

THE ASHTON FAMILY

BOOK THREE

CARRIE AARONS

Sizzle



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*For those who always struck to the straight and narrow, only
for the “wrong” thing to be exactly what they needed.*

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1

LIAM

No one tells you what kind of toll physical labor will take on a thirty-two-year-old body until your back and arms are so stiff they feel like they might snap off if you move the wrong way.

Well, I guess they do; I mean, aging is an obvious fact of life, but egotistical pricks like me who think they know everything there is to know about doing a job that requires such heavy lifting just don't listen. Or maybe we refuse to admit that our bodies are no longer the hulking twenty-something masses with the abilities they once had.

Either way, I'm in a world of pain as I hobble my ass down the main drag of my small town.

Hope Crest is quiet at this hour of the morning on a Sunday, the sun just peeking over the tops of the buildings on Newton Street. Red bricks make up the blocks of shops that sit on the banks of the Delaware River, the water calm and serene before the summer tourists chop it up with their kayaks and inner tubes.

This small, charming Pennsylvania town has been my home since I was born, and I wouldn't leave it for all the money in the world. Not that money is a motivating factor for me. If someone offered me season tickets to the professional football team in Philly for the rest of my life and a farm of fifty acres plus, I might be inclined to jump when they said how high. But otherwise, I'm staying put in my comfortable little slice of paradise in this East Coast river valley.

The scent of morning dew and baking pastries is enough to get me in the car this morning, knowing a good stretch and use of my muscles might shake some of the pain. And if that doesn't help, there are always the sticky buns from Vanilla Bean, the boutique coffee shop in town. Brenda, the owner, has been here for twenty years and often keeps a few of my favorite types of pastry in the back for me.

Yesterday was sucker picking day out in the fields I hone, and while picking unneeded branches off tomato plants so they don't drain the other stems of nutrients may seem like a monotonous, easy job, it's not exactly kind on the muscles. Bending at the waist and wrestling a lot of stubborn plants to whip them into shape has left me sucking in a lungful of gasped air each time my tailbone twists the wrong way. I figured trying to walk it off was a stupid decision, but then again, lying in bed last night didn't help at all, and I'll do just about anything to stop the throbbing.

My mother, bless her caring heart, has told me to go to the doctor about three hundred times at this point. Not that I've listened. Being the oldest son in a family of very close-knit, traditional, hometown royalty sort of folks, I have to assume my role proudly as the grumpy, know-it-all who loathes showing vulnerability both emotionally and physically.

That's how anyone who comes in contact with Hope Crest's resident vegetable farmer knows me to be. I can't disappoint them now.

The original Asher family farm was about four acres, with another acre designated for the large white colonial my grandparents and now my parents have occupied for decades. We used to grow about fifteen thousand tomato plants a year, which yielded about a hundred tomatoes per plant. For three generations, my family has been out working the fields, harvesting our tomatoes and other vegetables to make the homemade sauce for our pizzeria, Hope Pizza. We cultivate three types of tomatoes, garlic, onions, peppers, and herbs, from seedlings to fully-grown yields, and then can the ingredients to make our award-winning restaurant's special sauce.

My grandfather taught me how to till the soil, handle the delicate first sprouts, and use the water wheel transplanter to transport our plants into the fields. He educated me on growing times, seasons, farm equipment, greenhouse growing, picking, watering, and everything in between. Our family farm was his brainchild, and I was his apprentice from around the time I could remember my first memory.

I grew up between those rows of vegetables with dirt on my hands, boots on my feet, and the scent of it all swirling around me. The farm is where I feel most alive, most like me, and though it might be strange to some—including my family at times—I much prefer my solitude to the grind of the restaurant. Even while I do spend most nights there, it's only in the kitchen helping out and never customer-facing.

When I decided not to continue my college education because school and I never exactly meshed, I knew there was only one thing I wanted to do. I wanted to be out in the sun, the brim of my straw hat shielding my eyes from the rays, as I worked on bringing our food to fruition. I wanted to work with my hands and get lost in my thoughts as I went row by row, collecting ripe fruit and vegetables to turn into the delicious meals Hope Pizza would put out.

With a little protest from my parents, who wanted me to stay in school even if it was for a degree in some sort of agricultural study, I left my university and began rising with the sun and my grandfather each day.

We all ended up back in the family business, my two brothers, sister, and I. Almost everyone in our family worked with or for the restaurant tangentially. It's the nest we all flew from and landed back in years later when we were ready to settle down. For me, it just came earlier than the others.

The two years I got with my grandfather in the fields, just us two working like dogs and happy as pigs in shit, were some of the best of my life. Losing him to cancer so swiftly and brutally that I had to watch him vomit multiple times a day until he died four weeks later was the worst.

Ever since, it's felt like I've been wandering around with a storm cloud over my head, like I'm some grumpy cartoon character. My siblings equate me to the lovable but depressed donkey from *Winnie the Pooh*. While I love my job and the place where I live, the people I cared for and lost have left gaping holes in their absence, mostly inside my heart.

But I brush that off, like I always do, because there is nothing I can do about it. They aren't coming back, and even if they could, I'm too pissed off about being abandoned to dole out second chances.

Passing Hope Pizza with its red and white checkered overhang, gold lettering on the doors, and currently dark windows, a sense of nostalgia washes over me. Our family exists in this building as much as they do in the living room of my parent's home. No matter what I'm doing on Newton Street, I can feel a sense of calm when my gaze swings this way.

These days, though, that comfort comes with a twinge of anxiety.

With the purchase of my brother Patrick's wife's land, we added four more acres to our original plot and my heavy schedule and responsibilities have increased exponentially. In the generations before me, my great-grandfather and grandfather managed to get by with only one or two other seasonal workers during a harvest period. Now, I must employ about six or seven farmhands, depending on the time of year. Not only did we add three more acres of tomatoes, but we started producing vegetables at my brother Evan's request.

He's the head chef of the restaurant now that our father is trying to hand over the reins, and Evan's fancy culinary expertise means dishes with all kinds of specialty vegetables. Different types of eggplant, zucchini, peppers, cabbage, carrots, you name it, and in the last year, my little brother pestered me to grow it for him. I can't deny it's making a difference though; Evan has introduced staple menu items and dishes in his time as head of the kitchen that our customers and tourists rave about.

But the number of plants and labor it takes is too much for just a single person with an assistant anymore, and that's without my foray into the commercial sauce production. After my grandfather's death, I was lost for a good couple of years. My mother suggested I begin a new venture to take my mind off it, and thus Hope Sauce was born. Five years ago, my father and I set up a LLC to sell our pizza and pasta sauce to corporate chains, and it took off like a bat out of hell.

Never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd be the one learning about manufacturing plants, vetting the contracts of chain grocery stores, or manning booths at local farmer's markets, but here I am. All that has led to an even crankier, more exhausted version of me, which is why I look forward to Sundays.

Sunday, my one relatively quiet day, where I don't put in too much work or end my night cleaning the kitchen at my family's restaurant.

Except my alone time is about to be interrupted.

A little farther ahead on the sidewalk, someone is kneeling among a plethora of items. As I get closer, I realize their grocery bag broke, the flimsy paper torn clean through and deposited their haul all over Newton Street. Whoever it is has a white ball cap low on their head, so I can't make them out, but it would be a dick move of me not to aid them in gathering up the contents of their bags.

After all, I probably do know them in some form or another; you don't live in Hope Crest without knowing pretty much everyone. It's both a blessing and a curse being from a small town because if I don't help and just walk on by, that will probably be fodder for the gossip mill in under two hours.

So even though my back is screaming at me, I bend to pick up three tuna cans, a bell pepper, a package of macadamia nut cookies, and two drinkable smoothie yogurts. The half-gallon of milk is a goner, having popped its top on impact and spilled half its contents down the sewer drain below.

"I can try to carry these to your car, but it looks like you'll need a new milk," I point out, not trying to make conversation

or friendly small talk but trying to alert this person to my presence on a relatively dead morning street.

“Dammit, I knew I should have just rolled the cart to my car. That’s what I get for trying to be a grocery bag warrior and tough it out.”

The brim of the white ball cap rises with the person’s chin, and I’m struck by lightning on the spot as two green eyes nearly swallow me whole.

Or, well, that’s what it feels like. That’s what it feels like every single time she looks at me.

Eyes so green they resemble a field full of leafy, gorgeous plants ready to be picked. Cheekbones high and naturally tinged with a dusky rose color so that it always looks like she’s halfway to a blush. Long sunflower blond hair that looks like it’d be softer than the finest silk if it ran between your fingers. A mouth so luscious and full and pink, it would be sweeter than the ripest strawberry if I ever got just one taste.

Not that I ever would. Gabrielle Murphy is as forbidden as the most tempting creation in the Garden of Eden, and she’s made it clear for twelve years now that when it comes to me, she is strictly off-limits.

Because the first time we met, *I* was off-limits to her.

She was my teacher, and I was the senior who couldn’t stop trying to get her to notice me.

I walked into that classroom on my last first day of high school and a switch flipped. Math was my first period of the day and never a subject I particularly excelled in. There was actually a pep in my step though, because I was about to be done with school forever. I’d have to make it through the months of senior year, and my parents didn’t yet know about my plans not to follow through with college, but the finish line was on the horizon.

Then there she was, standing in front of the whiteboard with a marker idling in her hand, her plump, understated, pink-colored lip worried between her teeth, and she thought no one was watching yet. She hadn’t gotten into performer mode, the

kind of role teachers assume when they want high school-aged kids not to mess with them. Gabrielle hopped from foot to foot, that maroon flowy skirt she'd chosen swishing around her as she rolled her slim shoulders back in that snow-white blouse with sleeves like angel wings. Her blond hair had been secured in some clip with pearls at the crown of her head, and those emerald-green eyes rimmed by thick black lashes seemed to dart around the room in search of something that would bring confidence.

At that very moment, I knew for sure that love at first sight existed. Because it happened to me, just like my father had always said about my mother when he told the story of the first time they met. The men in my family have a pattern; glimpse the one woman who would bring them to their knees, fall in love with her, and spend the rest of eternity trying to make her happy. It's happened with almost every Ashton and DiNicoli, my mother's maiden name, man down the family line.

Oftentimes, my brothers and I would make sarcastic kissy faces when my father would wax poet about this topic. But at that moment, I knew I'd been a fool. Because Gabrielle Murphy hit me like a ton of bricks. She was Cupid's arrow to my heart. She was birdsong and rainbows and all the other flowery bullshit people write love songs about when they find the one in a sea of millions.

I'd found her, of that, I am sure. To this day, I can't describe exactly what it is about her; I just walked into that classroom, and something rooted deep in my soul recognized that this was the person I wasn't even looking for. I was young, a newly minted adult, and love was the furthest thing from my mind. I'd had girlfriends, been a bit of a player during that summer, and was looking to finish out the year and sow my wild oats. But one look at her, and something fundamentally shifted, like the earth's plates beneath my feet.

Being the situation as it was, Gabrielle wouldn't come near me with a ten-foot pole. But the way she looked at me, the almost tangible field of energy between us, I knew it wasn't one-sided. She could convince herself that anything

concerning her and me, even though I was nineteen and she was a brand-new twenty-two-year-old teacher, was downright wrong. But she'd never convince me of it.

To this day, I cursed her for not trying. Even after I graduated, she wouldn't relent. It crushed me more than anything else in life had up to that point. Her refusal changed who I am as a person and man, and I've been different ever since.

"Oh, I, uh ..." Gabrielle stutters, then trails off the second she realizes who is kneeling to help her.

"Where do you want them?" I grit out, the ugly side of me rearing its head now that I'm in her presence.

"You don't need to help, just leave them. I'll get them where they need to go." Her voice is even and measured, which only serves to tick me off more.

How can she always be so prim and proper around me? As if I don't affect her whatsoever.

"This is a hazard. If someone were to trip because you were too careless to grab a basket or cart, there could be injuries or a lawsuit. So tell me where to put them." My molars grind down so hard I nearly break them.

I don't mean to be this way; I swear I don't. But I've been this sullen, miserable version of myself for so long that even if the softer side wants to make an appearance, I drown him in my irritability.

"I was walking them back to my grandmother's condo on the canal towpath," Gabrielle mutters as if not wanting to admit it.

Because we both know what that means; it means I'll have to walk the array of groceries currently rolling down Newton Street all the way back to her place.

Could the fucking universe not give me a break? If I had to be the only person to bump into this woman, could she at least not have her car with her to cut this interaction as short as possible? But *no*, the world seems hellbent on fucking me over.

“Lead the way, then,” I grumble back, casting a cloud of gloom over the entire interaction.

Again, I don’t want to be this way. Once upon a time, I’d jumped at any chance to talk to her, to convince her that I was more than just some stupid boy. I was probably inappropriate in my effort and approach, too forward and way too obvious.

That all changed after she left, took off without a trace, and hadn’t been seen or heard from in twelve years. Ever since, my anger at her abandoning us before we could *be* an us is the only thing I can seem to feel when she’s near.

But deep down, no matter how many times she turns me away, leaves, or rebuffs what things could have been, I’ll never forget the first time I ever saw her.

Or the last.

That is until she waltzed back into this town and turned my world upside down for the second time in my life.

Don't let them see you sweat.

It's the incantation I've been repeating to myself since I stepped through the front doors of Hope Crest High School on this bright September morning. As if it's a spell I can cast over my classes of first-day students, that I'll be able to magically lull them into cooperating and not intimidating a teacher who is only four years older than them.

My family and friends think I'm crazy for starting my teaching career in high school because not only could I still probably pass as a student myself, but it's not like I'm some crack-the-whip type who demands respect by my very presence. No, if someone were to describe me, they'd probably go with words like understated, obedient, rule-follower, teacher's pet. I'm the Goody Two-shoes to my sister's wild child and the shadow to my extroverted brother. I'm the daughter, student, and friend you can always count on to be there on time, with a plan, ready to execute and wrap everything up in a neat bow.

To the freshman through seniors that I will be teaching math to, that's probably the lamest person they could think of on the planet. Which is why I'm hyping myself up via silent pep talk before that end of homeroom bell rings.

It's been years since I stepped foot in this small, charming town that sits on the banks of a rushing river. Hope Crest is where my mother grew up, but she left it behind long ago and has only returned with us sparsely through the years to see my grandparents on holidays or the rare birthday.

Except spending time with my grandmother, who owns the used and collectible bookstore in town, were some of my happiest memories. When I was done with college, done fulfilling my obligations and duty to stay on the straight and narrow, I made one crazy decision that was all about me. Well, as crazy as picking a location can be, at least. For my introverted, rule-following persona, choosing to live in a small town where I know no one and have no history was the most out-of-left-field decision I've ever made in my life. My parents didn't understand it, and my siblings thought I was weird for not living in a big sprawling metropolis, and what few surface friends I did have barely registered it as they jetted off to their exciting careers and mid-twenties nightlife.

Making this decision to teach in Hope Crest, though, is one of the bravest and most comforting things I've ever done. For the last three months after graduation, I've been able to spend so much more time with my grandmother, who is so much like me, that it makes me feel a part of my lineage for once. We bonded over tea with honey as we watched the fireflies on the swampy creek in her backyard. The two of us explored farmers markets on the weekends, she took me to plays at the community theater overlooking the water, and I even went bird-watching with her a time or two.

Coming here has given me a sense of finally being home, and even though I'm shaking in my boots standing here in my classroom, I know this too will come to be the best decision I've ever made.

The shrill ring of the bell overhead sends a shiver down my spine, but I roll my shoulders back and steel

up. Students begin pouring in, chatting excitedly about anything and everything. When some of them register me standing there with a smile plastered on my face, I nod in greeting. They check me out with a full body up-down, sizing me up to see what they can possibly get away with.

Some take back row seats, and I clock those as students to watch while others clamber to the front. I try my best to look neutral and friendly, giving off the air that my class won't be a breeze but will be worth their time. Or at least that's what I'm trying to convey with an expression and my stance—not sure if it's working.

All of a sudden, a group of about five hulking boys come through the door, and the pack of markers I'd picked up bobbles in my hand. They drop to the floor when a particular boy walks in and scatter with a noisy clang. I immediately drop, scrambling to pick them up smoothly, but now in a complete panic that I just showed them my tell when I was trying to keep a poker face.

Rising and trying to keep an embarrassed blush off my cheeks, I nod to the class once more. They're almost all fully seated now, waiting for the new teacher to speak her first words.

Except someone beats me to it.

“Don't worry, teach, you're doing great.”

My head snaps up, and my gaze lands on a boy in the second row. Except this student looks more like a man than a boy. Something rolls over me as our eyes lock, and I compartmentalize, too nervous to try to feel anything else. Even if it feels like the earth's plates move beneath my feet.

Then, as if in slow motion, he has the audacity to wink at me.

And every ounce of courage I built up this morning comes shattering down. Because when he does that, a

bunch of the other boys in class start to snicker. The girls roll their eyes.

I'm the butt of their joke now, and it's all thanks to him.

Little did I know that boy would turn out to be the worst thing that ever happened to my teaching career.

From the moment Liam winked at me on that first day, a tiny flicker of warning went off in my brain. Not in a sordid way, but in a way that made me nervous to be around him from a teacher/student standpoint. Although it was my first year, I'd been prepared that some of my students would challenge me in a way others didn't.

It felt like Liam had sussed out my anxiety from that very first day, and I had to wear an extra suit of armor around him so as not to crack the tough teacher veneer I'd built up. The way he watched me during lessons felt like he saw through the intimidating, no-bullshit nature I was trying to adopt, like he knew I was a fraud.

That scared me at first, more than anything.

Only about halfway through the school year did things morph into something else. Into something that made me feel dirty, downright awful, and like I should get myself the hell away from teaching and this town.

It didn't matter that Liam was older than any other senior at Hope Crest; he turned nineteen in January after his parents held him back from kindergarten due to a speech delay, I later learned. It didn't matter that we were only three years apart, a fact that would have been completely normal had we tried to date in any other type of circumstance. It didn't matter that I spurned every advance or attempt he made and refused to ever be alone with him for one moment.

To me, I'd committed the worst offense a teaching professional could do; I had compromised the safety and security of one of my students at my own personal expense. Even if the thoughts were only in my head, even if I never acknowledged the connection to Liam or anyone on this earth

out loud. Even if I did everything in my power to remain professional, respectful, and completely cold in my interactions with him.

I had done nothing wrong, and there was nothing anyone could document to show I stepped outside the lines. And yet when I think of that time now, I know I did the right thing by removing myself. Without a shadow of a doubt, I knew that leaving Hope Crest and the teaching career path after just one year of working out of college was the correct decision. At the time, I'd thought so low of myself that I thought I might form something like this with another student, and then this would just be some horrible pattern.

Obviously, twelve years later, I know that wasn't it. I knew myself then, and I know myself now; I would have never done anything morally wrong or even gray. What happened with Liam was something people only get once in a lifetime, and I turned the opposite way in fear that I might be a monster.

But I wasn't, and I'd come to terms with that long ago. I went on to coach kids in sports and drama programs alike while working for my father's website design business as my nine-to-five, and nothing even remotely close to Liam ever happened again.

No, the universe royally screwed me up by sending him to me at that point in my life. When I couldn't start anything, when it would have been wrong, when we both would have been crucified for it. Twelve years later, I realize I've never been in love the way I've dreamed of being, and only late at night do I allow myself to ponder if maybe that's because I should have just waited it out to see if I could have found that with Liam when the timing was appropriate.

Those thoughts have never buzzed around in my head more than when I moved back to Hope Crest a year and a half ago. Coming back here was never the plan, but that was before my grandmother Lucy left me everything when she died two years ago. To say it was a shock to get that phone call would be an understatement. While the rest of my family went through her funeral and the consequent planning of it with

subtle sadness and reverent glad-handing, I was beside myself with grief.

Our time together during those three months of my living here as a fresh college graduate was some of the best of my life, and even after I fled because of extenuating circumstances, we kept in touch frequently. She never put up a fight when I quit after my first year of teaching and didn't pry when I took off like hell was on my heels. Grandma Lucy was an understanding, wise, tough-as-nails woman who kept to her own business but was a supportive shoulder when I needed one.

Even though it was a pain for her to travel, she made the effort to visit me a few times in Charlotte, North Carolina, after I moved. It was like she knew I couldn't step foot back in Pennsylvania, so she came to me.

Being who she was, it wasn't a surprise that she hid her cancer from everyone while also refusing treatment; my grandmother had been certain it was her time and was ready to see my grandfather. Or so she'd written in the letter she left along with her will that instructed me to return to town, sell her bookshop, and donate all the paperbacks to various charities.

So back to Hope Crest, the place I swore I'd never return to. I went because I couldn't not fulfill her last wishes. Deep down, I think she plotted to get me back here. My grandmother always had that hint of a twinkle in her eye that betrayed just how much she really knew. All that was required of me was giving my job two weeks' notice, breaking my apartment lease, and delivering the news to my parents and siblings.

They all thought I was insane for temporarily moving back, but what the hell else was I doing? I was a thirty-five-year-old woman stuck in a rut, unhappy with my life, not in love or raising the family I wanted, so it made sense to make a major change.

And somewhere, on the edges of my mind, I wondered if I'd run into him. Liam Ashton. In twelve years, I hadn't let

myself look for him. Ever. I had no clue if he even still lived in Hope Crest.

That question was answered the first time our gazes collided at a town festival, and his face turned red with surprise and anger. Mine? It felt like I'd been shocked by a thousand static burns. Like my world had been jagged puzzle pieces that hadn't fit together in twelve years, and all of a sudden, they came flying back together and almost bowled me over. Looking into those brown-gray, so dark they almost looked black at times, eyes made me feel like the calm in the midst of a chaotic storm.

Liam looking at me made my axis adjust itself, and I knew, right then, that I'd been a fool to run for this long. That I'd been avoiding my destiny, too scared of it to find out if it was real. The truth was, I had nothing I wanted because I didn't have him.

All these years later, and I still can't deny love at first sight.

Yet, I am still skittish about it because it has been eighteen months since I stepped foot back here, and we still can't seem to have a conversation without it being awkward, painful, and avoidant.

Case in point, we're both kneeling on the rough concrete of Newton Street at seven a.m. on a Sunday, collecting my spilled groceries, and Liam can barely acknowledge my presence.

The long cream-and-coffee-colored locks at the top of his scalp spill onto his forehead, and those black lashes flutter down to his cheeks to evade my eyes. In the twelve years since I've last seen him, his muscles have grown muscles, the long, lean tapered shape of his body resembling that of a man who earned an Adonis title working outside with his hands rather than with manufactured machines in a gym. Dark stubble constantly shadows the strong jaw and rugged cheekbones he sports, and I'm not sure when dirty boots and thigh-hugging jeans became porn for me, but on him, they are.

The man is a woman's fantasy, a well-honed ride I'd like to take, and yet the other affect he's adopted since we last saw each other is a mean streak and a horrible attitude.

Liam Ashton is the grumpiest, growliest man I've ever encountered, and part of me knows I instilled that in him.

"You don't have to act like we're archenemies every time you see me. I'll be in town for a prolonged period of time; we could at least be cordial."

Seeing as I've already been here a year and a half, which has flown by. I might have used the excuse of slowly cleaning out grandma's store as my reason for staying, but I obviously could have sold and emptied it in about six months. Instead, I used the first six months of my time here getting a part-time job at the Hope Crest Playhouse assisting Wilson, the manager, by doing just about anything. Set design, instructing child acting classes, returning phone calls, and even selling tickets on busy nights. I was grieving, and adjusting to being back in this weirdly comforting but strange place, had thrown me for more of a loop than I bargained for. So I put it all off, moved into my grandmother's condo, and began working at the playhouse. Being in the theater, a place I've had love for since I was a child, made me feel a sense of happiness I hadn't in a very long time. Twelve years, to be exact.

After about half a year, I was brave enough to read through the terms of my grandmother's will. I'd blown through the meager savings I'd come here with, only to be surprised that my grandmother left me a hefty sum in return for coming to act out her wishes. So, for the last year, I've been moving at a snail's pace to fulfill them while sorting through my own baggage. It's been like therapy, albeit I haven't addressed the elephant in the room.

Or, well, the insanely handsome grump of a man who'd once been off-limits but is now the most eligible bachelor in town.

Liam looks so irritated at me outright addressing the tension between us, and he shifts until he's standing over me.

“Just giving you the same medicine you dosed out to me all those years ago.” It’s a fucking petty thing to say, and he knows it by the look on his face just split seconds after he delivers it.

But then the mask is back in place, and he’s glowering again.

In my chest, a twinge of guilt spasms. I spent so much time avoiding him when I moved to town the first go-round as a new teacher, and when I left, I’m sure it upset and hurt him. Definitely hurt his pride, and maybe something deeper, not that we ever talked about it. It would explain him acting like a bratty child, though.

Part of me thinks he *wants* me to notice his shitty attitude because bickering about what fault is whose is better than silence.

I begin walking, because I can’t stay rooted to the spot with my arms heaving with groceries any longer, and I feel Liam following behind me.

“You know there was nothing I could do,” I finally say, admitting out loud for the first time in years that there was a conflict and connection between us.

We walk along silently, the downtown still sleepy as birds sing above our heads. The weeping trees that line the back of the canal towpath shadow us, the red dirt under our shoes shuffling softly. I love it here, in the “secret-garden” esque setting of my grandmother’s condo. She lived in a different house years ago when I’d been a teacher here and moved to downsize but also be closer to the store. The row homes are done in white stucco and brick, with black roofs and wrought-iron balconies. They look like something out of a quaint French village and take my breath away each morning I look out the bedroom window. It’s an odd realization to feel like you’re at home in a place you barely spent time, but I do.

“As you’ve said.” Liam’s deep voice hits the back of my head once more. “Thing is, I’m a grown man now, Gabrielle. And it seems like you’re no longer running from this place.”

Or me. That's what I hear laced into his words. No, I guess I'm not. But he is the one who has been avoiding me like the plague since I've been back.

"Liam," I warn because this is no place to be having this conversation.

Not only is it not appropriate for other ears, in general, but I'm still scared of the judgment I'd get. We're so far from the time when he was my student, an actual lifetime away, really, but it's still the mental block in my head that keeps me scared and paralyzed.

"Yeah, I know. We don't call attention to it. Have you considered that's why I've been acting like an archenemy?" He uses my words against me.

Huffing out a sigh of frustration and exhaustion because I should have just gotten a damn basket or cart for all these groceries, I finally make it to the front steps of my grandmother's condo.

Setting down the items in my hands to take them in more reasonable loads, I turn to him. "Do you ... would you come in for a drink? Let me thank you."

Inside, I'm pleading with him to say yes. One, so we can have a conversation. But two, I just want to spend time with him. See if this ridiculously tension-filled raging inferno between us is anything or if I've always been imagining it.

"No." He shakes his head tersely.

That plucks a nerve in me, sending annoyance bubbling over the edge of my calm, proper demeanor. "So we're just going to continue to do this, circling each other and sending glares? Give each other a wide berth even though we live in the same town and have mutual friends?"

His sister-in-law, Cassandra, has become one of my closest friends in town, and she often invites me to some of the same parties or events he attends. Even his own sister, Alana, has invited me to go to a girl's dinner with her a time or two.

"I guess so. Remember, Gabrielle, you set the rules this way, not me." Liam shrugs defiantly.

Each time he says my name, it feels like a curse and a prayer.

It only makes me want to needle him more—I can't help it. Poking the bear with a stick at least gets a reaction out of him, and apparently, I have a death wish when it comes to this man.

“I would have thought that in twelve years, you'd grown up and matured. I can see now that I was wrong to assume that.”

Words like that directed at anyone, much less a man I don't know all that well and have a weird history with, are so out of character for me. I don't speak out of line, I don't fire comebacks or insults, and I definitely don't ask for trouble when staring it in the face.

But something about moving back to Hope Crest and living in my grandmother's house has stoked a fire in me. It's brought to life this part of myself I've always had a leash on, and it feels damn good to express things with confidence and a little spite.

Liam's irises are nearly black as he scowls at me. “The only thing you were wrong to assume in the first place was that you knew me at all. You decided not to, don't rewrite history. If you had, you'd know I've always been the kind of man, yes, *man*, who knows exactly what he wants. And that I don't play games. So, no, I won't come in. I won't feed into any kind of charade. I won't sit idly by and be cordial when I'm—”

He stops himself, and I can make out the tiniest tinge of a scarlet blush at the tops of his ears. It's insanely attractive and adorable. But Liam doesn't continue, and I know the walls he lifted for a millisecond to argue with me are slamming back down around his heart.

Without another word, he sets down my groceries he carried over here, turns on his heel, and leaves.

It's not lost on me that we're probably in a worse predicament than we were before this incident because now we've given life, oxygen, and words to this thing between us.

Throw in a match and the whole thing is bound to blow like a powder keg.

Sunrays burn down into the fabric of my denim work shirt, a sheen of sweat coating my entire body.

As a man who works outside on a farm and typically in the fields all day, I know it's far worse to catch a wicked sunburn than it is to wear long sleeves and pants all day. Even if I'm baking from the inside out, at least my skin isn't frying to a crisp. My typical uniform of denim button-down in a light, breathable fabric and Carhartt pants, plus boots, might have me sweating bullets, but at least I'm protected.

My hands work nimbly and fast for being so big, but then again, I've had years of practice. I pull ripened tomatoes from the vine in record fashion, depositing them in wooden crates to be transported back to the main building we use for collection and small office space. In the rows around me, two of my farmhands, Todd and Jake, assist in grabbing any of the tomatoes that have ripened.

It's our first round of harvesting, and while most of the plants are still cultivating and the fruit isn't ready to be taken off the vine, there are a few that can be snipped with a pair of garden clippers for a clean cut. We don't want them to overripen, or they'll be useless to us, and I'm diligent about getting every ounce of product we can from our farm. Or else, what the hell are we doing? Wasting food or having our crop go to waste is one of my biggest pet peeves, especially when we're the ones who put out the money to grow, harvest, sauce, and serve it.

I've spent all day out here with these two harvesting in batches, moving from our cabbage and greens in the morning when it's cooler to the tomato plants in the afternoon, so they have time to dry before we get our hands on them. Pick, wipe down, into the wagon they go, and then repeat the process. It's monotonous, hot in the sun, and my back is aching, but I crave the work. It gets my mind off the shit show that went down yesterday morning, and with Jake whistling old country songs under his breath, I can actually tune out for a while.

You know, since my interaction with Gabrielle has haunted me since it happened. It's not good enough that the woman haunts my fantasies, daydreams, nightmares, etc.? Now real-life conversations plague me day in and day out?

What she said to me on the steps of her grandmother's condo was so out of left field that it almost brought me to my knees. She never confronted me about anything between us, and here she was, coming out swinging. It was sexy as fuck, while also pissing me off to no end. Gabrielle is still assuming so many things about me and, just like before, never giving me a real shot.

Storming away was childish, I admit, but I almost fucking told her how infatuated I am with her. Even after all the years, the rejection, and never physically being intimate, I was about to confess to Gabrielle that I couldn't ignore this deep feeling of need whenever I looked at her.

"Hey, boss, something you should see over here." Todd's voice slices through my musings, thank fuck.

I pick my head up slowly, wiping the sweat from my brow, and take a long pull from my water bottle before gingerly walking over to the section of crops he's been harvesting.

"What's up?" I ask.

He points to the ground a good distance away from us. "Caught my eye. It looks damaged, no?"

Immediately, my heart rate picks up. If everyone else in my family is solely focused and worried about the restaurant twenty-four seven, I'm that way with our farm. This place is

my brainchild, and these plants are my babies. I know each square inch of this property; I sit out on the porch of the house I built five years ago, just over the property line from my parents, and catalog the blood, sweat, and tears I put into this land.

To see it damaged in any way, whether from animals, weather, or drought, absolutely guts me.

Todd and I walk to the area he was pointing to. It's about four half-rows of tomato plants that aren't quite ripened enough to be picked yet. Usually, I'd see green globes jutting from the leaves, produce that's fighting its way to be juicy and delicious but not quite there as of now.

Instead, I see a bunch of plants that have been either stepped on, cut up, or something else. Bending down to inspect them, I can't fully suss out what happened to these. All I know for sure is that we've lost about twenty plants for this harvest, and my blood boils in my veins.

Here is the secret as to why our sauce is so delicious, lauded, legendary, and every other name it's been awarded in magazines, recipes, and such for years: we've been using the seeds from the tomatoes my great-grandfather brought over from Napoli when he moved here in nineteen twenty. They're heirloom tomatoes, grown with the seeds of fourth-generation love, culture, sweat, and hard work. Search as far and wide as you want to, but you'll find nothing like the tomatoes we grow here.

It's why I've implemented such rigid security to protect our family's lineage of special ingredient. The fact that someone or something bypassed that makes me question everything. I'll have to pull the security footage tonight and see what happened, but this corner of the property may have a blind spot, and I curse myself for not putting more cameras up.

As if I don't already have six spanning the fields after the extras I put in when Cassandra, Patrick's wife, had a security incident on the property I bought from her a few years ago.

"You think it was an animal?" Todd asks, and I hear Jake coming up from behind us.

“Those breaks look too clean for it to be an animal, and there would be tracks.” Jake points to the ground.

He’s an amateur hunter and likes to dabble in survivalist tactics as a hobby, so he’d know best.

Per usual, I don’t use words to get my point across but rather inspect everything in silence. Words have never been my strong suit, and I personally think the world could solve a lot more problems if we all shut our fucking mouths sometimes.

Theories run through my head as I keep walking the land, both men having returned to their harvesting since they’re still on the clock. It could be as simple as a bunch of teenage idiots coming in and trampling the plants while trying to live out wild child fantasies before their senior year.

Except, as we learned with everything that Cassandra went through, sometimes things are more sinister than that. In fact, in the last couple of years, my family has been through its fair share of dangerous situations, my sister and her husband included.

Maybe I’m just spooked from those, which is why I try to shake it off. I decide to wait for a meltdown until I watch the security footage and begin convincing myself that it was just a stupid animal or maybe even a freak windstorm. Right, like we have many of those in Pennsylvania.

Either way, it might be a good thing that my mind is focused back on the work I do each day than a woman who wants nothing to do with me.

Another two hours of the monotonous chore that keeps my complicated thoughts at bay, and Jake and Todd tell me they’re calling it. The back of my old light blue pickup is loaded down with shallow crates of tomatoes, not packed too tightly so as not to put pressure on the fruit, which is a decent start on a season that looks like it’ll bring a huge harvest.

Just as I’m about to drive back to our building to unload and pack them for transport to the sauce manufacturer I work with, the sound of another vehicle approaching hits my back.

When I turn, finally taking my hat off as the sun gets lower and lower on the horizon, I see my father approaching on one of the quads we keep in the newer barn/garage we put up a year ago.

Dad makes his way off the four-wheeler just as I walk over to start the engine of the old pickup, and I curse myself for not moving faster. I love my father, I do, but he's antsy in his retirement. Staying still is not in his blood, he must have passed that down to me, and my mother making him rest and relax is officially driving him crazy.

"You all done picking for today?" he asks, shoving his hands in his pockets like he's some foreman on duty.

I blow out a breath, trying to keep my composure. It's not that I'm in a bad mood, even though I'm technically always in a bad mood, but I had a nice day alone out here with my plants. Up until I saw the trampled corner of the property, I didn't have a thing to complain about.

Now, I'm sure Dad will read something on my face, he's always been able to do it with me more than my brothers and sister, and I'll have to explain what Todd saw.

"Yeah, we got a good haul from our efforts. We'll have a good season." I keep it succinct, not meeting his eyes.

He removes his hands from his pockets as he moseys through the rows. "Good, good. The vines look good, growing well. If you need a hand one of these days, let me know. I did used to harvest almost everything back when I was still trying to make your grandfather agree that I could marry your mother."

I chuckle, thinking about my nonno's bushy eyebrows raising as he assessed my desperate and in love father. The old man was a stickler and a giant hole in the middle of my heart throbs for his absence. Obviously, life is like that, everyone dies eventually, and we all miss someone or something.

But for me, my nonno was the closest person I'd ever had. He understood me in a way most of my family doesn't, even if they love me dearly. We just got each other's glib nature, the

ease of tough work with no talking, the long days pushing our limbs to the brink, and then finishing off with a cold beer. He was simple and yet complicated, a man who had surefire thoughts and opinions but wouldn't share them unless you were in his inner circle.

Losing him was one of the harshest blows in my life, and I still look over my shoulder at dusk in the fields, thinking he'll show up sometimes.

"You all right?" Dad catches me staring into the abyss, and I cringe.

Even if Nonno was my best friend, it didn't mean the Ashton men couldn't read each other like a book. It's a goddamn superpower of my father and brothers, it seems.

"Todd found a corner of the property, about four half-rows of crop, that were completely damaged. It's probably not salvageable."

"You thinking it's just pests, animals, or something more?" Dad doesn't look too concerned.

I run my hand over my jaw. "Not sure yet."

My father shrugs. "Check the tapes, but this time of year, I wouldn't be surprised if it was just a bunch of deer or foxes causing a ruckus."

He's probably right, or at least I tell myself that. "Yeah."

"Otherwise, everything okay? You missed Sunday dinner last week."

I hadn't thought anyone would care when I faked being sick as an excuse not to be at my parents' house for our weekly tradition, but apparently, it was noticed. I love spending time with my family, even with the grumpy act I put on, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it a couple days ago.

I'd been feeling particularly down for no real reason, and knowing I'd have to go and sit in the presence of so many couples who were so damn in love had me nearly breaking my back molars I'd ground down so hard.

Telling my father I was lonely, yearning, and lost was not an option, though. I'd kept my feelings for Gabrielle a secret for twelve years until Patrick and Alana sniffed them out, and that was bad enough. They didn't even know the whole story or extent. I didn't need or want my family all up in my business trying to fix it for me if they got the full reasoning for my ghost-like nature these days.

"Yeah, just recovering from the migraine I had. It took me out this weekend." A lie, but the only one I have.

Dad nods. "All right, well, you have any more work you need help with?"

A bell clangs in the distance, and I know it's Mom looking for him. She installed that bell on the back porch when we were all just kids to wrangle us in for dinner while we were off playing in the fields or woods behind our property.

"Mom is going to drag you in by the ear if you don't go willingly." I raise an eyebrow at him.

He hangs his head in defeat. "I'm not meant for this! I need to do *something*."

That has me huffing out a laugh. "Aren't these supposed to be the golden years? The best time of your life? Go do that."

"Your mother is going to make me relax into my grave," he mutters but walks back to the quad.

Why do I have a feeling he's going to take off for a little drive in the woods to get his blood pumping before going back to the main house?

As for me, I'll take these over, unload them, and do enough loathsome paperwork that my eyes droop and my brain shuts down.

Only then will I be able to crash onto my mattress and sleep without dreams and nightmares of Gabrielle waking me in the night.

Half of my beer is gone by the time Patrick rushes into The Laura Inn, our usual once-a-week happy hour drink spot.

“Sorry, sorry, the baby was in a fuss trying to go down and I didn’t want to leave Cass.” He shuffles onto the brown leather bar stool next to me, his face flushed and hands trembling.

“We didn’t have to come out. Jeez, you should have told me.” Now I feel guilty, even though I’ve been looking forward to this little brotherly chat all week.

The two of us have been coming to the Laura for years. In part for its top-shelf drinks at a discount for us since our father and the owner go way back, the edgy but beautiful decor that was elevated from some of the dive bars in downtown Hope Crest, and easy nature of the place. But also because I insist on it; I wasn’t always the best big brother, but I could put my moods aside to realize I still need to bond with my siblings. Most nights Patrick and I went out, we’d be joined by our sister, Alana, and her now husband, Warren, who we grew up with. Now that Evan has moved home, he’ll come join us if the restaurant is closed for the night.

Tonight, it’s only the two of us, and my brother’s new fatherhood shows all over him. “No, no, it’s still nice to get an hour to myself. Cass insisted.”

I can tell, though, that his mind is elsewhere. Presumably, on the wife he’s obsessed with and my baby niece, whom he

can't stop gushing over.

"How is Rebecca?" I smile, and it's only fair that my niece is one of the only people who can get me to do so.

Patrick grins a megawatt grin. "Adorable. Beautiful. So smart for a three-week-old. But also a mess every time she cries or poops. How the hell can a thing that tiny make poops that big? And the stench, my God."

My brother cringes but looks happy to do so. I don't get it, honestly, so I just stay silent as I sip my beer.

"You want one?" I gesture to my almost empty glass.

He waves me off. "Nah, I'm just going to get a soda or something. It feels wrong to drink when Cass can't as she's still breastfeeding."

That shouldn't tick me off, that he's being so respectful of his wife, but it does. Probably because I have no one to do that for.

"Got it. Dude, you don't have to be here," I tell him earnestly, because I feel like he wants to be let off the hook.

Patrick winces. "This is our tradition, though. Brother drinks, this is what we do."

"That was before you had a whole-ass kid and a wife at home who needs help with a screaming newborn. I get it, Patty, I do. Go home. And next time, if it's too much, tell me instead of showing up with your head in the clouds."

I may not say it out loud much, but I care very deeply for my family and am always looking out for them.

"You're not pissed?" He half-rises, like he wants to listen to me and bolt but thinks I'll get mad.

I clap him on the shoulder. "No. Not at all. Go home. I'll be over to see Rebecca sometime this week, okay? Tell Cass hi for me."

He gives me a grin like he's heading back to the place he really wants to be, then speed walks for the doors.

Glancing around, I survey the crowd at the Laura. It's made up of a lot of familiar faces, but none who I want to strike up a conversation with. I may live in my hometown as an adult, but I rarely socialize with people outside my family circle.

The bartender just sets down my second beer when someone slides onto the bar stool next to mine.

"Funny seeing you here, stranger."

