



SPILL
the
SWEET TEA

VALENTINE TEXAS



BOOK TWO

LYRA PARISH

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Spill the Sweet Tea
Valentine Texas, #2

Cover Designer: Dee Garcia, [Black Widow Designs](#)
Photographer: [Wander Aguiar](#)
Cover Model: [Andrew Biernat](#)
Editor: Amanda Cuff, [Word of Advice Editing](#)
Proofreader: Jenny Sims, [Editing 4 Indies](#)
Proofreader: Rosa Sharon, [Fairy Proofmother Proofing](#)

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MEET THE VALENTINES

Beckett Valentine
Kinsley Valentine
Harrison Valentine
Remington Valentine
Colt Valentine
Fenix Valentine
Emmett Valentine
London Valentine
Sterling Valentine
Vera Valentine

in order from oldest to youngest

***Each book in the Valentine Texas Series
is a stand-alone with rom-com vibes and
a Happily Ever After.***

This one's for the book goddesses who love mood rings, tarot cards, and crystals. Everything you want is yours because you're lucky AF!

IT TURNS OUT FREEDOM AIN'T NOTHING BUT MISSING YOU

—TAYLOR SWIFT

KINSLEY

“*I*’m up! I’m up!” I roll over and reach for my iPhone, willing my tired eyes to focus on the time. I blink hard, trying to gather my bearings. “Four in the damn mornin’? Ugh!”

Pushing the comforter off me, I sit up and groan loudly, hoping whoever is outside understands they’re about to feel my wrath. Sometimes when I’m woken from a dead sleep, I turn into a bear. Everyone who knows me knows to beware. So this better be a 911 type of situation.

As the pads of my feet hit the cool wooden floor, the *knock-knock-knock* turns into panicked pounding.

“Kinsley!” the deep voice echoes.

“I’m comin’! Hold your damn horses!” I stumble through the dark, tripping over the high heels I kicked off when I got home from work less than ten hours ago.

After I unlock the dead bolt, I swing open the door and glare into my brother Harrison’s blue eyes. His dark hair is a sloppy mess, and I can’t tell if he’s drunk, but he smirks regardless.

Then I realize he’s standing buck-ass naked on my porch. His hands firmly cover his junk, and I lift my palm toward him to block the view of everything else.

“What in the world?” I look around and see he’s alone. No truck is parked in my driveway, either. No cell phone unless it’s tucked between his butt cheeks. This isn’t a prank, but it doesn’t look like an emergency, either. “I’m confused.”

“Can I please come in, or are ya gonna let me show my ass to everyone who’s awake on the ranch?”

I slam the door in his face, but I only make it two steps before he starts howling.

“Kins! *Please!* I can’t go home like this. I’ll make it up to you and grant ya one favor in exchange. Anything. You’ve got my word. Cowboy’s honor, cross my heart and hope to be bucked off and kicked in the nuts durin’ my next trainin’ session. Ya know you’ve always been my *favorite* sister!”

The last part makes me chuckle, considering how large our family is. I have five brothers—Beckett, Harrison, Colt, Emmett, and Sterling. I also have four sisters—Remi, Fenix, London, and Vera. Of course, I’m his favorite. I’m the *only* older sister he has, which says a lot, considering how busy our parents were.

“Pretty please with sugar on top?”

I swing open the door and glare at him. “Do you have any idea how much beauty sleep I actually need, Harrison? This is the fourth time in a matter of months.”

He shrugs, and I move out of the way, letting him inside the tiny house I live in on the family ranch.

“Sorry, sis.” He sounds genuine. “Do you have any of my clothes here?”

I rub my sleepy eyes. “Not anymore. You wore them home the last time you randomly showed up covered in manure. Pretty sure I still have a favor banked from that episode.”

“Well, shit. You have anything that will fit me?”

“Maybe.” I go into my room and open my bottom drawer. It’s where I keep the oversized clothes I love to lounge around in on the weekends. There’s a Jurassic Park shirt and some stretchy basketball shorts that might work. I set them on the back of the couch and then turn to give him privacy.

He mutters something under his breath, and when I finally glance in his direction, I nearly piss myself from laughing so hard. The shirt looks like a tank top, and the shorts stretch over his quads like spandex. He’s tall and built from working with horses and has nearly a foot of height on me, but this is worse than I expected.

I double over, wheezing, struggling to catch my breath. “This is…” I’m nearly choking at this point. “Waaaaaay too good.”

“I’m glad you’re findin’ this funny. They’re so tight on my balls I can barely breathe.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers. Trust me when I say this is as good as it’s gonna get when it comes to my clothes fittin’ you. Good night, Harrison.”

“Remind me to drop off an overnight bag tomorrow.”

I take a step forward and point my finger into his chest. “No. How ’bout you prepare not to have your clothes stolen in the first place?”

“Stolen?” He howls with laughter. “You have *no* idea what happened.”

“And I don’t *wanna* know. I’m tired! Now, can I please go back to sleep? I have to be up in two hours for work.” I grab his arm and nearly drag him to the door. After I swing it open with my free hand, I gently push him outside.

“I’d offer you my couch, but you’d refuse!”

“Because my legs hang off. Why won’t you let me buy you a new sofa?”

“Take it or leave it. I like my furniture.”

“Leavin’ it.”

“Well, if you start walkin’ now, you might make it home before the ranch hands wake up.”

“You won’t drive your little brother so he makes it safe?”

“Nah, it’s less than a mile. Beauty rest, remember?”

He sticks out his bottom lip. “You’re a *big* meanie.”

“I’ll happily claim the title. Oh, and you’re welcome, *jerk*. Next time, I’m not gettin’ up for you. And I will absolutely be takin’ that favor and adding it to the pile I’ve been collectin’.” I scan my eyes up and down him once more, snapping a mental picture of how ridiculous he looks, then slam the door. My only regret is not taking an actual photo in case I need it for blackmail later.

I’ve saved Harrison from trouble more times than I can count, but he’d be there without hesitation if I needed anything. He might be a giant pain in my ass, but he’s true to his word and returns his favors like a genie granting wishes. Nothing is too big or too small for a man with no boundaries.

My other siblings think I enable Harrison’s recklessness too much. Maybe I do, but I think it’s because I understand him in a way they don’t.

I climb back into bed, the sheets already cold from my absence. Nervously, I roll over and double-check my alarm, making sure it’s still set.

As soon as I fall into a deep sleep, my phone buzzes and plays a happy little tune—the intro to “Walking on Sunshine.” If my life were a musical, it would be my theme song.

After dressing for work, I do my morning routine—meditation, a daily tarot card pull, and journaling. Closing my eyes, I place my palm on the deck, connecting my energy to the cards. After a shuffle, one card quickly flies out.

THE STAR

WHEN I SEE IT, I squeal and hold it against my chest. It means to have faith because everything that's meant for me is on its way. It's a sign that I've survived and passed through a life challenge and am finally on the other side of it.

I'm hopeful, thinking about it as I search for my crystal of the day to pair with my reading. I carefully choose a clear quartz I charged by the light of the full moon last night. It's perfect because it helps amplify hope. I give it a quick kiss for good luck, then place it in the pocket of my dress pants.

I know I'm eccentric, but I don't care. It all started with a mood ring and a palm reading at the state fair when I was fifteen. Something is powerful about truly believing good things will happen and then them *actually* happening.

As the early morning sunlight leaks through my front windows, I write a few pages in my journal. It's cleansing to empty my thoughts and give gratitude. Sometimes I reread them years later, and I'm often left wanting to hug past me and tell her everything will be okay because it always is.

After I finish, I give myself a high five in the mirror. "I am smart. I am lucky. I am talented."

If I leave right now, I'll have an extra fifteen minutes before work. I decide to risk it and drive straight to Grinding Beans, the coffee shop a few blocks from my office in town.

By some miracle, there's a parking space in the front when I arrive. As soon as I enter, Jessica gives me a wave as she finishes stocking cups. I'm the only person here, which means no long wait. Today keeps getting better.

"Oh, I love the bright orange," I say, complimenting her neon hair, which is always changing colors. Jess should live in a hip place like Austin. She's too cool for Valentine, with her nose ring and sleeve of colorful tattoos. The girl is a whole vibe who radiates old-soul energy. And one day, when her parents decide to retire, this coffee shop will be hers.

"Thanks! Mornin'." She grins wide, showcasing the jewels glued to her teeth. I have questions to ask but don't. We'll get sidetracked and talk for too long.

“Good mornin’, sunshine! Today is gonna be amazin’.”

“Sure is. I *love* Fridays. Plus, I have tomorrow off. But anyway, whatcha havin’? The usual?”

“Of course. You know I’m addicted to that Snickers latte you created. Should think about puttin’ it on the menu.”

She giggles. “Everyone who orders it calls it Kinsley’s coffee. And no, before you even ask, I’m not shittin’ you.”

The girl knows me way too well.

“A coffee named after me? I’m honored. Might need to officially add it to the menu, then I’ll have to write an article about it.” I look up at the chalkboard, which changes every so often with seasonal drinks, and see the perfect spot.

She glances over her shoulder at the board, too. “I *totally* should. There’s room.”

Jessica rings me up, and a line of locals forms behind me. I swipe my card, leave a tip, and head to the end of the counter.

My timing was incredible. No line. Front-row parking.

I run my fingertips across the clear quartz in my pocket. Lucky gal syndrome for the win.

Taking a step back, I look around as the sounds of beans being crushed fill the space. The room buzzes with low chatter as I wait.

My favorite time to visit the coffee shop is in the early morning. It glows golden, like there’s magic inside. It’s why when I was writing my first novel, I became a 5:00 a.m. regular here. Those were the good old days, though.

Since the big breakup between me and the man whose name must never be mentioned again—Hayden Shaw—I haven’t been able to write creatively. However, that was nearly a decade ago, so I need to get over it and realize becoming a novelist isn’t in my future. Each time I opened my manuscript and put my fingers on the keys, nothing came out. So I quit.

Wild, considering I’m a journalist at the *Valentine Gazette*—the local newspaper. Work words are different. They have a direct purpose, and they’re technical. Plus, my asshole boss flips out if I miss any deadlines.

Shelly, the girl running the espresso machine, sets my gigantic coffee on the counter’s edge. I offer her a thank-you, followed by a grin, then drive the few blocks to work.

As soon as I walk in, my boss, Mr. Anderson, gives me a look that I can’t decipher. He’s often unreadable because he has RBF—resting bastard face—

so I've stopped trying to predict his thoughts.

"Mornin'!" I'm energized, even after being woken up by my naked brother. I lift my big-ass coffee into the air and head to my desk even though Mr. Anderson doesn't respond.

My space is exactly how I left it, with papers neatly stacked in the corner and a few crystals lining the top edge of my keyboard. Epidote: for manifestation, pyrite: for positive vibes, aventurine: for new opportunities and luck. It's my own personal Goal-Getter Gal Manifestation Kit.

I peel yesterday's sheet off my desk calendar and look at today's horoscope.

EMBRACE CHANGE.

READING this brings me joy each morning. However, the mention of change isn't something I tend to like because I'm set in my ways. But I've learned what will happen...will happen.

I wait for my email to load and watch the number in my inbox steadily climb. I breathe in deeply.

"It's too early for all that," David says. He's twice my age and has worked at the paper since I was a kid.

"No complaints from me. I'm over here livin' the dream."

He chuckles and sips his coffee, which I know is black. I can't relate. I'm a sugar-and-cream type of girl. Black coffee is reserved for serial killers and boomers.

At twenty-nine, I'm the youngest journalist here. The one with all the New Age ideas that get slapped down every other week. It's fine because eventually, they'll retire, and then I'll be running this place and denying the hip ideas of the next generation. The thought makes me giggle.

There are two other journalists. Pamela, who usually shows up late because she takes her kids to school, and Debbie, who will be here five minutes before eight. Not a minute later or earlier. She's more of a guarantee than the Old Faithful geyser.

Mr. Anderson storms out of his office and stands next to our desks, which

are grouped together in a square. “I’m thinkin’ about reopenin’ the secretary position. It’s been six months since Tammy retired. It’s time to find her replacement. Homecoming is next week. The harvest festival is in October. Then we’re in the holiday season until Valentine’s. We need help before we drown.”

By “we,” Mr. Anderson means “he,” but I agree. It would be nice to have someone to answer the phones and screen the randos who walk in off the streets to talk. Glad he finally recognizes that. I thought his ego would never let him admit it.

“Well?” he questions, but I don’t think my opinion matters.

He does what he wants, as always.

I clear my throat. “I think that’s a great idea. Want me to put it on the website?”

He nods. “That would be fantastic.”

“Are you runnin’ it in the paper, too?” David asks.

“Yes, I’ll have a description sent to you both here before lunch. I’d love to get someone hired before October first. Think it’s possible?”

As Debbie waltzes in with her oversized earrings and purse, I look down at my calendar. That gives us nearly three weeks, which is fast, considering how quickly the holidays are approaching.

“Mornin’,” she grumbles, interrupting Mr. Anderson’s conversation. She sighs, giving no fucks, and turns on her computer. Debbie has worked here for decades and can talk shit better than the rest. If you want to know something, she usually has the entire backstory and has already picked her side.

“What’s your problem?” she asks Mr. Anderson, who’s glaring at her.

He doesn’t respond because he knows better. She’s not intimidated by him and isn’t afraid to speak her mind or give an unwanted opinion. But she’s a hard worker, even if her personality is abrasive to some. It’s how she’s kept her job for thirty years.

“Well?” Mr. Anderson groans, and I blink up at him, remembering what we were discussing. “The hours are good enough for someone to want. The pay...*questionable*.”

My boss doesn’t say anything and returns to his office, shaking his head and mumbling something under his breath. I got a raise a few months ago, which was a total shock, considering he was riding my ass daily. We’re one big dysfunctional family, but it makes work interesting when it can often be

dull, especially in this small town.

I sort through my inbox. Some of it's junk. There's one for a journalist summit in November, a few emails from the city council about upcoming events, which I jot down in a notebook, and some town gossip that was delivered to me from a burner email. That's always fun.

After I've downed half my sugary-sweet coffee and contacted Lucy, the town librarian, to ask her questions about the book fair next month, my boss calls me into his office. I grab a pen and a notepad out of habit.

"I have a lead on a very *important* story I'd like covered," he says the moment I sit down.

This piques my attention. "And you're givin' it to me?"

He takes a sip from his mug. It has several aged coffee rings inside. Each time I see it, I want to throw up, then take a steel wool pad to it. "You're the *best* person for the job."

I narrow my eyes, wondering what he's up to, then flip to a blank page and click my pen.

He speaks. "Main Street Books."

As soon as the words leave his mouth, my heart drops. "Okay. What about it?"

"I heard they're celebratin' their hundred-year anniversary next year. I was also told they might be expandin'. Have you driven by there lately?"

I shake my head. I've tried to avoid the business my ex-lover's parents own since the breakup.

"You haven't?"

"Haven't paid much attention." This confuses him, I guess because it's almost unavoidable since it's on Main Street. But I'm just that good.

He continues. "A survey was done on the empty lot they own next door. Pink flags were stuck in the ground. Everything seems very hush-hush. Anyway, I'd like to run a few stories leading up to their centennial in February."

"But—"

He holds up his hand. "You've been sayin' you want different projects, that you're tired of school board meetings and lifestyle."

