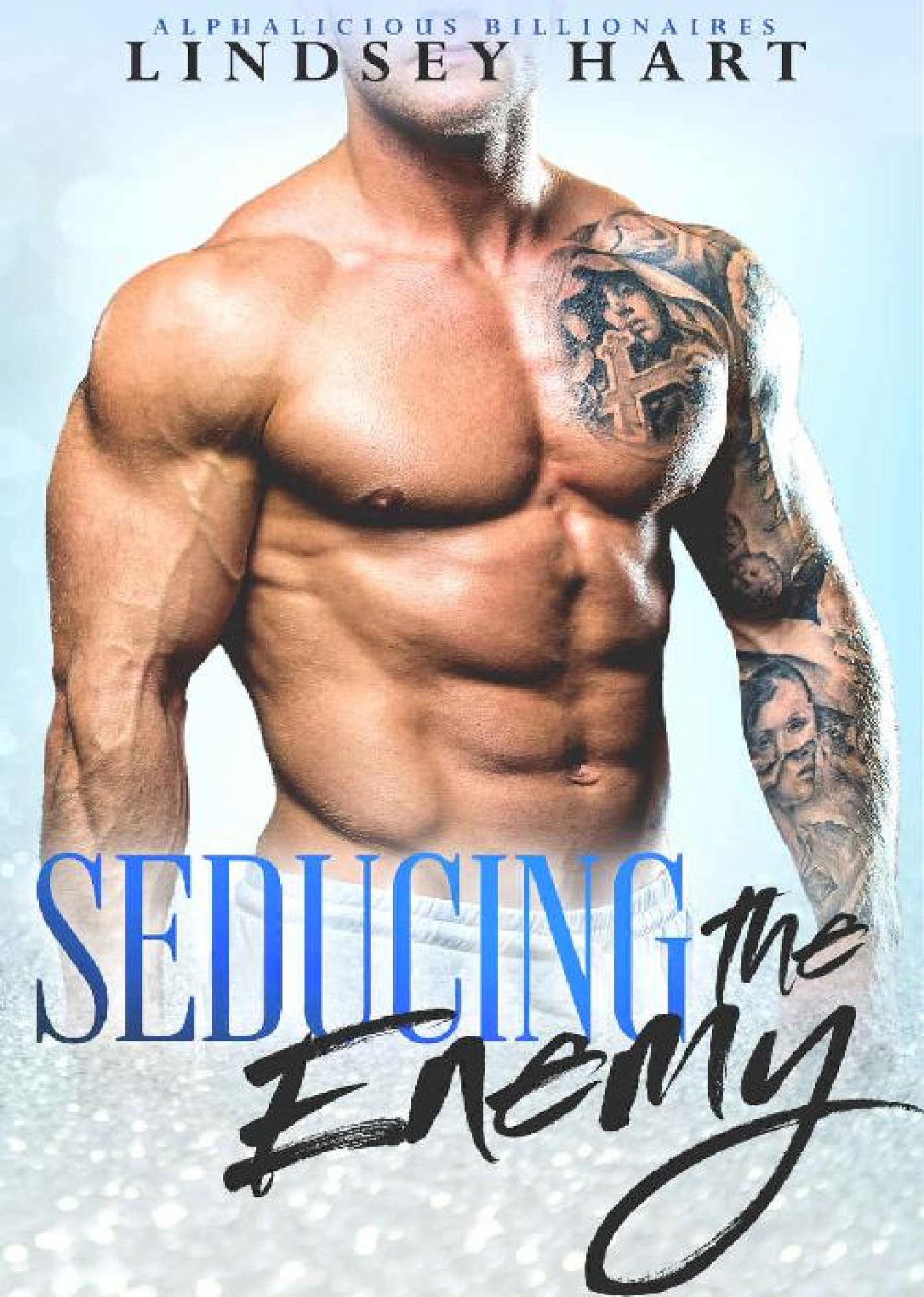


ALPHALICIOUS BILLIONAIRES
LINDSEY HART



SEDUCING *the*
Enemy

Seducing The Enemy

Alphalicious Billionaires



Lindsey Hart

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BOOK DESCRIPTION



**My best friend's smoking hot brother and black sheep of
the family is back.**

She's sure he came for revenge.

And his aim, a takeover on our company.

One we worked our ass off to expand.

So I was put on a mission.

Seduce her devil of a brother and find out all his plans.

Cuz us ladies need to show him we are not to be messed with.

I received only one warning though: **Don't EVER fall for the
Enemy.**

Even if he was my high school crush...

Even if he has somehow gotten hotter...

Even if he acquired a panties-soaking smoldering frown...

See how easy peasy this mission is going to be.

All I need to figure out now is:

1. How to seduce the guy without falling into his bed
(Maybe if it's my bed, it doesn't count).
2. Get him to talk (in-between kisses maybe...)
3. And reveal his evil plans (So me and my bestie could
ruin it).

Umm, did I mention that I can't even lie properly?

CHAPTER 1



Remi

“Dude, I need a solid.”

I’m not actually a dude, but Kimmy likes to throw that around like it’s December 31st of 1999, and the world is ready to spring into the new millennium. Y2K, baby. I’m already getting a bad feeling about this because aside from the late nineties’ wordage, Kimmy is giving me huge puppy dog eyes. They’re soft brown, and her face is all cherubic as it is, so it works well for her.

“Uhhh, how solid? Are we talking barely frozen water here, or like your Nanny’s big chest freezer that hasn’t been thawed out in twenty years and no one has dug to the bottom of it in even longer, so god knows what kind of horrors are hidden down there kind of solid?” I’m almost scared to ask.

Kimmy hedges and her eyes become one shade bigger and eight degrees more like a puppy dog. “Worse than the freezer.”

“Gah! What could be worse than the freezer? That’s like an eight hundred and seventy-eight on a scale of ten.”

“Van is back.”

Well, *that* definitely pricks my interest in the form of twinging lady bits, and if we're talking the hardness scale here, and I'm being candid, then in the form of my nipples just hitting freezer level times ten.

Kimmy's eyes narrow like she's zoning in on my nipples, and it's all I can do to not throw my arm across my chest and hide them. I'm saved when her irises land on my face, but then her eyes narrow like she's trying to decode what's going on in my head. I feel like I'm being incinerated by her gaze. When it comes to her big brother, anything she thinks I'm thinking, I'm probably very likely thinking it or have already thought it.

"He's back," she hisses, trying to sound tough, but it's all bluster. "He's staying with Nanny."

Well, yeah, because Nanny is awesome. I don't know a single woman on the planet who is pushing eighty and is still slim as a pole, fitter than any fiddle, and likes to walk around in every color of spandex every day of the week and multiple colors on Sunday. She's a mystery, a goddess, and the world's best human I know. She's also a gravy-making queen of a machine.

"He wouldn't go near Mom's house with a ten-foot pole," Kimmy continues. "That's just the vibe I got from Nanny on

the phone, though. He got back late last night, and she called me this morning at the crack of dawn—her crack, which is the absolute butt crack—at four in the morning. I’m glad she did because then I could give you a warning about having this SOS meeting in my office first freaking thing. I canceled all my other meetings because Van just slotted himself into my number one priority. He’s back to ruin my life. I freaking know it.”

“I doubt he’s back for total or even partial ruination.” I try to stay positive, gulping down a big swallow that tastes like the past, shock, and all my sudden musings about what Van must look like now and how he’s probably filled into his height and grown into a sexy man-body. That’s what happens when someone leaves when they’re eighteen and doesn’t come back until they’re thirty.

Kimmy grips the edge of her huge desk. It’s all modern in here with sleek furniture and crazy huge windows. The best of the best. Her dad was fanatical about that and a lot of other things. After he passed away and Kimmy took over as CEO, she took his office and kept it the same but changed a lot of other things, and now people actually like working here,

including me. Before, I just did it for Kimmy because she's my BFF, with an emphasis on *forever*.

“He's staying with Nanny because he's trying to turn her against the rest of us. He's poisoning us from the inside. Probably slipping actual poison into her gravy so that when she gives it to us, we'll croak.”

“Kimmy,” I sigh, ignoring the crazy vibes that Kimmy's throwing off. She can be intense, but usually, it's a good thing. My BFF is a kick-ass boss babe. “I doubt it. He's just staying with family because he's been gone a long time and Nanny is, uh, well, she's the buffer between that and the rest of the world. Nanny is Nanny. Who would not want to stay with her?”

Kimmy shakes her head from side to side so hard that I literally hear her neck creak. It makes me wince. Bones creaking is not a nice sound. “I know all about the will.” Ugh, the will. I never really liked Kimmy's dad, but he did me some real solids in my life. Kimmy also adored him, so I never said a word about it, but the will he left was a bastardly thing to do. “He knows about the will.”

Van was basically entirely written out of everything after he left when he was eighteen and married his high school

girlfriend. He went to Europe and never came back. And I mean it when I say he *never* came back. In all the years he was away, he didn't so much as contact Kimmy or anyone else in the family that I know of. She pretended like she wasn't stung by it because Kimmy is tougher than a tack and sharper than a nail—wait, I think I got that mixed up—but I know it broke her heart. She has every right to be angry. Maybe even wary. If her dad hadn't been an asshole of the first order who groomed his daughter to take over the family business and then written it into his will that Van could have the head spot if he ever came back and challenged Kimmy for it, I'm sure she'd have a heck sunnier of an outlook about her brother finally coming back.

Kimmy crosses her arms, her black power pantsuit practically crinkling with the movement because it's so new, and the energy in the room takes on a dramatically darker shift. "My dad had a change of heart when he included Van in the will. That was good of him." Her face is puckered and murderous. "I'm the one who worked my ass all the way up from the mailroom to CEO. I've earned this spot." Kimmy always wanted to make her dad proud. That's why she studied business instead of art the way she wanted to. When we were younger, we used to joke about how she'd live in a van and be

a crazy cat lady selling paintings. But then Van left, and she grew up, went to college, and became serious. She did work her tushy off. She didn't want anything to be handed to her just because her daddy owned the business. She more than deserves her place here.

Kimmy's jaw hardens. She's grinding her molars so loudly that it sounds like she's eating rocks as a new version of her favorite breakfast cereal. I have to reach out and grasp her arm because it's a horrible sound that puts my ears on edge to the tune of freaking bleeding. "Hey, we're going to get this figured out. You could always shred the will."

Her right eye starts to tick like crazy. "There's more where that came from. Endless copies. I can't shred them all. I can't burn them all. And I certainly can't change any of them." She turns to me, and, truth be told, she's gorgeous—straight up so beautiful that people stop and stare at her sometimes and forget what they were going to say or what they were doing, but right now, her face is a pure freaking evil genius. Or maybe just evil. She fists her hands at her hips. "Damn right, we're going to figure it out."

Shit. Oh god, oh no. This is the solid she was talking about. "N—no," I stammer as she looks at me in a pointed

way. It's the kind of gaze that incinerates a person straight down to their soul.

She's perfected the nasty CEO glare over the years, and she's only barely tempering it with her begging eyes because we're best friends. There's also the whole part where I freaking owe her this because after my family lost everything, she made sure her family looked after me. She's the reason I was able to go to college. It was her mom who splurged on my prom dress, or I wouldn't have had one otherwise. It was also her family who gave me this job after we graduated, and it was Kimmy who made sure I didn't have to spend the rest of my life getting papercuts in the mailroom. To say I owe her as more than just her bestie is an understatement of the freaking universe.

"You're going to befriend him and seduce him into telling you everything," Kimmy says so confidently, like yeah, it's just that easy for me to saunter up to her long lost super flaming hot older brother and be all like, *oh yeah, btw, tell me all your dirty secrets since that's not super sus or anything.*

I can feel my eye start to tick now. "How do you think I'm going to do that? If he's back after spending all this time away, he's not going to trust anyone."

“Do this for me, and I’ll throw in the handbag you love so much. I’ve seen you drooling over it.”

“God! Kimmy! This is your brother we’re talking about here. Be serious.”

She swallows thickly, and her dark and evil broody expression gets a heck of a lot darker. “I *am* being serious.”

“Seduce him how?” This is unfair. Kimmy knows all about the crush I used to have on Van.

“Not seduce him in that way,” Kimmy says, giving me a funny, hairy eyeball look, which made me realize that I just threw down all my cards on the table for her to read. *Smooth, Remi. Seriously, real smooth.* “I want you to befriend him, spy on him, and find out what he wants. If it’s not the company, then great. Maybe he doesn’t even know about the will. But if he does want the company, then he needs to be distracted.”

If you don’t actually mean ‘seduce,’ then you probably shouldn’t use that term. “But—but you love your brother.” I switch tactics since I’m not going to debate the semantics of a word that I don’t want to think about when it comes to Van. I don’t want to get into it with Kimmy, and I definitely don’t want to get into it with myself and my lady bits, which are flipping the flip out right now even though it’s been, oh...

right, fourteen years since Van left. File that one under #PatheticAFforlife.

Kimmy snorts and rolls her eyes at exactly the same time, which is a crazy look on anyone. She's seriously talented in so many ways. Next to her, I feel like a blundering hippo, and not the cute ones either. "This is *my* empire, and my brother isn't allowed to have it."

"But technically, that will...."

"Technically, smechnically. You know that if he comes in here, he'll mess everything up, right? Fire half the good people here just out of spite and probably run the other half into the ground because it's not him who spent his whole freaking adult life here learning the ins and outs of this place. If I lose my position here, you can kiss your ass goodbye."

"He wouldn't do that." She raises a brow. I can tell she's ready to argue about this all day, so I try and take a different route. "I don't know why you think he'd tell me anything. He didn't want to be my friend in high school, and that's all I have now to go on. I was just the dorky friend of his kid sister. We were both uncool to him. If we're going to do this, why can't we just ask him straight up why he's back and what his intentions are?"

File that one under #DumbAFsuggestions.

“You think he’s really going to dish all his nefarious plans to us when we’re the enemy?” Kimmy scoffs. “I don’t think so. What he’s planning is going to be a hostile takeover, and you don’t consort with the people you’re planning on overthrowing, at least not willingly. He wasn’t *willing* to let us into his life in the past decade and a half, so he’s not going to be so forthcoming now.”

“*Or* you could just be a nice sister and welcome him back and give him some love.”

Kimmy shakes her head, sending a mane of dark black hair flying over her shoulders. “I don’t care how you get me the information, just that you get it.” *Even if you have to torture it out of him* is clearly implied here. “Even if you have to seduce him for real.”

“What? What kind of hot mess do you think I am?” Right. The kind of hot mess express that isn’t really a hot mess but more like an epically spicy full-on disaster. Ever since my dad made a series of bad decisions, bankrupted his company, and lost the family fortune as well as our house and the lifestyle that went with being comfortably upper class, things haven’t been very right in any of our lives. “Can you do me a favor

and please not answer that? No seduction for real. We are not talking about my girly crush on him from a million years ago.”

“I just need to know that he’s going to mind his P’s and Q’s and keep his nosey nose out of what doesn’t belong to him.”

“But if it’s in the will, what can you do?”

“Stage a damn revolt. That’s what I can do.”

“That sounds like a horrible way to tear apart the company.” The priority should be keeping it together and making sure everyone has a job, not going to war with her brother. I don’t say that because, yeah, taking his side and all that wouldn’t go over well.

It’s not like my lifelong crush will ever sway my decision or anything. I mean, it’s all just silly, really. What younger sister’s BFF falls hard for the broody, muscular, hunky older brother with a heart of stone? Right. Fuck.

“It’s either you try and talk his intentions out of him, or I mic up Nanny’s house.”

“Kimmy, for the love of...Are you insane?”

“No! It’s the perfect plan. We don’t even have to put the mics inside the house. We can set them on the window ledges

or attach them right to the windows at night and listen in. It'll be fun. We can even tell Nanny. She'll be up for it. She always did love a bit of espionage."

"Yeah, in books and on movies, not wiretapping her damn house and phone."

She shrugs like she isn't affected by my protests to this at all. And also like she's not going to go along with me at all in resisting. If she wants a wiretap, she's getting the damn wiretap, one way or another. "Whatever. I have a way to get us in."

God, what could be worse than how bad this already is? "I'm scared to ask how."

"Nanny is having a surprise welcome home party for him."

"Oh lord." This just went from bad to the bottom of the freezer level bad.

"First of all, everyone told my brother not to marry Tina straight out of high school. She was pretty and way too popular and blonde. My brother thought he was in love, but he was just being a guy and thinking with his willy. No one thought it would end well, and no one was even surprised

when they divorced a few years ago. He didn't want to come home to a bunch of told-you-so and slices of humble pie, so he freaking stayed in Europe and only bothered to check in—oh, right. Never. That doesn't entitle him to anything, so you don't have to feel sorry for him.”

“I'm not feeling sorry for him! I just think this isn't going to work on any level. And what happened with his marriage was tragic. Tina ran off with two guys—twins. Body builders. Not one guy. *Two*. That's just the worst. And the only way anyone found out about it was because she changed her social media and put pictures of herself up with hashtags like *freshly divorced, bitches, and moving in style, double time.*”

“He's back because he's a thieving poop-pants, and he wants this company to prove he's not a total failure because he bungled things up so badly with the latter part of his life. That's his redemption plan. I'm sure of it.”

“Well...if we do go to that party—and I'm not saying I'm going to do this—it would be best if you could keep your animosity to a slow burn instead of a bonfire-style blaze that rips through everything. He's never going to trust any of us if you go at him, attacking and accusing him and calling his ex-wife a hussy.”

“She *was* a hussy,” Kimmy sniffs.

“Well, yeah, but still.”

“Say you’ll do it,” Kimmy begs. “Or at least try. It’s what you’ve always wanted.”

“Stop bringing my teenage self into this.”

Now Kimmy’s face isn’t just pure evil. It’s ultra evil times a thousand. “Friendships sometimes blossom. Besides, he’s lonely right now, as you said. He doesn’t know anyone, and he could use a sympathetic ear. You could even play the double agent and say you’re taking his side over mine because I’m the big bad baby sister. You could tell him that the company is totally his, and you’ll help him out because he’s a nice guy who had a bad rap in life, so you’re all about it because you have a bleeding heart for him. He’ll eat that shit up.”

“I don’t think you’re giving him any credit. Or me.”

She sighs. “Do you really want to go down in flames? Because seriously, you have an English degree. I told you to do business, but you wouldn’t listen. What are you going to do with that when we’re both fired, and I’m not around to save your bacon?”

Honestly, I'd like to say that I'd get a job wherever and do what it takes, but I have people depending on me—mainly my mom and dad because they never recovered. I have a mortgage, and I also have car payments and other bills. If I lose this job and can't find something that pays this well—and I know I won't because Kimmy is kind of right about the whole English degree thing—then my life is screwed. It sucks all around because I had to do something I loved, not something I didn't love. Even if everyone was kind of right about that, I refuse to admit to it, and I refuse to regret it.

“Fine.” I'm surrendering all my dignity here. I hope it's worth it. “We'll go to your grandma's party, but if it doesn't feel right or if I come up against a big dead end, we stop there. I'm not going to force someone to spill their guts to me, and I'm not going to coerce them or fake anything. I'm no good at lying; you know that. And this is your brother. I'm not going to do him dirty the way Tina did.”

“You wouldn't run off with two hunky, hot, Swedish body-building twins who would spend all day worshipping your body?”

Well, when she puts it that way...I mean, fuck, no!
“That's just wrong.”

“Better saved for book porn, right?”

“Yeah. Not real life.”

Kimmy’s grin is pure feline. “We’re going to rock this, and we’re going to save the company. No one is tearing apart my empire. No one. We’re in it together. Fist bump, bestie. It’s you and me against the world.”

Technically, it’s us against her brother, and this isn’t one of those stories where the dorky kid sister’s best friend grows up into some smoking hot dream machine, the older brother finally notices, falls blissfully and hopelessly for her, and they get their happily ever after. It’s far more likely that this is one of those stories where everything goes from bad to worse and doubly wrong, all served with a side of spandex-wearing grandmother and delicious gravy.

CHAPTER 2



Remi

“Just so we’re straight about this,” Kimmy says under her breath as we walk up the sidewalk to her Nanny’s house. “I think I steered you wrong.”

Oh really? You don’t say. I’m not shocked. She doesn’t mean that she’s calling the whole thing off, just that she’s worried about me. “You’re having a change of heart when it comes to spying on your brother and doing him dirty?”

“Nope. Doing him dirty is *your* job.”

Christ. I guess I walked right into that one. I’ve been stewing about that ever since it was suggested. I had a dream last night about the new, mature, and aged Van, who I haven’t even seen yet, handcuffing me. In a good way. And then doing some very inventive things to my body right after. I shiver now as bolts of heat rocket through me. I really hope it isn’t showing on my face. I’m worse than an open book, and this is not something I want Kimmy to be able to read off the pages of my expression.

She somehow has this crazy talent of always looking one hundred percent amazing, while I can never get my mousy-

colored hair to be anything less than outrageously frizzy. Kimmy's makeup is glorious. Mine, on the other hand, is already smudged, and the night hasn't even begun. I'm hell with a mascara wand, and whoever invented lipstick needs to shove that crap up their ass because it never, ever stays put. Kimmy's little black dress flows effortlessly around her curves, making her waist look even skinnier. She's all grace in towering heels, whereas I'm two seconds away from falling on my face, and I'm wearing flats. I took forever to decide what to wear before I finally went with a red cotton sundress, the kind that knots just below the bust. But considering it's strapless, and my bust isn't exactly ample, that might have been a horrible choice. Let's just keep our fingers crossed that a wardrobe malfunction doesn't happen halfway through the night. Or at all. I mean at all.

“I think I insinuated things about a possible romance. I got your hopes up.”

I press my lips together hard. “No. Okay, I have to stop you right there. Yes, I had a crush. And yes, it was my first crush. I've always had this sentimental feeling about it, but he wasn't here. He has not replaced my favorite book boyfriends, and I've never done a face swap on anyone I've ever dated. If

I'm hopeless at romance, it's my own fault, not because I hold this burning torch."

"Hmm." Kimmy's lips purse. "I notice you didn't add comments about a potential spank bank to the list."

"Gah! We are not talking about that!"

"You know what your problem is? You're too inherently honest." She grabs a tissue out of her purse and grasps my chin with one hand. Since she's a foot taller by nature and a foot and a half taller in those heels, it's easy for her to bend and get a good grip on me. She attacks my lipstick, wiping it away. I guess it really was a disaster.

"Then this isn't going to work."

"Yes, it will because everyone knows about your honesty problem. They won't see this one coming. And knowing you, you'll make it into something charming and endearing. You know why you never get any dates, Remi? It's because you're too intimidating. You're this little alpha female all wrapped up in a five-foot-three, dainty, absolutely gorgeous little package. Guys are scared to come near you because they're afraid of rejection."

“Uhhh, you’re confusing me with yourself. I don’t have an alpha anything bone in my body. Guys do ask me out, and then they lose interest because my brand of crazy isn’t for them. Also, they don’t like bookish, clumsy women who live with their parents and help pay the mortgage. That’s the boring brand of crazy, not the hot brand of crazy.”

I wrinkle my nose while Kimmy shakes her head at me. She tucks the tissue into the depths of her designer bag—the very one I’ve been coveting, damn her very much—and pulls out a tube of lip stain. Leave it to her to have something that’s not gooey and is far more effective than a lipstick but still does the trick. The red on her looks glorious. The red on me will probably look garish.

“It’s your confidence, too,” she says. “But we’re not really talking about you. We’re talking about my brother. And why you can’t let yourself be hopeful. This is a job, nothing more. A secret spy mission. He’s not someone you’re going to pity and try and fix and then fall for, do you hear me? He obviously sucked as a husband. That’s why Tina ran off with the muscly twins.”

What a name. “Maybe she sucked as a wife, and that’s why she ran off. Or...or maybe neither one was a shitty wife

or a shitty husband, and they just grew apart, especially since they got married young.”

“And then she went looking for hunky thrills somewhere else.” Kimmy sweeps her hand over the yard, and I have to say, it’s totally gone wild. The grass is waist-high, and there’s no telling what could be living in there. A pack of wild raccoons could have made it their home. “See? He’s not considerate. He’s been at Nanny’s for a few days already, and he hasn’t even mowed her lawn for her. Not even for the party.”

“It’s a surprise party.”

“Still. She probably asked, and he didn’t do it, so she didn’t want to nag. He’s always had his head up his behind and a giant freaking iceberg wedged up his ass, chilling between those frosty cheeks. But nothing could be colder than his heart.”

“Rude.”

My bestie’s face screws up, her bright red lips puckering into a snarl that is feral cat worthy. “No, you know what’s rude? Coming back and taking something that isn’t yours on a damn technicality.”

I take Kimmy's hand, tucking it into my own to help simmer the rage. Kimmy is great. Seriously. She might be a little guarded and abrasive on the surface, but she's not really like that deep down. She's the kind of person who's so loyal, she'll do anything for the people she cares about, and I know that for a fact because I'm one of those people, and she has done everything for me.

“Right. I've got it. No falling for the target, keep my head on straight, and figure out how he has room for his head up his behind when he's already got an iceberg in there to boot.”

Kimmy snorts and elbows me. Some of the ice in her face has thawed. “I love you. You know that, right, Remi? You always know how to make me smile even when we're staring down the worst.”

It's high praised indeed, and I squeeze her hand hard as I lead her up the sidewalk, which is cracked and strewn with weeds breaking through the surface. The grass has pretty much taken over, and I might have to agree with Kimmy on this one. Doing one's grandma a solid would have been in good taste. Hell, I want to ask if I can bust out the mower, but I know for a fact that it's one of those push things that doesn't have an engine. I don't even think I could push it for one pass before I

turn into a sweaty, heaving mess, and also, because it's me, my dress would totally fall off.

“Look,” Kimmy says, clenching my hand. “I just don't want you to get hurt in all this. I came across as heartless, but I'm worried about *you*. I know you think my brother is a DILH.”

“What on earth is that? Some kind of pickle?”

“It's dude I'd like to hump.”

“Ugh! He's not a dude that I'd like to hump. Don't worry about me. My heart is a closed-off stone. Even if it wasn't, he's never going to fall for my amazing charms, killer body, and sharp as shit wit. We all know he's like every other guy out there, and every other guy doesn't like me.” Plus, there's always the whole I don't have a killer body because I'm built like a stick, and no guy likes a woman who is smarter than them. Serious facts here, people. Serious facts.

“Don't knock your body. You have a great body. You're also super cute, and your mind is certainly sharp as shit. That's what I was talking about when I said guys are scared of you, but we both know that Sullivan isn't just any guy.”

I haven't heard Kimmy use her brother's full name in ages. No one uses that name since Van hated his name. I sigh, admitting defeat because I've already decided to bind my soul to hell with this mission. "Okay. Let's just go and give Nanny a hand."

We arrived two hours before the party was supposed to start in order to help Nanny set up. Van is away right now because she sent him out on errands with a list longer than her leg and impossible to fulfill—her words, quoted by Kimmy on the way here in the car.

Nanny is already anticipating her little helpers, and the front door bangs open. I'm totally enthralled by the sight of the diminutive, adorable woman with the banging older granny body encased in pink spandex leggings and a neon green spandex leotard. She's thrown on a black fuzzy sweater, and she looks like she's on her way to some really exciting jazzy ballet class. She's recently gotten into the swing of ordering online, and her first major discovery was wigs. Tonight, she's rocking a pink and blue cotton candy-looking number that goes down nearly to her waist. She's secured it with a black headband with spikes protruding out the top. Somehow, she

pulls the whole thing off. Plus, she has a better bum than I do. How is that fair?

I expected to be shocked and amazed when it comes to this crazy little old lady I love so much, but I wasn't prepared for the ball of reddish beige fur that goes streaking out the door, heading straight for us.

“Ahhhhh!” Kimmy yells, ducking behind me. “Eat her! Eat her first! She's tastier!”

The hairball stops short of me to launch itself off the ground. It leaps, long legs and curly fur sailing in the early evening breeze, and parkours off my chest, which knocks me back into Kimmy before throwing us both onto our asses. At least Kimmy takes the brunt of the fall. Karma is a real bitch. Turns out I'm not very tasty after all.

“Curly Cookie!” Nanny shouts from the door. “You get back here!”

We pick ourselves up. Kimmy dusts herself off, then swats my behind and inspects me for damage. I'm not hurt past my aching sternum and pride. “Christ, Nanny, what is that?” Kimmy yelps.

“I got a puppy! They’re supposed to be good for you. Lower blood pressure and all that. It gets you active and keeps you from getting lonely. Come inside. I’ll tell you about him while we bag up the popcorn for tonight.”

The entirety of the small bungalow smells like candied and caramel popcorn. It’s sticky and sweet in here, so much so that I’m tempted to stick out my tongue to see if I can taste the actual air. Nanny has all the bowls set out on the table, and she points over to the stack of clear plastic bags. “Gag ‘em and bag ‘em girls,” she cackles.

“I’m not sure you know what that actually means,” Kimmy quips wryly.

Nanny opens the door again for the puppy, who streaks in like a blur, skids out on the floor, and promptly starts licking its butthole. “You’ve got to watch this one. He’ll lick unattended assholes.”

Kimmy throws both hands over her mouth to stifle a laugh while I let mine out openly. What, pray tell, encompasses an unattended asshole? “His name’s Curly Cookie?”

The big butterscotch puddle on the floor looks to be a poodle, the big kind, crossed with something else. Poodles are

supposed to be smart, and this dog seems like he's going to be smart as a fox.

“Yup.” Nanny gets out a bag and starts jamming pink candied popcorn into it. Kimmy and I both approach the big wooden dining room table. I'm totally not taking any caramel. That stuff will never leave me alone if I touch it. I'm already accident-prone, so I let her have the pleasure. I take another candied batch instead. “Let me tell you all about him. He's four months old now.” She's beaming with pride, and it's so adorable. “His favorite food is trash. He's defined by his long gazelle legs and causing as much trouble as is earthy possible for one twenty-pound fur bag. He's a poodle Irish Setter cross, as far as I know. His mom clearly found curly-haired males delightful.” She titters away at this.

Then, she continues, “His favorite hobbies include, as you can see, licking his own butt, shredding everything in sight, jumping seven feet in the air, and landing on whatever or whoever might, unfortunately, break his fall. Characteristics include extremely selective hearing. His major talent is vacuuming food up faster than any known beast. The perpetual smell of fart lingers around him at all times, and he makes ungodly strange noises in the middle of the night that lead you

to believe he's being tortured to death." She glances over at the puppy, who is still pruned at his hind end. "Isn't that right, Curly Curly Cookie? My big butterscotch cookie. My cookie dookie dookie."

"Oh my god, Nanny, I think you've lost your mind."

Nanny hoots at Kimmy. "You think? Child, that happened a good long time ago. If you're only noticing now, your powers of observation need some work." She's already done eight bags to our one each. "Now get cracking on that popcorn."

"Why? Everyone knows you're just going to give out frozen gravy containers as party favors."

"Don't knock the frozen gravy," Nanny huffs. "Who doesn't like frozen gravy?"

"Okay. Okay. I won't talk about the gravy. Can we talk about Van instead? Like why he's back? What do you know, Nanny? All I got was your cryptic early morning call saying he was back and not to bombard him with questions because he's taking it easy for a few days. Then, right after you hung up, you texted me about having this surprise welcome home party." She wiggles her brows like she's not up to serious no good. "What I want to know is if he still smells like a zombie."

“He smells good, Kimberly. Don’t say that. How would you know what a zombie smells like anyway?”

“I don’t know. Maybe like your lingering fart dog.”

Nanny cackles at that. “Good to know you inherited my sense of humor. No one else in this family did.”

“Shit, I left the aloe vera in the car,” I interrupt. My hands are now fully coated in so much sugar that I don’t think it will ever wash off. Kimmy is faring so much worse with the caramel, but at least she’s not covered head to foot like I somehow would have been. “I’ll go get it.”

“Oh, you brought me another plant?” Nanny beams at me. “One can never have too many plants.”

“Even if you already have six hundred cactuses, eighty succulents, and forty million aloes?”

“Don’t forget the lilies and the house rose bush things. I do love those! Speaking of which, you girls need to come over and help me sort the flower gardens. They’re a real mess. Spring has more than sprung, and I need to get out there.”

I love gardening, and since our yard is tiny and my mom prefers a rock garden to anything living, I’m down for whatever chance I have to get down and dirty with dirt.

“You need to get Van on the lawn is what you need.” Kimmy’s rebuttal, in total Kimmy fashion, is one hundred percent snarky. “But real talk, is Van all sulky and sad and lonely? Does he need a friendly shoulder to cry on?” She gives me a not-so-discreet look. As I tackle another plastic bag, trying to get a wad of sticky popcorn in, which is like trying to fit my fist through a pipe the size of a dime, I pretend I don’t see that look.

“Van is Van,” Nanny responds cryptically. “You’ll see right away. Hmm, I wonder how he’s made out trying to find me a baking soda block.”

“What the hell is that?” Kimmy rams in a blob of caramelly-looking popcorn that makes my mouth water and then ties off the bag with a twist tie.

“It’s baking soda in block form. I told him it was the most important thing on the list. I also know that it likely doesn’t exist. At least, I’m really hoping it doesn’t. It would be bad luck for all of us if he showed up early and spoiled the surprise.”

“Yes, wouldn’t it just,” Kimmy responds dryly.

“Be nice,” Nanny cautions. “He’s your brother, and he’s had a hard time. He’s family, and families are supposed to love

and support each other.”

Kimmy shoots me a death glare under her eyelashes that says families aren't supposed to stab each other in the back and steal each other's company either. I shake my head at her, cautioning her to play nice as Nanny said.

“We'll be on our best behavior,” Kimmy promises, her voice sweeter than all the popcorn on the table combined.

Which is how I know that all of us are in serious trouble. When Kimmy goes to war, she gears up for the long haul. She's not really a pick your battles kind of person. She's the gear up, go in screaming and raging in full armor, fuck the consequences, let's do all the battles kind of a girl.

And I'm right in the middle of it all.

Two hours later, the house is packed with family—everyone from Kimmy's mom to distant cousins and a ton of Nanny's friends. I'm pretty sure she invited the whole block and then some, but that's just Nanny. Every single person from ages zero to one hundred and twenty (because I'm sure no one actually lives past that, but I could be wrong) loves her.

We're jammed into every crack and crevice, behind doors and also behind and under furniture and couches—I'm not

kidding because Curly Cookie went and hid under a couch. We're all poised and holding a collective breath.

When the door opens, the yell of "SURPRISE" is utterly deafening.

I'm peeking out from behind the couch with Kimmy at my back, and Nanny is basically riding horseback style on top of me. I have plenty to brace myself with, and yet the second Van appears in that doorway, blinking like he just stared straight into the sun and got startled because he blinded himself, a galaxy of stars bursts behind my eyes. I take in the man I haven't seen in nearly a decade and a half—the man who has become a bit of a myth, and alright, maybe a bit of a legend as well, in my head.

