feeling something.”

He raised a brow.

“Not like that, you pervert. It’s about finding some bit of happiness in this world. People use romance as an escape when life gets rough. That’s what I provide to the world.”

“Maybe those readers need to live their lives instead of escaping into a world of clichés and men who can’t possibly exist in real life.”

This was the most I’d talked to a stranger in a long time, but I couldn’t seem to stop myself. “Sure, romance is full of clichés, full of ridiculous tropes and characters. But, Chase, that’s the beauty of it. We can enjoy those things without judgment from people like you.”

“Like me?”

“What’s your favorite genre?”

He lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I like thrillers.”

I laughed at that. “Okay, Mr. Clichés are Bad. Thrillers are the most formulaic of genres out there. And you know what? That’s great! It works because it’s what the readers want. Just like my books.”

“Chase!” Lovern called, walking toward us. “You’ve met my Ellie.”

“Not officially.”

“Well, Ellie lives upstairs, so we see her a lot.” She turned to me. “Chase is my nephew. He’s going to be here for a few months helping me out.”

“It was nice chatting.” That was what I was supposed to say, right? I folded my hands together and bowed, my face heating as soon as I realized what I’d done. This guy already probably thought I was nuts. Great, now, I’d have to forgo all these delicious tacos when I could no longer show my face here again.

When I finally dared to look at him, a grin stretched his lips.

“Not so fast, dear.” Lovern put an arm over my shoulders. “I got a new shipment of your books in the back. Do you have time to sign them all?”

My work in progress was waiting on my computer upstairs. Just the thought of going back to it made me want to avoid my apartment for a while. “You bet.”

“Good. Chase can help you. I’ll handle the customers for now.”

Chase started to protest, but his aunt cut him off with one look.

“Looks like you’re with me.” I sighed.

This was not how my writing break was supposed to go. Chase led me into the back room where Lovern kept new releases until she could get them on the floor. I found three boxes with my name on them. Great. This would take a while.

Chase handed me a permanent marker and brought over another box to serve as his seat. I lowered myself to the concrete floor and opened the first box.

“That’s your book?” He reached for one. “This dude is half-naked on the cover.”

I snatched it back from him. “You don’t understand anything about the publishing world.”

“No, but I understand women.” He smirked.

“I’m sure you do,” I muttered as I slid a book toward me to scribble my practiced signature.

Silence stretched between us, the only sound the scratching of the marker.

After a while, Chase rested his arms on his legs and bent down. “Tell me the truth, Ellie. Is this really what women want to read? About these fake men?”

I shrugged. “It’s a fantasy. When I read a romance, I fall in love with the characters. That’s how I know it’s good.” And a select few became almost like book boyfriends, guys I didn’t want to let go of, the ones I dreamed about.

“How do you fall in love with a man who isn’t real?”

“But they are.” I signed another book. “In our minds, while reading, these men are very real.”

Chase reached down and pulled more books out of the box to hand them to me. “That’s what doesn’t make sense to me.” He held up a book. “Look at this guy. He’s ripped beyond most guys’ wildest dreams. I’ll bet he’s supposed to be an expert in bed.” He flipped the book over. “Ha! He’s an athlete. Does he have a heart of gold?”

I snatched the book from him. “So what if he does?”

Chase laughed. “I’ll bet he’s mean to everyone except the one special girl he loves.”

“No, actually, he’s not.” He totally was.

“Everything in a romance book is an eye-roll worthy cliché.”

“Have you ever read one?”

“One what?” He pushed a hand through his curls, brushing them back.

“A romance novel.”

He snorted. “Not exactly.”

I finished the last stack of books and packed them neatly in the box. “Well, we’re going to change that.”

Maybe this was what I needed, to go back to the basics. If I could prove to Chase that romance was more than a cliché,

maybe I'd be able to finish *The Perfect Man*.

I expected Chase to protest. We didn't know each other, we weren't friends, but this wasn't a challenge either of us wanted to back down from.

We left the boxes of signed books and entered the store as a line formed for Cruz's famous tacos.

"I feel like I owe you a taco." Chase glanced down at his shirt.

"Nah, I don't pay for them."

Chase crossed his arms. "I work here now and Cruz has already said he won't even give me a discount."

"Well, some men appreciate the books I write." I bypassed the line and held out a fist. Cruz bumped it before going back to his taco making. "Hey, Cruz?"

"Yes, Elle Belle?"

"Make this guy pay double." I patted Chase's shirt.

Chase looked to Cruz. "You won't actually charge me double, will you?"

"The lady gets what the lady wants, and I don't think she likes you."

I walked back toward the entrance, letting their argument fade into the background. It would be a total cliché right now to break out in song, but I wouldn't give Chase the satisfaction.

I trudged up the stairs and unlocked my door. A bell jingled as Mr. Darcy ran toward me. I scooped the white cat into my arms and kicked off my shoes.

I had some writing to do because Chase gave me an idea.

I couldn't create the perfect man without first considering the imperfect one.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynn Dare is the pen name for authors Michelle MacQueen and Michelle Dare. One day, they were talking about tropes and cliches when an idea was born. Next thing they knew, they had a book planned out. The Perfect Man is their first series together where they combine humor and romance. They hope you fall in love with their characters and laugh at their antics along the way.

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