"No, I've been sayin' that I'd like to start something in the paper that's like Dear Abby."

"You're still stuck on that?"

I keep a smile. "I'm not lettin' it go."

“Okay, I’ll make a deal with you, then. Do what you can to help Main Street Books shine. They’re one of the oldest bookstores in Texas, and if they’re expanding, that’s a big deal. You finish this project successfully, and I’ll *consider* adding the Dear Abby column to the entertainment section.”

I clear my throat, trying not to seem too excited. “Dear *Kinsley*.”

He gives me a pointed look. “That name might need to be worked on *if* I decide to move forward with it.”

“I know I’m beatin’ a dead horse repeatin’ myself, but I genuinely think it would get more people to the website. With how social media is, it could be a huge hit!”

“You give me what I want, and I’ll *consider* what you want. That’s my final answer.”

He’s worse than my parents. “But that’s not a yes.”

This makes him chuckle. “Okay, get out of my office now.”

“But...”

“Kinsley Valentine. Don’t bounce on my last nerve this mornin’. It’s too early, and I’ve only had time to chug one cup of coffee.”

I huff. “Fine.”

I jot down *MAIN STREET BOOKS* on my notepad and return to my desk.

David looks at me over his computer screen. “Uh-oh.”

“I should be happy right now,” I say, placing my face in my hands.

“But you’re clearly not.”

“I’m annoyed. Have you two heard about Main Street Books expanding?”

He laughs and nods.

Debbie speaks up. “Everyone knows that. Old news.”

I glance back and forth between them. “Seriously? How did I miss it, then?”

“Probably because the whole town has learned not to mention anything about Hayden’s family to you. Turns you into a ragin’ bitch.” She smirks.

I can’t deny it. Scrunching my nose, I meet her eyes. “Don’t mention his name around me.”

“See?” She holds out her hand. “Case in point.”

David shrugs, scrolling on his computer. “Someone told me they might double the size of their original structure so they can have enough space for authors to do signings there.”

“Seriously? That’s great news. They’ve been talkin’ about that for...at least ten years.”

“Then what’s the hang-up? It’s not like you’ll see him around,” Debbie says. “Or will you? A little birdie told me...”

“I don’t wanna know.” I hold up my hand. “I haven’t stepped foot inside that buildin’ in so damn long. I’ve avoided it like the plague. And now my future depends on pullin’ up my big girl panties and chatting with my ex-boyfriend’s parents *without* it bein’ awkward. My career is ridin’ on this, and that makes me anxious.”

David grins. “Oh, did Anderson decide to negotiate your Dear Kinsley article? Cheeky bastard.”

“There wasn’t a negotiation. He refused to give me a yes, even after I tried pushin’ him. All I got was a stern maybe.”

“That’s how he is,” he says. “If he’s considerin’ it, it’s basically a yes. So what’re ya goin’ to do?”

Debbie turns, waiting for my answer, too.

I sigh, throwing my arms into the air. “I guess I’m gonna write the articles and make it the best damn thing that the *Valentine Gazette* has ever published.”

Debbie stands up and gives me a fist bump.

“That’s the spirit. Good luck with that,” David encourages.

“Thanks. I’m gonna need all the luck I can get.” I use the five-second rule and count down from five to one, then pick up the phone and dial the number for the bookstore.

HAYDEN

Most people don't realize how damn big Texas is until they drive across it in a day. It takes me ten hours *without* traffic to get from Houston to Valentine. My back and legs ache from sitting in the car for so long while only stopping for gas, to pee, and to grab a cheeseburger to eat while behind the wheel. The road trip isn't leisurely, not considering my dad is being admitted to the hospital after having a massive stroke.

As soon as I got the call from my mother, I contacted Gia and Ralph, my business partners at the accounting firm, and explained what happened. I've asked for family leave. However, I'll use my banked vacation weeks if I have to. Gia was kind—told me to take care of my family and check in with her once I have an update. Ralph didn't answer, so I left a message on his voicemail.

Once outside Houston's morning rush-hour traffic, I texted my fiancée and told her I was leaving town. Not that we're on the best terms, anyway.

I've been in the car since nine, and I won't arrive at my hometown until dark. But considering the unstable condition of my father, nothing else matters.

Mom's a wreck, and I understand why.

She and Dad are inseparable. They run the family business, Main Street Books, which opened a hundred years ago in February. My great-grandmother loved reading so much that my great-grandfather built her a bookstore. It was a testament to his love for her, a business that's survived depressions, recessions, and world wars.

I felt bad putting all the responsibility of the business on my little sister, Haley, while we wait for answers. I say little, but she's twenty-six years old.

She'd have to open and close the store until my parents returned. There are a few part-time employees, but they can't cover the extra shifts.

So I'm going home. There's no place like it.

It's something I didn't predict.

Something I swore up and down would never happen.

I promised my ex I'd never return to Valentine.

While I had said it out of spite, I meant it and stayed true to that promise. But this is different.

I buried my deep emotions for Kinsley Valentine a long time ago, and they will stay sealed inside their coffin. However, her memories still hide like a skeleton in the closet of my heart. It's a realization I've recently come to terms with. When Kinsley randomly visits my dreams, I wake up contemplating calling her. But I never do.

My family fills me in on the small-town drama, but for the most part, they don't bring up her name, or any of the Valentines for that matter. The family is large, but they aren't trouble, so there's nothing to discuss.

The sun has vanished by the time I enter Valentine city limits. Hungry and tired, I think about making a pit stop at the local deli that used to stay open twenty-four hours. Not sure if it still does.

As soon as I turn onto Main Street, I roll down the window and breathe in the brisk mountain air. It smells fresh like it recently rained.

While the circumstances suck, I'm somewhat excited to be here. I've missed the small-town charm. In Houston, I'm another nameless face in a crowd of people. Here, I'm Hayden Shaw—the future owner of Main Street Books.

I park and enter the deli, almost expecting the overhead music to stop while everyone turns to stare, but not one person notices me. I lean against the long bar top, needing to stretch my legs.

A server eventually comes over, and I place an order to go as my stomach roars. I don't remember what time I ate. The drive already seems like a blur.

The cook slams Texas toast onto the flattop as the seconds tick by. Nothing here has changed. It's like walking into a time capsule with wood-paneled walls and black-and-white-checkered tiles. I'm thirty-one, but it looks the same as when I was five.

When I hear familiar laughter behind me, I glance over my shoulder and spot her.

Kinsley.

I'll never forget the first day I really noticed her.

I WAITED as a big blue butterfly was painted onto Haley's face. I'd taken my sister to the state fair because it was wristband day, which meant unlimited carnival rides. I'd just gotten my driver's license and borrowed my mom's SUV. We wanted to watch the rodeo, eat tons of fried food, and ride the Zipper until we were sick.

My eyes scanned the crowd as I shoved my hands into my pockets. Some ate meat on a stick, while others carried oversized teddy bears. Laughter drifted through the air, and the warm spring breeze brought the reminder that summer was coming.

Then my eyes landed on her. Kinsley Valentine.

The wind blew steadily, keeping her hair out of her face. I studied her glossy lips, which came to a perfect pout, and her big blue eyes. She showed her best friend Summer something on her pointer finger—a ring, I think. That was when I realized they were waiting outside a wooden wagon that read Palm Reader on the side in big red letters. Having your future told by a woman dressed in a silly costume was a kitschy thing to do as a teenager.

I'd seen Kinsley around town over the years, searching the shelves in the bookstore or tagging behind her older brother Beckett. But now, she looked grown up. She was the prettiest girl I'd ever seen, and I couldn't stop staring. I glanced over my shoulder at my little sister, who was swinging her legs, smiling.

I gave her a thumbs-up, then turned my attention back to Kinsley. But she'd disappeared, like seeing her was a figment of my imagination. Right then, I decided I needed to get to know her better, so the next time she entered the bookstore, I'd make it a point to speak to her. She already loved to read as much as I did. My teenage heart said we were a match made in heaven.

“SWEETIE, YOUR FOOD IS ALMOST READY,” the server says, pulling me from my daze.

Kinsley's back is toward me as she gives her man attention. He places a spoonful of strawberry milkshake in her mouth. They look...*happy*. Pointing

at his nose, he tells her she has whipped cream on hers. Then he leans forward and licks it off. My jaw clenches, watching the scene. I feel jealous, almost like she's still mine.

"Can I go ahead and pay?" I ask the server, needing to escape. She swipes my card, and I let her know I'll be in my car.

"Which one is yours?"

I point at the Mercedes parked out front.

"I'll bring it out to ya when it's ready."

"Thanks," I say, leaving her a fat tip.

Quickly, I go out to my car, slump in the seat, and wait.

I can't seem to take my eyes off her. A part of me feels like a stalker watching her in the dark, but she's as mesmerizing as she's always been. She looks beautiful with sun-kissed skin. Her laughter is contagious, and I smile thinking about all the good times we had together. But there were bad times, too. No relationship is perfect—at least none of the ones I've had. I honestly thought she was the one I'd spend the rest of my life with. I was wrong.

The light tap on my window makes me jump. I'm handed a thick paper bag with containers inside. The food is so hot it nearly burns me through the bag. I thank her, then I get the hell out of there before Kinsley spots me.

Deep down, I always knew she'd find someone who could ultimately give her what she wanted. That man wasn't me, and it took years for me to come to terms with that.

I drive forty-five minutes to the hospital. The roads wind, it's dark, and I hope no deer or wild hogs run out in front of my car. It's why most people in the West own trucks. I arrive and park, then grab the food and enter. I know visiting hours will end within the next fifteen, but I don't plan on staying long. It's late, and my parents both need their rest.

The double doors slide open, and the bitter antiseptic smell slaps me.

I hate hospitals. The stark white walls and overly shiny floors make me antsy. I've never been admitted, but I know this place is full of sickness and, with that, sadness. When I walk into the dim room, my mom's eyes light up, and she grins. Dad's sleeping, and the consistent beeping of the monitors almost disappears when I wrap my arms around my mom.

"What's this?" She eyes the bag.

"I brought you dinner. I know it's late, but..."

"Thank you, sweetie. I'm starvin'. I've been livin' off vending machine snacks and bland cafeteria food. Don't get me started on the coffee."

I snicker, keeping it down. Mom sits and opens the paper sack, and I take the spare chair next to her.

“Where will you sleep?”

She pats the leather armrest. “Here in this recliner. It apparently folds out into a bed.”

There’s no way she’d leave Dad, even if I offered to stay.

“Do you need me to bring you anything tomorrow?”

She shakes her head, opens the plastic container, pulls out a grilled cheese on Texas toast, then hands me the other one. “This is more than enough.” She keeps her voice low. “Why are you here? I didn’t expect you to show up.”

“I know. I couldn’t get any work done because I was worried, so I left.” I glance over at Dad sleeping, and it hurts my heart to see him hooked up to the machines.

Mom’s eyes soften. “They gave him some medicine to help him calm down. You know how restless he gets. Earlier, he threatened to check himself out of here so he could work tomorrow.”

I shake my head. “Stubborn as a mule.”

Mom laughs. “Something you two have in common.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I mutter as I open the box and smell my food. We’ve both always loved these sandwiches. The bread is soft and buttery, and there’s so much cheese on it that I chew for days before swallowing it.

“Other than that, how’s he been doin’?” I take another big bite.

“Fine. They ran a bunch of tests when he was admitted, so I’m hoping we get some answers. He’s having a hard time with his hand, but the nurse said we won’t know how his mobility was affected until tomorrow. Sometimes it takes a few days.”

This makes me sad. “Wow.”

“A lot is up in the air right now, and you know how *patient* I am.” Mom meets my eyes.

“My lack of patience is something I got from you. Have both of my parents’ best qualities.” The sarcasm isn’t lost on her.

“You must be exhausted from all that drivin’.” Mom daintily pats her lips with a napkin.

“I am, but nothin’ compares to the day you’ve had.”

“Thanks for comin’ by, Hayden. I’m sure your dad will be excited you’re in town. Lookin’ forward to tellin’ him tomorrow.”

“That makes me happy. I’m gonna text Haley and chat with her about

how I can help with the store.”

“Thank you. Much appreciated. You still remember how to do everything?”

I chuckle. “Nothin’ I can’t handle. You know I’m always up for a good challenge. Speaking of Haley, how’s she doin’?”

Mom swallows. “Not very well, but she’ll be okay.”

I reach over and grab her hand. “We all will, Ma. We’re in this together.”

She squeezes my fingers. “Yes, we are. She was up here a little earlier and said as much. Thanks for coming home, Hayden. I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too.” I give her a tight grin, knowing she’s probably the only one in the vicinity who’s happy to see me—well, other than my dad and sister.

We finish eating, and I throw our containers into the small trash bin, nearly filling it. The nurse stops by and checks on Dad. Knowing visiting hours are over, I kiss Mom on the cheek and give her a tight squeeze before glancing at my father.

“Love you, Mom.”

“Love you, too.”

“Keep me updated if anything changes.”

“I will.” I can hear the exhaustion in her tone.

“If you need anything—”

“I’ll let you know. Do you need a key to the house?”

I shake my head. “Still got mine. Night.”

I give her a wave and close the door on my way out.

My thoughts and emotions are all over the place. Before I drive back to Valentine, I text my sister before it gets too late. Then I take a quick nap in my car, hoping it refreshes me enough for the forty-five-minute drive home.

KINSLEY

When I roll over, I throw my arm over Luca's chest.
"Mm." He pulls me into his tattooed arms.

Luca is my non-boyfriend, a summer fling with an expiration date of September thirtieth. He's seven years younger than me and bartends at Boot Scooting, the local bar downtown. We've been fooling around for the past few months—no titles, no emotions—before he moves back to New York at the end of this month. I've tried to deny it, but I'm scared I've grown attached even though I agreed to this type of relationship. I've journaled a lot about it and decided to let the universe handle it because he's moving no matter what.

We're on the same page about long-distance relationships, and it's not something either of us wants. We only have right now, and that's good enough for me. It has to be.

Being with him has been a distraction and a reminder of how much I love the familiarity of a relationship, even if we're not in one. We never say the three powerful words to one another—I love you. What we have is physical. That's it.

"What time is it?" he mutters, his voice a hoarse gruff.

Yesterday, we had dinner at the diner, and then I brought him home with me. It's not often he has a Friday night off, so we took full advantage, especially now that our time together is coming to an end.

On October first, he'll be back in NYC, playing gigs and living his dream. He wants to be a famous musician, tour, and travel around the world. If the right person saw him or if the perfect opportunity fell into his lap, he'd be an instant success. I believe that more than anything.

Luca leans over and kisses me. I groan, wanting more of him, but as the kiss deepens, his cell phone rings.

“Ignore it,” he mutters, running his fingers through my dark hair and sliding his soft lips against mine.

The phone stops buzzing, then starts again.

I pull away, meeting his eyes. “Maybe you should answer? What if it’s your aunt Diana callin’ because she needs somethin’?”

He’s staying with his mom’s twin for the summer, as she needed extra help around the house after her husband passed away.

“Always so logical.” He turns and picks his phone up from the nightstand. Glancing at it, I see the number isn’t programmed into his contacts. Based on his reaction, he seems to know who it is.

“Everything okay?” I whisper as it continues to buzz in his palm.

“Shit. I have to take this. Stay right there. Don’t you dare move.” He slips out from under the covers, and all he’s wearing are boxers. Luca answers and shuffles into the living room. His voice is so low I can’t hear what he’s saying, but I’m curious.