At the sight of his tall figure leaning against the doorframe, the paper bag of groceries suspended in one muscular arm, jeans and a T-shirt that hugs and kisses his skin, and a face so handsome that it would make the devil jealous, my brain goes for a catwalk around my skull. Because it's my brain and skull, it's a clumsy catwalk, and it blanks out completely. I kiss any coherent thought goodbye while my chest pinches and my stomach flutters.

"You're drooling on my couch, love," Nanny mutters.

“That was Curly Cookie,” I force myself to say in my defense. Blame the puppy. Always blame the puppy. Gosh, is there seriously a wet spot forming under my chin? I snap my mouth shut as Van leans and pushes the door closed behind him. The paper bag hits the ground, spilling out a very odd-looking box of baking soda, and I guess that’s the universal cue for us to all come tumbling out of hiding.

As the crowd descends, Van does the most perfectly logical, Van thing to do and makes a fast break through the house, dashing for the patio doors. He slips outside before anyone can accost him and wish him well. He has to know that people are going to follow, but right now, I guess everyone is focused on snacks, descending upon the kitchen table like locusts and grabbing bags of popcorn. Someone puts a real deal vinyl record onto the wicked stereo system that Nanny has in the living room, and music starts pumping so loud that the cops are probably going to get called within the next few minutes.

“Milkshakes!” Kimmy yells in my ear to be heard over the music. “Kitchen. Nanny’s fancy snazzy blender. Now.”

I’d much rather make a fast beeline to the backyard and soak my eyes in the glorious sight of her older brother, who,

yes, as it happens, is still a real, living human being and not a fictional conjuring of my overwrought brain and hopeful ovaries working in tandem, but I follow Kimmy to the kitchen.

Kimmy is a blender pro. In no time, she's got fruit, milk, yogurt, and containers of ice cream spread all across the counter, and she's got a big list of demands coming up. The kitchen is rowdy, and the noise level threatens to blow our eardrums, but Kimmy is Kimmy, and she keeps demanding space so that our corner of the kitchen doesn't look like a mosh pit at a rock concert.

I can feel my throat closing up. I'm more like Van, not cut out for way too many bodies in way too small a space. I kind of happen to really dislike crowds, and I'm actually okay with silence, unnatural or otherwise. Kimmy, bless her freaking bestie soul, passes me two milkshakes—chocolate and vanilla.

“You look like you're going to hyperventilate,” she yells in my direction. I can still barely hear her. “Here. Take these to the backyard. Van loves chocolate.” All he would drink for two straight years, I swear, was chocolate milkshakes. I'm touched by the gesture, but then Kimmy gets that evil glint in her eyes, and I already know what she's going to say next. “Go put our Operation Information plan into effect.”

“Kimmy...”

“What? Everything is fair in war and war. And this is war. I’m not the one who declared it.”

Right, that would be your dad and his stupid will. Also... shit. All this evil, aka the plan, has a name now.

I stumble out of the patio doors in a daze. There are a few stragglers in the backyard, but lucky for me, almost everyone is still indoors, enjoying the snacks, music, and each other’s company. A few pockets of people—two girls who are probably eight or nine, another group of cackling grannies with their white heads bent together, and a teenage girl and guy making out—are spaced out around the fenced-in yard.

It’s a bit of a wreck back here. The grass is just as tall, blotting out crumbling patio stones, a sagging deck with an ancient barbeque, and flower beds that are in obvious need of tending, weeding, and planting.

Like he’s the light and I’m the moth, the magnet to my magnet, the sun to my Icarus, the—okay, I’m stopping right now—my eyes are immediately drawn to the guy lingering in the far corner of the yard between the dilapidated garden shed and the crumbling, weathered wood fence. His eyes meet mine

like a whisky-warmed storm of stardust falling from the heavens, and Operation *Be Still My Heart* commences.

The milkshakes in my hand start getting a second shaking because I'm trembling with all the subtlety of a cement mixer. I still manage to put one foot in front of the other, all while hoping I don't go ass over tits out here since the yard is a bit of a minefield, and I'm, well, me.

Van stands in the corner, a column of strength hewn from stone. He has those long, lean lines so symmetrical that they make a person's mouth water and their eyes tear up from the sheer natural grace of them. He's also the most cut individual I've ever seen. He's put on muscle since high school and filled out in that traditional boy-to-man way that makes my panties feel like they've been caught in a thundershower. Fuck that. If I'm being honest, my va-jay is having an internal meltdown and hyperventilating. Vagina hyperventilation is a thing. I swear it is.

"V—van," I whisper when I'm a few feet away. I thrust the milkshake at him so hard that it drips over the side of the tall glass. I realize at the same time that both my hands are so frozen that I can barely feel them. With an internal groan, I swallow past the swarm of angry bees attacking my stomach

and throat. “It’s good to see you again. Uh, here’s a milkshake. Chocolate. Because you love chocolate shakes.”

He stuffs his hands in his pockets, those silver eyes of his never leaving my face. He never believed in eye contact before, but he does now, to the point where it’s unnerving. I feel like he’s looking past my face, into my skull, and seeing my mush for brains going on right now because he’s so potently good-looking that all of me is mush for brains.

“Who made that?” His eyes drop to my hand like I’m a snake tamer holding a deadly viper there. One hand comes out of his pocket, and when I think he’s going to reach for the shake, he runs it through his hair instead.

It’s thick and longer than it was in high school and totally unruly, and of course, it’s not just a boring old brown. His hair is like something fancy, brown as a verb, but it’s not singed or seared or barbequed. He’s more like baking descriptors—chocolate, caramel, soft chocolate with streaks of caramel, buttery caramel. Umber? Is that a brown? Even though his hair is worn just a tad too long, it’s cut into a fuck-you style to all those who expect professionalism from hair, and it suits him perfectly. The sweep of it makes my nipples do puckery things. A few strands hang tauntingly over a hard brow,

shadowing it and shading those steely gray eyes. They're the kind of eyes that could burn a person alive. The thickest sweep of his lashes is highlighted and defined by that hair somehow, or maybe it's because of the shadows, and his skin glows with health and vitality.

I lick my lips nervously. "Uh...Kimmy made it for you. It's a gesture of peace."

He snorts, and it's unfair how attractive he is—so freaking unfair. His lips are unfair too. They're so pouty and full for a man, and somehow, they still suit him without being an illogical feature. They only add to his attraction, not detract from it. His sculpted jaw literally looks just that. Like it was made by a master's hand, not like how I would sculpt something if I were given tools and a rock or a piece of wood or even a lump of clay. Mine would be a disaster. But he's not a disaster. Not one bit.

"Can I have the vanilla?"

"Sure." I thrust out my other hand but forgot to tuck the other one back, and now I'm straight arming both. "I didn't taste it or anything." *Shut up. Oh my god, shut up.*

He takes the glass from the top and bottom like it's something that needs to be carefully extracted from my hands

without touching me. He steps back because my hand is still frozen, my hand like a claw around a glass that is no longer there. I watch as his godly lips move to the rim of the glass, and he tips the thick milkshake back, sips, and closes his eyes. His rumble of pleasure hits me in all my pleasure spots.

“Good,” he mutters.

Then, he gives me his back.

And a heck of a lot of *please get lost now* vibes.

So I do. Get lost that is. I walk straight back to the house. There’s something wrong with me. I’m still holding the chocolate shake out in front of me with my arm fully extended.

As soon as I step in through the patio doors, Nanny is there. She beams at me for no reason other than the fact that she’s a sweetheart. “You going to drink that, honey?”

I would, but my throat is currently clogged shut, and I also hate chocolate anything. I know that makes me a total anomaly, but what can I say? “No. No, I’m not.”

“Great! I’ll have it!”

The exchange goes so much more smoothly. Nanny takes the shake and ambles off, and I’m left standing alone. I find

Kimmy easily because she's still mixing shakes as she sways her hips and dances in place to the old-school country music someone put on.

“Hey! How did it go?” She's so hopeful that I start to sweat. I can literally feel it beading on my brow.

“Uhh, he basically told me to piss off without pissing off. I said ‘hi’ and ‘welcome back’ or...or something like that, and then I gave him the shake.”

Kimmy doesn't look angry about the fact that I got a whole lot of nothing and how my first reintroduction to her brother was an epic disaster. I'm still racked with nerves. I think they're going to plague me all night. My body is literally trembling. “Did he drink it?”

“What?”

She frowns. “The shake?” The blender lid is currently dripping a variety of colors of ice cream dots all over the floor by her feet. She isn't paying attention at all. All her attention is fixed on me, and it's so potent that it feels...wrong. Strange.

“I think so. I mean, he asked for the vanilla, which surprised me, but—”

“Who got the other one?” Kimmy drops the blender lid and grabs me with both hands locked around my shoulders. She looks like she’s going to shake me, and it scares the crap out of me.

“N—n—anny,” I stammer. “Why?”

“Shit!” Kimmy pulls me in close, slamming our chests together, but it’s so that I can hear what she’s saying without mistaking it. “We have to find her. I spiked that milkshake with enough laxative to take down an elephant.”

CHAPTER 3



Van

I knew it. Fuck the peace gesture. My sister is up to no good. I knew it the second she went streaking through the kitchen past the patio doors, dodging bodies and tugging Remi along behind her like the blender just opened up a portal to hell on the other side of the house, and she's in a rush to get back.

Alright, that's a little bit dramatic.

But I know she spiked that milkshake with something.

Which begs the question, why the hell didn't I tell Remi to dump the damn thing?

Because she turned into such a beautiful woman that you nearly fell over when you saw her again, your mouth shriveled up to the size of a moldy peach pit, and your throat closed up as if you'd choked on it.

I did choke. I did panic. She'd found me in the backyard, where I was hiding from most of my family, including my mother, because there was no way in hell I'd been expecting to be ambushed with a hellacious—I mean surprise—party. I

don't know what's actually more surprising. Seeing my grandmother in vibrant shades of tight-fitting spandex, the fact that she now has a dog who is as boisterous as she is, or that she somehow got my family and a heck of a lot more people together under this roof as a welcome home gesture to me.

Or the fact that Remi doesn't look like Remi anymore. She's blossomed into a goddess.

I had this plan that involved me coming back home and eventually trying to establish lines of communication with the people I love. I wasn't expecting an ambush of well-wishers to bombard me in Nanny's house. I don't know who I was expecting to run into first, but it wasn't Remi. Seeing her out in the backyard in that little sundress with the setting sun a mirror to her beauty, a backdrop that set her features to fiery gold...I had to turn around and give her my back to hide the enormous problem making its presence known in my jeans.

When I turned back after a minute, more composed and ready to have an actual conversation, she was gone. Logically, I knew it was Remi the minute I saw her holding those two milkshakes like picking the right one had the power to change the future, but my brain just refused to compute it. She went from being a slightly gawky, gangly teenage kid who was all

limbs and braces and uncertainty to becoming this...this...this blossom. The only blossom in an entire flower garden. She's lovely. She's still so petite, but she's grown into her limbs, and her teeth are so perfectly straight, so those braces obviously paid off. Her huge blue eyes are the same too, but the rest of her face...god. Let's just say twenty-seven years on this planet have been kind to her in every single way.

I know she wasn't in on any plot. My sister has always been the evil—I mean the brains—behind any operation. Remi has always just been the one forced to go along for the ride. She was far too innocent. She's always had this baby deer in the headlights look about her, but now that she's older, it just makes her look so innocent and sweet, and fuck me, no one looks like that. The thing about Remi, though? She's probably still the real deal. She always was. She always said exactly what was on her mind, and she always kept her word. You could trust Remi with a secret, and even if it cost her a lot, she'd take it to her grave.

It is why I find myself slamming back the rest of the milkshake that was meant for her and hurrying across the yard. I climb the deck, skipping all the steps and dodging all the holes—this place really needs a handyman's touch, so I guess I

have my work cut out for me—and burst into the house, wrenching the ancient patio door shut behind me. I head in the direction I just saw Kimmy tugging Remi and find them pacing anxiously in the hallway away from the living room.

Since this isn't *that* kind of party, no one has tried to make it back here where the bedrooms are. At least not yet. People are jammed in the kitchen and rather large living room, and they're now spilling into the backyard. I can hear enough chatter and voices that I think they've probably taken up residence in the front yard too. Nanny's house isn't huge, and it sure as hell isn't new. She moved here long before my dad hit it big when his corporation took off, and Nanny being Nanny, she wasn't going to leave her home, her refuge, and the block of people she knew and loved to move into some soulless bigger house just because it could be afforded.

In the shadows framed by family photos that span back a century, Kimmy and Remi stop with their heads bent, and sure as shit, they start muttering to each other.

At that moment, someone finally pauses the music, or maybe the record is just skipping, and no one's gotten to it yet, but the place goes so quiet this deep in the house that I can hear everything they're saying. They haven't seen me yet.

That's the bonus of hanging back like a total creeper behind the bend between the kitchen and hall.

"Someone needs to find her," Kimmy whisper-yells, panic threaded through her every word. "I thought she'd be here, in the bathroom region of the house."

I'm not sure who they're talking about, but Nanny walks past me, thumping me on the shoulder and winking at me instead of scolding me for listening in. I'm still hidden by the wall that I'm pressed flat against, and luckily, no one has spotted me, which includes cousins, second cousins, and my mother. Remi and Kimmy both look up when they see Nanny coming, and their faces transform into a mix of horror and relief.

"Oh god, Nanny, there you are!" Kimmy rushes over and takes her hand, rubbing it as though Nanny might be in danger of frostbite. In almost summer. In her own home. "Did you drink all of that shake?"

"Yes, dear. Why? It was delicious."

"Oh shit!" Kimmy twists her hands together anxiously while Remi looks like she's going to pass out. Her skin has always had this nice golden quality to match her dark hair, and it really set off her incredible blue eyes, but right now, it's

blanched stark white. “Noooooo, Nanny,” Kimmy wails. “That one was laced with enough laxatives to clean out a rather large elephant and then some.”

I freaking knew it. Damn my sister and her plotting. I knew that coming back here was going to make something like this happen. Kimmy would feel threatened, and she’d lash out. I was trying to figure out how to deal with that, and in the meantime, Nanny was planning this wretched surprise welcome home party for me.

Nanny puts her hands on her stomach and grins at both Kimmy and Remi. “Good. I’ve been slacking on the prune juice lately, and it just so happens I’m a little bunged-up.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Kimmy pleads. She whips her cell phone out. “I’m calling an ambulance. We need to get you to the hospital.”

Nanny just chuckles and waves her hand in front of Kimmy’s face. Her gnarled knuckles close over the phone, and she plucks it out of my sister’s grasp. “Let’s put that away. I’m fine. And what were you doing lacing milkshakes with laxative anyway? That wouldn’t have been for your poor brother, would it?”

“N—no,” Kimmy lies through her teeth. “I just accidentally knocked an entire bottle into the blender, and then I got distracted and forgot to tell Remi to throw it down the sink, and she went off with it instead.”

My sister is a shit liar. I expect Nanny to lay into her, but I should know better. Nanny has never had to lay into anyone in her life because she’s a great lady with so much natural charm that the entire world smiles in her wake. We’re all so scared of disappointing her.

“We’ll just wait and see what happens.”

“No, Nanny, we need to go to the hospital. If you don’t let me call anyone, then I need to take you.”

Suddenly, Nanny’s eyes go wide. “Oh, nature calls!” she announces, like getting spiked with a whole bottle of laxative hasn’t bothered her at all. She walks calmly past Kimmy and Remi, goes into the bathroom, and shuts the door.

They both wait anxiously on the other side. Remi goes another couple of shades whiter, and Kimmy bites on her bottom lip unmercifully. I wait too, my hand digging in my jeans pocket for my phone in case I’m the one who needs to call an ambulance. Kimmy might have made the damn thing, but I got all flustered and tongue-tied and didn’t warn Remi

about it, and she passed it off, so this is kind of equally my fault.

“God, your Nanny has an iron stomach,” Remi remarks. She starts to pace the hallway. Kimmy stands in place, but she’s looking more worried than I’ve ever seen her. Considering my sister is a bit of a selfish diva, that’s saying a lot.

“How backed up was she?” Kimmy wonders.

They both go quiet as they wait.

Not more than five minutes after she went in, the bathroom door cracks open, and Nanny comes out, looking as laidback as ever. Remi and Kimmy both rush to her, their faces twisted up with anxiety. “Very satisfying,” Nanny announces, closing the bathroom door tightly behind her. “Although, you might want to give the bathroom a few minutes to air out. I opened the window, but you know...don’t go lighting a match anytime soon. Tee hee hee. Anyway, no doctor needed.”

I can’t just let this go. Not when Kimmy could have poisoned Nanny or whoever drank that shake with that much laxative. Also, there’s the whole defending my dignity thing. I’d way rather go out to the backyard and forget about all this,

but if I don't stand my ground now, how am I supposed to live here in peace?

I round the corner, my hands limply at my sides. I don't really have to pretend very hard to be angry. The steel in my spine, the heavy breaths, and the ground together back teeth are all natural. Kimmy sees me coming before Remi does. She pokes an elbow hard into Remi's side, and her head shoots up hard enough to nearly knock the happy little framed family photos off the wall behind her. She was so pale before, but a faint pink creeps up her neck and explodes into her cheeks, and fuck me if I don't find myself needing to adjust myself ever so casually before I pop another very unwanted hard-on. I'm not sure what's going on with the boner springing whenever Remi is near, and I wonder if it has to do with the subtle scent of cinnamon and vanilla that seem to cling to her, but anyway, *focus*.

Right. Kimmy. Company. Get in and get out. Get it done and salt the earth after. No, wait. That's not right. I'm here to try and make amends with my family, not make things worse.

Kimmy's nostrils flare the closer I get. She's one big sassy ball of "*can you please get the fuck out of my space?*" She's practically breathing fire, and no, that's not fumes wafting

from the bathroom. Even Nanny pauses and looks between us, eyeing us warily like all unholy hell is going to break loose.

“Van,” Kimmy spits. “So good to see you back.” She says that in the way I’d probably say I’d like a bottle of laxative after all.

“It’s not good,” I mutter. “But it was time. And I know what you’re thinking. That I’ve come for you and yours, but I haven’t. I came back because you and mom and Nanny, you’re all family. That’s what matters.”

Kimmy rolls her eyes. “Fucking, please. That’s a crock of hot shit if I’ve ever heard a crock before. You don’t need to ladle it out. We can all smell it.” Nanny’s eyes track to the bathroom. Yeah, they really do. “Where were we as your family two years ago when Dad died, and you didn’t even bother showing up for the funeral? Or for the past fourteen years when any of us needed you? Where were you then? You couldn’t even be bothered to send a Christmas card or let anyone know that you’re still alive.” Kimmy might be fuming, but there, behind the raging inferno of epic spice times a thousand rage in her eyes, I can see the hurt.

I abandoned my baby sister. I got married and left home and went to Europe. There were so many things she didn’t

know. Things I never want her to know and also things our mom hasn't told her yet. I always wanted to protect her. Always. And I did that by staying away.

I put up a hand as Remi slowly grasps Kimmy's arm. I think it's in solidarity, but it might be to hold her back. "I wanted to make amends," I tell her. "I really did." And then it was too late. I had my head up my ass crack for too long, but I'm home now.

"Damn tooting he did," Nanny confirms. We're really going there with the puns right now, but it's not enough to make any of us laugh, though I can see Remi's lips twitch like she's tempted. She misses nothing. She was always so damn smart.

Kimmy isn't buying it. "You know what? You're a big, fat, nasty doddle wad, and I wish you'd never come back." Well, at least she has the nerve to tell it straight.

Nanny claps her hands. "Well, this is going smashingly. Who's up for a cocktail? Or a dirty chai?"

"Actually, Nanny, I'm feeling kind of sick right now." That's the truth. I can't remember the last time I felt right. Probably on my sixteenth birthday before everything went to straight-up shit.

“I’d rather get my nuts hacked off with a chainsaw than spend another moment in the same room with him.”

That’s clearly not a drink order from Kimmy, and Nanny gasps. “Jaysus, is that what the young people are saying these days?”

“No! Nanny, cover your ears!” I try and step forward to shield her from any more of Kimmy’s pirate-worthy language and maybe steer her back to the party where things are more benign, but Kimmy steps in my direction, blocking Nanny’s path. She bares her teeth at me, and I’m half fascinated, half terrified by this kick-ass woman that my sister has become but also really freaking sad.

“Of course, he’s feeling sick,” she hisses. “We’re all so sickened that he’s spent the last fourteen years MI fucking A.”

You wouldn’t have to be much of an empath to pick up on the fury emanating from Kimmy and lingering in the hallway like last night’s liver and onions. The open hostility is alarming, and I do know that growing up, Kimmy earned her black belt in karate, so I really wouldn’t like having my ass kicked. Then again, if she just did it and got it over with, maybe she’d get it out of her system.

“Kimmy,” I sigh, trying to be genuine even though I know she won’t believe me. “I really am sorry.”

“Shove it up the wazoo,” Kimmy responds, flipping me the bird. Remi’s eyes widen, and she steps up and tackles Kimmy, throwing her arms around Kimmy’s middle. She hugs her from behind like that, and it’s a tad bit ridiculous because Kimmy is so much taller, but her touch works some magic because my sister stops coming at me like a junkyard dog.

“Hey,” Remi urges softly. “Let’s go to a different part of the house. There are more milkshakes to make. Or let’s get a different record on the player. I can just tell that someone is going to break into the disco collection, and then we’re all fucked. Let’s get to it before they do.”

“Disco is a great idea!” Nanny hoots. She takes off down the hall, and my god, I think I might have to R-rate that spandex-clad granny booty out of my mind with a side of extra brain scrubbing. It’s both unnerving and hilarious to see her long cotton candy wig trailing in her wake. Nanny has only gotten stranger and a heck of a lot more fun since I left.

She was here to welcome me back, no questions asked, with literal open arms that barely closed around me because I’m not a small guy, and she’s a tiny little old lady. I will

always, always love her for that. I didn't think coming back here could possibly be good for me, but I did think it was time to stop hiding, licking my wounds, and waiting for things at home to go back to the way they were. That was never going to happen. Even with my dad gone.

Kimmy looks back at Remi, and they share a look so sisterly and close that it makes my throat close up. I know I'm never going to have that kind of a connection with my sister again. I sacrificed it on the altar of my own pride. The wounded boy who left home, vowing never to come back, returned an even more wounded, sorrier man. I'm Van, she's Kimmy, and we are like two strangers. No, worse. We're enemies.

“Come on,” Remi coaxes softly yet again. “Let's go.”

Kimmy finally gives in and lets Remi pull her away, but not before shooting me one last murderous glare as she passes by. Her expression tells me that this is so far from being over.

CHAPTER 4



Remi

This whole thing puts the shit in shitshitfuck like clams put the clam in clam chowder. Not sure that even makes sense, but my mind has been completely scattered over the past few days.

I know I tried and failed to get close to Van at the party, then he found us in the hallway after we nearly did Nanny in, and he tried to make peace. Kimmy doesn't believe him. Operation Information, aka Operation Fuck My Brother Over Before He Can Fuck Me Over, is still in place. I know I'm going to have to try again, and sure enough, she presents me with the perfect opportunity in the form of a phone call, informing me that Van is outside hand mowing Nanny's lawn. Nanny texted a photo, and since it's six in the evening and I'm off work, I can hightail my buns down there and get right on the whole finding out what Van's game plan is.

"Right, Kimmy. Because I have nothing better to do," I fume, not so silently, as my car eats up the miles that separate my house from Nanny's. I actually only live twenty minutes away when traffic is light. I'm hoping it's not, so I'm delayed,

or that it starts thunder storming in order to force Van inside, but alas, nothing saves my bacon.

My bacon is thoroughly cooked the minute I pull up to the curb in front of Nanny's house and see the object of my darkest fantasies and Kimmy's most wretched schemes, straining at Nanny's push mower. Even he has to put some strength behind it to get the damn thing working, but my god, does he ever get it working.

Van doesn't know I'm there yet because his head is down as he focuses on pushing the lawnmower from hell through the waist-high grass. It allows me to take a sinful moment to admire the muscles in his shoulders straining underneath a gray T-shirt, and by straining, I mean flexing, bunching, and putting on a show worthy of popcorn and lowered lights. I reach up and wipe away a bit of moisture that's gathered at the corner of my mouth. Yeah, moisture. Not drool or anything. Shit, where's Curly Cookie when I need to blame something on him again?

He's not doing what Kimmy accused him of, which was brown-nosing it hard with landscaping skills in order to get back into his family's good graces. Shudder. Granny brown-nosing. He's just mowing the lawn because he's a nice person

—a nice *strong*, insanely muscly person—and the lawn needed mowing badly.

My eyes do another involuntary slow perusal away from those muscular shoulders and the damp skin that makes the thin fabric cling, outlining every deltoid and trapezius and all the other muscles that I don't know the names for. I have no idea if deltoids and trapezius muscles are even in the shoulders and back. But one muscle I do know is the gluteus maximus, and holy ham and creamed corn with a side of stuffing, Van has the most beautiful, tight, mouth-watering set of buns on this planet. His faded work jeans outline his derriere to perfection. Oh, look. There's moisture leaking from my mouth again.

I get out of the car before someone can come and give me a ticket for loitering or arrest me for voyeurism. I should have spent the ride over thinking of a good ice breaker, one that doesn't sound like the first cheesy pickup line that comes into my head and gets blurted out in my usual awkward fashion. I stumble from the car, like literally nearly falling on my face, slam the door shut, and take the sidewalk in my flip flops, making sure that none of the crumbling bits of concrete catch me and make me go flying. This time I'm wearing skinny

jeans and a light, flowy blouse, so if something did happen, at least panties making an appearance wouldn't be a thing. Plus, I also have the advantage of a bra this time around. Just saying.

No witty icebreaker is forthcoming, so as I approach, my stomach is a tight fist of panic, and my throat is bone dry. I watch Van finish a row of grass, and at this point, it's so long that it looks like he's making hay to bale up behind him. I get another few seconds to admire the delicious hunky male before he reaches the end of the row by the hedges that are in dire need of pruning and has to turn around to start the next pass. *Damn it, that's not good time management. Think, think, think. Brilliant. Let's go. Pull it out of your ass if you have to.*

"Hey." The word comes out as a high little squeak, mostly because now I'm thinking about pulling things from where the sun doesn't shine. I raise a hand in greeting, but it's shaking. I'm shaking. *Damn it, where are my lady balls when I need them?* "I...is Nanny home?" *Double damn it, of course she is.*

Van frowns. He swipes his brow, which is dotted with perspiration, then wipes his hand on his worn-in jeans. He's just as sexy from the front. Maybe doubly so because his face is so beautiful that it gives his ass a run for its money and

because his damp T-shirt neatly outlines ridges of hard abs below.

My whole body pops a lady boner. I mean...I mean...
fuck.

“I...uh...actually, I know Nanny’s home. I was hoping I could talk to you.” *Smooth, Remi. Super smooth.*

Van’s brow arches up, and his silence is ominous. Maybe he’s just trying to catch his breath. His chest is heaving. His whisky eyes narrow, but that could just be because the low-hanging sun is right behind me.

“It was sweet of Nanny to give out frozen containers of gravy as party favors the other night,” I blurt, really going off the rails. “I really enjoyed mine. Have you tried any of it yet?” Yeah, because people just sit down and make a pot of gravy to have for dinner. His eyes narrow further, and I can feel myself going up in the usual flames of humiliation. “How she manages to not fall into that big freezer of hers, be swallowed up whole, and never seen again is beyond me. If one did get sucked in, they’d have to wade through eight hundred and sixty-four of those containers to find their way out again. That’s a fair warning if she ever sends you down to the basement to dig through it for a bag of peas or whatnot.” *Oh*

god, shut up. Please, shut up. I'm nervous now, and being nervous makes me ramble. "Also, how did they get that giant freezer down there in the first place? I'm pretty sure the house had to have been built around it." *Making things worse now. So much worse. So much humiliation. So much, please kill me now.*

I'm saved from burning to ashes on the spot, even if my face is probably purple by now, by the front door creaking open. Nanny steps out wearing a leopard print unitard and bright pink spandex leggings underneath. She's rocking a waist-length hot pink wig. "Remelia! I was just doing my evening workout. Van is rocking the lawn. Whoo-hoo, look at him go! He's going to have this bitch in kick-ass shape in no time." Nanny pauses. "Shit. I'm supposed to be using less bad language. I guess it shocks some people to hear senior citizens curse. I guess those people don't know that it's the smart ones who use bad language. It's a scientific fact. Look it up."

Hmm. I can see where Kimmy gets her inspiration. I knew Nanny was just pretending to be scandalized the night of Van's surprise party when Kimmy went on about nuts and chainsaws.

“O—okay...” I’m torn between standing out here on the narrow swatch of front sidewalk and making more of a fool of myself or heading inside and making up a reason for my visit. If I tell Nanny I came to borrow a cup of frozen gravy, would that sound legit?

A bounding bundle of hair goes streaking past Nanny, grabbing something with its teeth at the last second. It takes me a full heartbeat to realize it’s the hot pink wig, and the blur is Curly Cookie, now streaking straight for me while dragging it behind him, shaking his head as puppies do, delighted with his score.

“Curly Cookie!” Nanny yelps, putting her hands on her hips. “You get back here this second; you wig-snatching over-enthusiastic hair bag!”

The puppy completely ignores her. He wags his tail so hard, wriggling the lower half of his body, that the little skinny rat tail behind him actually makes contact so hard that it makes a whap-whap sound. He comes wriggling down the sidewalk, dragging the wig right to me. Whap-whap. Whap-whap.

“Watch your buttohole!” Nanny screams.

I nearly reach around and grab my bottom in a panic, but then I remember it’s only unguarded buttoholes that this dog

likes. I brace myself to get nearly knocked over by a huge, overly enthusiastic bundle of fur, but suddenly, I catch sight of a blur streaking out of the corner of my eye. A blur that isn't Curly Cookie.

Van comes racing toward me, and I have no idea what's happening except that I brace for contact, and why the hell is there going to be any contact between us? But there certainly *is* contact. In the form of boulder-sized muscled arms sweeping me up and throwing me over his shoulder. Is it wrong that the minute I'm turned upside down, all I can think about is how I knew this was going to happen in some form because I'm so clumsy that being the wrong side up is my daily normal, although I'm usually biting the ground and not being ground into spicy, damp, sexy male perfection?

I'm flush against Van's shoulder, then my face is sliding lower and lower, and *oh my god, there's his ass*. I really am up close and personal with Van's bottom, and I can't decide if this is the most embarrassing moment of my entire life or the best moment.

I don't get to make a real decision since Van starts running, and I'm being thumped and thudded, my midsection slamming into his shoulder. His hand sweeps up the curve of

my inner thigh and lands on my bottom to try and keep me from sliding and falling down the other side of him. My brain goes on a walkabout and short circuits until Curly Cookie's face appears in my line of vision but from the wrong direction. He's hanging over Van's other shoulder, the wig lying forgotten on the sidewalk behind us. We're thundering up the front steps, both of us draped like sacks of potatoes over Van's huge shoulders. He's running as though we weigh nothing collectively. Curly Cookie clearly thinks it's great. His big pink tongue flaps out to slurp my face, catching me right across the lips. Is it wrong that I taste dog and baby powder, which I'm assuming is Nanny's scent contained in the wig he just chewed?

All too soon, we're rushed inside, and the door slams shut behind us. Van sets the dog down first and then follows up with me. He's not even breathing hard, but I'm slamming air into my lungs, panting double time because I'm still so close to him that we're breathing the same freaking air. His eyes sweep up and down my body like he's inspecting for damage while his face is totally stoic, a shuttered mask. Without saying a word, he stuffs his hands into his pockets, walks through the living room, and turns down the hall, disappearing and leaving me in a heady state of absolute disarray.

At least Nanny is there to pick up my shattered, liquified feminine pieces. She whips off the wig cap, revealing flowing white tresses, and cocks a scolding finger at Curly Cookie. “Wig snatcher,” she mutters.

Curly Cookie does more of the tail wagging whap-whap-whap business. Then, he casually saunters off into the kitchen and begins slurping down water so loudly and messily that I find myself grinning.

That is, until Van storms through the living room, carrying a container of bug spray. He marches out the front door, and Nanny and I both watch him out the big windows as he bends and sprays something in the grass. Bend. Spray. Dodge. Bend. Spray. Slam. Bend. Spray. Run. Bend. Spray. Spray. Spray. Curse.

“Darn it. I told him to mind the hornets. They’ve made a mess of the lawn out there.”

“Oh my god! That’s what he was saving me from?”

“You and Curly Cookie both.” Nanny pats my arm. “You obviously didn’t get stung, or you would have known right away what was up.”

“Why didn’t Van say anything?” Like *anything*? Even a hello before the whole hornet incident. He’s still out there, hopping around and cursing, swatting, spraying, and trying to dodge the hornets, which I can now see flying up like little black jet planes, zeroing in on him. “He has to be getting pulverized out there.”

“Oh, yes, probably, but he won’t leave it well enough alone until he has things taken care of. It would have been ten times worse if I modernized and got one of those fancy new mowers. He would have run right over it, and then all hell would have broken loose.” Nanny huffs. “But I will say that Van has the manners of the love child of a porcupine and an ornery troll with an arse full of buckshot because people are scared of trolls, and it makes sense that they’d get out their shotguns and pitchforks whenever one came around.”

If Kimmy were here, she’d probably say that whatever that love child looks like would be cuter than her brother by far. I can almost hear her saying that at least trolls have class. Trolls have a certain allure and charm, and porcupines are just straight-up adorable. But not Van. He just acts like an ass.

“He saved me from the hornets,” I say woodenly, ignoring the Kimmy voice in my brain and the sense of disappointment

that I tried and failed, *again*, to lure Van into some form of even basic conversation. “So I guess there’s that.”

Nanny studies me for so long, her hazel eyes scoring every part of me straight down to the depths of my woefully inadequate would-be spy soul. “You came by because....”

“I...I needed to borrow a cup of frozen gravy.”

God, I love this woman. She doesn’t even crack a smile or give me grief about my horribly transparent excuse. She just nods knowingly and turns away from the window, motioning me to follow her. “I have just the thing you need. A whole container of frozen gravy for you. You get to choose. Beef, chicken, turkey, cream of turnip and beef roast, shrimp with garlic butter drippings turned gravy, sausage gravy, creamy gravy with mushrooms, or liver and onions gravy.” She keeps doing her Nanny stare through my soul thing. “I could use some help this weekend cleaning up the backyard, and I’m going to put Van to work at it. If you really want to talk to him, that would be the perfect opportunity. You could help out as well.” She breaks into a broad grin. “That last one is gravy as well. It’s called the icebreaker gravy.”