Valerie Notson, a former high school flame, and more recent hookup, gives me a Cheshire cat grin. Internally, I groan because I wanted to drink in peace and not be subjected to her very obvious attempts to turn us into something more.

"Valerie, hi." I don't ask her how she is or if I can buy her a drink because, well, I don't want to.

"You drinking alone tonight? I can fix that?" Her hand hovers close to mine on the bar top.

I down half my beer in sudsy, carbonated gulps so that I don't have to answer. Or maybe so I can get out of here faster.

Making the mistake of letting her sleep over more than once at my place was a grave error. She's a beautiful woman, has a decent job, and comes from a nice family like mine who has lived in Hope Crest for generations. She's outgoing, involved in the community, and on paper, probably looks like a woman I should end up with in this little river valley town.

Except I just don't like her that much. She doesn't seem to understand my personality, undresses me with her eyes any chance she gets, and it's always felt to me like she wants my last name more than me for me.

"Actually, I was just heading out." I place my empty glass down, throw a ten-dollar bill on the bar, and turn to leave.

"Wait!" Valerie's voice notches up with desperation. "Want some company to walk you home?"

Turning around, I catch the innuendo in her expression and blanch. I should take her up on this. I should go home with her or try to fuck someone else to get out of this funk.

Except this funk has lasted twelve years, so it can't really be a funk. No, I'm stuck on a woman who would rather run in the other direction than talk to me, and yet I can't take this very willing one back to my bed because of it.

"Have a good night, Valerie." I don't mean it to sound rude or dismissive, but I think it comes off that way because her face sinks.

She isn't a bad person; in reality, Valerie will make some man very happy someday. It just won't be me, and I wish she'd take the hint. I'm not looking for that with her or any other woman I've bedded in this town. I know there are rumors about me, about the line I deliver before they come back to my bed; one night only, and no feelings are involved. Unfortunately, I was stupid enough to repeat things with Valerie once or twice, and she probably got the idea she was the exception.

As I walk down Newton Street, I ruminate on my fucking idiocy. Why can't I move on, try to fall for someone else, and start to live the life I see my siblings have and I know I want?

A sound to my left has me focusing in the dark.

"Come on, you piece ... of ... crap." Someone grunts, and a grinding noise follows.

"Hey, what ..." I trail off on my offer of help as soon as I see who it is.

The exception to every rule and the only one I can't have.

Gabrielle is halfway down the walk of her grandmother's former bookshop, attempting to roll a dolly cart full of boxes. Clearly, it isn't going well, and it looks as if the load is heavy. Because I'm a moron with masochistic tendencies, I storm over and shove my way in, letting my shoulder bear the brunt of it.

"Have you not learned your lesson from the other day? If you can't carry something, call someone else to do it or get the proper tools." Perfect, now I'm just scolding her right off the bat.

With a surprised huff, she tips her face up to look at who just intercepted her near fall, then almost gasps when she sees it's me.

“You can't be serious,” she mutters, then looks skyward. “Are you purposely fucking with me?”

It's the first time I've ever heard her curse, and goddamn, if it doesn't have my balls tightening. I'm a sad bastard, getting turned on by a woman who doesn't want me in a situation where she'd take anyone's help but mine.

“Need more help?” I ask, trying not to smirk.

This isn't funny, not from either of our points of view, but there is some humor in the fact that the universe seems keen to drag us together.

“No, I've got it.”

“Those books are about to either land all over the sidewalk, break your ankle, or get torn apart from the way you're jostling them. Let me help.”

My mother taught me better than to leave someone in a bind, and it's not like I'd ever walk by this woman and not stop to assist her.

“I'm fine, really.” She tugs on the dolly, and it doesn't budge an inch. “I just have to ...”

I see it the moment it's going to happen. She loses her footing on the step she just put a foot backward onto and is going down with the books aiming straight for her body.

Lightning fast, I'm behind her, gripping her waist as I steady both her and the boxes on the dolly, pulling both close. Her back is pressed to my front as I sandwich her between myself and the books.

Suddenly, I'm all too aware that her entire ass is pushed against my crotch, the fabric of our clothing clinging to one another. Gabrielle seems to be holding her breath, and I reach in front of her to give the dolly a good shove. It cements itself upright and steady, not at Gabrielle's intended target of the bottom of the porch, but secure, nonetheless.

We stay stuck together like that for another beat, and my body goes cold the second she disconnects us.

“Thanks.” Her voice is quiet, and she won’t turn around as she checks the books inside to make sure they’re okay.

“Why won’t you look at me?” It might be the two beers or the thoughts that have been plaguing my mind since I last saw her, but I can’t hold it in.

“Liam, not this again.” She sighs, sounding exhausted.

“Again? We’ve never spoken about it, *Gabrielle*. I think there should be some sort of discussion, no?” I don’t know why I’m pressing this.

No, I do know why. I want to rattle her, make her react. I’m sick of avoidance and indifference.

“I’ve been working all day to empty this shop, to get it done quickly so I can sell this place and get out of town. So that you no longer have to growl in my direction and I don’t have to wonder—”

She stops herself, slapping a hand over her mouth like she never meant to give away that much information.

Internally, I fist pump like I’ve just won something because knowing she might wonder about me and us is a victory in itself.

“You don’t have to wonder *what*? If we could have been good together? If we could have been everything? If you had just given this thing a chance, that it wouldn’t have had to be this forbidden, awful thing but a connection that was better than any you’ve had in your life?”

Because that’s what I wonder about all the time. And for a guy who hates talking and having conversations, I’m just going for it. I’m fucking tired of this, and the dark and the beer are making me braver.

“You were a student, Liam. A boy whose brain hadn’t fully developed. A person I had explicit laws and rules to follow when it came to our interactions. It was best for both of us that I left—”

“Oh, fuck that. You never did a damn thing, Gabrielle. You didn’t initiate shit, you sure as hell ran in the other direction whenever I was in your vicinity, and we never even fucking touched. You did nothing wrong. It was all me, and fuck calling me a boy. I’m three years younger than you. I knew what I wanted. I’ve always been the type of person to know that; it was true then, just as it is now. So don’t tell me I was immature or naive, I’ve never been those things in my goddamn life, ask anyone.”

She refuses to give me an inch, not meeting my eyes, and I want to rattle her. I want to knock that suit of armor she always seems to be equipped with and get to the heart of the woman. She has to know that if she’d allow it, neither of us would be able to disengage from the other.

“That last night I saw you was not the time to get into it. Not then.”

She brings up the forbidden night, the one where it all almost came crashing down over our heads.

“So, when was I supposed to address it then, huh? You fell off the face of the earth. Not that I had much to go on since you wouldn’t give me your number in the first place, much less create any social media profile I could find. Yeah, that makes me sound like a fucking stalker, but all I wanted to do was talk to you after I graduated. That night at the canal, I thought maybe ...” I trail off because I’ll sound like even more of a lunatic if I confess to her that it felt like I was falling. I hadn’t said more than a couple sentences to her in a public setting up to that point, and it wasn’t like I’d taken her on a date or even flirted with her. Something deep down inside me just knew, though, when I looked at her that we were bigger than all of that. It felt like the kind of intangible thing I’d only find once in my lifetime.

“I didn’t want you calling, Liam. It wasn’t appropriate. You were a student, and I was your teacher.”

“And now I’m a thirty-two-year-old man asking the same thing. For a chance. Just one goddamn shot. Which you’re still scared shitless of because you think someone will judge you

for it? That's bullshit, Gabrielle. I think we both know what would happen if we stopped putting up roadblocks."

I'm panting at this point, turned on and angered beyond belief that she won't relent.

"You sound insane! We don't even know each other."

Maybe I do, maybe I am. All I know, though, is that the moment she fled Hope Crest, something inside me fundamentally changed. I went from this somewhat friendly, marginally cocky guy to a shell of myself. The world seemed to dim; the prospects I had seemed so bland and uninteresting. Colors dulled, and other women seemed boring.

That all sounds so dramatic, and I'm the farthest thing from that word. But I'm tired of being angry, of trying to beat her at her own game. I'm exhausted from pretending I don't want her, that I want her to leave town as soon as possible because we all know I don't want that. If this is the only shot I get, I better take it.

So, I tell her the truth because it's all I have. "I turned down a woman at the bar tonight. I'm always turning down women. For twelve years, any experience or moment I've had with a woman has felt off, not enough. Not since I looked at you for the first time has anything ever felt right. I know that sounds insane, I know I've never touched you, talked for hours with you, taken you out, or had you in my bed. I know all of this. But sometimes, a feeling like this can't be explained. It's not rational. Isn't that what chemistry is, though? Isn't a connection, that spark of indefinability and undeniability, not a logical thing? Or else, why would human beings attempt to go up to the ones they find attractive? For twelve years, I've not felt an ounce of the spark I did when I was in the same room as you. Then you walked back into town and it was like ... it was like I was getting one last shot at ever finding that *thing* in my life. Tell me I'm wrong. You have to say it or I won't be able to stop spiraling about this. You have to feel this. I'm fucking tired of feeling insane, like everything between us is only one sided."

After I'm finished, my chest is light as air. It feels like I've emptied a ton off my soul and deposited it at her feet to either pick up or discard. I wait on the edge, wondering if she'll send me into oblivion or help me soar.

Gabrielle looks away. Looks back at me. Looks away again. There is so much indecision and panic clouding those beautiful green eyes.

"It's not one-sided."

Her whisper is so quiet I can almost imagine I dreamed her saying that. But I know I didn't, I can't have, because now she's looking at me with such raw want in her eyes that my lungs seize up.

Air ceases to exist. The world stutters before it feels like it's spinning a million miles per hour.

And then, for the first time in my life, I claim this woman's lips. Suddenly, every single fiber of my being is reminded of why I was put on this earth.

Perfection.

The word repeats over and over in my brain, pounding at my skull as Liam devours my mouth. As we suck the air from each other's lungs. As our lips brand the other's like tattoos only made to fit him and me.

It's the only word that makes sense at this moment, and it's the only thing I feel. Every man I've kissed in my life, dated, been with ... none of it compares to this. To him. To this kiss that feels like it's ending a self-induced sentence of longing and misery.

His tongue wraps around mine, coaxing it in a way that I feel I know exactly how he'd use it when he got me naked and spread open. This kiss is passionate, erotic, heady, and grounding. Its opposition personified because while it feels like the rightest thing in the world, my head is yelling that it's wrong. That I've denied myself this for so long, and it's for a reason.

But Liam doesn't give me time to unpack that because one moment, I'm standing on the front porch steps of my grandmother's bookshop, and the next, I'm floating.

Liam picks me up, his strong arm banding around my waist with the other under my butt, and carries me deftly back inside the old shop. The night is dark, and we're in a particularly empty part of Hope Crest; Grandma Lucy's store is on the outskirts of Newton Street, so there isn't as much foot traffic but also not as many residential properties either.

With a booted foot, I hear him kick the front door closed, and I come up for air.

“What are we doing?” I ask, even as my fingers plow through his brown locks and his lips skate down the column of my neck.

“The thing we were always meant to.” He says it so surely, like he’s known forever that it would come to this.

My entire body tingles, my panties are slick with wetness, and the goose bumps on my skin won’t seem to rub off even as our limbs meet in several places each second. As he sets me down on the old checkout counter in front of the big bay windows, he comes between my legs, and I feel him, hard and thick, at my center.

A moan escapes before I can help it, and Liam is doing dangerous things to my neck as he sucks in the exact right spot that makes white dots appear at the edges of my vision.

“Not here, someone will see.”

Those big, rough, blunt fingertips make contact with the skin at my waist as he pushes my shirt up, and my nipples tingle with the need to be under his touch.

“Let them. I’m not fucking hiding this.” Those words mean way more than he’s letting on at this moment, we both know it, but I ignore that underlying meaning.

Instead, I hop off the counter and lead him to the back, where stacks of half-empty bookshelves conceal us.

“This isn’t doing a good job of warding off my teacher fantasies.” His growl is both sarcastic and lethal.

But instead of blanching from the fact this looks like some library tryst, I back up into one and take him with me. Now that he’s claimed my mouth, I know I won’t stop this. This spark between us ignited into a full inferno, one that I won’t be foolish enough to try to put out before I know how good it feels to be burned.

In a flash, our hands are everywhere. He whips my shirt off to get a handful of my breasts, and I slip the straps from

my shoulders as he fiddles with the clasp. Together we pull it off, my breasts heavy and needy as he palms them.

“Oh God,” I hiss out, knowing it’s been too long since anyone paid them some worthy attention.

They fit in his hands perfectly, and he jiggles them like a boy seeing his first pair in a funny sort of way.

“You have no idea how much I’ve dreamed of seeing these.” That voice is as rough as the calluses on his hands, which now stroke over my skin and send jolts directly between my thighs.

“I think I might,” I whisper, knowing I’ve probably dreamed of this moment just as much.

It would be ridiculous for me to admit that I’ve woken in the middle of the night probably a hundred times over the years, with sweat pooling my sheets and wetness between my legs over a sex dream I had of Liam Ashton.

Alternating between breasts, he lavishes my nipples with his tongue. My body warms to the point of boiling, but I need to touch him, too. Reaching out, I pop the button on his jeans and pull his zipper down, Liam moving so that he can use his mouth on my skin and give me access to stroke him in my fist.

With bated breath, I touch him, reveling the sinew of muscles as his lower abs flex from the contact of my fingers. Without missing a beat, he uses one hand to pull his shirt from behind his back over his head, and my God, does this man look like some kind of pornstar sucking my tits while undressing himself in one smooth move.

Squirming because I need friction between my legs, I push his jeans and boxers past his hips and let my nostrils flare as I take in what bobs out as I release it.

“Holy shit,” I deadpan, because, well ... *holy shit*.

Liam chuckles as he straightens to his full height, letting me drink in the sight of him wearing nothing but his pants around his ankles.

“Told you I’m a man.” The usually grumpy asshole has turned into some kind of smirking sex god before me, and it’s thrown me for a loop.

Usually, Liam is either scowling or haunting corners like a rugged vampire. Not three minutes ago, he was nearly yelling at me on the sidewalk. I assumed whenever we collided, our sex would be rushed in a flurry of forbidden ecstasy. Rough fucking to get it out of our system.

But this? This is different. Hell, everything since the first time I’d seen Liam has felt different between us than it ever had or did with any guy since.

Man? The guy is hung like a freaking giant. I’m not even sure the size of his penis is legal. Gulping because, holy hell, do I still want that desperately inside me? We stare at each other for a moment. Me in my jeans. Him pretty much naked.

The two of us are on the precipice of something we can’t walk back from. Shit, we’ve already gone too far. This changes it all.

Yet, I don’t care. Just like Liam said, I’m tired of running. Of refusing to admit what I want from him. Possibly with him. I already have a foot in the door, and I’m not turning back now.

As if making the choice at the same moment, Liam and I launch at each other. Hands, teeth, mouths, lips ... it all blurs together in one passion-fueled escapade.

I fist him and stroke from base to tip, my hand not even closing all the way around him, as Liam groans into my mouth and juts his hips forward.

Quickly, my pants get kicked off, and I slide out of my underwear to hint at what I need. The minute he grips my hip to widen my stance, I know I’m a goner. A thick knuckle brushes over my clit, as if testing my readiness, and I arch off the bookshelf, whining in need of more contact.

“*Fuck, your noises,*” he whispers as if I’ve branded him.

Two fingers enter me, stretching me impossibly as he curls them up to the spot that makes the world go blurry. I mewl,

dropping my head to his shoulder and nipping at the skin as he thrusts in a rhythm that sets my veins on fire.

“Oh, hell, that feels so good,” I tell him.

I might be a good girl, but I’ve been told I’m vocal in bed. I can’t help it, things just pop out of my mouth when I’m on the verge of a climax. And Liam is getting me there in record speed.

All of a sudden, he sinks to his knees in front of me, and my heart gallops.

“If I only get one shot, I have to taste you,” he murmurs, those gray eyes a midnight-black now and seemingly boring into my soul. “I could come from this image alone.”

If my grandmother only knew what we were doing on her bookshelves, she might faint. Actually, no, my grandmother Lucy would probably only want to make sure that I was pleased first before my partner got his. That thought nearly has me laughing, but then Liam skates his teeth over my clit, and I almost fall to the floor, my knees buckle so hard.

“Fuck, why the hell are you so good at this?” I moan as he feasts on me, my orgasm lingering just above my head.

One would think he’s practicing oral out there rather than growing crops, he’s such an expert at this.

“Give me more than one chance and you’ll find out there is a lot I’m good at.” He says this muffled while his tongue is diving into me and his thumb presses against my clit, so I can’t respond.

My climax crashes down onto my head the moment Liam sticks two fingers inside me as he sucks my clit into his mouth, and I have to shoot out two hands to hold on to the bookshelf, or I might collapse onto his face. My legs shake as I careen with pleasure, unintelligible noises making their way out of my throat.

Slumping against the half-empty rack of books, I blow out a breath. My bones are jelly, everything below my waist still tingling with the exquisite orgasm he just delivered. All the while, he’s watching me like a hawk, *rapture* is the only way I

can describe his expression. Liam rises from his knees, one long arm hooking behind my neck, and drowns us into a kiss. His lips taste like the musk of me, and it's such a turn-on while also feeling a bit dirty in a deliciously good way.

I sink into the kiss until he's cradling me so I can lie on my back. The old shag carpet of the bookstore rustles along my spine as I spread my legs for him, and he raises an eyebrow as if to ask me if I'm sure. We don't need to have any kind of conversation; we're consenting adults who would say something if protection was needed or if this felt too rushed.

Even if I claim not to know who Liam is, I find that I trust him implicitly. What a juxtaposition, but then that would force me to examine how I really feel about this man, and right now, my brain isn't functioning properly.

Liam locks his eyes to mine as he pushes in, the slide difficult even with how wet I am from coming all over his tongue. We're both panting, as if this might not be real and will end at any moment.

"You ... I ..." He can't seem to get the words out, but I somehow know what he's trying to convey.

This moment feels like the biggest of my life, and I think he knows and feels it, too. Like in some faraway universe, a version of us exists where we do this all the time. Where we're a couple, for real, and the thump of our hearts beat in time together. Where this forbidden thing isn't something we waited twelve years for.

In some other version of this life, Liam Ashton is my soulmate, and I'm only feeling the aftershocks of it from light-years away.

When he's fully seated inside me, the stretch impossible and glorious, Liam takes my lips with his. Our mouths fuse as he moves, the way he's stroking sending me to another dimension. I grip his shoulders, my nails digging in, as sparks shoot down my spine. My toes curl into the globes of his ass, and he hisses, grabbing my chin in his big rough hand.

“I knew it,” he growls as he makes me come undone, my orgasm so close I feel I could shriek with the pleasure.

If I could speak, I’d probably tell him I knew it too. That’s how deliriously out of my mind I am.

We both did. We knew it would be like this. It’s why I’ve been running from it for so long.

Except now that we’ve played with fire, I’m prepared to be burned up in him even if I know I should put it out.

Watching Gabrielle Murphy come underneath me—because of me—is the most euphoric moment I’ve ever lived.

She’s writhing on my cock, arching up into me so that her tits are practically pressed to my nose, where I’m nuzzling the skin on her chest. I memorize the moans bursting past her lips, the trickle of sweat on her neck, and the way her legs tremble as the climax steals through her limbs. How the hand at the back of my neck latches so hard that I don’t think I’ll be able to wash off the bruise of her handprint for the next year.

This woman is the most beautiful sight I’ve ever witnessed, and I know I’ll do absolutely anything to see it again.

“Holy ...” She breathes through her nose as she comes down, her eyes drunk with a post-orgasm glow.

“That’s right. Holy. That’s what this feels like.” I growl as I pick up my pace, needing to mark her.

My cock aches to release inside her, brand her, and make her mine. I wasn’t lying when I confessed that I knew it. I knew we would be like this; I knew being with her would be perfection.

“*Liam.*” She gasps as I drill into her, and it’s my undoing.

Sealing my mouth over hers, I let my release pour into her, the sensations in my body feeling like an earthquake I don’t mind crumbling in. My limbs seize up, air doesn’t exist for a

fraction of a second, the planet stops turning. There is nothing but us, and I want to stay here forever.

Of course, I can't, and the minute I'm done coming, Gabrielle nudges me so that I fall onto my back with a thump beside her. Catching my breath is a task I'm not quite up to as we stare at the ceiling, thoughts smashing together in my brain.

The scratch of her smooth skin on the carpet grabs my attention, and I watch this gorgeous creature stretch like a satisfied cat as a smile blesses her face for a moment.

"We should talk about this." My cheek meets the floor of the bookstore as I turn to look at her.

"No, we shouldn't." She begins to rise, her naked body illuminated by the moonlight.

She looks like a siren, here to send me crashing into the rocks with her beauty. I grab her wrist before she can stand, and Gabrielle whips her head around to glare at me.

"You can't tell me it's ever been like that with anyone else. You can't tell me that didn't feel ... fucking perfect." I sound desperate. I shouldn't say any of this, but I can't care enough to stop.

It's taken me twelve years to get her here, and I'm not backing off without a fight.

"It doesn't matter." Gabrielle relents a tad because at least she's not denying it.

Doesn't mean she's going to give me an inch either, though. As she begins to pull her clothes back on, I stand stark naked, trying to force her to look at me.

"What are you scared of? It's been twelve years, Gabrielle. Most of the people who live here don't even remember you taught at the high school. There has to be a reason you came back, and you knew I'd be here, too. You knew we'd run into each other. You wouldn't allow it to happen all those years ago, but now? Why can't you try? Why can't *we* try?"

I need some kind of explanation here because I'm so tired of feeling confused and empty. Sex between us has lit something in my chest that has been burned out and dead for so long, and I need her to give me a good reason why it can't stay this way.

"The minute I stepped foot back into town, at least four people I bumped into knew me by name and asked why I was back after so many years of not teaching here." She plants a hand on her hip in nothing but the jeans she had on before.

It takes everything in me to focus, and not on the way her perky breasts are winking at me. This woman ... goddamn, she's fucking perfect. The most gorgeous thing I've ever looked at.

"Because this small town is nosy and ridiculous." I roll my eyes.

I love Hope Crest to the core of me, don't get me wrong, but it wasn't making my argument right now an easy one.

"Exactly. If anyone ever knew what we just did, they'd be all up in our business. Going back to fact check and find out if I ever taught you. Then they'd realize I did. What if someone saw us back then, huh? You made more than a couple of uninvited visits to my classroom. Then that night on the trail ... what if someone saw us?"

My arms raise involuntarily, as if my body is completely over her harping on this. "Then they would have seen two adults talking to each other. Just the same as any time I stopped by your classroom. How many times am I going to have to tell you that you didn't do a damn thing? That none of it matters now, twelve years later, because I'm a grown-ass man who wants to keep feeling whatever the hell that euphoria was."

I point to the floor where we just made each other see stars, and even in the dark, I swear I see a scarlet blush on Gabrielle's cheeks.

"We need to get out of here." She pulls her bra and shirt on, and I know I won't get any more out of her tonight.

Grabbing my clothes and jerkily putting them on, I have to actively try to decrease my heart rate. This was never the way I saw our first time going, and knowing that I won't be spending the rest of it with her cuddled in my arms is more of a disappointment than I can voice.

"Let me help you clean up or bring out those boxes you were working on." *Before I interrupted and ate you out on a bookshelf*, is what I want to add.

"No, it's late. I'm going home." Gabrielle turns on her heel and starts for the front of the store.

"I'll drive you home," I offer, but it comes out as more of a statement than a question.

"I walked earlier, and no, I don't need your assistance." She doesn't bother looking at me, her blond hair pale and ethereal in the moonlight as she reaches the front door and the bay window next to it. Grabbing whatever bag she brought with her, she heads outside.

"Then this isn't much of a discussion now, is it. I'm walking you home." No way am I letting her go alone.

She doesn't realize what's been going on here for the past two years, even if she's probably heard some of the gossip. Two of the women in my family have been attacked, and I'll be damned if I'm even going to let the possibility of that happening to Gabrielle occur.

"Liam, I'm fine. It's half a mile. I'm a smart woman, it's a small town." Her shoulders set like she's been weathering life alone forever as she locks the front door of the bookshop.

I don't know it for a fact, but if I had to guess, I'd say my assessment is accurate; this woman has spent an awfully long time answering to no one and relying on no one. My heart aches with the want to be that for her.

"And I'm a stubborn man, which means I'm not taking no for an answer." On any front, but she'll find out more about that later.

An exasperated huff leaves her lips as she whirls around. "Listen, this was ... fun. Needed, even. But it's not happening

again and I don't need a chaperone. We've talked this to death and nothing more needs to be said. It was a slipup, one I'd been avoiding, and now we got the urge out. Go home."

Gabrielle is lying so ridiculously that I tip my head back and laugh into the dark night sky. "You're being delusional."

Pro tip: never tell a woman she's being delusional. Even if she is, she'll stare you down like she's trying to scorch your organs and body parts from the inside out and then stomp away in rage.

Which is precisely what Gabrielle does. Her feet hit the pavement aggressively as she speed walks away from me.

For a good couple of minutes, I trail behind her, not bothering to run to catch up. If anyone were to look out their window at this late hour, they'd think I was following this woman home in some weird, stalker-like way. Our positions look ominous, with her racing ahead of me as if she's trying to make me lose her scent. I'm steadfast though, chugging along to make sure she gets home safe and sound.

If she won't stay with me or talk to me, the least I can do is make sure the woman who just shattered my world over my head gets back to her place without any hiccups.

As pathetic as it is, I want to spend any modicum of time in her presence, even if she's running away from me.

I give her almost the entire half-mile walk by herself, knowing she'll probably rip my head off if I push the envelope further. Only when we're in the condo development I walked her home to the other morning with her groceries do I jog to her side. We reach her grandmother's place and Gabrielle doesn't cast me a backward glance, so I gently pull on her elbow until she's facing me.

Then, without warning, I lean in and capture her lips. Shocking her seems to give me the advantage, because her mouth moves of its own accord as I slowly, but with firm pressure, deliver the final gesture.

"A woman as special as you are deserves to be kissed good night, every night." I frame her face as her eyes go wide.

I won't say it now, but I know I've surprised her speechless with those sweet words. The thing is, I'll be whoever she wants me to be; the sweet gentleman, the growly jerk, the man who worships her body.

As long as she gives me a chance, I'll turn myself into her dream guy.

Sleep has evaded me for the last two days, which is how I find myself in my grandmother's shop at five a.m. sharp.

The streets off Newton are quiet and dark, the sun not even having risen fully yet. Sweat beads my brow as I heft more books into boxes, the addresses on them ranging from charities to prisons to libraries around the country.

Grandma was nothing if not detailed in the instructions of her last will and testament; empty the shop, send the designated book collections to the places she'd already ensured delivery to, sell the building which she owned and didn't rent, then sell off her condo, and donate her belongings. The woman was very ashes to ashes; she didn't want anyone to be stuck with her responsibilities or burdens and wanted them off my plate. She just didn't realize I'd wait to clear that plate well over a year since returning to town.

My plate because she didn't designate anyone else to do this job. Even though we'd only spoken over the phone in recent years, my grandmother was very perceptive when it came to me. I think she could tell I needed a change, that I needed to address this void in my life. Maybe she even knew coming back to Hope Crest would force me into that. Either way, Grandma Lucy had very specific plans for what would become of her estate and belongings after the cancer took her, so I'm here to adhere to them.

Emptying the store was first up since I'd avoided doing that for months. I dabbled around at the theater, took long

drives and walks most days, and almost blew through my savings without touching the inheritance she left. In a way, Grandma probably knew I needed the break in my life. Or what I was calling a breakup with the life I thought I'd have.

I avoided the back corner of the shop all morning, even though the ghost of what Liam and I had done here lingered in every single nook and cranny. I swear I could hear phantom sex noises as I boxed up children's books for a special library in a hospital strictly meant for treating childhood cancer.

To say he shocked me to my core with that sweet kiss on my doorstep would be an understatement. I scurried inside and stayed awake for hours afterward, replaying the sex and his words in my mind over and over again. Liam Ashton surprises me at every turn, both now and twelve years ago.

That unexpectedness is probably what kept me away, what makes me skittish about even setting foot in his presence again. Because I'm the good girl, the one who follows all the rules and lives up to every single expectation. Women like me don't have torrid affairs and fall for inappropriate men, even if he is no longer inappropriate in society's eyes.

Being the oldest child always brings responsibilities. I was the guinea pig, the child my parents tested all of their lessons on before they went easier or harsher with my younger brother and sister the second and third time around. I was the one who got the mess-ups, the expectations, the punishments.

However, being the oldest daughter? That came with a list of shit that I am still recovering from to this day. People talk about childhood trauma like it has to be this huge event or horrible incident. In reality, some of the hardest childhood trauma to heal from is that of little patterns of behavior repeated over long periods of time.

For instance, making sure that my siblings were up, dressed, and got on the bus because my parents had to be at work before it arrived. Strapping a ten-year-old with that is a lot. That was only the tip of the iceberg, too.

I made sure Dad bought Mom Christmas presents and that she had a homemade breakfast on Mother's Day. I assigned

chores so that the house was clean when our parents got home from a rare trip alone, only to realize neither of my siblings did them, so I'd deep clean the entire house. I figured out the college financial process because my dad was too busy coaching my brother's soccer team on the weekends to fill out the forms. I drove my brother and sister to and from practices while having to do work for my advanced placement courses in the car while they played sports. I set up parties for other people because Mom was too tired to do so or expected help. That's why she had children, she'd always say.

I worked the next couple of hours until my arms ached and my head was clear of any thought but exhaustion. At least the manual labor was tiring me out, hopefully enough that I could fall into bed and take a nap without feeling the ghost of Liam's lips on my skin.

On the checkout desk, my phone vibrates. Grabbing it, I see the time is around eight a.m. and that my mother is calling. The woman doesn't even have the decency to wait until the afternoon because she probably decided I should be up and at my day since that's how she raised us.

"Hi, Mom," I answer, knowing it would be far worse to let it go to voicemail.

Then I'd get a hundred texts about missing her call, asking what I was doing and how I could be so rude to my own mother. The guilt list goes on and on.

"Gabrielle, hi. You sound tired."

Always armed with a backhanded comment.

"I'm working in the bookshop this morning. How are you?" My teeth snap together, and I'm glad I haven't had a face-to-face conversation with her in too long.

"Your father wants to know if you'll be coming home for Sarah's birthday?" Mom asks curtly, like I should be the one keeping on top of their calendars.

No answer to my question, no wondering how I am or how the town is where she'd visited my grandmother frequently before they abandoned her.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to with everything I need to do here.” Chewing on my lip until I nearly draw blood, I wait for her response.

The cluck of her tongue on the other end doesn’t bode well. “You know, we haven’t seen you in months, Gabrielle. It’d be nice if you put a family function first one of these days.”

My chin meets my chest, and I pull the phone away from my ear to let the little gust of breath out without my mom hearing it. She said those words as if they didn’t feel like taking a bullet to the chest.

How many times have I put my family first, above all others? How many times have I broken my back to go above and beyond for the simplest things for her and my father? When my siblings refused to step up and it all fell on me, or how I sacrificed my wants and needs for years to please them and show up at the drop of a hat. It’s like none of it registered or mattered to her.

Guilt is my parent’s love language, and I’ve put up with it for far too long. The distance of being in Hope Crest has made it so clear for me to see, and now I don’t want to put myself back in that situation again.

“I understand that, but I’m trying to fulfill Grandma’s wishes and I want to do them right.” I try to muster all the patience in my body.

“It’s not like your grandmother understood the role of family. And Sarah will be pretty upset if you don’t show.”

My sister Sarah and I aren’t close. As much as I hoped to be the best big sister I could be to my siblings, our parents’ constant expectations and pitting us in competition against each other left sour tastes in our mouths. By the time I left for college and felt like I could finally breathe, I’d left behind most of home and the relationships I had there, including, unfortunately, my siblings. Now that we are all adults, we live our own lives and check in rarely with a text or two.

Sarah won't miss me one iota at whatever family dinner my parents are pressuring her into.

As for the comment about my grandmother, I have to bite my tongue. Arguing will get me nowhere.

"I apologize, Mom, give everyone my best. I just know I won't be able to make it." I squeeze my fist at my side, willing myself not to make any more excuses.

I'm an adult and don't have to justify my actions to anyone, even my parent.

"That's really disappointing, Gabrielle. We expect more of you. Your family won't be around forever, your father and I won't be around forever."

There it is, the final blow. Anytime my mother feels like she isn't getting what she wants, she throws out the mortality card.

"I understand. Tell Sarah happy birthday. Goodbye, Mom."

Hanging up before she can say more is something I'll be scolded about on my next phone call, but I can't bring myself to worry about it right now.

A tear rolls down my cheek as I inhale and exhale deeply. Even though I stood my ground, the guilt and disappointment still slice through me like sharpened arrows. Shedding that perfect daughter personality has been one of the hardest things I've done to date; just because we want to overcome our trauma doesn't mean it won't haunt us around every corner.

Case in point, the fact that I couldn't let myself experience an attraction that might change my life because it went against every traditional value and moral my parents tried to hammer into me.

Denying myself something with Liam stems from those responsibilities. Those expectations that I, the eldest child, would do every single thing in my life in the right order. Go to college, get good grades, graduate with honors, meet a solid choice for a partner, date for a while, only move in together after we get engaged, get married, buy a house, and have children. Raise those children under the same guidelines.

My parents are traditional; they followed the exact same timeline. Throughout the years, my mother was constantly pressuring me to stick to that laid-out plan. I don't even want to get into how disappointed she is that I am still single and childless. That's less than ideal for the girl who always tried to live up to those standards.

Falling for one of my students? That would have been an abomination in her mind. Doing long distance with someone three years younger than me? My father would have made mention of it every time we spoke. Back then, there was no world in which I could have fathomed starting something with Liam after he graduated, even when we'd done nothing wrong while I was his teacher.

Even now, it feels like a betrayal of the values my parents tried so hard to stick me with. Dating someone who used to attend the school I taught at? Getting into a hookup situation at thirty-five with a man I'm not sure even wants a family or the things my parents preached about? Moving to his small town to stay with him when my parents expected to have the kind of family who stayed close even if they couldn't stand each other?

Rationally, I know I'm making up excuses. I know that I disappointed their expectations a long time ago. I also know that my parents are human, that they are wrong a lot, and don't deserve the pedestal I put them on. At the same time, though, I can't let go of the girl inside me who just wants to please them. Because I'm human too.

Letting go of those ridiculous notions is also terrifying because once there is nothing more holding me back from giving in to the undeniable chemistry Liam and I have ...

I'm so scared I'll fall head over heels for that brooding, rough man. He could be the key to getting everything I ever wanted, but I simply can't get past the mental block to allow that to happen.

Hope Pizza is buzzing with the midday lunch crowd, Monday being our two for one slice day that attracts nearly every employee and worker in a twenty-mile radius.

Because who doesn't want a free slice of pizza to start the week?

Chatter hits my ears as I push through the front door with a crate of sauce jars in my hands. Mom stands at the takeout counter talking to two of her best friends from high school, nearly fifty years of friendship between them. I whistle through my teeth to get her attention, then blow her a kiss. I hear Mrs. Hankins, the blonde best friend who once pulled eight cactus thorns out of my arm after her son and I got into trouble on her property, tell my mother that I'm one of the good ones.

If only they knew.

Not that I am particularly bad, and I am one hell of a mama's boy, but if any of those women suspected I tried to seduce my high school teacher when I was a student, they'd keel over. Not to mention that I made her see stars in the stacks of her grandmother's closed-down bookshop, which most of them probably frequented for paperbacks when it was still open.

Fuck, I can't stop thinking about Gabrielle, even when the situation has zero to do with her. The feel of her skin and the sound of her noises haunt me days later, even though she's

avoided being seen in town since we slept together. I know because I've walked out of the way to pass her condo and the bookshop most every day, and there has been no sign of her.

Shit, I'm turning into a man possessed—either that or a creepy stalker.

The smell of something sweet hits my nose as I burst through the kitchen, another whirl of noise hitting my ears but one more pleasing than all the conversation out in the dining room. If I have to be out in public, I prefer to be relegated to the kitchen so I can knead dough or mix sauce without having to talk to the residents of my hometown.

“What're you making?” I kiss Nonna on the cheek as I pass her, dropping the crate of new sauces on the kitchen butcher block counter.

“Tiramisu,” she answers, turning on the industrial mixer Dad bought her years ago.

My grandmother doesn't stay out of the kitchen for long. Not since her husband and my greatest confidant passed. I suppose going home only reminds her of who and what is no longer there.

I cringe and stick out my tongue. “Gross.”

“Are these the arrabbiata I requested?” Evan interrupts us as he pushes through the dining room doors and raps a knuckle on the sauce jars.

I nod. “Yes, your highness. Just as you requested. Extra spicy.”

He rubs his hands together and grabs an apron off a hook. “Good, I've had this spicy fish pasta on my mind for a week waiting for these and I need to make it to see if I want it on tonight's menu.”

When Evan gets a dish idea, he doesn't rest until it's made and perfected. The guy is a hair-brained culinary genius.

“Because I'm making his least favorite dessert,” Nonna chimes in.

Evan chuckles. “I don’t understand how you don’t like tiramisu, it’s fucking delicious. Especially Nonna’s.”

“Watch your mouth, but thank you,” my grandmother scolds him.

“I like alcohol, and I like dessert. I don’t, however, like them together.” I shrug because this is my one sticking point on the food we serve at Hope Pizza.

“Your Nonno would be rolling in his grave.” Nonna makes the sign of the cross and chuckles.

“He always tried to shove that cake down Liam’s throat and it made it worth getting a purple nurple after laughing at it.” Evan’s eyes mock me.

“You were and are a little shit.” I point my finger at him, but there’s no heat behind my words.

My little brother and I definitely have the most animosity between us, the kind that is normal with siblings. But where Patrick and Alana understand me, were similar in that they never really left Hope Crest, Evan and I couldn’t be more different if we tried. We’re eight years apart, have completely opposite personalities, and have never bonded much with the age difference. I have a friendship with my other siblings, whereas Evan was too little when I first graduated and tried out college, and then he was caught up in the culinary world for the last seven years and not even living in our hometown.

While we clearly love each other, it’s a weird dynamic trying to see how we fit into each other’s lives. Especially since Dad hasn’t named a new owner for the restaurant. I know my siblings don’t really want the title and it will probably fall to me out of default of being the oldest. But then Evan came home to take his head chef spot, and it seems like he wants to be the successor. Which doesn’t sit right with me.

On the one hand, I want to own and run this place about as much as I want to electrocute myself. It’s a headache, a hassle, and I’d have to spend nearly all my time indoors. I don’t like to schmooze people or work with a staff, and I’m not nearly as skilled a chef as Dad or Evan.

But on the other hand, I am the eldest. This restaurant is my lifeblood; it's supposed to fall to me to keep it running and successful. I'm supposed to helm it one day, to take on the responsibilities my father and his father-in-law had before him. A tiny part of me, the egotistical prick who can't stand losing to his little brother, is too prideful to admit that Evan would be the better choice.

Maybe it's how he took confident command the day he returned to town. Evan returned from the West Coast like the prodigal son, ready to take control of the ship and turn the journey into a more amazing feat than anyone had before. He revamped the menu, changed our techniques, implemented new processes, and overall left his mark on the kitchen in a mere year of being the head chef. Evan did something I could never seem to do because I didn't have the passion.

My passion is out on the farm, in the fields, and everyone knows it. Yes, I am content and happy with my everyday job, but a small part of me wants to be the heir Mom and Dad planned on the day they first had me. Giving that up, or coming to terms with it, has proved difficult.

"Eh, yeah, but you guys like me like that. Get one of those sauces on the stove for me?" Evan bats his eyelashes like he's some damsel in distress rather than a chef with an ego the size of Texas.

"Cook it yourself, I know Dad came in and did lunch." There's no secret when I see Dad's famous method of spreading cheese as evidence on all the pizzas going out of the kitchen.

Evan's dough is also thinner, and he uses basil on all his crusts. Dad might think we all don't realize he's still sneaking into the kitchen half the days of the week, and no one will say a thing, but we're not morons.

"Don't tell him you know. I let him do Mondays because the regulars love his margherita and salami pies." My brother uncaps one of the jars and inhales the scent deeply.

"And so you get to fuck around with recipes like you used to with muddies in Mom's garden." I raise my eyebrows

because he is not the saint he labels himself to be.

Evan shrugs. “You caught me. Patrick wanted to see you before you left.”

Grumbling, I head for the back suite of offices behind the kitchen. My brother Patrick is the accountant and bookkeeper for the entire operation, while Alana handles the marketing when she isn’t at her new local goods shop down the street. Together, they’re a dynamo that keeps this place relevant and operational.

I want to get back to the farm as soon as possible. I have more tomatoes to harvest and need to check on the onions that look to be coming in, but if Patrick needs me, I won’t sulk off without seeing him.

“What is this, an ambush?”

I don’t like surprises, and when I find my brother and sister in his office with looks on their faces like I’m about to be ganged up on, my scowl causes even deeper frown lines than normal.

Alana is sitting on Patty’s desk, assessing me with some look I can’t read. It would be unwise not to be scared of my little sister; I don’t know how Warren, her husband and our childhood best friend, puts up with her. Probably because he melts like a puppy wherever she is concerned.

“Dad said you told him there was some kind of tampering in the fields?” Patrick starts, a grave expression on his face.

If there is one thing about my younger brother, it’s that he is the serious one of the bunch. I might be the growly, intimidating one, but Patrick is the intellectual, committed sibling of all of us. He wants to get to the facts, suss out a situation, and come up with a solution.

“He didn’t need to go tattling to you two. It’s just an animal or something. Four half-rows of tomatoes were messed up, it won’t affect our harvest too much. With the extra land from the sale of Cassandra’s property, we have more than enough to keep the restaurant and the sauce business comfortable.”