Instead of listening to his directions, I get up and go to the bathroom. As I’m sitting on the toilet scrolling through my social media, I receive a text message.

HARRISON: Hey, Queen Kinsley!

I LOOK AT THE TIME. It’s just past eight on a Saturday, and considering Harrison works at the horse training facility with my older brother Beckett, I know he’s been up for hours. The weekends are typically busy for them since that’s when their trail rides are scheduled. For a hefty fee, they take people out on horseback around the ranch. Beckett started the business, and Harrison is his pain-in-the-ass sidekick who always causes trouble. Plus, he’s a flirt and collects phone numbers like souvenirs.

KINSLEY: What do you want? You already owe me three favors. Are you planning on making it four?

Harrison: I wanted to wish you a good morning, that's all.

I KNOW BETTER. He texts me when he needs something because I'm the sister who will save the day every damn time. Even Summer thinks I enable his manwhore ways. Me and Harrison are more alike than different, which scares the shit out of me because he's a loose cannon.

KINSLEY: Yeah, right. What do you want? Spill the tea.

Harrison: Fine. [eye roll emoji]. Grace mentioned the newspaper is hiring a secretary.

GRACE IS Harrison's best friend, who we tease him about being in love with. He denies it until he's black and blue in the face, but no one believes him.

KINSLEY: How in the world did she hear about that? I found out yesterday.

Harrison: Her mama ran into Mr. Anderson at the grocery store, and he mentioned it.

Kinsley: News travels fast AF around here.

Harrison: You already knew that! But anyway, she's thinking about applying. Could you put in a good word for her?

I SNICKER.

KINSLEY: My recommendation might get her on a blacklist. Trust me when I say Anderson absolutely does not like me like that.

Harrison: Yeah, right. He loves you.

Kinsley: Not quite. But I'll see what I can do. [smiley face emoji]

Harrison: Thanks, sis! I owe you one.

Kinsley: Make that four.

Harrison: You're right. And you know I'll pay up.

Kinsley: You always do.

DURING THE SUMMER, I had to rescue him from Davis Mountain Resort. He was stranded at the top of DMR with no vehicle and needed his fairy godmother to help him escape a woman's house. The potholes were so bad I was worried the wrong one would send me straight to the pits of hell. But since he had no one to help him, I saved the day. Afterward, I had to get the front end of my truck realigned, which I made him pay for.

However, one time he drove all the way to San Antonio to wait in line for thirty-six hours to buy me VIP tickets to a Tim McGraw concert and did it without complaint. So when he asks for favors, I know he'll return them tenfold. Call me an enabler, but I think it's smart to have him in my back pocket.

After I wash my hands and brush my teeth, I return to my bedroom. Luca's still on the phone. I go into the kitchen and see him pacing in the living room. He meets my eyes, but concern is drawn deep within his. It worries me, and I hope everything is okay. I make a pot of coffee and give him his privacy.

My bed is a mess of crumpled blankets and sheets, so I quickly make it and then grab my journal and favorite pen. I crawl under the covers and start my morning pages. I chat about my new assignment, what I need to do today and over the weekend, then I do a quick meditation.

When I open my eyes, feeling refreshed, Luca enters and sits on the edge of the bed. I reach out and grab his hand, and he looks like he saw a ghost.

"Everything good?" I ask.

He sucks in a deep breath. "It will be okay. No one is hurt. It's news I didn't expect. I don't even know how to say this. I'm honestly in shock."

"Hey, you don't owe me an explanation for anything. Process it. Tell me later."

Luca swallows hard and nods. "I'm sorry, Kins. Mind if I take a rain check?"

I smile. "Absolutely. Not a problem. I have a few things I need to take care of in town within the next hour anyway."

He leans over and kisses my cheek. “One day, you’ll make someone happy, Kins.”

I snort. “I hope.”

Moments later, Luca picks up his clothes that are scattered across my bedroom floor and slides them on. Something isn’t right, and he seems off after that call, but I won’t force him to talk. Over the years, I’ve found it’s better to let people share things when they’re ready. I’ll give him the space he needs to process his emotions, even if our time together is quickly coming to an end.

I’ve not had a serious relationship since Hayden and I broke up, and I’m not so sure I ever will. A part of my heart died the day things ended, but there was no way around it. Since then, Hayden hasn’t existed—out of sight, out of mind. It’s a great principle if only it worked that way.

Once Luca is gone, I pull my tarot card for the day. It’s the death card. I stare at the grim reaper riding a white horse. I roll my eyes and push the card away. It means the ending of something, letting go and transitioning. Of course, I’d get this today. Sometimes, the universe is funny like that. Most think of the death card as bad, but it’s not. It means a major phase in my life is ending. Now it’s up to me to figure out what that is—hopefully, it’s my single-gal phase, where I desperately seek companionship.

When I walk past the mirror, I give myself a high five and say my morning affirmations, then I get dressed.

I called Main Street Books yesterday and spoke with Haley, Hayden’s sister. She seemed sad when she answered but told me that I could come by and chat with her in the morning. I explained what it was for, and that seemed to excite her.

After I grab my camera bag, I throw my hair into a high ponytail and make my way out the door.

“Today is gonna be great,” I repeat on the drive to town as I listen to Britney on satellite radio. I take the extended route to the bookstore, trying to get my mind right. When I finally arrive, I sit in my truck and stare at the historic building. The first time Hayden ever kissed me was inside those walls. There were a lot of happy memories made in there, ones I’ve tried to forget.

Sucking in another deep breath, I remove my camera from the case and place the strap around my neck. Then I get out and take a few shots of the front. Big fluffy clouds and the light-blue sky reflects off the windows. The

temperature is mild this morning. A cold front moved through late last night, carrying a whisper of winter.

I know I'm stalling, so I count down from five to one, then force myself to enter.

The warm glow of the overhead lights gives the store a cozy vibe. In the corner is a small fireplace. It's not burning right now, but once the temperature drops, it will be. I haven't stepped foot inside this building in far too long and have even started making my sister Remi come down here and buy books for me. I want to support the store; I just couldn't work up enough courage to face the past. Now I'm standing inside, wondering if I should tell Mr. Anderson to find someone else.

Strolling up and down the stacks, I appreciate how well laid out the sections are as I read the random titles on the spines. Becoming a novelist was Hayden's dream, too—something we bonded over. I always check the S's to see if he's published anything because he's that talented. However, it wouldn't be something his parents would keep a secret. They would make sure the whole town knew.

Many summer nights, we'd sneak in here after they closed and read books that hadn't been released to the public yet. It was how we broke rules the book-nerd way. The thought of it makes me smile, but then a tinge of sadness follows.

The smell of new releases mixed with freshly baked cookies wafts throughout the space. In the past, it would spark my creativity, and I'd go home and write. There was always something special about it.

I have plenty of time to walk down a few more aisles, and I like the fact that I'm the only customer here. Haley's probably in the back getting things ready for the morning shift, and I'm honestly thankful. Gives me time to reacquaint myself before coming face-to-face with her. Our conversations are usually short.

One of the things Mrs. Shaw always does is bake chocolate chip cookies in her conventional oven. They're free for customers to snack on while they shop. I once asked her about this, and she said real estate agents swore by it, and she did too. With the big plush chairs, the fireplace, and cookies, it was often a refuge for me as a teen. Once I got my license, I'd visit on the weekends so I could read the sexy romances that had all the *D*, *C*, and *P* words. My mom wouldn't allow me to have them, so I'd found a workaround. It's actually how Hayden and I became friends.

It all happened *here*.

I scan over the latest romances and then move over to the thriller section, something I started reading when I stopped believing love existed. Now, I hop between the two but read more things that keep me on the edge of my seat than not. As I pull one from the shelf to read the synopsis, I hear the deep clearing of a throat behind me. *Mr. Shaw must be here this morning*, I think as I turn.

My mouth drops open as I stand in front of the man I never thought I'd see in Valentine again. "Hayden. Wha-what are you doin' here?"

He sets the plate of cookies on the counter, and I notice he's wearing one of the bookstore's T-shirts. It fits him perfectly, nearly bursting at the biceps. I'm ogling him and realize it when he crosses his arms over his broad chest and smirks. "I work here."

I narrow my eyes while my mouth opens, then closes. "No, you *don't*."

He points at the name tag pinned to his shirt. "Clearly, I do."

I'm speechless and continue to stare, hating how sexy the scruff that lines his jaw looks.

"Good to see you, too, Kins. May I help you? Want that book?"

I realize I'm holding a novel about a woman who killed her ex. My cheeks heat. "Uh...no."

Quickly, I place it back on the shelf. He shrugs, grabs a cookie, then goes behind the counter, where he punches some buttons on the keyboard. By how his jaw clenches tight, I can tell he's unamused. However, if I'd known he was in town, I'd have never stepped foot in here.

The sweet smell teases me, so I walk over and snag a cookie, too. "Did you speak to Haley?"

His golden-brown eyes meet mine, and though my heart gallops in my chest, I continue. "I'm supposed to do an article about the bookstore."

He runs his fingers through his messy, dark hair. "An exposé?"

This makes me nearly laugh. "A commemorative piece, considering the centennial is in February."

A second passes. "No."

"What?" My nose scrunches.

"The answer is no. It's a complete sentence. Tell Mr. Anderson, who I assume is still there, that I won't speak to you. Send someone else."

My jaw nearly hits the floor. "You can't be serious."

"Dead serious. Goodbye, Kinsley." He turns on his heels and enters the

stockroom. I'm tempted to follow him, but instead, I count to ten and find my center before I leave.

I already know Mr. Anderson won't budge, which means I'm screwed. Hayden is such an asshole.

HAYDEN

The last person I thought I'd see bright and early yesterday, hanging out like a ghost in the bookstore, was Kinsley. She caught me off guard. That was the first conversation we've had with each other since the last time we spoke—a day I'll never forget.

This morning, I texted Haley to fill me in on everything I've missed. Not an easy task, considering how long I've been gone. She conveniently didn't mention Kinsley or that she was supposed to stop by. Only talked about Summer Jones and Beckett Valentine. I got the CliffsNotes about their fight over the Horseshoe Creek Ranch. Now, they're in love and will probably get married, or at least that's the town speculation.

Other than that, it's the same ole shit on a different day.

The Smiths are still feuding with the Mansfields, the librarian was caught having an affair, and some people speculate that one woman unalived her husband. Small-town rumors travel fast, so I can only imagine what will be said about me.

The steady morning has lots of weekend browsers. In my spare time, I count inventory and dust shelves. I try to keep myself busy so my mind doesn't wander too much.

Leaving Houston is what I needed. I'm not trying to escape my problems because they will wait for me to return. In fact, I need to take this time to find a solution to a big problem, but right now, my parents are my focus. Penelope, my fiancée, knows that, too.

For lunch, I lock up and quickly walk down to the deli to grab some food.

"It's you again," says the same server who helped me Friday. She's older than me, probably in her earlier fifties.

“Hayden Shaw. It’s nice to meet you.”

“I saw your name on your credit card. That’s when I realized the Infamous Hayden Shaw is back in Valentine. You’re gonna be the talk of the town, ya know.”

I sigh. “Typically, that happens when someone disappears and reappears after a decade. Hopefully, some other drama will take the focus off me, though. It always does.”

She laughs. “True. So whatcha havin’ today? Another grilled cheese?”

“Nah, I want a patty melt with french fries to go. Gotta get back to work.”

“You’re running the store?”

I don’t want to give her too much information because I know whatever I say can and will be used against me. My words will spread around town before I make it to the next block.

“Yep. For now. Have you ever missed Valentine?”

She gives me a look like I’ve lost my mind. “No.”

I shrug and slide onto the stool and wait for my food. “Leave for ten years, and you might.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Your order shouldn’t take too long,” she says kindly, then excuses herself to help one of her tables.

I nod at the guy in the kitchen and pull my phone from my pocket, noticing a text from my sister.

HALEY: Uh, you wanna explain why you refused to speak to the newspaper yesterday?

Hayden: I didn’t refuse to speak to the newspaper. I refused to speak to Kinsley.

Haley: She IS the newspaper.

Hayden: No, she’s a journalist. There are others. They can send someone else.

Haley: This isn’t a barter system! It will be good advertising for us, and it’s free. Plus, when we start the expansion, it would be nice to have an outlet to announce the news.

Hayden: I’m not worried about it. Kinsley won’t give up on this. She’ll make it happen whether I cooperate or not.

Haley: I hope you’re right.

Hayden: I’d bet my last dollar on it. If she asks to interview you, tell

her she has to go through me. Got it?

SHE SENDS me an eye roll emoji.

HALEY: You've been home for less than forty-eight hours and are already barking orders. Lucky me! I missed ya, though!

THE SERVER DELIVERS MY FOOD, and I leave. On the way out, I quickly shoot her another text.

HAYDEN: That's what big brothers are for. Missed you, too. Let's get together soon.

Haley: I'd like that. Tonight? After I get finished visiting with mom and dad at the hospital?

I CHUCKLE.

HAYDEN: I checked my schedule for the next few weeks. It looks like I'm free.

Haley: Wait, you're staying here that long?

Hayden: I'll tell you about it over enchiladas around seven.

Haley: That's perfect. I'll meet you at Rancho. Thanks, Bubba.

I GRIN, realizing how much I've missed my sister. We were as thick as thieves growing up, even though she's five years younger than me. Everyone knew she was my sister, and though I kept my nose in a book, I'd kick anyone's ass who messed with her.

Shoving my phone into my pocket, I enjoy the stroll back to the bookstore. The same local businesses are thriving, something I love to see. It's a perfect September day. I pass an older couple on the sidewalk, and they give me a hello. I almost don't know how to respond. In Houston, most are so busy on their phones or listening to music through wireless headphones that we overlook one another.

I unlock the store, then go to the back to eat. When I receive a call from my mom, I swallow down the bite. It feels lodged in my throat, though.

"How're things goin'?" she asks.

"They're fine." I pop a french fry into my mouth. "Havin' lunch. It's been steady, but I've been takin' inventory when I get a chance."

"That's great news. Wanted to give you a quick update. They're discussin' options right now. The doctor is hopeful that he'll be able to get at least ninety percent of his mobility back with some help."

"That makes me happy, Ma."

"Anyway, his nurse walked in. I'll text you the new room number when they decide to move him to the therapy hall."

"Thanks. Love you."

"Love you, too."

The call ends.

I could hear the exhaustion in her voice, and I wished I could do more to help. It's a waiting game I don't like, but I'll have to accept it. All I can do is be here to support my family.

At two, one of our part-time employees clocks in.

"Hi, I'm Hayden."

"Ah, Hayden. Heard a lot about you from your folks. Nice to finally meet you. I'm Samantha, mom and bookworm."

"Good meetin' ya, Samantha."

We make small talk the rest of the afternoon. She loves her job, but she was clear that the only reason she applied was for the discount. Smart girl.

When it's closing time, I grab the checklist of duties and initial the completed tasks.

"Need me to do anything else?" Samantha restocked books, tidied the shelves, and took a trash bag that was half-full of shredded papers to the dumpster.

"Nah, looks like that's it. Thanks for your help and hard work. Will ya be here tomorrow?" I realize I haven't checked the schedule for the rest of the

week.

“Nope, I come in at twelve on Tuesday, though. Might be a busy day!”