Well, butter my gravy-covered biscuits, doesn’t she just have my number. And geez, why didn’t I think of that while I

was racking my brain for something to say when I got here?

I have to blink back a sting of sudden tears because this woman is so kind. So, so kind. She just sees and *knows* everything. Gathering my courage and the last few shards of my dignity around me, I manage to scrape out a cough of a response. “I’ll...uh...I’ll take the icebreaker gravy and a container of the liver and onions gravy, please.”

Nanny gives me one of those looks that say there’s hope for the world yet. “If you actually like the liver and onions variety, you’re the perfect one to break through that boy’s thick ass walls and get to him.”

I don’t know about that. I just don’t know. I want to confess everything right there on the spot, but Nanny walks off, mumbling a song that she made up about pink wig stealing dogs and crazy front yard hornets.

CHAPTER 5



Van

Well, shiver my fucking timbers, if this isn't the worst way I've spent the weekend in a long time. However, in light of my previous rather dubious and shitty past, I'd like to temper that and say it's the worst way I've spent a weekend since I got back. It's also the first weekend since I've been back.

"Focus," Nanny says, snapping her fingers in my general direction while Curly Cookie goes bounding through the yard, causing as much general chaos as he does when he's in the house. He seems to live for it, but I guess that's just how dogs are until they turn five, and then all the piss seems to settle right out of them. I think it happens around age forty for humans, but maybe not since that seems more like mid-life crisis territory. "Fuck-us."

That's more what it sounds like when Nanny snaps at me. Fuck. Us. God, she's so right about that.

"What would you like me to *fuck-us* on first?" I pronounce the word the way she does, which makes her scowl, but she can't hide the twinkling delight in her hazel eyes. For

our tackling of the backyard, she's donned purple spandex leggings with neon green ankle warmers, a denim overall that's actually a skirt with little cat heads all over them, and a vibrant blue bobbed wig, which she keeps on with a huge floppy brimmed hat.

“How about the flower gardens? Err, no. Let's continue with the patio. And work on getting this deck taken down. If we can get this crap up, then we have a good chance of getting it replaced.”

By we, she means me because there's no way I'm going to let my grandmother do that kind of heavy lifting. She'd probably give herself a hernia. Hell, I'll probably give *myself* a hernia. I'm out here after mowing the nasty grass and cleaning it all out so we can see what we're working with. I've got my regular work armor on—faded jeans, a T-shirt, and a set of work gloves.

“I think taking apart the deck will involve tools. Like a hammer. Or a sledgehammer. Or a bulldozer. We don't have any of those. I'll have to go out and buy them.”

“No, you don't! I have a garage full. All your grandpa's old tools are in there. I didn't touch anything after he died. There's an ancient old tiller in there, too, for the flower beds,

and there are some other freaky power tools that would probably help us demolish this old path and get up those patio blocks.”

“We can probably reuse the patio blocks. I could just relay them after I dig them back up and clean them. The deck is rotted through. It needs to go. As for the flower beds, that’s your area. I don’t know anything about flowers. I can see if I can get the tiller working, but it’s probably going to need a good day’s taking apart and cleaning.”

“Just spray gas on the carb. That should get ‘er fired up.”

“Gah, Nanny! If you want to explode yourself, that sounds like a great idea.”

“I’m always up for a little danger,” she says smugly while patting the ends of her bobbed wig. Curly Cookie streaks by carrying a weed that’s crusty and dead, yellowed from last year, and he’s no doubt raiding the trash pile that I have yet to bag up. How very in character. He drops the weed, which is probably like eight feet tall, and then proceeds to growl and pounce on it like it needs a good old-fashioned killing.

And that’s when I smell cinnamon and vanilla. I’m pretty sure the dog isn’t emitting the delicate, mouth-watering scent because all he emits are potent, eye-watering farts, so I whirl

around to face the backyard's entrance—a dilapidated gate in the sagging fence that is nearly impossible to pass through because a bush has morphed into a tree and is blocking most of it.

Remi's small stature must have been how she managed to squeeze through the gate and past the tree-like bush easily enough. I watch her walk over with her hair up in a flirty, swinging ponytail and aviator sunglasses covering her eyes. She's wearing tripped-up skinny jeans, rubber boots, and a purple T-shirt with a green cartoon T-Rex on the front. It doesn't have any writing, but it's showing off just enough of those dino arms that I imagine it could have said T-Flex or something adorable that would match Remi's personality.

The minute I spot her, I feel like I've been coldcocked and knocked on my ass by Curly Cookie, which happens more often than you'd think—just try giving that beast his dinner. She lifts a hand in greeting, and a ring winks on her right index finger. It's of two twisted golden leaves entwined together, and it matches the little leaf necklace she has on. The leaf part barely comes down to the neck of her shirt. I'm so flustered that my tongue turns into a bunch of knots I can't untangle, and I have to do the age-old shove my hands in my

pockets routine, so she doesn't notice the semi-hard-on I'm sporting.

Why, why, why, is the insta-boner a thing whenever she's near?

If it gets any harder, I'm going to have to leave or make a "*there's a tool I could demolish the deck with*" joke, which I would never do. Ever. Especially not in front of Nanny. Or Remi. Or the dog. Or thin air and the world, vast and distant at large.

"Oh. Hey, Van. I didn't know you'd be helping back here." I can't see her eyes, but something a little too bubbly in her voice tells me that she did indeed know I'd be back here because Nanny probably planned this all out. "I just came over to help with the flower gardens. I've got a car full of flowers and dirt."

"Oh, bless you, sweetheart!" Nanny races over, practically skipping, to throw her arms around Remi. She hugs Nanny back softly, and then Curly Cookie races across the yard and pounces on them both, his little rat tail going full force, and they include him—slobbery, farting, hairy critter with death breath that he is.

I'm just over here, minding my business, awkward as hell, and damn it...I think maybe the twinge going off in my chest so hard that I almost want to reach up and massage the spot is probably loneliness. It's incredible how watching people be happy and close to one another can make a person feel isolated like nothing else. *Fuck my life multiplied with a heart attack* since that's roughly what the ache in my chest is probably going to translate into.

"I'm going to head into the house and make us some lemonade. Sullivan, can you help Remi unpack her car?" She winks at the end, and it's official. She totally planned this. Now she's making her great escape into the house to produce some kind of lemonade that will take her eight hours to make.

I know all of Nanny's tricks.

She doesn't give me time to back out. She calls Curly Cookie and goes skipping up the broken-ass deck like it's not two seconds away from total annihilation and then in through the patio doors.

I raise a hand and run it through my hair, messing up the sticky strands. I'm pretty much a sweaty mess right now, and shit, Remi is standing there so tidy and perfect without a speck of dirt on her. The thought of messing up her pretty red rubber

boots and smudging her jeans, her T-shirt, or her gorgeous creamy skin with dirt from the garden gets me...Rock. Fucking. Hard.

I want to punch myself. In fact, I want to dick-punch myself. I'm probably going to need to dick-punch myself to get the situation under control.

And still, I'm just standing here, overthinking this and turning what I want to say over and over and over in my head until the words just won't come out.

"Umm, I parked in front." Remi peeks over my shoulder to the second sagging gate in the worst part of the fence, which overlooks the back alley. "It would probably be easier if I pulled around back?" I ogle her like an imbecile until she clears her throat and says, "Um, okay. Yup. Just going to go drive around back now. If you could open the gate for me, that would be awesome. I really don't need that much help. It's only like thirty bags of soil and six hundred trays of flowers. I borrowed my parents' minivan and swapped out my car with them since I knew it would be a big load." She suddenly looks horrified, though I'm not sure why. Maybe it was the big load statement. I have to fight back a grin. "I can handle it myself,"

she squeaks, and turning around, she bolts out of the backyard the way she came in.

My god, I have never felt like more of a useless twit, and this is coming from a guy whose wife ran off with twin Swedish bodybuilders. This is coming from a guy whose father—

Thankfully, I don't have to think about it since the rattling sounds of the vehicle of death cough and sputter and clang its way down the alley and appear on the other side of the fence. I haven't moved. I've just stood right here like a log stuck in a bog. I need to get that gate open. Useful. I want to be useful to Remi. Talk. I want to talk to her. Move. I want to walk forward and do all those things. Why won't my body just cooperate?

“Fuck-us, Sullivan!” Nanny screeches out the open kitchen window. Damn it. She's watching this whole thing play out. “Go and get the gate.”

I guess that's what I need to get my mojo moving. I break out of my invisible concrete barrier and get the gate open just in time to see Remi walk in with two huge bags of dirt thrown over her shoulder. She already has the most adorable smudge of black earth on her cheek. One that I'd love to brush away for her. But no, I won't do that because she's Remi—Kimmy's

best friend for life and a life-long family friend. Also, because I'm in no position to offer anyone much of anything other than the burned-out, chewed-up husk of my heart that Tina left behind.

Fuck-us, Sullivan. Yeah, that's what I need to do.

CHAPTER 6



Remi

Well, so far, this is going great. I've had about zero words from Van. He did open the gate for me, though, so I guess that counts for something.

I heave the bags down, and my sunglasses nearly fall off my face at the effort. I go to right them, making a big streak of dirt smear down my nose, a streak so big that even I can see it. "Oh my god!" I'm horrified at the whole clumsy me thing coming out front and center, but then I figure, fuck it. It's only a streak of dirt. Perfection is highly overrated. I laugh it off and brush the smudge, probably making it worse.

Van stays wrapped up in his silence, but he steps toward me and pulls something out of his pocket. It's a hanky. Who the hell has hankies anymore? This one is legit, too, with embroidered flowers on it. I freeze when the super-soft linen makes contact with my skin. With one quick swipe, the dirt is gone, and Van is back, pacing away from me and walking toward the car. But I can feel him all over my body like he'd cupped my face and kissed me breathless.

His scent lingers in the air after him. I've hit some real lows before, but this has to be a new one since I'm obsessed with the fresh, clean scent that's sharp in my nose. It gets my lady bits fired up and makes me all shivery and twisted up inside. I want to save that scent, bottle it, coat myself in it, and have it always. I want to live in a fog of it.

Bam. Bam, bam.

Three bags of dirt hit the ground right beside the ones I set down, spurring me into action. We work side by side, emptying out the van. I wasn't kidding about the amount of stuff I bought. Along with the gravy from the other day, Nanny pressed two one-hundred-dollar bills into my hand and told me to buy the place out.

I didn't quite accomplish that, but I did get enough for her small flower beds back here, I'm sure. I also got a brand new shovel, which I took out last. I walk straight to the first flower bed, the largest one that spans the back of the fence, extending from the falling-down garden shed all the way to the end. I try to act like I know what I'm doing, but when I plow the shovel into the dirt, it doesn't go anywhere. It's like striking concrete, and the force of it vibrates up my arms and into my ribs, jarring my teeth. I glance around to see if Van saw that, and

yup, judging from the way his jaw muscles are flexing, he's clenching his teeth against a laugh.

“For the love of frozen gravy, I think this needs to be turned over by something other than a shovel and a set of hands.”

“A tiller.”

Halle-freaking-lujah, we have words!

I want to encourage that, but something tells me to address the whole elephant in the room thing first. If I get that out of the way, maybe he'll be more comfortable talking to me. Isn't everyone more comfortable when their companion doesn't have an agenda?

“I'm sorry about the party,” I say, digging my toe into the grass. It leaves a massive divot in the freshly cut lawn, which is mostly dead and spindly anyway since life was being choked out of it before. I gasp and quickly try and cover it up, which only makes it worse. “It was awful. The party, I mean.”

Van sighs. I'm not looking up, but I hear how tired he sounds. “Yeah,” he agrees, the word heavy. “I wish Nanny would have warned me about it.”

“It’s kind of hard to have a surprise party if you tell the person it’s for in advance, though.”

That earns me a soft laugh, and I finally do look up. I still have my sunglasses on, and I hope they hide my starry-eyed gaze. Van’s got his hands in his pockets. There’s dirt streaked across his arms, T-shirt, jeans, and jawline, which gives him a rugged allure. Gardening looks good on him. I’d like to lick him clean. I mean, shower him clean. I mean, lick him in the shower. *Damn it, just stop, brain.*

“Very true. Doubly so because if I had known in advance, there’s no way I would have shown up. I spent the night dodging family and almost everyone else so that I didn’t have to answer a thousand questions.”

“Where did you hide? Under the bed?”

His eyes track to the garden shed. Now I’m the one laughing. “Oh wow, really?”

He shrugs. “Yeah. It worked great. So, what are you really doing here? Did my sister send you to spy on me?”

Alarm bells clash in my head. That was just tacked on there so smoothly and casually, but I’m not fooled. Van’s soft caramel eyes are watching me way too closely, and I nearly

choke on my tongue before I can respond. “Uhhhhhh, no. I’ve been promising to help with the flowers here for a while. It’s already late for planting season. I got everything on sale, so that was a bonus. Probably the only time procrastination pays off.”

He crosses his arms, and his muscles bunch up. His T-shirt tightens over his chest, and I swear I can see the outline of a nipple. Never underestimate male nipples. They’re amazingly sexy. “Did Nanny bribe you to come over here and keep me company?”

“I—I—”

“I mean with gravy, not with cash.”

“Ummmmmm....”

“She’s not trying to play some kind of matchmaking game, is she?”

“Naturally.” Sometimes the truth is best. I remember Kimmy’s pep talk about my unflagging honesty. “But that’s probably her intention with most people who are single and in the same area at the same time. I came to help with the flowers. And...and because I wanted to see if you were okay. You were right about the party being intense.” I beg him

silently with my eyes to try and understand what I'm saying, but I don't know if he does, and it's probably best to just come out with it. "Kimmy can also be intense, but she's had to be tough. She's been running things by herself for a long time."

Van's not going to dig into that right now. Not when he has something even juicier to sink his teeth into, and sadly it's not me the way I want it to be. "Nanny told you that I'm being broody and too quiet," he presses. "Or maybe you just want to know what level of a wreck I am after everything that happened."

Oh shit. Abort mission. Abort freaking mission. Bail, bail, bail. "Kimmy's glad you're back," I blurt. There's no way I'm setting foot into that trap he just set out. "She might have a funny way of showing it, but I know she is. She missed you. Once she gets over her shock at all this, she'll realize that." At least, I hope.

"You'd be more convincing if your left eye weren't twitching manically."

I suck in a breath. How the heck can he see that behind my sunglasses? "Define manically."

"Like it's doing right now."

“It’s not really doing anything.” *Shit, it’s twitching like a bitch.*

Because someone out there finally has my six, and I think that means the back side of me, Van lets the whole matchmaking thing go. “Anyway,” he sighs. “Nanny has a tiller. It’s in the garage, or so she says. It’s also going to need some work, and by work, I think that’s her polite way of saying it’s probably been sitting there rotting for twenty years.”

“What’s wrong with it?” I realize how stupid that sounds as soon as it comes out. “What’s not wrong with it?” I amend. There. Better.

“I’m going to start with the carb first, put fresh gas in it after that, and see if it runs after some love.”

“You could always just throw gas onto the carb. That seems like the best of both.”

Van struggles against a grin. “You’ve been listening to Nanny way too much.” He angles toward the front of the yard, his shoulders bunching as he pushes his hands deeper into his pockets. “I could use an extra set of hands if you want to help.”

I have to say that I'm shocked. It was the last thing I expected. "Really?"

"Yeah. If Nanny finds that I left you out here in the hot sun all alone, there'll be hell to pay. At least the garage has some shade."

"Ha. I knew you weren't making that offer out of the goodness of your heart." *Oh shit, did I just say that out loud? Yup, I absolutely just did.* Thankfully for me, Van finds it funny, and his smile grows from a lip twitch at the corners to a lip twitch in the middle of his lower lip.

He continues the pattern of silence as he beats a path to the front yard. He even tackles the bush monster beside the gate, holding the branches back for me so that I don't get whipped in the face again. He's so much stronger than I am, and that means I don't get knocked nearly flat on my ass when the gate finally gives because he's holding that open for me too.

Say what you want about Sullivan Carlson, but he appears to have impeccable manners... even if he's not much for conversation.

Also, because I walked behind him the whole time, I got to check out his backside again. I've been up close and

personal with that backside when he carried me over his shoulder into the house to escape the hornets. My eyes are naturally glued there again, against my will. I hope that the sunglasses hide the worst of my butt-checking-out intentions, but he never looks over his shoulder to catch me at it.

We end up in the garage, which is basically an add-on, cave-like structure at the side of the house that is dark, cool, and slightly damp. It smells like motor oil and earth, and there's a bunch of sketchy-looking ancient containers lining the shelves at the far end. The floor is concrete, but it's seen better days. Way better days. I think it's more cracks than actual cement.

It's neat and orderly, even if dusty and unused. The tiller sits at the back near a pegboard on the wall displaying tools of every kind—wrenches, hammers, screwdrivers, levels. A wooden bench stands below that with old metal coffee cans filled with nuts and bolts.

Van walks straight to the tiller, checks it over with a quick swipe of his hands, then grabs several screwdrivers off their pegs on the wall. He begins dismantling the thing like he knows what he's doing, and I don't know, maybe he does. I

have no idea, and I'm not sure my version of help would be any real help at all, so I hang back and watch.

“Well, that seems to be a fine specimen,” I venture. “It looks like it would start right up with some love.” It looks like death warmed over and then warmed and warmed and warmed again, but hey, sometimes that's the best kind of warm death.

Van's head remains bent, his dark, scrumptious chocolate hair falling on his face. “Hmm.”

“So...you're staying with Nanny, and this is your way of paying her back because she's letting you use the spare room rent-free?” That's too nosy. Of all the things to say...well, at least it wasn't, “*So, I heard your wife left you for two muscly dudes. Who does that?*”

“She could always charge for the room and pay me in gravy.”

I let out a surprised laugh, my second of the day. “That seems like a fair trade. She would never run out of gravy.”

Van's head snaps up, and his eyes, which are even more scrumptious than his hair, all soft caramel, flash with fire. “Look, Remi. I know you think that Kimmy and I are locked in some silent dick measuring contest about the company, but

there's no contest at all. She's got more balls than I'll ever have, plus a black belt in karate, and I know she'll kick my ass every single time."

Oh god. It's absolutely childish that hearing him talk about dicks and balls in any form creates a slow, languid heat spreading through me—arousal that makes me want to melt into a liquid puddle on the spot, scrambling my mind and making me silly and forgetful. But there it is. The opening I need. It's time to get down to doing the job I promised to do. Spy talk, even if I'd rather stand here and enjoy the view while musing about all the things that aren't real life.

I brace myself, pull up a little of my unfailing honesty, and go for it—subtlety, be damned.

"Uh, okay, yes, she's worried that you're going to steal the company from her. She's worked really hard over the years, taking what your father built and expanding on it. She's the CEO. It's not that she doesn't not want to be the one in charge. I mean, she does want to be the one in charge, but she's more worried that if someone else comes in—namely, uh, you—they'd wreck everything and dismantle the company, and people would lose their jobs."

Van runs his hand through his hair, looks down at the floor, then continues working the screwdriver on the tiller. “Not going to happen.”

“But there’s a will.” I hope I didn’t just disclose something he doesn’t know about. That would suck. That would really suck. Kimmy would never forgive me for botching this right the fuck up.

“Yeah, I know about that. You can tell my sister that she has nothing to worry about. Maybe we can even make some sort of peace and not be enemies since I’m not going to hold my breath for a real friendship again. I know I left and abandoned her. I was a shit big brother. There was...stuff.”

He might not be holding his breath, but I literally am—my chest a strange mixture of hope and fear, worry and empathy—but he doesn’t go on. He’s not going to expound on that. He clearly doesn’t want to talk about it, but I can’t just leave it alone. “What kind of stuff?”

His hands work the screwdriver just a little more furiously. He puts each screw in the pocket of his jeans after he takes it out. I hope he’s mentally cataloging how it came apart because the thing is so ancient that I doubt there are any

videos online telling a person how to put it back together again.

Van grunts.

“Oh. I...I see. That kind of stuff. Stuff you don't want to talk about.”

Another grunt.

I wish we hadn't regressed to the language of cavemen as it's doing a serious disservice to them because they probably used those grunts as a method of communication while I'm getting nothing at all here. Also, maybe cavemen actually did more than grunt. I don't know. *I'm so sorry, cavemen.*

“Van?” I debate telling a ridiculous joke just to see him smile. I don't think he's done that since he got back. Maybe he saves them for private moments where it's just him with no one to see it. But *I'd* like to see it. I can't even remember what his full-on grin looks like.

I do remember how he used to walk as a teenager, with a sexy sort of swagger that I always thought he'd grow into as a man, but I haven't seen that walk either. Logically, I know it's probably because he was metaphorically kicked in the nuts and completely emasculated by his ex-wife, but I can't say that's

the reason. I don't know anything about anything, really. Back in the day, I had enough of my own problems to worry about, with my parents losing everything, going bankrupt, and just trying to hang on. I wasn't paying enough attention to what was going on with Kimmy and, by larger extension, Van. I watched him, sure, because I had a hopeless crush on him, but it wasn't like he was going to take me into his confidence and pour his heart out to his little sister's best friend. Even when I got older, I was still three years younger than him, and when you're a teenager, that's a big deal, I guess.

I have no idea why I think he'll do the pouring out his heart thing now.

He's clearly not in a talkative mood, and there doesn't seem to be any further information I can wring from him, and honestly, I've accomplished my mission. Haven't I? I believed him when he said he wasn't going to mess with the company. I'm sure I can convince Kimmy.

"I should probably get going. I just remembered I should return the van. Nanny has my number, so if you get this thing going or if you need some more help, I'm off after five most days, and I have weekends off. I'm more than willing to come and help out." *And not spy on you. Or spy on you. Or*

whatever, maybe I just want to be around. I also don't want to appear pathetic, clingy, or forceful, so bailing right now is probably a good idea.

Lame. It's a lame excuse, and Van knows it. He grunts.

I've never been someone who is very good at impulse decisions. I tend to overthink everything, and when I do something impulsive, it's always something I regret later because I somehow either manage to mess it up or it's something I should have actually taken the time to think about. Whatever this thing is, moving my feet forward is probably a bad impulse decision in the making. It's coming. Oh god, it's coming. And my feet won't stop. I'm moving forward through the garage, inhaling motor oil, ancient gasoline, and the citrusy, spicy scent of Van. Then, oh god, I'm walking around him, and he still hasn't moved. It's like he's frozen in time, enabling my bad decision that hasn't happened yet, and then it happens.

My arms slip around Van's huge shoulders. He goes absolutely rigid, which allows me to half melt, half flop against his back until my hands meet around his muscular chest and my face grazes the back of his T-shirt. He smells like freshly cut grass and the salt of his sweat, which isn't gross at

all. It's like he sweats fresh rain and citrus, for goodness freaking sake. I rest there for just a second, absorbing his warmth and the sticky dampness of him that is somehow beautiful too. I memorize as many little details as I can before I pull back. I know this is never going to happen again, so I'm going to keep every little bit of it treasured away in my memory forever.

Pathetic? Please. It's not like this hug is fulfilling a lifetime fantasy or anything. Alright, so maybe it's a little bit pathetic. But whatever.

I stumble back a few steps, putting a safe distance between us, and Van doesn't move. His hand is frozen on the screwdriver, his body rigid and tense. "You—you looked like maybe you needed that," I stammer, gulping for air so loudly that he can probably hear. "Whatever the reason why, or whatever anyone else says, I'm glad you're back. If you ever need someone to talk to, I'm all ears and no judgment." *Someone needs to put me out of my misery, that's for freaking sure.*

I take off, fleeing the garage, my rubber boots scraping over the uneven floor. I even make it out without tripping and doing a faceplant. In the backyard, though, the gate makes me

stumble, and then the bush monster on the other side catches me, wrapping snarly, long branch arms around me. It actually keeps me from falling, but it does take me a while to get myself untangled. I'm so unsteady after that it's a miracle I make it into the van. It coughs to life, sputtering as I steer it down the alley and back to the main streets.

The thing is so ancient that it doesn't have any sort of phone connectivity, but as soon as I get back home, I send a text off to Kimmy, telling her that everything is fine and she doesn't have to worry.

Of course, she can't just leave it at that. She has to call.

I pick up on the first ring, still sitting in the van, which is turning into a sweltering tin can because it's hot and the AC died a long time ago. I crack a window in the driveway and lean my head out. "Hey," I say casually, and I hope it's a *hey, I didn't just hug your brother and have a freak out twenty minutes ago*.

"So he said he's not back for the company, and you believed him?"

"Yeah, I believed him."

"Then why is he back?"

I sigh. The phone is so sticky against my ear, and my palm is so damp that it's a combination that nearly slides the device down the side of my face. I don't want to have this conversation in the house where my parents might overhear anything, so I put up with the heat. "I don't know. He wasn't in a talkative mood, but he did assure me that he wasn't back to take anything from you."

"He's lying."

"I don't think he was."

"I need proof."

"Kimmy..." I have to bail. I spring open the door and tumble out, my clothes stuck to my body, clinging like a second skin. My arms are still tingling, and I think it's from that hug earlier and not from impending sunstroke.

"He needs to write it down. Negate the will. Surrender all his rights or any claim or whatever."

"Okay, so write something up. I'm sure he'll sign it."

"He won't. Not if I give it to him. You'll have to do it."

"What?" I think we're going straight into avoidance territory, and this is unhealthy. I know Kimmy missed Van, and she's totally pissed he just abandoned her. I have no idea

how to fix it, but me getting him to sign her paperwork probably isn't going to do much of anything to fix their broken relationship. "I can't do that. If you want him to come to any kind of meeting with you, you should set it up through lawyers and ask him to come and sign. I'm sure he would. Also, your Nanny needs help with her yard. We should go in a few days and plant those flowers. It wasn't just me who promised."

"Did you remember what I said about chainsaws and nuts? I'm not doing anything with Van."

"Yeah, I remember, but you don't have nuts or a chainsaw, so I guess you're stuck with the alternative, which is to grin and bear it or help your grandma out and hope that he won't be around." Although, I really hope he will be around. And that he's not mad that I dared to give him a hug, which is a way out of bounds thing for me to do.

"What happened?" Kimmy asks. "You have that hitch in your voice that you always get when you make bad decisions."

"N—nothing. It's just hot, and I'm sitting out here in the van so that my parents don't overhear, and I'm boiling alive. I wanted to give you an update. Gotta go. See you at work on Monday."

"Remi, wait—"

I hang up, leaning hard against the van's door. I'm panting, boiling in my own skin, and it's not entirely the weather's fault, even if it's unseasonably hot today. I'm still wearing my sunglasses, and they're melting off my face. Okay, so maybe the van did cook me alive a little on the way back, but that hug. Oh my god, that hug. I don't think I'm ever going to get over it. A different Van scrambled my brain, ovaries, and lady bits before I ever got in the van.

And that's a real problem because I don't need to add any fuel to the *I haven't gotten over Van* fire, especially because he was only ever just Kimmy's big brother. It was a silly, immature crush and not something that is worthy of not being able to get over. I'm not some crazy person, and I've certainly never done a face swap. It's not my fault that I haven't gotten it right with anyone yet.

Whatever. After that surprise hug, which was probably a little too much like the surprise party, I'm pretty sure he'll go out of his way to avoid me for however much longer he plans on sticking around here, and then sadly, all my little crush problems will be solved.

CHAPTER 7



Van

I'm so tired of being lonely. I'm like this giant burning ball of blazing loneliness. An island of loneliness. I emit it like the sun emits fucking gamma rays. Or does it emit that? Maybe it's UV I'm thinking of. God, how can I be thirty years old and not know this?

I'm so scared to say anything to anyone because every time I open my mouth, I feel like all the bitter shit from the past is just going to come pouring out—the product of a twelve-year marriage and the two years after that, during which I spent trying to get my shit together and pick up the pieces. I've asked myself the usual questions so many times—how much of it was a lie, were we ever really in love, did any of it mean anything, how could one person do that to another person who put their faith in them—that I'm sick to death of the endless cycle. I wish I could rip my brain out of my head, put it in the washing machine, and give it a thorough cleaning before I stuff it back in place.

In short, ever since I found out some crucial familial information that set me at odds with my dad after I turned

sixteen, then leaving at eighteen, getting married, trying to make a life with the person I thought was the right one, and having all that shattered to shit, it's been a heck of a dark time.

And then.

That hug.

*That crazy, spontaneous hug that said *you don't have to explain. I get it. My life fell apart, too, once upon a time, and it sucked. I know things are hard. Sometimes all we need is just a second of physical contact with another empathetic person. I'm here. Always.**

I still can't believe she hugged me.

That hug set off a string of chain reactions that I didn't expect. Internally and externally.

Said chain led me to fix the tiller in record time because my mind was suddenly clear and focused on it, and all the nasty voices banging around in my skull just shut the fuck up for a change. After tilling all the flower beds, I tackled the deck, which was a good physical distraction anyway. After all that was done, it was nearly dark. Tomorrow I'll rent a truck and get all the rotten wood cleared out. Then I'll start taking up patio stones to see if they can be saved.

Feeling hungry, I ate something and actually tasted it for the first time in god knows how long. Nanny's chicken and pickle sandwiches with accompanying pickle gravy on the side were the best things I've had in ages. The shower I took was warm instead of cold, and what do you know, warm water is so much more pleasant. After that, I hit my much too small twin-sized bed, expecting to fall into an exhausted sleep, but it didn't happen.

My brain refused to be silent, and after a few hours, I got up and crept into the kitchen. I wasn't hungry, but I did think about making myself a cup of tea or something equally soothing. I spotted Nanny's address book—which she's maniacal about keeping up to date—and found an entry for Remi's parents. I then found one for Remi. It was the same address.

I knew where she lived in high school, and it hasn't changed. They haven't moved.

I can't say what made me think it was a good idea to throw on a fresh pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and a hoodie, then tug on the shoes I use for running, but I did all that and slipped out of the house. I left Nanny a note just in case. Something to the tune of how I needed a walk to clear my head.

I really did go out with the intention of just going a few blocks, but I kept going. And going. And then I switched my phone's GPS to Remi's address and kept going.

I'm still going. At this point, I've walked about thirteen point eight of the fifteen miles that separate our houses. It's now two in the morning, and I have no intention of doing anything other than walking past the house like some sketchy nighttime creep.

I guess I'll have to blame the wind for my change of plans. It kicks up out of nowhere, and I get a mouthful of street dust that still hasn't been swept away from the winter, even though it's that borderline time between late spring and early summer. The grit sticks between my teeth like grainy toothpaste—the kind they use on you at the dentist. Shudder.

It might be the dead of night and pitch black out, but by the light of the streetlights, I can see the clouds shifting overhead, blown around by a wind whipping hard enough to send me off my feet. It's hard to inhale into it, but I do, getting a lungful of the fresh scent that warns that it's going to pour. As if to confirm my suspicions, thunder crackles overhead, a distant rumble way off. It would make sense, given the heat of the day, that it's going to storm.

I like storms.

Just not so much when I have a fifteen-mile walk back to Nanny's house and a few miles to go in the other direction.

The first drops hit my head a few minutes later, gentle when they come down, almost reluctant, but then the clouds give an ominous rumble and let loose with a *what the fuck ever* downpour that drenches me on contact. I hate the feel of wet clothes, specifically wet jeans, but wet sneakers might top that one. I'm soaked through, glad that my phone is at least water-resistant and is still telling me that I have less than a mile to go.

I break into a run, letting it guide me to make rights and lefts off of sidewalks as I bolt through the worst of the downpour. It's not a warm rain, and with the combination of the stiff wind gusting, my teeth are chattering as I crest the last block.

My phone tells me that the destination is two hundred meters ahead on my right. I know that by now, since not much has changed in the mid-sized split level since I last saw it. None of the lights are on, which makes sense given that it's now three in the morning. I race around to the back, bypassing yellow siding and stucco. There's no fence, and I know exactly

where Remi's room is, compliments of having to literally go into the house on more than one occasion to convince Kimmy it was time to go when I picked her up. Or at least I did know where it was. Hopefully, it hasn't changed.

The backyard is exactly the way it used to be, so that gives me hope that there hasn't been a switch-up. The bushes are thicker and the trees taller, but the deck, the location of the barbeque, and the sprawling rock garden that Remi and Kimmy never understood are still the same. I kind of like it. It's charming, with different sizes of rocks surrounding a small angel statue.

I choose a pebble and turn to face Remi's window. This always works in the movies, and I'm so drenched that I'm not above giving it a go.

I let the tiny little stone fly. It hits the window with a bang that sounds more like a boulder was just hurled at the house, and it promptly cracks the window in four different directions.

"Shit!" Yup. That's just about the sum of my luck right there, laid out all neat and clear.

I can't very well run off since I have to at least offer to pay for the damage. I'm considering ringing the doorbell to explain myself and apologize when a light clicks on. A set of

big, wide, fearful blue eyes peek over the frame, and then Remi's whole head appears. She slides the window open carefully, dubious of the damage.

“Van? What on earth are you doing out there?” She blinks sleepily, and her eyes shift to the sky, then back to my sodden figure. “It’s pouring, you know?” Her hair is tousled all over the place. Sleep looks good on her. Almost as good as the loose-fitting cami top she’s wearing that outlines her...never mind. Not going there right now.

“I can see that.” I can feel it too. At the last mile, my shoes decided to make the worst squishy farting noises back at me as I pounded over the pavement. “I’m sorry about the window. I sure as shit didn’t expect to wreck it. I’ll pay for it. I’m an idiot.”

Remi folds her arms on the sill. Her bedroom’s on the main floor, so not very high up. Only about a six-foot distance from the ground. “Why didn’t you just ring the bell?” She leans a little further out, and the way her arms are folded pushes up her breasts in the top. I have to force myself to look away before I get caught staring there.

“It’s the middle of the night.”

“Oh, right. I guess it is.” She pauses. “Do you want to come in? You must if you were throwing stones at my window. Why are you here anyway?” Her eyes widen. “Did you walk all this way in the rain?”

“Well, technically, it only started raining at the end of the walk.”

“That’s fifteen miles! How on earth did you come all this way? *Why* did you come all this way?” A bolt of lightning blazes across the sky, illuminating the dark storm clouds overhead and pretty much the whole backyard along with it. The crack of thunder is so loud that I throw my hands over my ears. Remi lets out a soft scream and ducks down, then pops back up, looking embarrassed. “You need to get in here before you get fried on the spot.”

“I...” Why *did* I come all this way? Was it to talk to her? To thank her for that hug? To say something, anything, because there is so much I need to get out, and I feel like maybe she’s the one who I can tell it to?

Maybe I’m just crazy. Probably that.