“That’s not why I’m bringing this up and you know it.” My brother’s tone edges on paranoid.

“We’ve just had too many coincidental incidents in the past two years to take things lightly.” Alana is more reassuring and a little more grounded.

“Calm down, it’s probably just an animal.” But even I’m not sure if I dig deep.

“Did you check the security footage?” he questions.

Fuck. I meant to, but then ...

Gabrielle.

This is why I don’t get involved with anyone, but she is too tempting. It had been twelve years coming. We’re not even anything to each other. The woman actively wants to forget I exist, and I am already dropping too many balls.

“I forgot.” The monosyllabic answer doesn’t give away that I didn’t remember to call my security company because I was too busy fucking Gabrielle Murphy and then thinking of nothing but her for days after.

“You forgot? About something that has to do with the farm? I’m sorry, are you ill?” Alana presses a hand to my forehead and I shake it off in annoyance.

“I’ve just been busy, is all. I’ll get to it today. They were probably in a blind spot anyway, so I’ll call to put in a camera there.”

Patrick blows out a frustrated breath. “You have to keep on top of this stuff, Liam. With everything we’ve gone through ...”

His wife and baby are at home, and he is just spooked. That’s how I can let go of him accusing me of not holding up my responsibilities to our family and business. That doesn’t mean my fists don’t tighten with pissed-off energy.

“I get it, okay? I’ll do it today. Anything else you need to dole out to me, boss, or can I go?” I hate being spoken to like a child, especially by my younger siblings.

Alana gives me a sympathetic smile. “We’re just being cautious, you know that.”

“I do.” I nod, itching to get back outside and away from the bustle of our little downtown.

It’s like my body craves solitude and the air of the fields. Once Patrick relents, I hug my sister and hop back in my truck, speeding for the farm.

I needed to focus on what I can control and let go of the things I can’t.

Or else the yearning for things I can’t have will consume me once more.

The first time I knew I was truly in trouble when it came to Liam was around Thanksgiving time of his senior year. His football schedule was over, and I guess that meant he had more free time on his hands.

After feeling his eyes on me for months, after his lingering gaze tracked me wherever I went down the halls of the school, after a few attempts he'd made to stay after class and small talk, it all came to a head.

I walked into my classroom on a Friday afternoon and found a single daffodil laying on my desk.

The yellow flower, even in its lonely state, smells so much like spring that I ache for warmer weather. It's just sitting there among the books and papers on my desk; the classroom lights off at the end of the school day.

Picking it up, I press it to my nose, wondering who put it here.

"That's the flower of March birthdays."

A deep voice comes from the door of my classroom. I nearly jump out of my skin, because there is Liam Ashton in his jeans and the green sweater he'd worn in my class today.

"How did you—"

I was about to ask how he knew my birthday was in March but cut myself off because that wasn't at all what I should say.

“This is a nice gesture, but no thank you.” I say it solidly with my whole chest, holding the flower out to him so he can take it back.

“I got it for you, you should keep it.” His eyes are so earnest, and I know he thinks this isn’t anything more than the flirting he does with his peers.

Except it’s so much more dangerous than that.

“Liam, you are a student. My student. Any kind of talk like this is inappropriate.”

“You’re only three years older than I am,” he says defiantly, as if that makes anything okay.

“That doesn’t matter. I can’t accept this, and please stop making attempts like this. I could lose my job, or worse, even if I’m discouraging every instance.”

The real fear of being labeled something I’d never be or do is real and palpable. My teaching career is of the utmost importance, and I’ll lose that if anyone walks by this classroom right now. Not to mention, it’s morally unsound to even entertain a student in a conversation like this for the mere three minutes Liam and I talked about it.

“As if I’d tell anyone or let them get the wrong idea if they found out.”

He’s talking as if we’ve already committed some sin, as if I’m a willing participant in whatever this is.

“No. Stop it now. I’m not asking you to do anything like that, I’m not asking for ... I am not allowing this. If I need to have you transferred from my class, I will. Please don’t make gestures like this again. It is inappropriate and unwanted.”

Something unreadable glimmers across Liam’s face, and he turns on his heel. What he doesn’t do is agree with me, and that only serves to cause seismic panic waves to reverberate through my chest.

After that encounter, I kept my distance. I made sure never to be near Liam outside of the one class I taught him in. I went through painstaking effort to ensure I wasn't alone after school hours. I discouraged any kind of look he gave me, cutting off any attempt.

It wasn't as if he was dangerous or too forward with his attention, but I had to fight the chemistry so hard when it came to him. There was no denying it existed, yet I wanted to ignore it to the best of my ability.

Now, twelve years later, we're still doing the same thing.

A summer Friday night in Hope Crest is punctuated by teens walking the streets in hordes, dripping ice cream in hand while they cause innocent ruckus, older couples sitting on benches sipping teas or taking in the sights with contented smiles on their faces, and families going out to eat or running about in the park.

Warm bursts of wind and fireflies dot the air, and the scent of the fries coming from the street side takeout window at the diner is all too tempting as I turn the corner on Newton Street.

I spent the day going through Grandma's rare book collection in the shop. She left me the number of a collector and a museum curator, both of whom I called to come assess the editions she'd held in her possession. The curator had stopped by this morning and taken a look at the books, all peeling covers and cracking spines, and gave me her assessment of what they might like to include in their collection.

I'm not looking for money for them, I simply want them to go to the places they belong and will be cherished. My grandmother worked hard to put together a first-edition collection that made her happy and proud, and I simply want to continue that legacy.

After so long in the dusty shop though, I need to get out. Maybe grab a cocktail or dinner at one of the bar tops on the main drag. I have a few friends here that I could call, but no one who I want to bother. That's my life, summed up; I have people close enough to hang out with, but no one who I think

might show up for me if I really need it. I live my life like a recluse, trying to keep as quiet as possible until someone notices and wants to chat with me.

As it usually is lately, Cass is at home with a newborn. I brought over a basket of muffins to her and Patrick just days ago and had to actively stop myself from telling her I slept with her brother-in-law. Then there is Alana, Liam's sister, who is nice enough but intimidatingly friendly in her approach. Wilson, my boss and friend at the playhouse, is probably out somewhere here having a grand old time, but I'm just not in the mood.

It's late, I'm hungry, and then I just want to crash on the couch with some reality TV show that will take me out of my own head.

The Laura Inn is a good option, but it's the Ashton hangout spot, and I'm trying my hardest not to come into contact with Liam. The man shattered my expectations for what sex would be like with anyone else, and I'm still smarting from how arrogant and growly he'd be if he knew that.

I don't feel like diner food, so I set my sights on Leo's, a wine bar I've heard has good small plates and a flight of whites that I could hear calling my name. My feet point in that direction, the people watching a good distraction as I walk the two blocks to the restaurant.

As I ask for a seat at the bar, I notice a guitar player strumming in the corner. She sings some lines of a James Taylor song, which calms my soul. Congratulating myself for picking wisely because this music plus some good wine is the medicine I need tonight, I open the menu and scan the options.

My foot taps in time with the slow sound of the summer song as I place my order, a flight of whites with a plate of lobster gnocchi and some mango shrimp tacos. I'm walking home, so no need to limit myself. Plus, it's been so long since I've been out on a date, I can treat myself like I'm the most sought-after woman in the room.

The crowd in here is sensual and lively; a lot of couples talking close over tables or groups by the guitar player

nodding along with glasses of bourbon in their hand.

A pair of molten black eyes catch mine across the room, and my heart gallops in my chest. Why the hell does he have to be here? I've avoided him for over a week, and as far as I know, he rarely comes to Leo's.

Yet here Liam Ashton is, sipping amber liquid from a tumbler in the dark corner, his eyes scouring every part of me as we acknowledge each other. He's clad in all black, the color of his clothes matching his eyes, only his wavy chestnut hair setting his ensemble apart from the cloud he's shrouded himself in.

I'm not sure if he's alone, but with the way he won't stop undressing me from across this restaurant, I turn around and will myself not to find out.

The only thing worse than seeing him here while trying to forget that we ever had sex would be seeing him here with a date while I try to pretend we never had sex. Earth-shattering sex. Could-get-myself-off-just-thinking-about-it sex.

The bartender sets my four wineglasses in front of me and instructs as to which each is while pointing to the glasses, but I barely hear him. I gulp the first two in one drink; the wetness sliding down my dry throat as if I were parched for years. The waitress sets my food down soon after, and I begin eating as consumedly as I can.

I put my all into the food, trying to act as if it's the only thing on the planet I'm interested in. In reality, I barely taste it. All I can feel at this moment, from the top of my scalp to the tips of my toes, is this burning, tangible thing between me and the grumpy, lethal man across the room.

Damn him for ruining my me-date.

"Can I close my tab out, Will?" a gruff voice tickles my ear, and I refuse to look back.

Liam is standing so close to me, I can feel the heat of his body on my shoulder. If I shift back even slightly, our bodies will connect. As it is, I'm squirming, the need for friction between my legs like a symptom of him being in my vicinity.

I both hate and crave this at the same time, and I guess this is what they call lust. Real lust is the kind you can't extinguish, even if you want to. Real lust makes sane people do irrational things.

"Sure thing." The bartender fist-bumps the man behind me, and I know they probably grew up together.

"How is your dinner?" Liam's voice comes again, but I know it's pointed at me.

I clear my throat, looking down at my half-eaten plate and last glass of wine standing. "Delicious."

"Eating alone?" he asks, even though he can tell I am.

"Mm-hmm." I refuse to ask him the same question.

The bartender brings his bill, and I take it as my chance to escape to the bathroom. Perhaps he'll be long gone by the time I get back.

Taking my time in the bathroom, I splash cold water on my neck and examine my reflection. Jesus, I look sex-mussed and the man hasn't even touched me. The wine put a flush in my cheeks, and I know there is wetness in my underwear that has nothing to do with having to pee.

When I feel enough time has passed, I exit the restroom. Only to nearly collide with a broad chest waiting in the hallway at the back of Leo's.

"I paid your tab," Liam tells me, muscular arms folded over his chest as he leans against the wall sexily.

"Why would you do that?" I nearly stutter, caught off guard by his presence.

That's when I notice my purse is hanging off the end of his fingers, and I grab it.

"I've been trying to talk to you for nearly ten days now, and you won't let me pin you down."

The innuendo causes a firestorm in the bottom of my belly.

"There is nothing to talk about." Jutting my chin up, I sound like an insolent child. "If you'll excuse me, I have to get

back to my dinner.”

“Stop it, Gabrielle. We both know you were trying not to eye fuck me across the room, and I sure as hell wasn’t trying to hide that I was doing so.”

His earnest, outright statements always catch me off guard. “You’re too bold, anyone ever tell you that?”

“No. Because I’m not, not with anyone but you. Not with anyone I don’t long to touch like I might shrivel up if I don’t get the chance again.”

A breath guffaws out of me because the way he talks renders me speechless.

“I have to go.”

Rough fingers skim my elbow. “Like hell you do.”

“Not here,” I snap back at him, annoyed that he always knows how to push my buttons.

I’m not an easily riled person, yet at every turn, Liam Ashton seems to prick under my skin like a stubborn thorn.

As if to demonstrate how much of a thorn, Liam follows me out of the bar and into the parking lot.

I can feel his footsteps behind me as I walk the sidewalk around the building, two options presented to me. I can chance walking to my condo, hoping he won’t follow. Or I can walk around to the parking lot, where no doubt his truck is parked, and we could ...

God, this man drives me batshit crazy. He’s more than ten feet back from me, and I swear I can still smell the dirt, sandalwood, and whiskey on him. His signature scent is enticing, a little dirty, more than raw. The attraction and chemistry that pulls us together like magnets makes my stomach twist in on itself and has me wanting to do stupid, *stupid* things.

“What do you want from me?” I turn around, throwing my hands up in exasperation.

Without knowing it, Liam Ashton is my mirror. Never having spoken about important things, refusing to give in to this chemistry for twelve years, spurning his advances, avoiding him since I got to town.

None of it has done any good. I still stare at him and see everything I could have while being terrified at the same time.

The arrogant asshole raises an eyebrow, as if to say I should know exactly what he wants from me. It's not the tearing at each other's clothes forbidden sex that I picture. No, this man wants a conversation. A chance.

And I'm too scared to give it to him. Which is why I lunge across the parking lot and take his mouth with mine. Maybe having some of that earth-shattering sex will distract him from what he really wants to get out of me. More confessions.

Our tongues tangle as his teeth scrape across my bottom lip, and Liam and I let out sighs of relief like we've been in pain the entire time we've been apart. Like this right here is our natural state, and we're comfortable drowning in it.

My hands fist his shirt as his hands skate up the column of my neck, turning my head where he wants it so he can plunge the kiss deeper. The pressure around my throat turns me on something fierce, and I realize I've never had a man do this.

In all honesty, even at thirty-five years old, my sex life has never come close to being incredible. I've had partners, men who thought they had skill or at least some who tried, but that spark was just never there. Even with boyfriends.

I'm alarmed to admit why. Saying it out loud would make the last twelve years seem like an idiotic mistake.

"Get in the car if you don't want anyone to see us," he instructs, his hand still around my throat.

It's so erotic, such a test of power dynamics, that I'm nearly trembling. That's what this man does to me. Me, a self-proclaimed independent woman who wouldn't give in to this man for twelve years, who refused to think of him, and yet here he is, nearly bringing me to my knees.

I hop into the cab of his pickup, and my ass hits the bench seat in the back. His windows are nearly blacked out, thank God, or someone on Newton Street was about to get the show of their life. My head spins so hard with lust, it's hard to care.

"Hurry," I tell him, pulling at my clothes as quickly as I'm pulling at his.

We're a rush of hands and lips in the dark, a secret I don't want anyone to find out about while he's trying to lead us into the light for everyone to see.

"Patience, beautiful." He chuckles against my skin, branding me with a smile he rarely shows to anyone.

I wiggle out of my shorts as he shoves his jeans to his ankles, then position myself over the cock waving like a proud, enormous staff between us.

Liam hooks two fingers up inside me, curling them to a spot that makes me slump into his chest with zero shame. I mewl as he works me over, rolling my clit with his thumb as his other hand brushes down my back. Lazily, as much as my brain can function to do so, I use both hands to gently stroke him.

When my nail meets the head of his cock, he hisses, and I know I need him inside me.

"Need you now," I mumble as we rid ourselves of the last stitches of clothing between us.

Anyone walking past his truck in the parking lot of Leo's could probably figure out, or even see, what we're doing. I'm not exactly quiet as I slide down onto his length and nearly scream at the size of him and how fucking incredible he feels. Liam himself lets out a growl to rival a black bear.

But I can't care. Not when I'm pumping up and down on his steel-hard dick, his hands roaming my body as I take us to the brink of losing our minds.

I press my hand to the roof of the car, riding him like he's my favorite sex toy.

“Fuck, you’re the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.” Liam grips my hip, sheathing me on his cock over and over again.

It’s like we’re both attempting to drive each other insane. Sex has never been out of this world before because it wasn’t with him. That’s what I’m scared to admit. I’ve never felt this deep a connection, and I barely know this man on a factual level. But it’s more of a soul thing, something I didn’t dare to believe in for most of my life.

I was one of those women who laughed at things like astrology charts and soulmates. Thinking that someone was made for me since both of us came into this world was a foreign concept I couldn’t comprehend. Rolling my eyes at lovey-dovey couples who swore that fate set them up was old hat for me.

Until now. Until I met him. Until I realized that maybe everything I thought had been wrong.

Right here? This proves it. In the back of this dark pickup, with him, is the most I’ve ever felt like me. Like I wasn’t complete until he made me so.

And when we come together, our climaxes shaking our bodies as he inhales into my chest pressed to his face, I realize I will never be the same again.

Birds tweet in the trees outside my office window, and I wish I could be out there with them rather than in here stuck at a desk.

Not being with my plants, outside, or working with my hands, drives me crazy. I'm not meant for a cubicle or a chair with an adjustable back. Yet I promised Patrick I'd look over the security footage, and after yet another distraction last night with Gabrielle, I knew I had to whip myself back into shape.

Especially because the woman hopped out of my cab like her very fine ass was on fire as soon as I pulled up to the curb of her grandmother's condo.

Shaking it off as I down the last cold dregs of my coffee, I set to work and put the beautiful, infuriating blonde out of my head.

I go into the system I employ for security purposes and pull up the various cameras I installed on the property. Knowing the timeline helps; it had to be before we were harvesting that day, obviously, but no more than two days prior because when I'd been out there doing grow checks, all the rows had been completely fine.

That area of the property does have a bit of a blind spot, so I was reluctant to say I'd catch anything, but I started to sift through the hours of footage on a sped-up loop.

On the first day in question, I think something could have been tampered with, there is absolutely nothing. Nothing but

the wind in the trees as they sway in fast forward. Not even a hawk, which are frequent on our property.

During the second day, I'm still seeing nothing. The morning passes like every other on the numerous cameras, and I idly wonder how cool it would be to put up a time-lapse video on the Hope Pizza social channels of watching the food we use in the restaurant grow. Alana would shit herself if she knew I was thinking in social media marketing strategies.

As I wonder how badly my sister would laugh at me for bringing that up, I see a blip on the screen. Nothing more than a minute or two at the speed I have the video going, but it's there. Straightening, I pause the screen and go back, setting the speed at a normal one.

“*Fuck ...*”

Because there it is. A chunk of five minutes where the camera closest to the rows of ruined plants goes black. Suspicion, fear, and fury creep up my neck in a poisonous trio, making me look around my office like the culprit might be standing right here with me. Then, on the five-minute mark of it going down, it comes back up like nothing ever happened. You can barely make out the damage; the rows too far from the camera.

But they would have been close enough to pick up on some animal, or *someone*, prowling about in that section.

I need to get a handle on this. Call the cops or a PI like my family had in previous situations. This isn't the first time someone has come into our lives with bad motives, and it's not the first time we've found someone trying to steal our plants or our recipes. Hope Pizza is a revered East Coast establishment; we've been written about in the biggest food and wine magazines around the country. Internationally, even. It makes sense that others try to copy our success, but it always baffles me when people try to go to lengths such as these to try to replicate it.

Something else sticks under my skin like a dirty sludge, though. And that is guilt. Because I've gone nearly two weeks without checking these tapes, too preoccupied with following

Gabrielle around town like a desperate little puppy. Each night this week, I frequented bars downtown that I didn't normally drink at to see if she'd come in because she was avoiding my regular joints.

Then, *bam*, my plan actually worked out. I got to be with her again, even if just for a short, intense time. Until she barely let me drive her home, and we discussed nothing that had been on my mind.

I'm failing all around; I can't keep it together with Gabrielle, and now I can't even protect the farm. I need to get fucking serious, and there is one person who knows the connections I need.

The drive to Cass and Patrick's house is about ten minutes from the Ashton family property, considering they bought a big old farmhouse on the side of Newton Street. With its weeping willows and the new baby swing hanging from one of the branches, their house looks like something out of a perfect storybook.

Letting myself in, I hear the din of the TV and make sure not to trip over the diaper bag spilling into the front hallway.

"Hey," I whisper as I walk into Cass and Patrick's living room.

My baby niece, Rebecca, is asleep on Cassandra's chest, and Cass herself looks close to snoozing out.

"Hey." She smiles, looking tired but radiant.

Having kids was always in Patrick's future, I know that about my brother. He wanted the white picket fence, the perfect family, kind of what he thought our parents represent. I'm happy he finally got it after some strikeouts, even if the little zing of jealousy at walking into a room full of baby toys and framed family pictures stings me a bit.

"How's she doing?" I ask, sitting next to my sister-in-law and admiring my niece.

Rebecca is probably the most gorgeous baby I've ever seen, with a head of strawberry-blond hair just like her mother and big blue eyes. Her skin looks like a doll's, all porcelain

and unblemished. And she has us all wrapped around her finger. Never in my life had I changed a poopy diaper, but my niece giggled through the whole thing and so hell yeah, I'm volunteering for shit duty.

"Good, just cranky from a little upset stomach this week. She's contact napping like a champ though, and I hate putting her down even though I probably *should*."

"What you *should* do is whatever you feel like doing. This angel deserves to be cuddled all day." I coo at the baby even though she's asleep.

"I knew you'd be the softy uncle." Cass smirks.

"Can I get you anything?" I ask, surveying the island she's set up for herself.

Blankets, baby bottles, a huge thermos of water for herself, the remote, her cell phone, a magazine, and even a bowl of pretzels; the woman could single-handedly rule the world.

"I'm good. You just stopping by or can we have adult talk time? I need some actual human reconnaissance from the outside world."

I chuckle. "I'm not here to gossip, but I do need your help."

Her free hand slaps onto my arm. "Anything. *Anything*. I love this angel to death but give me an actual task that will stray my day from spit up and animal flash cards."

"I was wondering if you could hook me up with that intensive security company you hired after the break-in at your dad's place," I tell her.

It kills me to bring up the attack, even though I know she and Patrick have come to terms with it as best as possible. But this is necessary. I need the extra oomph that a high-tech, celebrity client serving, intensive security company can provide. Cass still has a lot of connections to rich and powerful people that a lot of normal folks can't access, and I know she'll, of course, do whatever I ask of her. Still, I hate having to bring it up.

“Of course, why?” Alarm laces her voice.

I hold up a hand as if trying to calm her with my body language. “It could be nothing, could just be my system isn’t up to date or a little whacked. Could be something. I’m not sure. That’s why I want the added measures. And your richy-rich connections can help out in that area. We had some rows of tomato plants destroyed.”

I can’t bring myself to tell her about the blacked-out security camera, because I can’t put that on her right now.

“What? Why hasn’t anyone told me about this?” She sits up, jostling Rebecca, who lets out a soft whine.

Cass pats the baby’s butt firmly and lulls her right back to sleep.

“Because we didn’t want to worry anyone. Everyone around here gets a little spooked whenever something seems a little out of the ordinary.”

“Can you blame us?” She does seem to take a calming breath, though.

“I guess I can’t. But I just want to talk to the company, have them come out and survey the property, give me their cost estimates and install it. We should upgrade the system anyway.”

“You got it, consider it done.” Cass nods, reaching for her gigantic water bottle and taking a gulp.

“Now, how are things going with Gabrielle?” she asks.

Cass never lets this slide, not since she found out or, most likely, was told by Patrick that I had a crush on my high school teacher. Since she and Gabrielle are now close from working at the playhouse together, she likes to think she’s playing Cupid. If that were the case, the aim of her arrow sucks because her friend can’t get away from me fast enough.

“Who said there’s a ‘things’ to be going?” I’m being evasive and annoying, but I don’t usually talk about my personal life with my family.

“Because I strapped this little minion to my chest and went to the theater the other day for the kid’s improv class. When I asked Gabrielle what she’s been up to, her face went bright red. I knew that meant you two had been fooling around.”

My mouth hangs open. “Are you psychic, woman?”

“If I was, I wish I could use my brain power to get this kid to sleep through the night. But no, I’m just a very astute woman who knows that you’ve been traipsing after her since she got back to town. And it looks like you’ve finally worn her down, congratulations.”

“Not quite,” I mutter, though I should have kept my mouth shut.

“Uh-oh, tell me what’s up? Lay your relationship problems on me. They’re probably much sexier than whatever is going on in my bedroom right now.”

I shudder. “Cass, you’re married to my brother, remember?”

“Eh.” She shrugs. “Tell me what’s going on.”

For a second, I weigh whether I should open up, but knowing I’m torturing myself every day with what to do, I just go for it.

“Well, things have made headway on the ... physical front.”

Cass interrupts me with a sassy wiggle of her eyebrows.

“But she doesn’t want to hear anything I have to say. Obviously, you know what kind of went on; we had this undeniable thing between us back when she was my teacher. She rebuffed me every time I tried to even talk about it, wouldn’t engage with me at all, and she’s standup for that. Because I was probably persistent as fuck. Nothing happened, Gabrielle was professional through and through. But we’re only three years apart. I hoped she’d see reason after I graduated, after nothing stood in our way. But she took off, and now ...”

“She’s back and still won’t hear you out?” Cass fills in the blanks.

Nodding, I gulp down the hurt. “It’s twelve years later, she isn’t even teaching anymore, and still it’s like she thinks something between us would be inappropriate. It’s ridiculous. And she knows this doesn’t ... fuck. It’s like with you and Patrick, you just knew, right?”

Cass smiles fondly. “Even when I wished I didn’t know, it was always him.”

“That’s how I’ve felt from the very first moment I walked into her classroom.” I drop my eyes to my lap.

It’s the first time I’ve ever admitted that to anyone besides Gabrielle, and it feels shameful but also like a weight has been lifted.

“*Liam.*” Cass almost gasps. “I didn’t realize this was ... you feel in love with her at first sight, didn’t you?”

I nod, feeling so vulnerable at this moment.

My sister-in-law wears an empathetic expression and strokes her hand over the back of the baby’s head.

“When she left, I couldn’t see the point of taking up with anyone else. In twelve years, I’ve never come close to feeling what I do for Gabrielle, and we hadn’t even kissed back then. It was just this bone-deep feeling, you know?”

“Lucky for you, I do. Some people might call that crazy, but I felt it with your brother. So I know. You can’t turn it off, as much as you want to try.”

“So what do I do if she won’t even listen to me long enough to explain that, much less give me one shot?” My lips turn down in a pout, because I feel defeated at this point.

Cass purses her lips and tilts her eyes to the ceiling like she’s thinking. When she’s done, she levels me with a stare.

“Now, I’m only telling you this because I think you two would be spectacularly beautiful together and happy as clams once she gives in and if you don’t mess it up. But don’t think I’m going to be your source of inside info moving forward.”

“Okay?” Why do I feel like she’s about to make me pinky promise or something?

Cass nods like she’s satisfied with my answer. “Gabrielle has told me a little bit about her family and her life back in Charlotte. Essentially, it sounds like her parents put a lot of pressure on her to be the perfect daughter. And sure, we all get hit with that, but Gabrielle sounds like she’s lived every moment of her life inside the lines. Walking the straight and narrow. Never straying from her parent’s plans or saying no to them. She gets guilted majorly on a daily basis even now, as a thirty-five-year-old woman. In my opinion, she holds herself to this impossible standard and won’t let go of it for fear of getting hurt. So, even if it’s twelve years later, she still views any potential relationship between you as something so out of the moral realm her parents have instilled in her.”

Listening to her words turns a lightbulb on in my brain, one I didn’t know needed to light up for the picture to become clearer.

“So, giving me any kind of shot would just be wrong, in her parents’ eyes. They’d want to know when and how we met, and would shame her for even entertaining a relationship with me, even now?” Disgust laces my tone. “Some loving family.”

Cass gives me a sad smile. “Unfortunately, Liam, not everyone is a part of a family as loving and accepting as the Ashtons. But maybe you can use your knowledge and understanding of how a family should let you live your own individual life to get through to Gabrielle.”

If I weren’t already sitting, my sister-in-law’s words would have knocked me on my ass. I’ve been pushing Gabrielle so hard, trying to scale her walls and break down her defenses, when I need to really look at how different we are. Just because we have this chemistry, this tangible attraction, doesn’t mean we view it the same on a fundamental level.

Making her see things from my side might slowly show her that not everyone acts like her parents do. Maybe then, we can have that shot I’ve been dreaming of.

“All right, work on that comedic timing for next week, study the scenes provided and then Cass gave you some movies to check out that you might not have watched,” I inform the mid-twenties improv class in front of me as they all begin to collect their bags.

This is one of my favorite classes to teach at the theater because these amateur actors have no expectations that they’ll be famous. This is a hilariously fun and enjoyable Wednesday night hobby for them. The scenes can get raunchy, and most of these people are genuinely funny.

Cass usually comes up with source material for our classes to study, which movies or shows that she thinks demonstrate what we’re trying to explore in terms of acting. People sign up for the classes here to have some fun but to also perfect a craft. Even if they aren’t going to be on the world’s stage, there is something satisfying about pursuing a passion.

“Thanks, Gabrielle.” One of my improv students waves on the way out, and I’m left alone in the smaller theater at the playhouse.

Being here and working here has brought a sense of calm that can’t be replicated. Drama club was one of the only things I got to do for me growing up, and it was only available when I was acing classes and taking on a thousand extra-curriculars at the behest of my parents. But I did it all so that I had a chance to sing and dance and act. Something about the theater

made me feel wholly like myself, something that didn't happen often in any other place.

The first time I returned to Hope Crest, I worked at the high school as not only a teacher but a drama club advisor as well. The one year I'd been able to work with students had reignited my love for the theater, and I knew I'd have to get more involved in the future. Of course, that time was cut short. But the moment I realized I'd be coming back and would need something other than cleaning out the bookshop to occupy my time, I looked into jobs at the playhouse.

Wilson took me on that first day, right there in the interview, and I've been working with the seminars, amateur productions, and improv classes since. Anywhere he needs me, I'm willing and able to lend a hand.

Something about this rustic, enormous building that looks like a quaint barn on the outside calms my soul. With its antique fireplaces, ornately painted double theaters, the sweeping cathedral ceilings painted with farm scenes, the scarlet carpet in the lobby, and old-timey gold popcorn cart at the refreshments bar, it all makes sense in some deep part of my heart.

When I am here, nothing bad can touch me. I'm here for me and me only, and I guess the actors I help out along the way. This is the first job I've ever had that requires no heavy lift or pep talk to come in and do it. I am here because I love it.

Going to the controls behind the stage, I flick off the house lights and dim the ceiling ones, creating a darker effect in this room that can house a hundred and fifty people. Only the stage lights remain, remnants of the last musical the amateur company put on occupying the backdrop.

A piano sits on the corner of the hardwood by the flashbulb lights at the front of the stage, and I take a seat. Nights like this are some of my favorite, and Wilson is in his office and has left me alone in here. I think he knows this is my therapy, sitting alone at the piano in the theater, playing and singing terribly sad songs as if calling to some former part of myself.

Closing my eyes, I start, touching the keys with a surety that I rarely ever possess in everyday life. They come to life under my hands, the notes hitting me square in the chest. I sing for myself, humming the words at first and then singing them more clearly. It doesn't even matter the song, it's more about the feeling.

The melody I'm playing takes over me as I belt out the chorus, abandon running through me like wildfire. The song opens up some part of my chest that always refuses to bleed or be poked at. But with this music, playing here alone on the unlit stage, I'm allowing myself to be the rawest possible version of me.

Tapering off as the lyrics leave me, I play the last melancholy note of the song and keep going, stroking the piano keys in a sad rhythm that also makes me feel less alone.

"Wow," someone says quietly from somewhere in the rows, and when I look up, Liam is standing in the center of the theater holding a plate full of pizza.

Shock, embarrassment, and all that chemistry usually buzzing around us hits me full force. I wasn't aware I had an audience, or I'd never have been singing like that. I don't perform for anyone anymore, I dabble when I'm alone after Wilson heads out for the night.

Ducking my head so he can't see my blush, my subconscious tracks him as he makes his way to the stage.

"That was ... your voice ..." There is awe and wonder in his tone, and I can only imagine how furiously maroon my cheeks are now.

My eyes lift and connect with his, that gorgeous lean figure standing mere feet from me now, and I'll never get over the look on his face and how it's directed at me. It might be the first time in my life I feel cherished.

Suddenly, the piano lid drops ... right onto my hands.

"Ow!" I yelp, pulling my right hand out a little delayed since I was staring at Liam.

“Oh, shit!” He runs over, lifting the damn lid, then slipping onto the piano bench and straddling the wooden seat as he takes my hand in his. “Does it hurt?”

My breath catches in my lungs, but it has nothing to do with the sharp pain radiating through my fingers. The concern he’s approaching me with, the soft note of his voice, and the way he’s touching me like I’m fragile. God, I think I blink back some tears.

“A little,” I admit, glancing down at my fingers.

My middle and ring finger shine bright red, and I know they’ll bruise eventually. I can barely feel the pain over the beating of my heart, though.

“We should get you an ice pack. I’ve caught my hand like that a couple of times in farm equipment, nearly lost my pinky to a tractor once, now that I think back.” He chuckles as he puts pressure on my fingers, which is helping.

Being this close to him after our hookup in his truck has all the tension bleeding out of me. How is it that this man makes me so nervous and so calm all at the same time? And why is it that I’m getting used to him coming around?

“What’re you doing here?” I ask, puzzled by his appearance in this place that I know like the back of my hand.

It doesn’t fit that this rugged farmer is sitting up on stage with me, not that I don’t like it.

“I was bringing some pizza by at my mom’s suggestion. She knew tonight was Cassandra’s later night, and Wilson is always down for pizza. And, well, I figured you’d be here, and I always want to see you.”

His admission is sweet, almost bashful, and my heart swoons like it’s wearing rose-colored glasses.

“Your voice is beautiful. I didn’t realize you could sing like that.” Liam’s eyes search mine as if he’s seeing me clearly for the first time.

“There is a lot we don’t know about each other.” I should take my hand out of his, but I don’t.

“Not from lack of trying on my part,” he says quietly, and it’s not to guilt me but to state a fact. “Although, I mean, seeing someone naked technically means you know more about them than certain people.”

That makes me laugh in a way I need in this tense moment. “I guess you’re technically correct.”

Liam slides the plate of pizza he carried in with him onto the piano keys, and I should yell at him, but the scent coming from the food is too heavenly.

“Have dinner with me?” His eyebrow shoots up like he means more than his words convey.

Shrugging, because I could eat, and it’s right here, I pick up a slice. “Cheers?”

He copies the gesture and we both take a slice without breaking eye contact.

“Finally talked you into a date.” That devilish smirk captures his face, which is too gorgeous for any one man to possess.

“Actually, I injured myself, I’m hungry, and you happened to show up. Didn’t have to work too hard for that one.” This little banter is foreign and a welcome change from our usual charged interactions.

“Just twelve years’ worth of trying, but who’s counting?” He grins, but that puts a sober moment over the interaction.

We chew in silence for a few minutes, trading looks when our eyes meet and surveying the empty theater.

“Thank you for bringing this. You didn’t have to, but this was nice,” I say when I polish off my slice.

Liam looks down at the piano keys and then back up at me. “Our interactions haven’t been all that traditional. Or well, they haven’t followed a traditional pattern. You know how I feel about you, or how I want to proceed. And I understand your reservations, or I did when it was still inappropriate for us to be together. But we both have admitted we feel this spark, and I sincerely hope you’ll look past anything you

might have been taught about relationships or expectations and see that this could really be something.”

The moment he says that, it’s like my brain starts to itch. There is no way Liam would know my upbringing, so someone must have tipped him off.

“Have you thought about the fact I just might not want to date you? That I’m not interested?” I question this as a defense mechanism.

He shakes his arrogant, beautiful head. “Come off it, Gabrielle. You know we’re combustible in the sack, I think you’re gorgeous and you can’t keep away from me. There is chemistry, at the *very* least. But you’re scared, and I understand that. I’d love to know more about why and try to convince you to change your mind. I come from a family of people who go after what they want with nothing holding them back. I grew up with parents who encouraged our dreams and wanted us to have adventures to figure out who we are. Perhaps it’s why we all ended up back in the nest, because growing up here was so liberating in its own way. I know I might be an outlier when it comes to families and support, so I realize me putting pressure on you might only send you running further.”

Inside, I swear my heart is cracking open. Or maybe, it’s cracking the chains I’ve put around it for decades. Liam is the first and only man to look me in the eye and tell me he understands why I’m scared. That he’ll give me the space to figure my head out while still wanting to try at us being a *something*.

“All I want is to see you happy. To get to know you more. To spend time with you without us fighting or rehashing the past or colliding in secret places. Although, don’t get me wrong, that last part is mighty fun.”

A small giggle works its way past my lips. “I won’t disagree.”

Liam’s gray eyes heat. “But it’s not just about that for me, when it comes to you, so tell me what you need. Explain your thoughts to me, and I’ll listen. I’ll try like hell not to be my

defensive, overreactive self. Because what I feel when I'm with you has to be unique, special, and I hope you feel it enough as well to try and work through things."

In a million years, I never expected him to approach me like this. Maybe that's what has me thawing, has me considering that maybe we could turn into something good and real.

"Okay." The word is quiet when I speak it, but Liam lights up the instant I put it out between us.

"Should I get us two more slices, then?" His expression looks so hopeful, like a kid on Christmas.

I nod. "Sure. And maybe that icepack."

The two of us spend the next hour eating pizza, discussing some of our favorite trivial things, and generally staying away from tougher topics. Wilson wiggles his eyebrows as he leaves us to lock up, and I barely notice the amount of time gone by before Liam holds out his hand to help me down the theater steps.

When he walks me to my car and leaves me with a good night kiss on the forehead, I daydream and hum the whole ride home like some schoolgirl whose crush noticed her for the first time.

It's the best night I've had in ages, and even if I won't label it to him, easily the best first date I've ever been on.

Showing up at Gabrielle's door less than twenty-four hours after what I consider our first date is probably not what I meant by giving her space and going slow, but I can't help it.

Being able to sit and talk to her without the intensity of our secret moments is like a warm cup of coffee filling up my soul. It gives me energy and satisfaction and feels like slipping into a place I could call home. I want that feeling every second of every day, which is why I went back on my word a little and showed up here after my day was done.

The bouquet of daffodils in my hand is meant to placate her, maybe even charm her a little, for showing up unannounced on her porch. My stomach flutters with nerves, and damn if this woman doesn't make me act unlike I ever have for any other female. As I ring the doorbell, I pray to the heavens that this isn't a mistake.

A few seconds later, Gabrielle appears in the glass column window next to the front door, confusion on her beautiful, makeup-free face. When she opens it, there is a spoon in her hand. Glancing down her body, I take in the tight white cropped T-shirt and fuzzy dark green sweat shorts she's wearing. They fit her knockout body like a glove while also looking completely relaxed and comfortable, and by the look of it, she has no bra on. It takes a concerted effort not to lock my eyes on her nipples, rosy and pink through the material, so I direct them to the slim gold anklet wrapped around the bottom of her leg. Something about a piece of jewelry there

makes me go hard, as if I don't all the time around her, but it's so simple yet enticing on her mile-long limbs.

“Liam, what are you doing here?”

It's the second time she's asked me the question in so many days, but her tone doesn't sound annoyed, so I've got that going for me.

“I wanted to check if your hand was okay.” I extend the flowers and she blushes.

“It's okay, feels a little sore and I'm definitely bruising, but I'll be fine.” She holds up said hand, and some of her fingers are clearly purple with bruises. “Looks nastier than it feels.”

“Good.” I stuff my hands in my pockets to keep from touching her.

Something about standing in the same place as her makes me want to attack her lips, as if it's a physical response I can't stifle no matter how many times I'm near her. She's my high, and kissing her makes it feel like I can breathe.

“Do you want to come in?” Gabrielle poses the question as if she's trying to consider whether she actually wants me to.

“Only if you're okay with that. Or don't have any company. Shit, I probably should have called or something before I just showed up.”

Nerves are getting the better of me the longer we stand out here. Plus, I couldn't call her. I don't have her number. When living in a small town, with access to other people's number who could easily provide hers, I guess I never asked for it. I know that, before recently, she wouldn't want me to have it.

Number one goal for tonight: get Gabrielle's phone number.

“Liam,” she laughs lightly, “come inside. It's okay. I just opened a pint of mint chip ice cream and was watching a show, if that sounds rousing to you.”

Being in the same room with her is the most excitement I've ever had, so that's a yes.

Following her into her grandmother's old condo, I noticed Lucy's touches everywhere. While the row of houses is nice and even upscale, newer builds for Hope Crest, this is definitely a home that was owned by an older woman. There are antique plates hung on the wall, a collage of old black-and-white photos going up the stairs, a maroon couch that looks to be out of the eighties, and a TV so big and bulbous, I'm sure you can't even get spare parts for it anymore.

"It's not the trendiest of digs, but it does the job." She laughs as I survey our surroundings.

"It must be nice to be among her things, even if she's not here anymore." The words pop out of my mouth before I realize it.

Gabrielle tilts her head to the side, trying to digest my message. "It is, actually. I didn't know my grandmother very well for most of my life. When she died, I felt like there were so many stories she still had to share with me. Being here, discovering her things, it's been a revelation of sorts."

"I get that. My grandfather died ten years ago. He was ..."

A tsunami of emotions hit me at my mention of Nonno. I don't talk about him often, to anyone except his longtime wife—my nonna—but doing so always opens up this chasm of loss in my chest. He was my best friend, and when he passed, I felt unmoored. Still do in certain ways, if I'm being honest.

Gabrielle isn't touching me, but she's standing closer now, and her big green eyes nearly swallow me whole. "I'm sorry. Death is never easy, no matter how close our connection. But I'd venture to say it's even worse when they're so intertwined in who you are as a person."

She can't know how close to hitting the nail on the head she is, but I try to breathe through my nose as I nod.

A screeching sound on the very out-of-date television distracts both of us, and we turn our heads.

"Is this the episode where they go to that island and the one girl melts down over the other girl accidentally eating her

steak at dinner?” I point to the TV as the familiar cast of characters dances across it.

“You know this show?” She looks gobsmacked.

Busted.

I shrug. “I’ve watched all six seasons since my mom forced us to have bonding nights if I was going to live on their property. It grew on me.”

Really, I’d just wanted to squeeze a home-cooked meal out of my mom and she dragged me into watching TV with her after. I can’t lie, reality shows are addicting, and she introduced me to this gateway drug. I’ve been hooked on D-list celebrities doing funny shit on screen ever since.

“Liam Ashton, you are full of surprises, aren’t you?” The way she bites into her lip when she says that has me thinking she means something completely different than my taste in television.

I didn’t come over to get in her bed tonight, though. Hell, I long for that so badly that my balls have been blue for a week. But I made a promise to take this slow and give space, so that’s what I’m trying to adhere to.

Thinking about taking my time with her on a mattress for the first time is mighty enticing, though.