I snicker and give her a wave goodbye as I finish counting the drawer and close out the register.

She helped me get the new releases ready for next week and put together a small display in the fiction section. The press around this fantasy book has been huge. Something about erotica with dragons. I’m not sure, as I haven’t remained up to date with what’s hot. I did read the first chapter and was hooked. It made me remember why I used to devour books, the adventure of it all.

A lot has changed in my life, and it somewhat saddens me.

I used to read five books per week, but once I moved away, I stopped. My writing is nonexistent, too. Sometimes I ask myself why I went to school for business when it’s not my passion. I know the answer, though. I wanted to be someone important. I thought it’d fulfill me more than being a bookseller. *Wrong.*

I drive a short distance to my parents’ house. They live in a subdivision outside town that gives the perfect view of the mountains. Valentine is set in a valley, and the landscape is incredible on clear days. Texas has it all.

My bedroom is exactly the way I left it when I moved out. One would think after nine and a half years, my parents would redo it, but they haven’t. I think my mom was hoping I’d come home and want to keep things familiar. Though Haley shares a small house in town with a roommate and works full-time at the bookstore, it was still difficult for my parents to adjust. Change isn’t always easy.

I check the time and make my way to the only Mexican restaurant in town—Rancho Grande. As soon as I enter, Lupita, the owner, greets me with a hug. “Hayden!”

“Cómo estás?” I squeeze her tight.

“Muy bien. How have you been, mijo?” Her dark eyes sparkle with endearment.

“Great. I drove all the way from Houston for your enchiladas. No one down there can make them like you.”

“You flatter me.” She grabs one menu.

I hold up two fingers, and her eyebrows rise.

“A date already?”

“Nah. My sister’s joinin’ me.”

She slips another from the holder and leads me across the room. “Was thinkin’ you and Kinsley were workin’ things out.”

I smirk, moving into the booth. “Not quite.”

“You mean, not *yet*?”

I playfully roll my eyes. “Lupita. I see you’re still a matchmaker.”

She shoots me a wink. “Enjoy. Don’t be a stranger.”

“Thank you. I won’t.”

I read the menu to pass the time while I wait for Haley, but I already know what I’m having. The server comes with chips and salsa, and I order two margaritas. As soon as he returns, my sister walks in. I wave at her, and she bolts toward me, hugging me hard before sliding into the seat across from me. The last time I saw her in person, she was sixteen and still in high school. My little sister isn’t little anymore.

“You ordered me a margarita? How sweet.”

I reach forward, sliding hers closer to me. “Nah, these are both mine.”

Her face contorts, and I move it back toward her. She snatches a chip and dips it into the homemade chunky salsa.

“Whoa, it’s hot today.” She fans her mouth and then sips her drink.

“You look great, sis. I can’t believe you’re a grown-ass woman now.”

She grins. “Thanks. Yeah, time does that. Oh, is that gray hair I see?”

I was waiting for her to point it out. “Corporate accounting is stressful. Anyway, catch me up.”

“You first,” she tells me, going in for more salsa.

“I work seventy hours a week. I think Penelope is cheating on me.”

Her jaw nearly hits the table. “What?”

“It’s been a rough month,” I admit. Something I refused to acknowledge in Houston. It was easier to keep pushing forward with the same routine.

“Did you break up with her?”

“Not yet.”

She looks at me like I’ve lost it. “Why not?”

“It’s complicated.”

“No, it’s not,” Haley argues. “Grow some balls.”

“She’s pregnant,” I finally blurt out.

Haley’s shocked. “Did you actually see her pee on the stick?”

“No, but she left it on the counter for me. I dunno what to do. If the baby is mine, I want to raise him or her. I wanna be there for my kid, ya know?”

“It’s the honorable thing to do. But if she’s cheating on you, how do you

know it's yours?"

"I don't. I'll have to take her word for it until a test can be done."

She sighs. "Do you have proof that she's sleepin' around?"

"No. But there are some pretty clear signs."

"That she will deny. Hire a PI or something to follow her while you're here. You know the saying—when the fiancé is away, it's time to be a cheating whore."

"Maybe you're right. It's a lot to deal with right now because I'm worried about Dad. I can only take so much."

My sister gives me a sad smile. "Things will get better. I'm sorry, I should be excited for you, about the baby, about potentially being an aunt, but you don't seem very happy. When did you find out?"

"Tomorrow will mark a week. I've noticed weird things, though. That's why I think she's seeing someone else. There was a shirt at my condo that wasn't mine. She argued and tried to convince me it was, so I dropped it. A few days later, she told me she was pregnant. The day Dad had his stroke, we'd planned to go out for dinner. I was planning to confront her then, but I came here instead." So much is bearing down on me, and it's heavy as hell.

"I'm sorry, Bubba. This is awful."

"Thanks. Enough about my fucked-up life. What about you? How're you doin'?" I can see the same exhaustion on her face that Mom was wearing.

"I'm...making it." She chokes up. "Really worried about Dad. I've read way too much WebMD. But when I saw him today, the nurses and doctors seemed hopeful, which helps some."

Haley has always been Daddy's little girl, so I know this has shaken her up.

"Everything will work out, sis. I promise. Did Mom give you an update today?"

She nods, stirring her straw in the mug. "Yeah, she did. Of course, it's good news, but I can't help but feel sad. I know Dad is gonna struggle with this."

"Yeah, but he's a fighter. He'll push himself and be right back to normal."

"But what if he doesn't?" She meets my eyes, tears welling in hers.

I reach forward, grab her hand, and squeeze. "He will."

The server returns and takes our order, then grabs the menus out of our way. We laugh and nearly cry and do our fair share of shit-talking. It feels

good, and it's the first time I've genuinely smiled in months.

Our food arrives, and we dig in. Lupita comes by the table to check on us, and I give her a thumbs-up since my mouth is full. It pleases her, and she pats me on my back before greeting more guests. When our plates are clear, I grab the check and pay. Haley protests, but it's a losing battle.

As we walk out to our cars, she speaks up. "Have you ever thought about moving back to Valentine and leaving Houston behind?"

I look up at the moon rising over the horizon, feeling trapped. "It's been on my mind."

She looks up, too, and we stand in silence.

"Do you ever think about Kinsley and what would've happened if y'all hadn't broken up?"

As I meet her eyes, I smirk. "More times than I'd like to admit."

KINSLEY

As soon as I open my eyes, I'm annoyed. I hate when I wake up on the wrong side of the bed.

Mondays aren't something I usually dread, but after the weekend I've had, I do.

Before I get dressed, I go into my living room and sit cross-legged on the floor, then take in a few deep breaths. I open my meditation app and choose a calming one. Twenty minutes later, I feel better. However, a cloud of dread still hangs over me.

I grab two smoky quartz crystals. With one in each hand, I repeat, "I create my own luck."

Once I'm dressed, I tuck one into each pocket, continuing my mantra all the way to work. Because today, I need all the good juju I can get when I meet with Mr. Anderson.

After I park on the side of the building, I get out and suck in cool air.

"I am lucky. I create my own luck. I am lucky. I create my own luck." I rub the crystals in my pocket.

Summer would make fun of me, but I swear by my mantras and manifesting. I look for the positive in people and situations. I've had some amazing things happen to me because I believed they would. I'm okay with being woo-woo. Give me some pom-poms, baby.

As soon as I walk into the office, the energy feels off. David sits at his computer, pounding away, which isn't a surprise considering he's an early riser, and Mr. Anderson's door is closed. I plop down at my desk and boot up my hard drive.

David doesn't even take his eyes off his screen. "Fair warning: Anderson

is in a *mood*.”

I sigh. “Must be something in the air. Is he PMSing, too?”

“Think he has a tampon in his ass.”

This has me howling. If our boss catches us having a good time, he won’t be happy. I’m pretty sure he wants us all to be miserable, just like him.

“I think he wakes up in the mornin’ and flips a coin. One side says toddler, the other says asshole.” A grin meets David’s lips, and he pushes his reading glasses up on his nose.

I cover my mouth, trying not to snort. “I have to speak to him about my assignment. I’m not sure it’s gonna work out,” I admit.

David stops typing. “Tell me what’s going on.”

I fill him in on Hayden being back in town and how we’re not on the greatest terms.

“Ahh, old lovers.” He puts his fingers back on the keys.

“That’s not why!” I protest, but we both know better.

“Do you think investigative journalists get an interview from every serial killer out there when writing about a case?”

I shake my head. “Of course, they don’t. It’s usually a no comment or no response.”

“Then treat it the same. Do your write-up and make sure to put in there somewhere that Main Street Books had no comment.” He shrugs.

“That will look bad, though.”

David stops typing and meets my eyes. “For who? Not the newspaper.”

I nod. “You’re right. Thank you.”

Mr. Anderson’s door swings open, and his voice sounds like a bark when he calls me into his office. I reserved this meeting on his shared calendar as soon as I got home from the bookstore on Saturday. Maybe that’s why he’s being a toddler?

“Hope I don’t get fired,” I whisper to Debbie on my way to the hot seat.

“Close the door,” he says when I enter.

I sit in the cold chair in front of his messy-as-hell desk. How he finds anything in here is beyond me.

“What did you want to discuss?” he asks.

“Grace Jenkins might apply for the secretary job. I’d like to give a recommendation for her,” I say, gauging his mood before I drop the bookstore bomb.

He nods. “Yes, I saw she applied. Will probably set up an interview next

week.”

“She’s hardworking and very nice.”

“Are you two friends?”

I know this is a loaded question. “No, sir, not really. She’s younger than me by a few years. We ran in different crowds.”

I leave out the part about her being Harrison’s best friend and having watched them grow up together. And how she hung out at my house every summer since they were seven years old.

“Noted. Anything else?”

My heart picks up its pace. I place my hand into my pocket and rub the smooth surface of my smoky quartz, which is cold to the touch. “I went to Main Street Books to start an open dialogue about the article and get more information. They won’t speak to me. The message I received was to tell you to send someone else.”

He glares at me. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” I try to keep my tone and face neutral. It’s not the complete truth. Hayden won’t speak to me because I ghosted him after he ended things, so this is his way of paying me back. Honestly, I have nothing to say to him.

Mr. Anderson clicks the pen in his hand a few times very fast. The sound grates on my nerves, and I’m half tempted to ask him to stop, but thankfully, he does.

“Should I call down there and try to get some answers?”

I shrug. “If you feel the need. Honestly, I’d *love* to know, too.”

He scribbles something onto the paper next to him. “Fine. I’ll reassign this to Pamela. Our deal is off the table. Is that all?”

His reply is abrupt and leaves my head spinning.

“If they won’t cooperate, what do you suggest I do? I tried and—”

Mr. Anderson holds up his hand. “You had one short-lived conversation, and now you’re throwing in the towel. Journalism isn’t easy. You don’t want it bad enough. I can see that.”

I open my mouth to protest, but I can’t get a word in as he continues.

“The bookstore opened a few years after Valentine was established. The archives contain plenty of articles to go through, and you could interview the seniors in the community who were around before the building had central air. It sounds like you don’t *want* to do it, and that’s fine.”

My cheeks heat out of frustration. “It’s *not* that.”

“Then what is it? I’m trying to understand here. You got denied, so you’re throwing in the towel. Please explain what I’ve missed.”

I don’t have a solid explanation, not one that Mr. Anderson would understand. Telling him about my ex, who I’ve tried to erase and is the last person I want to speak to, isn’t a great excuse. At least not one he’d ever accept.

Sometimes we have to do things we don’t want to do. Sometimes we have to fight hard for what we want. But at what cost?

People around here are more than happy to spill the tea, potentially having their words quoted among the black-and-white pages. I’ve *never* had to beg to speak to anyone for the *Gazette*.

The difference is this is personal.

“I’ll keep the damn project,” I say between gritted teeth.

“Great. You should never quit when something gets hard. You adapt. I’d like two articles written and published before the end of the year. I want a headliner for the front page in February. Put your spunk and personality into it, and I’m sure it will be well received.”

We have a brief stare down, and he lifts his brows as if waiting for me to say something else. I don’t give him the satisfaction. Instead, I go back to my desk, annoyed.

“Why hasn’t he fired me yet?” I ask David as I scroll through my emails.

“Because he likes that you’re so determined. It keeps him young. No one else in here cares. We don’t have the energy. We’re counting down until retirement,” David says.

“That’s right. I’ll let this boat sink with him on it. Then I’ll move to Galveston, become a GILF, and live off my fat pension.” Debbie closes her eyes, almost as if she’s imagining it. “Margaritaville every day of the week. Permanent vacation. I can’t wait.”

I clear my throat. “I only have forty-five more years.”

Everyone bursts into laughter.

Mr. Anderson walks out of his office, giving us the stink eye. He doesn’t like it when we’re having fun. We stop talking until he returns to his dungeon.

“Sometimes I really can’t stand that man,” I mutter.

“Only sometimes?” David grins.

“I can only stand him when I’m walking out to my car to leave on Friday,” Debbie adds.

The three of us grow quiet and jump back into our work. Someone enters the front, and at first, I think it's Pamela. Since we don't have a secretary, we usually take turns greeting the visitors.

Remi is carrying a box of donuts with the bakery's logo on top. She's dressed in the cutest pants falling low on her hips and a Beatles T-shirt. Her dark hair is pulled back into a low ponytail. As soon as she spots me, Remi rushes toward us, smiling wide.

"I was thinking I'd love a chocolate donut, and here you come!" I squeeze her. Out of my four sisters, she's closest in age to me and is three years younger. "I'm so happy to see you."

"Manifesting queen over here. Not sure why I decided to stop by, honestly. Thought y'all could use a pick-me-up. Guess it's your lucky day." She leans in and whispers, "Also, I heard what happened at the bookstore."

A small smile meets my lips, and I'm certain Haley told her because I let her know, in a *very* professional way, that my interview was denied.

I grab a napkin and snag a donut. It's still warm, probably right out of the oven, and I hold back a moan.

"This is so good," Debbie tells her.

"I asked for the freshest ones," she explains, then looks around. "Wanna share with your boss?"

David grabs one in each hand and then gives my sister the same warning I got when I arrived.

"When is he *not* in a bad mood?" Debbie grins mischievously. "Let me take him one. Maybe it'll cheer him up."

Remi hands her the box and checks her watch. "Should probably get goin'. Y'all have fun with that. Love ya, sis. Text me later. Let's do something soon."

"Okay, thank you for this. Means a lot."

"It's a good day to have a good day!" Remi says.

I turn my attention back to Debbie.

"You're such a suck-up," I whisper with a snicker.

She lightly taps on the door, and he yells for her to enter.

Debbie uses her sugary-sweet tone, the one we know is fake. David and I roll our eyes as Mr. Anderson eats it up. He has no idea how to read her sarcasm, and that's the joke. He thanks her, then asks her to shut the door. She yanks it hard and slams it with her free hand, knowing it pisses him off when we do that.

“Oh, sorry,” she singsongs in front of his office.

I glance at David. “And you think I get on his nerves.”

“Nah. If it’s a contest, Debs wins every time.”

I take another bite of my donut. “Now *that* I agree with.”

Debbie places the box on the table that holds the reams of paper next to the printer, then she goes to her desk. She groans. “If I have to go to one more damn city council meeting, I might gouge my eyes out.”

“Uh-oh,” David and I say in unison because that means drama is being stirred up.

“They moved the time of the meetings to four, so most townsfolk can’t attend. It’s sabotage.”