The second sizzle of lightning and a jarring clap of thunder hasten my decision, and I stride toward her window before I know what I’m doing. I attempt to jump and grab the

windowsill, which I manage to do, but it leaves me dangling like a dead man, suspended in mid-air. The sill makes a creaking sound that announces impending doom, probably for the both of us. Remi leans further out, her hair trailing like a curtain above me, brushing my knuckles. She's so soft. I mean, her hair is so soft. The fresh rain scent is pierced by her cinnamon and vanilla scent. Her lips look so soft from this angle, her face so delicate. At the surprise party, I did notice that she was pretty, but this is a completely different angle, and she's not just beautiful. She's a goddess of rain peeking out of the window.

“Good lord, go around to the front. I'll open the door.”

I obey. What else can I do? I walk around to the front of the house and stand on the concrete doorstep. There isn't much of an overhang, so the rain is still doing its worst to me, but at this point, how much more drenched can “already soaked to the bone” actually become? I'm squishy and squelchy all over, an overused sponge that's at max capacity. I lean my head against the door with a groan, putting one hand on the metal, though that's probably a mistake. If lightning decides to strike me down, I'd have two connection points, and one of them is my brain.

Good lord, *what* on earth was I even doing here anyway? I've asked myself that twice now, but maybe the third time is the charm. *Why am I here?* Nope, still no answers. The door still hasn't opened. My head is still connected to it. I wait for a valid reason to come to me. I'm sure it's coming in three, two, one...nope, still nothing. Ah, that's right. I don't have one. I know I'm a—what's the word that people have brought back to use, that ancient word, the one little bastard kids like to sling about on that horrible app Nanny makes me play so I can pass levels she can't—oh yes, a pleb. A creepy pleb, to top it off.

That's hardly kind. Give yourself a break. Your life has been a pot of poo stew lately. Also, you're going to humiliate yourself as soon as she opens the door. You had better just leave now.

Yes, I should leave. I want to leave. I need to get back to Nanny's house and get my sorry ass into something dry and into bed where it belongs. Except, I'm still here. My head is still connected to the door. That's what spells out disaster when said door opens, tumbling me—you guessed it—headfirst into thin air. I get my hands out in front of me to try and stop the forward momentum, but all they do is stop my

head from breaking my fall on the vinyl flooring. At least there's a soft doormat here, one which I'm soaking rather ungraciously.

I scramble up, my face burning ten shades of blazing fire. I can practically feel the rain sizzling off with the heat. "I—I'm sorry," I stammer.

Remi is looking at me with the widest eyes and the most shocked expression. She's changed into a pair of black, skin-tight yoga pants that make her legs and bottom look hecking amazing and a soft-looking fuzzy purple sweater that slides low over one shoulder, revealing an expanse of creamy, perfect skin.

"Are you okay?" She gapes at me. "Can I help you up?"

I rub my wet hands on my wet jeans and lean back into wet shoes. "Nope. I'm good." *Just an imbecile.*

"Come inside," she whispers. "Like, *more* inside so I can shut the door. I haven't snuck into my parents' room yet for a change of clothes, but I'll find you something. My dad has a spare T-shirt and sweats, I'm sure. I'll put your clothes in the dryer, and after you've dried out a little and had something hot to drink, I'll take you home."

She's so nice. She's just so, so nice. I can count on one hand, I mean one finger, how many people have been truly nice to me in the past, oh, let's say, decade or so. I guess now I need two fingers. Wait, maybe three. Does Curly Cookie count as a person? I just stand there staring at Remi because I'm a sappy sponge and a lost cause who's frozen in place with a fiery face after faceplanting into her house at three or so in the morning without any explanation, still unable to say anything.

“Umm...” Remi crosses her arms. She's staring at me, waiting for me to make the next move.

Right. That's my cue to explain why I'm here. To talk, spill whatever it was that I came to spill, do some unburdening, and freaking *try* and save myself. But just like the party and every single time I've seen Remi since I got back, my tongue is tied into ten thousand knots, my cock is starting to do something really inconvenient in my jeans, and my chest is a vice around my hammering heart, booming in my ears. It's extremely loud, so no wonder I can't say a damn thing. I can't hear my own thoughts over the roaring. I also can't catch my breath. My body is all clammy, and yes, it's possible even though I'm already soaked to the bone. I know I

shouldn't panic. I should just say something. Anything. Like, literally *anything*. Get the ball rolling. I've done it before.

She's so pretty. Her eyes are so blue, and she looks good in that sweater. Her hair is messy, but it's sweet like that. The just woken up from sleep look is a good look on her.

What I should not do is take a step forward, but somehow, I'm doing that anyway. I shouldn't be reaching out blindly and falling toward her as though I need her to save me. Like as though her touch has the power to do that. I'm not even sure what's happening here. Am I asking for another hug? For just that basic human contact and kindness that isn't so basic?

Remi's eyes roam down the length of me quickly, starting at my face, down to my toes, and then ending back on my face. I take another step closer. She doesn't move. Her eyes are even bigger now, and they're so, so blue. The sweater she's wearing sets them off. They're cerulean now. Just those eyes alone could thaw some of the nasty ice that's encased my heart for such a long time. This moment is...well, I don't know what it is, but it's happening. It's happening because I'm there now. I've closed the distance, and I have a hand on her waist. I'm a sopping mess, but I gently pull her up against me anyway, not like a beast. She gasps but tilts her face up. I

lower mine, and our mouths meet somewhere in the middle. It should be a crashing, perfect harmony, but I'm out of practice, so I glance my teeth off of hers.

“Ouch!”

“Oh my god, I'm so—” I try to get the apology out, but it never happens because her hands close around my neck, and her fingers trace little circles there against my wet, bare skin, the pattern raising the slicked-down hairs at the back of my neck. After all that cold rain, now is the time I break out in goosebumps.

She guides my face back down until our lips are touching again, softly grazing. Then hers part beneath mine, and *oh my god, heaven*. She's all gentle sighs, sweet passion, safety, and fire—delicious goddess fire. Also, *oh my god, this is Remi, Kimmy's best friend. My little sister's best friend. She already hates me enough, and it's three in the morning. I'm a hot mess, a total wreck, a sopping wet fool, and a total pleb to top it all off. That's me. Plebby, pleb, plebville*. Ugh, that word is so unkind. Why? Just why? Thanks a lot, video game kids.

Her lips are so soft, softer than I could have ever anticipated. They taste like mint and sweetness, gentleness and promise, and also kindness. I want more. I want to close my

arms around her, steer her to the wall, press her up against it, and plunder her mouth properly. I want to take my time, trace my tongue with hers, and have her strip away my wet clothes even though it would probably be difficult because these jeans are for sure not going to come off without a fight. I want her hands on my cold skin, warming me up. I want her body on my body—skin to skin because that’s always warmer—while we snuggle under warm blankets with sheets that smell like her, her hair fanned out on a pillow around me. I also want her curves pressed down the length of me, her cheek over my heartbeat.

It’s a nice fantasy, but it isn’t real, no matter how my dick is giving me one heck of a fist bump inside my jeans. And holy shit, that fist bump is way too close to Remi. This isn’t a fantasy, it’s real life, and I need to get the heck out of here before I ruin what little I haven’t pulverized into smithereens already.

I tear my lips from hers, wrench myself away, and whirl for the door. It’s still open, rain slanting into the house. My wet shoes squeak and slurp and burp and fart as I stride out the door and down the concrete steps.

“Van?” Remi mumbles, confused. But I don’t look over my shoulder. I just keep walking. “Sullivan!” She sounds more urgent now. Not mad, but louder. “Where do you think you’re going?” I can’t look back. I just can’t. I have to get out of here and save her from making any further bad decisions that involve me. I hit the sidewalk and make an abrupt turn. “Van!” Remi calls again, her voice echoing through the rain-soaked night. “Come back! It’s horrible out! Let me drive you!” I keep going. “There’s lightning, Van! You could get killed!”

I have this horrible image of her coming after me and trying to make things better for me, offering more of her kindness that I want so badly to accept, so I break into a run. I don’t want her to catch up with me. I don’t want her to have to get in her car and come out into the night to find me. I don’t want her to be nice to me. I’ve already made a mess of things as it is, and I don’t need to give Kimmy another reason to hate and mistrust me. I came back to try and make things right with my family, and this isn’t the way to do it. I don’t know what I was thinking.

Eventually, Remi’s voice fades into the night, blocks behind me. I take a few turns down other streets, just in case, but I’m pretty sure she didn’t come out after me. The rain

comes down harder and colder, driving into me as the wind picks up. Great. I only have twelve or so more miles to go like this. I shouldn't have kissed Remi. If I hadn't done that, maybe I could have accepted a ride. If I hadn't sprinted out of there like a frantic teenager, maybe I still could have accepted a ride after offering her a sincere apology. It's what I wanted, but when I realized she wasn't coming after me, I felt strangely hollow. Like everyone else, she's probably given me up as a lost cause.

CHAPTER 8



Remi

If Van thinks I've given him up as a lost cause, he's dead freaking wrong with sugar on top.

I show up the next afternoon at Nanny's because I have flower beds to plant. I made a promise, and I'm not going back on it. Alright, so it's obviously not just about the flowers. Van *kissed* me last night. It might have been just a teeth clash, and then after that, the softest brush of his lips against mine, the taste of rainwater, night air, salt, and man overwhelming me as he opened his mouth to me, but then he was gone. And I want...more. Obviously. I've only spent...umm...a pathetically long time hoping for a kiss like that. Even if I shouldn't have, I did. Even though I shouldn't hope now, I do. I know Kimmy said she would approve of any methods I used to get information, but I know that deep down, in her heart of best friend's heart, she would never want me to cross any lines with Van. She doesn't want either of us to get hurt, and things are already complicated.

The kiss wasn't the only reason I showed up at Nanny's. Van had no idea what it meant to me. To him, it was a spur-of-

the-moment thing that he immediately regretted and was clearly embarrassed by. He freaking ran from me—straight out into the night. I circled the block, the adjacent blocks, and then the neighborhood for an hour trying to find him, but it was raining hard, and he'd obviously taken a different route back home so that if I tried to follow him out there like a fool in my car, I wouldn't be able to locate him. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts, memories, and the horrible storm, and I had to let him.

But it doesn't mean I'll let him get away with it today.

No, he owes me a rototilling and some yard work. He also owes me an explanation, and if not that, then he owes me *something*. Okay, okay, so maybe I just want to make sure he's okay. I don't really think he owes me anything. He already gave me my life's desire with that kiss.

Wait, hold up, let's not get pathetic here.

“Hey, Nanny.” As usual, she lets me into the house before I can knock on the door, and she pushes an ice-cold glass of lemonade into my hands before I can ask for something to drink. She's rocking a bright green wig that she's tied back with a huge, bright pink bow at the back of her head, a leopard print mini dress, and hot pink spandex leggings underneath.

She doesn't go a day without spandex. Honestly, she should be an influencer. I'd definitely go out and buy them after seeing how she styles them.

"It's a good day for planting. The beds are already all tilled up." She walks to the back door and points at the flower gardens, which to my consternation, have indeed been turned over. "That rain last night helped a bunch. That and Van finally got my old tiller running late this morning. He did a great job out there, don't you think?"

"Oh." I stare so hard at the freshly turned dirt that my eyes burn. "Yeah, he did." I force one heck of a fake smile. "That's great. I can't wait to get the flowers in. Did you have a plan? I don't know much about plants or anything. I just bought whatever I thought looked nice. I don't know a thing about which ones need shade or extra sun or which ones are going to get tall."

Nanny shrugs. "Nah. Just put them in however you like. Whatever survives makes it, and whatever doesn't, I'll nurse back to health myself." Nanny is a plant queen, so I have no doubt she means that.

I know I'm taking a big risk here because I'm always so utterly transparent, but I do it anyway. "Is Van here?"

“He just went to the hardware store. He broke a pry bar this morning trying to get the rest of those old deck boards up, and it was my only one. I told him to get some gloves too. That old deck is a mean, splintery bitch.”

I stare at the few deck boards that are missing. Before this, I didn't notice the pile of two or three off to the side and the ones missing from the edge. “I see that,” I muse.

“Judging from the way Van was going at those boards, I guess he really meant business. Although, who doesn't like a bit of demolition?” She winks at me. “I personally love wrecking things. Smashing shit up is one of life's greatest joys.”

“Did you just say smashing shit up?”

Nanny looks confused. “Isn't that how the saying goes? No, I guess it's fucking shit up. Yes, that's it!” She grins and cackles. “That's one of life's greatest joys.” She pats my arm. “Now, you go on out. I'll send Curly Cookie to keep you company until Van gets back. Not that he's much company. Van, I mean. I apologize for the silent treatment. It's not you, you know.”

“I do know.” I think I know. I mean, I know he had stuff going on before he kissed me and ran out on me as though

he'd just realized I had lizard lips and a frog tongue and that I tasted like old flies. Ugh. Shudder. What a horrible mental picture.

I head outside, skipping over the sag in the deck and the splintery ends where the boards were removed. There aren't any steps now, but I jump down the few feet, landing safely in my flip-flops while managing not to spill the lemonade in the process. The yard is pretty quiet for a Sunday, and the neighborhood is draped in the easy afternoon silence. It's so hot out that it could sizzle an egg before it ever hit any surface, so maybe that's why there's a general lack of noise. Everyone is hiding out in their houses. The tree at the back corner of the yard is big enough to give some shade, and the garden shed casts a small shadow over the back flower garden that skirts along the sagging fence, so I decide to start there.

I came prepared for a gardening battle. I wore my old jeans, my flip-flops so I could kick them off and enjoy the earth between my toes, and an old T-shirt that I'm pretty sure I've had since high school. It's one of those band ones, all faded out now, so you can barely see the logo on the front anymore. I have my hair tied up in a messy bun, and I've included a headband to keep the strands out of my eyes. I even

brought a pair of my mom's old gardening gloves, and I have them safely tucked into my pocket. I'm ready to rock.

Halfway into the first tray of flowers and the back row of the garden, I realize I'm so not ready to rock because the gate opens and slams shut, and Van is there. I freeze as if I'm a flower garden ghost, or maybe his worst nightmare materialized in front of him. I can't say the pinch of his lips or the instant frown on his face is flattering. *Mouthful of flies. Mouthful of flies.*

I stand up, freezing again in place and waiting, even when a trickle of sweat traces down the back of my neck because it's punishing out here. He should be the one to say something. Last night was so strange. *Strange and wonderful.*

My breath catches in my lungs as Van takes that first step. He's also holding a crowbar in one hand and a hammer in the other, which isn't at all ominous. He's not soaked now—duh. In fact, he's very well put together now with his hair smoothed back, tanned skin glowing with health under the early afternoon sun, black T-shirt stretched across broad shoulders, and jeans riding low on his trim waist, hugging his leg muscles just right. I try not to have an eyegasm right there in the flower garden, but of course, my whole body gets uncomfortably

warm on top of the scorching heat. It becomes even warmer as Van takes another step and then another.

I brace myself for it. For the inevitable, awkward moment where we talk about what happened last night, he says it was a mistake that should never happen again, and my heart breaks into a thousand tiny, hopeless, silly little pieces, crushing all the dreams I should have given up on a long time ago—okay that I *thought* I had given up on a long time ago—into a thousand pieces.

A bark splinters the air, and Curly Cookie comes bounding over from the side of the yard where's he's been doing official inspection business for the past hour that he's been out here. At first, I think he's going to run to Van, but he changes directions halfway and runs up to me instead, wagging his tail so hard that it whaps against each side of his body as usual. Whap whap, whap whap. Mr. Whap Whap keeps coming, wriggling his way over to the freshly turned dirt.

He's coming over for pets and rubs in the most adorable fashion. He's so cute that I forget all about how it's so hot out here that it's actually sucking moisture out of the ground from

the rain last night and creating a hazy fog of humidity hell that makes my clothes feel damp and sticky.

Curly Cookie's feet hit the earth, and suddenly I know for sure that, nope, it's not pets or rubs he wants. He digs a hole in the garden, shooting dirt in all directions.

"Curly Cookie!" Van drops the tools and races across the yard right as I get a dirt shower. I try to turn away from the onslaught of damp earth, but clods hit me all over my shirt and jeans. A few land in my hair. I taste dirt, but at least I get my eyes shut in time to prevent getting a good up-close look at it.

Van leaps over to the flower garden right as I turn back since the dirt has stopped flying, all just in time to see Curly Cookie doing the doggie squat over the massive hole he's dug. Which, okay, isn't the end of the world. It's kind of nasty, but I can just scoop it into a trash bag with the shovel and get on with what I'm doing here. Even if my nose is wrinkling up because it's kind of *fresh* and the smell is wafting.

Van stops abruptly and gags. Hearing him gag makes me want to gag, but I swallow repeatedly. "Curly Cookie!" Van coughs, wheezing for air. "Get over here right now. *Please.*"

I like that he tacked on "please" at the end, especially for a puppy.

Curly Cookie finishes up his business and turns to give me a proud look and an adorable puppy smile that makes me forgive him for doing business right there in the flower garden, which I now have to clean up. *And then*, he circles the hole. He turns around and kicks at the dirt with his front paws.

Aww, he's going to bury it like a gentleman. How considerate.

Except that's not the plan.

Or maybe it is, and the plan just goes wrong because Curly Cookie is a puppy—a large, overly excited puppy.

Anyway, plan or no plan, he gets going with those front paws, covering eagerly, and then he backs up, still shooting, scooting, and digging. *Awww, no, he's going to bury it like a gentleman. How not so considerate!* It's all happening so quickly that I don't have time to get out of the way or duck and cover before I'm hit with a dirt shower that isn't just dirt. Nope. Definitely not just dirt. Curly Cookie hasn't just flung earth at me. He's flung doggy doo all over my jeans. And my shirt. And maybe my hair. At least I manage to turn around to avoid getting it in the face, and my back takes the brunt of it.

“God, no!” Van scoops the puppy up with a single catch, throwing him over his shoulder and carrying him to the house.

“Nanny!” he calls, and I hear the woosh of the patio door opening. “Curly Cookie needs a bath. He’s in trouble. He’s a poop thrower, and Remi is coated.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying not to breathe through my nose but also really trying to suck some air in because could this get any worse? No, I really don’t think it could.

I turn around slowly when I hear heavy footsteps. Might as well get the uber humiliation over and done with.

I was wrong. Things *can* get worse. Van is standing there holding a garden hose, and there’s a distinct sorry, not-so-sorry expression on his handsome as smoldering sin face. I put up my hands, warding him off. “Hey, now. Let’s not get too carried away.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, but there’s a big smile on his face—a true, soul-deep smile that I don’t think I’ve seen on him since he was fifteen or sixteen. And right now, he looks so boyish and charming that maybe getting covered in dog doo is worth it. If that’s what it takes to get a smile out of him, then sign me up. I’ll gladly take it. Alright, maybe not gladly, but reluctantly. Look at me with the smell clearly going to my head.

“Curly Cookie gets a bath inside, and I get hosed down in the yard?” I whine, grasping at straws. I know this is going to happen no matter what. His hand is already on the nozzle on the top, getting ready to squeeze and unleash icy, cold hell on me.

“Curly Cookie was cleaner than you are. Only his paws were muddy.”

“It’s not fair, is it?”

“No,” he sighs. “It’s not. But then, what in life actually is?”

“If you do this, I swear I’m going to—”

“I’m truly sorry, Remi.” His hand flexes, and I’m doused in a stream of water. It hits me in the chest, and I let out a blood-curdling scream.

The water isn’t really that cold since the hose has been sitting out in the grass, warmed by the sun. It actually feels kind of nice against my humidity-drenched, dirt and dubious dirt coated body. Van adjusts the nozzle, and instead of one direct, forceful stream, I get a delicate shower. He sweeps the nozzle up and down, and when I spin around, he soaks my hair—messy bun, headband, and all.

Van is gentle, and the water feels good. He takes his time, holding it for me to spin around to wash the dirt from my hands and to try and scrub the dirt and, um, other things out from my hair and clothes. I find myself laughing through most of it, and not just because if I didn't laugh, I'd cry. I guess it's kind of funny.

When Van comes nearer to inspect my hair, I stop laughing, sucking in a great gulp of breath and holding it. He's so close that if I turned around, I'd be able to pull him closer and kiss him again. All of me goes wild at the thought, my body heating up enough that the water is probably steaming off me. But of course, I don't. The wonder of that thought is tempered quite thoroughly by the fact that my breath would probably be worse than flies at the moment, and if not, then the rest of me certainly would. Van keeps working the water over the worst of me. If he didn't have my undying love before...Who would have thought that hosing a girl down would be the way to her heart?

I'm still scrubbing my shirt and jeans when I look up and catch Van's eyes on me. They're like soft, buttery caramel under the golden sun. He's truly gorgeous with his jaw set in a hard line, a fine line pinched between his brows, and his lips

thinned out from his smile, which is replaced by an *I really am sorry about this* expression. I get to admire all his masculine godlike beauty for a few more seconds before the water abruptly becomes frigid, and this time, my screams are real. I dash out of the way, and Van lets the nozzle go, setting the hose down on the ground.

“You can have a shower now,” he informs me. “Inside. Nanny is setting out clothes for you.”

“Thank you, kind sir. How gracious of you.” That earns me the smallest twitch of his lips.

I walk to the patio door and slip through the kitchen and down the hall, dripping wet. “Oh, my dear!” Nanny cries when she sees me. “I’m so sorry about Curly Cookie’s dung shower. And Van’s garden hose shower. I told him that he certainly wasn’t allowed to hose you down out there.”

“That’s okay. It was nice until the water became cold. And good lord, I needed it. I was one dirt monster from head to toe.”

Curly Cookie comes wagging up behind Nanny, looking as pleased and happy with himself as ever. He’s been hosed down inside himself, so he’s extra curly now. “My butterscotch cookie says he’s sorry. He won’t go mucking

about in your business again. It's the leash for him if he can't stay out of the flowers, though I'm sure after a few days of training, he'll get the hint. He's young yet."

"No harm done." I squat down in front of Curly Cookie, who whap, whap, whaps himself in a wriggly mess. His big chocolate eyes are so adorable that no one on earth could stay mad at him. I'm dripping puddles of water all over, but when I extend a hand, a soft, pink tongue comes out to lick the back. It's a long tongue. It surprises me, actually. I wonder if Curly Cookie ever gets a mouthful of flies. That's how long his tongue is.

"I've set some clothes inside the bathroom for you. Have a shower, then I'll have a snack waiting."

"Oh, you don't have to do that—"

"Nonsense." She winks at me. "I'm going to make Van join us, so I set out something a little extra special for you."

The shower is nice and hot, and I use a generous amount of lavender-scented shampoo and coconut and papaya scented conditioner. It's quite a combination. Nothing compares to the combination of an outfit that I have to put on after my said shower. It's quite...*vibrant*. I study myself in the bathroom mirror. At least the fit is decent, though the leopard print mini

dress and chartreuse leggings are quite something else. Whatever. I'm thankful there are leggings, so my bottom doesn't have to hang out of the crazy tight, crazy short dress.

My hands shake when I run them through the wet strands of my hair. There's no brush in here. I salvage what I can and pull it into the elastic I saved from before. The headband is headed for the trash, but it pinched behind the ears anyway.

You can do this. You can have lunch with Van, and everything can be normal.

Yeah right. I blink at myself, and even to me, my eyes look all heated, the pupils enlarged, the irises glowing a bright blue. I'm wearing my hope right there, not on my sleeve but stamped all over my face. At least when I was covered in dirt, it was harder to tell. This is too naked, too open, and I don't think I can shut it down.

I mean, it's no biggie. It's not like I have to sit across from the man I've spent so much of my life feeling things for, shutting it down, being unable to shut it down, wondering about him, needing to stop wondering, being unable to stop wondering. It's not like he kissed me last night or anything. It's not like it was a surprise to both of us; kind of rushed, not even that sensual, barely open-mouthed. It's not like I couldn't

feel the pain behind it, the plea to see and save him. Alright, so it was like that, and yes, he ran away after, but maybe I'm being dramatic. Maybe it was the whole fly-breath thing. It's not like we need to talk it out. Although, yes, we need to talk it out. But seriously, we're not going to do that at the table with Nanny right there.

I sweep my hands down my ribs, angling to study the dress. I'm not wearing a bra underneath since the only one I have is sopping wet. I just hope my nipples don't go doing anything stupid like noticing how insanely beautiful Van is and getting appreciative. I can get through this without looking at him, right? No. Not right. I'll always have his image burned into my brain.

Including the pain that I saw in his eyes last night as rain sluiced around him and lightning flashed in the sky. He looked alone. Alone and lonely.

Ugh, this is going to have to do, leopard print and all. At least I didn't have to stand here with a thousand outfits, wondering what to wear, and at least I got up my courage to come here at all instead of hiding at my parents' house and wondering what the hell happened last night. I guess the only

thing left to do is go out there and face whatever is still coming.

CHAPTER 9



Van

Well, look at me. Still here, still kicking, and still alive to fight another day despite the ultra amount of humiliation that went down last night and having to face up to it in the backyard. Curly Cookie did me a solid in a way. He provided the icebreaker—the poop breaker, as it was.

Nanny's French toast makes it better. Even the sulkiest, most sullen of bastards has to perk up at the smell of fried egg, sugary goodness, spicy cinnamon, and mouth-watering maple syrup. No matter what my nerves are doing, I force myself to keep my eyes on the platter on the table with the mountain of toast that Nanny has produced, seemingly out of thin air—she's a magician in the kitchen—and not on Remi, who sits in the chair across from me.

Nanny takes the one at the end, and Curly Cookie has his own bowl full of dog food on the floor. He munches away, crunching, slobbering, and smacking his lips. For someone who just sprayed dung all over the place, he's still pretty darn cute.

“How was your shower, dear?” Nanny places a few pieces of French toast onto Remi’s plate before passing the serving tray over. She already has a glass of orange juice filled for all of us. I feel like it’s early in the morning, not mid-afternoon, but Nanny always did love a bit of breakfast for lunch. Or dinner. Or midnight snack.

“It was good,” Remi mumbles. “Thank you for the clothes.” She won’t look at me. I notice she’s looking at Nanny, even though I’m trying not to look at her either.

I put six pieces of French toast on my plate. Nanny would worry about me if I ate anything less. Plus, I still have a shit pile of work to do with that deck. I need the fuel. I stuff one into my mouth, nearly whole, and chew. It’s good. Damn it. It’s so good. Nanny always knows just what to make to pull me out of even the deepest, funkier funk.

“That dress looks stunning on you, dear. I think you should keep it.”

“Oh, I—I’m not sure I’d have the right place to wear it.”

“Nonsense,” Nanny laughs. “The backyard is the perfect place. Or for a walk. Leopard print is the perfect pattern for strutting your stuff.”

Against my will, my eyes sneak up and across the table. Remi is looking at her plate. It leaves me far too free to take her in. Her eyes might be lowered, and her hair might be wet, but she's still glorious, beautiful, and breathtaking sunshine. My eyes drop a little bit lower and freeze on the dress. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. She's not wearing a bra. I can see her beaded nipples through the fabric. I wrench my gaze the heck away, my body burning. I'm like petrified wood under the table, and it makes me want to stab my inappropriate boner with my fork. A few holes might help the bastard deflate.

I refuse to think about last night's kiss. Or how I ran. I've been dying of humiliation. I refuse to think about how Nanny probably planned this, sitting us down across from each other. I refuse to think about Remi's nipples, hard little peaks arching through that ridiculous dress. I'm not going to think about how soft her lips were or the way those wet clothes pressed against every slight, delightful curve of her body in the backyard. I don't want to think about how her screams were half a screech and half a sweet melody of a laugh or how she's not wearing a bra right now because Nanny didn't give her one since borrowing someone else's grandmother's undies is way too much.

And, there we go. Successful boner deflation. Thoughts of granny panties for the win.

If that hadn't done it, Nanny's next words sure would have. "Sullivan, sweetheart, you should take Remi on a date." At the bang of my jaw slamming into the table, Nanny huffs. "Never you mind that she-viper of an ex-wife. It's time she was forgotten, and you learned how to be happy again."

Now I have to look at Remi. She looks as shocked as I am. Her eyes are pure golden sunshine and liquid blue seas, more tranquil than I have any right to deserve. Her fork is paused in mid-air, and she's biting down on her bottom lip to keep her face blank.

"N—Nanny," I stammer. "That would be the worst idea." Remi starts sawing her bottom lip, and I realize what an idiot I am. "I mean, Kimmy...." I realize I've stabbed a piece of French toast, and it's leaking syrup all over the table because it's suspended in midair on my fork.

"Your sister doesn't have anything to do with you taking a beautiful woman out on a date," Nanny huffs. She takes a sip of her orange juice, all innocent.

"Kimmy's already frothing at the mouth." As if I have to explain that to her after the whole laxative incident and

showdown outside the bathroom during the party. “Taking her best friend out on a date would be like piling gasoline-soaked, really dry, old wood onto an already roaring fire.”

“I’m kind of right here,” Remi grunts.

Nanny whips her head around and smiles at both of us. “Ask her. Ask if she would like to go out on a date with you.”

“Like, *right here*,” Remi mumbles.

“Remi, would Kimmy care if I took you out on a date?” I wince. Why the hell did I just say that? I’m not giving in to Nanny’s crazy schemes. I’m not. I’m really not.

Remi lowers her fork calmly, but I can tell what an effort she’s making to hide what she’s really feeling. There isn’t anything accusatory in her eyes. Nothing hurt. Nothing that asks why the hell I showed up at her house, soaked to the bone, kissed her, and then ditched her. Nothing that says, *yeah, right, I wouldn’t go on a date with you even if you were the last man alive, the world was burning, aliens and beasts from other planets with really sharp teeth were coming, and you were my only hope of not being eaten alive very, very slowly, one excruciating chomp at a time.*

“She would,” Remi says carefully, her voice even and measured. “She’d care, but she also wants me to spy on you, so she’d be thrilled.”

“Nonsense,” Nanny laughs, waving both her hands in the air. She turns it into a little dance, shimmying in her chair, and if you know Nanny, you’d know that’s not in the least bit strange. “It’s a chance to patch things up between your sister and yourself, Sullivan.”

“By dating her bestie?” I ask dryly. “I don’t think so. That’s not the kind of patch I want to put on the situation.”

“I don’t want to be a patch,” Remi says, a bit defensively now. “But I could talk to Kimmy.”

Nanny suddenly bangs the table. We both jump. “That’s the spirit! Maybe you could double date.”

“Kimmy has a boyfriend?” I don’t know why I find that harder to believe than swallowing down the whole double date thing.

I just can’t imagine who on earth would be brave enough to date my sister. She’s vibrant, pretty, driven, powerful, successful, and a total alpha female—all the things men are scared of. She’d be an amazing catch if she could find the right

person. I just, god...it's none of my business. I can see how mad Kimmy would be even knowing I was thinking about her, her life, or her love life. She'd tell me I have no right because I bailed on her, and she'd be absolutely correct. I hurt her. And I have no idea how to make it right. You can't just make something like that okay again.

“Goodness, no,” Nanny says. “But maybe she'd get one if I suggested that the date was a great way to figure out your real intentions.”

“I have no real intentions,” I choke out. “We both know that!”

“Kimmy doesn't believe you.” Nanny states the obvious. “It would be a good ice breaker. You'd be in the same room, and you could start to have that conversation you desperately need to have. Even if it takes years, you have to begin it somewhere. And you need to get back in the game.”

I shake my head. “Good lord, Nanny, of all the crazy schemes....”

“Good!” she exclaims like it's settled. Like I just agreed to something, which I most definitely did *not* do. “Take the lovely Remi to your mom's house when you have dinner for the first time since you've been back.”

“Gah, are you for real?”

She nods, proud as a freaking peacock. “I’m for real. It will be good practice.” She winks at me. “I’ll send gravy along with you as a gift.”

“Shouldn’t Remi get a say?” I’m likely red-faced now, my plate of French toast totally forgotten. Good thing the piece on the fork in my hand stopped dripping syrup all over the place a long time ago. I flick my eyes across the table, taking in the sweet, fresh blush on Remi’s cheeks. Her long lashes are lowered, her lip bright red from where she was gnawing at it. My breath leaves my lungs in a rush as her eyes flicker up and land on me. I’m frozen and stunned. I’m stuck in place. I’m gawping like a gawper of an imbecile, but I can’t stop.

Please say no, I beg her with my eyes. For the love of gravy, please say no.

“That depends.” Remi’s voice is all soft and just the tiniest bit amused, which tells me that I’m in deep trouble here. And not the payback for kissing her and running kind of trouble either.

Nanny bites the bait. She’s all about the trouble. “On what, dear?”

“On whether you’re willing to give me another container of your liver and onions gravy for my trouble.”

“Oohhhhhh!” Nanny squeals. She leaps out of her chair and does a little dance right there in the kitchen, jiving her hips and shaking her spandex-clad bootie. My god, where does she get all that spandex? And how can I now go about washing my eyes out and scrubbing my brain? Literally. I need a solution here, people. “You had better believe I’ll give you as much gravy as you can handle.”

Remi’s face takes on an expression I don’t even know how to decipher or put a definition to, and her eyes lock with mine. “Alright then. I’ll do it.”

And just like that, I’ve landed myself the first date I’ve had with anyone but my ex-wife since I was seventeen years old. For the record, it means I’m more than rusty. It also means this is going to be a complete disaster.

CHAPTER 10



Van

Ugh, god, I'm this *thing*. This cringeworthy thing that barely passes for a human, pulling up to Remi's house in a rental car because I still haven't bothered getting my own yet. It always seemed rather low on my particular long list of problems to fix, people to apologize to, relationships to mend, people I need to convince not to hate me, and bridges I need to try and somehow unburn.

The thing about the comment on the thing feels so true. It hits so close to home right now. But just one glimpse and the nerves, fuzz in my mouth, bitter taste at the back of my tongue, and pounding in my head, chest, and gut, fade. All of it. Just one glimpse of Remi coming through the open door, and I'm *consumed*. Remi is wearing a little yellow cotton dress with a bow on the front and a lightweight black sweater, and as she walks to the car, her yellow flip-flops slap the ground.

All the energy is sucked out of the vehicle and world as I tumble out—out of everywhere at once. Her hair is bouncing in a high, flirty ponytail. She's wearing coral lipstick, and her lashes are thicker and darker, longer than ever over a sea, sky,

and vast expanse of blue. All I know right now, hanging half out of the driver's side door, is that I'm *alive*.

I'm alive, and I feel like I'm doing more than sleepwalking my way through a list of regrets that has somehow turned into a nightmare that's my life. Right now, I'm awake. Every nerve ending is awake. My body is jolted into screaming awareness. *Awake*.

I scramble out of the car, leaving the door half-open, and walk the rest of the way up to meet her. I should have brought flowers or something. A plant? A container of gravy for her as a thank you for letting Nanny rope her into this against her will? Should I fall to my knees in apology and beg her forgiveness for dragging her down into this mess with me when all she deserves is to shine bright like that sunny yellow dress she has on?