“Well, you’re here, so let’s watch? Plus, it’s probably better if I don’t house this entire pint by myself.” Gabrielle claps her hands as if she’s made this the plan we’re sticking to.

“Only if you don’t mind. In which case I’d love to.”

“It’ll be fun to watch with another fan. Let me put these in a vase and I can bring us two bowls.” She turns for the kitchen.

“If you wanted to eat it from the pint, don’t bother. Just bring me another spoon.”

Gabrielle spins as she begins to walk backward, a small smile on those gorgeous lips. “Ice cream is so much better out of the original packaging.”

“Never heard truer words.”

I sink into the couch and get comfortable while she makes noise in the kitchen. Part of me can't believe she offered to let me come in and hang out, yet the me of twenty minutes ago hoped my arrival would lead to this.

“These are beautiful, by the way, thank you.” She sets the vase down on the coffee table, and the daffodils bring a cheery energy to the room. “Always bringing me daffodils, huh?”

“These were more well received than the first time.” My voice isn't sad or mad, but I relish the progress she's allowing us to make.

“What woman doesn't like getting her favorite flowers from a man? Well, when the moment is appropriate, I guess. Oh! Did you see her just throw that plate across the room?” she yelps at the TV.

We dig into the mint chip, which is arguably not my favorite flavor, but Gabrielle seems to love it, so I shut my trap. There is something intimate about us each taking turns holding the container while the other scoops from it, like we don't mind swapping spit or sharing in a way that's different than getting naked and horny.

“Would you ever go on one of these shows?” she questions.

“Hell fucking no, do you know who I am? I barely talk to people I like.”

Gabrielle giggles with enjoyment at my self-deprecation. “I don't know, you could be the quintessential grumpy character, it might bring a hell of a lot of entertainment to a show. This hot growly farmer cussing people out, getting pissed at the shit the producers make him participate in.”

She laughs as if she can imagine it.

“So you think I'm hot, huh?” It's the only thing I choose to highlight.

Those green eyes roll as she pops green ice cream in her mouth. “You asking is just fishing for a compliment.”

I shrug as if trying to deny it. “How about you, would you do one of these shows?”

A beat of silence passes. “I guess it might be fun, but no. There is something invasive about putting your life on TV, and if I had a family so near and dear to me, no way would I jeopardize their privacy or our relationships. If I had something so loving and close to me, I’d keep it just mine.”

What she isn’t saying, or so it seems, is that she’s never had something like that to protect, so she can only imagine it.

“And that’s why you’re the type of person I would want in my life.” My words are hushed, but I keep my eyes on hers when I say it.

Everything she is, everything she tries to be, is so goddamn attractive to me. She’s my dream woman incarnate, and I feel like I need to pinch myself that I’m sitting here next to her.

The moment seems to become too serious for her, because she turns back to the TV and makes me start ranking my favorite characters on this channel’s franchises until we both cackle around bites.

Gabrielle is the epitome of natural beauty as she snickers and makes comments next to me while hogging the ice cream. I’m happy to let her do so since it means I can just watch her. The way she talks with her spoon as if painting a picture of her opinions. How the blond strands of hair fall in her eyes, and she allows me to tuck them back behind her ear. And that if I say exactly the right thing in terms of the episode, she turns to me with a beaming smile like I’m the funniest man on this planet.

This is what I want with her; relaxing nights, just the two of us, where we do nothing but watch stupid shows and eat ice cream on the couch. I don’t want adventure and excitement, and I don’t need a woman who is going to request crazy public sex acts. Although truck sex behind the bar was one of the hottest things this woman has ever given me in my life.

But really, I just want companionship. I want to build a life with someone. I want all of those little inside jokes my brother and sister have with their spouses. I want that life partner who will support and back me up through anything. I want to be that for her, to build her up and take care of any little thing she needs. I want to surprise her with flowers or a full gas tank, I want to sit out on the back deck and drink beers while arguing about where we should get takeout from.

I *want* her. Period. It might seem strange to an outsider who only sees the amount of time we've spent together. It's very little.

They weren't there the first day I saw her, though. To feel the ground shift under my feet. To know that love at first sight truly exists. They didn't feel her skin, hold her close, and know how this connection is rare.

"Will you go on another date with me?" I blurt the question without thinking.

Because my psyche wants it, another chance to treat her like she should be treated, and apparently act accordingly.

Gabrielle turns to fully look at me, worrying her lip between her teeth. "The thing is ..."

My chest falls in disappointment. "No, I get it."

I asked for one shot, and that looks like it's all I'm getting.

"No, Liam, that isn't what I mean." Her hand on my arm sparks hope deep inside my flesh. "I-I want to go on a date with you again. Honestly, I want to spend too much time with you. That scares me. What you said at the theater is true; I've been scared to step out of the lines I was painted into for so long. Doing something out of the character my parents molded me into is ... it's terrifying. But I came here to gain back a sense of who I am without their influence. That sounds sad as a thirty-something-year-old woman to say, but it's true. I want to date you, I really do, but there are so many other factors that make me skittish."

Jumping on the slim chance she's opened up, I ramble. "If you want to keep this between us for now, if you want me to

be a secret, whatever you want. Basically, I'm saying I'm all in for however you want to move forward. I just ... I want a shot at that moving forward."

It's as vulnerable as I can get, and I feel like my feet are dangling over a precipice.

Gabrielle takes a deep breath and blows it out like she has to breathe in a rhythm to come to an answer.

"Okay. Okay. I ... yes, I'd like to go on a second date with you."

Thinking isn't an option as my hands dive into her hair and my lips press to hers in a sweet, hopeful, gleeful gesture. Happy isn't an emotion I feel very often, not in the kind of way where it lights your body up and makes you feel like a little kid during the first snow of the season. But that's what's suffusing my body right now, and I want to shine that light to Gabrielle ... with my mouth.

She chuckles onto my lips, and we break apart enough so that our eyes meet. My hands are still on her face, and grown women are still yelling at each other on the television while Gabrielle is in pajamas. It gives me a glimpse into a future I very much desire.

"Get ready to be charmed, swooned, and swept off your feet. You have no idea what you're in for, Gabrielle Murphy."

“All right, there is no way anyone is getting through this system.”

The tech slaps his hand on my desk, and the spiffy new software he installed is pulled up on my monitor.

“Even if someone were to tamper with the camera system, this technology allows us to fill gaps with the circuit we’ve set up. It’s reporting right back to our headquarters, where we can remote in and fix any weak link in the loop. So you’ll be covered. This thing will identify a gnat trying to chew on your plants,” he explains like he’s making a farm joke, but I don’t laugh.

“So it works, it will keep working, it will find any way to detect any suspicious behavior on the farm?” That’s all I care about.

“No doubt about it. We’ve got you covered. And if anything breaks or you need more coverage, you’re on the plan now, so sending a tech out here is at no extra cost.”

As if they aren’t charging me an arm and a leg to have this system already, but I nod in understanding. Cassandra set me up with her fancy security system company, the same one that A-list celebrities use to keep stalkers out of their private mansions. It’s a ridiculous chunk of change, but protecting our family recipes is priceless, and investing in that security is worth it.

Or at least it will be if it turns up who the hell fucked with our old system and those rows of tomatoes. I surf around the program on my computer a couple more times before the tech heads out, and then it's into hyperdrive mode to get ready for tonight.

After leaving Gabrielle's condo with a heavy make-out session and a stiff dick I wouldn't let her do anything about since I'm letting her do this on her timeline, I started to prepare for our second date. It needs to be romantic, memorable, private so that no one in Hope Crest gossips about us, and fantastic enough to land me a third date.

Which is why it starts with a presentable appearance. Obviously, Gabrielle already thinks I'm attractive, or she wouldn't have let me screw her on the bookshelves in her grandmother's old store, but it's time to up my game to the big leagues. Which means shaving my usually untamed stubble and beard into a decent shape, gelling my hair, putting on cologne, and gritting my teeth while I video call my sister for outfit help.

Alana's incessant giggling and taunting are somewhat worth it when I stand in front of my bathroom mirror at fifteen minutes to seven o'clock and give myself a once-over. I hope to blow Gabrielle away and make it so that Mr. Right shows up at her front door.

Ringling her doorbell with another bouquet of daffodils about ten minutes later, I'm about to comb my hand through my hair due to nerves but stop when I realize it's gelled to the point of almost being cemented. I never do my hair. I'm not a man who is even concerned about it, much less takes a hat off long enough to make sure it's still there. Between that and all the other prep I've done, including some manscaping—Jesus, who the fuck am I—I hope Gabrielle realizes how fucking special she is.

I don't even dress up for my mother, and I love her more than most any woman on the planet. But get me one date with this woman and I'm willing to spit shine my shoes if it means she'll be impressed.

The wood creaks a second later, giving way to the most gorgeous sight I've ever seen.

"Holy crap." Gabrielle's eyes flair with appreciation and lust as she opens the door and takes in my appearance.

Me? I'm fucking speechless. A goner. Dead on arrival from how fucking incredible she looks.

Her body is encased in a floaty, gauzy white sundress with flirty little sleeves and a tight bodice. The top is cut so low that her breasts swell in the curved neckline, and she has a tiny little gold pendant winking at the dip of her collarbone. Her hair runs in waves over her shoulders and down her back, the gold color spun in tendrils like precious metal. Shapely, lean legs go on for miles into tan sandals wrapped up around her ankles, and I want to take everything off with my teeth.

I don't have a fucking clue as to how I'll make it through this date without mauling her.

"You're a vision," I whisper, not sure I trust my voice to speak.

"More flowers? A woman could get used to being spoiled." She blushes and takes them from me, putting them on her inside table and then stepping out to lock the door.

I step off the porch, appreciating the backside view even further and having to stop myself from biting my fist in sexual frustration.

Gabrielle smirks as she comes to stand in front of me. "You look like a proper gentleman. I kind of miss the rugged, dirty farmer."

Bending to her ear but keeping my hands to myself, I ghost over the shell of her lobe. "Ask for him anytime and he'll give you whatever you want."

She tries hard to disguise the shiver that rolls over her. "Where are you taking me?"

"I hate being cliché, but it's a surprise." I had a pep talk with myself during said outfit once-over that I needed to actually converse on this date.

I am so out of practice that my hands shook on the drive over to Gabrielle's, but the moment I saw her just now, it seemed to calm some of that. She's always done that to me, made me feel like I'm standing on solid ground even as she was lighting my heart on fire.

My hand falls to the small of her back as I walk her to my truck, open the passenger door, and help her up.

"Are you trying to cop a feel before we even have appetizers?" she quips with a smug smirk as my fingers trail down the smooth skin of her calf.

"Nope, just making sure you get the seat belt on and are safe."

"Liam, I've been driving and aware of vehicular laws longer than you have." She rolls her eyes as she straps in.

"No more age gap jokes tonight. Or ever, for that matter. Three years is nothing." It's said in a light tone, but I hate that she needs to be that asterisk between us.

Gabrielle nods, her sunflower hair floating around as she does. "Fair enough."

I called in some favors, and a few hefty ones at that, to set up the perfect spot and date for her. Because although I know it needs to be out of town, that doesn't mean I want to spare anything.

"I've never driven this way," she remarks as we coast past a sign telling us to visit Hope Crest again.

"You said private and I made it happen." I flash her a smile before turning my eyes back to the road.

Damn, she smells so good it's distracting. We make a bit more small talk, from our days at work to what takeout we ate this week, before I turn off onto a gravel road through the forest.

"Spooky," Gabrielle teases, and I navigate as the sunset glints over the tops of the trees.

My truck bumps along for a few minutes more before the restaurant comes into view. It's essentially an old boathouse

that used to belong to one of the wealthy families who has an estate along the lake that eats the rest of the horizon Gabrielle and I can now see. But Dockland's has been a teal and white shingled eatery for as long as I can remember now, back when my parents had a wedding anniversary party here when I was in elementary school.

It's a single story, twenty-table bar and grill with the best seafood in Pennsylvania—if you ask me—with a hundred-yard dock floating in the water behind it. At the end of said dock, past the various boats that usually tie up to it for diners to come in right off the water, is a gazebo hung with twinkling fairy lights.

And for tonight, a private table for two.

“*Oh, Liam.*” Gabrielle unconsciously grabs my hand, and I count this as a victory.

“One point for Casanova,” I joke, tugging her gently so that we walk to the stairs descending to the water and dock.

“I had no idea this place was even out here.”

“It's a local secret, I'd say, even though half of the surrounding towns spend special occasions and birthdays here. You can also always find the same fishermen drinking at the bar on any given day.”

“Why is it empty now? Is it closed?” she wonders aloud as our shoes hit the dock planks.

Holding her fingers laced in mine a little tighter now, I make sure to traverse slowly. “Dockland's has always been closed on Mondays and Tuesdays to give the owners a night or two off. It's a family place, much like our restaurant, and I know how tirelessly they work. But I called in a favor to get us a private meal.”

“You didn't have to do that. I would have settled for anywhere, even in town. You probably could have convinced me.” She looks sheepish when I glance back.

“You deserve something this special, and every romantic moment I've been witness to between my parents has taken

place here. Or I've heard about it. This is where my dad proposed to my mom." I smile at the thought.

Gabrielle sucks in a breath, and I hope I'm not spooking her with how big a hold this place has on my heart.

"Plus, Nate, the owner's son, needed some last-minute garlic for a dish they were serving. I sold him ten crates for half price. He owed me."

"And you used that to cash in a date with me?" She almost sounds like I'd be nuts to waste that on her.

"I'd use any clout I had to call in something to impress you." I say this earnestly as we enter the gazebo.

The table is set with a white cloth and teal plates that match the color of Dockland's exterior. Steaming rolls and salted butter sit in the middle, along with two lit candles. The only sounds are the hum of boat engines nearby and the lapping of the lake waves against the dock. Pulling out her chair, I make sure Gabrielle is seated and comfortable before I round the table and sit across from her.

"This is amazing." Her gaze takes in the entire lake valley, a hidden treasure that leads back out to the river valley through a narrow channel.

"I've always loved it here, and don't let it slip, but they have the best clam chowder on the East Coast."

"I think Maine and some of the like might disagree with you." She chuckles as she observes the small menu Nate and I cooked up for tonight.

"Evening, miss. I won't bother saying hi to this knucklehead, because he's badgered me about making this perfect for a week now." Nate comes up to the table with a bottle of wine, and I flip him the bird disguised as scratching my nose. "But, of course, we'd pull out all the stops for a beautiful woman like you."

"Stop flirting with my date." I nearly growl.

He smirks and ignores me. "Tonight we have our famous clam chowder soup and shrimp cocktail for an appetizer, then

Liam chose the tuna steak and lobster roll for you to split as entrees, with our caramel cheesecake for dessert.”

I cringe. “Shit, I probably should have asked you if you like seafood.”

Nate snickers next to me, and I send him a glare.

“Luckily for you, it’s my favorite genre of food.” Gabrielle grins, then looks to Nate. “That all sounds fantastic. I can’t wait to try it.”

“Good, I’ll pour you some wine and leave this guy to screw up this date because I surely won’t.”

Another glare is directed at him until he scurries back to the main restaurant, and I pick up my glass. “To not screwing up this date even if my childhood friend has hexed me.”

She clinks her glass to mine. “I have a feeling there would need to be a meteor strike to ruin this night.”

My dry throat is thankful for the bite of the white wine.

“To be honest, this is the first time I’ve been on a date in ... well, years,” she admits.

Nate is walking back down the dock with our appetizers, and I refrain from asking anything more until he’s out of earshot.

Gabrielle ladles her soup as it’s finally clear to ask why. “That surprises me, looking at you. I mean, not that dating is all about looks. You’re obviously way smarter than anyone I know, too. But ... shit, I’m putting my foot in my mouth. Why haven’t you dated?”

I look like a rambling, nervous idiot, and it probably shows I haven’t been on a date in my whole life.

To her credit, she’s only giving me a gracious smile. “I don’t know. The older I got, the more I was just resigned that I wouldn’t meet someone who ticked all the boxes. That maybe I’d just at some point decide to have a baby on my own or something, that I didn’t need the dream husband and the picket fence. I got caught up in work and pleasing my family, although my mother’s constant nagging about marriage was

also probably a deterrent. Anyways, I haven't been on a date in a long time. And never one as romantic as this. So Liam, you don't have to be so nervous. I'm having a wonderful time, and you're knocking it out of the park."

A breath I didn't realize I was holding whooshes out of my lungs. "Good, because I've never planned a date. I wanted tonight to be special."

I sound like a teenager saying that, but it's true. I've got a lot riding on tonight.

"Never?" She looks shocked as she swallows around her spoon.

How has a woman eating never been this distracting before? I try not to focus on her lips, but it proves a humongous effort.

I shrug. "I was never interested."

"So there have been no other women?" Her eyebrow quirks like I have to be bullshitting her.

"I'm not going to lie and say there haven't been some, but none that meant much. None I wanted to pursue, as shitty as that sounds."

Gabrielle nods as she swipes a shrimp through the cocktail sauce. "We're two pretty closed-off people, huh?"

The wine starts to buzz in my veins, and I know I'll only have a glass, but there is something about enjoying a meal with her on this dock that makes me want to sit here all night long.

"Nah, just two people who were waiting for the right person to open up to."

"That sounds awfully poetic, Liam," she says.

"Would you like me to bring back the glib, dirty farmer now?"

"Save him for later. I'm enjoying the gentleman in front of me." The side of her mouth tips up.

Nate brings out our entrées, and I divide them up for us. It seems a little too bold to feed her a lobster roll out of my hands, as badly as I want to. Treading cautiously will have to do where Gabrielle is concerned for the near future.

“Do you like being back in Hope Crest?” It seems like a safe question.

She nods. “I always loved it here. From the couple of times we came to visit my grandma growing up, I always just had such fond memories. The river, downtown, walking around in the summer with ice cream cones dripping onto our hands. Everything about it felt so picturesque. I guess that’s why your family never left, huh?”

“It is pretty special. Weird to think we could have been in the same place at the same time when we were kids when you came to see your grandma.” The tuna steak melts in my mouth as I take the last sip of the one glass I’m limiting myself to.

“Instead, we had to meet in that damn classroom.” Gabrielle’s eyes light with sad amusement.

“Too soon to joke about yet?” I question.

She shakes her head. “No. I guess it brings some levity, right? It just ...”

“Sucks? Yeah. Any different place or time and maybe I wouldn’t have been so miserable coming out of high school. I do wonder why you never went back to teaching, though?”

She dips her head. “I thought maybe it was me. Maybe I had a ... problem.”

That confession sends a pang of guilt through my gut. “Don’t even dare to think that.”

“Rationally, and with time, I knew it wasn’t true. That I was lying to myself and turning it all around in my head. But I thought if I went to another school, maybe it would happen again and I just couldn’t ... I couldn’t risk that. So I stayed away.”

“I’m sorry.” It somehow feels like my fault.

“Don’t be. The thing is, I didn’t miss it. I’d been lukewarm about teaching anyway, but my parents deemed it a good, solid career and I always followed their lead. I spent so much time training to be one, and leaving it in a snap left me so unaffected, I should have known it wasn’t for me. Then I ended up in a job that kind of assisted teachers, and I was lukewarm on that, too. I envy you for knowing what you wanted to do and being passionate about it from day one. I’m in my mid-thirties and still have no clue what I want to be when I grow up.”

Setting down my fork and knife as she takes a bite of her half of the lobster roll, I wipe my mouth and contemplate something.

“I feel like the whole ‘what do you want to be when you grow up?’ question is such bullshit. What kid knows that they want to be a doctor or a librarian or a firefighter? They’ve never actually done any of those things besides seeing highly fictionalized versions of them on TV or something. Plus, no one should want to aspire to be labeled fully as their job. When did we stop teaching people to want to be happy, or loved, or fulfilled? Shouldn’t we just want good people around us, a warm roof over our heads, a little bit of fun, and a whole lot of things we enjoy doing when we grow up? Damn, it just irks me, that question. You don’t have to know what you want to do, Gabrielle. You just have to know who you are and how you want to live. I’m a farmer, one of those jobs that people pick on as lowly or not measuring up to some worldly standard, and I’m generally a very content person. You can shovel shit for a living and still enjoy your life.”

Gabrielle studies me from across the flickering candlelight, and if I’m not mistaken, there might be a tear in her eye. “That’s pretty damn deep for a man who doesn’t seem to express those sentiments out loud much.”

“I’ve got a lot of time to think while I’m shoveling dirt, ya know?” A small smile tips the corners of my mouth up.

“I never bargained for you,” she whispers as the last ray of sun descends. “This path I was supposed to follow was supposed to lead to happiness, you know? Do everything in

the right order, to the right standard, and it would pay off. Except you're right, they never tell you as a kid that so much of life is enjoyed when you're off that stupid beaten path."

"Which is why you came tonight." I fill in the blank.

Nate doesn't seem to want to interrupt but silently clears the table as he sets down dessert and disappears.

"Because I'm finding that when I'm with you, I can very clearly see who I want to be and how I want to live."

It's the most perfect thing she could have said and even gives me enough confidence to fork a bite of cheesecake off and feed it to her. The gesture is more than sexual, even though a zing of lust traces down my spine when I do so.

Being able to feed her demonstrates the trust she has in me, and with each passing moment, a new fiber of connection sews us together.

I'm just hoping she'll let me fashion so many that someday, we're inseparable.

Our steps are slow and measured as Liam walks me to my front door.

“Do you want to come in?”

He hesitates as I dig in my purse to find my keys. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Tonight was the best date I’ve ever been on, and I thought that after our pizza in the theater. So this man now holds two of the top spots in my best dates record book, and he’s standing here like a gentleman about to kiss me on the cheek properly and head back to his car. From the twinkling fairy lights to the delicious food to the wine that loosened my tongue a bit to the hypnotic rocking of the dock, tonight blew any other act of romance I’ve ever received out of the water.

Liam killed the planning and execution of our first dinner out, and I don’t want it to end here.

“Liam, I’m an adult. I’m a woman who knows exactly how much weight each action holds, and I know what I said about moving at my speed. Well, this is my speed. I had a wonderful time tonight, you gave me the best date ever, and I don’t want you to say goodbye at the door. I want you to come in. I want to take you up to my bed, and I want the rugged man I was promised.”

Those gray eyes flash with lust under my front door lamplight. “As long as you’re sure?”

“I couldn’t be more certain.” I reach out for his hand as I simultaneously unlock my front door, and then we’re through the threshold.

“I’m really happy you had a good time tonight.” His hands come to my waist as we shuffle backward into the core part of my grandmother’s condo.

“I’m really *happy*, period.” A nod back to our conversation over dinner about finding happiness instead of what you’re supposed to do or be.

Then I press up on my toes to taste his mouth. When our tongues meet, the kiss growing gradually from sweet and caressing to firmer and more passionate, I taste the same wine and cheesecake I devoured, as well. The memories of our date swirl around, joining the growing feelings I have for this man. To call something perfect means a lot to me since I haven’t experienced much of it in my life, but if I had to give it thirty-five years to get this, I’d do it all over again.

Liam groans as I press my body closer to his, our arms wrapping around each other as my nipples tighten against the fabric of my bra.

“I’ve never tasted anything as sweet as you.” His lips skim down my neck as my fingers long to explore the expanse of his abs while pushing up his shirt.

“Take me upstairs,” I tell him, because I know he’s only going to follow my lead.

So lead, I will. Well, as much as I can since this lean, outdoorsy sex god just picked me up as if I’m a wheelbarrow full of soil he needed to fertilize some crops. So not sexy, but his farmer discourse is really getting to me.

My legs twine around his waist, and he’s so hard I can feel his cock pulse as he shifts with each stair he takes. Hands in his hair, I pull every time he bites my neck in the most scintillating way.

“To the left,” I direct him as he crests the landing, and in no time, I’m tossed onto the guest room bed.

“God, you’re fucking gorgeous.” He practically growls as he begins to unbutton his shirt and toe off his boots.

I sit up on my elbows, appreciating the show, but Liam lowers an eyebrow like he expects me to be clothes-free by the time he kneels on the bed. Still, I don’t immediately begin undressing because what’s in front of me is mesmerizing.

Tawny skin lays over cut muscle, not from the gym or clean eating but from hours of hard, manual labor. Liam is a different kind of muscular that I prefer, lean in a way that only men who use their hands for hours on the land can be. My mouth nearly waters as he strips the shirt off his shoulders, letting his abs and biceps bunch as his hands go to his belt buckle. Those gray eyes are dilated with want and need, and I can’t help but stare at his tongue as he bites it between his teeth in anticipation.

“No fair that you’re still fully clothed.” His plump lower lip pouts.

“I thought you’d be the one taking this off me,” I challenge.

“Only if you want it shredded between my teeth. I hope it’s not one of your favorites.”

Jeez, that bite of banter makes wetness pool between my thighs.

Liam shoves his pants and boxers past his hips, and then he’s nude, a feast for my eyes as his cock springs free in all its enormous, perfect glory.

“What’s not fair is that you look like that, act like you do, and are single.” I gesture to the demigod in front of me.

Liam stalks me across the mattress as I crawl back, retreating just to taunt him.

“I’m only single because I’ve been waiting for you.”

To most, it would sound like a line. To us, it’s the most truthful thing he could say.

Unlacing my sandals like a pro and tossing them over his shoulder, Liam’s hands come to my legs and stroke upward,

the rough calluses nipping at my flesh.

“I’ve thought about little else since the bookshop than tasting you again.” Gentle kisses on my thighs make my hips buck upward.

The man hasn’t even taken my clothes off yet, and I could honestly come in seconds. He just does it for me.

Liam holds eye contact as he reaches under my dress and taps my hip, signaling for me to push my butt up so he can slip my panties off. I do so, and he drags the fabric down, taking note of the style and color before bringing his eyes back to mine. My heart is lodged in my throat; obviously, I know what’s to come, in general, but not knowing what he’ll do next is adding as much fuel to my pleasure as his hands are going to.

“Fuck, your scent ...” His head disappears under the skirt of my dress, and then I feel the lightning bolt of his tongue as it spears me.

Deep, so deep between my folds, only to be further overwhelmed when he presses his thumb against my clit. Liam groans in appreciation against me, the humming causing a moan to slip from my mouth as my hands fist in the sheets.

“Oh my God, Liam,” I encourage him without being able to actually use words to do so.

“You, saying my name, could keep me going even if there was no oxygen left.” His voice is a curse as he works me over.

Flattening his tongue, licking all the way up my slit, breathing hotly on my swollen nub, pounding into me with two fingers, then three—it’s too much to take. My body shakes under his expertise, and soon I’m thrashing and begging.

“Come on my tongue, Gabrielle,” he commands, and it’s my undoing.

Pleasure, hot and bright, rips through me. I shudder with it, writhe, yell. Nothing has ever felt as good as it does at the hands of this man, and as I wind down and watch through hazy eyes as he reappears from the fabric, his face could cause a spontaneous orgasm all over again.

Possession, clear as day, marks his expression. He wants me and only me so intensely that I yearn to be his forever.

“Wanting you has been inevitable. Now that I’ve had you, it’ll never be enough.” His hands roam my exposed skin, as if he’s trying to memorize what every inch feels like.

Together we help undress me, sitting up so he can tug the dress over my head as I undo my bra and throw it to the ground. Then Liam is there, over me, nothing but our panting noises.

“I know, *I know*,” I tell him because saying more meaningful words right now seems dangerous.

They’re on the tip of my tongue, and it scares me that everything always gets so intense between us. It’s clear that I was made for no one else but this man and vice versa, but it feels insane to admit.

So instead, I keep my eyes on his as he pushes inside me, our hands on each other’s faces as Liam strokes in and out. Our connection is slow and unhurried for how charged and desperate the air around us feels. I realize Liam is trying to pace us to make this last. He seems to be cataloging every gasp I take, each way my body moves when he bottoms out or retreats to the tip. His fingers roll my nipples, and I arch my back up into his chest, reveling in the steady pulse of my orgasm building like a tsunami that will drown me.

The entire time, neither of us break eye contact.

What I feel as we both come apart in each other’s arms is all I’ve ever wanted but didn’t know I needed; pure completeness with a person who truly understands and cares about me.

We might be denying anything is happening, we might be sneaking around behind everyone's backs, but something is building between Liam and I that has the possibility of wrecking me.

A month passes with us going on out-of-town dates, sexy trips to the car at the bar, dark-of-night bookshop meetups, and late-night house calls. Anyone paying attention would peg us right away, but aside from his family knowing most of his comings and goings, there isn't anyone in town who would be keeping track of me.

The more time that passes, the deeper my feelings for Liam run. Underneath the grumpy, monosyllabic exterior is this thoughtful, protective, warm man. When we're together, I feel like I'm one of the only people he shows that side of himself to, and in turn, that only makes me fall faster. It's the way that he always has to be touching me, even if it's just a hand on my arm, that makes me need to catch my breath. It's the way that rugged face lights up when he flashes me a small smile as we're huddled under the covers. It's the way he always remembers to kiss me long and slow before we part.

This thing with Liam is quickly becoming something I don't like living without, and the questions about where it's headed seems to be on the tip of my tongue. But I won't ask them; some type of self-preservation is still holding me back.

Other than the confusion with my love life, things in Hope Crest are panning out exactly as I planned them. Grandma's

shop is nearly empty, the rare editions of her books are on their way to collectors, I'm in talks with museum curators, and I am in the beginning stages of consulting with a realtor who can sell off the shop. Grandma bought the building some time ago, so it's my responsibility to sell to the right buyer.

The same real estate agent also asked me about her condo, but that will take me longer to part with. Not only for sentimental value but because Grandma Lucy has a ton of mementos to go through. I've mainly been focused on the shop up until now, and between that and my theater job, I don't have much time to go through the house yet.

Convincing myself of that isn't hard because if I face reality, that's a bit of an excuse. I've been here coming up on two years. Dragging my feet at the beginning gave me a slow start to everything that needed to be accomplished, but it all could have been well within this time frame.

If I were being truthful, I don't want to sell it all off because I don't want to leave.

Popping a piece of homemade cinnamon donut in my mouth, I realize that Hope Crest has come to mean home to me more than any other place I've lived in my life. The thought is bittersweet, as I've finally found a place I feel welcome, but my grandmother isn't here to enjoy it with me. I would have loved to share this time together in a town that meant so much to her.

In the last few years, honestly the last decade, I felt untethered and adrift in my life and its purpose. Not until I established real relationships here had I begun to think that maybe I'd been looking for my path in all the wrong places.

Another bite of donut passes my lips, and I almost groan with appreciation. The sweet treat was made by an older woman who lives two houses down from Liam's sister.

Alana came into the theater two days ago and basically gave me no choice but to attend the block party on her and Warren's street. It's the first year their neighborhood decided to throw one, and she insisted I attend. The wink she threw in wasn't subtle whatsoever, and I realized that Liam's family

probably knew more about his connection to me than I thought they did.

Tons of people mill about on the street, sidewalks, and lawns out front of the neighborhood of cutesy craftsman homes. Neighbors chatting, children riding bikes or coloring with sidewalk chalk, babies gurgling as they munch on juicy watermelon. Younger couples, some even teenagers, seem to be sneaking off into the trees to do who knows what, while the older generations sit in lawn chairs they've dragged out to people watch and comment on everything.

I like to think that Grandma is looking down on me, proud that I came out to something like this.

"Those donuts are to die for." Cassandra plops down next to me on the grass as I see Patrick walk off with their baby daughter, whispering in her ear as if she understands anything he's saying.

"So freaking good." I nod my head emphatically.

"I'm happy you came out tonight, this is fun. I needed to get out of the breastfeeding trenches, and you needed out of those musty bookshelves." She'd come by the shop today to lend a hand with the last couple of boxes.

And, I don't doubt, to make sure I actually came to the block party and didn't back out last minute.

"Did you do a lot of partying when you were in Hollywood?" The question is out of the blue, but I don't feel like getting into my personal life right now.

It's still surreal sometimes that Cassandra Mauer, one of the biggest actresses of our generation, is one of my closest friends. Our friendship is still relatively new in terms of length, but she's one of the kindest, most open people I've ever met. It's influenced me to be more open with people around me. Back home, and all throughout my childhood, I didn't have many close friends. My family's expectations kept me closed off, and voicing my feelings was discouraged, so I rarely did so.

The moment I met Cass, though, she led me into this friendship with a caring hand and open dialogue. For being someone so watched by the media and public, I felt she'd never let any of it taint her view of life or others.

“In the beginning, I guess. It was a lot of industry events and I'd go to network, to meet people. I fell into acting, but after the bug bit me, I wanted as many projects as I could take on. So many people go to those parties to make connections and possibly land jobs, not just to be noticed and written about in the tabloids the next day. After a while though, it gets old. Not all that glitters is really gold. This is, though.”

She points in the direction of the sunset, but I know she's talking about the small-town party on this street. Giving up fame and fortune for Hope Crest might seem ludicrous to some people, but Cass knows the special sauce this place possesses. And I'm not just talking about the sauce that Liam helps make on the farm.

There is something magical about this town.

“I can see that. You got the dream, Cass.” I elbow her, smirking.

“You could have that, too.” She looks at me, and I know she sees what I'm trying to conceal.

“You two want beers?” Alana passes us with a tray of sliders in one hand, a soccer ball in the other.

“Sure.” Cass nods.

“I'm okay, thanks.” I hold up a hand.

Just observing those around me, watching the Ashtons interact, watching the babies giggle, that's enough of a high for me. Plus, I need to keep my wits about me if I'm going to stay away from Liam tonight. Getting drunk and handsy with my secret lover in front of his parents is probably a no-no.

“Hi, Ma.” I hear Evan Ashton across the party as he walks up to kiss his mother on the cheek.

She brushes away something from his forehead with her thumb. The gesture is tender and caring, if not a bit nagging,

but her son seems to enjoy teasing her about it. This kind of effortless family dynamic is so foreign to me that my stomach aches with a desire for a childhood I never had. The Ashtons seem to genuinely like each other despite being bonded by blood, which is something I have never experienced.

After a string of bullshit guilt-trip texts where my mom included my siblings in the group as if to make an example of me, I finally had to silence our family group chat. No one even responded to her or stood up for me, just took note of her digital shaming. It was a beatdown on my mental health, and every time she sent them, it felt like a setback of the life I'm trying to live for myself. It's been a few weeks since I've heard from anyone, and it's hard but relieving to admit I hope it stays that way.

Watching the Ashtons interact, it's clear that what I grew up in is not healthy.

"I'm thinking of doing something like this for Rebecca's first birthday," Cass muses, and I know she already misses her daughter even though she's only been away from her for two minutes. "I know, I know, she's only six months old. But I want to celebrate every single thing elaborately, even if she can't remember. Not ridiculous, no renting out halls or thousand-dollar cakes or expensive entertainment. But I want this enormous family that we've built in Hope Crest, that also extends to our friends, to be around us for every special occasion. We can throw up a tent in our backyard for all I care, but I want the big party."

"And that's what you should have. Aren't you just so tired of doubting your own intuition? Even if it just has to do with a one-year-old birthday party? Gosh, I know I am. It's like I turned thirty and wondered why I was always second-guessing myself. Just make the gut decisions you want to, and if it turns out horribly, you get through that, too."

Am I giving advice that I'm not actually taking? Yes. But at least I can tell the truth, even if I'm not applying it.

"Jeez, you're so right. I moved here thinking I could care so much less about what the world thought, and I still factor

that into my decisions without realizing it. That's that, we're having a one year blowout bash."

"And I'll be there with bells on." I high-five her.

"I never actually understood that saying." She chuckles. "I mean, I guess I do, but it sounds funny."

Before I can agree with her, her husband comes over to whisk her away. A band just set up on the street, and a makeshift dance floor has emerged. Couples shuffle together, smiling and singing as the drum beats hit.

Cassandra puts Rebecca in a carrier on her chest, the baby giggling while her mom dances, and Patrick envelops the two of them. They all sway, the smiles on their faces absolutely lovestruck and ridiculous.

Jealousy swamps my body like I'm drowning in it.

I skirt around the crowd forming and fall back to the refreshments area, observing but not participating. Isn't that always my lot in life?

"Wish you could be out there dancing with me right now, huh?" a gruff voice sneaks up behind me.

My back is still to Liam, but I turn my neck to see his handsome face out of the corner of my eye. To anyone else, it looks like two Hope Crest residents talking at the little coffee table Alana set up on the sidewalk. To me, it's a secret tryst that feels scandalous out in the open like this.

"You probably don't dance." I chuckle quietly because Liam Ashton on a dance floor would be a sight to behold.

"For you I would." He shrugs, filling up a paper cup with hot brown liquid.

My heart flutters. It's such a romantic notion, this man giving up something that is probably, usually, non-negotiable to him. For me.

"Come on, beautiful, let me take you for a spin." His fingers brush lightly against my elbow, and I have to squeeze my eyes shut at the desperate urge to wrap my arms around him.

“Not here.” My voice is low, both with the need to keep us hidden and the shame I feel at rejecting his offer.

Even if I’m not looking directly at him, Liam’s disappointment is palpable.

God, I’m a coward. We’ve been sleeping together for months, have been essentially exclusively dating for a number of weeks, and still, I’m too chickenshit to claim any of it in public. Part of me still thinks I’ll be labeled with a scarlet letter for taking up with him.

“All right.”

I know, before I turn around, that he’s gone, and my heart drops to my feet. Fuck, I’m such an idiot. A gutless idiot. For the first time in my life, a man who I want to show me off to his family offered to do so, and I’m turning him down at every attempt.

Suddenly, I can’t feel more out of place. Among all these people who love freely, laugh openly, and seem to have this path they are sure about, I will forever be the odd one out.

So, after saying my goodbyes to Alana and Cass and hoping to God I don’t run into Liam, I steal away from the party like a thief in the night. Except the only things I’m escaping with are my foolish standards and misguided values.

An hour after I leave the party, there is a knock on my front door.

I can’t say I wasn’t expecting it. Liam might not like to talk, and he might hate conflict in a lot of situations, but when it comes to us, he seems to always be the one dumping our issues out in the open between us.

His large hands are braced on the doorframe when I open up, and those gray eyes assess me wearily.

“Is this always what I’ll be relegated to? Showing up in the night, long after the public displays could have been had?” The rough voice is full of emotion.

“Liam, I didn’t know what to do. I’m ...”

We stare at each other as all my insecurities about us rear their ugly heads.

“All I want is you, Gabrielle. You’re the woman I want to introduce to my family, the only woman I’ve ever wanted to bring around them. I want to hold my girlfriend’s hand in public and not worry that she’ll try to bolt.”

Taking a deep breath, I wave him inside. He follows, but only so much as to stand in the foyer.

“I’m trying, I swear, I’m adjusting. It’s just taking me awhile. It freaked me out when you wanted to go so public today before I’ve ever been to a family gathering. Maybe we could start small, just like that space we talked about you giving me. I can’t just jump right in as much as I’d like to. I want you too, I just ... I’m trying. I don’t know what else to say.”

Liam drops his head and a beat passes. I’m almost sure he’s about to call this off.

Until he reaches for my hand and laces our fingers together.

“It feels like I’ve been waiting so long for this, that all I want to do is dive in headfirst and make up for all the time we’ve lost. But I get it. I know why you’re cautious. I’m sorry. I got in my head about it all and I told you I’d give you space—”

“I’m sorry, too,” I whisper, stepping into him. “I wish I could just stop overthinking, but it doesn’t work like that.”

“I know.” Liam brushes the side of my face with his fingertips.

“We’re going to work it all out, okay? I’m trying, Liam.”

“I know we will.”

We’re stuck at an impasse of wanting more but not allowing ourselves to have it. Or at least I’m not allowing us. But I hope he can hang on enough until my head catches up with my heart.

“Come to bed with me?” I ask, knowing we both know that means something way more than sex.

Being in the comfort of his arms is the only way I want to end the day.

“There is no way I could leave you now.”

We both know he means something way more than just tonight when he says that.

My phone buzzes on Gabrielle's nightstand as I watch her in the bathroom applying her nighttime skincare.

I'm lucky she even let me in when I came over half-cocked, ready to demand she let me in at a pace she isn't ready for. Per usual, her openness surprised me, and here I am under her sheets as she performs a ritual I'm blessed to even get to watch.

Alana's name pops up, and it's later than my sister usually calls, so I don't send it to voicemail. Even if I realize my girl is about to come to bed in an oversized T-shirt, and I'm pretty sure she has no underwear on beneath it.

Dammit, my family has the worst timing.

"Why are you calling me so late?" My grouch side comes out full force.

"Hello to you, sunshine. It's not that late. Not for those of us who wake up at the ass-crack of dawn."

"Are you seriously making fun of me for getting up to run the farm that produces the food that pays your paycheck?" She can't see me, but my eyebrows are raised.

Alana huffs on the other end. "Fine, fine. But I had to tell you something, and I didn't think it should wait until morning. I just texted you the video."

Putting my phone on speaker as I go to my messages, open up Alana's, and see that she has indeed sent me a video to some social media site I don't subscribe to.

“Oh, what the hell is this? You sent me some stupid meme or whatever and had to call me about it?” Social media and I are not friends.

“Of course not, you idiot. Open the video and watch it.”

“I don’t even have that app,” I whine, not wanting to log into something.

“My God, you’re a caveman. Just open the video in a browser, and it’ll play by itself without the app.”

“If you say so.” I do as she says, and the video does, in fact, pop up.

On the screen is a young girl, maybe in her twenties, and she holds up one of our sauce jars. The caption to the videos reads, “Need a dupe for this expensive sauce? I just found one!”

“What is this?” I say out loud, but Alana doesn’t answer.

I think she figures I haven’t finished it. The girl goes on to explain to whoever she’s talking at the screen to that our sauce is just so expensive but tastes *bomb*, in her words, and she’s found a sauce that tastes exactly like it.