My face contorts, and I stand. “Expose them!”

“You know the rules, Kins. Must stay neutral when reporting.”

I sigh, knowing she’s right. “And I thought my assignment sucked. It’s actually not lookin’ too bad now.”

“Mine has both of yours beat. Sports. More specifically, golf,” David says.

Pamela walks in, gives us a perky “good morning,” and finds the donuts. “What are we talkin’ about?”

“Shitty assignments,” Debbie explains.

“Oh, don’t get me started.” She spins her chair around and sits.

“I’m startin’ to see a pattern here,” I say. “I think Mr. Anderson likes torturing us by givin’ us projects we don’t want. When I’m runnin’ this place, my reporters will pick and choose based on what excites them. Then I’ll assign the leftovers.” I plop back into my chair.

“Kinsley for president,” David announces, and I happily agree.

Eventually, the conversation lulls, and we return to our work.

I open a Word document and type *Main Street Books* at the top. The cursor blinks rapidly, almost mockingly. I want that *Dear Kinsley* column more than anything. The last thing I’ll do is let Hayden Shaw get under my skin. My ex has already taken enough from me over the years, and I won’t let him ruin this, too.

But somehow, the rest of the day is unproductive. I close my document with two sentences written, and they’re pathetic.

By the time I get home, my eyes are tired. I pour a glass of wine and write a few pages in my journal. Luca hasn’t reached out to me since he left my place, and I’m annoyed that Hayden’s name has found its way back onto the

page. I don't hold back as I jot my thoughts.

It makes me mad that he returned out of the blue and now has control over my future. He swore up and down that he'd never show his face in Valentine again. Bastard.

As I empty the rest of the bottle of wine into my glass, my phone rings. I left it on the couch in the living room. So I rush over.

It's Summer.

I answer breathlessly, but my usual chipper tone is nowhere to be found. "Hey! Sorry. What's goin' on?"

"Everything okay?" Summer's tone immediately changes, and I can imagine the expression on her face faltering. This is her concerned voice.

I often try to ignore things that bother me and smother them away until it doesn't matter anymore. She understands me better than anyone, and sometimes I can't pretend everything is fine. After a whole bottle of wine, the truth bombs tend to explode.

"No. I'm fuckin' pissed." I've been replaying the conversation I had with Hayden on Saturday, followed by the one I had with my boss today.

"What's up?" she asks.

"It's Hayden." My teeth clench when I say his name. It almost feels foreign on my tongue.

"What about him?" She sounds lost. I guess the gossip train hasn't stopped by her place yet.

Since she and my brother got together, I've been giving them their space to enjoy the honeymoon phase of their new relationship. Plus, she's been working hard at the bed-and-breakfast since the grand opening. I've tried not to bombard her with things that are trivial because she's a worrier.

There's a pause as I think everything through again. "He's back in town."

"What? Is he just visitin'?"

"No. He's back for good." However, I don't know if that's the truth or not. He's working at the bookstore, covering shifts, so I assume that's the case. If he were only visiting, he wouldn't be running the place. It's the alcohol talking, but I don't correct myself. Silence drips on. "I'm sorry. Anyway, you called me. Everything okay?"

I try to smile when I talk, hoping it changes my mood.

There's a shift in her tone when she speaks up. "I wanted to tell you that..."

Then my brother's voice joins in. "We're engaged!"

I dance around the living room, squealing. Wine spills onto my hardwood floor, but I don't care. I'll clean it up later. "For real? This is the best news I've heard all day! Congrats, you two! Oh my God. I'm so happy for you. Like, this is incredible. Oh, I'm the maid of honor, right?"

My best friend in the entire world will officially be my sister. My excitement nearly bursts out of me, but I try to hold it in.

Summer laughs, and the sound is contagious. "Oh my goodness, of course."

I catch my breath and sit on the couch, grinning ear to ear. "Well, it seems like we have a wedding and a funeral to plan."

"Uh, *just* a wedding," Beckett tells me.

"Oh no, see, that's where you got it wrong, big brother. Hayden has it coming."

"Don't go startin' battles you can't finish," Summer warns in her motherly tone. I'm sure her future kids will be afraid of it, but I'm immune.

"A battle?" I choke out because the gulp of wine I took was too big. "Bless his heart. This is war."

And at that moment, I contemplate living in my villain era.

While I don't want that bad juju in my life, what if *I'm* actually *supposed* to be his karma?

HAYDEN

I wake up from a dream about Kinsley, hard as concrete, and I reach down to grab my cock.

Stroking, I pick up the pace. My groans fill the space, and I nearly laugh aloud.

Eighteen and thirty-one-year-old me aren't much different—still jacking off to the same girl in the same bed under my parents' roof.

The orgasm builds fast as I replay memories of us being together. Kinsley has the perfect tits, a grabbable ass, and a hot mouth that she knows how to use in and out of the bedroom. I can't take much more as I stroke up and down the shaft before rubbing my thumb across the slick warm precum, which is glistening.

I let go, allowing my release to take over, and I come so hard that I grunt out with relief, thankful I'm home alone.

Then guilt quickly follows.

I clean up and sit on the edge of my bed, running my fingers through my hair. "What the fuck am I doin'?" I mutter, placing my face in my hands.

I shouldn't be thinking about Kinsley like that.

Before I get too lost in my thoughts, my cell vibrates. When I glance over, I see it's Penelope. I force a smile and answer.

"What the fuck, Hayden? You can't call me? It's Tuesday."

Her high-pitched tone hurts my ears. I pull the receiver away as she continues screaming. I don't know what to say, so I try to keep my tone light. "Good mornin', sweetheart."

"Stop with the shit. I waited around all weekend to see if you'd contact me. You didn't. It's like you don't care about me, and that hurts. I went to

sleep pissed because of it.”

“I’m sorry. Things are hectic here, and I’m working at the—”

“I don’t want your excuses. I’m your fiancée, Hayden! The woman you’re gonna spend the rest of your life with. The woman who’s carrying your child. And you can’t give me a call to check in, to let me know you’re not dead or something?”

Nothing I can say would be right, and I’m trying hard not to set her off. It’s not even seven in the morning yet.

“I’m sorry.” I apologize because it’s the only thing that somewhat appeases her when she’s raging like this.

“Do better,” she snaps.

I ignore her comment. “How are things goin’?”

There’s silence, and I think, for a brief second, I can hear another man’s voice in the background. She clears her throat like she’s trying to cover it as if I’m some idiot with no clue.

“Terrible. This pregnancy might do me in. What I need is a massage and a pedicure.”

“You should contact the spa and see if they have any openings.”

“What a great idea. Are you treating me?”

“Sure.” I force out, trying to keep my tone in check.

“Thanks, babe. I love you. I miss you.” She doesn’t sound genuine.

“Miss you. Have a good time,” I say, and then she ends the call.

I think about my life and my relationship, having a loveless marriage, and it weighs heavy on me. Then I remember what Haley said. I grab my laptop and quickly search for private investigators in Houston. Pages upon pages load, and I write down a few numbers. Sure, it feels extreme, but I need to know the truth to stop feeling like this. The way she almost had me believe that shirt was mine is frightening. It wasn’t even my size. Had it been, I might’ve believed her because she was so convincing. Makes me wonder what else she’s lied about that I’ve gone along with.

That moment woke me up, and I can’t unsee the woman behind the mask.

Haley is right about one thing—while I’m gone, Penelope will have her guard down. If she’s cheating, she’ll take advantage of my absence. I have to know the truth.

Before I head inside the bookstore, I walk the four blocks to the bakery to grab something to eat. As soon as I enter, the smells of sweet bread and caffeine fill the small space.

“Hayden Shaw,” Sadie, the owner, says from behind the counter. She’s wearing a huge grin and an orange shirt that complements her dark-brown skin. Regardless that the place is full and a line continues out the door, she comes around the counter to hug me. Sadie might be a highly independent and smart businesswoman, but she also gives the best hugs.

“Hey, stranger,” I tell her with a grin. “Love the braids.”

“Thanks.” She flips them over her shoulder.

Sadie used to babysit me when my parents traveled for bookseller conventions. When she was sixteen, she’d allow ten-year-old me to do whatever the hell I wanted as long as it didn’t result in a hospital visit. It was our little secret. My parents knew I was self-sufficient, though, so she was mainly around to help with Haley because I was too young to be responsible. But Sadie treated me like I was older when everyone else saw me as a little kid.

Valerie, Sadie’s sister, whistles when she sees me. “What in the world are you doin’ in town?”

“I could say the same about you, little miss. You swore up and down that you were movin’ to the city.”

Valerie giggles. “And you swore you’d never return to Valentine, too, if I recall correctly. What are you doin’ here?”

“I’m visiting for a little while, working at the bookstore.” My parents asked Haley and me not to mention anything about Dad’s health to anyone. I respect their decision for privacy because as soon as anyone in town learns Dad had a stroke, they’ll be bombarded with visitors, food, and everything else. People mean well, but it’s a lot to deal with right now, so I understand where they’re coming from.

“Are you movin’ back?” Sadie asks.

“Not sure.”

Valerie nods. “Ahh, testing out the waters.”

More people fall in line behind me, and Sadie asks me what I’m having.

“Surprise me,” I tell her. She grabs a few breakfast croissants, donuts, and her daily special—a strawberry cream éclair.

“On the house,” Sadie yells to Valerie, who’s making change for another customer.

“Nah, let me pay,” I try to argue, but I know it’s no use.

“You’re family, Hayden.” She’s always treated me like her little brother, and if I had an older sister, I’d want it to be her.

I pull a twenty from my wallet and place it into the tip jar. On the way out, I wave goodbye with a “thank you.”

The bookstore opens in an hour, and it’s release day, so it will be busy. I take my time, enjoying my stroll in the early fall temperatures. The leaves on the trees in the park in the town center have started to change colors. Soon, most things will turn from green to brown, and Valentine will transform into a miniature Christmas town. I used to find it annoying how the community would celebrate every holiday, but living in Houston for the past decade has made me realize how much I missed it all.

When my stomach growls, I peek into the bag that Sadie gave me and pull out one of the glazed donuts. I take a bite, and it’s so soft and warm that it nearly melts in my mouth. As I look up, Kinsley rounds the corner with a coffee in her hand. Her long brown hair is down, and the ends are curled. She tucks a few loose pieces behind her ear, and when she spots me, her brows furrow. I shouldn’t be surprised to see her, considering the newspaper’s main office is on Main, but I am.

“Mornin’,” I say to her as I pass, and she ignores me completely, pretending I’m invisible. All I can do is laugh, and the sound reverberates off the buildings.

I unlock the door to the bookstore and walk inside. As soon as I flick the light switch, I notice a note on the floor that someone must’ve slipped under the door. I pick it up, then read the words in perfect cursive.

You’re an asshole. I will get my interview.

I’D RECOGNIZE that handwriting anywhere. Kinsley must’ve stopped before work to leave me this cute little message. She’s so sweet. Shaking my head with a smirk, I fold it and shove it into my pocket. She’ll probably get her interview, but not before I get what I want in return.

While I finish breakfast, I call a few private investigators. The first two don’t pick up, but the third one does. I explain my situation, and he gives me the price and tells me he’ll send over the contract. I don’t know what to expect or what he’ll find, but my gut tells me something is going on. I need to

get to the bottom of it before I make one of the biggest mistakes of my life and marry this woman.

Things have been rocky for years, and I put up with a lot. I always seem to be apologizing, and each time I've tried to call it off, it's like Penelope suspects it. She becomes the sweet woman I fell in love with, and our relationship gets better for a little while, but it never lasts. I'm not sure why I've held on this long. Maybe I'm afraid that without her, I'll be alone.

The morning shift is steady. At lunchtime, Haley comes in to relieve me. Instead of going home and staring at the old posters on my wall, I walk to the newspaper office.

When I enter, I hear the sounds of fingers clanking on keys. There's no one at the front desk, so I wait. A silver bell sits on the edge, with a note that says to ring it for assistance, so I do. The high-pitched ding nearly pierces my ears. I'm not impatient, but after a few minutes, I ring it again.

A minute later, Kinsley comes up front.

"What do you want?" She crosses her arms over her chest, her eyes sliding up and down my body once.

I smirk, wondering if she likes what she sees. "That's no way to treat someone you're meant to interview, now is it?"

Her jaw clenches. "Some of us have *actual* work to do, so if you could get to the point, I'd highly appreciate it."

I wave her note in the air. "I got your message."

Kinsley licks her lips and shoves her hand into the pockets of her dress pants, but her expression doesn't falter. Time has made her harder, I see. "I didn't need a reply."

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm well aware. But I've decided that I'll give you your interview..."

"Really?" It comes out harsh.

"But I'm interviewin' *you* in return."

She snorts, but there's sarcasm behind it, and her smile doesn't meet her eyes. "No. And stop lookin' at me like that. I'm not the same girl you used to love."

I slowly scan down her body, landing on each of her curves, then back up again. "You sure about that?"

She sucks in an annoyed breath.

I'm under her skin, and damn, I want to stay there.

"Those are my terms. Take 'em or leave 'em," I say, smirking.

“I’m leaving them. I don’t need you, Hayden. I never have. And I *never* will.”

I playfully grab at my heart, putting on the dramatics. “Ouch. That one hurt. But if you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

Without another word, I turn and leave. The door closes slowly, and when I glance over my shoulder, I meet Kinsley’s death glare.

If looks could kill, I’d be laid out flat on this sidewalk.

KINSLEY

After being face-to-face with Hayden again, I called an emergency best-friend lunch meeting to talk this out with Summer because she tends to be more logical than me. Plus, I want to see her ring. As soon as I sit down in the booth, she enters the deli with a pep to her step. I love seeing her happy like this—she’s literally glowing.

“Show me!” I reach out to take her hand. The diamond sparkles in the sunlight. “Wow. It’s gorgeous. This is your grandma’s ring, right?”

“Yep! I can’t believe you remember that.”

Summer and I would sneak into her parents’ bedroom when we were kids and play with her mother’s makeup and jewelry. Since she was an only child, we got away with much more at her house than at mine. With all the kids my mama had, I was convinced she could predict our antics or read our minds. Nothing got past her.

I chuckle. “How could I forget? When you’re ready to start planning, I’m ready to start helping! However, I would suggest choosing a date that’s on a full moon.”

Summer bursts into laughter and shakes her head. “I expect nothing less from you.”

“What? The ancient Greeks believed that if you married on a full moon, you’d have a lifetime of happiness together. Avoid the waning moon. Yikes.”

“Whatever you say. There are no dates yet. But Beckett suggested dress shopping in November once it’s cooler. Maybe we can look at bridesmaid dresses, too?”

I have to hold back a squeal. “Yes. I would *love* that. I’ll request off when I return to the office. Text me the dates.”

She immediately sends me a message. “Did it now before I forgot.”

A server eventually comes over and takes our drink and food orders. I carefully slide the crystals from my pocket and set them on the table. Summer picks one up. “What are these for?”

She’s used to me doing this but always asks questions.

I hold the dark-colored stone with hard lines on the side. As I roll it between my fingers, I speak up. “This is black tourmaline. It’s a powerful crystal. It wards off negative vibes and brings in positive energy instead. It grounds, protects, and helps with awareness so you can get what you want in life.” I point at another one. “Rose quartz, for healing old wounds.”

“Oh, I like this one. It’s smooth and looks like a mirror.” She hands it back to me.