"I'm so sorry about this." Great. I'm basically a flashing neon sign that refused to give the proper warning signals to the wreckage ahead because it's wrecked too. Obviously, it's the wrong thing to say because Remi can't hide the way her face falls, no matter how she struggles to do it.

She does shrug, though, making an effort. "You're not the one who sold her soul for a container of liver gravy." She

means it as a joke, but her voice has an edge of hurt to it.

God, we have to have this out before I go to my mom's because it's going to be even worse there. I have no idea what I was thinking, getting back into this. Why didn't I just tell Nanny no? Remi doesn't deserve this. Everything I touch crumbles to dust. She should stay far away.

Her eyes lock with mine, and they're so bright and clear that it's like staring straight into a sun-dappled oasis. She crosses her arms right there in the middle of the cracked concrete driveway with the weeds growing up through the broken cement. "I'm not going until you tell me why," she says slowly, annunciating every word for me.

"Why what?" My brain has checked out. It's so obvious. It checked out at the sight of all that beauty in front of me, and it's not coming back anytime soon.

"Why you kissed me! Why you were at my house that night." Her head tilts up stubbornly. "Why you really came back here at all. What really happened? Why you never came back before that. Why you agreed to take me on a date if you didn't really want to. Why you're doing any of this. Because, to me, it just seems like you want to take me with you because I'll be a useful distraction."

I can't hide my shock. I've gotten really good at pretending that everything is fine. That I'm fine, but everything is not fine, and there's no hiding it now. Remi is mad. I'm starting to realize that it's the spitting fire kind of mad, though, on her, it looks sweeter, gentler. It's there in the locked jaw, the hard fire burning in her irises, the slight flare of her nostrils, and the hurt splashed all over her face.

I've thoroughly read the situation wrong. I don't know what to say. "I'm sorry I kissed you." Her lips thin out. Alright, also the wrong thing. Wrong, wrong, wrong. "I'm a mess." I'm still grasping at fucking straws, and I don't even know what that's supposed to mean as it's so archaic. "I went for a walk to clear my head because I couldn't sleep, and it turned into a jog, which turned into me finding myself at your house. You hugged me before, and you were kind to me. You aren't suspicious of me. That hug you gave me didn't demand anything else in return. I didn't mean to kiss you. It just happened. But it was a mistake. This whole thing is a mistake."

Remi's eyes narrow further. She draws her arms around herself and gives me a classic Kimmy staredown that could wither a person on the spot. And I *do* wither. Rather

inelegantly and quickly. “Have a good night, Van,” she says before she turns around and her flip-flops smack, smack, smack their way back up the driveway toward her house.

I was right. It was a mistake. Kissing her and having this date that isn’t really a date, especially since we both had to sweat over it for a week because Sunday to Saturday night is a long ass time. It’s not really a date if my mom is there and Nanny arranged it, but it’s still enough of a date that it feels like a date.

Taking her to my mom’s house would be the worst thing I could do. So why can’t I just stop her, apologize properly because I feel horrible and hate that she’s hurt, and let her go? No. Instead, I run after her and dodge around her, blocking her path like an asshole. “I puked,” I blurt out. Yeah, so sexy and romantic. Exactly what she wanted to hear.

Her eyes widen, and she looks around and over her shoulder as if looking for the evidence.

“At Nanny’s,” I clarify. “Before I left.”

She frowns, and her hand snakes out, smacking me square in the forehead. She gasps. “Shit! I’m sorry.” Her palm flattens out, nice and cool against my clammy skin. I’m warm. Hot. Jesus, I think I’ve sweated through my dress shirt on the ride

over here, even with the AC going on full blast. I close my eyes just a fraction. Just for a second, as her hand switches to the back and grazes my forehead again, I feel safe. “You’re not fevered. Are you sick?”

If I have any shot of salvaging this, I owe her the truth, or at least as much of it as I can tell her. “No. Just...terrified. There are things that...things that I don’t want to get into from...before. Family stuff. I haven’t had the best relationship with my mom since I was sixteen, and I never talked to my dad again after I left. I can’t explain it now, and I shouldn’t have let Nanny talk us into this, but I’m...floundering here, and it’s not right to ask you to save me or bring you as a sort of buffer against my mom. Maybe that makes me a coward, but even if this were just a regular family dinner, I’d still want you to come. I don’t know why I kissed you. I really don’t. I just wanted to, and I did it. I guess I ran because I panicked. I don’t want my sister to hate me. I truly don’t. I don’t want anyone to hate me. I don’t want *you* to hate me.”

She blinks, lowering her hand. It hovers there, in midair, like she wants to take mine, but then she clasps it in front of her dress, hiding it in the flowy yellow fabric. “Why would kissing me make me hate you?”

“I don’t know. Because things are complicated, and I think I might be cursed?”

“I don’t think that kind of thing rubs off with a single kiss.”

How wrong you probably are. “If you want to go back inside, that’s fine. I understand. But please don’t stop coming to Nanny’s because of me. That would break her heart. Anyway, I’m so sorry. I’m just going to go now.”

“To the dinner?”

I nod. “I have to face it sometime.” I still haven’t given her a real answer to most of her questions. “I came back because I want a relationship with my family.” That sounds so hard to admit, and I don’t know why. Maybe because I’m afraid I sound like an imbecile. “I’ve pretty much shot it all to hell, but I wanted to see if anything could be salvaged.”

“And now you don’t want to go. To your mom’s.”

“No, because it’s complicated. But also yes, I mean, because I miss my mom, even if things are the way they are.”

Remi’s eyes rake over me. “You look like you’re going to throw up right now.”

That's probably an accurate assessment. I feel terrible. Why won't the sun just relent? Why am I still sweating so badly? Why did brushing my teeth and chewing on a few sticks of gum on the way over here not erase the bitterness at the back of my tongue? Why is my empty stomach still rebelling?

"Do you want to come in for a minute?" She's not mad or annoyed now. She's sweet and gentle, utterly guileless. Vulnerable and open. I don't know how she can stand to be that way when it feels like it's going to kill me. "I can get you some water and a fresh shirt. We'll go to Nanny's, so you can change before we go to your mom's."

"You still want to come with me?" I gape at her. "Or you will, even if you don't want to?"

She gives me this look that says she's not exasperated even though she should be because there's something I've failed to comprehend. It's like I'm the only one in the world that hasn't gotten it yet, and I still have no idea what it is. "Yes. I'll go with you. Text your mom and tell her we've run into some bad traffic. Or that it started snowing. Wait, uh, no, that's really not believable. Throw me under the bus and tell

her that I took forever to get ready, which made us late, and I'm terribly sorry."

"You're way too pretty to be wasted on a bus." Annndddd, the award for the most awkward human being on the planet goes to me.

Remi's lips twitch. "Okay. Come in. And don't run off this time. I spent an hour looking for you in the rain."

"Jesus." I shut my eyes tight. "I'm so sorry." One shaky exhale is followed by another. "I don't deserve this."

"What don't you deserve?"

"Your kindness." I don't mean to say that.

Remi steps closer. I can smell her now. She's like roses. Literally. She smells like roses, which makes me think about how I was just telling Nanny that she should get some for her yard because they're so beautiful, and I like them so much. "Don't think that's ever going to stop me," she says. She steps past me, and I follow her into the house.

It's much cooler in here than outside. Her parents aren't home, or at least I don't see them as she leads me to the bathroom. I stare at her in question, but she motions me to wait, so I do. Soon, she's back with a fresh T-shirt and a brand

new deodorant, which she pops the cap to show me it hasn't been used. Yeah. As if I'm the most hygienic person around right now. I lift my arm automatically and sniff myself, and *holy good god*. Soaking through a shirt has a not-so-pleasant aroma to it, let me tell you that, and all the while, Remi was standing right by me, and she never said a thing.

“Okay, get changed. I'll get you some water, and I'll get my keys.”

“Your keys?”

“You're in no shape to drive.” She passes me the shirt and deodorant, and our fingers brush, which sends a shower of sensations through me like it's the first time I've ever been touched by a woman in my life. My throat closes up, and I feel like I'm losing my head here, all over the fact that it's been a heck of a long time since someone bothered to take care of me. Other than Nanny, of course.

But that's exactly what she does.

After I've changed, Remi gives me a bag for the deodorant, which I guess I get to keep—I'll replace it for sure—and my old shirt. She then makes sure I have a cold glass of water and that I drink it.

“I think you’re courageous,” she tells me, assessing me as I drink. I nearly spit out the water. “Because whatever made you leave for so long must have been bad. You didn’t leave after Tina, but rather, you came back after her, so it had to have been even worse than that. I don’t even want to think about what’s worse than having her treat you the way she did. She was a blind, heartless, ruthless crazy twit, and that’s all I’ll say about it. Well, also that she was crazy because no one who had you and your beautiful heart should have ever thrown it away, and I’m sorry for your heartbreak because it’s awful, and I can’t imagine how much it hurts.” She stands on her tiptoes, her eyes all soft and shiny, and I’m frozen, water glass between us. She’s all roses and coral lips and ethereal eyes, and then she kisses me on the cheek so softly that it’s like a whisper. Friendly. Sisterly, almost. “It’s going to be okay. I think you’re wonderful, but you need to learn to believe it too. You can talk to me. I’m always here. Even in the middle of a stormy night. And your family? They still love you. They’ll forgive you for anything, even Kimmy, if you just ask.”

God help me. I want her lips to linger there, her breath warm on my cheek, the world freezing to a most unbelievably wonderful halt. I want to turn my face and let those rose petal-soft lips of hers brush over mine. I’d like her to do something

daring and unexpected. Like bring her lips to my earlobe and maybe even nibble a little.

And now, fuck, I'm hard as a rock.

I'm so thankful when she steps back because I can then set the water glass down on the table in the entranceway under the big round mirror that her mom probably chose, next to a pile of old flyers and mail. I thrust my hands into my pockets again, which seems to be my magic charm as of late. She's already turning around while I do my handsy crotch-shielding trick, and I follow in her rose-scented wake, my heart feeling like it's going to burst out of my chest.

Remi is sweet, fresh air. She's the first breath that I'm filling my lungs with after coming out of hibernation in some cold, dank cave. My sister would probably quite like that image and say it's apt, but it also feels like the truth. Remi is hope. How many days and nights, months and years has it been since I truly believed in that word?

CHAPTER 11



Remi

I wait in the car because Van says he'll only be five minutes. He's back in ten, smelling like man, cedar, mint toothpaste, and a fresh shower. His hair is wet and tousled like he quickly attacked it with a towel. He has a new button-up black shirt on—rolled up at the elbows—and a fresh pair of jeans. He's so beautiful that I want to lick the man-veins that run from his hands to his elbows and maybe pop a finger or two in my mouth.

Right, so the creep meter just ratcheted up a good ten notches, and I'm pretty sure it only goes to ten. I want to tell him that he's so beautiful, it hurts. I want to tell him about all the times I used to doodle his name in the margins of my notebooks with a bunch of little hearts and stars and how he's filled up my dreams for as long as I can remember. I want to say that I'm furious on his behalf when it comes to how Tina treated him. I want to treasure his broken heart and get out my glue and mend the pieces. I also want to ask a thousand more questions about what really happened and why he left and then

tell him how my gluing skills suck because I was never able to put my own heart back together.

Instead, I just put the car in drive and concentrate on that. Even still, I nearly speed through a stop sign that I see at the last minute and have to brake hard, which just about shoots the frozen containers of gravy—transferred from Van’s rental to my car before we left my house—from the backseat to the front.

“What did you tell your mom about me?” I ask, doubling my attention on the road and the sneaky stop signs. To be fair, that last one was set way in the middle of nowhere and covered up by a tree.

Van smooths his palms down his jeans, and I try very hard not to recall any of my ten million fantasies about his hands on my body. “I told her the truth. How Nanny was trying to play matchmaker and then trapped us into going together.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to blurt out that he’s never truly seen me once in his freaking life, and I’d just really like to be seen. I think he’s the only person who doesn’t know how I feel. Trapped into it. Yeah. That’s how it went down. Van isn’t ready, which is so obvious. He has a lot going on, and I’m not going to push him. Not even if he did kiss me. I’m not

going to tell him what I feel, and I'm not going to drop any more hints. No more friendly hugs either because they're dangerous.

“Because we're friends,” he tacks on, seeming to sense that he's hurt my feelings.

I'm just Miss Ultra Pathetic over here because being friends with Van perks up my sad, wilted heart and the rest of my body parts, all in tandem. I'd really like to be his friend. I've never been his friend before. Just Kimmy's. I'm warmed by the unexpected sentiment, and it carries me through the rest of the drive. By the time we pull up in front of Mary Carlson's house, even my palms are damp, and the spine-tingling warmth I felt has been replaced with a stomach full of butterflies. I'm nervous for Van. I feel bad for him—the fact that he was sick to his stomach and said he was terrified.

“Are you okay?” It's a stupid question since I know he's not. He's staring at his mom's sprawling house with the three-car garage, huge driveway, and impressive architecture, including a bank of windows that looks like it goes all the way up to the heavens. Those windows also look like they might grow legs and stomp us flat on their way out of the gated community.

I didn't grow up here. Van's parents moved several times after my parents went bankrupt, but once upon a time, we lived in a neighborhood just like this one. When I was younger, I had no idea of the costs involved in maintaining a lifestyle like this. I can still barely imagine because I know what the costs are for our household, and they're enough, let me tell you.

"They moved up in the world," Van says dryly. He's never been here before. He's never even seen this house before. "Didn't think it was possible, but I guess it always is. I suppose, to be fair, it could have been worse. There could have been eight bays to the garage and another two levels to the house, an extra six thousand square feet, security guards at the front door...."

I pull up to the driveway, my deathtrap of a car sticking out like a sore thumb in a neighborhood where people only want to be seen if they can be seen being wealthy. Boats dot the landscape, and every other driveway has sports cars sitting out that are worth three times what my parents' house cost. I'm not very good at pulling sarcasm out of my ass, and I don't think Van needs my commentary about the house, so I

just ask, “Do you think we should go in?” *No, just sit out in the car and bake in the heat all night.*

Van swipes his hand over his forehead, letting me off the hook rather graciously. “I brought a second shirt, just in case. Although, maybe that’s the third shirt. Or a fourth.”

“Are you going to throw up again?”

“I think I’m okay. I’m here now. I guess I should just get it over with.”

I want to grip his hand. Squeeze it. Tell him it’s going to be okay. But I don’t. I’m scared to touch him again. I’ve hugged him, he’s kissed me and hosed me down, and I’ve felt his forehead. That’s more touching than I thought I’d get in a lifetime, and I’m kind of on sensory overload.

“I’ll grab the gravy.” I barely gasp the words out before I tumble out and dip back into the backseat, retrieving no less than eight containers that are all labeled. I noticed earlier that there is no liver gravy. I have to say; Mary is missing out.

“Christ,” Van says on the doorstep before he rings the bell. “The place is like a castle. Rather imposing.”

“I heard that you did alright for yourself in Europe.” At my words, he frowns, and I want the ground to open up and

swallow me. “I mean, Kimmy was trying to figure out why you’d want her company when you were clearly a rockstar over there. Your investment company is amazing. When she looked it up and connected the dots and realized it was yours, she was super impressed.”

At least I get an eye roll to prove that he’s not mad. “I doubt she put it like that.”

“Well, something like that. I’ll talk to her, Van. It’s going to be okay.”

Soon, the door opens, and Mary is there with her bright orange bob that is no, not a wig, her country club style sweater and slacks, and pearl necklace. She barrels at me with open arms, crushing me to her like it’s been years since she saw me too, and not just recently at Nanny’s party. I’d basically freaking lived at Kimmy’s house growing up, even after my family moved. We had so many sleepovers, and we always hung out. I can’t count the number of times I’ve been over to every single one of the houses that Kimmy’s family lived in. Mary is like a second mom to me.

“Gravy!” she gushes after hugging us both. Van is stiff as a board, and he looks so uncomfortable. It was like the hug was too much, although, before this, he sounded like it was all

he wanted. He doesn't look like he wants to barf or make a break for it, though, so that's good.

“Yes, gravy.” I hand the bag over. “Do you mind if I use your washroom? I had way too much water to drink before I drove.”

“Of course not! Go right ahead. You know the way. We'll be in the kitchen. I have dinner ready and waiting.”

“I'm so sorry about being late.” I twirl around in the sundress. “I had so many of these to choose from.”

Mary winks at me. She knows I've probably never in my life been late for anything due to something clothing or makeup related.

I really do have to pee, and I did want to give Van a few minutes alone with his mom in hopes that things wouldn't be awkward all throughout dinner and the whole evening. I might be here to soften the blow or whatever, or however Nanny thought this might work, to be Van's sort of wingman—weird as that is—or intermediary or icebreaker or *whatever*, but if he didn't have a moment alone with his mom all night, that would be unfortunate.

I take my time, taking the world's longest pee in history. In reality, I sit on the edge of the claw-foot bathtub in the world's most extravagant, huge bathroom, staring at the towel warmer on the far side. It doesn't stare back. It just sits there, warming towels and whatnot. I've never had a warm towel in my life unless it came straight from the dryer, and that's usually by happy accident.

I whip out my phone and pass a few levels on that silly game Nanny got me hooked on.

Finally, I make my way out of the bathroom.

I'm coming down the never-ending hall—which even has high ceilings and fancy lighting—when I catch Mary's hushed voice and Van's not-so-hushed voice echoing through the house. The house is big, so voices carry.

"I'm truly sorry," Mary says, but I don't catch the start, just that much.

"Mom, not now, please," Van groans.

"You didn't have to stay away. People change."

"You didn't have to stay with him." Van's voice is harsh. Bitter. Accusing.

Who's him? Certainly not Van's dad?

“The company was his everything,” Mary hisses. “It meant the world to him. That’s why he left it to you in his will.”

“The will is a joke. I couldn’t take it even if I tried. I checked. There were clauses.”

He checked? But I thought he said he wasn’t interested in the company?

Mary gasps. “What are you talking about? What clauses? There’d have to be a way around them. He was sorry, Van. He wanted a relationship with you. He felt bad about everything that happened.”

“That’s why he contacted me so many times over the years.”

“It’s why he left you his empire and dream. We’ll get everything fixed. I’ll take a look at the will. My lawyers can figure it out.”

“Mom, just leave it.”

“I won’t leave it. Your father wanted you to have it.”

“He didn’t. He wanted to throw it back in my face.”

There’s a long pause, then comes Mary’s voice, heavy and sad. “I’m just glad you’re back. Nanny is overjoyed, and

Kimmy will come around. She'll see that—”

I'm fuming. The anger I feel within me is a sick sucker punch in the gut. It's like swallowing all those nasty hornets that chased me off Nanny's front lawn and also a mouthful of Curly Cookie's handiwork in the backyard. I'm seething to the point where it feels like that towel warmer got to me instead of the towels. My blood is boiling.

Van waited all of two seconds before he was scheming with his mom in the kitchen. He told me that he had no interest in the company or replacing Kimmy. That's not why he came back. He said he wanted to make things right with his family and unburn bridges. Yeah. Freaking. Right. That was clearly a crock of shit because they were just plotting world freaking domination in the form of Kimmy's company in there.

I stroll out of the hall, making as much noise as I can. I'm determined to paste on a cheerful smile because it's exactly the kind of thing Kimmy would want me to do. She'd want me to stay and act happy and sweet and find out as much as I possibly could, but I just can't do it. I'm the world's worst spy. It only makes things worse that when Van and Mary see me, they both whirl around from the table they're standing in front of in the grandest of kitchens and dining areas. They both look

guilty. As guilty as can freaking be. They wouldn't look that way if they weren't scheming. They were knee-deep in old family drama, and they couldn't look worse if they'd had to run their underwear up a flagpole in the front yard, inside out, for everyone to see.

I no longer have to fake feeling sick. I set my hand on my stomach, which is spinning. "I'm sorry. I—I'm not feeling well. I'm going to go if that's okay? I'll come over another time. I'm really glad that you two can have dinner together, though. You both *deserve* it."

I walk quickly to the front door, as fast as I dare, knowing I'm generally quite clumsy. I don't want to land on my face. I shove my feet into my flip-flops, burst out of the heavy front door to a chorus of beeping from the security system, and power walk to the car. I'm so close. So freaking close. And I'm shaking all over. I need to call Kimmy. I need to warn her. So, so close. Almost there.

A hand closes around my wrist, big and warm and masculine. *Fuck*. As soon as I spin around and shake it off, Van's hand drops away. He steps back respectfully, his golden eyes—freaking lying eyes—freaking lying nice manly lips,

and freaking lying face right there. So, so close. He has no right to look confused. But maybe that's actual guilt.

“Are you okay?”

“Using my line on me now?” Lame. I know, I know. I suck at being ruthlessly angry.

“You just sprinted out of there. You were feeling fine before. You were also in the bathroom for a long time. If you're sick, let me take you home.”

“I'm good, thanks, Sullivan.”

“Sullivan?” He rakes a hand through his hair. “What did I do to deserve that?”

I'm a shit liar, and I'm also pissed, which is why I can't help the words that I snap at him. “Oh, plotting with your mom to take your sister down after you promised me you weren't doing that. I think that deserves the use of your full name, even if you hate it. Guess what? I don't like you right now. I think I might even hate you. I trusted you, and you lied to me. You're a turd.”

Annoyingly enough, he has the audacity to cock a brow and step in front of the driver's door, blocking my way. He crosses his arms, which are all big and bulgy, and god, I don't

want to notice how attractive he is right now, standing there, towering over me. He's still so beautiful that I could cry. I could cry because he's a jerk, and now this means war. Kimmy is going to be so hurt, and I'm so hurt, and nothing is going to be okay.

“I wasn't plotting anything with my mom, I promise.”

I want to stomp on his toes, but that would get me nowhere in flip-flops. Now I see why Kimmy chooses those huge stiletto heels. Those would do some damage. If she were here, she'd call her brother an unwashed ballbag and try and kick him in the junk. Then, she'd get in her car and calmly drive away, and he wouldn't be able to stop her.

“I heard you!” I screech. “I heard you freaking talking about the will and those clauses and how she wants to get everything fixed for you.”

“Remi.” He's saying my name in that way that means calm down and let me explain. Nope. I'm not calming down, and I'm not going to let him explain. I'm not going to listen to any more of his lies.

“Get out of my way.”

“No. You're upset. Don't drive off like this.”

“Get. Out. Of. My. Way.” He shakes his head, and I want to charge at him and—and what? Beat him ineffectively on his big huge, rock-solid chest? Watch his abs tighten as he flicks me off like a fly? Grab his face and punish him with kisses that let him know just how angry I am because they would be kisses with bites, and god, what if he liked that? What if I liked when he bit back? The heat in my body isn’t just an angry heat any longer, and I don’t like it. Not one bit. “Fine.”

I move fast, storming over to the passenger side of the car. I jam the key into the door, get the lock popped up, and launch myself in. But I’m not quite fast enough to get the door shut. It stops halfway, with Van’s leg blocking it.

Whatever. I can work with this anyway.

I scramble into the driver’s seat, jam the key in the ignition, and crank the car to life. It literally sounds more like car engine death, but whatever. It fires up, and I’m getting out of here. If Van doesn’t want to get run over, he’ll get out of the way.

I start to back down the driveway, and that’s when he plops into the passenger seat and shuts the door. I let out a cry of rage and quickly slam the car into park. “Get out!” I yell. I

slap the steering wheel with an open hand. “Just get out right now! I don’t want to talk to you anymore.”

“Remi—”

“Don’t fucking Remi me. Get out of my car with your forked tongue and slithering lies and your freaking kiss and lips and—”

“The will states that the company shares can only go to a full-blooded, biological son of my dad.”

I whip my head around, staring right into Van’s whisky dark eyes. The amber flecks are really glowing, and he might be playing it calmly, but I can see how wrecked he is and how his face is crumpling up. Oh my god, are his eyes misting over? I swallow the hard burn in my throat and the nasty wrecking ball going through my chest, telling me that everything is not fine. Everything is so fucked up, and this, *this* is why he left.

“Why is that a problem then?” I choke out, half understanding, hoping against hope that I’m wrong.

I’m not.

“Because, Remi, I’m a bastard. I know that’s old school, but I really am, in the sense of how that word actually used to

get used. I'm not and never was my father's son.”

CHAPTER 12



Van

Well, now I've gone and done it. I've wrecked dinner, worked my mom up, and thrown down archaic terms like "*bastard*." And fuck me sideways; I can feel my face getting wet. On top of everything, I'm going to sit here in Remi's car and freaking *cry* because it doesn't hurt any less right now than it did when I was sixteen and I found out. It's just a little less shocking for me now. The pain level is still the same. No, I think it might actually be worse because, at sixteen, I was still processing. None of the horrible things that happened had actually taken place yet. I didn't know anything about being alone, not like I thought I did. I had no idea what it would be like to lose my entire family. To have to give them up because they were basically taken away from me. I had no idea what it would feel like to have my dad dead and buried when he should still be alive and have him reach beyond the grave to give me one last middle finger salute with his will.

Yup, it's time to press the backs of my hands to my eyes—hard—because if I don't get a handle on this shit, the floodgates are going to burst wide open, and years of trauma

are going to come spilling out, and Remi in no way, shape or form, deserves to be the one to take the brunt of it.

Frick on a stick; this is mortifying.

“Sullivan, I...”

She’s using my full name again. I have to do something. Right now. In a second. Okay, in another second.

Her touch is a light whisper on my shoulder. I can’t see it or her because I have the heels of my hands pressed into my eyes, trying to stop the leakage from happening, and it’s like holding water in a bucket full of holes. That never works out, FYI.

“Just wait here for a minute, okay?”

By the time I gather myself together enough to tear my hands away, her door’s open, and she’s already gone, walking up the steps to the front door where my mom is standing and watching everything.

It’s official. This is how I die. Right here, in Remi’s car.

I watch her gesture to my mom and then the car before my mom shakes her head. Remi takes her hand, and at last, they hug. My mom’s tall, still-lithe body presses into Remi’s much smaller one, and her bright orange hair sticks out a good half a

foot above Remi's shoulder, which she affectionately pats before Remi walks back to the car.

Like a steel beam falling off a building right as I had the misfortune to step below it, it hits me that Remi knows my mom so much better than I do. I had the first eighteen years of my life with her, yet I barely knew her at all. Remi's had that and all the ones that came after. I'm glad. I'm glad Remi was like the second daughter my mother never had and that she was there for Kimmy over the years. Nanny too. She's watched over my family and been a part of it. I know if I asked Remi, she'd say they were the ones doing her a favor since I know Kimmy fought hard for her to be included after her parents went bankrupt and were no longer part of the neighborhood or regular elite social circle that was made up, for the most part, of sharks scenting blood in the water.

I know Kimmy fought my parents for the tuition so that Remi could attend the same private school they went to together. Kimmy never abandoned Remi. My parents probably paid for Remi's college too, and she works with my sister now. She probably feels like she owes our family something when really, I think it's the other way around. You can't put a price tag on someone like Remi.

She slides back into the car and gives me the softest, judgment-free look. It's a look that says she's sorry for my pain and sorry I'm the one hurting. That she's so sorry about how my dad was an asshole and sorry for everything else she doesn't know about. Her look says if she could just do something to make it better, she would do it in a heartbeat.

The world does not deserve people like Remelia Samson.

"Where should I take you?" she asks in a whisper. The car is still running from when she tried to drive away. She reverses much more calmly now and heads down the street.

"I ruined dinner," I mumble, barely hearing myself say the words as I fixate on the passenger window. It seems like the safest place to look.

"It's okay. Your mom understood. I talked to her. She's worried about you. She knows you're upset, and she knows why, obviously. More than I do. Anyway, I promised we'd come back another time."

"Did you promise you'd look after me tonight too?" Snarky and bitter is not how I meant for that to come out.

Remi doesn't rise to it. "Yup, you bet your bottom dollar I did."

I think the appropriate response would be to just shut up now.

“So, where do you want to go? I can take you back to Nanny’s. Or...or we could just keep driving aimlessly until you feel like talking. If you want to talk, that is. We could go to a nice park, but that’s rather, um, public. Or we could go back to my house. My parents are at a softball game tonight, playing in their rec league, not watching, which means a healthy amount of chicken wings, burgers, and beers after the game. They won’t be home until late.”

Remi is so small and sweet. She’s like sunshine, happiness, and liquid cheer personified. She doesn’t deserve to have me unload this on her. She shouldn’t even know about this. I told myself that no one would know. My dad made sure no one found out, but he’s not here anymore. He’s not here, and I’ll never get to make things right with him even though I am. Yeah, I’m here, Remi’s here, and she knows. I can’t just unsay what I blurted.

Even though I never wanted to tell anyone, I knew that when I got on the plane to fly back here, there was a point of no return. A point where nothing would make sense unless I explained everything to the people who needed answers, and I

did owe them answers. My mom knows, most obviously, but she has no idea what happened with Tina or anything else after I left. Nanny doesn't know anything, and Kimmy also doesn't know anything. But if I'm going to stay and try and make a life here, the first step toward that would be honesty.

I never thought I'd have to tell Remi.

I thought my sister would do that after she found out. She'd waltz into Remi's office at work or announce it over coffee with her. *Oh, btw, my brother's a bastard. Crazy, isn't it? And that might explain a lot, but I still think he's a prick of the first order.*

"I get why you're being super quiet. It's okay. You don't have to talk about it. We can just keep driving wherever and anywhere. I'm okay with silence. I might have to stop and get gas eventually, but that's okay too."

I make a split-second decision that I'm probably going to regret, but it's a longing that goes bone-deep. "Your place then, if that's okay."

"Yeah, it's okay."

The rest of the ride is silent, but I think I do enough broody and loud thinking for the both of us.

Remi's parent's house—I guess it's her place too—is older on the outside and inside, but it's homey and nice in a way that no house of mine ever truly felt like, at least not for me, even before all things related to my life went up in flames. Remi's room is fairly spacious. There are bifold doors on the one side for the closet and wooden slatted doors that must be original since the house was probably built in the seventies. The carpet might be original too. It's red shag, which I'd find quite awesome at any other time. Even right now, I can somewhat appreciate it.

She has a double bed, and because I'm a big rude oaf, I flop down on it hard enough to rattle the pillows and shake the bedframe beneath. As Remi's not a big rude oaf, when she flops down beside me, the bed hardly shifts. I have an arm thrown under my head, and I'm staring up at the white popcorn ceiling. She's staring up too, and not at me. I don't feel her gaze boring a hole through the side of my face. Her shoulder brushes against mine—her bare shoulder. A shiver quakes through my body. I'm lying on her bed, our bodies grazing, in her room, and her parents aren't home.

Holy shit, how did any of this happen?

She doesn't press me one bit. The only sound in the room is our breathing. In and out. Slow and even for her, a little more wrecked and ruined for me. I think it's impossible to be an even breather when your chest is caving in.

I should get to it since she probably thinks I'm crazy. "My mom had an affair. My dad was working a lot at the time, so he never knew. He never thought I looked like him, but then Kimmy did, and he got suspicious and did a paternity test behind my mom's back. He confronted her on my sixteenth birthday by telling us he had a surprise in the garage for both of us. I thought maybe it was a car, but no, it was that. He wanted to ruin the day I was born so that it would be spoiled for the rest of my life. Something about turnabout being fair play for him."

"What the fuck?" Remi breathes. It's not a good "what the fuck" either. It's a "what the fuck" that says she'd like to unwind time and go back and save me from that birthday, from finding out that way, and from everything that came after. I wish she could. God, I wish she could.

"My parents were rich, and you know the whole cardinal thing about rich people. Secrets. They have secrets on top of secrets on top of secrets. Layers and layers of secrets. Secret

sandwiches that they eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. My dad didn't want something so wretched to get out, so he agreed to keep it a secret, but he forced my mom and me into silence as well. He wanted me to leave, but I was sixteen and still a minor, and my mom fought for me.”

Remi sets her hand on my knee like it's okay if I need to break down. Like she wouldn't mind. She keeps it there like it's also okay that I'm telling her all this, all this shit that fucked up my life and soul, shriveling up my heart.

“My dad never wanted to set eyes on me again, but my mom protected me until I was eighteen. As soon as I graduated, I left. I didn't want to spend another day in that house. My dad had already told me that I was dead to him. If my mom wanted to stay married and enjoy that life and ever see either of us again, then I was dead to her too. Tina was... she was kind to me. We got together, and I was searching for someone to save me, someone to cling to. I clung too hard and fell too fast, and she gave me everything my parents no longer could. When I asked her to go away with me to Europe—I don't know why I picked it, it just seemed fucking far away—she said yes. She wouldn't go without a promise, though, so I asked her to marry me, and we left.”

“How...” Remi’s exhale is heavy, and there’s so much pain in that one word. “How did Kimmy not find out? How did no one find out?”

Secrets. Always the secrets. So well kept. So well guarded. “Tina eventually did know. My mom secretly sent some money at first, but then my dad found out and put a stop to it. I had some when I left too, but it didn’t last for very long. My dad controlled the finances, and it was all my mom could scrape together. She gave me a start, and I’m thankful she did. I would have been more thankful if she’d fought for me harder, but she had Kimmy as well. My dad could have taken Kimmy and made it so she could never see her again. He had all the money and power while my mom was a stay-at-home mom. Everything was in his name, even the bank accounts. He chose what he gave her. There was nothing she could have done. She didn’t sacrifice me for Kimmy. She was trying to figure out how to keep and save us both, keep us all together.”

“I’m so sorry, Van. I really am.” Her hand flexes on my knee. It feels nice, that touch, her slim fingers, anchoring me to the bed, anchoring me to this reality, anchoring me *here*. Somehow, she makes the scattered parts of me feel real. “No one should have to go through that. No adult should act like

that. Your dad raised you. He was still your dad. I'm just so sorry."

"With Tina, it was...difficult. When there wasn't any more money, and I was working and going to school, and she figured out there wouldn't be more money coming in, she lost interest. I realized she wasn't really with me for me. Everything changed, but I still clung to it like a fool. We were married, and I wanted to make it work. I always felt like I had something to prove. I never felt like I'd be enough."

Remi's hand traces over cautiously, and then her little finger bumps against mine. She tangles them together like she's making a pinkie promise. I like that she didn't say anything. That she just waits for me to get it all out. It's the only thing I like because admitting how helpless I felt and still feel even now makes me ache.

"I didn't lie to her." I should probably explain that so I don't look like an asshole. Although, I probably was an asshole. "I didn't tell her either, though, and I should have. I was eighteen, and I was dumb and scared, and for the past two years of my life, I had been living in hell."

"I'm so sorry," Remi whispers again. What else is there to say, really? "That you had to go through that. It wasn't fair to

you.”