The minute I hear that, my blood goes cold. Because no one’s sauce tastes like ours. She then demonstrates the similarities between our sauce and some pizzeria in Philly called Duomo’s Oven. How they’re both tangy but sweet with a hint of zest. How their tomato sauce almost has this rustic flavor.

The girl then goes on to detail that this other restaurant is only selling the jars out of their own kitchen, so if you’re in the area to grab them, but they’re not retail yet.

“What the fuck is that?” I press the phone back to my ear, feeling a chill go up my spine.

“I thought the exact same thing. It just popped up on my feed as I was scrolling, and the video is only from two days ago. But it felt off.”

“We just put the new security system in,” I grit out, not that this has anything to do with that.

“It could just be they taste really similar. We’ve had comparisons like this before, there have been a ton who have tried to copy our sauce. There are hundreds of videos like this out there.”

“Just not one popping up after I found those ruined rows.” Internally, I’m trying to stop myself from reacting as if this is the worst possible case.

“Who is it?” Gabrielle scoots in beside me and lays her head on my chest.

“My sister.” I mouth, not wanting Alana to get nosy and ask what I’m doing here.

Gabrielle picks up her phone and scrolls while I finish my call, but I love how she keeps us connected. I love that she’s become comfortable enough to do her little routines in front of me or that we can lie in bed doing different things while holding hands. The things that real, longtime couples do.

“I know, Warren said the same thing. I say we keep an eye on this place, I can even go out and maybe try a slice to compare, but we’ll keep it on our radar. We’ve got the new system, I’ll put an alert for that restaurant’s name in my media channels, and we’re doing all we can do.”

“Right. We are.” I’m trying to convince myself as much as she is.

“Just thought you’d want to know. Sorry to cause you the anxiety. But say hi to Gabrielle for me.” Alana giggles on the other end.

“How the hell did you know I was here?” I blurt out, too raw to keep secrets right now.

“Are you kidding me? You literally whistled at the restaurant when I was there this week. *Whistled*, Liam. All of us have known for weeks, you’re a horrible liar. Or keeper of any secret. That’s why no one tells you shit.”

I harrumph at being caught and for having a flaw pointed out to me. “Yeah, yeah. Thanks for ruining my night. Sweet dreams.”

We hang up, and the video plays repeatedly in my head.

“What’s going on? Everything okay?” Gabrielle is now sitting up beside me, and I reach under that T-shirt to confirm my assumption about the panties.

“Goddamn, I knew it. And I can’t even enjoy it due to my annoying sister.” My scowl deepens.

Gabrielle chuckles. “Enjoy later. Tell me what’s bothering you.”

Pulling up the video on my phone, I let her watch it. Gabrielle presses play twice, seemingly scrutinizing it, and then hands it back to me.

“Sometimes a coincidence is just a coincidence, Liam,” Gabrielle suggests, though I know she’s also trying to calm me down.

But something niggles at my brain that this isn’t that. “I know that. But this feels weird.”

“Maybe it is. Maybe something nefarious is going on, and you have a right to be cautious. I’ve been here for what’s happened to your family. I know how something can snowball into something much more threatening. But for now, I don’t know that this should cause a panic.”

Just touching her, holding her close, is like a balm to my anxious nerves. “You’re right. We’re doing everything we can, it just ... I don’t want to go through another kind of scandal that is dangerous for my family. We’ve worked so hard for our business, to cultivate something of our own and to see that taken under my watch? It’s one of my worst fears.”

She straddles me, taking my face in her hands as my eyes close with worry.

“I get that. You shouldn’t have to protect it so fiercely, but there are bad people in this world. That’s the case anywhere. You can only control what you can control.”

“Like the fact that a perfect woman is sitting on me half-naked right now?” I want to change the subject terribly, so my hands slide up until they’re toying with her nipples.

“Take this shirt off and she’ll be fully naked,” Gabrielle husks out, her eyelids hooding as I begin winding her up with my fingers.

Her lips sealing over mine is enough to quiet my brain, especially when I do strip her naked and flip her over to devour the taste between her legs. Being inside Gabrielle makes the outside world disappear until it’s just us two inside this bedroom, nothing else existing. When my hands are tangled in her hair, and she’s whispering in my ear about how incredible I make her feel, I don’t have a worry in the world.

It’s not until we’re satiated and about to slip into a dreamlike state, her wrapped up in my arms, that the thoughts of worry filter in. And the preparations I’ll need to take to protect my family at all costs once more.

The bridge is nearly empty at this time of the morning, and I'm almost thankful that Liam made me get out of bed at the crack of dawn.

"There is nothing like bridging the line between two states when the sun comes up." He holds my hand as the murky blueish sky becomes lighter and lighter.

"This is gorgeous. We should come out here on a boat sometime." The morning breeze is cool off the water, even in the summer, but I revel in the way it's making me feel alive.

"My Nonno used to do that with me when I was a kid."

"Really ... he fishes, too?" I smirk, squeezing his hand.

Overhead, some birds squawk, and a car drives over the bridge next to us. Liam suggested walking the bridge between Pennsylvania and New Jersey when we both woke early this morning, and since it was close to five a.m., I didn't think we'd be seen by anyone. A date in Hope Crest, if one considers this a date, is a small step to becoming more public like Liam wants. Even if no one sees it.

"Not since he passed. It really wasn't my favorite thing, but I loved doing it because he did. He'd get so excited to set up our tackle boxes and pick out snacks to bring on the boat. The act of sitting in quiet solitude with him was what I liked best about it."

A shimmer of compassion passes through my gut. I'm not sure why, but it feels special that Liam is letting me in about

someone as close to him as his grandfather.

“Was he a lot like you in that way? Cherished his silence?” Because I can see it without ever meeting his grandfather.

“Yes, I’d say he was the family member most like me. We understood each other, and he made me feel less alone whenever I’d feel or react in a certain way. When you grow up around people who don’t operate like you do, no matter how much I love my family, it can be like you’re some alien who is wrong in your emotions.”

“Damn, does that resonate.” I snort.

“How so?” The question sounds like one of genuine curiosity.

Shrugging, I try to put it into words. “My family and I just ... we never see eye to eye. They’re so foreign to me in a way I’ve never been able to comprehend. While I love them, because I know I’d do anything they asked in a crisis, I just ... we aren’t the same. They’re cold and unaffected in situations where I openly weep. They brag and boast while I’d rather just sit quietly and enjoy experiences with them. Sometimes it feels like I was born into the wrong place with the wrong people, as bad as that sounds.”

“It doesn’t sound bad, it sounds honest. It also sounds like you finally decided not to attempt turning yourself into one of them?”

Beneath us, the river runs over rocks that look shallow enough to step on. Idly I wonder if Liam would ever want to go tubing with me.

“Finally. Just a little too late. I wish I had more time with Lucy to discover more about her. My ties to my nuclear family kept me from her for a long time.” It’s one of my greatest regrets in life.

“Why wasn’t your family close to your grandmother?” he wonders aloud as we reach the line.

Liam plants one foot in Pennsylvania, the other in New Jersey, and then ushers me to stand in front of him and do the

same. Once I do, he pulls me back against his chest as his arms band around my upper half.

“I’m not quite sure. She and my mother never really got along, more of that unlike people being paired together because they’re family. But instead of letting us experience all types of different people, my parents kept us very close. Anyone who had a different type of thinking than theirs was deemed irrelevant or almost like a threat. And my grandmother was apparently part of that group to them. It’s hard not to hold it against them now that she’s gone.”

He nods into the side of my face. “That’s easy to hold on to. But they might have done you a favor. Had you not finally woken up to all that, you might not be here. And something tells me that Grandma Lucy meant for you to be right here, right now.”

His finger directs my attention in front of us, where the sun begins to rise on the river. Orange sunbursts combine with red rays, pink clouds, and hints of purple as they all streak through the sky. The palette before us looks like something no human could ever recreate to the perfection the sky does every day. Nature’s painting steals my breath and has me leaning back into Liam to make sure we’re connected in a moment that feels so special, even though it occurs every twenty-four hours.

“You think your nonno is up there shining this down on us, too?” I whisper, watching one of the simplest wonders of the earth with him.

“Probably up there growling about how early it is, but how the fish don’t bite well at any other time of day. And he’s definitely made those angels buy him a decent espresso machine, because he was cranky as hell if his coffee wasn’t up to snuff.”

We laugh quietly together, but I hear the sadness tinging Liam’s chuckle.

“I’m so sorry you lost him.”

“I am, too. It took me a long time not to be so fucking mad about it.”

Turning, I hold him now, trying to give him the same comfort he gave me when we were talking about Lucy.

“My nonno was my best friend. When I lost him, it felt like I’d lost the one person who really understood me. It’s taken me quite a few years to adjust to the fact that I need to let other people in, to give them the same chance I gave him as I grew into a man.”

“And how is that working out for you? Letting others in?”

He leans down to ghost a kiss over my lips. “I’d say pretty damn good. You should try it sometime.”

“Noted.” I squeeze him in a hug, relishing this connection we’ve discovered.

We’re two people who were impacted in very different but very profound ways by their grandparents. And it feels like both are standing on this bridge with us, guiding us gently along whenever we need them.

“I want you to join me for family Sunday dinner this week,” he says as the rays of the sunrise shine on our faces.

The brightness seems to warm my bones as well as my heart. “I would love that.”

“Really?” I feel Liam’s stare bore into mine.

“What? Did you think I’d say no?”

He chuckles deep in his throat. “I thought it would definitely be much harder to convince you.”

“I think you’re learning to speak my language, Ashton.” The tease comes with a light elbow to the gut.

Those skilled lips press gently to my temple. “Let me become fluent and I’ll never speak in any other dialect.”

Aside from the farm, the restaurant, and my home, the farm and feed store is one of my most frequented locations.

I'm here once or twice a week to pick up this or that, even though we have a shit ton of supplies, tools, machinery, and whatever else we need on the farm. But, as is life, we're always missing some key element that I have to run a last-minute errand for.

Since I started shopping here as a kid with my nonno, I'm used to bumping into the other local farmers and chitchatting about the weather, harvest schedules, crop ratios and yields, and just about everything else that is riveting to me but would probably bore the hell out of my siblings.

Which is why it's strange for me to see Dan Quillin here on a Tuesday afternoon when I know he's usually up to his elbows in cow's milk. After a while, you come to learn the schedules and tasks of the others in your profession in the area.

"Dan, what're you doing here?" With the desired hammer in my hand, because Alana somehow keeps coming by the farm to steal the brand I buy and like, I reach out the other one to shake his.

His old, tired eyes grow shifty and tense, like he can't hold himself together or something. "Ah, Ashton, good to see you."

That doesn't answer my question, nor does he take my hand in greeting. A sense of awareness prickles up my scalp because I've known this guy for years. Decades. He's a solid dairy farmer who sticks to his word and is usually no-nonsense. He's glib, like me, most of the time, but if I get him talking whey and curd, he'll go on for hours.

"Yeah, everything okay? Isn't today one of your main milking days?"

That wrinkled, weathered face that looks like it's seen years of sun appears downright exhausted. "It used to be."

A sinking feeling consumes my gut. Looking around, I see it's relatively empty in the store today, so I step closer.

"Is something going on with the farm?"

While we're all completely dedicated to our craft, this is a passion for each and every farmer in this area, and it's not uncommon that sometimes things go sideways. Whether it be financial, like the cost to harvest, the economy effecting our sales to the food industry, or bad seasons affecting outputs, there is always risk in operating a farm. This life is tough, it's hard work, and we're not always rewarded. Even when we are, it could be in a minor way, and you have to turn around to repeat the process all over again.

I've seen the nicest, most determined people fall victim to something out of their control, and those were agriculture families that spanned generations. Dan comes from the like, but he looks about tapped out as he stands in front of me.

"Half my land was just zoned to be demolished for that state highway they want to extend. They want to build that road right over the property my family has owned since before I was born. Just take it. I won't be able to produce with what they're leaving me with, nor will our farm thrive if it's set up right next to all that noise, pollution ... you get the drift. I have no choice." His voice is hoarse as he tells me this, as if he's trying to hold back tears.

"There has to be something we can do. My nonno established that coalition a while back, right? We could try to

get that group together again, try to fight them—”

“It’s no use, Liam. I’ve tried everything, talked to counsel, sought other options. They’re taking my farm, and there is nothing more I can do about it.”

Shock, anger, sympathy, and so many other emotions wrap around my throat like a hand squeezing my air supply.

“But they’re paying you? For the land, the house?” Where will he go if he’s not going to keep working on the half they leave him?

He nods, rolling his eyes. “Yes, I suppose I should be grateful.”

We both know he’s anything but. “What are you doing here then?”

“Just trying to get some supplies while I still can, make the most of the herd and potential sales I have left to pad my bank account before the one thing I’ve ever loved is ripped from me.”

From what I can recall, Dan never married. He has no children. Aside from the extended family who help him run the farm, he doesn’t have anything else.

“I can’t believe that. It makes me furious.” My hands ball into fists because it shouldn’t be allowed for someone to just take his land.

Even if the road is necessary, I see red when it comes to thinking about any of my property being taken from me.

“Of course it does, but at least you get the luxury of that while still maintaining your pride and joy. You wouldn’t understand. You’re an Ashton. No way they’d ever do this to you.” If I’m not mistaken, there is some malice in his voice.

And something about his body language is alerting me in a way I can’t pinpoint, but it’s probably his anxiety and stress causing him to act skittish.

“Dan, I didn’t mean to—”

“Whatever, Ashton. Like I said, don’t worry about your land. They’ll never take it. I’m just another casualty while you and your family will succeed for lifetimes to come.”

With an angry stomp, Dan marches away from me, his supplies and future purchases forgotten as he haphazardly discards them to the floor. The jingle of the bell above the door barely registers past my shock, because while I wouldn’t call us friends, Dan has never acted so hostile toward me.

But I see what he’s saying; he’ll blame anyone and anything to ease his pain at the moment. Lashing out isn’t uncommon; I’d probably do the same thing if I were in his shoes.

Bending to retrieve the number of goods he left on the floor, I put them all back in their correct spots to save the shop owners the trouble.

After buying what I need and getting in my truck, I head for the farm. Even though I get to drive home to our land, which is intact and safe, I can’t shake the uneasy feeling Dan Quillin left me with or the thought that something like that could come for us someday.

“They already love you. You don’t need to worry about anything.”

“You’re the most sullen of the bunch, so I guess charming anyone else won’t be the lift it usually is with you. But I’m not nervous about *who* is in there, I’m just worried about ... the whole meeting the family thing is something I’ve never done.”

I blink at Gabrielle, who won’t stop tapping her shoe on my parent’s front porch. “Wait, never?”

“I told you, I haven’t dated all that much, and nothing was long term.”

“I guess I knew that, but I just thought ...” I don’t know what to say.

Do I want to celebrate that she’s never gone home to another guy’s family? Absolutely. Do I also love, in a caveman kind of way, that I’m going to be her first in so many ways? Yes.

But voicing both of those sounds so possessive that I stop myself.

“That I’m so old I must have met some guy’s parents already?” She cringes.

“Oh, fuck, no, I didn’t mean that at all.” My hands come to her shoulders as if I’m trying to tell her my motives via osmosis. “You know I don’t think about that at all. I just ... I was being a total asshole thinking that I love that my family is going to be the only one you ever meet.”

Gabrielle bites her lip in a nervous way, but her voice is all sarcasm. “Who said you’ll be the last guy whose family I meet?”

“If I have any say in it, mine will be.” The look I give her is earnest because we both know this is something more than just casual dating.

Blinking at me once more, she laces her hand in mine and turns to the door with a deep breath. “Let’s do this.”

“They’re going to love you,” I reiterate again.

Pushing open the door to my childhood home, I’m greeted with the familiar scents of tomato sauce, vanilla, and the mud from my father’s old rain boots in the front hallway. My eyes immediately go to the nook under the staircase right in front of us, where Alana, Patrick, Evan, and I used to play hide-and-seek as kids. As we walk, I’m greeted by the scratch on the dining room table put there by a hockey stick that Alana flung when she was trying to kill a wasp in seventh grade. After that comes the saloon-style doors on the kitchen entry that Patrick once knocked down by sliding in to them at full speed when we were all playing tag in our bathing suits.

This house holds so many memories that bombard me as soon as I step foot inside. Most of them good, but then there are the ones that remind me of Nonno, and a tinge of sadness creeps in. Putting them out of my mind, we walk farther into the house as noise erupts in the kitchen.

“Ah, there’s my family.” I smirk at her and then roll my eyes.

“My boy, come in here. We were just trying to settle a debate about whose soap box car went faster in the derby when you were kids.” Dad’s voice hits me first as I walk in to my entire family huddled around the island.

Even though Mom and Nonna pretend it annoys them to high heaven that we all crowd in here as they’re trying to cook, I know they secretly love it. It’s always at least five to ten degrees warmer in the kitchen than any other place in the

house, and I'm not surprised my dad and brothers are already a beer deep.

"Mine was so good, I calculated its measurements and built it to standard size. Evan's almost flew off the course, remember?" Patrick all but pats himself on the back.

"All I remember is that Alana was working the lemonade stand and I bought so many I nearly peed my pants." Warren looks at my sister like she hung the moon.

"Stop trying to make us all look bad," I chime in, hugging my brother-in-law even though he's being mushy as fuck. "And you're all wrong. I won because I spent three months building an exact replica of a soap box car I saw in a racing magazine. Dad presented me with the medal and we all didn't care which Ashton beat each other because at least it meant those older kids who toilet-papered the house once were losers."

"Yes! That's right." Patrick high-fives me like we're all back in elementary school, winning all over again for the first time.

"You guys are idiots," Alana murmurs, and Nonna chuckles as she stirs something on the stove.

"Look who showed up ... Miss Murphy." Evan whistles low under his breath.

I cut him a look like I might murder him if we weren't about to sit at our mother's dinner table. The whole room turns to look at Gabrielle, who has been standing behind me in the shadows of the hallway this entire time, and she gives a little wave.

"Hi, everyone. Liam invited me to dinner tonight, I sure hope that's okay." Her voice is all nerves.

Cass jumps up to greet her friend, enveloping her in a hug. "Of course, it's okay. If it means Liam won't bitch about half the stuff he usually does, I'm all for it."

"Thanks for the support, Cass." I shake my head at my sister-in-law.

“Good to have you, Gabrielle.” Patrick hugs her next and raises an eyebrow at me in approval over her shoulder as they embrace.

“It’s not like we don’t all know her.” Alana chuckles, coming in for the next hug.

Sheesh, my family is welcoming her with open arms when they usually bemoan my attitude.

“Well, I don’t.” Dad steps up, and I straighten a bit.

Rationally, I know my father will be nothing but kind to Gabrielle. He learned his lesson with Cassandra when he was less than nice to one of his son’s future partners. But it’s a significant moment, me bringing a woman home to meet my family. What I didn’t tell Gabrielle on the porch is that I’ve never brought anyone home either or met a woman’s family myself. This is a big step, but I didn’t want to put even more pressure on her with that knowledge.

“Mr. Ashton, it’s nice to meet you. Well, formally. I guess I’ve eaten or taken out at your restaurant and seen you around town quite a lot, so—”

“To you it’s Thomas, none of this Mr. Ashton stuff. We’re so happy you’re here.” He shakes her hand and gives her his best smile.

“Laying it on a little thick, yeah, Dad?” Evan mocks him.

“He’s overdoing it after what he did to Cass,” Patrick says, and although I know he’s mostly joking, I think it might still be a sore spot.

“Who I love more than some of my own kids, now.” He reaches for Cassandra’s hand and squeezes it.

“Not fair.” Alana pouts. “You like your in-law kids better than us.”

“Well, it’s not my fault they’re so kind, sweet to me, and tend to side in my favor. That bodes well for you, Gabrielle.” Dad winks at her.

My woman throws her head back and laughs. The reaction shocks me for a moment because if we’re both translating it

the same way, she thinks Dad will like her more once she's his daughter-in-law. Meaning we'll end up together.

Thoughts swirl inside my head that include weddings and homes and a future I want so desperately, I can taste it.

"Wait, the young woman who used to be a teacher and moved back? Isn't that Lucy's granddaughter?" Mom finally comes into the conversation after wiping her hands off on her apron.

"Lucy?" Nonna asks, eyeing me like I've been keeping secrets from her.

"Everyone, this is Gabrielle Murphy. Yes, she used to teach here. But she hasn't in a long time, and she moved back to close down her grandmother Lucy's old bookstore after she passed. She and I have been seeing each other, and I care very deeply for her. So be nice, or I'll gut you."

"There's our disgruntled asshole." Evan points at me. "Plus, she's way prettier than you. I'd never be mean to someone so pretty."

"Cut it out, idiot," I growl at my brother.

Even though I know he's joking, the jealousy monster in me claws to get out of my chest.

"Gabrielle, I'm so happy you're joining us for dinner. And happy that you make my son so happy. For once, I think I've seen more smiles on Liam's face than scowls in a week, and I bet I have you to thank for that."

"Gross, Ma," Evan mumbles, and I elbow him in the ribs.

To his credit, Patrick also gives our younger brother a side-eye at his innuendo. Thankfully, no one else seems to hear it. And when Mom leaves the room after plopping a chaffing dish in Gabrielle's arms, I make everyone hang back to give them time.

Well, except for me, who sneaks around the corner to listen as they set the table.

"I've seen you once or twice at the theater with Cassandra, and I always meant to say hi, but something always distracted

me. I'm sorry about that, it wasn't very neighborly of me. Especially for someone so important to my son. I'm sorry about your grandmother. Lucy was a strong and kind woman, and I very much enjoyed the conversations I had with her over the years." My mother's voice conveys sympathy.

It strikes me that she knew Gabrielle's grandmother better than I did. "I'd love to hear about those conversations some time. Please, don't apologize. I try to keep a low profile in town, being relatively new and not knowing a lot of people. I'm just thankful to be here tonight, your house feels like such a warm home."

"It is, filled with decades of happy memories, some of which I'm sure will be argued around this table tonight. Tell me, are you happy to be back in Hope Crest?"

While I'm sure Gabrielle was most nervous to meet my mother tonight, this couldn't be going better. Of course it is, this is the most amazing woman I've ever met, meeting the other most amazing woman I've ever known. She's holding her own in this house full of my crazy family members, not that I ever doubted she would.

"I am. It's such a charming place, and I love being somewhere that feels so warm and friendly. Every time I walk down the street, at least five people say hi to me, and they barely know me." Gabrielle chuckles. "I just wish it could have been sooner or before my grandmother passed. I would have loved to have seen the bookshop in its best shape."

"It was such a beautiful little store. I took my children there nearly every Easter to pick out books for each other's baskets."

I'd forgotten about that until now, a tradition we hadn't done since we were kids and still believed in that magic bunny. Hearing her talk to my girlfriend about it makes me want to do the same things with my kids one day.

"But you're loving working at the theater? What's the next production?" Mom is always the best at making others highlight the best parts of themselves.

“I do. The classes are so much fun to teach. I always liked working with kids, but this is in a way that I’m actually passionate about. It took me kind of rearranging my life a bit to realize that, but I’m happier where I am than I have been in a while. I guess a lot of that has to do with Liam.”

The smile in her voice is everything. I might be peeping around the corner, but chills break out on my skin at Gabrielle’s words to my mother.

“My oldest son is a very special man, and only a woman wise enough to see that would be the right one for him.” My mom speaks from experience, having dealt with my moody ass for all these years. “Which is why I’m glad he met you.”

“It’s rude to eavesdrop, Liam.” I feel the *thwack* of a kitchen towel on my back and turn to see Nonna bringing a dish into the dining room.

“Not when I really want my family to love the woman I’m dating,” I whisper back.

My grandmother stops in her tracks. “You already know that. Any woman you bring here has an automatic A plus stamped on her. Because it’s you, Liam. You have some of the most shrewd judgment I’ve ever seen. Any woman you fall in love with will have to be damn near perfect. Saintlike, in our books. Gabrielle is wonderful.”

She leaves me there with my jaw hanging open. Are these people determined to make me cry tonight? I don’t fucking cry.

Though the women in my life seem hellbent on making it happen at this dinner.

“All right, dinner is ready! Everyone sit!” Mom commands, and everyone shuffles into the dining room.

I make sure Gabrielle is seated next to me as I pull her chair out because, knowing my family, they’ll try to steal her away, and I need to be able to hold her hand for the entire meal. Cass is on my other side, with Patrick on the other side of Rebecca’s high chair in between them. Mom and Dad take

the heads of the table, Nonna is on Gabrielle's other side, and then Warren, Alana, and Evan sit across from us.

"Honey, this looks delicious. I don't even usually go for Mediterranean food, but my stomach is rumbling just looking at this." Dad winks at Mom across the table, and she blushes.

Decades together, and they're still more in love than most couples I've seen. It's what I've always aspired to when I considered whether I'd ever get married.

"God, I think hummus might be one of my favorite food groups," Cass gushes.

"Same. A little garlic, a bunch of cut up peppers, and leave me alone with it." Gabrielle giggles, scooping some onto her plate.

"I never thought I'd meet someone who loved this kind of food more than August." Alana sighs, and I know she misses the waitress who has worked at the restaurant since high school.

"How is Auggy doing?" I ask, genuinely curious about how she's fairing at college.

August is doing an accelerated program at her university, where she attends throughout the year in trimesters instead of getting the summers off so that she'll be able to graduate in three years. When a full tuition scholarship came through in the nick of time before she graduated high school, the usually sullen and downtrodden girl had brightened like someone finally getting their shot.

"Her first semester went amazingly well, and every time we talk, she seems like a different person." Warren beams, pride glowing from him.

He was somewhat of a role model to August, also having a dark past that he rose above.

"I miss that girl, but watching her spread her wings is a beautiful thing." Mom clears her throat as if this is making her emotional.

“Why do you guys like her more than me?” Evan rolls his eyes.

I can't tell if he's joking or not, but it isn't like he understands our bond with August. He was mostly gone while she was working at the restaurant for the last couple of years.

“Because we do.” Alana ends the discussion with a smug smile.

We all serve and help each other get a little bit of what is on each dish, and then the table goes silent as we chow down.

“Holy wow.” Patrick groans, nodding at my mom emphatically.

A while back, we made our parents promise that Sunday dinner would be anything other than Italian food. You know, since we eat it practically every other day of the week. Whether we cook it at home or takeout, it just can't be what we serve in the restaurant.

“I think you need to open another restaurant,” Gabrielle compliments my mother.

Mom chuckles. “Over my dead body. My hair is already gray from all the years I put in at this one. No, we're good with one. But thank you for the vote of confidence.”

The conversation then devolves into the best meal any of us have ever eaten. Cassandra wins when she pulls the Hollywood card and tells us about an Oscars after-party dinner she was once invited to.

“Gabrielle, did Liam ever tell you about the time he got drunk on wine coolers and accidentally locked himself in the barn?” Evan gleams an evil smile, butting in with his tattletale little antics.

Beside me, Nonna snickers, and everyone around the table starts to laugh. My littlest brother found me in the morning, passed out in my underwear in the hay. Which is something I definitely didn't need my girlfriend to know about.

“Did I ever tell you all about the time Evan fell off the roof trying to sneak Jill Mareno out his window?” I fire back, not

one to let my little brother get away with shit.

Out of all my siblings, Evan and I have the most tension. I love him like crazy, but he's a little asshole when he wants to be. Which is always. Being the oldest and the youngest means we have this weird competition that neither of us ever seems to define.

"Evan Ashton!" Mom gasps, not prepared for it to come out that her baby has a bad boy streak.

Evan points a finger in my direction. "Not fucking cool, dude."

"*Language,*" Dad warns him.

"Or the time that Liam lost a bet about a football game and had to wear a pink visor to work in the fields for two weeks straight." Evan giggles, not deterred by our parents scolding him.

"Hey, I looked damn good in that visor." I point my fork at him.

"I'm sure you did." Gabrielle presses a kiss to my cheek.

This is all I can ask for; my family ragging on each other as I sit next to the woman who is quickly becoming my everything, holding her hand under the table during dinner as my grandmother talks about memories from growing up in the restaurant, while Alana and Warren chat with her about the theater's next production.

"Boys, will you clear and bring in dessert?" Mom turns to Patrick and me, and of course, we oblige.

My brother gets to clearing the dishes as I break out the dessert plates and spoons, then hit the drip button on the coffee pot.

Just as I'm about to enter the dining room with the first of several cakes Mom baked, my phone goes off. And the notification is from the security company Cass set me up with.

"What's wrong?" Patrick asks as soon as he sees my face, another one of the cakes in his hands.

“I got an alert from one of the cameras out on the farm.” I look down at my phone, studying the video.

“Let’s go.” Evan jumps up like he’s ready to go to war.

Around the table, everyone begins to rise. We all know the kind of danger this can cause, and I’d say my family is spooked after what has happened to us in the last two years.

“Hold on a second, we should alert the company, go over the video ...” Dad steps in as the voice of reason.

“Except what if whoever it is didn’t leave yet? We should go out there.” Warren puts in his two cents.

“No, I don’t want you going out there.” Alana places a hand over his heart.

“Get the BB guns. Mom has a Taser in the drawer in the hall. Grab them both. Then we’re going out.” I make the executive decision because there is no way I am letting someone come onto our land and mess with us again.

“This confirms someone really is trying to steal our crops, right?” Cassandra’s voice wavers as she holds Rebecca close.

“It’s going to be okay. Let’s call the authorities while they go out.” Gabrielle goes over to rub Cassandra’s back.

Mom joins them, offering to take the baby so Cass can breathe for a moment. “That’s a good idea.”

My eyes connect with Gabrielle’s, and I see real fear there. Not caring that this room is full of my family members, I cross to her and take her into my arms, pressing a kiss against her temple as I breathe her in.

“Be careful, okay?” she whispers.

And this is why I love her; instead of telling me not to go and dissuading me from my gut instincts, she gives permission while wanting me to be safe.

I love her. I am in love with this woman, and I need to tell her as soon as I feel she won’t run away from me at the mention of that phrase.

Right now, though, I need to go out and protect what belongs to my family because someday, she'll be a part of this.

"I will." I kiss her once more. "You stay safe in here, okay?"

"I'm just waiting for you, hero." She makes a small joke and it cuts a little of the tension.

Those words are the thing pumping blood to my heart as I head outside with my brothers, not knowing what we're about to encounter.

Somewhere in the distance, past the rows of our crops and through the woods we played in as kids, a coyote howls.

The sound sends a chill through my bones as my father, brothers, Warren, and I walk through our family property, stepping over the plants sprouting up all around us.

Dad looks back at me and points left, signaling that he might hear something further out that way, and we all follow his lead. Using the alert from my security app, I could tell that whatever masked figure was poking about in our fields was toward that corner anyway.

The five of us stalk that way, trying not to make a sound, keeping light to a minimum. My ears perk up like that might give me an extra advantage as adrenaline surges through my veins.

I'm more than acutely aware that every woman I love is sitting in a house not an acre away and that not only has my protective instincts at a level one hundred, but I'm nearly shaking with the rage inside me.

How dare whoever this is come onto my land and threaten my family? How dare they put Gabrielle in danger, especially on the first night I bring her here?

This son of a bitch is about to get what's coming to him or her.

Noises of rustling, stomping, and some mechanical sound I can't place are getting closer, and blood pumps fast in my ears.

Dad supplied me with one of the pepper spray bottles Mom keeps in the house while he has the Taser and the rest of them have BB guns. I have a real gun in a safe in the warehouse we use to house all the farm paperwork and supplies, but it's too risky to head there and use any sort of light or sound.

When I asked why I got the least lethal of all the weapons, each man turned on me with a knowing look. Then Dad spoke and told me they knew I'd have enough fury to take down whoever this was with my fists alone, and I couldn't disagree. When you poked the bear, meaning me, you got the violence.

Suddenly, Warren goes down, tripping on something, and then I hear cursing and thrashing. Shining my flashlight in that direction, I see my brother-in-law tangled up with another figure, and we all rush toward the scuffle.

"Get the fuck off me!" whoever has trespassed onto our land yells.

They're covered in black clothing, a hoodie with dark jeans, and there is a black backpack on the ground next to where Warren tries to subdue whoever this is. I dive in without thinking twice, helping Warren to hold the person down and try to keep him contained.

"Fuck! He bit me!" Warren lurches back, inspecting his arm, and finally, I get a look at who is on the ground.

Brown hair, pale skin, and a scar running across his right cheek that looks old and puckered. I don't know this man, who looks to be younger than me but not of boyish age, and I wonder what the hell has possessed him to break through our security. I wonder what the fuck he's here for.

"Get the ties around him!" Dad orders as the thief struggles to break my hold.

Patrick jumps in and pins his legs down so he can't squirm quite as much, and I squint as Warren puts the zip ties on.

"Who are you?" Dad demands, yelling into the twenty-somethings face the minute Patrick and Warren haul him up.

"Mom says the cops are on their way, should be here in five minutes," Evan reads off from his phone.

“I’m not telling you shit.” The guy spits on the ground, disrespecting my father, and I lunge at him.

“No way.” Dad’s arm shoots out as Evan steps in front of me, and his hands press me back as the heels of my boots dig into the dirt beneath them.

Fury rages through me. “This fuckbag broke into our home, destroyed a portion of our land. What the hell do you want, huh? What are you after?”

I nearly bare my teeth at the guy.

“Liam, calm down,” Patrick warns me.

Even though I can feel the testosterone in the air from my male relatives around me, I seem to be the only one getting so agitated to the point of action. I guess this is what they were talking about when they handed me the measliest weapon.

“Fucking Ashtons,” the thief mumbles, and I swear, I want to pummel him more than my next breath.

It’s not just that he was attempting to take something from us; no, I’m this keyed up because the woman I love more than myself is in the house he can see from right here. What if he’d what if she was out here or something? What if she was alone?

Irrational thoughts run through my head as my brothers and father question the asshole with little success.

“Liam!” I hear Gabrielle’s voice like a shot in the dark, and my spine goes rigid.

A light blinks on at the back porch door, and I’m assuming Evan has been relaying messages to the women inside that it’s okay to come out, even if I don’t think it is. Then again, my little brother isn’t thinking about losing the one woman he’s wanted nearly his entire adult life.

Warren inhales sharply. “Tell her to get inside.”

One look at the asshole thief and he’s smirking. I dare him to make some comment so I can plow my fist into his face, but at the exact moment I’m about to say that, red and blue lights fill the air along with the wail of sirens.

“Go, we’ll bring him around front,” Evan promises me, our eyes connecting.

They start the walk to the front yard, flanking the idiot on all sides as he shuffles his feet, making it more difficult for them to transport him. The squawk of police radios hits my ears, but all I can seem to do is run for Gabrielle, her pale hair illuminated in the moonlight.

“What the hell are you doing out here? I told you to stay inside,” I thunder as I near the back deck.

“Evan said you caught him, and I couldn’t stand waiting another minute. It was stupid, I’m sorry, I just ... if something happened to you ...”

The raw emotion in her voice gives me pause, softening the steely anger in my heart.

“You don’t trust me?” I reach her, pulling her into my arms as I bury my nose in her hair.

Gabrielle clings to me, wrapping her lithe frame to mold with mine as her hands hold on to my hair.

Just the feel of her skin beneath my fingertips has relief coursing through me like a balm.

“More than you know. I just don’t trust anyone else.” That seems to be a theme of our story.

Our bodies continue holding one another as I hear a commotion in the front yard. When I go to pull away from her, Gabrielle tightens and doesn’t let go.

“They have it handled. Let your family help you, you’ve been taking all of this on your own shoulders since it started, and it’s time everyone be involved.”

Dipping down, I capture her lips, needing to taste the plumpness of her bottom one in my mouth.

“I’m not good at giving up control,” I admit, my voice ragged with emotion.

Tonight scared me more than I ever thought possible. As much as I want her, I want the life we could have, and I see

now why my brother and Warren are so protective when it comes to Cassandra and Alana. Thinking about Gabrielle anywhere near harm's way makes me feral.

Those green eyes mirror the moon above, something like warmth and understanding shining up at me, and something inside my chest gives way.

"I love you." It comes out sure and strong, even though I've been afraid to say it for weeks now, scared I'd run her off.

Gabrielle's quick inhale of breath tells me she was not expecting me to say that at all right now. "I tried so hard not to, but dammit, you wore me down, Liam. I love you. I'm so in love with you, it scares me most of the time."

"Thank fuck," I mutter before sealing my mouth over hers.

How could so much bad and so much good happen in the span of one night? In the span of just a few hours?

If this is what life feels like when you finally open yourself up to the possibilities of it, I'll take it. I'll take all the mess and unpredictability if it means I get her.

Never before did I think I'd be riding in the lap of the man I'm in love with while he drives a tractor, but I guess that's what I get for falling for Liam Ashton.

After last night's heart-stopping events, which I'd rather never repeat again, and after waking from a nightmare while sleeping in his arms, I told him I wanted a normal, regular day watching him do what he does.

That was after we were all interviewed by the policeman who put the trespasser in the back of their car. Liam brought me back to his home on the Ashton property, and we made love furiously for two hours before falling into pillow talk until the wee hours of the morning.

The last twenty-four hours have been chock-full of firsts, from meeting his entire family to witnessing a crime to seeing my boyfriend's house for the first time. The log cabin ranch is situated farther back on the outskirts of the acreage his family owns. From what he's told me before, he had it built a number of years ago because he wanted to stay close to the farm while also not being a grown man who lives with his mother anymore. As we neared it in the night, I spotted the neat rows of shrubs and plants that sprouted up in front and beside the charming porch, complete with two red rocking chairs illuminated by the recessed lighting he'd installed overhead.

"You do the landscaping yourself?" I teased.

Liam snorted. "You think I'd let someone else touch my land?"

No, no, I did not. In all the time I've known him, the very first thing I learned about this man is how independent he is. How headstrong. Especially when it comes to the fields and acres passed down through his family.

Which is why I wanted him to bring me out here today. After waking up in his big California king, the dark gray sheets and comforter pooling around us as he lazily explored my naked body, I knew I had to suggest something to take his mind off the current situation. If not, Liam would spend all day stewing in his office, reviewing security footage, and working himself up more. The police have the guy in custody, they'll figure it out, and until then, there is nothing for us to do but sit tight.

"You doing okay, beautiful?" Liam says over my shoulder, but I can barely hear him above the noise of the tractor.

I nod emphatically to let him know I'm more than good. He seems to squirm in the seat, and I feel the unmistakable outline of his hard-on pressed against my ass.

"Right now?" I roll my eyes and laugh.

He shrugs, two thick hands controlling the tractor as he boxes me into his lap. "The sexiest woman I know is sitting in my lap while I drive a powerful piece of farm equipment and she dons my straw hat. Baby, this is my every fantasy come to life."

Leaning back into him, I whisper, "Good to know. Maybe we can reenact this when it gets dark."

A choking noise comes from Liam's throat, and I pat myself on the back for taking his mind off the more threatening issues afoot.

A couple more feet and we come to a stop with him powering off the tractor. I stand to make space for him, and then he helps me climb down until we're standing in the dirt next to rows and rows of crops and plants.

"You do this all by yourself?" I look around in wonder.

Of course, I know how hard those in agriculture work to provide food for this country, but I didn't quite understand it

until I shadowed him today. From inspecting the greenhouse plants that were in the early stages to placing orders for next year's supplies to checking on the growth of vegetables and fruits set to ripen a few weeks from now to coming out here to harvest some more tomatoes ... this is a lot to have on his plate.

"We always hire a bunch of farmhands who rotate throughout the seasons. My family helps out. I definitely don't do it alone, it's a lot of work. But I love it, so I don't much mind when I have to tough it by myself."

I see it in his eyes, his love for this land. The way he observes every tiny leaf and patch of dirt. The way he carefully walks through the rows as I follow, trying to pick up on what he's looking for. There is so much care in his actions, and I have no idea why this man is still single when he's got a heart like the one in his chest, but I'm damn thankful he was before I found him.

His footsteps stop at a particular tomato plant, this one swirling with vines that snake across the ground. All over it are plump red orbs that look ripe for the picking.

"You want to try one?" he asks, producing a pocketknife.

"Please." I grin, remembering the tomato and mayonnaise sandwiches Grandma Lucy would make me as a kid.

She'd always swear those sandwiches tasted best with tomatoes fresh off the vine.

Liam plucks one off, wipes it down with a wet paper towel, then inspects it for a moment before slicing into the flesh vertically in a neat, even cut. He hands me a juicy, dripping piece of the tomato, the sun glistening down on what appears to be the perfect ripeness gleaming up at me.

"Damn, this looks delicious." I wink at him.

"Probably why people are climbing the fences to steal it," he mutters, making a joke. But I know there is frustration behind it.

Ignoring his tossed-out comment, I bite into the slice he gave me and groan. "This tastes like summer."

Liam blinks at me like I've read his mind. "Exactly."

We cheers our half-eaten slices like they're tasty beverages, and I sigh with contentment. Despite all the chaos of last night, I'd trade anything to stand here with him, the sun beating down on us in our dirty, dusty clothes, sharing tomato slices like kids trying not to get caught. It's so simple yet freeing, and I know at this moment that I want a million more of these days with him.

"You told me you loved me last night." I squint up at him as his straw hat falls back a little on my head.

Liam shifts it so that I'm no longer blinded by the light. "And?"

I shrug, not wanting to be that insecure woman who needs to hear it every moment but also being that woman completely.

"I just ... it was a heated moment, and we got swept up. In the light of day—"

"In the light of day, I'm still just as in love with you as I have been since pretty much the moment I first saw you. And before you ask, yeah, that moment was a long time ago. You think I'm not serious, Gabrielle, but I've told you from the start. It was like I was struck by lightning when we first met, and I mean every word I say to you."

God, sometimes when he talks, he damn near steals my breath.

"Never in a million years did I think I'd end up here." I gesture around me.