“This, my dear, is hematite. Helps with confidence and creativity. Lord knows I need it right now.”

Our sweet teas are set on the table, and we continue our conversation while we wait for our turkey wraps. My phone buzzes, and Luca’s name pops up on the screen. It surprises me, but I reject the call and silence my ringer.

Summer’s brows lift.

I suck in a deep breath. “It’s Luca. Dunno what’s going on with him. We haven’t seen each other in days.”

“Why? I thought y’all were trying to take advantage of the rest of his time here.”

I shrug. “That was the plan, but on Saturday, he got a call from someone and left pretty quickly afterward. He was tryin’ to explain himself, and I told him to process whatever it was first. He seemed upset or shocked. I’m not sure. That was seventy-two hours ago.”

“He’s still leaving for New York at the end of the month?”

I nod. “I’ve been tryin’ not to think about it. As much as I hate Hayden being in town and having to do this stupid article on the bookstore, it’s been a distraction. Not sure if that’s a good or a bad thing at this point.”

“A wise woman once told me that everything works out as it should.”

I give her a soft smile. “It’s gonna be okay. I truly believe that. I’m frustrated and feeling a bit lost, but it makes life interesting, doesn’t it?”

“That it does. So tell me about this project.”

Our food arrives, and I fill her in on what Mr. Anderson wants me to do and what’s at stake.

“So you’re telling me that if you get this done to his specification, he’ll

give you the column?”

I nod as I chew. “I’m sure it won’t be that easy. Mr. Anderson never gives me exactly what I want. There will be some sort of stipulations that go along with it, but it’s a start. But give me an inch, and I’ll take a mile.”

“That’s true. Have you tried interviewin’ his parents or his sister?”

The question seems so simple, but it’s more complicated than that. “I haven’t been able to get ahold of them. Each day I’ve gone to the bookstore, Hayden has been there. Haley told me that he wouldn’t allow her to speak to me, that it has to go through him.”

She makes a face. “Where is Mr. and Mrs. Shaw? That’s the question.”

“Probably on vacation or somethin’. I did drive by their house, and his mom’s SUV wasn’t there, only his luxury car.” I roll my eyes.

“That’s weird, don’t ya think? He’s randomly home, and his parents are gone?”

“You’re right. I guess I didn’t quite think about that. I wonder if he’s staying for good or if it’s temporary. He told me he was working at the bookstore, and I was so flustered that I assumed. Maybe not all is lost, and he’ll return to Houston to his princess girlfriend. Hopefully sooner rather than later,” I say.

Summer takes a drink of tea. “Who knows? If I run into him, I’m gonna ask.”

“If you see him, you’ll be like, whoa. Time has been good to him,” I admit.

“I’ve seen pictures on social media, but you know they aren’t always accurate.”

I meet her eyes. “He looks good. More muscular. Scruff along his jaw. Even has some gray. And he smelled like he used to, like he’s still wearing the same cologne he wore when we dated.” I pause for a moment and look down at my food. “A part of me was hoping if I ever saw him again, he’d be like the Hunchback of Notre Dame, and I wouldn’t still be attracted to him. But no, he’s sexier than ever, and I actually kinda hate him for it.”

“I know how that is.” She pops a fry into her mouth. “Now you’ve got two men to deal with.”

“Don’t wish that upon me. Luca is leaving, and Hayden doesn’t exist in my world. I’m officially a single Pringle, and I think I’ll stay that way for a while. Spend that time to work on me and figure out what I want in life.”

“There was a time when you wanted to publish. Maybe you could finish

that book?”

I shake my head. “I deleted it.”

Her mouth falls open. “What? You didn’t tell me that!”

“I did a spiritual cleanse, and it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. I don’t regret it.”

“I’m shook.”

“I haven’t been able to write creatively in years. I held on to something that was holding me back. Each time I looked at the file, I felt anxious or like a failure. Once I deleted it, I was free. That probably sounds stupid.”

“No, it doesn’t. That makes a lot of sense. You tried. That’s all that matters,” Summer tells me as her phone buzzes. Her face softens when she answers. She doesn’t even have to tell me who she’s talking to. I know it’s my brother.

“Hey, Beckett!” I say, and Summer tells him I said hi.

They chat for a few minutes, and she ends the call after a few *I love you* *mores*.

“Adorable. I’m not jealous at all.” I laugh, but I know it took them a while to get where they are. I still have hope for myself and am genuinely excited for my bestie and brother. They deserve happiness, and I’m thrilled they found that with each other.

She throws a french fry at me, and it lands on my lap. I pick it up and dip it in ketchup before popping it into my mouth. My phone buzzes again, and I look down at the text message.

LUCA: Can we talk? Maybe over dinner?

“WHAT’S IT SAY?” Summer asks, leaning over to look, but I have one of those privacy screens on my phone—too many snooping eyes in Valentine.

“Luca wants to talk over dinner.”

“Oh. Do you think it’s a good thing?”

“Not sure.” I wipe my mouth with my napkin and push my plate forward. “Everything feels very unstable right now. Makes me miss the boring days. Anyway, enough about me. How’s the B&B going?”

“Great. Busy as hell. We’re already booked up until the end of the year!”

“Already? That’s incredible!” I lift my hand and give her a high five, and she slams her palm against mine with a giggle.

“It’s shocking. I also enjoy working with Remi. She’s like you, but not woo-woo.”

“I’m glad she’s working out, but she better not replace me.” I snicker. She loves to read and watch YouTube and recently quit her online personal assistant job to work for Summer.

“Never!”

The server comes over and picks up our plates. I slide my debit card across the table and pay for our lunch. We typically take turns—it’s something we’ve always done. I check the time, knowing I need to get back to work. After I drop my crystals back into my pocket, I stand and give Summer a hug.

“Thanks for having lunch with me. I feel better.”

She squeezes me back. “I’m always here for you. No matter what.”

We make our way to the front door.

“Hey, tell me what happens with Luca.”

“I will.”

Summer gets into her Jeep, and I wave goodbye as I return to work. One good thing about my job is that everything of importance is within walking distance. While thinking about it, I open my phone and text Luca back.

KINSLEY: Sure. What time and where?

Luca: I’ll meet you in the park for dinner around six.

Kinsley: See ya then.

WHEN I WALK into the office, it’s freezing cold. David’s wearing a scarf and gloves, and Pamela has her winter coat on.

“What in the world is goin’ on in here?” I look back and forth between them.

“Anderson is having his hot flashes again.” Pamela rolls her eyes.

“My menopause loves it.” Debbie shrugs. “No complaints from me!”

I walk over to the thermostat, which has a locked cover on it so only Anderson can control the temperature. The thing says sixty degrees. The next

five hours will be hell...or rather, the North Pole. *Fantastic.*

However, we all know the drill and have learned to prepare for this. It's worse in the winter, though. He'll turn off the heat and let the temps in the building drop into the sixties. Can't wait until he retires.

I pull the small space heater from the back of my bottom drawer and plug it in under my desk. I've been warned not to use it several times because it might blow a fuse, but that's never happened. As soon as I turn it on, an awful smell fills the space. David's eyes are wide.

"It's knocking off the dust! I swear it's not on fire."

"You're not being inconspicuous about it, though. You know he'll flip out."

I shrug. "Let him. I'll complain about awful work conditions and threaten to contact headquarters."

Moments later, Mr. Anderson bolts out of his office. I turn off my heater and sit back at my desk like I've been working since I returned from lunch.

"What is that smell?" he asks, searching around. "Something is burning."

David clears his throat.

"I was blow-drying my hair in the bathroom. That's probably what it is. Haven't turned it on in a while."

He gives me a pointed look. "On company time?"

"During my lunch break. I think I'm allowed one hour per day, correct?"

Mr. Anderson ignores me and goes to the break room for coffee. He returns and clears his throat. "I have a meeting this afternoon at three and will probably be tied up until the end of the day. Please ensure all articles are turned in for our biweekly print before you leave."

We nod and give our okays, and he returns to his cave. I reach down and click on the heater again when he's out of sight.

For the next hour, I update the community calendar printed in the Wednesday run and complete the article about homecoming next week. I have pictures of the six girls and boys running for the homecoming court.

As I glance down at their senior pictures, I try to remember how I felt during my last year of high school. I thought I was an adult and knew it all. I also thought I'd marry Hayden Shaw, too. Naive should be my middle name.

The Wednesday paper isn't long. We print around six pages, depending on what's going on. Considering football is all the teens have around here, most of this week is focused on getting ready for homecoming. Next week will be too, buying me some time on this bookstore article. I push the

thoughts away.

The rest of the day passes quickly, and I always feel like I'm racing against the clock. Probably because I am. However, to date, I've never missed a deadline.

I email my work over to Mr. Anderson and check the time. I have thirty minutes to spare, so I start updating what I can. At five sharp, my two coworkers turn off their computers and leave. Considering I'm meeting Luca outside in an hour, I try to get ahead. At fifteen till six, Mr. Anderson opens his door and meets my eyes, probably wondering why I'm still here.

"I'm about to leave. Finishin' up some things," I explain.

"Sounds good. Lock up when you finish," he tells me, turning off his office light.

And like that, I'm alone in this big building, staring at my computer screen, watching the cursor blink at me. My brain feels like mush as I grab the keys to my truck from my top drawer. My phone buzzes, and I see it's the alarm I set to make sure I break away. In ten minutes, I'll walk out this door, head across the street, and find Luca. Right now, I'm not sure what to expect, not after the look on his face when he left my house. But I'm going to think positively.

I close my eyes, meditate for five minutes, then leave.

There's a slight breeze, and the sun hangs lazily in the sky. I slide my hand into my pocket and run my thumb along the rough edges of the stones clanking together with each step I take, then I cross the street.

Luca sits on a blanket with a picnic basket beside him. He's on his back, his baseball cap covering his face from the sunshine. I take a mental snapshot of how carefree he looks with his arms tucked behind his head. My shadow covers him, and he removes his hat and looks up at me. He smiles instantly.

"Hey," he says, standing and pulling me into a hug before helping me sit cross-legged beside him. "I hope you're hungry."

"I'm always hungry." I waggle my brows, and he snickers while pulling items out of the basket.

He hands me something wrapped in foil and hot to the touch.

"Tacos," he confirms.

"A man after my heart." The words slip out of my mouth, and we both grow quiet, knowing our summer fling is over and the time we spent together will be nothing more than a memory. I unwrap the silver protective layer, then take a bite of a chicken fajita taco. "Did you get this from the food

truck?”

He nods. “I did. It’s great, isn’t it?”

I laugh. “It actually is. I haven’t had a chance to stop by there yet.”

“They’ve only been open for a week. Try the corn in a cup when you go. It’s incredible.”

“I’m addin’ it to my foodie list.” I take a few more bites, not liking the nervous energy I’m feeling. “Okay, come out and say it. I don’t think my nerves can handle waitin’ much longer.”

Luca gives me his signature boyish grin and then inhales deeply. “I’m leaving sooner than the thirtieth.”

I search his face.

“And I owe you an explanation as to why. I know you said you didn’t need one, and I appreciate that, but I respect you, Kins. And I owe you as much after everything we’ve been through over the past few months.”

I give him time to compose his thoughts and don’t interrupt him. Though I do reach over and squeeze his hand.

“My ex, Liliana...she’s pregnant. And it’s mine. It happened the last time we hooked up before I left New York.”

“Wow.” I finally understand his shocked reaction when he received that call. “Congratulations. That’s great. I mean, if you think it’s great. I’m here to support you however you need.”

He focuses on the grass with a blank stare. “Not sure how to feel about it, but I know Liliana hasn’t been with anyone else. She’s not that type of girl. I’ve contemplated it over the past few days, and I think I’d like to work things out with her if she takes me back. I do love her. I think I always will.”

“I understand.” I crumple the taco wrapper into a tight ball and place it inside the basket.

“Leaving you is hard,” he admits. “Harder than I ever imagined it would be.”

I force a smile. “Summer fling. No emotions, remember?”

“Right. The rules.”

The silence drags on, and I scoot beside him. Luca opens his arms, allowing me to lean into him, and he holds me one last time. “I’m gonna miss you,” I admit.

He kisses my forehead. “I want you to be happy, Kins. You deserve as much. I’m sorry I couldn’t be the man you needed.”

I swallow my emotions and nod because there’s nothing else to say.

HAYDEN

In the afternoon, I go to the park to read the hottest new release. I find an empty bench under a big tree that shades me from the sun. It's been a long-ass time since I've delved into a book, but I'm looking for an escape. It's so good I lose track of time.

Right after six, I lift my head and notice Kinsley and her boy toy chatting on a blanket. I can't help but peel my eyes off the pages. They're too far away for me to hear anything they're saying, but based on their body language, I can tell it's not a happy conversation. I should get up, walk away, get in my car, and drive home, but I don't. I continue watching them together.

A spark of jealousy flares deep inside me. I have no right to feel this way, not after all this time, but it doesn't stop the surge of annoyance.

She should be mine, but Kinsley Valentine is the one who got away—my biggest regret.

As he talks, she listens intently, not taking her eyes off him. She nods when she's supposed to and even reaches over and touches his hand. I wonder if she used to look at me the same way. As if I could do no wrong. Somehow, I still ended up hurting her in the end. The breakup haunted me for years, and I realize I should've fought harder for her, for us, because a love like we had only happens once in a lifetime.

Moments later, he holds her, kissing her forehead, then they pack up to leave. When they stand, he hugs her tight. Their embrace lingers, then they go their separate ways. Except Kinsley doesn't leave when he does. Instead, she finds a bench and sits with her legs crossed, staring up at the clouds.

I close my book and stand. I could leave. I could get in my Mercedes and pretend I didn't witness any of this, but instead, I make my way across the

grass toward her.

When I'm close, she narrows her eyes and gives me her signature scowl. I deserve it.

"Go away," she snaps as I sit down beside her. "You're the last person I wanna see right now."

"You're not a treasure to be around, either."

Her expression is serious, but then she bursts out laughing. "The universe works in mysterious ways, doesn't it?"

"You good?" I turn to her, knowing that she's not.

"I'll survive. It's something I'm used to." Then she gets up and walks away.

I stay planted for twenty minutes afterward while the sweet smell of her perfume lingers like a ghost beside me.

By the look on her face and the tone in her voice, I think he might've broken up with her.

This revelation shouldn't make me happy, but in a fucked-up way, it does.



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I wake up to an email from the private investigator I hired. It's Wednesday. I haven't been away for a week yet.

There are several photos of my fiancée wearing a tight-ass dress in the parking lot of one of Houston's most expensive steak restaurants last night.

Reservation only, three-hundred-dollar plates.

I try to make out the guy she's with, but the photos aren't clear. I can only see him from behind. However, the PI got the license plate of the black Lexus.

The owner? Ralph Halburt—one of the partners at the accounting firm.

There's body cam footage of her drinking wine...*while pregnant*, if she really is.

I feel sick to my stomach, but I'll get as much evidence as possible because Penelope will deny and deflect. Even if I present photos, she'll say it wasn't her. If I caught her in the act, she'd make an excuse. Accountability isn't her strong suit.

So, as I brew a pot of coffee before I head to the hospital, I give her a call.

It continues to ring, and right before I'm sent to voicemail, she answers breathlessly.

"Hey, how are things goin'?" I ask.