“I never felt like I could come back until my dad passed away. He wouldn’t have let me see my mom or Kimmy, and I wasn’t allowed to contact either of them. He would have persecuted my mom in order to punish me. The will was one last, cruel blow. A joke. A parting shot from the grave. The thing is, when Tina finally found out I was getting nothing, that’s when she checked out. The bodybuilder thing happened pretty much right after. When she sent the divorce papers a few weeks after she left, I signed them right away.”

“No one should be with someone for what they can get out of them,” Remi says a little viciously. She’s angry, but it’s for my sake. “No one.”

I should have been wiser. It’s one of many things I should have done differently about my marriage. I should have clued into that long before I did. Well, no, that’s not true. I knew, and I really didn’t do anything about it. I have to change tracts, though, because it’s too late to change what happened now.

“What you heard was my mom’s guilt. She wants to fight it, to undo it, to make everything alright. And I was telling her that I didn’t want it. I have my own company in Europe, but you already know that though. I took a few weeks off to settle

down here, and the plan was to always run things from here if I could. I wanted to see if I could put my life back together. Or at least my family. I—I hate that I couldn't come back until he was gone. I never wanted revenge or anything like that. I guess maybe I was trying to succeed as proof that I could since that's usually the best form of vengeance there is. I don't feel loathing anymore. I just feel sad.”

In truth, I feel weighed down to my very core, down to the marrow of my bones. Carrying this shit has been so heavy, and my god, I'm so exhausted. Secrets are like that. Insidious. They'll fester inside you and eat you alive if you give them purchase. “I feel like I failed somehow. Failed everyone, including myself. I'm also pretty sure he died of a broken heart, and that's on me.”

Remi abruptly releases my hand, and yup, she's disgusted with me. I'm disgusted with myself too. The feeling is most certainly mutual. But then...but then, she flips over onto her side, and before I can muster enough courage to look at her, her hand traces down my shoulder and runs over my arm, stopping at my wrist. I finally do get my eyes to cooperate, even though they're burning furiously now, and moisture might be clinging to my lashes. The blinds are half closed on

the window at the far side of the bed, and the sun is getting low, coming through them, painting Remi in slashes and dashes and a dappled glow. She's so beautiful that my eyes start burning for a different reason, and the aching spot in my chest isn't the right kind of ache either.

“So all that time, you were pretending to be happy....” Remi's hand traces a small circle over my shoulder, and tendrils of heat flare out from the spot. I work hard at controlling my body's reaction because adding an inconvenient boner to the whole bastard deal is just in bad taste. “The world saw you as this golden boy. Everyone loved you in high school. You looked so carefree. And that smile you gave all the time? The one I haven't seen since? It's because it was fake, wasn't it? You hid the real you the whole time.”

Emotion blocks off my throat. The air is getting thinner and thinner in this room. Remi's eyes are getting bluer and bluer, and I realize it's because there's a sheen of tears in them. But she doesn't let them fall. She's not pitying me. She's stunned, and she's hurting for me. Because I'm her best friend's brother.

Remi swallows, and then she brushes at her eyes, taking her hand away. “I’m glad you’re *home*.” My body breaks out in goosebumps. She makes that word sound sweet. Even if nothing about this city, my mom’s house, the company that Kimmy runs—any of it—is home anymore. At least Nanny’s is still familiar. “I’m glad you told me. It’s so painful, and it’s not right. You’ve lost years of your life to this. I’m so very sorry. But you trusted me with this, and I’m honored.” Tears make her words thick and unsteady, but she keeps swiping at her eyes so they don’t fall.

I hate that she’s crying over this. For me. I take a breath. Then another. I have to force them because my chest is so tight.

Suddenly, a smile—the truest of smiles—breaks over Remi’s face like a golden sunrise. It matches all that sunshine coming through the window, laving her in gold, laving her sharp cheekbones, full lips, and pale skin—all that delicate beauty she’s grown into. “I’m so glad you’re back. This is your home, and you deserve to be here.” It’s like she’s dipped into my head and read all my insecurities.

My heart aches. I never even confessed all this stuff to Tina. I just worked my ass off to give her the kind of life she

wanted, the kind of life I thought she deserved. I'm pretty sure I was just setting myself up for failure, but I didn't realize that until I was signing the divorce papers and my heart had shrunk to the size of a walnut. No one likes walnuts. They're gross. At least, I hate them. Of all the nuts, they're my least favorite.

“What do you feel now?” Remi asks, astonishing me. It wasn't the question I was expecting.

The first word that comes to mind isn't something I can say. Frankly, I feel worthless. That's what I've been fighting for the last half of my life. I scraped together an investment company from nothing, convinced people to take a chance on me, and made sure they didn't regret it. I worked hard day in and day out, sometimes sixteen to twenty hours a day. I even worked when I went to school. I never stopped working. I thought I wanted to prove myself to Tina, to give her everything she thought she was getting when she married me, because that was only fair. Honestly, though, I knew it was bigger than that. I had something to prove to my father.

“I thought if I could do it, be successful enough, be good enough, he'd say it didn't matter. That it was in the past. That I was his son again.”

I stare into Remi's eyes, the most beautiful eyes in the world, I think. They're more beautiful right now than anything I've ever seen. I watch a tear trickle out the corner and race over her nose, splashing onto the pale blue bedspread below. Her room is simple, elegant, and clean. Everything is put away. The furniture isn't new, and it's minimal. The one treasure in her room is against the far wall—a huge bookcase overflowing with books. I like Remi's room. It's peaceful, kind of like her.

I can fall into her eyes right now, and she lets me. They're safe. She's safe. Why didn't I ever really notice how wonderful she was? Why did I never wonder at all how Remi turned out or who she became?

Remi surges forward, shimmying on the bedspread until she has her arms around me. She crushes herself to me, astonishing me and stealing my ability to think or form words. Her arms wrap sweetly around my neck, and my face is next to her throat, only a few inches from her chest. From. Her. Chest. Her breasts—soft, pillowy breasts—press up against me. After she holds me for a minute, the best minute of my life, period, she looks down at me and sweeps a strand of hair off my forehead. I feel...seen, appreciated, welcomed, adored, and

loved in a warm, friendly, sibling kind of way. It offsets the pain that has been roaring through my heart, scorching me raw inside for years and burning me down to ash over and over again. Remi is like rain. She falls around me like the soaking I got the other night, drenching me to the skin. It feels good this time. She feels good.

“You’re amazing. You’ve survived so much. You can do anything. Anything at all.”

I close my eyes and let her stroke her soft fingers over my forehead. I didn’t realize I was so exhausted. Mentally, yes, always. Emotionally, also always. Physically too. The bed is so welcoming, Remi is warm, and the sunbeams slanting over us feel good. I feel content, almost lazy, and safe enough to keep my eyes closed for just a few more seconds.

Remi’s words fill up all the spaces in my head, chasing away the memories, the anger, the fear, the feelings of worthlessness. I don’t feel lost right now. Instead, I feel very *found* and so very *wanted*.

I haven’t had a good sleep in ages, so maybe it’s no wonder that everything gets heavy, and my breaths grow even. Even though I want to stop myself from falling, I can’t.

I know that Remi's here. I know she's got me, and she'll keep me safe.

CHAPTER 13



Remi

I couldn't not sleep beside him.

So, in the morning, a very early five in the morning, it's a bewildered, blurry gaze, still heavy with sleep but widening with astonishment, that meets mine.

"Oh my god," Van mutters, backing up to the far side of the bed.

He fell asleep on his back, and I covered him up with an extra quilt from the linen closet, but during the night, he rolled around quite a bit. He moaned once, snored for hours, stole my pillow from me, tugged the blankets off me three times, and nearly shoved me off the bed twice with all his tossing and turning. I loved it all.

His eyes rake over the room, rake over *me*. He lifts the blanket up, and they rake over his body.

"Don't worry. We're still dressed." I put my hand over my mouth to keep in a giggle. It's a good thing my parents never check on me when the lights are out and it's late. Plus, I have a lock on my door that I made sure was secure. It's also a good

thing they'll be sleeping late this morning because it's Saturday, and copious amounts of wings and beer will do that to a person. "You fell asleep last night and slept all night."

"Fuck. I'm sorry!"

"That's okay." It's more than okay. It's something I've dreamt up. Now I can die happy. File that under #horriblypathtic and also under #thingsnevertosayoutloud.

"God, did I drool?"

"I don't know. I was sleeping too." Lies. I didn't sleep a wink. I watched Van on his back for hours, at peace, his lashes starred and heavy, his breaths so even, shoulders rising and falling. He was sweet, and he looked younger and so much more carefree. The soul-deep loneliness that was in his eyes while he was pouring his heart out was shuttered away. I hoped he was dreaming and that it was sweet, but I stayed awake to guard him even in sleep, just in case I had to slay the monster in his nightmares.

I would have done it a thousand times over and slain all the demons in the world just to give him those few hours of rest he needed so badly. I slept beside him and never touched him, but it was like I could still feel his heart pounding as if we were pressed up against each other. Maybe my heart just

pounded enough for both of ours. I've held my heart and all my desires in check for so long, and now they're not checked at all. Now is a dangerous time. A time when everything seems possible even though I know it's not true.

“Did I snore?”

Like a rusty chainsaw for most of the night. “Not that I heard.”

He puts both hands up and scrubs them down his face before swinging his legs off the side of the bed. “I had better go.”

Please don't. Not yet. I'm not ready for this to be over. “Okay. But it's really early. Will you stay for a cup of coffee first?”

“Uhh, you want me to have coffee? When I just woke up and have no toothbrush or—”

“I can get you one. And a shower, if you want.”

“No, Remi, I can't borrow your dad's clothes again, and you've already given me deodorant that I still haven't replaced. But I'm going to. I promise.”

“Don't worry about that. My dad buys in bulk when something goes on sale, then gets sick of the scent. He wasn't

going to use it. I have an extra toothbrush, and you can still have a shower.” I lean in and smell him, and he backs up, alarmed. “Nope. No weird smells. I think you pass muster.” No weird smells at all. He just smells like him. Like sleep and cedar and the man of my freaking dreams.

Last night, Van gave me something no one else has had from him. He probably thinks it’s a burden, but I think it’s a gift, and I want to carry some of that for him. My heart is aching and hurting for him. I don’t know what I can do, but maybe just listening helped. It wasn’t just my fantasy of spending a night with Van that made me let him sleep. It was because he needed it. And I wanted to watch over him. I know no one can save someone else, but I’d like to help, just a little if I can.

I get out of bed, looking as ruffled as he does. Except I didn’t sleep, so I’m probably a little bleary too. “I’ll get you a toothbrush.”

In the bathroom, I brush my own teeth and finger comb my hair, sticking it up into a messy bun. Then, I wash my face and call myself good to go. My sundress, unfortunately, is creased into horrible patterns, squashed on one side, and wrinkled beyond repair, but I do apply fresh pit stick, then

consider doing more. Van could roll into this house covered in mud and smelling like the bottom of a trash can, and I'd still be enthralled, but I don't hold myself to the same standard.

I sweep back into the bedroom. Van is standing by my bookshelf, surveying my collection, but there's something wrong with his face. Something is very, very wrong. His jaw is hard, and there's an expression on his face that's impossible to pick apart, but it looks like disbelief. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and there are goosebumps on my arm. My stomach flops around and falls as I step forward very, very carefully.

“What's wrong?” I mean, besides the obvious. Because I don't think this is about what he told me last night.

Guilt burns in his eyes, a softer shade of brown now. It's not light out, but it's also not dark. I flicked the light on before I left. However, it's not the light burning in those depths. It's something—

I glance at the bookshelf. Then at Van. Then back at the shelf. He looks there, too, and I follow his gaze this time.

My heart doesn't just ache or shiver or vibrate or pulse. It stops completely.

Holy. Fuck. Please. Please. No.

It's the kind of no that a person truly means. One of those *please, no, I'll do anything, anything, I'll be good for the rest of my life, and I'll never swear again or think a horrible thought about anyone ever* kind of please, no.

"I'm sorry," he whispers guiltily. "I didn't mean to...it just had a nice cover. The mermaid and the one with the cat. They were just sitting there, and I didn't mean to pick them up. I just wanted to look."

My journals. He found my journals from high school, and it's clear he read them. Even if he just flipped through them, it would be enough. So. Freaking. Clear. I only started keeping a journal when I was fifteen. After a few years, I switched to simple, plain notebooks because they were easy to write in and cheap. I needed cheap. Those first two—the mermaid and the cat ones—were gifts from my parents. Yes, they're very pretty, but they're also filled with all my darkest secrets, including a few THOUSAND times where I confessed my undying love for Sullivan Carlson.

All he would have had to do was flick through it to spot his name dozens of times, littering the pages. From my foolish

teenage heart to paper. There are probably quite a few hearts, too, with his name doodled in different lettering.

“I’m so freaking sorry, Remi,” he says again. He looks at the floor. He can’t look at me.

I don’t know how to have this out. I don’t know what to say. He spilled his heart to me last night, and now he knows all about mine, but I didn’t confess it. I didn’t give it to him. Instead, he stole it. How can we have coffee now? Now that he knows. All those entries were dated, so it’s clear they’re from high school, but he still knows, and now I’m humiliated. What must he assume about me? What does he think about me now? Last night, I was a friend, an equal. I was someone he trusted. I was someone he wanted to open his heart to. I was there for him, and he had my heart, but he didn’t know it. He’s never known it. Now he does, and I’m probably just some silly girl to him again. Not a woman. Not a freaking grown woman at all.

I’m so humiliated. I’m wrecked by this. My heart is a mess because I’m furious, and I want to fall down on my knees and weep. I want to accuse him of stealing my secrets, things that were never meant for him, and I want to howl. But

part of me, the rational and sane part, wants to go and get that cup of coffee and laugh it off as a silly crush.

That's the option I'm going with since it's dumb to be mortified over this. I'm not going to let this wreck my life and dictate what happens from here. So he saw what I wrote when I was fifteen and sixteen years old. Big deal. Maybe it *is* a big deal, but so what? So I had a crush on Van, but now we're here, and it's now that matters.

I open my mouth to tell Van that there's a toothbrush with his name on it, and in ten minutes, there'll be a cup of coffee with his name too, along with my heart, waiting, always my freaking heart—okay, so I won't tell him that bit—but he doesn't give me a chance.

He whirls and dashes to the window. He pulls up the glass—there's no screen because it busted out a long time ago. I'm not even sure if this room ever had a screen on the window. It's a big window, just the right size for someone to climb out. If you're me and not a full-grown man, that is.

Also, if there weren't blinds in the way.

Van thrust the blinds aside, but they come back at him, tangling around him. He tries to leap out, and it's a tall window, so that's not a very smart thing to do. He ends up half

out but mostly in, his feet arched up and kicking, trying to shove himself the rest of the way. It's a six-foot fall down to the ground at least, and there's no way I'm letting him face that head first. My blinds are destroyed like a cat the size of a T-Rex just went through them.

I do the most logical thing by racing forward and grabbing his feet with both arms, locking them around his legs. I pull back, and he might have gravity, but I'm damn well determined not to let him eat dirt. In my mind, I keep seeing his head getting squashed like a melon as he hits the ground. It might be grass below, but I'm not going to let that happen.

“Van!” I yell, pounding on his legs. “Van! Stop! Stop kicking me!”

He freezes, and that split second is enough for me to drag him back through the window. He hits the floor of my room, breathing hard, and I slam the glass shut. My blinds are gaping in several spots, destroyed beyond redemption. I throw my hands on my hips and stare down at him. “Are you insane?”

He nods, throat bobbing as he swallows quickly. “Yeah. Yeah, I'm starting to think the odds of it are pretty fucking good.”

“What the ever unholy fuck did you think you were going to do?” I whirl around, pointing to the door. “If you’re going to bail on me again, use the freaking door. It’s that way.”

He’s still sitting on the floor, but he looks like he wants to leap up and take me up on my offer. I slump down beside him, falling to my knees so I can look him in the eye. “Yeah, so I had a crush on you. So what? You don’t have to spaz and leap out my window and fall to your death. Good lord.”

“Do you still feel that way?” he gasps, his shoulders and chest heaving. He’s pressed himself up against the wall like it can save him. Like he can melt through it and escape that way. Unfortunately for him, it looks like they’re going to hold.

I guess this is the moment of truth. I don’t want to lie. I can’t lie. Not after last night. This isn’t a brush it off as a joke kind of a thing. Not with the way he’s looking at me now. I think about all those doodles and hearts and his name next to mine, engraved on paper and the walls of my heart forever. All those teenage dreams. “In varying shades and degrees of it, with a lot less intensity and a lot more maturity...yes.”

“Oh, god. Oh, sweet gravy. Kimmy is going to kill me.”

I laugh, and he gapes at me. “You think Kimmy doesn’t know? Didn’t know? I told her right away. She’s my best

friend. We've never kept secrets."

"So she sent you to seduce me into giving her information? Is that it?" He looks betrayed now, horrified and appalled.

"No." I set my hand over my thrumming heart, willing it to calm down before I have an actual heart attack. "No, that was not it. Okay, so she did want me to get information out of you, but mostly just to figure out if you were going to take the company from her or not. She told me to do what it takes. Did she mean it? Of course not. It was just Kimmy being Kimmy. Did she want information? Yes. Is she scared to death about being replaced and losing everything she's worked for? Yes. Did she want me to hurt you? No. She might have said she did and pretended like she didn't care, but she does.

"I've never lied to you. I'm a shit spy, and I admitted that from the start. I love Kimmy, and I...*cared* about you. I still care about you. You're feeling sad, and you're hurt, and I don't like that. Last night? That wasn't me trying to get something out of you. That was me listening because you needed someone. But, Van, as for the seduction stuff and whatever else, I never planned on it. I would never have tried, and if I had, it wouldn't have been seducing. It would have

just been real and honest, and you would have known the difference.” I blink, my heart finally settling into a pace that isn’t going to slay me. “*You were the one who kissed me.*”

“And you slept in the same bed with me!”

“You feel asleep. We were fully clothed. Nothing happened. You were exhausted. I...I didn’t actually sleep.”

At this, his eyes nearly pop out of his head. “Oh god. Oh my god, that’s even worse. You just watched me sleep all night?”

“The lights were off, so not exactly.”

“I’m floundering here, Remi. You’ve got to help me out.”

I don’t know what he’s asking for, but I drop to my knees and throw my hands around his neck, just intending to hold him close to stop the meltdown that’s probably coming. I’m not sure why he’s freaking out so badly. I don’t get the change. But the would-be hug turns into Van tilting my face to meet his, and our mouths crash together. He kisses me like he’s been waiting his whole life for this very moment, or maybe it’s just wishful thinking on my part because that’s how I kiss him.

My heart breaks itself over and over again against the wall of my ribs. My breasts are heaving against the dress, and I

press closer to Van, craving his heat, needing to be closer, wanting it all—more of him, more of his skin. I want to touch him all over, but I keep my hands on his shirt even though I want to tear it apart and reveal the golden skin and hard abs below. I want to put my mouth there, all over him. I want to worship him until he begs me and makes hoarse, animal sounds. I want to make him feel good. Yes, I've thought about this a lot. But this is more than anything I've ever mused about before or, okay, I'll admit, fantasized about.

I want to make him feel more than just human again. I want him to know how special he is. How, if our lives had been different, maybe he could have been my everything. Or someone else's everything. I've always just wanted him to be happy more than I ever wanted him for myself, and the thought of him being used and discarded, working hard yet never feeling like it was enough, and feeling worthless and alone and abandoned makes me sick and angry and heartbroken.

The moment goes on, and it lasts and lasts. His lips are heaven. I taste like mint, and he tastes like mint because I can taste myself on him, but he's sweet too. He tastes like himself, and I can't get enough. He's a really good kisser. I always

knew he would be. I make little noises against his lips, which he matches with feral-sounding groans that are barely audible. Lifting my hand, I trace a small circle at the back of his neck before I bury my hand in his messy hair and scrape my teeth over his bottom lip, sucking it into my mouth. He gives me that grunt I've been craving, and his tongue pushes between my lips, finds mine, and strokes it in a way that has me clenching my thighs together because I know I've freaking ruined my panties, and soon, the evidence is going to be leaking down my thighs. I'm wearing a dress, damn it, and it's too much. But still, we don't stop. It's like the world around us has disappeared, leaving just us behind, and there isn't such a thing as time or expectations.

It all comes rushing back as soon as we break the kiss. Van pulls away, and we both gasp for air. If we didn't want to suffocate, he needed to pull back. But I still want to grab him, climb on top of him, and kiss him breathless all over again.

"Oh..." I have to put my fingers to my lips. I'm shaking. Van is right beside me, and he's trembling too. "Wow." He looks pale. Scared. Not regretful. Instead, he's looking at my lips like he wants to kiss me again. At least he's not running for the door.

“Everyone hides their heart,” he rasps in a low whisper. His hands flex at his sides, by his knees, like he wants to reach for me but is physically holding himself back. “Everyone pretends. Why not you? Everyone has this end game, and everyone wants something. But not you. Why not you?”

I know he means it as a compliment, and not a backhanded one either. He’s not trying to insult me, and he just gave me the kiss to end all kisses, so I find it easier to answer him. “Believe me; I’m far from being faultless.” I turn around to look at the door, but it’s probably only six in the morning, and my parents won’t be awake for another six or seven hours. They might not do this often, but softball is something to party hard over.

“Maybe I’m not a plotter,” I continue, turning back to Van. “No one likes it when people are honest. That’s why they have that saying about being honest to a fault. The things I want—they might be so small and simple that everyone thinks I have no drive or ambition, and that’s okay, I guess. Because I know otherwise. But if the things I want aren’t grandiose, does it make them less important?” I can feel my lips quivering and my emotions rising to the surface. Goodness, isn’t that one

heck of a tangled mess? I have no idea what I'm feeling right now. But it's a lot. So, so much.

I just kissed Van. Really kissed him. And I was really kissed *by* him. It's so monumental that I'm surprised the world isn't turning to ash or falling down around us and that poets aren't getting out their pens to write a song about it.

“What do you want?” He really wants to know. He's asking me in that sweet voice of his, made raw by emotion. His eyes skim back over my lips, and I feel him down to my center. Not just *that* center but the center of me where everything is. It's the feeling that you've known someone forever, and they're a part of you. That center.

Alright, he's so gorgeous under my ruined blinds with the sun starting to streak through the window and highlight the golden sparks in his eyes that I want to drag him to my bed and make him forget that anyone on this earth ever thought he was anything less than perfect. And a perfect sex god. When I finished with him, he would have zero doubts.

This is so not helping my soaking wet panty, throbbing clit, or tingling nipple situation one bit.

“I want to be happy. I want to be healthy and have my family and friends be healthy too. I want good things for them.

I'd like a small house of my own, two cats, and maybe a dog. One day, probably some kids, and above all, a husband who adores me and who I adore. I'd like that to never change, not until we're ancient and old, and even then, no matter what comes after, I'd still like to haunt him and have him haunt me. I don't need tons of money, and I don't need fancy crap. Oh, and Nanny. I'd really like her to last another hundred years because she's amazing, and I have no grandparents of my own. I'd also like your sister to fall head over heels in love because she's like a sister to me, and I want her to be happy. I want your mom to be happy, too, especially now that I know what she went through.

“My parents lost everything when I was younger, and they had to move to this house. This was basically paradise after the little apartment we had when things were getting sorted out. My mom cried every day, but then they got jobs, rebuilt their lives, and learned how to laugh again, and we were whole because we were together. We were a family. Nothing else was important. Anyway, that's what I want for me.”

“With me?”

“Oh, Van...” I touch his hand and he doesn't jerk it away. He does whip his eyes up to my face, though. “That was just a

teenage crush. I'm not going to pretend that I don't feel anything now because I do, but I don't even know you as who you are now. I only have two kisses to go on. And I really, really liked them."

He flushes faintly, and it makes my heart sing. I brush my finger over the back of his hand again, and he doesn't flinch. "I'm sorry." That deep voice reaches right to my heart and wraps its fingers around it. "I'm sorry about the journals and falling asleep in your bed after I dumped a crapshit of stuff on you. I'm also sorry about the window and your blinds and what just happened now."

It's the kind of apology that says save me. Don't let me go. Grab my legs when I'm falling out of a window and tug me back. Look for me for hours in the rain. "I'm not." My voice doesn't waver. Not one bit. "Try it again." I can't believe I'm brave enough to do this, but I know if I'm not, it won't happen again. "If you're still sorry, you should do it one more time. Everyone is all about the third time's the charm and all."

And he does. My god, he does. He reaches for me and draws me close, punishing my mouth. The kiss turns sweet after a few seconds, though, and he explores gently, taking his

time. It's a thing of wonder. Like he can't believe this is happening. I can't believe it's happening either.

When Van stands roughly and tugs me into his arms and kisses me breathless all over, dragging his hands through my hair to tilt my face back to deepen everything, my head swims, my body cries out, my clit throbs, and I know I don't want this to end.

The kiss does, but only because I tear away, panting and wild-eyed, and race over to shut the door and twist the lock. I put my finger to my lips, saying nothing at all. Just shhh, and then I twine my hands around Van's neck, stand on my tiptoes, and let him take my breath away with another raw, seductive kiss that makes me tingle straight down to every single one of my toes. I've never been aware that they're all there before, all ten of them. It's quite fascinating.

I'm the one who guides him to the bed, and I'm the one who presses down on his shoulders to make him sit on the edge. Then, I guide him further back and help him stretch out. The bed doesn't make a sound, thank goodness. It's an old one, so I didn't exactly trust it.

I watch as Van shifts on the bed and stretches his back out, his body so big that he nearly takes up the whole thing, his

feet half hanging over the edge because he's tall. He's always taken up all the air like this whenever he's near. All the room. All the space in my chest. His eyes are golden, swimming, and his lips part in surprise as he watches me. I never thought we'd be here. I'm not sure what to do now and how to proceed. I want him so freaking badly, but does he want this too? I guess I could just ask...

“Are you okay?” I whisper. “Are you sure?”

He rifles a hand through his hair and leaves it there, thrown over the pillows. “If you're okay.”

“What about after?”

His eyes darken. “I don't know. I'm worried about that. Are you?”

“A little. Should we not do this?”

“What exactly are we doing?”

“I don't know. Can I touch you?” When I say that, he groans a little too loudly. I put my finger to my lips again and smile because I can't stop myself. “Shh. Only if you're quiet.”

His lips press together to stifle any further sound. He nods. “Yes, Remi. I want you to touch me.”

“Okay. We'll figure out the after, well...after.”

I'm standing at the foot of the bed, and his eyes sweep over me, setting little fires off one by one under my skin. He never tears his eyes away as I watch him the same way. Neither of us moves, and the room is totally silent. His eyes are so glorious and beautiful. I'm shaking, and all of a sudden, I feel silly now. It's light in here. I'm not a goddess by any means, but I'm also nervous about stripping his clothes away and dying because it's all so good or even embarrassing myself by doing something he doesn't like. I feel like I'm going to faint. But I just need to start. Where should I begin? Oh god. Oh god. Oh god...

Socks.

I start with his socks. They're the first thing I see, closest to me, so I take one, peeling it off his foot. I run my hand up his heel, past his arch, to his toes. He clamps his hand over his mouth to keep in a giggle, and his foot flexes, toes curling in.

"Oh my god, are you ticklish?"

"Most people don't go for the feet first," he says, voice thick with amusement. "I didn't think you'd find out so easily."

I strip his other sock away, glowing now, not so nervous anymore. I let them drop to the floor, but then what? Now I

take his jeans off? Straddle him? Ugh, you'd think that in all the years I've had fantasies and lucid dreams about this, I'd be a little more prepared and not so cripplingly nervous.

My clothes. It feels safer to take off my clothes, so I stand there in a beam of sunlight at the foot of the bed and slide the straps of my sundress off my shoulders. Staring at me, Van makes an anguished sound. Too loud. "Shh," I whisper again, casting my eyes to the door. My parents are probably sleeping the sleep of the chicken wing and beer dead, but if they wake up and knock on the door, I will die of both humiliation and sexual tension.

I keep working the dress off, letting it fall to my waist. "Christ." Van sounds like he's dying now. The dress falls to the floor. His eyes never tear away from me. They're glowing even brighter now, and he has this look of awe on his face that fills me up to overflowing. It makes me confident enough to reach behind me and unclasp my bra. My boobs are not the stellar kind. They're an A-cup at best, but the way Van looks at me with hunger in his eyes, his lips parted like he wants to make another sound, a louder sound, a sound that's going to be begging me because he needs this as badly as I do, makes me

hot and wet. His eyes are a caress that I feel all over my skin. Gentle. Warm. Scalding. Wicked.

His gaze rakes down, and when he fixes on a spot below my waist, he jerks on the bed. “Christ, Remi.”

I follow where his eyes are staring, and I can see the wet spot on my gray cotton panties. They’re the boy shorts kind. Not sexy. But thoroughly soaked. When I mean wet spot, it’s more like a lake. I slowly pull them down my hips, shimmying them off.

Van is way too loud. “I’m going to die,” he groans loudly. “You’re killing me.”

“Okay, that’s it,” I huff. “That was your last warning.” I’m not mad. I’ve suddenly got a burst of inspiration that if I don’t act on, I’m going to rethink it, rethink all this, chicken out, and be mad at myself forever.

I grab my panties off the floor, wad them into a ball, walk around the bed, and stuff them into his mouth. Gently. If he didn’t want me to, he could have fought me off easily or protested. He could still just reach over and pull them out. Instead, his eyes get heavy, and he groans around the fabric.

I hop up onto the bed and straddle him, totally naked. I have no idea what I'm doing or where I'm getting the courage for this. I just know that if I don't have him inside me soon, filling this ache, then I'm the one who's going to be slain.

I pay attention to his jeans, undoing the button and sliding open the zipper so quietly that it doesn't make a sound. Going slow. I can make out his rigid bulge below, even before I slide his jeans down. He helps me, lifting his hips so I can strip them off. When I reach into his boxers, his nostrils flare, his eyes squeeze shut, and he makes the sexiest noise around my panties.

“Oh my god.” I jam my hands over my mouth, holding in my laugh. Who was the woman who just did this to him? Who put her panties in his mouth? Surely that wasn't me? “I'm so sorry, Van. I'll take them out. This is way too kinky.” I lean forward and brush a kiss over his forehead. I reach for my underwear, but he shakes his head furiously. “You're okay?” He nods even more furiously. “Okay.”

I turn my attention back to his boxers. I'm stripped bare, and he's still in his dress shirt and underwear, which I like. It's hot. It's even hotter when I peel his boxers down and take his rod out. His cock throbs in my hand, huge and long and so

freaking hard. He's glistening at the tip, so wet that it produces an instant and immediate matching response from me. I can feel beads of moisture slipping down my thighs. I pump my hand down his length just to feel the hot velvet skin over the hardness beneath. I trace the veins with my fingertips, memorizing every perfect detail.

Van makes a muffled noise, and his body responds, his abs curling up, hips jerking into my touch. He inhales and exhales hard as I grip him even harder, sliding my hand up and down again and again. I want to take him in my mouth, and when I bend to do it, he cups my face in both hands and shakes his head, eyes wide.

“Why not?” I whisper.

He just shakes his head again as his thumb caresses my cheek.

“Right. Okay. I'm not going to last either. Not more than a few seconds, probably.”

“Mpphhffhfffhfhfhfhf.” I think that's an agreement, especially because his nostrils flare wide, his shoulders rise and fall jerkily, and his head grinds down into the pillows.

I'm on the pill, but I think it's a good thing to use a condom, though I'm too embarrassed to ask him if he wants one. I haven't been with anyone in months, and I'm sure he hasn't either, but I also don't want to have a lengthy discussion about the pill, so I bend over and reach for the nightstand beside the bed, pulling out a box of condoms. They're old. Really old. I check the date. Oh, thank god they're still good. I tear one off the strip, rip the packet open, and peel it down Van's length. Or at least I try. It's a bit of a mess, and I suck at it, so he finally helps me by taking over and getting the damn thing on. He's a little bit big for it, which I think is the problem. It looks painful. I'm painful. My body is an inferno, my thighs are soaked, and I am so damn empty that I feel like I could actually scream. Maybe I need to rip those boxers off him after all and cram them into *my* mouth.

I'm still straddling him, and I take him in my hand and guide him to me as I lower myself down. My legs are tense. All of me is tense. He's like a rock beneath me, rigid and still, and I have to close my eyes because I can't look at him when I do this. His eyes shutter close right before mine, and at the look of utter bliss on his face, I relax.

His legs are thick with muscle, and he's a big man, while I'm not a very big person, so even parting my legs like this makes them burn. But it's delicious. I love how I can barely fit over him enough to do this. I run him through my wetness, my eyes closed, feeling how soaked I am. He groans louder from behind all that fabric as his hips jerk up into my hand. He's right there, and this time I guide him to where I need him. He can't stop himself from moving, thrusting just a little. He's big, and he stretches me as he slips just the first inch inside. Then, he freezes, and I take the side of my hand between my teeth, biting down so that I don't scream. I need more. I need all of him.

Everything disappears. Nothing matters except this. I'm totally lost in this, and I think Van is too. There's just us, just here and now. Surrendering to each other and giving each other what we want. And it is bliss. I take more and more of him, sinking down harder while Van's breaths come harder and more uneven. Mine do too.

I set my palms on his shoulders and lean forward, taking more and more of him until he's seated inside me. He's so big that I could die. I could break apart just like this. I'm scared to move because I'm already on the verge of coming, and if I do,

it's going to be loud. I need something, something to contain the sound and bliss that is going to crack my world in half.

I put my face next to Van's ear and whimper his name, rolling my hips as I do. He trembles beneath me, quaking and burning. He lets me set the pace, which I do, filing myself and taking him exactly where I need him. I lick the side of his neck, kiss him, and pour my moans into his skin as my hips work over him. He fills me over and over because he can't stay still either, and I dig my nails into his shirt. I wish I'd stripped the damn thing off—torn the buttons open with my teeth like an animal.

Next time. Please, please, please, let there be a next time.

Our hips meet and slam together. His hands come to my waist, and he steadies me as I rock against him. As I grind down on him. I can't breathe. The heat is there, so hot, so overwhelming, building and filling me up as well. He's stroking inside me, thrusting in long hot passes that make me see lights and stars. I can feel all his muscles working beneath me. His chest tightening, his abs bunching, his legs tensing. I change the rhythm in response, grinding harder, rolling my hips slower, and letting him feel all of me while I savor all of him.

I know this is it. I've just taken him to that spot inside me, and he's dragging himself in and out, filling me over and over, bumping into the button that makes my brain short circuit. His hands dig into my hips. I love the feel of his fingers, big and strong, guiding me gently, urging me. I'm less gentle with his shirt. With his neck.