"In Hope Crest? With me? Or standing in a field eating tomatoes?" The wiseass crooks the corner of his mouth up.

"All the above?" I smirk back.

"Do you want to be here?" There is a weary hope in his voice.

Moving into him, I wrap my arms around his waist. "Nowhere else I'd rather be in this universe."

We sway in the field, the warm breeze whipping around us as Liam holds me and shifts from foot to foot, even though there is no music.

“Will we hear from the police today, you think?” I don’t want to bring it up, but I know it’s on his mind, and he’s avoiding talking about it to try to spare me the ugliness.

“Last I heard was from Dad when he gave us that text update around six a.m. The guy, Nolan Walger, lawyered up. All they could charge him with was trespassing and attempted theft, but he wouldn’t talk about who he is or where he comes from. Dad thinks he’ll be released today to await the trial, which will be so slow to get off the ground. So basically, we still know nothing.”

I read the text from his phone this morning about how this Nolan guy refused to give any explanation. According to the law, that’s fine, and he’ll have to answer in front of a jury after he enters his plea. But Liam is right, that could take ages.

My man gives a frustrated sigh as he slices off more tomato for us. “I just want to know *why*. I could give fuck all about justice or retribution, I want to know *why* he’s doing this. Or who he’s doing this on behalf of.”

That’s the million-dollar question and one that won’t be answered quickly. If he lets it, this will drive Liam mad.

“I know you do, I know that. But right now, we’re all doing exactly what we can. So try to put it out of your mind and put me to work. Let me entertain you with how terrible I’d be at your job if I were to do it.”

Even in his early stages of fury, those gray eyes heat with lust. “I could *definitely* think of many ways to put you to *work*.”

“Get your mind out of the gutter, Ashton. No tractor sex until later.” I munch the last of my tomato and wipe my hands like I’m ready for the next thing.

“We’ll see how long you last, beautiful.”

That sexy bastard has the nerve to roll his eyes and wink at me before thrusting a harvesting crate in my direction.

A week later, Liam insists we meet up with his family at The Laura Inn, their usual drinking spot, for a normal night out.

Not that I don't love the idea of being on his arm, of being a bigger part of the Ashton crew, but something about public dates is still freaking me out. For fuck's sake, I've told the man I love him, yet I still can't get over the idea that one of my former students might see us together.

Still, he's been so pent up these last few days that I know I need to agree to it. Which is how I find myself in the passenger seat of his truck headed for downtown on a Friday night.

Liam's thumb taps on the steering wheel repetitively, and I can tell he's lost in his own world.

Two days ago, Alana and Liam went down to the city to try the pizza from that video they saw, but Liam knew instantly it wasn't the same. The girl who made the video wasn't accurate in her tastebuds, as Liam told me, and it tasted nothing like the Ashton sauce.

So we were back at square one while the cops try to investigate where the trespasser came from or what his end game is. The Hope Crest police so far haven't found any leads to who he might be associated with, and I know it's driving Liam crazy. We're trying to be patient, but with how scary that night was, I know everyone in his family, and the two of us are on edge.

The Laura Inn is lit up in all its glory tonight, with groups chatting at the outdoor tables as we walk inside. As we make our way over to the couches by the fireplace, I feel that strong, warm hand on my back. Immediately, I shrug away from Liam.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just ...” Gesturing to the room around us, full of Hope Crest residents who look to be the same age as Liam, I try to point out that anyone could see.

“We’re all adults, Gabrielle.” He rolls his eyes at me.

“These are your peers,” I whisper-hiss.

“Again with this three-year age gap? It’s ancient history, *goddammit*.” I can tell he’s getting more and more frustrated by the second.

Diverting us from the couch, he nods his head so that I follow him to the hallway by the bathrooms.

“You’re overreacting.” Liam moves toward me, looking like he might put his arms around me as I back away.

Wrong thing to say to a woman in any situation, but especially when she actually is. It only makes me go into hyperdrive in my freak-out.

“I’m not! What if someone says something?”

“What the fuck could they say, baby? That I’m dating a woman who taught here for one year a decade ago? It’s not forbidden, it’s not wrong. Nothing ever happened between us until you moved back to town and I was thirty-two years old. Stop being so damn scared and let me *be* with you.”

If I let him take me back out there, if I let him touch me in front of people, everything I’ve been terrified of could come true. Or ... or we could finally be a real couple, not hiding in the shadows.

With shaky breaths and a resolve to leap and not look, I walk back out, feeling Liam’s presence behind me, then beside me.

He threads his fingers in mine, and I expect the world to shift on its axis. I expect that the residents of Hope Crest will start yelling *shame* at me, that someone will snap a picture to upload to social media with a caption that will call me all sorts of ugly accusations. I assume that I'll be labeled as a horrible person or that they'll protect their lovable Ashton kid.

But none of that happens. No one even glances at us. No, I walk across the room hand in hand with the man I'm falling deeper and deeper in love with.

"Hey, guys." Alana gives me a warm smile as everyone greets us with hugs and offers to buy a round.

"Who is watching the baby tonight?" I ask Cass, pleasantly surprised she and Patrick came out.

"Leona. I swear, if that woman could kidnap her granddaughter, she might." But the way she says it, I can tell she's thrilled to have an involved family in her daughter's life.

"I saw her flipping through photo albums with the baby the other day, as if Rebecca would be able to even comprehend what was going on." Liam chuckles.

Patrick wraps his wife up in a hug as they sit side by side, practically pulling her onto his lap. "She wants to pass on our legacy, and we get a kid-free night alone in our house. I'm all for that."

He nuzzles his face into Cassandra's neck, and I can tell he's whispering something not appropriate for public consumption by the way she blushes.

Liam and I take seats on the couch opposite them as Warren and Alana pull over some more armchairs. Eventually, Wilson shows up, and he, Cass, and I get into a discussion about the greatest running Broadway plays while the rest of the men talk about the latest youth football fields the town is installing.

We're all in a really good mood, drinking casually, and every so often, I feel the press of Liam's lips on my cheek, neck, or hand. It makes me feel cherished and special in this

bar full of people. Each time he does it, my stomach flutters with the love we finally admitted to having for each other.

“Look at Evan trying to score.” Patrick chuckles, nodding his head in the direction of their younger brother.

“Ah, to be young and cocky and irresponsible.” Wilson sighs dramatically like he misses his youth, even though we’re all still young by many standards.

“I wouldn’t want to be in his position on any day,” Liam says confidently as he snakes an arm around my waist. “This is the best seat in the house.”

Alana nearly jokes on her glass of wine. “I’m sorry, did the master of monosyllabic just make what equates to a diehard romantic speech for him?”

“You know, sis, I think he did.” Patrick’s sly smile earns him a middle finger flipped up by Liam.

Joking aside, it feels like a breath of fresh air to be able to be out in public with him like this and admit these feelings to those closest to us.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” I let him know before trying to push off the couch.

“With me?” Liam winks as if I’m trying to do something other than pee in there.

“Not this time, Casanova.” I roll my eyes.

As I leave the group, I hear them start to razz Warren about the newest company holding he discovered after inheriting his late, and very wealthy, adopted father’s business last year.

The bathroom is empty as I pee and readjust my clothes, but a woman sidles up next to me as I wash my hands in the sink, and our eyes connect in the mirror. I give a small smile, just polite public restroom etiquette, then reach for a paper towel off the counter.

“Wait a second, did you teach at Hope Crest by chance?”

Her innocent question makes my stomach drop. “Um, yes.”

She flutters her eyelashes. “Oh my God, you’re Miss Murphy! I had you senior year for math!”

My hands begin to sweat, and a cold bile drips down my throat. I don’t know why I’m freaking out internally, it’s not like most people in this town didn’t know my grandmother or that I taught here. But it’s something about her mannerisms that’s triggering me.

“Well, it’s nice to see you again.” I manage to smile and get the words out without sounding like I’m having a total meltdown.

“Oh, now I get why Liam wasn’t interested in me.” Her short chuckle is haughty and sarcastic. “He’s into cougars.”

My jaw nearly hits the floor. “Excuse me?”

She fluffs her hair and wipes some imaginary lipstick from the corner of her mouth. “I thought it was odd that he never wanted to take me home, but now I know it’s because he’s fooling around with his teacher, right? Must be the scandal in it that gets him hot.”

Holy fuck, she did not just say that. I mean, I know she did, but it seems surreal that one person would talk to another like that.

“I-I ...” Her cruel jabs have rendered me speechless, and I don’t get anything out before she turns on her heel with a vicious smile and walks out of the bathroom.

Part of me wants to crumple to the floor and cry. Part of me wants to give that woman a piece of my mind and tell her to fuck off. Another part wants to hightail it out of this bar, back to the condo, and pack my bags to bolt.

Instead, I brace my hands on the bathroom counter for a few minutes and will myself not to cry while I inhale and exhale deeply. I have not a shred of courage or mental stability as I exit the bathroom, but I know for my own self-preservation that I have to get out of here as quickly as possible.

Scampering back over to where the Ashton family sits, I bend down to tell Liam I’m leaving.

“Something came up, I have to go.”

He catches my elbow before I can whirl around and leave it to this man to notice something is gravely wrong just by looking at my face.

“What happened? Did you see the man from the farm? Sit down, talk to me.” He turns us away from the group, but I can tell they’re looking at us.

Shaking my head, I try to pull away from him. “It’s ... I just need to go.”

“Gabrielle?” Alana questions, and Liam practically growls with annoyance at her butting in.

Leaning down to whisper in his ear, I deliver the blow that just nearly tore my gut out.

“That woman said something about me being your teacher,” I whisper, my face on fire and my heart pumping double time.

“Who?” Liam looks concerned, but he isn’t getting up to bolt like I want to.

Subtly as I can, I point over my shoulder.

“Fucking, Valerie,” he mumbles, stringing in some other curse words. “Ignore her, she’s jealous. She’s wanted to go home with me a number of times and I turned her down.”

A hot poker of jealousy stabs my gut, but it doesn’t outweigh the shame of her comments. “I can’t. I’m going to go, okay? I’ll ...”

Call you? See you later? I can’t seem to form words because I don’t know if the ones I say will be true.

“Let’s talk outside.” He doesn’t give me another choice as he stands, plants a hand on my back, and steers us toward a back exit.

Over my shoulder, Cass throws me a questioning look, but I leave his family in the dust with no explanation. I hope they don’t also start forming terrible opinions of me.

My mind spirals as we walk outside, from the worst outcomes to horrible things that might happen because of tonight in that bathroom.

“Can you tell me what’s going on in that head of yours?” he says quietly as we step out alone into a gravel parking lot.

Running my hands through my hair in frustration, I try. “I told you this would happen. That someone would say something about me teaching here, and now she’ll get the whole town on it. This is why we shouldn’t be out in public, Liam. People still care. Gossip will spread. The shame I’ll feel, the judgment we’ll get ...”

It makes me want to throw up. My hands start to shake as bile wells at the bottom of my throat.

Liam looks up to the sky and then back at me, as if gathering his wits that are nearing their end. “Gabrielle, no one thinks that. Does some jealous woman? Maybe. Maybe she’ll talk shit and tell her friends. But I promise, no one else cares. My family loves you, we were having a great time. And sometimes you just have to accept that people might talk, then forget about it. I love you, you love me. That should be all that matters.”

Except I’m not really hearing him, not when my ears are ringing with the oncoming anxiety attack. My brain is playing tricks on me, and I’m too far down the rabbit hole to comprehend anything rational.

“You don’t care that someone thinks this. You ... you actually like it.” My head tilts sideways, assessing him like he’s the enemy.

“Don’t make shit up because you’re in your own head. Stop it, Gabrielle.” That deep voice takes on an edge of defensiveness as he tries to reach for me.

But I’m already stepping back, away from him.

“You don’t want me for me. You want to show the world that you bagged the teacher? That you’re hot enough, mature enough, to score with the older woman who is off-limits to you. I’m so fucking stupid.” The curse slips out even though

I've been trained my entire life not to speak like that. "This was all about the chase to you, and I'm the moron who fell for it."

Liam's spine goes ramrod straight as fury turns his eyes from gray to black. "If you truly think that, then you haven't learned a goddamn thing about me."

Tears slide down my cheeks, whether for this fight or how I can't seem to mentally hold myself together, I'm not sure. My stomach feels like it might upend itself, and I clutch it as if it'll ground me.

"Or maybe I knew you too well all along, which is why I fled town to get away from you. You're not good for me. From the start, this was toxic, and I can't ..."

Liam looks torn between distress and rage, and there are so many charged feelings sparking between us that I'm surprised we haven't caused some power outage.

Before I can say another thing to damage us beyond repair, I turn and stride away on shaky legs. He drove me, but my condo is close enough that I can still make it there before I break down. Headlights and voices strike my periphery but I barely notice them, the jovial mood of a weekend night in Hope Crest unable to penetrate the panic threatening to shut me down.

As I round the corner of Newton Street, finally away from the majority of the crowd, I realize Liam hasn't followed me.

Part of me is relieved, while part of me expected my persistent grump to not have let me run off alone. I guess when you offend someone so deeply, they don't feel like being your knight in shining armor anymore.

The thought I might have lost him by my own doing envelops me, and I keel over and retch into a bush under the shadow of a large tree. My mouth is sour as I straighten, and I know I need to hustle if I'm going to make it home before I descend into the madness tapping at my temples.

Because I may have saved myself, but I might have just ruined the greatest thing I ever had in my life.

Despair still roils in my gut as I push through the swinging kitchen door of Hope Pizza.

All the lights remain off at this time of morning, and out the big bay window with the restaurant's signage, Newton Street is quiet. Not like it was less than twelve hours ago when Gabrielle ran off on me.

My heart squeezes like a fist is trying to crush it, and I have to grip the back of a chair to keep upright.

Sleep was nonexistent as I drove myself home in a fog and fell onto the couch, refusing to climb into a bed that smelled like her. The insults and accusations she hurled at me outside the bar weaseled their way under my skin, and still feel like splinters causing pain every five seconds. Her paranoia and intense worrying about what people thought about us broke both our hearts, and I don't know how to move past this.

I spent months trying to slowly coax her, convince her, and it was to no use. Deep down, she seemingly will always feel this way. When I think about us right now, all I feel is hopeless.

Not going to sleep meant heading out in the moonlight to work in my fields since it was the only thing that could take my mind off my problems. But even that hadn't worked. So I came here to sit on the stool Nonno used to occupy when he'd watched Nonna bake night after night, but that didn't work either.

Which led to the cleaning tear I am on now at six a.m. Because apparently, scrubbing the floors with a toothbrush and ripping every cabinet and closet to shreds at Hope Pizza is how I am taking out my aggression these days.

Having already gone through the spice rack in the kitchen and thrown out expired bottles while labeling everything, I'm now rooting around the drink station and tossing old paper goods that have been mangled or stained during service. Damn, I didn't fall far from my mother's method of coping.

"Um, what the hell are you doing?"

A disheveled but bright-eyed Evan stands behind me when I turn my neck.

"Cleaning," I clip out, crouching to reach a fallen stack of lids that have settled behind the countertop.

"Yeah, more like destroying the restaurant. You gonna get this all put away before noon when lunch service starts?" His voice is gruff, like he just woke up.

My brother spends more time here than anywhere else, and I should have known he'd be in the kitchen when I just wanted to be alone. But something about his presence is pissing me off more than usual this morning. Oh, wait, it could be that I got in an enormous fight with my girlfriend, and everything is pissing me off, but Evan has always been a good emotional punching bag.

"This place has gone to total shit since August left." I harrumph, tossing aside all the unorganized shit on the shelves.

"Why does my own family like that waitress more than me?" Evan snarls, clearly upset by my comment.

Shooting him a glare for referring to her like that, I tell him, "Because she kept her head down and didn't complain or criticize everyone within these walls. August is a damn hard worker and doesn't let her ego get in the way of shit."

"Says the guy who is too stubborn to admit he shouldn't take over the family business and should stick to what he loves

doing on the farm.” My brother lobs back the ultimate insult, and I nearly topple over from the force of it.

“What the fuck did you just say?”

He throws his hands up, sighing. “Don’t barge in here in some shit mood just because you and your girlfriend got into a fight last night. Yeah, we all saw it, brother. But just because you’re heartbroken or some shit doesn’t mean you can come into my domain and wreak havoc.”

Andddd I see red. “*Your* domain?”

“Yes, my domain. I’m the one who is here day in and day out, prepping the menu, cooking the food, greeting diners, coming up with long-term plans. I’m the one who sources the food we don’t grow, who has to put out literal fires when something goes wrong. And I don’t mind because I love it. All of it. But not when you bulldoze everything in sight just because you’re the oldest.”

There is the crux of our issue with each other. We’re fighting over this legacy I don’t want but that fell to me. And Evan is fighting to take the one thing he loves about Hope Crest, while not being the one to inherit it.

“That’s right, I *am* the older brother. Every responsibility should fall on my shoulders, and you, being the youngest, got to gallivant around the world and be babied. You’re so fucking entitled. You want this business, the one that is rightfully supposed to go to me? Then man the fuck up and claim it. You left, Evan! You were gone for years, years in which we barely heard from you while you were building your name. That’s great for fucking you, we’re all proud. But don’t act like we weren’t all here busting our asses for this restaurant. Don’t act like Hope Pizza only registered on the radar when you waltzed back into town.”

The plastic glass I just picked up is slammed onto the drink counter, shattering in my hand and onto the floor. My bones vibrate with rage, and I know I’m projecting all my anger into this argument, but I can’t seem to stop.

Evan's eyes narrow and his usual Mr. Sunshine attitude seems to cloud over with storms. "That's what you really think? That I left out of my own selfish reasons? That I didn't want to be just like my big brothers, my doted on only sister? That I looked up to you so much, wanted to be exactly like you, but knew I never could be. Ever think that maybe, just maybe, I left to prove myself to this family that never expected very much of me? You're right, Liam, I am the baby. And as such, I never got any responsibility. No one ever expected me to be the backbone, the legacy-holder, the man who would carry on our family name. Not like you. Not like their firstborn, their hero."

My brain stutters to digest his words. "I'm no one's—"

"Yes, you are! You're my hero. My big brother. The guy I always wanted to be exactly like. I came back because I finally felt good enough to contribute something to this family, and now I'm not even allowed to take responsibility because you all think I'll fuck it up. Do I want this business? Do I want to own it and run it? Absolutely, I do. No one has that kind of faith in me, but by God, do they have it in you. And here you are, driveling about like some lovesick idiot instead of the strong, kick-ass brother who can crush the skulls of anyone who gets in his way? You want your life to be the way you want it? Go fucking make it that way, Liam! Give the restaurant to me, finally make a decision about something. Declare to Mom and Dad that you want the farm and the farm only. Tell Gabrielle to cut all the bullshit and just be happily in love. Stop putting up with shit you don't want, and maybe you wouldn't be in here before dawn rearranging fucking plates and folding pizza boxes."

His hands fly around him as if they'll make his point even further. Our panting, angry breaths are the only sound in the dark, quiet restaurant.

Here we stand, two brothers who love so hard but misunderstand each other so terribly. All this time, I thought the worst of him, while he was just trying to live up to what he thought was the best of me.

“Thanks for making me feel even more shit than I did when I walked in here.” I slump down, sinking to the floor and burying my head in my hands.

There is a rustling, and then I feel Evan sit down beside me. “Yeah, well, I’ve hated the way we’ve been at odds since I got home.”

The anger seems to have dissipated, the fever pitch rose, and now we’re both too exhausted to continue it. When you get out all you need to say, sometimes that’s all that needs to be done. It feels like Evan and I were sitting on these thoughts for some time; they needed to explode and then be forgiven.

“For the record, we’re all so fucking impressed by you. Out of all of us, you’re the star. The one who truly made something of himself.” I peek at my brother through my fingers.

He runs a hand through his hair. “From where I’m sitting, you’ve all done so much more with your lives. You’re all so damn happy where you’re at, in our hometown, settled down, and in love.”

I snort. “That remains to be seen on my part.”

Evan shakes his head. “Nah, Gabrielle will come around. You’ll grovel for whatever you did, because it has to be your fault, and then she’ll forgive you. The way you two look at each other, it reminds me of Nonno and Nonna.”

He couldn’t have paid me a higher compliment if he tried.

“All right, should we get this cleaned up before someone else comes in and strangles us both?”

“Are you asking politely if I’ll help you clean up the mess you made?” Evan gives me that wiseass little brother tone.

“I’m asking if you’ll help, so we can also discuss what we’re doing about the business moving forward while we clean.” I raise an eyebrow at him, knowing that he wants to claim ownership of the restaurant, and I’m about to aid him in doing so.

“Deal.” He gives me his hand and we both pull each other up.

At least it feels like one feud in my life is starting to find some resolve. As for the much larger one, the one that risks my own heart, I’m going to need to go out and get what I want, just like my brother advised.

Even after I puked in the bushes on the way home last night, I still feel the nausea of that sour spit rising in my throat.

Blinking my eyes open doesn't help because the light of day confirms that the fight with Liam really did happen. Jeez, I didn't even drink that much last night, and I feel more hungover than I did in my twenties. This is what I get for having an emotional blowout, I guess.

The bed is rocking with a sensation that sends my stomach rolling as I try to sit up.

My hand fists in the oversized T-shirt I put on before I fell asleep, the soft material rubbing against my gut even as I groan from the unpleasantness. Wait ...

Attempting to plant my feet on the floor, I realize I'm not rocking at all. I'm not on some boat, which could have been in the dreams I came out of but don't remember. But I do feel seasick, like I'm tumbling head over foot in the water and not able to calm the rising bile in my throat.

Nope, definitely on dry land and just about to ...

Nausea sweeps into my mouth and stomach so swiftly that I bolt from the mattress, running to the bathroom in the hall since I've been sleeping in the second bedroom and not the master of my grandmother's condo. My knees hit the cold tile just seconds before I vomit, water and the remnants of my dinner last night splashing into the toilet bowl.

The rolling sensation passes immediately and I plop down on my ass, groaning as the acidic taste permeates my mouth.

“Oh, shit.” White-hot sweat swamps my brow in the next second.

Could I just be manifesting some of the heartbreak of our fight into physical symptoms? Is that what happens when you scream at someone you truly love? I’ve never been lovesick, but this definitely qualifies. Maybe this is why people say breakups suck so much.

Then again, that seesaw in my stomach doesn’t seem to have dissipated after I just got sick. I still feel queasy as I sit here.

Wait ...

I’m thirty-five years old. I’ve been to the gynecologist and even gone through the informational appointments about egg freezing as I got to my geriatric pregnancy age so that I’d be able to have kids if I met the right person. They told me my hormone test showed that my egg count was low; and the ultrasound I had confirmed that and also showed my uterus isn’t an ideal shape to become pregnant easily if I wanted to try naturally. The odds were stacked against me in all the categories, and yet ...

I am pregnant. With every wave of nausea, I know I’m pregnant.

This isn’t getting sick with the heartbreak flu or from a glass too many at the bar last night. This feels different.

At this moment, I know I’m pregnant.

Holy shit. Holy fucking shit.

I mean, I need to get a test to confirm. It’s not like I have one laying around, thinking that this was almost impossible at this point. But I’d bet any amount of money that stick will have two lines on it. Having read so many online forums and watched so many shows that included pregnancies, women always say they had some other sort of intuition.

Right here and now, I know in my head, heart, and very sickly stomach that I'm growing a baby.

Liam's baby. *Oh God.*

It's not like Liam and I had been careful. I'd been off birth control for a while since I wasn't sexually active for a long time, but I thought nothing of it, considering my advanced maternal age and all the information the doctors had given me. Part of me had become resigned to never becoming a parent because of how little romantic interest I'd had in anyone. Being a single mom loomed somewhere in the distance, put on the back burner until a few years down the line, when I didn't think I'd have anything more than that one option.

We're the cautionary tale, the idiots who hadn't used protection, and I am somehow surprised I am now with child? A small part of me probably knew we were treading on thin ice, but I was so entrenched in not talking about what we were doing that it hadn't occurred to me.

A baby at my age, with the improbability given to me by doctors, seemed far-fetched. I'd let the dream go, and I guess my intellectualism as well.

Fingertips hit my lips, and I realize I'm feeling a smile there. For as messed up as my current predicament with Liam is, for as up in the air as my whole life seems right now, I can't feel anything except radiant happiness.

A mother. I'm going to have the chance to be a mother. Something I've dreamed of my entire life is finally, improbably, surprisingly, coming true.

Even though we fought, even though I have no idea if he still wants to be with me, I can be confident that this baby was conceived in love. This baby will be so loved.

The back of my scalp hits the cool tile of my grandmother's bathroom wall, and I let a tear slide down. Crying seems almost natural at this point, but because of where I am and how I discovered this, it almost feels like Grandma Lucy is a part of it. She would have been so happy for me, that I know.

I know I need to move, to get up and brush my teeth after puking and then go buy a test to make one hundred percent certain that I'm pregnant.

Pregnant with Liam Ashton's baby.

Then, I'll have to go back with my tail between my legs after I insulted his very character. After I tried to ruin us with all my fears, doubts, and insecurities.

In an instant, my life changed. It's funny how that happens; one second, you're one person on this one path, and the next, you're completely different, headed down a road you never planned to be on.

Cupping my stomach as I rise, I rub the T-shirt there and hope the tiny life can feel the immense love I already have for it.

Leave it to the universe to stick it to you hours after you blow everything up. I'm not ready to confront everything head-on. My mind is still reeling from last night, the way we yelled at each other and how he didn't come after me.

For once, I wanted something to cherish all on my own. Which is why I went to the store, peed on the stick alone after getting home, and ordered the baby's first onesie online shortly thereafter.

All my life, I've been living up to someone else's expectations. I walked the straight and narrow to avoid anyone's judgment.

Even if just for a short time, I have this precious thing that no one can touch or tarnish, and I'm keeping it to myself.

For a few months there, it felt as if I had the old me back. The person I was before Gabrielle left the first time. That confident, joyful, content man I'd been developing into before my world view turned on its axis.

After our fight, I'm right back where I was all those years ago; slammed into some alternate universe where nothing feels right, happiness seems unachievable, and finding someone to spend my life with is not possible.

Gabrielle's freak-out took me right back to this headspace where the world is against me; I do nothing but focus on the grind of my work and can't bring myself to discover small moments of joy anywhere. Her insecurities about us when all I've done is reassure her and tell her I'm in love with her won out. Her doubts and fears were bound to destroy us, and they've done just that.

I'm not sure what to say to make things right. Or if I want to.

If she is still so unsure about our future, why should I be putting everything I have into making sure we have one? While I miss her like a limb I've lost, my ego and emotions are battered and bruised. Taking offense to what she said about me, how she judged me, isn't irrational.

The last three days have slowed to a snail's pace, the hours and minutes stretching so long without her.

Between that and still no development on who has been messing with our farm, I'm wound up so tight that I feel like one pinprick will send me spiraling. Since the night that the cops caught the trespasser on our land, nothing else has happened to put it or us in danger. Business has run as normal; nothing is out of the ordinary.

Still, the police have no answers as to why the man tried to ransack our field, and it left me just as uneasy as everything with Gabrielle has.

Alana swears that the cure to any ailment is a greasy cheeseburger and fries. Nothing else has worked to cure this debilitating heartache, so I might as well fall into a food coma if I can't seem to do anything else.

It's how I end up at the diner, a place I frequent for a weekend cup of coffee and a short stack. This monochromatic restaurant that looks like something out of a fifties sitcom is everything you want in a standard diner: simple, good food, small-town gossip, quick-witted but wise waiters and waitresses, and the guarantee of not much changing within its walls.

In a way, this place is comforting. It remains the same even through the turmoil of the town or its patrons' personal lives and drama. Feeling the roots of my small town is the only thing keeping me upright at this point. When things inevitably go to shit with Gabrielle again, I'll be left in Hope Crest without her.

The chasm that further opens in my chest is like a physical pain I could double over from.

Connie, the waitress who always seems to be working behind the counter with its pink-padded stools, gives me a head nod as if to say she'll go grab my takeout order. The unspoken language of knowing each other from being lifetime residents of this town is one thing I'm thankful for right now; speaking as little as possible before I lock myself in my house with fried food for the night is the end goal here.

A chime over the door sounds, alerting the staff to another customer entering, and I turn out of habit.

The world, at this moment, stops.

It's only been three days since I last saw Gabrielle, but with the way my chest is caving in, you'd think it has been a lifetime. My fingers ache to touch her, my lips crave hers, and my soul yearns to be held by hers.

She stops in her tracks, her head almost whipping back at the sight of me. Like my presence caused her whiplash.

Time seems to stop as we stand across the diner staring at each other, everyone else's lives and conversations going mute with all the feelings swirling around us. It's as if we're swept up in this bubble that blocks everything else out.

It's inevitable we'd run into each other. Hope Crest isn't a big place, but I've been doing my best to be scarce in town. Staying on my land, working my crops, it's a therapy of its own and means I don't need to venture to places she might be. Especially so soon after our blowout fight.

Usually, one person in a relationship is more stubborn than the other, but in the case of Gabrielle and me, I fear we're both too pigheaded for our own good. It's why no one has broken down and contacted the other, or at least that's what my thinking has been. I wouldn't know what's on her mind because, as I said, we haven't uttered a word. There has been no white flag.

And as I stand here taking in her bloodshot eyes, pale complexion, and the uncomfortable set of her mouth, I think I know we won't be reaching a resolution soon. She's shifty, still beautiful beyond reason, but shifty as hell. Without having to say a word, I know she doesn't want me to approach her here in this diner. It'll only make things worse.

"Here you go, hun." Connie interrupts our stare-off, setting my to-go bag on the counter.

Fishing out some bills from my wallet, I set an amount on the counter that is probably way over what I owe. Can't seem to care about that right now, though. Gabrielle is still frozen to the stop, and I'm at a loss for what to do next.

With an imperceptible shake of her head, she gives me a direction; *don't do it here.*

Again, another plea from her not to expose us in public. My gut roils with anger and sorrow.

Seeing her here, our eyes conveying so much without breathing the words we both want to say, reminds me of a night long ago. Another instance where I felt her slipping through my fingers.

Everyone in my graduating class is driving through town with their windows down, music blasting. They're underage drinking at bonfires on the edge of their parents' properties. Occupying their last night of high school existence with teenage debauchery as if their lives aren't precious and fleeting.

As if they'll live forever in this moment.

Me? I've been walking this trail for an hour, trying to see past this season I'm in. Trying to suss out what is next for me and how I can get what I truly want because it seems out of reach.

Sneakers scuff the red dirt of the canal path I've trod since I was a child, coming out here to fish or run around like an explorer with my siblings. The Delaware River trail is as familiar to me as my heartbeat, and coming here to clear my head as the sun sets is the only thing I want to do the night before I'm officially done with high school.

In two months, I'm supposed to go off to college. I'm supposed to leave my hometown and everyone I love to adventure into the unknown, and goddammit, I don't want to do any of it. I want to stay here, on the land I was born to tend, with my family, in the small town that has become my paradise.

I want her, too, but that's looking less and less likely with each passing hour.

Gabrielle Murphy has avoided me for so long that I'm not sure she'd recognize my face even though she sees it

in her classroom every day. Tomorrow, though, at two p.m. on the dot, she no longer has to act like I don't exist. She no longer has to pretend that I haven't been cosmically drawn to her from the moment we first saw one another.

Tomorrow, everything could change. But this pit in my stomach tells me it won't happen.

The sun is below the trees now, and darkness floods the trail, which doesn't scare me. The forest song of bugs and nocturnal animals coming to life is almost a comfort.

Another sound hits my ears, that of footsteps, and it's not odd that someone else would be out on the trail right now. It is, however, odd they're this far out. I must have walked miles from town at this point, my thoughts consuming me and taking over any physical discomfort.

Turning, I nearly fall on my ass. Because it can't be possible, she's out here doing the same thing as me, at the exact same moment in time.

"Gabrielle." I breathe, almost as if it's a question of whether she's real or a mirage.

The woman stops in her tracks.

She's real. Not a fantasy brought to life by my imagination.

"You can't be here." It flies out of her mouth, and she slaps a hand over those full lips as if she didn't mean to say it aloud.

I quirk an eyebrow. "This is a public canal path I've been walking way longer than you've ever lived here. So yeah, I can be here."

"Liam ..." The tone of her voice tells me that's not what she meant, and we both should know that.

"Yeah, yeah, you want to keep pretending I don't exist. Or that this thing between us doesn't exist. I get it." I'm

so tired of not talking about this that I just let my tongue loose.

For this one night, this couple of minutes alone in the dark on a path that no one else will probably stumble across, I give myself permission to say everything I think.

“There is nothing between us,” Gabrielle whispers-hisses, looking around like someone might overhear us.

I throw out my arms. “There is no one here. No one to hear me when I tell you that I think about you all the time. That I think about what we could be all. The. Time. That I don’t give a fuck about three years, and that by tomorrow, it won’t even matter anymore.”

“If you really think that, you’re more immature than I thought,” she shoots back, hitting below the belt.

“Keep telling yourself that I’m just some idiot. Some off-limits kid. Because deep down, you’re scared. You’d rather follow the straight and narrow than explore this. Which, come tomorrow, will be perfectly okay to do. I’ll be out. You’ve fulfilled your duty of avoiding and acting as if I don’t exist. What you’re really scared of is that after tomorrow’s ceremony, there won’t be a reason you can keep avoiding this chemistry.”

“Will you stop it?” she hisses once more, even though the look in her eyes tells me I’m right.

I know I’m probably coming on too strong, have been for a while, but I can’t explain this. Most days, I wish I met her one year down the line. Maybe in college, where it would be perfectly normal for the two of us to fall into a relationship and never look back.

“No. No, I won’t stop, Gabrielle. Because you know just as well as I do that there is something here. Something you’ve never felt. I may not have lived as long as you or seen as much of the world, but I’m a practical person. I can recognize when something is standing right in front of me. I felt it the moment we first

saw each other. The ground shifted. You had to have felt it, too. So what're we going to do about it? Because after tomorrow, we have every right to see if we can make the earth tilt a little bit more."

My gaze searches her face, and I watch the war in her eyes as she debates what to say. Just as I think she might answer, an owl hoots in the distance, and the spell is broken. Gabrielle's eyes go wide in the dark, and then she turns and begins to run, actually run, in the opposite direction.

I'm left standing on the trail, my heart on my sleeve, waiting for her to take it.

I just have to trust the universe that after graduation, I can talk her into giving us a real shot. That after tomorrow, everything will change.

I had no idea that we wouldn't have a shot. Because the next day, after I graduated, Gabrielle disappeared from my life for over ten years.

The memory floods me, leaving me with this inexplicable breathlessness as if it's happening all over again all these years later.

Because it seems to be. Time has duped me, putting me in the exact same situation over a decade in the future. And just like that night, Gabrielle turns away without another word, retreating from the danger this spark between us brings. Fleeing from the diner without ever picking up food or sitting down. I have no way of knowing what she was doing here or when I'll see her again.

Once again, I'm left contemplating what will become of my life if she's not in it.

Questions blur before me about medical history and surgical procedures and family diagnoses.

Looking around the waiting room of the only ob-gyn in Hope Crest, who probably delivered three-fourths of this town, I'm sorely bitter about being here alone.

As if it's not of my own doing, having chosen to withhold this news from the father of my baby, but hey, a hormonal pregnant woman can feel however she wants. The three couples sitting around the room holding hands and looking like they're out of their minds with happiness are making me feel a kind of jealousy I don't think I've ever experienced before.

And all because I'm a damn coward. A spineless, fearful, too-proud coward.

Coward doesn't begin to cover it. In the last week, I've seen Liam at least three times, twice from afar and once up close at the diner when I fled like a total chickenshit. I've had ample time to apologize. To tell him I regret ever accusing him of something as vile as using me for some fantasy. To tell him that I know deep in my heart we were always endgame and that I know he'd never get bored with me after the chase.

I've had more than enough time to tell him that I'm pregnant with his baby, that we're about to bring a little human into the world together.

That I love him so much, I ache every morning when my eyes open, knowing I probably screwed this up beyond repair.

The guilt, pain, and fear sit on my shoulders like a weight. One I don't want to stress about, because ever since I found out I was carrying this child, I've wanted to give it nothing but peace. I know that sooner or later, I'll have to put my tail between my legs, admit how wrong I was, and plead with Liam to forgive how stupid and hurtful my words were.

Today, though, today I get to see this baby for the first time. Everything else can wait.

Still, that twinge of jealousy as I'm called back, alone, and walk past all the couples burns deep in my belly. I'm a stupid woman, thinking that I could continue to do it all alone.

I need Liam, and that's no longer something I'm scared of. As soon as I know both the baby and I are healthy, I should go tell him that.

"Hi, Gabrielle, I'm Nicole. I'll be doing your ultrasound today." The short brunette in scrubs brings me back to a dark room and ushers me onto a padded chair.

Above me, three screens hang close to the ceiling, and next to the table is an ultrasound machine with all its bells and whistles.

"Can you just confirm your date of birth? And that you've filled your bladder to properly do this ultrasound?" she asks, and I confirm all the information she asks for.

Lord knows I'm about to pee a geyser when this is over, but I did as they asked when I set the appointment up.

"All right, since you're so early into the pregnancy, we're going to be doing a vaginal ultrasound, if you could just undress from the waist down and lie back with this sheet over you, I'll be right back in."

Her kind smile is the last thing I see before she exits the room, and my throat nearly closes at how nervous and excited I am. This moment is one so many women look forward to their whole life, and I thought I might not get to experience it.

“All ready?” A knock at the door has me scrambling onto the table.

“Yes!” I call, more than ready to get a glimpse of my baby.

After Nicole sets up all the equipment and explains how the ultrasound will run, I try to relax as she inserts the probe and begins twirling it around my uterus.

“Does everything feel okay?” she asks, looking at her screen.

“I mean, it’s not the most comfortable thing in the world, but I have a feeling I’m in for a world of that through the next nine months, so I won’t complain now.” We both laugh at what I’m sure is brutal honesty.

“You’re not wrong.” She shrugs. “I have three kids, and I love them to death, but pregnancy is as uncomfortable as it is wonderful.”

I’m about to quip back something self-deprecating, but I’m distracted when a pea size blob fills the screen.

“There’s baby.” She smiles, adjusting the probe to get different angles.

Blinking back tears, I look at that small life in my belly—the one who is half-me, half-Liam. The feeling, the connection, the pure joy, it’s unlike anything I’ve ever known.

The heartbeat begins to whoosh across the screen, and the sound that fills my ears feels like tangible hope renewed. Everything I’ve known before this moment vanishes; all the worries, fear, insecurity, feelings of never belonging to anyone or any place.

This. This is who I belong to. I was waiting my whole life to create this tiny one, and it’s like I finally have a purpose when I could never find one before.

“You’re about ten weeks from what I can gather from the measurements. Do you remember when your last period was?” Nicole interrupts my emotional moment.

She’s staring at me like I’m not the idiot who hasn’t been tracking her cycle. The thing is, I was rarely regular. After I

turned thirty, my body began to malfunction on me, and I know my mother had gone through very early menopause at forty-five.

But wait, had she said ten weeks? Holy crap. I pretty much got pregnant the first time Liam and I had sex.

In the back of my head, something very close to fate is mocking me.

What the hell am I doing? What the hell am I doing picking fights with a man I've been destined to be with since the first moment we saw each other? What am I doing in this ultrasound alone when I have a man who so desperately wants to be with me, he'd risk everything he has and his own reputation just to love me? What am I doing keeping this from him when he's seen the future we could have back when I thought it would never exist?

All at once, I want to launch myself from this table and run to wherever Liam is. If this conception date isn't proof of how hard the universe has been working to bring us together, I don't know what is.

From the moment he sought me out, pushed the envelope, and then did so again years later, I've been trying to run from this. And now, we have this thing that will tie us together forever. The thing is, even if this never happened, I know I can't avoid it any longer.

The "it" being this soul-colliding chemistry. This spark we've both felt since the first moment. This intangible connection that I've never felt with anyone but him.

As Nicole continues to make sure everything looks good with the baby and my placenta and then calls the doctor in for a rundown of first-trimester expectations, I can't help but count down the seconds.

Because as soon as this ends, I'm going to tell Liam that he's about to be a father.

I'm elbows deep in the dirt, tiny drops of rain dotting the earth beside me as I dig for another fence post hole.

I've been out here for hours by myself after the farmhands, and even Patrick, put in some work to help me install the second layer of security. They went home a while ago as the thunderclouds rolled in, but I was in a groove, and this manual work is the only thing that has been able to shut my brain off in a week.

The rhythmic physical pain of the work as it strains my muscles, makes sweat roll down my back, and has my breath heaving through my lungs is a welcome discomfort.

"Liam."

I swear I'm dreaming that her voice is behind me, my name coming from her lips. It's why I don't turn, why I keep slinging dirt over my shoulder, why my hands ache with the force of holding the shovel.

"Liam, I'm sorry. *Please* look at me."

The desperation in that voice, the way the apology rings through it ... it hits me square in the chest. She's here. Gabrielle is actually here. It's not just a figment of my imagination.

Dropping the shovel immediately, I whirl around.

She's standing a few feet away in the grass, her blond hair long and swaying in the wind that picks up as the clouds overhead intensify.

“What are you doing here?” I’m confused by her appearing here as if out of thin air.

Part of me assumed I’d never see her again, like this was history repeating itself.

Her skin seems to glow; she looks like an ethereal angel in the midst of the storm brewing overhead.

“I ... I’m ... I have to tell you ...” She can’t seem to get her words out, shaking her head with a smile on her face as her gaze dips to the dirt.

“If you’re here to say you’re leaving, I don’t want to hear it.” My heart is a heavy stone, sinking into an unreachable pit.

In my bones, I know I won’t recover from her going this time. Not seeing her again, not having her in my arms, it will kill me. Gabrielle detailing the reasons for her exit will only pour acid in the wound.