"Okay. Had a rough night. Ended up staying in and watching TV until I fell asleep. Been throwing up all morning."

I know it's a lie. "I'm sorry to hear that. What did you watch?"

"I don't remember. Pregnancy brain." She's so good at lying that it makes me question how long this has been happening. Months? Years? She knows I'm trying to prove myself, that I've been pulling double shifts and picking up additional clients to show my worth. Meanwhile, she's sleeping with my business partner.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

She sighs. "If you have to ask, then no."

There's no winning. "I thought I'd fly home for a quick trip so we could go to the doctor together. Check on the baby and get the process started."

"I haven't decided on the ob-gyn for delivery yet."

"Maybe we can see your regular gyno? I have some questions."

"I don't wanna deal with that right now."

I force a smile. "Okay, whatever you think."

Have I always been this complacent?

I should end things with her now.

Over the years, she's shown me glimpses of her ruthlessness when she doesn't get her way or is called out for bad behavior. I don't trust what she would do if I broke things off while away. She'd probably burn my condo to the ground and leave nothing more than ashes. So I'll bide my time until I can speak with her face-to-face.

"I am ready for you to come back, though. Can you leave early?"

She knows I can't—it's the only reason she suggested it. "No."

"Well, I want you to. I need you here." Her voice shrills.

"I can't. My parents need help right now."

I notice how she doesn't ask about my father. She hasn't checked in once because she's not worried about anyone but herself.

She huffs. "You're thirty-one years old and have your own life. Being there is a waste of time, and you're burdening everyone at your job."

"I'm not doin' this with ya today." I'm firm.

"Doing what? I'm not doing anything but expressing the way I feel."

"And that's fine. I heard you, but it doesn't change things. I'm needed

here. I thought you understood that.”

“You’re needed here, *too*. You’re being selfish.”

My heartbeat thumps rapidly in my chest. *Selfish?* “I’m lettin’ you go. I hope ya have a good day.”

“You better not hang up on me! I’m not finished!”

“There’s nothin’ left to discuss, Penelope. I’ve gotta go.”

She yells as I end the call. I set my phone on the counter and try to calm down.

When my coffee finishes brewing, I pour a cup, trying not to let her affect me. I’m not here gallivanting, having the time of my life. I’m working, feeding my parents’ fish, and trying to stay sane after my dad’s massive stroke.

However, I shouldn’t be surprised.

Penelope does this often—starts pointless arguments that end with me apologizing and buying her whatever she wants. I don’t like conflict, so I try to solve problems as fast as possible, even if that means taking the higher road when she’s done me wrong. I tend to make excuses for her. I see that now.

Penelope grew up with a silver spoon in her mouth and parents who didn’t give her enough attention. They were too busy working so they could buy her designer clothes and diamond earrings and send her to cheer camp.

My phone vibrates several times. I wait a few minutes before picking it up because I know it’s her.

PENELOPE: This is NOT over!

Penelope: You better call me back RIGHT NOW!

Penelope: You’ll regret this.

Penelope: You’re hurting me! It’s not good for the baby for me to be this upset.

Penelope: I’m crying because of YOU!

THE MESSAGES KEEP COMING, but I don’t respond. Instead, I turn off my cell phone and set it on the counter. As I blow on the hot liquid, I question how I got into this toxic relationship. But then I remember how quickly we hit it off

when we met.

Penelope was kind, beautiful, and caring. She was opposite from Kinsley in every way. After moving to Houston, I needed a distraction, so I fell for her hard and fast. My friends never liked her, though. The red flags were there, but I blissfully ignored them. Once the two-carat ring was on her finger, the sweet, innocent, and happy character she had played disappeared. The facade quickly faded, and the toxic cycle began. She quit her job and moved in with me, then her dictatorship and hold over me began.

I loved her and would do anything for her. Then one Christmas, I wanted to surprise my parents by visiting, and Penelope lost her shit. She didn't want to join me on the trip and told me she didn't want me to leave. She had a meltdown, and I canceled my flight to stay with her. That's when I began working more.

I stare at the wall, reliving and replaying everything that has happened over the years. She wanted me isolated so I wouldn't see things as clearly as I do now.

The manipulation. The lies.

Fuck. This is a mess.

After I finish my coffee, I get dressed and drive to the hospital.

When I walk into Dad's room, he's sitting upright in bed watching *Supernatural*. Mom is crocheting in the corner. There's a tray of breakfast food from the cafeteria that's barely been touched. The eggs look like rubber.

"Mornin'," I greet them.

My father beams. "Hayden! Your mama told me you were in town."

"Yep, wanted to come and help y'all out while you recover."

Mom slides a chair over for me, and I sit beside the bed.

"You don't have to worry about me. I'll be fine. Will probably be out of here in the next few days."

I turn to Mom, and she shakes her head. "The doctor said he needs a month of therapy at least."

"I won't be in here a month," Dad states, and he seems to believe his words. "As soon as I can get my fingers and foot to cooperate, I'm walking out of here."

"You should probably stay until they release you. The doctors know best."

"I know my body better than they do."

I chuckle. "Stubborn as a mule."

“Strong as one, too.” He laughs and picks up the remote to flick through the channels. He looks better than he did the first night I visited. Color has returned to his face, and his fighting spirit is in full force.

“I believe in you,” I tell him confidently. “Also, I got you something.” I pull a book from my shoulder bag and hand it over.

“A book about strokes?” He looks confused.

“Yeah, it’s full of inspiring stories from people who have recovered. It has firsthand accounts from family members.”

“Thanks, son. But it’s hard for me to read right now. It’s a thoughtful gift, and I appreciate it. But you know what I really want?”

I lift my brows.

“Your words. A book with your name on the front of it. You used to write stories all the time in high school.”

“That’s what hormonal teens do,” I explain. “Make shit up.”

“No, it was deeper than that. There was a time when you’d talk about your novels being up front in the window and having signings at Main Street.”

I smile. “People change. Dreams change.”

“Maybe, but talent like that can’t be learned. It’s something ingrained into you.” He taps the cover of the book. “I’ll have your mama read it to me when she’s bored.”

My ma snickers. “I’d be happy to.”

We talk for a few hours, and I catch my parents up on my life. They ask about Penelope, though they’ve never met her in person, only through FaceTime. I keep the conversation light and fluffy, not giving away that we’re having problems. When the nurses come in for Dad’s midmorning therapy, I take that as my cue to leave. I quickly give Dad a side hug and a high five, and then I walk out.

Mom follows me. “Everything okay?”

I smile. “Yeah, things are fine.”

By the look on her face, she doesn’t believe me.

“I got a text from Penelope this morning.”

This shocks me. “And she said what exactly?”

Mom unlocks her phone and flips it around. It’s a photograph of a positive pregnancy test with a message that says **YOU’RE GOING TO BE A GRANDMA!**

“I was waiting for you to tell us, but when you didn’t...”

My heart drops. This is the last thing my mother needs right now. And Penelope said *I* was selfish?

“I didn’t mention it because I don’t want you excited over a lie.”

She reaches forward and grabs my hand. “What in the world is going on?”

“It’s a lot, Ma. Nothing to worry about, though. Think about Dad and his recovery. My mess is trivial in comparison, and it will all work out. I hired a private investigator.”

“Hayden,” she whispers. “This sounds serious.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sorry she brought you into this. Things are rocky between us, and I need evidence because I suspect she’s cheating.”

My words don’t seem to make her relax. “Son, this is awful.”

I squeeze her shoulder and grin. “It’ll work out. Promise you that. Being home has helped me see things more clearly.”

“Good.” She puts her hand on top of mine and pats it, then she makes her way to the coffee maker stuffed in a small break room. My mom looks over her shoulder at me after she pours the coffee into a Styrofoam cup. I linger in the doorway.

“You know your dad has been talkin’ about your writing for years.”

“I haven’t written in a long time. Not since I moved to Houston.”

She takes a sip and makes a face before pouring in more sugar and cream. “Maybe that should change.”

“Maybe. Do you need anything before I go?”

She walks toward me, and I take a step back, allowing her to pass me. “Nah, thanks for coming today. I think you brightened your dad’s spirits.”

“I hope so.”

“Oh, Kinsley Valentine contacted me for an interview for the bookstore. Have you heard from her?”

“I’ll take care of it.” I smile. “If she calls again, tell her to reach out to me.”

“Will do. Have you told anyone about your dad?” She takes another drink of her coffee.

“Nope. But people are startin’ to notice.”

She smiles. “That’s fine. Let’s keep it our secret until we can’t. You know your dad is too proud.”

“I know.”

KINSLEY

I wake up groggy from the wine I drank to help me fall asleep. My eyes are swollen from crying, so I splash water on my face, hoping it will help. It doesn't.

Last night was awful. I threw a pity party for one. The realization that Luca would be leaving hit me like a ton of bricks even though I knew this day would come.

I'd been preparing myself all summer for when it was time to say our goodbyes. I didn't expect it to go the way it did. The best sex in the world didn't change that, and it's okay. As they say, it was fun while it lasted.

Now I need time to heal.

While it's not a true breakup because we never used titles with each other, it still feels like one. Summer warned me about this. Hell, I warned myself, but with Luca, it was never love. It was physical, and we enjoyed each other's company, but it helped me realize how alone I am, and that scares the shit out of me.

There's no way I can go into the office feeling this way, so I email Mr. Anderson and let him know I'll be in after lunch because of interviews. It's not a lie. I do have a meeting scheduled with Mayor Martinez.

My thoughts drift back to Luca. Then I think about Hayden, knowing he probably watched the whole breakup like a reality show.

I don't know why or where the idea of following Hayden manifests while journaling, but it does.

So I go rogue.

When I arrive at the bookstore, Hayden's Mercedes is nowhere to be found, so I drive to his parents' house, where he's staying. They live in a

subdivision right outside of town. After I spot his car in the driveway, I wait at the end of the block.

As if I'm a detective, I pull out my binoculars and focus on the kitchen window. When I spot him, I feel a jolt of excitement. For a moment, I thought it was his dad, but nope. If I want my interview, I'll get it from his parents, but his mom's SUV isn't here. I called her cell, but she didn't answer, so I left a message. I thought she'd get right back to me, but I haven't heard a peep.

Hayden stands in the kitchen, drinking a cup of coffee shirtless. He looks like he's lost in thought. Eventually, he moves out of sight, and I ask myself what I'm doing. Summer's words yesterday have played repeatedly, and I'd like to talk to Mr. and Mrs. Shaw about the bookstore and see if they have any old family photos in all those albums his mama has stacked under the china cabinet in the dining room. Showcasing vintage photos of the store over the years would be incredible. I've found a few in the archives, but I'm sure they have things not many have seen.

Before I get too lost in my thoughts, Hayden exits through the front door and walks to his car. His jaw is clenched tight. He's annoyed about something, but what? And where is he going this early in the morning?

As he backs out of the driveway, I duck down in the driver's seat, hoping he doesn't see me. Once he makes his way down the road, I put the truck into drive and follow him from a distance. Out here, in the middle of nowhere, it's easy to realize you're being followed because you're often the only vehicle on the road.

At first, I think he's going to the bookstore, but he stops at the gas station. I park on the side of the road a few blocks away, hoping he's oblivious. I wish I had time to get a coffee, too, although I already had a cup at home this morning as I planned out my day.

For some reason, I get this nagging feeling. There are too many unanswered questions. Why is Hayden in town? Where are his parents? Something is off about this situation, and I'll use every sprinkle of my investigative skills to figure it out. *I'm on the case.* I snicker.

Promptly ten minutes later, he travels down Main Street, past the bookstore, and heads in the direction out of town.

I'm at least a mile behind him, but I consider turning around. What if he's traveling to El Paso? That's three hours one way, and I have to be at city hall by ten to interview the mayor for next Sunday's paper. I make a deal with

myself to only drive as far as Van Horn, which is forty-five minutes. If he drives through and continues on his path, I'll turn around.

Honestly, I'm not sure what I'm thinking and am starting to second-guess myself, but my intuition never lies. I'd follow it off a cliff.

Instead of allowing my imagination to run wild, I stay the course and keep my distance. I'm far enough away that he hopefully won't notice me, but I might lose him if he drives any faster. I hold the steering wheel with white knuckles as my heart gallops.

In the distance, the two-lane highway comes to an intersection, and he slows but continues straight. So do I. When he turns into the hospital, I don't stop. I keep driving until I'm at the edge of town, and a wave of guilt surges over me. It's not hard to put two and two together, not when his parents are inseparable. One is sick, and Hayden is here because it's *that* serious. There's no other explanation.

I pull into the gigantic truck stop that sticks out like a sore thumb in this small town and park on the side of the building, trying to regain my composure. A sinking feeling overcomes me as a million questions float through my head. The hospital is small in comparison to most. It's one large building with no additional floors, but it's divided into sections, and they offer advanced trauma life support. If it were dire, they'd have life-flighted them to El Paso or Midland, which somewhat relieves my worry. When accidents occur at Big Bend National Park, people are usually sent here, so I know they can handle nearly everything.

After composing myself, I turn onto the highway that leads back to Valentine and call Summer. It's just past eight, and it will be hit or miss if she answers, considering that's when most guests eat breakfast at the B&B.

To my surprise, she picks up.

"Hey, do you have a minute to talk?" I ask. There's chatter in the background and the sounds of plates being stacked.

"Yeah, what's up?"

I'm unsure where to begin, so I blurt it out. There are no secrets between us anyway. "I followed Hayden this mornin'."

"What?" Her voice goes up an entire octave, then she laughs. "Why?"

"I was curious! I wanted to know what he was doin', and I think I might've figured it out."

"Aren't you supposed to be at work right now?" I'm sure she looked up at the big clock on the wall in the dining room area.

“Yes, but this was important. I told everyone I’d be out of the office for interviews and research this mornin’.”

“Did you put air quotes around research when you said it?”

I chuckle, which is what I need to relax slightly. “No, but maybe I should have. Anyway, I followed him to Van Horn.”

“That’s odd.”

“He went to the hospital.”

Silence.

“Oh no,” Summer finally says. “What do you think is goin’ on?”

“Not sure. I think I might call and try to find out.”

“They won’t give you any information,” Summer tells me.

“I know. But I wanna confirm who’s there, who he’s visiting. I have a sinking feeling it’s one of his parents. I haven’t seen his mom’s SUV—”

“Kins, have you been stalkin’ him?”

“Before you say anything, I’m not a psycho. I need to talk to them about this article for work, and Hayden refuses to speak to me. I reached out to his mom and left a message on her cell, but she hasn’t returned my call. Regardless, there’s somethin’ more serious going on here. One of his parents might be in the hospital. There’s no other explanation.”

“Yeah, I think you might be right. Shit, I gotta go,” Summer tells me. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine, I understand. I needed to tell someone.”

“Keep me updated, please. Also, I won’t say anything to anyone. If Hayden and Haley aren’t mentionin’ it and people around town don’t know, there’s a reason for that.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. Anyway, we’ll chat soon! Have an amazing day!”

“You too.”

The call ends, and I drive silently, deciding to keep this information to myself. When I pass the Valentine City Limits sign, I get a call from Mayor Martinez asking to reschedule the meeting for tomorrow. I give the universe a quick thank-you because I’m not feeling it anyway. I agree and thank him even though he doesn’t know he did me a major favor.