But it's not enough. I'm going to come apart, and his neck isn't going to hold the sound of all that pleasure in. I keep rocking, not daring to break the rhythm. I don't think I could tear myself away if I wanted to. Our bodies fit perfectly together, and he's glorious under me. I caress Van's face with my hands, smoothing them over the stubble on his cheeks before I tear my panties out of his mouth and seal my lips over his.

At the taste of myself on him, the taste of him and me together, I fall over the edge. I can feel myself closing around him, the spasms shredding through me. I can feel myself shaking, and then it really hits—the pleasure, a livewire jolt that flies through me. My body locks around Van's as I explode. I whimper and mewl, the pleasure coating every inch of me, changing me like a chemical reaction. I hang on, scrabbling at his shirt, still rolling with his rhythm because I

need him to come with me. I want him to tumble over the edge with me as I kiss all my elation and pain and triumph and surrender against his lips. He drinks down the sounds and kisses me back.

Then, he tears his mouth away, and we both gasp. “Remi,” he groans, just my name, before he takes my lips again, kissing me like a hurricane. He’s a storm crashing all around me, landing all around me. All of my life, I’ve wanted him. I’ve wanted him for so long that it feels like I could die at this moment. I could die of happiness, torture, and needing him so fucking bad that I can’t breathe through it.

When Van groans and tenses under me, all his muscles become rock hard. He keeps going, but then he stills, and I can feel him throbbing inside me, shuddering beneath me. “Fuck, Remi,” he pants against my mouth, so quietly, so raw. “Fuck.”

He sends me spiraling all over again. I can’t stop, and the second climax hurts more than the first. It’s way more intense. I feel like my body is breaking apart, splintering around Van. My heart might be splintering around him too. In a good way. Even after my hips stop rolling, he stops pumping, and we’re both quiet and still, I can feel myself trembling around him from the inside out. I’m so lightheaded and boneless that I

don't feel real anymore. I feel like I could float away, but Van's arms come around me to steady me. He pulls me down against him, gently, always so gentle, and I stretch out on top of him before he guides me to the side—guides us both to the side. He holds me, pressing little kisses against the crown of my head. I breathe in deep, inhaling a real breath—a full breath—because this really just happened, and it was more perfect than anything I've ever known. My chest floods with happiness.

I nuzzle against him, kissing his neck and stroking his face, my eyes still closed. I'm afraid to open them. I'm afraid that if I do, this is all going to go away. I don't want this to have been a dream.

It was real. It was real. It was real.

“I need you,” he whispers against my hair, raw and vulnerable and soft. “God, Remi, I need you.”

My arms close around his neck, and I brush my lips over his. “I need you too, Van. I need you too.”

CHAPTER 14



Van

People say things happen in the heat of the moment, but it's been a week, and I still need Remi just as badly. Probably more. I've held myself back. I've craved her all week, wanted her, dreamed about her, lain awake multiple nights thinking about her.

When she texts me and tells me to come over because her parents are out doing softball stuff again, I come. Not through the window but through the front door. Sheepish. Scared. I'm as nervous as last time but not such a hot mess this time. Although, I didn't bring flowers. I should have brought flowers. Or maybe even some gravy as an offering.

She sweeps into my arms, launching herself at me in a streaking blur of black T-shirt and blue cut-off jean shorts as soon as I get through the door. After sliding the lock in place, she then half climbs me, but only half because I'm already lifting her up. Her arms twine around my neck, and my hands cup her lovely, curvy bottom to hold her up as she peppers my face with kisses before I finally pull myself together, get situated, and tilt my face up for a real kiss.

“I missed you,” she gasps right before her lips meet mine.

“Mmphhhf soooo blooo.” Maybe kissing and talking isn’t a good idea since that didn’t come out right. Anyway, I’d rather just kiss and not talk.

She trembles against me, taking my mouth and melting into me while I stumble around like I’ve had a few too many of those chocolate milkshakes. Alright, maybe that’s a bad example. Remi has to break the kiss a few times to give me directions even though I should know the way to her bedroom. I’ve done this before, but I’m drunk on her kisses, her delicious mouth, and the burning need that’s consuming me.

Remi is consuming me too. The kiss is consuming me. She’s not afraid to use her teeth to scrape over my bottom lip, use her tongue to stroke deeply against mine, and angle her head and give me all of herself. I have endorphins firing like crazy, and maybe that’s what makes me feel drunk.

Our tongues battle it out, tasting and warring and pleasuring, and I finally turn the corner and end up in Remi’s room. I get the door shut with a great amount of effort, and then it’s only a short trek to her bed, though it feels like it takes forever. When I set her down and tug her legs toward the end of the bed, I’m all goosebumps, liquid bones, and red hot

desire. Her hands are already working on the button on her shorts, tearing at the zipper. I'm so hard that my dick is going to tear through my jeans before I manage to get my hands coordinated enough to strip them off.

I give up on that task when Remi tears her shorts off, baring herself to me. She puts her heels on the bed and lets her legs fall open, and holy gravy, she's not wearing panties.

"That's very naughty," I gulp, my voice sounding like a hiccup and a gasp had a baby.

"Yes." Her eyes glow with feral delight. "I anticipated you coming over. I didn't see the point in putting them on when they were just going to end up on the floor. Thought I'd save on some laundry. It's a green choice, really. Helping to save the planet one pair of panties at a time."

I choke back a laugh and fall to my knees. I skim my hands over Remi's slender ankles, up the creamy skin of her calves, and up her knees. I caress her thighs, letting my fingers play over her silky skin like she's an instrument. I feel her vibrate beneath me, and it's like, yup, I'm hitting all the right chords.

She makes a far more satisfying sound when I replace my fingers with my lips and start tracing kisses up to where I need

to taste her. She spreads her legs a little further apart on the bed, lifting one eyebrow in a saucy challenge. Her pupils are blown, though, so I can tell how much she needs this.

“Dear god, Van, I just realized something.” Remi’s fingers thread through my hair. “My pussy is dying a slow, agonizing death, and it needs instant revival. Only your tongue can save her.”

“Gah!” I don’t know whether to laugh or be scandalized, but maybe both. Both are fun. They should always go hand in hand. “Well, in that case....”

I try my best to give good mouth to, uh...well, not mouth. I accidentally scrape my teeth over Remi’s clit, but when she throws herself back against the bed and mutters something that sounds like “holy fucking gravy buckets,” I guess maybe it wasn’t a bad thing. I go to town, burying my mouth in the sweetest pussy that ever existed. Remi is perfect from head to freaking toes, but she’s the most perfect here. I lave her clit with my tongue, sucking her into my mouth until her back arches off the bed and her legs tremble around my shoulders. I do my best to save her dying pussy, to bring her back to life. Judging from the sounds that are escaping her throat and the way her hands tear at my hair and shoulders, I’m either

making things a heck of a lot worse or doing something incredibly right.

I'm pretty sure the entire resuscitation should involve more than just her clit, so I move away, licking every bit of her and savoring every single drop of arousal that I gather up with my tongue. I explore between her folds, parting her for me with my fingers until I can fill her with my tongue.

“Oh my god, Van...god, gravy, please....”

I swirl her clit gently with my finger while I continue working her with my tongue.

“Shit, I dreamed about this,” Remi pants. “Alright, fantasized. About you doing this to me. But this is so much better. It's so, so much better.”

I'm glad my skills are up to par. I make a humming sound against her before I do things with my tongue that I didn't even know I was capable of. One of them includes flicking her clit and sucking it into my mouth one more time while I fill her with two fingers, which is what finally detonates her climax. In her fantasies, I'm probably an orgasm master, and I don't want to be lacking in real life. She arches her back, her hips pulsing and slamming up into my hands before pushing back down into the bed. She makes the softest noises, not

screams or even cries of pleasure. She's biting them back, being quiet even though there's no one at home.

I lap at her, tasting every single bit of her as she comes and comes. I love the way her body responds to mine, and after she rides the last cresting waves, I look up. I love the way she looks, hair spreading out all over the covers, chest heaving against the little tank top she has on, and cheeks flushing a dewy, rosy pink.

I kiss my way back down her thigh before I swing her around on the bed. She's all limp and boneless, and all she can do is look up at me. I'm the one who slides open the drawer on the nightstand to pull out the condoms that I know are there because they were there last time. I'm the one who shoves my jeans down while she watches every single movement with wide, round eyes fixed on me, eyes that are just for me. I leave my clothes half on, not because it's hotter, but because I'm utterly desperate. If I don't do this soon, I'm going to literally lose my chance because my dick is an uncooperative asshole, and he wants Remi right freaking now.

I roll the condom down my length, which is so damn swollen and hard that even the feel of my hand putting the love glove on is nearly enough to send me over the edge. I

can't embarrass myself like that no matter what, so I grit my teeth and mentally give my cock a dick spanking for doing this to me.

Remi scoots up on the bed and holds out her arms in invitation. I basically fall half on my face and half onto the bed since I still have my jeans on, and they're hampering my movement big time. But she makes it work, shimmying down, her hands locking around my neck and on my shoulders. She pulls me down and kisses me almost violently like she's half-starved for my taste or the taste of herself on me. She shifts herself under me again. She's so much smaller, so I make sure I'm in a decent enough position where I can at least get my arms under myself to make sure I don't accidentally crush her.

Her hands leave my neck and work my jeans and boxers, pulling them down a little bit further. "I don't want to get zipper rash," she murmurs with a laugh against my lips. Her hands grasp my ass after, and she groans. "Dear gravy, it's like grabbing onto two boulders. You're incredible, Van. You're everything I ever dreamed of but like times a thousand. You're like a unicorn, but you're real, and that's so freaking exciting and sexy." I reach between us and fist my dick as she wriggles against me and whimpers into my ear. "Please, Van," she

pants. “I need that unicorn of a cock inside me right freaking now.”

“Gah,” I gasp again, for the second time. I’m speechless.

Remi just laughs and wriggles against me, which has double the effect of bringing me close to being a no-pump chump. I line myself up with her opening, caressing her slick wet center with a few strokes to lubricate the love glove. She moans every single time I put pressure on her clit, and those moans travel straight down to my balls. They’re already clenching up, but nope, not going to let it happen. I line myself up for real, let out a groan that is probably more of a bellow, and thrust inside her with a single flex of my hips.

“Oh my god,” Remi gasps.

I freeze. “Did I hurt you? Shit, I’m so sorry.”

She grasps my shoulders and moves under me, bucking up against me and wriggling until a sea of stars floats in front of my eyes. “Not a chance. That was a good ‘oh my god.’ Now can I say, ‘oh my god, please do it again?’”

Fuck, she’s going to kill me.

But I do. I do it over and over again, moving my hips in time to the rhythm that she helps me set by moving hers too.

She's so tight, her walls closing around me like she doesn't want to let me go. I start slow, but I don't stay slow for long. The bed starts to creak and groan, which Remi informs me from some other universe, is a new thing, but I'm so lost that I can barely hear what she's saying.

She pulls me back to myself by digging her heels into my ass after she wraps her legs around my hips, pulling me in closer and closer. She's incredible, she's the world, she's everything, and I can feel her trembling, her muscles tightening under me. She rides me like she's not the one on the bottom, and when she comes again, I follow straight over the edge with her. I give a half cry of amazement that I managed to hold out as long as I did. Take that no-pump chump. I got at least eight pumps in, I'm sure.

She pulses around me after, and we come down from whatever euphoric land we entered together. I feel like I have about two seconds of strength left, so I use it to roll off her, but I pull her with me. While the heat might have given way a little, it's still pleasantly warm in here, so we just lay there together without blankets to cover us up, half-dressed and entirely unashamed.

I'm happy. Truly happy. I don't feel self-conscious here. Instead, I feel...I feel *good*. More than good. I can believe, when I'm with Remi, that things might be okay. She gives me hope. She gives me the ability to see it.

I had planned on asking her, but I was going to hold off, at least until the right moment, but it feels like that moment might be now. Now that we're side by side, breathing together, her hand on my chest right above my pounding heart, I ask, "Would you go on a date with me?" I'm taking a huge risk by asking, no matter how right this moment is. I still feel the way every single one of the last years of my life burned away to ash. I still feel inadequate, unworthy. Like I'm cursed, and not just by the man who should have been a father to me, but by something greater. The universe, maybe. Universal curses are not something I want someone as pure sunshine and goodness as Remi is to tangle with.

Her hands stroke through my hair, smoothing over my temples as though she intuitively knows that it's starting to pound there. "I would love to go on a date with you, Sullivan Carlson."

Her saying my name gives me pause, and I don't know why it should now, after all the years I've been using it. My

dad's last name. Not my real dad, but the only dad I ever knew. My mom always refused to talk about the actual incident. Maybe one day she will, but she couldn't then, not even in a private moment. It could be that she didn't want to burden me with it. Perhaps she thought something could still be salvaged, and it wouldn't happen if she brought the past into it. I've always wondered, though. How could I not? Wondered who he was, I mean. What his name was, what he was like, what happened. I owe half my DNA to a nameless, faceless shadow.

“Are you okay?” Remi's fingers smooth over my forehead, rubbing the crease between my brows. Her fingertips slide down my nose and lower, tracing a path over my bottom lip. “I thought if you were asking me, you'd like me to say yes.” She's teasing me, and thank goodness she's so good-hearted.

“I'm sorry. I'm such a dolt. Yes, I'm excited.” I nip her finger, sucking it into my mouth until her eyes close and she makes a small whimper of pleasure. I release her and reach up to cup her face.

“But you're worried that we're hiding here. We're not, Van. It's just the only time and place we can have any privacy,

short of renting a hotel room or finding some dark alley somewhere.”

“A dark alley. Romantic,” I say, and at least she giggles. “And what grade of a hotel room are we talking about? Because I can assure you that I’ve made a small fortune in Europe, so it doesn’t have to be anything less than a five-star.”

“I don’t want a hotel room.” She smiles back at me and leans into my hand, nuzzling my palm with her velvet cheek. “I just want you. And you’re right. I don’t want to hide.” She pauses, and she’s comfortable with the silence in a way that no one else I know can. “You’re worried about Kimmy.”

“I don’t know how to talk to her. I know you must be putting her off, even if you haven’t talked about it. Told her that I’m being cagey or giving her breadcrumbs or something.”

“I haven’t done any of that. I’ve just turned the conversation to work whenever she asked me, so it’s clear I don’t want to talk about it. I told her last week that you aren’t interested in the company. I’ve always told her that. I won’t tell her anything else because it’s not my truth to tell. I don’t feel like I’m being dishonest or a bad friend. We needed some time to figure things out. Until I was sure myself, I wasn’t

going to say anything. It would hurt her feelings and make it impossible for both of you to ever have a relationship with each other. But now, if you want to go on a date, I think I do need to talk to her about that.”

“She’s going to be so angry. She’ll think you set out to seduce me and failed, and I seduced you because you...uh... because of before.”

Her lips quirk, and my god, is there a limit to how much grace this woman is willing to extend to me? “Let me handle the talk with Kimmy. I know my own mind, and she knows that about me. I also know her, and I know she’s always missed you, and she loves you. We’ll get it figured out.”

“I’m having dinner with my mom tomorrow,” I blurt out, so close on the heels of what she just said, but I have to tell her. “We’re going to talk through everything, I hope, but I don’t know how much she’ll tell me about anything. Maybe everything? Maybe nothing? If it’s nothing, then I hope that one day, she’ll open up. It would give me....”

“A certain measure of peace?”

“Yeah,” I say with a sigh. “A certain measure of peace. Maybe...maybe after we talk, we can have dinner with Kimmy—the three of us. Maybe with Nanny too. Then we can

tell them what really happened. All the shame and secrecy and hopes that my dad would one day forgive my mom and ask me to come back home—all of it is buried with him now. Maybe we can have a new beginning.”

Remi’s sea-blue eyes fill with tears. She’s the ocean, calm and cool against all the scathing, fiery emotions always whirring inside me. She makes them settle. *She* makes me feel at peace.

“A new beginning. I like that. For all of us. I’ll talk to Kimmy tomorrow or Sunday, and I’ll text you after. Then, we can figure out when and what our date night will be. And where. Although for the where, can I be obscenely boring and make date night be helping me build the deck at Nanny’s? I know between your mom, Nanny, Kimmy, and me, the flower gardens were planted, but I know the rest is a lot for you to take on all by yourself.”

“Good liver and onions gravy, Remi. I don’t deserve you.”

“Yes.” She swivels on top of me, knocking me onto my back. She leans over me, and I’m framed by a curtain of her hair. “You do.”

CHAPTER 15



Remi

“That bastard! That scheming, wretched, horrible, plotting bastard!”

I shift quite uncomfortably. Kimmy doesn't know, and I hate that she's using that word. It's a token enough curse word, but I would far rather she be more inventive.

“That slithering, lying, duck-faced, platypus-assed....” She heaves out a long, angry breath like a dragon snorting steam. I wonder what any platypus ever did to her. They're adorable. That's not an insult. “I knew this would happen!” It's a little bit awkward that Kimmy bangs her fist down on the table because we're seated in the middle of her favorite restaurant, getting cheesecake at seven at night. Seven at night on a Sunday shouldn't be a hot time for dessert, but Kimmy knows all the best spots, and the little diner with the cheerful blue booths and ceiling tiles made of hammered bronze or copper or whatever that I've always loved so much, is fully packed.

“Whoa.” I raise both my hands and then point at her cheesecake. “Firstly, you did not. Secondly, eat. You'll feel

better. Cheesecake makes everything better.”

“Is that why you suggested this place?” Kimmy picks up her fork, looking no less murderous. She stabs the cheesecake, though, and that’s all.

“Of course. A little sweetness to combat the mountain of bitterness I knew was coming.” I wait until she gets a few bites down before I even attempt to turn things toward a more civil conversation. “There are things you don’t know about. Things that happened. Van left for a reason, and it had nothing to do with you. He had to stay away for reasons that also had nothing to do with you. He missed you. A lot. The fact that you both aren’t on speaking terms has torn a massive hole through his heart.”

“His black, horrible heart.”

“No. He has a good heart.”

“He doesn’t,” Kimmy grumbles, but there’s less fire in her voice. She won’t look up at me, and I know it’s because she doesn’t want me to see the tiny, desperate speck of hope in her eyes. I know it’s there. I know it’s always been there. My heart pinches and aches.

“He doesn’t want the company.”

“He does,” Kimmy insists stubbornly.

“The will was fake, Kimmy.”

Her neck snaps up at that, and her fork goes flying over her shoulder as her hand jerks involuntarily. I wince, and she whips around, covering her mouth with both hands. A not-so-happy-looking two hundred and something pound burly dude who looks like he eats metal bars for late-night dessert instead of this place’s famous cheesecake whirls around in his seat. His glower could freeze the hottest fires of hell, and he makes me realize there’s such a word as grunted because he looks so *disgruntled*. He’s maybe in his thirties, and if he weren’t snarling like a raging beast, he’d probably be quite handsome.

Kimmy puts on her best, charming Kimmy smile. “I’m so sorry,” she says to him. She scrambles up and retrieves her fork from the floor. “I’m so, so sorry. That was a total accident. Are you hurt?”

“No,” he snorts, eyes raking up and down the lovely red dress she has painted on over her luscious curves. He’s not being creepy. It’s just that no one can keep themselves from looking at Kimmy. She’s gorgeous, and when she’s in red, no one stands a chance. That snort was more of the variety that

says a fork couldn't do dick to him because he's made of iron and has skin thicker than sheet metal. "No harm done."

"Good. I'm so glad to hear it." Kimmy pats his shoulder. "Can I buy you your dessert to make up for just about embedding my fork in the back of your head?"

Kimmy could charm the pants off anyone, including the love child of an angry, rampaging, snorting, horking bull and the nastiest creature from the depths of any lore. I can't think of what that might be, but this guy is far from it. Wearing a knitted sweater and jeans, he's sitting there alone and eating cheesecake by himself. His dark hair is well-manicured, as is the short beard that graces his square, iron jaw. He might be burly, but this guy is fit in a way that—hmm, I don't know—freaking football players are fit. And not the quarterbacks or the ones that run fast, either. Yeah, I don't know much about sports, okay?

The big wall of a guy grins at Kimmy, easy-going now. "I'd like it better if you and your friend joined me and let me pay for yours."

I've heard a lot of come-ons and pick-up lines over the years. This one is just honestly spoken, like the guy really would enjoy that, now that he's narrowly missed and escaped

having a fork surgically removed from his skull. His smile seems genuine. I almost feel bad for the way Kimmy is going to shut him down because she shuts everyone down. She's married to her job. She says that all the time. She might have been on some hot dates before, but she gets annoyed when guys check her out, and even more so when they ask her out. She doesn't like flirting, and even though she looks like a goddess, she's not into flattery.

"I'd like that too."

I nearly fall off my chair and simultaneously just about stab myself in the leg with *my* fork. What the hell? I couldn't have just heard that right. But no, I guess I did because Kimmy is coming back, getting her plate and water glass, and craning her head in that come hither with me directive that she has down to a science.

That's how we end up sitting at the guy's table, my hands folded in my lap, my fork and cheesecake perched on the blue Formica tabletop. I'm beside Kimmy, and she's seated across from Mystery Dude.

"Hadrian." He offers his hand to me first, then to Kimmy. Hmm. Clearly a mind reader, on top of his Kimmy-charming talents.

I really don't know what to say or think. My mind is a big blank space. I've never seen Kimmy react like this to anyone. It's like Hadrian has doused himself with extra charming pheromones, and she's been seductively sucked in, but I can't smell them because pheromones only work on certain people. Maybe that's why I could never get Van out of my head. His pheromones were a perfect match, and they stayed perfect. That and a hundred thousand other reasons, half of which I still don't understand. He's this wonderful mystery, and he wants to take me on a date.

I must be making some kind of moony-eyed face because Kimmy rolls her eyes. "Right. So, my bestie and I were discussing my brother." I can't believe she's really going to air this to a complete stranger, but Hadrian sits there so calmly with his big stony jaw and piercing blue eyes. A faint whisper of a breeze drifts through the place, I have no idea from where, and I swear his beard actually rustles. He would be intimidating if not for the kind way his lips tilt up in a perpetual smile that seems completely real. "I got a little worked up," Kimmy admits. "And that's when my fork just about took up permanent residence in your skull."

"I see. What had you so bothered?"

Kimmy's jaw clenches. Where's the sharp end of that sword-honed tongue of hers lopping off this guy's head? Good gravy, is she still blushing? She indicates to me with a chin tilt. "She's been madly in love with him forever. He left for a long time, and now he's back and wants to take her on a date. She's asking me if that's okay."

"Kimmy," I hiss. Yeah, I'm scarlet too, but for a completely different reason. "What did I say about the mad love stuff?" That I can only hope it's coming? That would be nice. Dear god, with Van, it would be nice. But that's for the future—months and years down the road. "It's just a date. One date. We're still getting to know each other, basically. People change a lot. He left when he was eighteen, *for a good reason, and stayed away for a good reason*, but now he's back. It's complicated. I was trying to tell Kimmy that there are things she doesn't know about yet, but she will if she'd just *talk* to him."

"And that's when I got worked up, and my fork went flying."

"I see." Hadrian folds his hands, his half-eaten chocolate cheesecake sitting untouched since we joined his table. He scans us with those cool blue eyes of his, but they don't make

me uncomfortable because they're sparkling like he understands everything. He seems like he's ready to go to battle, but more so with humor and good taste. "I vote for the date. She seems like she's waited long enough for it."

Kimmy doesn't like that, I can tell. "But he's my long-lost brother. It's not okay for him to come back and woo my best friend and steal her from me. Would you steal your little sister's best friend?"

Hadrian bows over the table as best he can, which is just a bend forward and a sweep of his hand, but it's regal. Like we've gone back in time a good century, and he's doffing a top hat. "If she were as beautiful as you, lady, I have no doubt I would do whatever it took to make her mine."

Ha! I'm firmly onside with this big burly stranger who might actually like to quote poetry and recite the classics despite his brutish look. I shoot Hadrian a look full of gratitude under lowered lashes. Kimmy's mouth opens and closes. She's shocked, so I decide to press the advantage.

"Hear Van out, Kimmy," I beg. "Listen to him. Don't hate him. It would break his heart, and if that doesn't matter to you, then it would break mine, and I know that matters to you."

She rolls her eyes. “Did he send you here to beg and handle me?”

I pick up my fork and point it her way. “If he did, I would have set him straight. No one handles my bestie. Handles. Goodness.” I wink at the stranger as a form of warning. He looks at Kimmy, and she looks at him, and neither of them looks away.

It might be a little bit silly or weird if it were anyone else, but all I can think of is that maybe there *is* one man on earth who isn’t afraid of a powerful alpha female who knows their own mind.

“They’re going to ask you to dinner,” I tell her, breaking the strange quiet. Her eyes whip away, back to me. “You need to go. No excuses.”

“Like I swallowed a watermelon whole and have to go to the emergency room?”

“Yeah. Like that.”

“Like I accidentally slipped on a piece of lint and sprained my ears, so I can’t sit and listen?”

“Yup.”

“As if I’ve suddenly discovered that I have an extreme dislike for gravy and a fear of wigs, so I can’t be in the same room with Nanny unless it’s also with my mom and Van?”

“Yes,” I sigh. “Yes, all of those.”

“Hmmpf,” Kimmy snorts. “What fun is that?”

“It sounds fun to me,” Hadrian says. “Fun and ominous.”

“No first-degree murder either,” I warn her. “Try and control the impulses.”

“I suppose you’ll tell me that I need to take care with forks next.”

Kimmy isn’t everyone’s cup of tea, but this guy looks like he wants to drink whatever kind of tea she’s made of. His eyes are still glistening, and even I have to admit, there’s something about him that draws a person in. I’m not feeling it like Kimmy, though. I’m already drawn in by a completely different force in the universe.

“I think you should go,” Hadrian says again, gently. “Family is important. The people in our lives are all we really have. I can tell that you’ve missed him. That you want to go. Being tough is all well and good, but not at the expense of your heart and soul.”

Okaaaayyyyy, my vote is for Kimmy to marry this guy. He's amazing. The best fork-slinging, cheesecake-eating, kind of hulking scary coincidence that's ever happened to us.

"My soul isn't in any danger," Kimmy groans. She shoves her cheesecake away, but I know she's going to get it boxed up for a more palatable moment when her appetite comes back. This stuff is too good to waste. It's legit one of her only weaknesses.

That and bearded, mysterious, blue-eyed black-clad strangers with ancient-sounding names, apparently.

"If you agree to go, I'll whisk you away immediately after on the most romantic date you could possibly imagine."

Kimmy frowns. "Really? And what kind of romance do you think would suit a person like me? A woman you don't even know? What's your idea of a good evening, most noble Hadrian? You don't even know my name, and you're already presuming that you know what kind of world I'd like offered at my feet?"

Oh, shit. Good gravy, here we go. The sword/tongue lashing is about to happen, and this guy's head is going to metaphorically go rolling all over the place. Even

metaphorically, I like my cheesecake with a little less blood and gore.

Hadrian just grins. He's totally got Kimmy's number. I mentally applaud him for being unafraid of her. Kimmy deserves someone who could make her heart leap and sing and dance. Someone who understands her the way I do. She might have tough skin, a whip-smart brain, a cutting wit, and more business sense than half this city put together, but underneath all that, I know she's tender and soft and is just waiting for the right person to come along and appreciate her instead of always trying to snuff out her light because they're intimidated by her spirit.

“What date could I possibly imagine after you have a heart-rending, serious conversation with your family?” he asks, as if in clarification. I can feel myself tensing. Kimmy isn't one to be wined and dined. I really hope he doesn't start going on about rose petals and candles. “A ride on the back of my bike, free with the wind rushing all around. After that, stand-up comedy at some dank little club where the jokes get gutter real fast. Then two shots of whisky and a plate of pizza nachos, followed by another bike ride to some secret place where the stars are fantastic and slow seduction is at its best.

We'll get cheesecake to go, of course. Hard words are better swallowed down with some sugar. Even if they're good words, cheesecake alone is just worth getting for itself because it's the most delicious invention in history."

Oh. My. Gravy. Kimmy is *speechless*.

Kimmy is usually the one who can silence a whole auditorium of people, someone who could inspire a whole company. She's got this gift for public speaking that I don't have. I know she's afraid of very few things. Very, very few. She pretty much radiates calm and control and powerful authority. That's why guys usually run in the other direction. But right now? She's silent. Amazed. She looks like she's sixteen again, happy and with nothing to prove to anyone because she doesn't know her brother is leaving yet. She doesn't know how unhappy he is or how fractured her family is behind the façade. She has no idea that she's going to have to spend the next decade of her life working her butt off to prove herself to her dad and then taking over his company and clawing her way to the top. She's going to come into her own, and it's going to look good on her, that mantle of strong woman, but right now, she's just girlish and young again, and it's beautiful.

She quickly recovers because Kimmy is Kimmy, and no one is going to get her at a loss or stump her for long. “So if I go to this hypothetical dinner and cut Remi and my brother some slack, you’ll take me on that date?”

“Would you like me to?”

Unbelievable. Hadrian is giving her a choice. She put the power back in his hands, and he’s thrusting it right back at her with a smile as if he doesn’t mind at all. What does this guy do? Where did he come from? It’s like he dropped out of the sky, perfectly made and formed just for Kimmy. How on earth is he *single*?

I’m so sure Kimmy is going to say no, and she’s going to slap down a few twenties, pay for the guy’s dessert, and walk out. She’s going to put her armor back on and be the Kimmy I know, the one who charges through life. She’s going to tell me that I can date her brother, but she’s going to be mad about it for a long time. Our friendship will survive, but she’ll be kind of sulky and surly for a good long while, and I’ll have to bribe her for months to come with the things she likes. I’m afraid her smiles will no longer be real, she’ll always be looking after her shoulder, and she won’t ever give Van a chance. That

would hurt him so, so much, and watching that would break my heart.

Amazingly enough, Kimmy raises her eyes, and she's got this wistful, soft smile going on that I have never seen before. "Yes," she says, and that word is so self-contained, but it's also not contained at all either. She pulls out her phone. "Let me have your number, and I'll call you when I need that date."

Hadrian lists off a series of numbers so fast that I don't catch half of them, but Kimmy gets them and saves the number. Then, she puts her phone away and motions at the plates in front of us now that her mind is made up. She doesn't give Hadrian her number in exchange, and he never asks for it. He trusts her.

I trust her.

And just like that, it's all decided. Kimmy will go. The rest is up to Van and, I guess, his mom, but right now, I have a renewed sense of hope. Sitting beside me, even as rigid as she is, I think Kimmy does too. Just when I think that all the most incredible things are done for the night, and I'm finished with witnessing historical firsts, Hadrian goes and proves me wrong.

“There are so many outcomes, possibilities, reasons, situations, and scenarios, just from a single event. I hope you find the answers you’ve been looking for all this time.”

We finish up our cheesecake, and since Kimmy isn’t one to sit and linger, she says goodnight and insists on paying. Hadrian lets her, which surprises us both. He does it like a gentleman too. We go out the door together, and she watches him walk over to this bike, throw a big leg over the sleek-looking black and chrome machine, tug on a helmet, and rip out onto the street.

“Gah,” Kimmy gushes on a big exhale. “I think I’m in love.”

I noticed, Kimmy. I noticed.

CHAPTER 16



Van

I'm as nervous as I was the first time I came over here for dinner. This time, I drove myself, and this time, I managed to not throw up. I brought an extra shirt and pit stick just in case. Even still, as soon as I walk through the doorway of my mom's house with Nanny beside me, it begins to sink in that we're doing this. Nanny could see that I was a wreck, so she came along with Curly Cookie perched on top of her lap. Although he's cute, he's *giant* and doesn't weigh what you'd think a hairy bone bag should weigh.

Kimmy is going to be here soon. She's going to be here, and my mom and I have to tell her everything. And Nanny too, but Nanny is kind and forgiving, and I wouldn't doubt if she somehow knew already. My mom is her daughter. A mother knows her daughter, doesn't she? Maybe she doesn't know *know*, but she probably senses something.

My mom's welcoming yet composed smile doesn't stop my breath from squeezing out of my lungs or my heart from trying to rip straight out of my chest. It's doing some weird thrashing in there that would probably give it a great career as

a heavy metal drummer if it had arms and feet. I have to reach up and tap at the spot, trying to settle things down.

Nanny thrusts a container of gravy at my mom. “This one’s special. Chicken and turkey combo,” she says. “With mushrooms and potatoes infused right in. I put two birds in one big ass roaster, stuffed the cracks full of spuds and veg, and presto pronto, here you go.”

Despite myself, I find a smile cracking through my foggy, anxious fuzz. I still think there’s a good chance I might pass out, so I walk straight into the kitchen and take a seat at the table. It’s big and round and has more than enough upholstered chairs for everyone. The house is practically large enough for a hundred people to live in. Was it really just her and my dad all alone here? She wouldn’t have had a choice, I know that, but why doesn’t she sell it now?

I came over for dinner a few nights ago as I promised. Before I ever talked to Remi about this. During dinner, my mom and I talked everything out. I guess it’s easier for us, shared pain and all that. I now know how guilty she feels about everything. She thinks all this was her fault as she’s the one who strayed from her marriage and kept it secret all these years. In her defense, I learned that my parent’s marriage was

never a happy one. My dad strayed many, many times himself, but she didn't do it in retaliation. She made friends because she was lonely, and she found someone who would listen to her. When she told him she was pregnant, he ghosted her and straight up left. She never could find him since she didn't have any resources at her disposal. My dad was the one who controlled all the finances, so she couldn't leave. She had no money, not even a bank account or credit card in her own name. She even made excuses for my dad the whole time we talked. The. Entire. Time.

But I'm not making any excuses. What happened happened. My mom fought hard to keep me safe for as long as she could and then to keep Kimmy safe. She's lived with her mistakes, shame, guilt, and a man like my father. She was trapped in a loveless marriage for years. I know she could have left and maybe made it on her own, but that's probably where her fears kept her paralyzed, and it was a decision she made long before I was born. I can't imagine how hard it would be to leave with a newborn and no money. Yes, she could have done it. I'm not saying she made the right choice, but I don't get a say. The past is the past. And when she had Kimmy, there was truly no way to leave. She was my dad's child. If she'd taken her, she would have been hunted to the

ends of the earth, and when he got Kimmy back, my mom would never have seen her again.

My mom and dad met in college. She didn't come from money, so she was working two part-time jobs and going to school full-time. My dad was studying business, and she was also studying business too. Not because she wanted to, but because she thought it gave her the best options after graduation. He noticed her. She was stunning—a goddess who shone brightly. She was funny, and he was charming. He stole her heart, and I guess they were happy for a while, even after they got married when they both graduated.

I can see all the steps he took in making her dependent on him. He didn't want her to work, but he came from a family of money. He didn't want her to have friends unless they were his friends too. She could only go to socially approved events and do things that contributed to his image. His family didn't like her. They hadn't wanted them to get married, so they offered no support. Maybe he'd stolen her ability to make a decision to leave long before she ever had to make one. My dad was like the tides, I guess. The same kind of furious tide that wears on a beach, taking it grain by grain until there isn't any sand

left, and eventually, there isn't a beach at all, and the shorefront is forever changed.