Gabrielle is silent for a moment, looking at me with wide eyes. What she blurts out next is not something I ever expected this woman to say to me in this lifetime.

“I’m pregnant.”

Her expression is earnest, a slight smile on her lips, while her eyes bore into mine as if she’s willing me to understand.

The words filter through my brain like I can’t fully compute them. Like I need to hang on to each syllable. I’m so caught off guard by this that I have to reach for something to lean on. Which, in this case, is a wobbly fence post, and I nearly fall over at the impact of her news.

“You’re ... *pregnant?*” The word seems foreign on my tongue.

“Yes. I’m so sorry I haven’t told you. I found out a week ago and I’ve just needed ... it shocked me so much that I needed a minute to catch my breath. But yes, we’re having a baby. And God, I hope you want *us* to have it, not just me. I know we have a lot to discuss.”

Gabrielle is just rambling, going on and on about optics and timing and situations. I can barely hear all that, though,

because I'm still stuck on the first thing she said.

She's pregnant. With our baby. We made a baby together. I'm going to be a father to a child that is half-me, half-Gabrielle.

"We're having a baby," I whisper, walking toward her.

She gulps nervously. "Yes."

My eyes shoot down to her stomach as if I'm going to be able to see a bump there. Of course, there is nothing. I don't know how far along she is, but knowing our baby is inside her fills me with this sense of completeness.

I close the distance between us and pull her into my dirty arms, Gabrielle not protesting one bit that I'm getting her pretty sundress filthy.

Those green eyes fill with tears as she blinks up at me, holding our stares together.

"I know I said horrible things, that I accused you of my own fears and insecurities. It's still a thought in my mind, most likely always will be. But not because I think that of you, it's just how I was conditioned to think. To judge others. Those thoughts aren't real, though. They're self-sabotage. They're poison. I know that ... especially now. We have a shot at something so rare, so good. It's not perfect by any stretch, but it's ours, and that's all I could ever want. This little family, our love, *you*. That's what I want. I've wanted it for a lot longer than I've let myself admit, but I'm tired of creating obstacles through my own fear. I love you, Liam. I want to love this baby right alongside you. If you need some more time, if what happened the other night still lingers and hurts—"

Placing my hand on her cheek, I cut her off. "I'm holding everything I've ever wanted, right here in my arms. You think I'm ever letting it go again?"

"Thank God." She breathes, but before she can ramble some more, I take her mouth.

The kiss I deliver is so searing, so consuming, that I think we both might topple over like that fencepost I haven't

secured. We're pouring everything we have into this intimate gesture, forgiving each other without words.

A crack of thunder and a bolt of lightning illuminate the dark sky overhead, and as we break the kiss to look up, the heavens unload.

"Ah!" Gabrielle squeals, holding tighter to me as the rain starts to pound down on our skin.

She's laughing as I bow my head to look at her once more, and I can't help but join her. The giggling advances into a full-blown laugh attack as we cling to each other.

Crazy happy and delirious with the news, we stand in the downpour together and let it wash away all the negativity of the past.

"Come on." I grab her hand, and we sprint through the rain to my UTV, which provides a little cover with its closed top.

Still, rain soaks us as it pours down the roof and onto our shoes and legs that stick out the open sides. I wind us through the fields and past the barn, finally stopping in front of my porch. By the time we make it up the stairs, we're both drenched. But I need to touch her, need so badly to strip both of us down and keep her in my bed until we're properly made up.

Water hangs on my eyelashes as her long blond strands drip rain down her back. My smile is megawatt, a laugh forming on my lips that's silenced with a boom of thunder. Her eyes go wide at the noise, and I pull Gabrielle to me, my hands slicking over her wet cheeks.

"Out of all the things in this world, you're the only one I've truly ever wanted. *Needed*. Do you know how much I want this family with you?"

Those words seem to breathe life into her, into this version of a woman who has told me she never once felt accepted anywhere. Who never once had someone tell her how valued she is or that they were proud to know her. I'll tell her and our child every day for the rest of time.

"I love you," she chokes out, burying her face in my neck.

My hands move down to cup her belly. “We made this life.”

Everything in me has this tinged, awe-like feeling, as if none of this can be real, but somehow is. I went from thinking I was losing my world to gaining it back and then some.

“Do you want to see the ultrasound pictures? They’re in my car.” She nods her head to the car that’s being pelted by the storm.

“More than anything. But after this stops. First, I need to feel you against me.” I crave her skin on mine.

Our kiss begins and never ends as I let us into my house, one I’m convincing her to move into with this recent development. I never want to be apart from her for another moment, and I don’t want one morning to go by when I don’t wake up with her.

Her legs are around my hips as I carry her to my bedroom, never breaking contact as we fall to the mattress together. Tingles light my spine up as we pull the sopping wet clothes from our bodies, sighs of relief falling from our lips as flesh meets flesh.

My hands tangle in her wet strands, and Gabrielle rakes her nails down my back to the chorus of groans we’re both making.

“Baby,” she murmurs, a rare pet name slipping out.

That one word lights my skin ablaze and means more than her lustful state could comprehend right now.

“That’s what we made together. When I was inside you, when we came together, we created one. God, but you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. Seeing you with our baby? It’s going to be,” I have to stifle a groan of absolute pleasure as Gabrielle pulls me on top of her so that my cock slips through her wetness, “perfection.”

“Perfection.” She moans, and I know she means both right now and when our baby comes into the world.

“I have never, and will never, love anyone as much as I love you.” My hands bracket her face, heart thumping at how close I was to losing her.

To losing everything I’ve ever wanted ... but only with her.

“Thank you for never giving up on us, even when I couldn’t see past the darkness,” she whispers, reaching up to thread her fingers in mine.

Now, we’re both holding her face, and I know I need to be inside her, but I pause. We’re on the precipice of the biggest chapter of our lives. The one where everything falls into place, and I can’t wait for it.

“I promise to always be your knight in grumpy armor, being stubborn as hell and not letting go, even if it’s irrational.” I kiss her cheek as Gabrielle giggles huskily in my ear.

“I love you,” she murmurs.

That’s when I push fully inside her, our bodies connecting like they’re made for one another. We make love slowly, almost delicately, as if a haze swamps us, and we can’t move any faster. It’s an anguished, erotic, burning build, and I’m shaking as my eyes collide with hers right before we both tip over the edge.

As I come, flooding her with warmth and her pussy flutters around my cock, I realize that I’ll get to do this for the rest of my life.

That has me pressing a sated, exhausted smile into the damp hair at her temple.

The playhouse is buzzing with people; those mingling with glasses of wine in their hands, families trying to corral children to settle down before the show, and couples huddled together for a romantic night out.

I'm stationed at one of the doors, having volunteered to be an usher tonight when Wilson begged Gabrielle to enlist me after they were down an employee due to a stomach bug. As I hand out playbills to people as they enter, my attention is across the room. On the woman who I haven't been able to keep my eyes off since the first time I saw her.

Gabrielle is practically luminescent as she flits across the lush, red velvet lobby. The space is inviting, warm, and vibrating with the pulse of energy only a place like this can provide. And the woman I love is furthering that feeling, letting her gleeful smile enhance people's nights and their own excitement of the theater to come. She fits here, without a doubt, and watching her work is a privilege.

As if sensing my eyes on her, those green ones flick to me, and I watch her whole body relax when we hold each other's gazes. Without having to say a word or make any gesture, I know she's thinking about us getting home tonight and crawling into bed together. She is my home, as I am hers, and even in this room full of people, I can understand the comfort for her of having me here.

In the two weeks since we made up, since she told me we were going to have a baby, life has seemed brighter than ever.

We told my family about the pregnancy two days ago, and even while shocked to their cores, everyone seems excited for us. Cassandra was so happy that her friend was going to become a mother so close to when she did and burst into tears that Rebecca was going to have a little friend. My mom hasn't stopped hugging me since, and Patrick won't stop making dad jokes on my behalf. Evan might want to kill us all, but I know deep down he's happy he gets to be the fun uncle and teach all the kids bad words and make them their first pancake breakfast.

"I've never seen you so smitten. Matter of fact, I've never seen you so happy."

Dad comes to stand next to me, so out of place in this theater and the outfit Mom made him wear that I have to do a double take.

"She really got you into a suit jacket, huh?" I smirk, knowing this probably pisses my dad off.

"Woman is trying to suffocate me." Dad huffs, then flexes his arms as if the sleeves are cutting off his circulation. "But I love your mother so, what am I going to do?"

His shrug is exactly how I feel about Gabrielle; I love her so damn much, I'll do nearly anything she asks. Like, be an usher at the theater when I actively hate conversing with people.

"You're thinking that you'd do the same for Gabrielle." It's Dad's turn to smirk as the call goes out that there are five minutes to showtime.

A rush of people begins toward the theater doors, and I rifle out the pamphlets in my hands without having to talk as they scurry inside the dome behind me.

"Of course I would," I tell Dad when the crowd of people slows to a trickle.

"It suits you, you know. I've been waiting for you to become the head of your own family for quite some time now." My father's bushy eyebrows are nearly white in his older age as he raises them.

“You do know that Patrick was always the wifed-up child, right? The whole white picket fence was his dream.” The lobby is becoming less and less full.

Dad crosses his arms. “But being the man of the family was yours. Don’t think I didn’t see it as you were growing up, Liam. You’re my firstborn, the prodigal son.”

“You’re not supposed to actually admit that you have a favorite,” I taunt him.

He rolls his eyes. “I’m not, it’s a figure of speech. Since you were a kid, you’ve always had this air about you that makes you seem much older and wiser than you are. You’re a natural born leader, even if you’re quiet and subtle in your approach. You’ve kept your siblings on track, kept the farm afloat and even thriving. Liam, you have really stepped up in the last five years, in a way that left me confident to retire.”

“As if you’ve really retired,” I mutter.

The man has been in and out of my and Evan’s business so much, you’d think he had frequent flyer miles.

“Now you’re getting ready to start your family, the land Cass sold us is in development, and you’re ... you seem happy, Liam. I’m proud of you, son.”

It’s what every child always wants to hear from their parent, and I let it soak in. Not that I’ve ever doubted how much my parents love me, but I’m the least high-maintenance of all their children. I’m the one who always took a back seat emotionally to the problems of the others, never wanting to burden anyone with how I was feeling. I was the kid who worked as hard as I could to be noticed, not by asking for love or attention. To know that the way I’ve gone about everything is something that makes my dad proud ... well, even though I shouldn’t want the validation because I already know inside how happy I am, it still makes me feel like I’ve achieved something.

“It’s also why I’m so happy to know you’ll be taking the reins now that I’m done.”

Frustration ripples through me, and I have wondered when he'd bring this up. It's possibly the worst time and place to have this conversation, considering there is a theater full of people in back of us and a lobby full of our family members, but I'm so exhausted by the whole thing that I have to shut it down once and for all.

"Dad." I sigh, knowing I'm about to admit something I've been avoiding. But my talk with Evan and the new chapter Gabrielle and I are entering prompted this. "We both know that I don't want it."

"Of course you do. You're the oldest child, the dependable one. This is in your blood, it's how the legacy of our family and this business has always been." Dad doesn't look incredulous, but there is a finality in his tone that makes me panic.

"And now we're going to do something different. The farm is what I want, Dad. Before me, that had never been an option. Yes, Nonno saw to it that the farm was a bigger part of the business, but it was never a business within itself. It was never just as big as the restaurant, not until I came along. Now, the two need to run separately, and you need one person to run the farm and one to run Hope Pizza. I don't want that added responsibility. Not only do I suck at it, but it's not my passion. Not like how your other son feels about it."

I nod my head at Evan, and Dad's eyes flick over to my youngest brother.

"Evan isn't ready for all that." He says it simply, as if my brother didn't give up his big city dreams to come home.

Clapping my dad on the shoulder, I deliver the news he needs to hear. "He is. He gave up the city to come run the family business. If that doesn't show you that he's ready to step up, I'm not sure what will. As for me, I'm staying put. I'll be on that farm, making it successful every day. That's where you want me, to ensure the business thrives. Not downtown, not in the kitchen, or in some office talking strategy. That's not me, and you know it."

The confession comes out surprisingly easy, and I'm honestly floored at how much calmer I am during this talk than I thought I'd be. For months, years, I've been dreading this takeover conversation. Probably because I didn't want to do it. But now, I see this path forward so clearly that it's easy to tell my family what I want.

Gabrielle, our baby, the farm. In that order. My brother told me to go get the life I want, and that's it. So I'm going for it. Dad can't force me into the restaurant; not only will I fight him tooth and nail, but he just said he sees how happy I am. He knows, deep down, how many years it's taken me to get here, and even in his stubbornness, he won't want to ruin that.

Dad purses his lips. "You kids never make it easy, you know?"

"Am I in for that, too?" I smile, knowing how much I can't wait to be wrapped around my child's finger.

"Oh, hell yes." He chuckles, clapping me on the shoulder. "You'll also be told you're wrong every step of the way, be in awe of how strong willed and resilient they are, and be bowled over when they make a decision you hadn't seen in their future. You'll think you know absolutely everything about them, after all, you raised them, but they surprise you at every turn. And damn good on their part. Damn good on your part, Liam. Did I imagine that my eldest son would become me one day? Yes. It's the family tradition, and you've never been anything but the tow-the-line son. Naturally, I expected it. But I can see how things have changed. I know how much the farm means to you. Am I ready to hand the reins over, am I completely on board with your brother being the head of the business? Maybe not. But you're right, that's for me to worry about."

To say I'm shocked at his rationale would be an understatement. "Dad, I ... I'm surprised you see it this way. Happy, but a little surprised."

My father shrugs. "Eh, what can I say? I'm an emotional, nostalgic grandfather now. About to be one twice over. I'm getting sappy in my old age."

I give him a sideways hug, about as physically emotional as two men in this family can get. “I appreciate it. It’s where I want to be, that farm and my family with Gabrielle are all I’ve ever wanted. But you need to give Evan more credit, have some faith in him. I have a feeling he’s going to surprise you.”

“I guess we’ll see.” He gives my brother a scrutinizing look across the theater lobby as the real ushers begin to close the doors.

The hum of the orchestra starts up, and I know I should get in there as my dad excuses himself to take Mom into the theater. But I see my sister standing by the doors, looking out, and Warren is nowhere to be found. No one is, really. The lobby is all but empty now, and I know Gabrielle is backstage helping with the production.

“Al?” I ask, moseying over to her. “You okay?”

“*Shh*,” she hisses, not looking back at me.

“What’re you doing?” She’s acting weird, and while that can be normal with my sister, I don’t know what she’s looking at.

“There is a group across the street ... hold on.”

Joining her where she stands at one of the massive front windows near the ornate, double gold door entrance to the playhouse, I squint at what she might be looking at.

“Isn’t that the trespasser?” Alana’s voice is hushed.

Blinking against the darkness of the street, I watch a couple figures make their way down the main drag in Hope Crest. The face of the man who trespassed on our property is burned into my brain, his mug shot sitting in an email on my phone that I’ve looked at a thousand times. When I can’t get it out of my head, I stare hard at the photo to understand why this stranger would do that to our family.

“I can’t make anyone out,” I tell her because the sunset glare is shining through the window into my eyes.

Then one of them moves, a shadow casts over his face, and I know without a doubt that’s him.

“There he is. Fucking hell,” my sister curses, pointing at the glass.

“What is he doing here? Does he know we’re here?”

“Why is he following us?” Alana mutters to herself but so I can hear.

“Don’t speak any louder.” Even though none of our family or friends are in the lobby anymore, I don’t want to cause a scene.

As it is, I’m going to station myself by the entrance and miss the entire production to make sure he doesn’t come through those doors. Staring back across the street, a ripple of shock moves through my chest as I glimpse another familiar face.

“And that’s ... Dan Quillin?” The words come out of my mouth in a confused statement.

The group of people, maybe five or six men, stop under a streetlight across from the theater windows, and I can make them out clearly. The man who tripped up Warren, who was trying to destroy our land, is deep in conversation with Dan Quillin. The same Dan who has owned another farm in Hope Crest for years. The same man who lamented to me about his troubles at the supply store not too long ago.

“How the hell do those two know each other?” Alana’s head whips in my direction.

“I have no fucking clue.” Alarm beats through my veins like my heart is pumping it overtime.

Because currently, I’m rifling through every possible scenario in which these two people could have come in contact with each other. How do the puzzle pieces fit? Does one have something to do with the other and the attack on our land?

“Should we ...” She motions across the street, signaling that maybe we should go over there.

I know myself too well though, and no good would come of that. No, I have more than just myself to protect these days.

Opening up a can of worms right now, before we're sure what this is, is not only not smart, it's dangerous.

"No. I'll stay put out here to make sure they pass by, don't come in here. You go and watch the show; I'm sure Warren is waiting." My tone is calm, trying to reassure her even though a skeptical expression covers features so close to our mothers.

"Liam, this is suspicious. Something is off here." Her low voice is a warning.

"And we'll figure it out. But right now isn't the time." Starting shit at Gabrielle's job is the furthest thing from what I want to do.

She nods, relenting, and walks backward to the doors into the theater. I don't turn to see her go, instead keeping my focus on the men on the sidewalk. In chunks, they peel off, walking back down the sidewalk and away from the playhouse. My eyes track the backs of Dan and the trespasser until they're over the horizon line and out of sight.

Thinking I have my happily ever after is dangerous. It's put me in the mindset that nothing can touch us. Now that we have each other, nothing can hurt us.

How very wrong I was. Something is brewing, I can feel it, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it before it harms anyone else I love.

Of all the people I could have imagined showing up on my doorstep, Leona Ashton is the last one I was ever prepared to see.

“Uh, hello.” I open the screen door of my grandmother’s condo and step onto the porch.

Leona has given her son so much of her looks, except this refined older woman has a wiseness in her eyes that can’t be passed down without the knowledge to get there. She is in a beige linen set, looking like the ultimate coastal chic grandmother, holding a basket full of what smells like cookies that make my mouth water.

Leave it to my baby daddy’s mother to show up and produce the one food that has yet to make my pregnant stomach roll with nausea. The irony.

“Gabrielle, I hope I’m not intruding. Liam told me you were over here today and I thought you could use some help.” Her smile is warm and without judgment, which makes me feel even more off-kilter.

With the bookstore pack-up near completion, and the production at the playhouse fully performed and underway, I decided to take some time this week to finish cleaning out my grandmother’s condo. Liam and I haven’t officially decided what our living situation will be once the baby is here, but we know it won’t be apart. Getting Grandma Lucy’s things packed, sorted, and donated is a heavy lift, but I want to be the one to do it. Honoring her and the life she unknowingly gave

me by calling me back here is one thing I can give back to her, so here I am.

Having Liam's mother come to help me wasn't on my bingo card for today or even this year. While the Ashtons know about our baby on the way and seem genuinely thrilled for Liam, I haven't spent much one-on-one time with the women of the bunch aside from Cassandra. Even if I am a grown woman about to become a mother, I'm still a little petrified of spending alone time with Leona Ashton. It feels like I'm trying to pass a test I don't know any answers to.

"That's so thoughtful of you, of course. Would you like to come in?" This fever dream feels real, and I realize it is, so I should probably invite her into the house and not leave this important woman standing outside.

"I would love that." She gives me a small grin and a nod, as if she knows she has to steer the direction of this encounter.

"Don't mind the clutter, there are boxes everywhere to both keep and donate," I apologize for the mess as I lead her into the kitchen.

In a fit of early nesting, I went on a cleaning spree to boot, and now there is stuff everywhere. While I've wrangled most of the upstairs, the downstairs and basement need work if we're going to list this house.

That only leads to my heart beating double time because it makes me think about moving in with Liam. About creating a home together, the place where we'd raise our son or daughter. I want it so badly I can practically taste it. Through the nausea, of course.

"Oh, don't worry about it. I raised three boys, I know a mess." She sets the basket on the counter and unwraps it. "These chamomile chocolate cookies were the only thing that got me through my pregnancy with Evan, so I thought I'd make some and bring them over."

My heart melts at the sweet gesture, probably because my mother would never be so thoughtful. Delicately, because I

don't want to look like a ravenous lunatic, I accept one and take a bite.

“Holy crap, those are the best things I've ever eaten.” I gasp and sigh as the gooey cookie sinks into my tastebuds.

Leona takes one too. “Mm, this reminds me so much of when I had my babies in my belly. I miss it, even as an old woman. There is something so special about this time in your life. You're so connected to this tiny human you've created.”

Smiling, because she's exactly right, I palm my growing bump. “It's both alien and amazing at the same time. A woman's body is incredible, even if I'm starting to feel like a small blimp.”

Liam's mother chuckles and rubs her hands together. “So, what can I help with? I recently cleaned out our basement, and Thomas is a bit of a hoarder, so I'm primed and ready.”

“You're too kind. You really didn't have to come over here, I'm just tottering about, picking things up and deciding what to do with them.”

She waves me off. “Of course I want to help. You make my son very happy, and that, in turn, makes me thrilled. I want to do all I can to show you that our family is yours now, no matter what. So, tell me where to start.”

If I address that, I'll burst into sobs. The care these people have shown me in mere months seems to be healing some childhood trauma I boxed up in the back of my brain.

“The kitchen could use a thorough purge, so if you don't mind, we can tackle that?”

“Let's do it.” She winks at me conspiratorially.

It's surreal having Leona Ashton help me pack up my grandmother's kitchen. We work in tandem for about forty minutes, wrapping dishes and cookware to donate to local shelters or families. Every once in a while, Leona will ask me about a certain knickknack or decorative item to see if I want to keep it. My back strains from the work, but it feels good. This is the first week I don't feel too nauseous. I finally have

some energy to get up and do things, and this early nesting kick has hit me hard.

“You’re so happy, you’re glowing.” Leona’s voice across the room has me looking up as I pack some pot lids into a box.

I blink, trying not to tear up. Everything makes me emotional these days, and when a mother figure says I’m glowing from a pregnancy I never thought I’d have, that’s going to get me every time.

“There were many times in my adult life that I didn’t think this would happen for me. That I doubted whether I’d have children or a family. Even with the morning sickness, I wouldn’t trade this for the world. It’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Not to ... well, it’s probably weird to say this to his mother, but Liam is the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

She grins. “I always knew that boy was going to make someone feel very special. I’m so happy it’s you. You both deserve this.”

Worrying my lip between my teeth, I have no idea what causes me to say what I do next.

“Sometimes I wonder if that’s true. This isn’t the most on-track situation. We’ve had a ton of hurdles, and it wasn’t like this was planned.”

Leona feels very much like a safe space, and not having had that for much of my life might be the cause of spilling my guts to my boyfriend’s mother.

“Gabrielle, has anyone ever told you that it’s okay to want crazy things? To leap into untraditional situations or pursue something with a madness others will call insane?”

“Honestly?” I shake my head. “No. I was raised on the straightest and narrowest road you could imagine. And am still held to that standard by my family to this day.”

Leona hangs her head a bit. “I’m sorry to hear that. As a mother, it’s easy to have aspirations for your children. To want to push them down certain paths. The hardest thing is to take a

back seat and watch them make the decisions that best fit them.”

“I’m understanding that more as I move further into adulthood. Unfortunately, I don’t have parents who do that hard thing the right way.”

She motions for me to sit down at the table in my grandmother’s kitchen. “They just may not be willing to, even if they know they should. Being a parent is the hardest job you’ll ever have. Most rewarding, yes. But also the hardest. You don’t think it’s been tough watching Liam struggle? I’ve always known something was right under the surface, just not what it was. Until you came back to town, that is.”

My blood goes cold. Is she referring to what I think she’s referring to? That age-old feeling claws at the back of my throat, the one that says I’ll be found out for being a horrible person.

“You ... you think me going after your son is inappropriate.” The shame and guilt are evident in my voice.

Leona looks around like she’ll see someone else in the kitchen. “Going after? Who said you did that? From all accounts, it looks like you did nothing of the sort. I’m not wrong, am I?”

Gulping, I shake my head. “No. I did everything possible never to cross a line.”

“Even ended your career and moved far away to make sure you stayed on that straight and narrow. As a mother in that past life, I’m grateful for you doing that. I appreciate you sticking to your morals and knowing what was clearly wrong.”

Liam must have divulged more than I thought to her, or maybe she just guessed.

“But now? You’re both grown adults, Gabrielle. You only have three years separating you, and sure, I would have been on alert if he’d started dating you after graduation, but you put your foot down. You made the best decision for you both. And you’re still doing the same thing. Liam is a man who is free to make his own choices. He waited for you, and you were both

in search of each other, even with all the years apart. Seeing how you are now, I can confidently say that you two deserve all the happiness coming to you. You're going to be a wonderful mother." She reaches out to squeeze my hand.

Something in my chest breaks free, like a weight that dumps off and no longer constricts the organ. Leona has said the words I didn't realize I was waiting for. She's released me from this prison of shame I put myself in for falling for Liam. It's not absolution, but I'm on the road to accepting that everything we've done since I returned is above board.

"Funny, I was kind of starting to doubt that. I don't come from one who seems to care much about being a mother. Honestly, I worry sometimes that she thinks we're all mistakes she made. I never want my child to see themselves like that. I want what Liam and his siblings have; two parents who love them so fiercely that they'll do anything to make sure they're happy. Even if it makes them miserable."

"I wasn't always super mom, you know." She rolls her eyes as if making fun of herself. "The kids love to idealize that, but I think they have amnesia when it comes to some of my worst moments."

I can't imagine Leona Ashton being anything other than the perfect fairy godmother of a mom, so I'm shocked, too.

"One time, when only Liam was in school and the others were toddlers or babies, I took them to your grandmother's shop. I had to get out of the house, they were driving me mad, and Thomas was working so many hours at the restaurant. I thought it would be sweet to go to the bookstore and let them pick a few. God, I was naive. The moment we walked in, Patrick had an accident on the floor, Evan began screaming, and Alana ripped some pages out of a kid's book. I was *mortified*. It was hard not to cry as I begged your grandmother to let me clean up the pee, but she just scowled at me and gave the kids lollipops as she towed it up. Then she wheeled out an old-school TV, put on a Disney movie for them, and made me sit down while she made me some tea. It was the kindest thing I think anyone has ever done for me. She told me that she could tell that I was trying my hardest and loved my

children to bits. That it was all that mattered. Told me that in life, we make a ton of mistakes and we can't dwell on them or we'd never see the good stuff staring us right in our face. That Lucy was one of a kind, I'll tell you."

There have got to be tears streaming down my face with how much Leona is pulling at my heartstrings right now. "She sure was."

"All of that is to say, you come from a very strong woman. Forget about anyone who thinks you aren't or judges you to a standard that is wrong and not meant for you. Lucy saw in you what we all see; the kind of woman any man would be lucky to be with. The kind of mother who will try their hardest and love their children to bits. That's what Liam sees, it's what I see. We're so happy you're in our lives, and I know my son is a better man because you came back. Let it all go for a little bit; this is the happiest time of your life. Revel in it."

The soothing moment given by a mother who really cares is like a balm to my soul. Up until now, I've still had those weights tied to my ankles, the pressure and judgment to act like the standup daughter my parents always wanted me to be. Except they don't get to define that, I do. Leona just said as much, and now I have this found family who will help me realize it even more. Even when our child is born and we're tied together as a real family.

So, for the afternoon, with a woman I hope to one day call my mother-in-law helping me, I let it go and decide to live in only this moment. Honoring Lucy alongside a woman who I know myself, her son, and her grandchild will honor for the rest of our lives.

“If you don’t stop, we’re going to miss the appointment.”

I can’t help the giggle that slips past my lips as Liam’s fingertips play with the elastic waistband of my underwear.

“It’s not my fault you wake up smelling like the most delicious treat I’ll ever taste. Every morning, there you are, in my arms, all this smooth skin and irresistible sexiness and I’m just supposed to what? Not want to hump you?”

Morning Liam might be my favorite version of the man. He’s all dreamy and sleep mussed, with his hair wild and those stormy eyes flashing with lustful interest across the pillow. He’s so playful, a side of him I don’t usually get to see, and spending this last month with him has been something out of my wildest fantasies. Every night I get to come home to him, and every morning we wake up in the same bed. Living together has proved pretty easy, even if we didn’t discuss it. I just fell into staying at his place so often that I kept bringing more and more of my things over here, and suddenly we were roommates.

Liam has only made me feel one hundred percent welcome, and the pregnancy has only brought us closer together. Case in point, his fingers are currently trying to explore a part of me Liam is very acquainted with.

“We have time,” he coos, charming and sexy in his husky morning voice.

“The doctor is going to be all up in my vagina, knowing that your cock was just in there.” I always wonder if my gynecologist can tell when I’ve last had sex, like some vagina mind reader.

“Good, she’ll know I’m keeping my pregnant woman very satisfied.” Two thick fingers sink inside me, and I gasp at the fullness.

“God ...” My forehead drops to his as he pumps into me, both of us lying on our sides facing each other, and the time and when we have to leave falls out of my head.

“I love you in this morning light. So gorgeous, all rosy and sleepy. Your bare skin on display for me.”

I’ve always been an underwear-only sleeper, and to say that Liam approves would be an understatement. “Feels so good.”

The jumbled words are all I can get out as those talented fingers work me, pushing in deep while his palm hits my clit at just the right angle. We’re hidden beneath the covers in our own little sex fort, and I reach for Liam’s bare chest. His abs are like defined stones that I trace with my nails, making him hiss, and when I push past the waistband of his boxers to fist him, he growls before fusing his lips to mine.

We start nearly every morning like this, which is probably how I got pregnant so quickly. Denying ourselves for all those years will do that, leading to so much sex that it’s a struggle to keep our hands off each other some days. I know it’s the honeymoon stage, but we deserve it, and I’m basking in this delusional, sex-crazed happiness for as long as I can.

Lord knows we won’t be getting much sleep for a whole other reason in a few months.

“You’re so wet for me, beautiful. Always so wet for me. Fuck, I love the way you feel. The way you smell. I love *you*,” Liam whispers in my ear as his fingertips hit a spot inside me that has me bucking off the bed.

“Yes, please ... right there.” I’m panting now, my breath coming in spurts.

“That the spot?” I can feel his smirk on the side of my cheek.

“You know it is.” I growl because he’s withdrawing his fingers.

“Let’s see if I can’t get you a better angle, then.” He rolls me over on top of him until my legs straddle his waist and very obvious erection.

Even in his little gestures, Liam shows he’s always listening and cares so deeply. As I get further into this pregnancy, my hips and back have been taking a toll. That makes missionary a bit uncomfortable, and he compensates by pulling me on top to ride him almost every time we have sex. While I worry I’m breathing like an out-of-commission train screeching down the tracks, his stare and words always reassure me that he’s just as turned on as he always is.

“Fuck, your tits are so big these days, I could come just looking at them.” He rolls my nipples between his fingers, and my head falls back.

“I need you inside me.” My hands land on the bed beside his head, my round stomach pressing into his abs.

“Those words also have me dangerously close to coming, as well.” He arches up, sliding his boxers down and then fisting himself to lineup at my entrance.

How mouthy he is when we’re having sex always notches up my level of arousal. Liam isn’t a wordy guy until I get him between the sheets, and the shock of it alone turns me on so much I have trouble breathing.

“Jesus, Gabrielle,” he huffs out as I slide down onto him, my wetness making me take him all as I sink down in a smooth motion.

A moan stutters from my lips because, holy crap, does he fill me up just perfectly. My inner walls flutter around him as I rise up and then fully sheath myself on him over and over again, our mouths fusing as he works my hips in the exact rhythm I need them to grind in. It’s like Liam is in my head; no one before has ever compared, and I’m the luckiest woman

alive to get to share myself with this man for as long as he'll have me.

“You feel so good, baby.” The endearment pops out as I connect us, my orgasm sparking behind my eyes.

“Come for me, I need to hear you.” Liam’s husky voice spurs me on.

He catches me by the chin, forcing me to open my eyes and stare down at him as the eruption begins low in my spine. I feel like the world stops spinning as warmth floods my veins and pleasure shoots out to every extremity. Liam begins to move, extending my orgasm as he thrusts up into me hard and fast.

“Gabrielle, baby ... God damn ... you make me feel—”

He’s cut off by his own guttural groan, and I watch as his face contorts with fierce ecstasy as he slams me down onto him. My sensitive clit grinds into his pelvis, and I moan loudly, the aftershocks still making me twitch as he pours himself inside me. It takes a few blinks to clear my vision, but when I look down at Liam, he’s panting with an arm thrown over his face.

“Holy shit, I think I might have blacked out; that was so good.” A wry smirk turns those full lips up.

I can’t help but to bend down and kiss them, his cock still so hard inside me.

“The doctor is definitely going to know I’ve been freshly fucked.”

“Like I said, *good*.” He rolls us over until we’re face-to-face and pulls out of me, wetness pooling between my thighs. “Hopefully, we woke this little one up enough for the appointment.”

Today is the first time Liam is coming with me to the OB’s office. He is so excited about it, even if he isn’t outwardly saying it. For the past week, since I told him about the date of the appointment, he’s been smiling randomly when he doesn’t think I’m looking.

“Well, it definitely woke me up.” I nuzzle my nose into his shoulder.

Liam snickers. “The perfect way to begin the day, if you ask me.”

Forty-five minutes later, Liam sits next to me in the waiting room of the doctor’s office, holding my hand.

“Why do these offices always have the TV blaring?” he whispers as some talk show contestant shouts out over the rows of leather chairs in the lobby.

“I feel like it’s so we can’t hear ourselves think. Or maybe the front desk just wants to be able to hear it.” I shrug. “They deserve to, with all the annoyances they probably go through.”

He smirks at me. “Is that why you kept laying it on so thick when we checked in?”

“I just have a feeling they put up with some nasty patients, and I never want to be one of them.”

“My people-pleasing baby mama.” He tickles his fingers up and down my arm.

“There are just some things I can’t cut out of my personality that have been surgically embedded.”

But I am getting better at being more assertive with what I need, so I guess I could count that as a win.

“Gabrielle Murphy.” A nurse opens the door to the back hallway of exam rooms, and I stand with Liam following.

He grouses, his spine going rigid, but follows me as he places one hand on my back to lead me.

After the usual urine test, undressing, blood pressure, and typical questions about how I’m feeling, the nurse leaves us in the exam room, where I sit awkwardly on the table while Liam bounces his leg in the spousal support chair.

“You okay? You seem tense.” Something shifted in his attitude the minute we got back here.

He bites down on his full bottom lip, and I have to smother a sigh; this man is too gorgeous for his own good.

“Nothing. Forget it.” Except his leg is agitated and shaking violently now.

“Liam, what is going on?” My voice takes on a panicked note because we have so many things going on right now and I don’t know what just got under his skin.

After the night I made him work at the playhouse that all the Ashtons attended, Liam and Alana sat us all down to tell us they’d seen their fellow farmer Dan and the trespasser together outside in a group. It could mean nothing, but Thomas isn’t all that sure. One thing is definite; it’s suspicious. Warren and Thomas went to the police right away to report it, discreetly, of course. Since it could be nothing, and they’d known Dan Quillin a long time, they didn’t want him to suspect they were poking around trying to figure out how he was connected to the man who had trespassed on their land. If it turned out to be nothing, they’d have burned a bridge in the community.

On the other hand, all the men were now riddled with even more anxiety, and Liam has his head on a swivel constantly like something is about to happen.

“I just didn’t like the way she said your name,” he blurts out.

Confusion flits through me. “What didn’t you like about it?”

“That she called you a Murphy, when I so desperately want you to be an Ashton.”

My jaw may be somewhere on the floor because that sounds oddly like a proposal. It’s the only thing I can think, and then I’m thinking that I’m insane and girlishly unhinged because no way did Liam Ashton just ask me to change my name to his while I’m sitting here pregnant with his baby out of wedlock.

I don’t have any more time to regroup, though, or ask any of the questions lingering on my tongue because our doctor walks in at that very moment after a complimentary knock.

“Are you two ready to find out what you’re having?” the doctor asks as she comes in, a huge smile on her comforting face.

Recovering quickly because I have a thousand questions for the stoic man sitting in the corner of the room, I nod enthusiastically.

We opted to find out the sex of the baby early using a blood test but wanted to wait to hear it from our doctor along with the other results from the genetics they test during said test.

My OB looks over the paperwork in front of her and grins, a professional but happy expression that has my heart thumping. Liam shoots me a wink, and again I’m floored that this man continues to surprise me at every turn.

“Congratulations, it’s a *boy*.”

The information floods my brain in a rush of warmth, love, and excitement. Suddenly, Liam jumps up and comes at me, arms open as he hugs me into a tight squeeze.

“A boy!” I yelp, tears pooling in my eyes. “A little farm boy who will love working in the fields with you, exploring in the woods, and wrap every single person around his charming, surly finger.”

“*A boy*.” Liam chokes, and when he pulls away after kissing my cheek, his eyes are glittering too, with unshed tears. “He’s going to be such a mama’s boy.”

We hold on to each other until the doctor clears her throat, and then we’re laughing and half-crying as I settle back down on the table for my exam. After checking all the normal things and measuring my belly to make sure it’s measuring the same gestation as my due date should be, she dismisses us and tells us to schedule another appointment for a month from now. There is no ultrasound today, and part of me wishes we got to see the baby, but hearing he’s all healthy is good enough for today.

The entire way to the car, as my hand is laced in Liam’s, I think about how this baby boy will have his last name, too.

Part of me prays Liam brings it up again because the moment he asks me to be his wife, there is no way I'll say no. He simply has to ask.

“Let me get your door.” Liam races around the car to catch up to me.

“I can open my own door, I'm not fragile. I won't break.” I roll my eyes.

Since he saw Dan with the man who trespassed on the night of family dinner, Liam has been especially overbearing. And no, I don't mean overprotective. I mean *overbearing*. He's all over me, trying to keep me safe, protecting me, and generally being a pain in my ass.

“Do you or do you not remember what happened at family dinner?” He emphasizes again, like I could have forgotten how scared I was when he went outside and left me in the house.

“I do, but it's not like anything is going to happen here.” Although a nervous tremor skitters down my spine at my words possibly jinxing us.

Liam gets me in and then rounds the car. Once he's inside, he continues. “We don't even know what is happening in the first place, so I don't want to be too cautious. Something is fishy, that's for sure. I can feel it in my bones. If anything ever happened to you or the baby, I ...”

We both seem to fill in the blanks there, and the inside of the car is silent for a few minutes as he drives us back to his house. His sentiments about protecting me make me think through what he said at the doctor's office, and I can't help but bring it up. After all, we're having a child together, might as well get all the tough discussions out of the way.

“Did you, um ... did you mean what you said back in the exam room?” I stumble over the words in my nervous haste.

Liam grips the wheel with one hand, the other on my thigh. “I did. I mean, it wasn't the way I wanted to ask. Or at least tell you of my intentions. I know we haven't spoken about what happens next for us, but—”

“Yes.”

The word tumbles out of my mouth before I even realize what I’m saying.

“What?” Liam nearly slams on the brake at one of the only four stoplights in Hope Crest.

A silly, crazy smile splits my lips, and my heart feels so light it’s like it’s floating in the air like some magical rainbow bubble. “Yes, I want my last name to be yours. Yes, I want this with you forever. Yes, I want whatever happens next. If you’re asking, and the end result is that I get to spend my life with you, then yes. The answer is yes.”

Liam’s face just melts. *Melts*. Like he’s been waiting a lifetime to ask that, to get me to agree to this, and has been holding so much anxiety over it that now he gets to relax.

“Why did I not think this would be as easy as it is? Is there some catch you’re going to throw out?” He continues driving and curses this man for going the speed limit and making sure I’m safe.

All I want to do is jump into his arms and kiss him.

“Only that you must promise you’ll always kill bugs that get into the house, won’t eat the last cookie in the package, and will get in bed with me every night to scratch my back. Don’t be so surprised, though. I’ve been fighting you a long time, fighting this. It’s only recently that I’ve seen we were inevitable, we were always destined to end up right here. Sure, the baby sped up our timeline, but it’s the greatest blessing of a push I’ve ever needed. I want you. I want us. So, the answer is yes to any and all of the above questions you were going to ask.”

Clearing his throat, his eyes flit over to me, and I find that they’re glassy. “Dammit, woman, you’re seriously going to make me sob while operating this vehicle.”

I cup his cheek as he squeezes my thigh again.

“This isn’t how I was planning to do this, by the way. The nurse calling you by your last name just threw me off for some reason. I thought about bringing you to the lake or doing it in

the bookshop when we closed it up. I wanted to have a ring and candles and roses. I wanted to give you everything you deserve, not halfway get the question out as I drove us home in the middle of the day. But damn, if our timing hasn't always been stupendous. When it comes to you, I will take whatever I can get, no matter when it is. Which is why I'm not squandering this chance. The only thing I want is every day of the rest of my life with you. Rain or shine, come hell or bad harvest, I want every second to be with you. To raise our kids on the land I was raised on. To build you a big old house that we fill with memories and laughter and muddy boots. You are all I've ever wanted, Gabrielle."

Shifting up so I can kiss his cheek across the center console, I'm met with his lips as he tries to keep his open eyes on the road.

"In my head, I was much smoother and more romantic than this when I proposed," he says again, chuckling as I sit back down.

"I don't need any of that. Just you." I lean across so that I can rest my head on his shoulder.

His hand comes up to stroke my hair. "At least let me get you the exact ring you want since we kind of jumped the gun."

"Beautiful jewelry? You've got a deal."

We ride the rest of the way home with my head on his shoulder, his hand on my baby bump, and all I can feel is pure, radiant joy. The man I never expected to love is going to be my husband, and that makes me the luckiest woman on earth.

Pressing my phone to my ear, I take one of the last stacks of books from the back of Lucy's former shop and put them in a box.

"You're sure the detective said he couldn't find any traces of Dan and the trespasser knowing each other?" I spit out, annoyed as hell.

Patrick's voice comes across the other end. "No, he couldn't find any evidence of them together except as residents who live within the Hope Crest town limits."

"So we're back to square fucking one." My molars grind together as I tape up the box. "Why the fuck is this taking so long?"

"I mean, they caught the guy. To the cops, that's a win." Patrick tries to placate me.

"But we need to know why. Because this doesn't feel over until we have a reason."

"Maybe it was just random? Maybe there wasn't a motive and he's just an idiot who likes doing reckless things. That could just be it, Liam." My brother sounds distracted on the other end.

I hear a bit of wailing and realize Rebecca is crying. "Do you have to go?"

"Nah, she's just teething. I'm going to grab her this little ice pack toy she loves." More rustling, but he keeps talking to me. "Like I said, I just don't know that we'll get any answers."

He'll pay for the trespassing, it'll be on his record. But since that night, no break-ins, none of the fields have been tampered with."

"And you'd have been okay with just chalking it up to that when it came to Cassandra and what went down with her?" My voice has an edge because these are the things I love most on the line here.

"That was a completely different situation and you know it. The cops in town have really done a one-eighty since everything went down with Cass, and they've done everything to look into this. They can't connect him to Dan."

"And I still feel like everything I love is in jeopardy," I counter.

Patrick sighs. "I know that, Liam. I'm not saying you're wrong to be cautious, but there is nothing else we can do right now."

More crying comes from his end, and I know my brother is stressed out with other things in his life right now. Keeping him on the phone and lamenting to him about my fears is only putting more on his shoulders.

"Okay. Go, take care of my niece. Give her a kiss from me." Resigned, I let him hang up.

While my family is on my side with this, it's hard when they're all caught up in their own lives. They're more easily accepting of what the police are telling us because they don't feel as connected as I do to the land. After all, it's been my lifeblood for years. Before I had this new, burgeoning family to take care of.

Even with the rest of my world seemingly falling into place, I can't shake the feeling that something is looming over my head waiting to decimate it all.

I may take out some of my anger on the books and tape, slamming them into boxes as I violently close them shut. It does nothing to stave off the anger I feel, and I hate leaving things unsettled. Part of my personality craves completion, a task well done, a loop closed. This situation feels disjointed

and suspect, and I hate that it leaves me feeling bereft in some way.

The bell over the door clangs, and I turn to see Gabrielle walk in. A yellow sundress floats around her curves, the outline of her belly on display as my mouth waters for her. Fuck me, but this woman couldn't get any more gorgeous, and then I had to go and get her pregnant. Keeping my hands off her provides a full-time job.

"Hey." She grins as she nears me, and my entire soul seems to calm when she's within reaching distance.

For a split second, as my mouth captures hers, I forget about all the turmoil in our life right now. I forget I need to be on edge and in protection mode every second.

"How's baby boy doing today?" I pull back but keep her in my arms.

Lately, she's been having some nausea again, which the doctor confirmed is completely normal, but I've given her strict instructions to relax other than necessary work like helping out at the theater. I've largely taken over boxing up the remainder of the bookshop, which is almost done, thanks to her anyway. Today is our final day in here, and it feels bittersweet.

"He's doing fine after I scarfed down a pistachio milkshake. Probably the grossest thing I never thought I'd say, but it's like his lifeblood, so if it makes him happy, I'll continue drinking them."

I cringe. "Weirdest pregnancy craving ever?"

She shakes her head. "Your nonna told me, when I stopped by the restaurant yesterday, that she used to crave sardines at midnight when pregnant with your mom. I think that might be grosser."

"Definitely," I agree, not wanting to let her go but knowing I need to finish packing up.

"How much have you gotten done?" she asks, setting her bag down.

“I’m on the last two boxes, and they’ll be left on the porch for that final donation place to pick them up. Don’t you dare touch a thing.” I point a finger at her just as she’s about to bend over a box.

“Liam, I’m fine. I want to help.”

“And I want you to sit there and look beautiful.” I smirk, complimenting and grounding her at the same time.

“You’re insufferable.” She rolls her eyes but does take a seat on the one remaining chair left in the bookshop. “Your mom asked me if we were moving in together yesterday.”

A laugh harrumphs out of me. “That woman can’t contain her meddling, can she? It’s not enough we’re giving her another grandchild?”

Of course, we’re moving in together. I mean, shit, she already lives with me in every official capacity that counts. Eventually, I want to build us a bigger house somewhere near the Ashton family land, but that will have to wait until after the baby comes.

“I think she’s trying to hint at a bigger question, which is if we’re getting married.” When I look up, Gabrielle is grinning a sly smile.

We haven’t told anyone about the engagement yet. Technically, I still need to get her a ring to solidify it, and I know my mother and sister would crucify me for not having one to ask her with originally. The baby was so much of a surprise announcement that we want to keep this to ourselves for the time being. Plus, we’ve been a bit insular. Okay, a lot insular. Being in this honeymoon and babymoon phase all at once means we want to spend time alone as much as possible, so it’s not like we’ve exactly been around our family and friends together to spill the beans.

“They can’t help themselves.” I shake my head and tape up the final box. “We’ll tell them soon. Between the shop closing, and the appointments, you haven’t been feeling well, the trespassing, the harvest ... we’ve got a lot on our hands. Any spare second, I want to spend with you. We’ll tell them soon.”

She walks to me again, eyes flitting to the box, and I see the emotion in her gaze. “I’m in no rush, just thought it was funny. Your family is the best. I can’t believe I get to be a part of it.”

“With open arms, they’re about to claim you as their own. Be ready,” I taunt because my family can be a lot.

“Lucy would get such a kick out of me coming back here, falling in love with an Ashton, and staying for good. Her meddling hand is definitely in this as well.”

“Not a doubt in my mind that’s true.” I sway us, even though there is no music.

It just feels like the thing to do right now.

“I’m so sad it’s closing. I’m so sad I didn’t fight harder to keep it, or at least try to find someone to buy it who wanted to keep this place as a bookshop.” She looks around and her mouth droops down at the sides in a frown.

My hand rubs up and down her back. “This is what Lucy wanted, she said so in her instructions. She’d already set everything up for you to put in motion, you know this is how she wanted it. Her legacy will always be here, the people in this town will always remember stopping in for a good paperback or a chat over tea. And our son will know where he came from, what this place meant to Hope Crest.”

She snuffles and buries her face in my T-shirt. “I wish she were here to meet him.”

“Me too. She is, though. I believe she and my nonno are up there, drinking beers and laughing at all the stupid antics their families get themselves into. Evan alone provides comedic material on the daily.”

Gabrielle snorts and straightens, wiping her cheeks. “And we’ll always know this is the spot where everything came to a head. Literally.”

I chuckle. “That night was out of this world. I dreamed of something like that for years. Now I know the real thing is better.”

“Our baby boy can never know this is likely the place he was conceived,” she jokes.

“It’ll be a real hoot if he’s as into books as his great-grandmother was. We’ll know where he got it from.” My eyebrow crooks with sarcasm, and she cracks up laughing.

“Thank you for pushing the envelope that night. For admitting what I was never brave enough to. If it wasn’t for how sure of us you were, I wouldn’t have this life today.”

“I’ve loved you for a long time, baby. It was always going to end up like this,” I reassure her.

“Should we go home? I’m exhausted and have some raw steaks in the trunk. Baby boy was also craving a steak with extra Worcester sauce.”

Nodding as I heft the last boxes out onto the front porch, I lace her hand in mine. “Our son is oddly specific in the things he wants.”

“Kind of like his father.” She smirks.

The way that word sounds off her lips, it’s better than I could have imagined. I’m about to be a father, and I’m about to raise a child with Gabrielle. The whole thing feels surreal.

Her hand is on the doorknob, and she pulls it closed, effectively locking it, and we leave behind decades of memories.

“To the next chapter?” she asks.

“We’ll never forget this one, you know. But yes, it’s about to be the best one yet.”

With backward glances, Gabrielle and I walk away from the place where we really, finally, started after so many years apart. And I grip the hand of the woman who is about to make every one of my dreams come true, knowing that I’ll do anything on this earth to protect and make her happy.

Morning sickness doesn't dissipate into the second trimester because, at eighteen weeks, I can barely sleep past four a.m. without getting up to puke.

I know I need to talk to my doctor about medication or a natural remedy because no one should have to exist this way, but part of me wants all the symptoms full force. There was such a long time where I thought I'd never even get the chance to have a baby of my own, so I want whatever the worst of this is so I can also get the best of it.

Liam left early this morning to meet with the factory owners where he has the sauce jarred, but it doesn't escape my notice that he leaves me a glass of ginger ale and a sleeve of crackers on the nightstand. The man may be one of few words, because he doesn't leave a poetic love note with it, but he demonstrates how much he cares with his actions. That same "meal" greets me every morning because my baby daddy knows I need to settle my stomach before my feet even hit the floor.

Slowly, I chew the crackers down past the bile rising in my throat and gulp some of the bubbly drink. A few minutes later, I start to feel human again, and baby boy lets me know he likes the carbonation with a few kicks to my ribs. Smiling, I rub at the spot, knowing the havoc he's causing in my body is worth every symptom.

Sunlight pours through the windows of Liam's kitchen as I try to stomach some toast, and the chirp of birds outside makes

something open inside my chest. I love it out here, which shocked me at first. Growing up in a busy suburb, I wasn't used to the solitude of the woods or a small town with no big box or chain stores. But as I sit alone in what I'd probably have joked was a log cabin not too long ago, I'm completely at peace.

Knowing our son will grow up on this land, one that his ancestors called their own as well, makes this that much sweeter.

The outside air calls to me come midmorning, so I pull on a sweater and some boots. The air is growing cooler, even marginally, as we round the seasons to autumn. My heart does a happy dance knowing that pumpkin everything, colored leaves, and soup season will be upon us soon, and I'm sure Liam will be grumbling as I drag him apple picking, but I'm nothing if not basic when it comes to fall.

A gentle breeze has my hair floating on the wind as I walk down the porch steps and out into the front yard. Which, essentially, is the start of the crop fields. It's no wonder Liam built his house on this patch of land on the Ashton acres; it's just a stone's throw from the land he loves so much. As much as I want to design a house for our family and am obsessed with home decor ideas, as nesting hits me hard, I know we'll stay here for a while after the baby is born. The coziness of his home is enticing, just thinking about our family of three nestled in there makes me want to burst into emotional happy tears.

Opting to walk through the fields instead of taking the path to Leona and Thomas' house, I let my heels hit the dirt. Careful to avoid the corn cropping up on the outskirts of the fields, I mosey between the stalks letting my hands skim the plants.

Alone time like this makes my mind wander, and since it's occupied with so many baby and motherhood thoughts these days, I war with myself for the hundredth time that I should call my family and tell them about the pregnancy.

It's been months, and I still haven't broken the news to them. For one thing, I know the responses I'll get: disappointment, half-ass questions, judgmental comments, and insincere promises that they'll get out to see the baby once he's born. I can practically play through the entire conversation in my head, like it's a script my parents and siblings will follow.

Their reactions will be nothing like how Liam's family has treated me and us since they found out, with excitement, love, and so much support. At some point, I need to let my family know, but I've been dreading what it will do to me mentally. In some way, I know it will be the last time we truly connect. They don't reach out to me unless it's to use guilt to try to lure me into something I don't want to do, and I no longer feel this pull to keep them in my life.

Sure, I don't wish ill on them, but they also aren't my family any longer. I get to choose now who fills that spot, and I choose Liam and our baby. The love I feel in our home, in this found family, is far greater than any I was born into.

While I contemplate just how I'll go about telling them, a whir in the distance catches my ear. It's probably one of the farmhands working on a different part of the fields acres away. My feet keep on trucking, the walk helping to clear my nausea and my mind.

Suddenly, almost out of nowhere, the rumbling grows louder, shaking the ground beneath my feet, and I turn to see a machine nearly at my tailbone.

"Oh my God!" My surprise is drowned out by the whir of farm machinery, and not just any kind.

An enormous combine, heading straight for me.

What the hell is going on? It's the only thing I can think as I dive out of the way, the vehicle barely missing my right ankle as I land in the dirt on my ass. I turned my body, curling in on myself to shield my stomach and the baby from any damage. Except now I can feel the throb in my lower spine at coming down so hard.

The combine speeds by at a pace I don't think is normal, but I guess how would I know? Did Liam get home early? Did whoever is operating the machine not see me?

Questions flood me as I slowly pull myself up, my lower half aching from the impact. The nausea is back too, making me almost double over. Could be the adrenaline and fear flooding my system, and I know I need to get back to the house and call my doctor after that fall. Severe worry swamps me as my hands fly to my stomach, wondering if my baby is okay.

Please, dear God, you have to be okay.

But before I can clear the stalks of corn and get out into the open once more to hurry back to the house, the rumble is back. The machine is just feet away, leaving a ruined field and plants in its wake, and I've got nowhere to go. Running will only fail me; I'm slow as it is right now, and the combine is far faster than I could ever be on foot. Diving again might injure me further, and going the other direction only puts me more at risk to be hidden in the field and susceptible to be run over.

Waving my arms frantically, I try to get the driver to stop instead. It's close now, and I turn to the side, trying to shield my belly and the life inside. *Stop*, whoever this is has to stop!

I glimpse into the machine to see an older man's face, his shocked surprise as he sees me standing there. His hand wrenches back and the grinding of gears in my ears sets every nerve on fire. The combine wheels dig into the dirt, trying to get traction, but it's too late. It's barreling toward me even as it slows, and I won't escape in time.

Throwing myself again, I pray with everything I have to anyone who will listen to just keep my baby safe. To make sure Liam doesn't find me in this state but that someone else discovers me. A garbled "I love you" leaves my lips as the ground rushes up at me.

My body hits the ground sideways, dust and leaves clogging the air as I try to suck in. Even taking a breath hurts, and my head is the last thing to smack into the hard ground. Stars dot my vision as pain radiates through my skull.

One second, the sky is a bright blue above me, and then it's a wave of colors and distortion, the fall registering within my body and shooting anguish through my limbs.

Someone shouting is the last thing I can make out clearly before black erases the other colors, and then I'm gone to the world.

The call comes from Dad, who heard a ruckus in the fields as the farmhands screamed for anyone to come help.

My cell rang when I was twenty minutes from the house, excited to get home and back in bed with my beautifully sexy, pregnant fiancée ... even though no one knows we're engaged.

It was Dad, practically yelling frantically in my ear that I needed to get to the hospital and not go back to our property. Instantly, my heart was in my stomach as the sole of my boot punched down on the accelerator. I think I broke about five traffic laws getting to the ER, and as I sprinted through the parking lot, my heart had been in my throat.

What the hell happened? It kept running through my head the entire time I raced to be by her side. All Dad knew was that Gabrielle had been slumped over in the fields, bruised and bloodied, while our enormous combine had been running but abandoned. It wasn't even time for me to pull that machine out yet. Dad had said that a ton of crops had been run straight over.

Worrying about our land, the security cameras, and a culprit is the furthest thing from my mind, however. All I can focus on is that Gabrielle has to be okay, that if anything happens to her or the baby, I'll scorch the earth looking for someone to punish.

Except the moment I arrive, begging to be let back to whatever room she's in, the hospital staff informs me she's

having all kinds of testing done and that I have to wait.

Which is how I end up sitting in an uncomfortable hospital chair, my head in my hands, heart full of fury as I wait for the doctors to bring her up from all the tests they're running on her. My family waits with me, scattered in various positions of sitting and standing, or in Dad's case, pacing.

"She'll be okay, sweetheart. Gabrielle is strong. She's already a warrior of a mother and a girlfriend who looks at you like you hung the moon. She's going to fight through this." Mom squeezes my shoulder in what is supposed to be a comforting massage, but nothing takes the fear away right now.

"I asked her to be my wife. That's my wife in there," I choke out, emotion clogging my windpipe.

"You what?" Alana's voice is full of tears as her head whips up.

"Weeks ago. We were waiting until I got her a ring, the question just kind of slipped out. I couldn't wait any longer." My voice feels flat now, foreign to my ears.

If I lose her, if I lose them, I won't be able to ...

The thought alone paralyzes every limb with fear.

"Your wife is going to be okay." My mom corrects herself, giving me a small smile.

It's the only sliver of joy we'll get today now that my family knows the truth.

"Gabrielle is a fighter." Cass sniffles, her emotions clearly running down her cheeks.

Evan is the only one manning the restaurant while everyone else closed ranks and came to sit with me and support both of us while this purgatory traps me in its claws. It's been two hours, and I still don't have any news, and I haven't been allowed to see Gabrielle yet.

"She was alert in the car?" I ask Mom and Dad for the millionth time.

Mom's hand squeezes my shoulder again. "She was awake but definitely out of it, so she must have hit her head."

"But she kept asking for you, asking about how the baby was." Dad says this as if it's supposed to give me some hope.

"And they said they didn't see any bleeding from between her legs, as far as they could tell," Cass adds in as if Mom hasn't mentioned that to me a dozen times.

"I'm going to murder whoever—" Alana cuts herself off at the mention of the incident.

It was clearly an attack, but I can't let my brain go there, and the family slices her glares for reminding me of it. If I let that fury take me over right now, I won't be able to focus on Gabrielle and what really matters.

"Are you the family of Gabrielle Murphy?" A woman wearing scrubs appears in the waiting room.

Shooting to my feet, I nearly raise my hand. "She's my wife."

Sure, we don't have the paperwork, but we will soon. And I don't need that tying me up from hearing about her condition right now.

"Follow me, sir." She nods, and we leave the waiting area in favor of a quieter hallway.

As I pass, Patrick reaches out to squeeze my arm in solidarity, and when I look up, unshed tears are in my brother's eyes. He gets it, just how serious this is, and being a father puts that much more worry on us both. But I have to cling to the hope because the other option is just not fathomable.

"Mr.?" The doctor wants to confirm who I am.

"Ashton, Liam Ashton." I gulp, my voice shaking.

"Mr. Ashton, your wife had a nasty fall. Seems that in the dive, she partially strained some ligaments in her ankle and has some bruising to her ribs. We're still trying to determine if she needs concussion protocol."

“And the baby?” My voice cracks, everything within me hoping that I don’t need to hear about injuries to my unborn son.

“The baby is doing well, as good as can be. Your wife was very smart, and lucky, that the fall avoided any injury to the baby. He seems to be doing very well, he’s a strong little guy.”

A hot and cold nausea grips me at the news because I’m so relieved that I could faint. It’s a visceral reaction, and I have to shoot my hand out, palm flat to the wall, to make sure I stay upright.

“Thank God,” I whisper to myself.

“Your wife will need to stay for monitoring. We want to make sure nothing in her placenta tore and that the baby’s vitals stay consistent and healthy. Otherwise, we’ll treat her for the ankle and concussion, but both of those aren’t threatening and should resolve in a few days. I can take you back to see her now.”

“Yes, please, yes.” I start walking as if the doctor has told me which way to go.

“Mr. Ashton, Gabrielle might be drowsy when we go in, and you need to mind her injuries.”

It’s like she knows all I want to do is wrap her in a bear hug. I nod, and she gives me a small smile.

“She’s going to be all right.” Her reassurance makes me feel better than my family does because this professional actually knows it will be.

Following as she navigates down several hallways, I wring my hands as they begin to perspire. The only thing I want is to see Gabrielle, and yet I feel like I might break down when I finally hold her in my gaze. Finally, we stop in front of a door, and suddenly it opens to reveal the woman I’ve loved since I can remember what that emotion is.

Blond hair caked with dirt, her fragile body an outline under the white sheet covering her waist, the swell of her baby bump ... I’m at a loss. Both so relieved and still fretting with

worry at the same time, my insides feel in flux with all the conflicting emotions.

“Baby ...” I have to bite down hard on my lip to stop from crying the minute I see her.

Cataloging everything at this moment, I want to survey her injuries, commit them to memory, and then hold her, knowing that she’s safe, if not unharmed.

Despite being the one trying to hold it all in check, Gabrielle suddenly bursts into tears at the sight of me.

Running across the room, I gather her into my embrace as gently as I can. “You’re okay, you’re okay,” I coo at her, stroking her hair as I’m careful to avoid pulling at any of the wires. The machines around her beep, and I reach down to rub her stomach, only to discover the band around it.

“What’s this?”

“They’re monitoring the baby to make sure I didn’t cause him any damage. So far, he’s healthy as can be.” A whoosh of breath releases from her lungs as if she’s been holding it since the whole thing happened.

“First of all, you didn’t cause him anything. Someone did this to you. None of this is your fault. If anything, you sacrificed other parts of you to make sure he was okay. But I’m relieved, to say the least, to hear our son is good. If anything happened to you, if anything happened to him ...”

The tears come now, two leaking down my cheeks. It’s so out of character that the wetness feels foreign.

“We’re okay, I promise. A little battered, but okay.” She cups my face as her thumb brushes away the tears. “The only thing I could think about was you. How you’d come save us, that you’d do anything to make sure nothing more happened to us.”

“But I wasn’t there.” Guilt suffuses me.

“Liam, that’s not what I mean. Of course, I know you can’t physically be with me, with our son, every minute of the day. But I know, in my heart, that you’ll always protect us. Fight

for us. You're our strength, you make me believe when I can't find it in me."

Love, so overpowering and positive, warms the organ in my chest. The one that only beats for her.

"I will, forever. I just thank everything in the universe that you're all right. So much worse could have happened, and I can't do this life without you. I love you." I kiss her temples, pressing my lips to her soft skin over and over again as if it will make her injuries heal.

"I love you," she whispers, nuzzling into me.

We stay that way for a while, until Gabrielle dozes off, and even then, I don't untangle myself from the uncomfortable position on her bed. As long as I'm holding her and she's comforted in her sleep, I'm not moving.

Hours later, they allow our family to come in. They stop by with enough food to feed an army, funny anecdotes to cheer us up, and Alana brings some books and fancy skin products to keep Gabrielle happy in the hospital for however long they keep her.

"You know I'm never leaving this room while you're here, right?" I say through a bite of pizza.

She rolls her eyes. "You won't last twelve hours. You need to be outside, to get some answers, and we'll both be bored to tears."

I shake my head. "Nope. Where you are, I am. Right now, especially."

I can't imagine leaving her side for one second while we await news of the tests and about the baby. She's in a bit of pain from her ribs and ankle, and I need to be here to alert anyone if she needs medical attention at any moment.

"Liam, I'm all right. Healing, and I feel better already." She's lying, but I'm not going to call her bluff. "You need to be out there on the farm, looking into what the hell happened."

Just the mention of her being run over by my own equipment has venom pumping through my veins. "The police

are on it, Patrick is going over there now, and the farmhands are going over the security footage. I'm of no use—”

“No, but you know you want to be on the case, helping as much as you can,” Gabrielle interrupts me, giving me a knowing smile. “And I want you to be. I want to know if this was an accident, if I was targeted, or what. This person could have done so much harm to our baby. I won't feel safe until this is finally solved.”

Neither will I, but I've been trying not to bring that up.

“You need to just rest. Don't worry that beautiful head about anything else.” Giving her a fake, forced grin, I try not to let my unease and anger show on my expression.

“I love you, but—”

Gabrielle's next protest is cut off by someone rushing in the door. When my neck twists to see who it is, I'm surprised that Dad is back in the room. He left not twenty minutes ago to go over to the farm, and I hadn't expected to hear from him for hours.

“They caught it all on the security tapes. Asshole didn't even care about disguising or avoiding them. Like he wanted to be seen,” my father seethes, his hands in fists.

My heart drops to my feet, and Gabrielle's face goes ashen.

“Who? Who was it?” she squeaks, her voice a meek, broken thing.

Dad gulps, his eye flitting to me. I nod, knowing we can't shield her from this. Can't shield her from what I now know was a targeted attack. Someone tried to take my family away from me, and they were going to pay.

“Dan Quillin. It was Dan driving the combine.”

A week after being discharged from the hospital, the police call me in to get my statement on the accident.

Liam has been trying to put them off since we know Dan Quillin is responsible, and he shouldn't pose a threat to me anymore, but we can't delay any longer.

The hospital and my OB gave me strict instructions for a week of modified best rest after the accident to make sure the baby doesn't have any more excitement until he's born months from now. At first, I was dismayed at having to sit or lie in bed for the couple of days, but I know it's what's best for both of our health. The other injuries are healing fine, and other than being mentally shaken and worried, I'm doing okay.

Being on bed rest means they have to bring me into the police station using a wheelchair, which I hate. But the sooner this is over, the sooner I can focus solely on growing our son in the safest manner possible.

"I can't believe he did this," Liam mutters for what seems like the thousandth time since we got the news of who the culprit is.

"When the police told us he confessed to ruining the crops, paying off the trespasser, and then using the combine to try and ruin the rest of the harvest"—I shake my head—"I couldn't believe someone would actually do that." The confusion still sits in my chest at the thought.

Dan Quillin confessed on the spot after they found video footage of him sneaking onto the Ashton property and taking the combine out of one of the farm buildings. That plus his fingerprints were enough to satisfy the police's case, and now they need me to recount what happened from my point of view on that day.

"He's always been such a standup man, such a wonderful neighbor and town resident. I've seen people in our farming community fall on hard times, but they've never reacted like this." Liam shakes his head again, like he can't reconcile the man he knew with one who would harm his family.

We're waiting in the lobby of the police station for the detective who will take my statement. The breeze blowing in from the door each time it's open is cooler than it has been in recent weeks, and the smell of fall is in the air. There is a water cooler across the room that keeps dripping and a phone at the nearest desk that rings periodically. It's a small-town police station, and this is probably its biggest case in recent months.

The Ashtons apparently can't keep out of this place, and I'm just glad that our chapter is finally coming to a close.

"Miss Murphy, thank you for coming in today." A mid-forties male detective smiles at me, then turns to Liam. "Liam, I'd say it's good to see you, but I guess not under these circumstances."

"Jim." Liam stands to shake his hand, and I remain in my wheelchair.

Just then, I watch as the father of my child's back goes ramrod straight, and I follow the direction in which his vision is tunneling. And then there is Dan Quillin, being led from a room at the back of the station.

"What the fuck is he doing here?" Liam barks.

Jim blanches and gives the other police officer, the one leading Dan, a death stare. "I told you to wait until tonight to move him. They're here for the statement. I'm sorry, Miss Murphy, this wasn't supposed to be—"

“You’re okay?” Dan Quillin directs his question to me, his eyes searching my face, and my walls come up.

But even through my defenses, I can see his ghost-white face. The way he’s shaking, not with fear, but I can tell it’s remorse. The way he seems to visibly let go of a breath he’s been holding when he sees that I’m all right, as if no one told him yet whether I survived.

“Don’t you dare speak to her.” Liam’s harsh command makes the man who almost ruined us nearly crumple.

“I’m so sorry, I never meant for any of this—”

“You almost killed my wife!” Liam roars, and I fear he’s about to tackle this man across the police station.

“I didn’t know she was there.” Dan’s voice is a desperate, reedy thing. “I swear I didn’t know. I would never hurt another person, a woman. I’d never ... I’m so sorry, Liam.”

The older man breaks down crying, and I can’t hold on to my hatred. The disgust and anger for this faceless person, someone I’ve never met but knew by name only in the last two weeks from conversations with the Ashton ... he’s not a monster. He looks much like Liam’s father, a man who has worked all his life to preserve something.

Now that it’s slipping through his hands, he did something drastic. You never know what you might be capable of until you’re faced with a dire situation. In my heart, for myself and this man who is losing everything he worked for, I decide to forgive.

I don’t know what divine intervention got me here so quickly, but it’s like his expression, the way he sounds so desperate to take it all back, just helped me let go of any lingering anger. I know what it is to harbor upset, frustration, and malice. It’s not healthy for anyone, and it solves nothing. Dan will get his punishment, but I can rest easier knowing I don’t have to be a part of it.

The old me, the one who was scared of so many things, would be proud of how I’m handling this now.

“Liam.” My fingertips are on his arm, and my voice is meant to be an antidote to the tension in the lobby.

My soon-to-be husband turns to me, bends down to where I am in the wheelchair, and shuts his eyes. “I need to control myself.”

I palm his face. “You’re keeping us safe, I’ll never be mad about that. But look at him. Really look at him.”

He turns away from me to do as I ask, and for a few beats, I know he’s really studying Dan. When he turns back to me, his lips are pursed, but the fury has left his expression.

“That’s a man who is remorseful, who deeply regrets his actions.”

“Baby, he hurt you.”

“And I’m okay. So is our son.”

Liam stands, surprising me, and points a finger in Dan’s direction.

“You have one chance to answer me. Tell me why you did this.”

Dan’s eyes drop to the floor, shame evident in his figure. “You know that our farm has been struggling for a while. We were in dire straits, financed to the hilt and trying to secure more. Then the government came and said they were seizing our land, land that’s been in my family for generations. Not only would we barely be able to pay off our debts with the money they were giving us in exchange for taking our property, but we wouldn’t be able to survive with what they were leaving us. Then our cows developed some kind of bacteria that made it impossible to sell these last few months’ worth of milk, and it all just collapsed. I couldn’t take it any longer. Everything was unraveling right in front of my eyes and there was nothing I could do to control it. But I could ... fucking hell. I wasn’t in the right state of mind. It’s not an excuse, but part of me thought, if I destroyed something that seemed to be working so well, I’d feel better about my own shit luck. Why was my farm disappearing while yours was thriving? I’m not proud of those thoughts. But to act on them?

I'm so sorry. I didn't know what to do, my family's legacy is gone. I'm a selfish man to try to take yours, too. You have to believe me, I never wanted to hurt a person, any of your family. I didn't see you," he directs this to me now, "and when I did, I tried to stop right away. The machine was going too fast, though."

He's right. I watched him try to stop it. I'll have to recount that part in the statement I give to Detective Jim.

"I'd take everything back. I was crazed, furious, out of my mind with anger and shame. I never should have targeted you, and I'm ... I'm so deeply sorry to both of you. To your family, Liam."

Dan's eyes stay on the floor, and I watch more tears drip to his feet.

Liam's hand lands on my shoulder, and even though I wish we could erase what's happened, my heart still hurts for this man. I know what it's like to feel like you're unanchored, running from the inevitable.

What happens next is something I never expected in my entire life.

"Once upon a time, someone sacrificed their own feelings for my wellbeing. For my reputation. To make sure that what happened was the right thing. It might have hurt me deeply at the time, but in the end, it led to a much brighter future."

He looks at me, those gray eyes zoning in on the small bump of my abdomen, the baby we created living healthy and strong inside my belly.

"And while you put my family in danger, I understand it to a point. I know the strife you've encountered, what it means to think about losing something so near and dear to you. My family's farm is a part of me, try to take it and I'd be a shell of who I am. And so, in this, I can put my own feelings aside to make things right. To forgive, even when I don't want to. Which is why I want to help you."

My heart bursts with pride. This is the man I fell in love with; he protects his family and is loyal to the town and the

community that raised him. He understands how the people who work these lands feel about them; so connected and rooted here that they'd consider giving them up akin to dying.

"You want to do what?" Dan's eyes snap up and all but bug out from their sockets.

"He'll still be charged for what he did," Jim jumps in.

"And I deserve any and all of that." Dan's voice is small, but he acknowledges his wrongs.

"While that's still the case, I won't push for it. You'll get no support from me," I interject, finding my courage. "I'll be doing everything possible to recommend that his punishment is as minimal as possible."

I have no idea if I can do that or if it will work, but I'd hope the words of a victim go a long way.

"And I will work with your family to preserve what will be left of your land and farm. I'll pump my own supplies and knowledge into keeping your dairy farm alive, because I believe this community is greater for the product you produce. Farming and harvesting is our way of life, it guts me to know anyone would have to lose that. I'll make sure the Quillin property doesn't disappear."

The way he's handling this right now turns me on more than any other time since I met him. He's incredibly sexy, standing up for what is right rather than what he wants to do. Swallowing his fury and vengeance is so mature and shows so much growth that I don't know how I ever doubted this man was the one for me.

"Why would you do this?" Dan's voice is rough with emotion.

"It's just like I said, sometimes we need someone to sacrifice what's inside so that we can make it to the other side. I want to pay the world back for the time it did that for me. You get this one shot, Dan. When it's your time, don't squander it."

"We need to take your statement. Technically, you're not even supposed to be doing this." Jim looks nervous, like he

just let something happen that he wasn't supposed to, and Dan is led in the opposite direction.

When he passes me, he mouths the words *thank you* and *I'm so sorry*, once again. Sure, I know he means them, but I don't need them. They aren't for me. The only forgiveness I can give is to myself, to let this go and focus on the future I want so much.

Jim brings us back to a room and asks us if we need water, to which I answer yes. But really, I just want a minute alone with Liam.

"You're the most honorable, incredible man I've ever known." I press a kiss to his scalp as he leans down to press his mouth to my clothed bump.

"That was fucking hard," he murmurs, pressing his ear to my belly as if he might be able to hear our son talking.

"I know. But in the long run, that will make us feel much better than holding on to anger that does us no good. You're a phenomenal person, Liam Ashton. Especially when you let people see the heart you have under your armor."

"Are you okay?" He glances up, his eyes full of love.

"I will be." Assuring him as we wrap our arms around each other.

The cocoon we make protects our baby, cementing our little family; that is the only thing that matters right now.

"Let's get this over with, and then let's go home and start the life I've dreamed about since the first time I walked into your classroom." He kisses my lips.

"Sounds like the happiest happily ever after to me."

EPILOGUE

GABRIELLE

Four Months Later

“**W**ith the way the baby is positioned, head up, he’s breach. Considering how early it is and with that complication, I don’t want to take any chances. We need to take you in for a C-section.”

My doctor’s words ring in my ears, shock permeating every cell, and I absentmindedly turn to Liam to gauge his reaction.

To my surprise, my husband is cool as a cucumber, smiling at me like he couldn’t be more excited.

“This wasn’t the plan, we were supposed to have another month.” The panic in my voice is clear.

He smooths a palm over my jaw and shakes his head. “We knew something like this might happen, right? After the accident, it was a possibility. We’ve been monitoring, you’ve been doing everything right. We got him to this point, you’ve been a freaking warrior, and now it’s time for the doctors to take us all the way home.”

After another bout of bedrest in the last month, a high blood pressure diagnosis, and worrying that I'd torn a part of the placenta during the incident on the farm, to say this pregnancy has been a roller coaster would be an understatement. There was always the chance that we'd deliver early, but I never thought it would be so sudden like this.

Liam and I got married four days prior to this regularly scheduled appointment. Neither of us wanted anything fussy, and following in Alana and Warren's footsteps, we had gone down to the courthouse to be legally bound to one another. We wanted to be husband and wife when our son came into the world, to be a united family, so that we wouldn't have to go through anything legal with his birth certificate. I have the paperwork to change my name, but I guess that will have to be done after I give birth.

Since that's happening today.

The ring on my finger sparkles as I look down, still trying to digest the information, and I can't help but zone out to the memory of him putting it on my hand.

We'd been standing in front of the local judge; well, Liam had stood and I'd been in the wheelchair due to bedrest restrictions. Liam got down on one knee again and pulled the ring from his pocket, a total surprise I didn't know he'd been planning. It was a flower-shaped diamond composed of other tiny diamonds and was so unique and beautiful that I burst into tears.

I guess I was prone to do that these days, what with the surprise baby and wedding shower his female relatives threw me a month ago. They made me feel so special throughout this whole journey, and I can't understate how incredible it feels to have a supportive, safe place to land for the first time in my life. The Ashtons are my home now, too, and I know I can count on any one of them in the future.

As for my own family, we haven't had much contact. I called to let them know about my accident, which also led to the pregnancy reveal, and their reaction was much what I

expected. I'd been scolded about traditional ways of doing things, expectations, etc. I'd politely told my mother I didn't agree and haven't heard from her since. Only my sister reached out to share they were sending a wedding card. When I received it, I felt nothing.

I no longer let someone who so clearly didn't understand me rule my life. Deep in my heart, I know what I want and who I want it with, and that's all that matters.

"The baby won't be in danger?" I ask my doctor, nerves creeping up my throat.

We're sitting in her office in the hospital, her second location that she requested I see her at ever since the injuries from the combine. Specifically, in case something like this arose and I needed to be rushed into emergency labor and delivery.

Or, in this case, surgery.

"I perform about ten C-sections a week, Gabrielle. You're in very capable hands. I won't say that nothing will go wrong; this is surgery and something can always go wrong. But this is why we've been monitoring, this is what gives us the best chance to have a healthy mom and baby. You just have to trust me."

I do, but it doesn't mean it isn't still scary.

"You can do this. We can do this. It's a different route than we thought we'd take, but we can handle this. We've handled so much together, this is just another hurdle."

Liam's expression, his voice, and his reassurance always do the trick. This man has always known how to wear me down, how to help me get over something, so, of course, this is no different.

He's right, too, about this just being another bump in the road. From the time we met to distancing ourselves from each other when I thought it was the right thing to do, to coming back together, to learn the chemistry never went away. Nothing has been easy for us, and the past few months are an example of that. My injuries might have healed completely,

but we're still dealing with some things from the combine incident.

Dan Quillin's charges and trial are still pending, but we've let the prosecutor know our stance and are hoping their office takes into consideration how we feel when his sentence is delivered.

As for the promise Liam made about his family farm, he has already upheld it. Even though he doesn't want to be personally involved with running it, or any day-to-day operations because it just hits too close to home, he increased one of his farmhands' salaries and made him the operational director, if you will, of the dairy farm. Working in tandem with the Quillin family members who took it over, they're trying to make the portion of land they have left remain profitable.

If we can get through that, we can get through anything.

"Okay. Let's do it." I nod, sounding more confident than I feel.

My doctor explains the entire procedure, has me undress and step into a gown, and then we both have to sign documents and procedurals. Once that is all done, the team wheels me back to the operating room, and I have to say goodbye to Liam temporarily at the doors.

"I love you. I'll be right out here in my funny hat and I'll be in there in a couple minutes." He's not allowed in the room while I'm getting my spine numbed.

"I love you so much. Tell me it's going to be okay?" My nerves are on high alert.

"We're about to meet our son, everything is perfect." He grins, bending over the rail of the bed to give me a kiss.

And then I'm in the operating room, all bright white lights and foreign language of the doctors and nurses communicating. I try to stay calm, following the directions they give me. A nurse asks if I'd like to put on some music, and she puts on some classics to lull me into a calmer state. The same woman lets me hang on to her as they open the back of my gown and insert the needle in between my vertebrae.

After some pain, burning, and a few minutes, my entire lower half is numb.

Liam appears as they're stringing a curtain up so that neither of us can see my exposed guts on the operating table.

"Hi, beautiful." He cradles my head with one arm and latches on to my hand with his other.

"All right, Gabrielle, we're going to start. You'll feel a lot of pressure and it could take us some time to get him out depending on how he's positioned. You just stay calm, tell us if you're feeling any pain, and let that husband of yours distract you."

"I've distracted you since the classroom days," Liam whispers in my ear.

"This is not time for thinly veiled innuendos." But I can't help the laugh that comes out of my mouth.

"See, he's doing his job already," my doctor says.

The whirl of surgical tools, the nurses and doctors communication, and the pressure I feel take over anything else I could possibly focus on. Liam lets me squeeze his hand to death as it feels like someone has taken an elephant and planted it on my ribcage.

After what feels like forever, my doctor looks over the curtain. "He's almost here, you doing okay?"

I nod, so anxious to see my baby that I don't even care if I'm cut open in the middle. The pressure intensifies as they seem to be wrestling him out, and just when I think I can't take it anymore, a cry splits the air.

"*Oh my gosh,*" I cry out, knowing that my baby is alive in this world.

"Your baby boy is here." One of the nurses comes around the curtain, handing him to Liam.

My husband bends our baby to my face, and the arm without my IV instinctively comes around the little bundle as I kiss his cheek.

A head full of dark hair like his daddy, little cupid's bow lips, and green eyes blinking at my own. We match, our eyes a mirror of each other, and I start to cry as I stare at this perfect little creature Liam and I created.

"How is he so beautiful? Like the angels kissed him and only him?" Tears make my voice hoarse.

Gazing at my son has now become my new favorite activity, just in the last six seconds.

"Thank you. Thank you for giving me the most incredible gift I'll ever receive." Liam bends down to kiss me as he secures our son in my arms, letting me hold him even while I'm being stitched up behind the curtain.

"What's his name?" one of the nurses asks.

"Lucas DiNicoli Ashton." Liam beams, and I nearly start weeping as I look at our namesake, who has so many important people making up his name.

Lucas, for my grandmother Lucy. DiNicoli, to honor Liam's nonno and that heritage. And Ashton, our shared last name and one that means so much to the land Liam loves so much.

"We love you, little buddy. So so much." I stroke his face and cheeks, knowing there is another person on this earth I'd lay my life down for.

Even as they stitch me up, help me recuperate, and transfer us to a post-op room, the only thing I can focus on is Lucas. How sweet the sounds he makes are, how strong his little fist is when wrapped around my finger.

And how utterly perfect both he and Liam look the first time my husband takes off his shirt so they can cuddle skin to skin. I've never seen anything more beautiful in my life.

Coming back to Hope Crest had never been in the cards, and neither had any of the events that followed. But I thank my lucky stars they did because this is the life I was meant to have.

The two of us shirking the rules and living by the ones we believed in, that's what got us here.

And I'm not giving that up for anything.

Looking for the final Ashton siblings' book? Pre-order [Hearty](#) for Evan's story!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author of romance novels such as *Fleeting* and *Love at First Fight*, Carrie Aarons writes books that are just as swoon-worthy as they are sarcastic. Her stories are fueled by vanilla lattes, melancholy music, and copious amounts of candles.

When she isn't writing, Carrie is busy bingeing reality TV, having a love/hate relationship with cardio, and trying not to burn dinner. She lives in farm country with her husband, two children and ninety-pound rescue pup.