I sat there and listened to it all, and I couldn't pass judgment. I didn't come back here for wrath, for justice, or to condemn my mom. I came back because I love my family, and I spent a lifetime trying to make up for not having them. I made myself rich, but it didn't matter. I tried to save my marriage, yet I failed. I thought I knew what I wanted. I thought I'd be okay. And then I finally realized, after it all fell apart, that my heart wasn't in Europe. It never truly was. It was right here. Always.

It's still right here, and I refuse to let the mistakes that any one of us made in the past dictate how we're going to be a family in the future.

I flat out refuse.

"Oh good, Kimmy's here," I hear Nanny say, all proud and resolute as if she didn't doubt for a second that she'd actually come, and I realize I've been in a world of my own for the past five or ten minutes. I have a drink in front of me. Lemonade, because mom learned from Nanny how to make it the best way, with real lemon slices and not so much sugar, so

that it makes you pucker. I didn't even see her set the glass down.

“Have a drink,” mom coaxes me while Nanny races to the door. “Your blood sugar is off. You're white as a starched sheet.”

“Starched sheets.” I shudder. They seem like they'd be prickly and uncomfortable. She's right, though. I'm back to being two seconds from passing out. I feel like a starched sheet, except I'm damp and prickly under my T-shirt. How a cotton shirt can be prickly, I have no idea.

I can feel the beads of sweat trickling from the back of my hairline to soak the shirt. It's nasty. Mom waves her hand in front of my face, fanning me. “It's going to be fine, Sullivan, I promise. You can believe me because I'm your mother, and this time, I'm not going to stop until it's fine and our family is back together. You're both my children, and I should have protected you both so much better than I did. It's not happening again. No one is leaving this house until the truth is out there, and we learn how to take the first steps in loving each other again.”

My stomach twists, but so does my chest. “I already love you, Mom,” I tell her, and by sweet buckets of whatever gravy

Nanny cooks up, I mean it. “I love you so much.”

A sheen of moisture forms in her eyes, but she stubbornly blinks it away. Nanny is leading Kimmy to the table. I can smell her perfume, something expensive and intricate, vanilla and oranges, some spices, and a flower mixed in, maybe? She’s immaculate, and she’s wearing a freaking all-black power suit and towering heels while her hair is piled up in one heck of a tight twist. She looks like she’s ready to be on TV at some political conference, conquering the world.

Then, when she spots me, her nostrils flare, and she grimaces like she just smelled a big dung pile, and no, it’s not Curly Cookie, who’s sitting at her feet, wagging his tail. It’s me, and that’s the same old Kimmy I’ve gotten used to since I got back. The one who despises me. I think if it were any other way, I’d be worried. At least right now.

She’s *here*. Remi worked her magic, and Kimmy listened. Now it’s up to us to do the rest. A new determination settles over me. Not grim, but hopeful. My heart is still beating hard enough to choke me, but I can get through this without passing out. Look at my mom. Look at how strong she is. I can at least be half that strong.

“Let’s get it over with before I stick a kebab skewer up your arse and roast you on the barbeque outside.” Kimmy snarls. “A dash of lemon and some peppers, mushrooms, and zucchini should set off your nasty flavor quite nicely.”

“Kimmy, behave.” Nanny chuckles. “What kind of gravy would you pair with it, dear?”

Kimmy frowns, but I see the way her eyes sparkle with love when she looks at Nanny. “I don’t know. Suggestions?”

“Definitely au jus. Dipping sauce. Or a marinade. Not a gravy at all.” Nanny winks. “We have to keep our options open.” Bless Nanny, I know she’s not talking about gravy at all.

Kimmy sits down in the chair across from me, mostly because Nanny is on the one end, my mom is on the other, and Curly Cookie is sitting all curly, rusted-haired, and proud in the chair between Nanny and me, which makes up all the chairs my mom brought to the table. Five chairs. That chair could have been Remi’s. She offered to come if I needed her, but she also understood that this meeting was family time. Not that she’s not family. It wasn’t about that. She’s like a sister to Kimmy, like another daughter to my mom, another

granddaughter to Nanny, and...*definitely* not anything close to that to me.

When I told her that maybe we should have this dinner with just the four of us, she kissed my forehead, told me that Kimmy had agreed to it over cheesecake, and then showed me just how talented she was with her...hmm, alright. A gentleman never kisses and tells, but I will say we had to be quiet because her parents were in the living room watching TV, and I had to sneak in through her window in the first place. Until we're officially dating, she doesn't really want them to know that we've been not-so-officially dating.

Now that we're all seated, and the smell of roast beef is still coming from the oven, cooking away but not ready yet, my mom gives each one of us a slow, lingering, loving look. "Are we all ready?" She gets three nods in response and one pink tongue wag. Curly Cookie's breath smells like bacon treats, and it wafts over me as he pants.

"Kimmy? Do you promise to behave?" Nanny prods, nudging Kimmy under the table with her foot. I can tell she does it because Kimmy jerks in her seat.

"Yes," Kimmy mutters, the word scraping out of her like it's torture. "But only because I promised Remi I would." Her

eyes track over to me. “For some inexplicable reason, she thinks she’s fond of you, Van, and I don’t want to break her heart. She’s like my sister and bestie, all wrapped up into one. She thinks she owes me, but really I owe her because of all the people who have abandoned me in life—people who should have been my friends, guys who ran because they couldn’t hack it, teachers who hated me for being smarter than them, people who didn’t even know me yet decided they didn’t like me because I’m ‘too much,’ and brothers who abandoned me—she’s always stuck by me.”

“Brother. As far as I know, I’m the only one. I mean... shit. That came out wrong.” I look at my mom nervously, but she hasn’t taken offense. She is rather pale now and also green around the edges. I feel the same way. Like my stomach is full of rocks, and they are not digesting well. I’ve felt that way for days and days. For years and years. Ever since I turned sixteen.

It’s time it was out there, and we all knew the truth. It’s time to put this to bed, to rest, and back to wherever it belongs because I don’t want it gripping and controlling me, sucking the air from my lungs, and dictating my future any longer. I want to be free. And so does my mom. So does Kimmy, even

though she has no idea what's coming. This has impacted all our lives. It broke us apart. Now it's time for us to come back together, to stitch up all those old wounds and finally let them heal.

And so my mom starts. She tells Nanny and Kimmy the same things she told me. This time, the story doesn't end there. She has to tell Kimmy everything, including how my dad found out, his threats over the years, and the reason I really left and had to stay away. I feel for my sister. I love her. I always loved her. I loved being a big brother. Most guys would hate having their baby sister trail after them all the time, but not me. I remember being five years old and fascinated with her as a toddler. She brought so much joy to my life. She's always been tougher than me, always, and that was a source of fascination and awe for me as well. I still feel awestruck when I see her, now as a grown woman. I'm amazed at everything she's accomplished. I truly am. And also at how loyal she is to Remi.

I have to watch now as Kimmy takes everything in. It's impossible for her to sort through it all right now. It's going to take days, weeks, and probably even longer before she can come to terms with this, with growing up one way and for

years, thinking our family was something it wasn't. She's bracing herself as the weight of our secrets settles on her. Nanny is too, but it's worse for Kimmy. Nanny let her judgment and any anger and sadness go—a long time ago. But Kimmy never did. She was always the one who got left behind. The one who thought her big brother had just forgotten her.

“I never forgot you,” I tell her after mom is done. There are tears streaking down Nanny's weathered cheeks, but Kimmy is dry-eyed. She's like stone, but I know she's feeling it inside. I know that soon, she'll have to let all of it out, and if she needs me when she does, I'll be there for her this time. I'll always be here for her whenever she needs me. “I didn't leave you by choice. I always thought about you. Mom would send me updates when she could. She always had to go to the public library to do it because they had computers there, but she'd email when she could. She had her own email that she never used anywhere but there. I'm sorry we couldn't tell you, and I'm sorry you felt abandoned all these years. The truth is, I did too.” I glance quickly at my mom, who is also crying softly. “Not by you, Mom. Just...maybe that's not the right word. But I did feel alone.”

I know it's only right that I tell them about Tina, so I do. I tell them everything I told Remi. About how we got married young, how we both tried to make things work, but then the money ran out, and things were tough, how I tried and tried because I thought it was right, and I felt guilty because I wanted to be good enough for someone, and how unhappy it all was, and eventually, how it ended. It's been two years, and my mom was only able to tell them discreetly because it wasn't the kind of thing Kimmy would ever have brought up with my dad. She never talked about me, and my mom knew that.

The last thing I tell her about is the will and my dad's condition that makes it so I can never inherit anything of his or come after her and the company, not that I would anyway. I quickly add that I don't want to comment about it. I absorbed the hurt a long time ago, and it's past time to move on. For all of us.

"I think we should hold hands," my mom suggests when it's all said and done, and everything is out there.

I feel hollowed out. Empty. Relieved. When people talk about burdens being physical weights, yeah, I get that I feel so much lighter too.

“What, like we’re going to summon the dead?”

My mom and I both let out twin sighs of relief. Kimmy did finally brush away a few tears, but she’s back to being my snarky, lively, spitfire sister.

“No. Not the dead. Life,” my mom corrects. “I want to summon all the good moments of the rest of our lives. Summon all the good that is yet to come. Good intentions, that’s what. We’re going to put it out there collectively, right here, right now.”

“Well, shiver my timbers and shave my sheep. I think that’s a great idea. Curly Cookie, you join hands too. Let’s see it.” Nanny holds out her palm. “Paw, dear. Right here.” He complies, eager to shake for her, probably for more of those bacon treats. “Come on, sweetheart, take his other paw. He’s part of the family too. We won’t be a closed circle if we leave him out.”

I hold out my hand expectantly. “Okay, Poo-flinger, let’s have it. Paw to my palm,” I mutter under my breath, but I’m happy. Oh god, I’m happy, and my chest is going to burst wide open with it. This is a fresh start. This is having my family back. This is everything I gave up hoping for and everything I

always did hope for because even when you give up, you're still holding on, clutching tight, hoping against hope.

I'm so happy that I take the big, warm paw without hesitation. The fur feels dusty, the pads are a little scratchy, and they're like tiny furnaces in my palm, but I don't care. Nanny takes Kimmy's hand, Kimmy takes Mom's, I take my mom's other hand, and then we're joined—an unbroken circle. A family.

“Should we chant?” Nanny asks.

“Nah,” Kimmy says. “Let's just enjoy the quiet together.”

I think we're all surprised, though we shouldn't be. Kimmy's always been so, so strong. Always full of surprises. I'm in awe of my little sister all over again.

“What's a newb?” Nanny asks after a few moments of quiet, and we all break out laughing. We finally release our hands and just sit across the table from each other again, relaxed and at peace.

“A newb? Where did you hear that?” I choke out.

“On that darn app. Those kids with their foul little mouths. Talking smack again.”

“One of them called me a pleb!” I say, rolling my eyes.

“You need to get off that app, Nanny,” Kimmy chides, even though I’m sure she doesn’t know which one it is. Or maybe she does. Maybe she rocks at it and passes levels for Nanny all the time.

“I can’t. I’m hopelessly addicted. It’s not my fault that a bunch of four-year-olds is better than I am. Pah! They’re born with a phone in one hand and a computer in the other. It took me years to even learn how to turn my tablet on. I think I’m doing just fine.”

“You are, Nanny. Just ignore the rude little cusses. They aren’t nearly as cool as you, even if they can sling around words like newb and pleb,” Kimmy advises, a beautiful smile on her lips. Seeing her smile softens her face. It softens her so much. “Or let me at them, and they’ll regret ever insulting my Nanny and brother.”

“I don’t want to get banned for life from the app! Next time one of them calls me a newb, I’ll tell them to piss down their own throats. How’s that for an ancient-sounding cuss? I read it in that racy, historical fiction romance smut book you lent me, Kimmy.”

“I most certainly did not,” Kimmy scoffs.

“Alright, so I snuck it off your bookshelf the last time I was at your house.”

“I do not have any such things in my house! I would never read something like that!” Her lips are twitching in time with her right eye, though, and it gives her away. I love that she still has the same tells she did as a kid.

I love that we’re here now, smiling and laughing, and Mom is getting up and talking about the roast, saying it might be burning, while Nanny is advising about the gravy, of course, and how much to set aside for Curly Cookie. This was my dream for so long, and now I’m living it. It is truly the greatest gift I could ever have imagined.

When Kimmy’s eyes meet mine across the kitchen, the hostility is gone, replaced with warmth and maybe even forgiveness. There was no flinging herself across the table for hugs, no sobbing, no outward show of affection, and no *I’m sorry I almost killed you with laxatives the first time we’d seen each other in a lifetime*. That’s just Kimmy’s way, and it doesn’t mean any less to me that she can look me in the eye right now after all the pain we’ve endured and the pain-filled conversation we all sat through. It’s enough to make me believe that a fresh start might just be possible.

CHAPTER 17



Remi

There's nothing like watching a hot, hunky man do home renovation projects, especially when that man is Van. As a thirteen-year-old girl, I fell in love the way thirteen-year-old girls do, but ever since then, it's always been Van who hung the stars, even if right now he's just hanging up a new set of blinds—to replace the ones he broke—over my bedroom window. He might have been gone for most of his adult life, but he's back, and we're here right now. Even after all this time, he's still all the constellations for me. Mad passion? Definitely. Mad love? As I said before, I hope that's coming.

Especially when he finishes with the blinds and turns around with a screwdriver in his hand and the most adorably proud grin on his face. “Well? Are you ready for our first real, official date?”

My god, I've been sitting on this bed for the past twenty minutes while he put up the blinds, trying not to die of anticipation. My parents are in the living room, reading and watching TV. They know all about Van being here tonight to take me out. They were surprised at first. I hadn't even told

them that he was back. They knew nothing of my former crush, thank goodness. After I did some explaining, they were happy for me.

“I’m so ready.”

After spending a few minutes admiring the blinds that mean so much to me—they’re just blinds, but they’re blinds that Van chose and hung up and took care of after he went through the other set and kind of totally wrecked them—he sweeps me off to his rental car. It’s all leather on the inside and still has that fresh car scent that rentals never really lose because I swear, when they clean the cars, they infuse them with that scent to enhance customer experience. Then, the scent magically lasts until the next cleaning, and the whole cycle starts over again.

Did I mention I’m nervous? I’m so nervous that I’m rambling in my mind.

I have no idea where we’re going, but I dressed conservatively for late-night date night. It’s Friday night, and when I said we should make working on Nanny’s yard our first date, Van refused. He wouldn’t hear of anything so unromantic. I said he could just come over, but then I remembered that my parents, for once, didn’t have any softball

obligations. While he would have been on board for it, either way, he wanted to treat me to something special. Something memorable.

Since I have no idea where we're going or what we're going to be doing and Van said dressing casual was fine, I went with jeans and a light sweater. The heatwave finally let up, and now we're back to regular old Seattle summer weather. I'm sure that next week, as we move into the real part of summer, it'll be back.

I realize we're heading to Nanny's, but I don't say anything. I figure Van may have forgotten something. When he pulls up out front, I'm all ready to just stay in the car, but he shuts it off and walks around, opening my door for me. The butterflies in my stomach are out of control as he offers his hand. I take it, feeling a little bit confused, but if he changed his mind after all and wants to work on the deck, I'm definitely in. Anything with him would be the most wonderful first official date I've ever been on.

Van lets us in the front door, and then he starts explaining into the silence of the house. "Nanny and Kimmy went over to Mom's place for girls' night. They took Curly Cookie, and I guess because he's a puppy and not a person, he got a pass.

Nanny wanted me to have the house to myself. When you suggested we work on the deck, it gave me an idea. I tried to think of a place that would be more private and special than this, but I couldn't." His hands sweep over my eyes as he steps behind me. "Let me lead you?"

"Okay." I giggle and try not to bump my backside into his front, but it's impossible. I do it a few times as we walk, and he groans every single time.

"Slaying me, Remi. You're going to make me want to abandon all my plans and just take you down the hall and test out my theory that the twin bed in the guest room where I'm staying probably won't hold both of us. Have you ever broken a bed before?"

I gasp, half thrilled and the other half thrilled too because that's a scandalizing and tempting suggestion. Invitation? Gah, now I've got mental pictures of Van and me breaking beds galore, which makes me want to abandon whatever the surprise is before I even see it.

"Keep your eyes closed." A rush of summer air hits me in the face as Van slides open the patio door. I hear the woosh of it.

"Can I open them yet?"

“Hold on. Just one second. One second more. Another second.” He takes my hand and leads me out onto the deck. I somehow don’t trip over my own feet, which is a marvel, but then again, he’s keeping me steady. The deck is solid under my flats, and the air is scented with trees and flowers—fresh, summery scents. “Okay. Now.”

My eyes pop open, and I inhale sharply. “Oh my god! Van!” I don’t know what I notice first. My eyes sweep over the yard, taking in the grass that’s recovering from being tamed back, the neatly planted flower gardens, and the still sagging fence that is the next project after the—“Oh my god!” I finally noticed the deck. “You finished it already!” It’s brand spanking new, solid and lovely, and freshly stained a dark brown. It’s still a few hours before dark, but strings of patio lights are winking golden overhead. I notice the small glass patio table and chairs next, all brand new and laid out with two place settings. There are two jar candles flickering beside a vase with sunflowers.

It’s the most charming backyard I’ve ever seen. All of this. Van did all of this for me.

“Nanny cooked dinner before she left,” Van admits, his eyes glinting caramel soft, his smile even softer and a little

sheepish. “I’m bollocks in the kitchen, so it’s a good thing she did. Roast beef, mashed potatoes, and asparagus spears. All I have to do is heat it up.”

“Is there a matching gravy?”

“Oh yes. You betcha. Can’t forget the gravy.”

My heart swells. This is better than any five-star place, swanky club, or even a hotel room scattered with rose petals and little towel animals. This isn’t token. It’s special. It’s *us*. “I’ll help you heat it up.” My voice shakes just a little, wavering with emotion.

“Oh no,” Van insists. He walks around and pulls out a chair from the table. “Have a seat, my lady. Let me take care of everything.”

My god, I think I’ve waited my entire life to hear those words. I sit, feeling like a princess, and that feeling never fades. Van brings out two plates a few minutes later. I have to say, Nanny has outdone herself, but then again, Nanny always outdoes herself. She’s more than magic in the kitchen. She’s magic at a lot of things. My heart swells, knowing how excited she would be to be a part of making this night special for Van and me.

Van knows me, and he's poured gravy liberally over everything. *Be still my heart.*

The first bite makes my mouth sing, and it's a song of pure delight. My taste buds are practically tap dancing as I make my way through the best roast beef, the fluffiest mashed potatoes, and the most succulent asparagus that ever existed.

Van meets my eyes after I'm practically scraping my plate and contemplating picking it up and licking it—and no, I'm not going to do that because I'm supposed to be classy right now. He clears his throat, and I can sense one heck of a hard truth coming. I brace for it, scared that this is the end before we even get to start, and he's going to try and bolt again because he's scared, and this is a lot.

“I have to be honest, Remi, I'm not sure I can do the whole marriage and getting my heart stomped all over thing again. I've been there, I've done that, and I'm always going to have the souvenir T-shirt hanging in my closet.”

“Whoa.” As soon as I laugh, the deep line digging in between Van's brows disappears. It clearly wasn't the reaction he was expecting. I'm not at all hurt about him telling me his honest feelings, even if he's a bit panicked and is jumping to all the conclusions. “We've known each other again for five

minutes, so don't worry. I'm not ready for a ring or a T-shirt. I'm just ready for this first date." I relax back into my chair, savoring the way the flickering candlelight brings out the gold flecks in Van's eyes. "I'm not ready to jump ahead five or ten years, not even in my mind. I'm just here with you, and it's wonderful. I want to enjoy that. We both know that since my journals exposed me, there isn't any pretending that I haven't dreamed of this moment for a long time. I didn't realize that what I was really waiting for was the exact time when I can just bask in a single moment, savor it, and enjoy it." I wriggle my brows. "You're the moment, Van."

He shakes his head and scoffs, an amazed, incredulous kind of scoff. "I'm no weatherman, but there's a hundred percent chance I don't deserve you and that I'm a total imbecile."

"No, you just needed to get some nerves out of the way and get some very real concerns off your chest."

"Can I still savor the moment too?"

"Absolutely. Savor away."

We both sit back and just study each other, and it's not creepy at all. It's a nice moment. It's one of those that wraps around you and holds you tightly, and you feel absolutely safe

and secure. I'll remember exactly how Van looked with the colors of the sunset reflected in his chestnut hair, the gold in his eyes twinkling, and the soft curve of his lips as they're turned up in a contemplative smile. I'll remember his golden burnished skin, the black of his T-shirt, and the way he crosses his arms over his chest, which brings all of him into the starkest of definition. He is beauty defined. He's that whole word made real.

“If this moment were gravy, it would be....”

Van laughs and breaks out of his thoughts. “It would be something extra special. One of Nanny's one-of-a-kind creations. One that has yet to be made. The one lone container in the freezer. The one gravy in a sea of gravy.”

“A gravy boat in a sea of gravy.”

It comes on suddenly, but we both break into laughter. I laugh so hard that I actually snort, and it's not one of my faults. I have never been known to break into snorty giggles, but I'm all snorty giggles right now.

“You're beautiful,” Van says, wiping tears away from the corners of his eyes because he laughed so hard. “You don't just *look* beautiful. You *are* beautiful.”

“This is coming from a man who has seen me covered from head to toe in poo, so I’m not sure I set the bar very high.”

All of a sudden, he gets totally serious and somber. “Goddess of rain-soaked nights, the tamer of wild puppies, planter of flower gardens, giver of the most special hugs in the world, would you honor me with a dance?”

“A dance? Out here?”

“Yes. Out here.” He points to a spot on the lawn. “Wait right here. I’ll be right back.”

I do wait right there, my head swimming and spinning and my heart overflowing. If Van wanted this to be the most special night of my life, he’s already made it that way, and it’s not even half over. I hope it’s not half over.

A few minutes later, he’s back, carrying a blue box-looking device. He sets it down on the deck and plugs it into an electrical outlet at the side of the house. When he opens the lid, I realize it’s a portable record player. A super old one. No doubt it’s Nanny’s. She has a collection of the very best things. He slides a record out of its sleeve, and I smile the widest, cheek-numbing smile when the first notes of an opera I don’t recognize because I’m no opera connoisseur start drifting out

into the night. I'm not sure the neighbors will really appreciate it, but when they realize the sound is coming from Nanny's house, they might give us a pass. Nanny is universally liked, and not only because she's the gravy queen on the block and always has some to spare for everyone.

Van helps me out of my chair and leads me down the deck stairs. It might just be a small square deck with a regular old railing around it and a few steps, but he constructed it, and he did a heck of a job, which makes it special.

He guides me onto the grass, which is still half-dead and half-struggling, but it will come back. One day, it will be lush and green. His hand sweeps to the small of my back, and the other hand grasps mine. I lean into him, our bodies so close. So freaking close. I'm going to wait at least a few minutes before I rest my head on his shoulder and basically do no dance steps at all.

"You helped make this happen," Van whispers in a smoky tone. "You're so special, Remi. You're magic. Everywhere you've been—and will ever go—is better after having you in it. I'm better after knowing you. You watched over my family while I was away, and you loved them when I couldn't be here to do it. I know you weren't trying to take my place or make

up for anything, but thank you. Just thank you. Thank you for the milkshake swap and that first hug. Thank you for opening your window to me in the middle of the night, in the middle of a storm. Thank you for trusting me, grabbing me, and hauling me back when I tried to throw myself out your window and down every metaphorical dark pit. You make me believe it's okay to start to put my heart in your palm.”

He picks up our joined hands, and we stop dancing so he can run his fingers over my palm, over all the life and love lines and whatever other lines there might be. I'm no palm reader, but I know if anyone can read and make sense of them, it's Van. I know every line there has him in the future.

“I admire your courage so much. Your loyalty to your family is incredible. You have the most huge and generous heart. I love how fiercely you defend Kimmy and how you'll always stick by her, and not just because our family helped you out financially. I love that you still live with your parents and you've worked so hard to support them. I know you used to say that they lost everything, but they didn't. They lost some money and a house and a lifestyle, but they didn't lose you, and you're everything, Remi. You're absolutely everything.”

My breath has been completely stolen, and my brain has deserted me, but I can offer a smile and a squeeze of our palms together. I can lean in and sway with Van, and finally, finally, I can lay my cheek right over his beating heart in silent response.

I'm so excited for the future. No matter what we've been through, we'll make it. You're incredible, you're amazing, and you're like the world's best, mysterious, magic gravy. You're absolutely everything too.

EPILOGUE



Van

I have no idea exactly when Nanny became such a master of gravy, just like I had no idea when she became such an avid lover and collector of spandex, but now that I've been back home for a year, I've become used to seeing her brightly clad self bouncing around from here to there like a lithe young gazelle.

Kimmy and I might both be in the investment business, but I'm not her competition. She keeps herself confined to the States rather happily, making a killing and a name for herself, and I keep my interests in Europe. It wasn't easy running a company from the other side of the world especially with all the staff I have there. I rather fearfully approached Remi six months ago, when I was drowning in more work than I could handle, and offered her a job. She accepted, rather less fearfully. Little did I know she'd already talked to Kimmy about the possibility of coming to work for me to help me out. Of course, Remi saw how I was struggling since I never tried to keep it a secret from her, and here she thought she was

going to have to twist my arm to convince me to accept the help.

For all those people who don't understand how you could live and work with your significant other...well, here's the secret. It's easy. But it does take an open mind and a heck of a lot of patience, and...oh, who am I kidding? For me, it hardly takes any of that. I love working with Remi. Somehow, we're a good fit in that department too. Any hardship involved at all would be on her part, having to put up with me, but she assures me regularly, with laughter and huge smiles, that it's not so much of a burden. When you work and live from home, things can be a heck of a lot spicier, that's for sure. I can't say how many times Remi has surprised me by walking in with something sexy on when I should be crunching numbers or when she takes off her regular work clothes, which are also sexy, especially when I should be answering emails. To all those who think the office should only ever be used for office things and that under no circumstances should one's desk double as a bed, I'm sorry. I'm profoundly sorry. But also not sorry at all.

I never realized before how I wasn't really living at all. I was trying to prove a point and make myself into someone I

thought someone else needed me to be. I was never really me. I kept hoping I could be a son to my father, a husband to Tina, and a success at work, but I didn't realize that none of those things mattered because if you love someone, you forgive them. If you love someone, you take them as they are. If you love someone, you don't hold things against them that aren't their fault. And if you love someone, you want them to be them and only ever them, but that also includes better versions of themselves, just not other, non-authentic versions.

I'm not saying I'm perfect. I'm definitely still learning, but this time around, I can enjoy the ride.

"You've been very naughty, my love." Remi strolls into the expansive room that serves as our workspace.

I found a charming mid-century house that was, for the most part, still quite authentic. It's nowhere near my mom's old gated community, and it's a lot closer to Nanny's regular old subdivision. I like being regular despite all the money I have. Turns out my mom likes it too since she bought the house down the block after selling her old one, and now we all live close by. Kimmy is the furthest away because she wasn't ready to give up her new build and take on a fixer-upper, but she's still only a twenty-minute drive across the city.

“What have I done?” I ask in mock horror and a little bit of confusion.

Remi holds up a folder bursting with papers sticking out every which way. “You were supposed to take care of this last night, and here I find it still sitting on the to-do pile, not done. You know these budgets are very important.”

She’s grinning, and I can’t keep a straight face. “Yes. Yes, that’s right.”

“Hmm. I think naughty CEOs need to be punished by their secretaries when they misbehave. Wouldn’t you say so?”

Oh! Note to self: misbehave more often. I like this game.

“Absolutely. You’re absolutely correct.”

Remi tilts her chin up and sets the file down on my desk. Then, her eyes flash with warmth and amusement. “You don’t think I’m just maybe being a little bit impertinent right now? That you might have to, I don’t know, take off that belt and spank my bottom with it while I bend over your desk?”

My mouth drops open, and all the blood in my body rushes straight to my groin. This is new. I’m wearing a belt, alright, but I’ve never thought about taking it off and doing any sort of spanking with it. I’ve never spanked Remi, period.

When she sees my hesitation, her smile falters just the slightest bit.

“I mean, if you think that’s too kinky and you don’t want to spank me, you could always use the belt to tie me into a pretzel position and explore your options from there.”

“Gah!” I rake both hands through my hair before I get some semblance of control back and get over my shock. “Anything. Any which way. Belt or no belt. I’m canceling all my morning meetings.”

My morning meetings are important. They’re usually also generally quite early to make up for the crazy time difference in Europe, which is another great part about working with Remi. Her hours match my crazy hours. At first, it was pretty exhausting trying to keep up with work and also finding the energy to see her in the evenings. But it’s much better now.

“Sweetheart, I was kidding about the file. You didn’t do it, but I know how busy you are. And it’s Saturday morning. I have no idea why you’re up at this hour and in the office, but you have no meetings for today.” Remi giggles and strides over to me. Sliding her arms against my neck, she presses herself flat against me. I get the benefit of all her soft curves, her warmth, and her deliciously kissable, tempting lips just

inches from mine. “You’ve been working so hard that you forgot all about the weekend. This isn’t actually a punishment. I came down here to surprise you.”

“I certainly am surprised. Is it really Saturday?”

Her eyes are twin pools of mirth. “Yes. Yes, it’s Saturday.”

“In that case, I think I’ll take you straight upstairs and spend the entire day with you in bed.”

“Oooh,” she gushes. “I like the sound of that. In pretzel positions?”

She’s going to be the death of me. I’m going to need all day just to make it up to her for lasting all of three strokes once we get up there. All this verbal foreplay is enough to slay me on the spot, and it’s not a joke about my stamina. It’s just me being straight-up honest. To be fair, all Remi has to do is look at me, and I’m a goner. I think I always was, right from that first night I saw her again at Nanny’s surprise party for me.

Nanny still talks about that night. None of us can drink a chocolate shake anymore without a reminder of that night. Also, every time I hear the word chainsaw, I think about what Kimmy said about hacking off her nuts with one rather than

being in the same room with me. Fortunately, as a family, we're past the rusty saws and laxative stage and into more of the *we all like each other again, and we're family* stage. Remi and I haven't discussed marriage, but I know the second we do, Nanny will be brewing up a special gravy just for us. Our marriage gravy. She'll definitely want to hand out containers as party favors, and who am I to complain?

"If you like," I say indulgently, my heart full to bursting. "Pretzel or any other position, I'm game."

Remi lets out a squeal and leaps into my arms before she kisses me senseless. Quite literally. I'm completely at a loss to explain how I got this lucky. Coming back here, I wanted to try and fight for my family, to get them back. I never thought I'd find love, and certainly not this all-encompassing, heart-roaring love that has healed so many wounds for me and taught me so many lessons.

"Pretzel," Remi says, eyebrows raised. "We might need the internet to help with this one. Do you have your phone so we can look up the correct way to do this?"

"Nah." I start walking at a controlled pace toward the door. As controlled as I can manage, considering I want to race out of there with Remi and get her upstairs before all these

delicious mental images give me a heart attack. “Let’s just wing it.”

My partner-in-crime, my partner-in-everything, my partner-in-life, and my soulmate all around, Remi gives me two thumbs up and another kiss that is a blatant invitation for more. “Winging it. I like the sound of that. I thoroughly approve, and I heartily love you.”

“I heartily love you as well, my dear. With my whole heartily heart.”

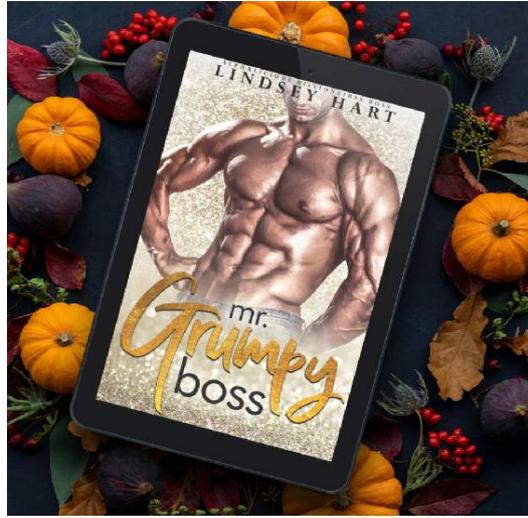
She throws her head back and laughs, raising her arms in the air and giving a hoot of pure joy that I feel echoed all the way down to my toes. My heart is full to bursting. So, so full. I clear the doorway and make for the stairs. “Hot. Puns are so hot,” she informs me, and my god, she is my perfect match. Not that I ever doubted it, but she proves it to me every single day because this is what every day is like. I mean, not the pretzel talk or belt discussion, but the joy and ease and the love we’ve found in each other. That’s our everyday. “Not as hot as pretzels, but I’m not complaining.”

Me neither. Not one bit.

The End.



MR. GRUMPY BOSS



I do it every single day... badmouthing my hot boss... in my secret diary.

He is as grumpy as he is gorgeous, okay.

And I never thought he would accidentally read it.

Now, instead of firing me, The Grinch had a proposal.

The pretend girlfriend kind of proposal.

Me and Grumpy Asshole? As Lovers?!!

Puh-lease!!!!

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Sneak Peak

Dear Diary,

*I think my boss has a secret obsession with plants. Who else installs a jungle on the side of the office building just so he can have a leisurely stroll every single afternoon?
#Mybosshumpsplants*

Philippe's mom calls and leaves really weird messages. Often with me. Doesn't she know I don't know how her son's love life is going, and I'd never want to? Gag me. If he was the last man on earth...okay, I don't know where I'm going with that. Just yeah. I'd rather let the species go extinct than reproduce firebreathing dragon evil grumpy boss babies with him. So no, I don't actually know, or care, who his girlfriend is.

Side note—thank goodness he doesn't make me order flowers or something like that for her. If she even exists. I highly doubt it, though. Who could put up with him if they had a choice? Even the hardest gold digger wouldn't go for that.

□□□□□□□□□□

“Oh My God!” My eyes fly open, and I nearly leap out of my chair.

I'm in such a hurry that I nearly fall out of the dang office chair. I scramble to bring up my sent emails. My orange sucker falls out of my mouth and lands in my lap. It sticks to the leg of my best pair of dress pants, but that's the least of my worries.

Because I just realized I didn't attach the report I fixed.

Nope. There is no Data for Monthly Report attached.

But there is a Diary Therapy Thingy. I attached the freaking diary I've been working on for the past two months. My diary.

THE diary with all my rants about what a jerk my boss is.

My. Life. Is. Officially. Over.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE



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