Instead of going into the office, I send my boss a text and let him know I’m not feeling well and taking the day off. He replies with some stupid message about deadlines and that he’ll see me tomorrow. I drive through the edge of town and make the turn to go to my parents’ ranch. When I finally

make it home, I sit on the couch and google the number to the hospital.

On the call, the prompt comes up, and I press zero to be sent to the operator. When they answer, I ask to be transferred to Christopher Shaw's room.

“Room C23. One moment.”

Before the call fully connects, I hang up and breathe in deeply. It's Hayden's dad, and if I'm calculating this correctly, I first saw Hayden on Saturday. So it must be something serious if they've kept him here for nearly a week.

HAYDEN

“It’s been forever,” I tell Harrison Valentine when I run into him at the grocery store. He’s changed a lot since the last time I saw him—he’s more muscular. For a moment, I thought he was Beckett.

“Yeah, man. Long time no see. Whatcha doin’ back in town? Came to get back with my sister?” He waggles his brows.

“Oh yeah,” I tell him. “She’s been *dyin’* to see me.”

“You mean *dyin’* to kill you.” He snickers while carrying a bright-red store basket like Little Red Riding Hood. Inside is an onion, a jar of peanut butter, and some biscuits.

“Ya know, that wouldn’t surprise me one bit. She’s perfected her death glares over the years.”

Harrison bursts into laughter. “Oh, you’ve run into her already?”

I give him a pointed look. “You know how small this town is. Avoiding someone is damn near impossible.”

He nods as we browse the strawberries. “That’s the truth.”

“How’re your grandparents and parents doin’?”

“Great, actually. We’re supposed to get together this Sunday for supper. You wanna join us?”

I tilt my head at him. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah, man. I’m sure everyone would love to see you. It’s been too long. Don’t be late, though. Last one in has to do the dishes.”

“I’ll think about it. Feels like a giant setup to get me murdered by your sister.”

“At least you’ll get a nice home-cooked meal before Kins ends you.” Harrison gives me his number since I don’t have any personal contacts from

Valentine saved. Actually, when I scroll through, it's all business acquaintances. The realization hits me like a ton of bricks that I have no friends left. My coworkers don't count because if I quit, I don't think I'd stay in contact with any of them.

"Thanks, man." I text him so he has my information.

"Yeah, no problem. How's your sister?"

"Off-limits and not interested in you, playboy," I tell him.

"Playboy? Pfft." Harrison has a reputation that precedes him, and he knows it.

"Dude, I saw that influencer's video of you and Beckett givin' her horseback ridin' lessons."

He snags and bags women, especially after his training business went mega viral last year on social media. I was shocked at first that someone I grew up with could have a video with millions upon millions of views. Harrison is the poster boy for twentysomething cowboys, and I'd say he enjoys that.

Harrison smirks. "I think everyone has seen it now. It's why we're so busy these days. All the ladies wanna ride my...*horses*."

I drop a few apples in a plastic bag, and Harrison does the same.

"You still best friends with that girl? What was her name?"

His cockiness somewhat fades, and his face softens. "Yeah, Grace. Pretty sure we'll be best friends until the day we die."

"She married yet?" I grab two avocados and put them into a plastic bag.

"Nah, but she's dating someone, and they seem serious. If they get married, I'mma be her man of honor."

This makes me chuckle. "That would be a sight to see."

Harrison picks up two oranges and a cluster of bananas. "Well, I'll see ya 'round. We're meetin' on Sunday, six o'clock. But I'd show up thirty minutes early. Don't forget, Mama will make you do the dishes if you're the last one there. Guests aren't excluded from chores if they're late."

"Understood. Nice chattin' with ya." I go to the zucchini, not impressed by their size. In my periphery, I see Ethel watching me. She's been the town gossip since I was a kid. When I make eye contact and smile, she turns her head and pretends she hasn't been staring.

So much for being friendly.

I finish shopping and load the groceries into my car while thinking about Harrison's invite. It's been a long time since I've seen any of them, and they

were my second family for years. I was friends with Kinsley's brothers and even helped her babysit her younger siblings when we were teenagers.

After I drive home and unload everything from my car, my phone rings.

It's the private investigator.

"I've emailed you more information. I wanted to make sure you got it."

"Sorry, thanks for lettin' me know. I'll log on to my laptop."

"Great. I'm waiting for your response on how to proceed. Thanks."

The call ends, and I grab my computer from my room. It's been a few days since I logged on because I've been so busy with work. Penelope hasn't tried to call me in six days. Not after our argument last week, when I didn't respond.

My personal inbox has a lot of emails, but it's mostly junk. I find the one I'm looking for and open it.

MR. SHAW,

I have attached my invoice for the first fifty hours and also attached additional photographs that you might find interesting. Please let me know if you'd like to continue services.

FIFTEEN PHOTOGRAPHS ARE ATTACHED. The first one is Penelope kissing Ralph at our doorstep and her letting him in two days ago on Tuesday. Based on the time stamps, he leaves at midnight. Two hours later, another man arrives, and she hugs him, kisses him, then allows him to go inside my fucking condo. The private investigator catches him leaving at four in the morning. Still worse are pictures of her having breakfast with someone completely different yesterday morning. Afterward, they checked into a hotel. I feel sick and angry.

I've been gone for five days.

Sucking in a deep breath, I reply.

I'M NOT sure what to think about any of this, but I think I have enough information. I'll take care of the invoice today. Thanks for your help.

FEELING NUMB, I press send and then log on to my security camera app. Nothing is recorded on the cameras during that time, but she has the password, so she probably turned them off. Sneaky as hell. I would've never thought to go to such lengths. It makes me wonder what her endgame truly is with all of this. My trust in her has been broken and can't be repaired.

I sit at the breakfast bar in the quiet. It's weird being in my parents' house while they're away. Things are exactly how they left it, too. There's a half-opened envelope on the counter and the stack of mail I've been collecting.

After I eat a bowl of oatmeal, I go upstairs and set my laptop on the small desk in my room. A world of ideas swarms in my head. I open a document, then put my fingers to the keys, thinking. There's only one story that I feel compelled to tell, and it starts with a boy and a girl who found each other through their love of words.

My fingers fly over the keys. Excitement fills me as my creative spark ignites. I've missed it like the land misses the rain during a drought. An hour passes, then two, and when I finally take a break, it's time for lunch. Pulling myself away from my project is almost painful, but I do it to allow my fingers and my mind to rest.

When my stomach growls, I make a sandwich and eat it in the kitchen while standing, then I get dressed for my afternoon shift. I have to relieve Haley in two hours so she can go to the hospital to see dad. Then I head back to my laptop and make sure my draft is uploaded to the cloud to access it on my phone. Before signing out, I search for flights to Houston.

There aren't many options, only the red-eye. Instead of mulling over it and giving myself a chance to change my mind, I buy a ticket with a returning flight on Friday morning.

I can't stay with Penelope. I can't keep pretending. But after being with her for seven years, she deserves to be told in person. She might not respect me, but I won't let her pull me down to her level.

Once I have a confirmation email, I text Haley and ask her to trade shifts with me. I offer to work a double on Saturday, and she immediately says yes. This conversation with Penelope will be intense, but I'll bring my A game. Whatever happens, tomorrow won't be easy or end well.

I connect to the Bluetooth printer in my dad's office and print the photos I

was sent. Maybe then Penelope will understand she can't deny it. My mood sours thinking about it.

After closing my laptop, I devour a few chapters of the book I'm reading until I leave for work.



TRYING to sleep on the five o'clock flight is useless.

I was restless last night, replaying exactly what I would say. My nerves are shot, and while I've rehearsed my responses, I'm still nervous. I'm a softy when women cry, which is probably why she turned on the waterworks for the most mundane things. One time, she hysterically sobbed because the grocery store only had white eggs, not her farm-raised brown ones. Love can make a person ignore some crazy shit.

I take an Uber from the airport to my condo downtown. All I've brought with me are my laptop and case, along with a folder stuffed full of photos of my fiancée with other men in random places. I walk down the sidewalk and up the steps, punch the code into the front door, and let myself in. The lights are off because it's still early.

When I walk into our bedroom, I notice two people in our fucking bed. The rage builds inside me, and I flick on the light.

"What the actual fuck?"

Penelope bolts up out of bed, naked. Ralph leans over to grab his slacks from the floor.

"Someone wanna explain what the hell is goin' on?"

Penelope rushes over to me. "It's not what it looks like. I swear. He was ___"

"Shut up," I snap.

Her expression changes. "You're not supposed to be here right now."

Ralph stands, buttoning his slacks. He grabs his shirt.

"What would your wife think about this?" I ask him directly. "You think she'd be happy to know you're fuckin' my fiancée?"

Silence.

Penelope starts crying.

"Put a shirt on," I tell her. "Actually, go with him. Get out right now."

"No, please. It was only one time, Hayden. I love you." Her face is

contorted, but not one tear falls down her cheeks.

I open up my computer bag and grab the stack of photographs and hand them to her. “Get. Out.”

“You had me followed?” Her expression changes, and I see the anger flash behind her eyes. “You’re a psychopath!”

She tries to turn this situation around on me the best she can, but it doesn’t work. I don’t take the bait.

“It’s over, Penelope. I flew all the way back here to tell you that to your face. I didn’t expect that one of the men you cheated on me with would be here.”

“Shut up!” she screams, pulling out her suitcase from the closet, then plucking several items from her dresser drawers. The front door slams, and a minute later, a car zooms down the road out front.

“He didn’t wait for you.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“I hate you, Hayden,” she seethes. Her chest rises and falls while she slams things. When she walks by the lamp on the nightstand, she grabs it and throws it to the floor. Penelope is like a tornado as she wrecks the place, breaking whatever she can. I watch her pull pictures of us from the wall and slam them on the floor. Glass from the frames shatters across the hardwood. Anything she can disturb on her way out the door, she does. Something I predicted would happen.

“I’m leaving because I can’t stand to be around you!” she screams as she heads to the door. Before she walks out, she comes over to me and slaps me across the face. “Maybe if you didn’t work so much, I wouldn’t have had to look for love elsewhere.”

“And the baby?”

“Fuck you. Even if I were pregnant, it wouldn’t be yours.”

My eyes widen. “You need to get help.”

She grabs her suitcase and then slams the door behind her.

I look around at the destruction she left behind, but I smile.

Penelope is out of my life.

All I have to show for the past ten years is a failed relationship and a destroyed condo. But I’m finally free.

KINSLEY

It's Friday, and I have two more hours of work left, but I've mentally checked out. My enthusiasm became nonexistent once Mr. Anderson reprimanded me for not having any updates. Technically, I've only been assigned the project for a week, but he wasn't impressed. He said I should've written more than the commonly known facts on the bookstore's web page.

I swear an hour has passed, but it's only been five painful minutes when I look at the clock. The afternoon slump has taken hold.

While Mr. Anderson is on a conference call, I check in with my bestie.

KINSLEY: Hey! Do you have plans tonight?

Summer: No, but I'm exhausted from dealing with people all day. You're more than welcome to come over and watch a movie.

Kinsley: And be Beckett's and your third wheel? Nah, I'm good. I need a pick-me-up, though. Would love to go dancing at Boot Scooting.

Summer: Sorry! If you change your mind, you know where we live. Do you have plans in the mornin'? If not, you should come to the B&B and join me for coffee while I work. We can catch up.

Kinsley: Yay! Count me in for that. Depending on what I do tonight, I might need a hangover breakfast.

Summer: I've got you covered!

So I MOVE to my next choice and text Harrison.

KINSLEY: You got plans tonight?

Harrison: Yep, I'm spending time with Grace. We're going to see a movie in Alpine. Wanna come?

Kinsley: What if I decided to pull a favor tonight and have you cancel?

Harrison: I'm at your disposal, but Grace might be upset.

Kinsley: It's fine. You two lovebirds have fun.

HE SENDS ME AN EYE-ROLL EMOJI. At this point, I go down the list of people I hang out with, and it's somewhat pathetic. Next up is my sister Remi.

KINSLEY: Please tell me you're not busy tonight.

Remi: I am, but what's up?

Kinsley: I wanna do something fun and not stay in tonight. Everyone has someone to do shit with but me.

Remi: Oh, well, I'm going to Spirit Painting tonight. Alone. You're more than welcome to join me.

SPIRIT PAINTING IS an adult painting venue where you can bring your own booze. It opened up in town last month.

KINSLEY: I've been wanting to check it out! Ya sure I won't be killing your vibe?

Remi: I'd love for ya to join me. Haley canceled. I'm living in my independent woman phase, so I'm still going.

Kinsley: I adore that. But next time, text me. I'm the perpetual third wheel these days.

Remi: I'll bring an extra bottle of wine for ya. Last time I checked, the class wasn't full. I'll be there around six, and it starts at seven.

Kinsley: Eep! Can't wait!

MY MOOD IMMEDIATELY SHIFTS, and I'm excited about hanging out with my sister. It's been too long. She's working night shifts at the B&B and sees Summer more than I do now. I'm not jealous of their relationship. Just feeling lonely.

At four thirty, I stand and stretch.

"The day is almost over." David lifts his arms above his head. "I'm goin' hikin' in the mornin'. Lookin' forward to it."

"Yeah? That's exciting. The weather is supposed to be nice."

"Sixty-two and sunny. Sounds like I'm describin' myself." He snickers.

Even Pamela laughs at that one. I sit in my chair and reorganize my folders with information about the upcoming articles I need to write. It's a mindless task but one that's necessary. Nothing sucks worse than trying to find a file and not knowing where it is.

When David puts on his jacket and pulls his keys from his desk drawer, I power off my computer and grab my shit. This week has been hell.

I drive home and change into something more comfortable, then take a quick break before heading to Spirit Painting. It's downtown, a few doors down from Grinding Beans. Since it's an adult extracurricular, they're not open until the evening. Pamela did a write-up about the business and interviewed customers when it first opened. I was busy writing an article about the B&B and haven't had a chance to try it out.

When I arrive, a woman at the front counter greets me with a grin. "You here for tonight's class? The seven or the nine o'clock?"

"Oh, there are two?"

She smirks. "Yeah, one is a lot rowdier than the other."

"Sounds like fun, but I'd like to get in on the seven o'clock one. My sister Remi signed up for that one."

"First time here?" she asks, typing away on her computer.

I nod, loving the place's vibe with its oldies music and bright-colored walls. Positive quotes are handwritten in bubble letters, and the energy inspires my creativity.

"You're gonna have fun...even if you have no paintin' experience."

"Great, because I don't. Although I do know how to follow instructions."

"You'll do fine, then. Oh, it looks like we have one spot left," she tells

me.

“I’ll take it,” I say, sliding my card down the reader when she tells me it’s ready. I sign my receipt and sit in one of the empty chairs by the front windows meant for those waiting for a class to start.

Fifteen minutes later, Remi walks in and hugs me with both bottles of wine in her hand. “I’m so glad you joined me!”

She hands me a bottle of cranberry wine, and I thank her. “Oh my gosh, you smell good.”

“Thanks. Fenix started making lotions and body sprays, and she’s using me as a test subject.”

“Oh? She didn’t tell me.” I make a mental note to keep up better with my younger sisters, Fenix, London, and Vera. It’s hard since we’re in different places in our life. Fenix is twenty-two, London is twenty, and Vera is sixteen. The three of them are close, like Kendall and Kylie Jenner at this point, and Remi and I are Kourtney and Kim.

“She’s waiting until she has specific scents perfected before asking other people. I’m sure she’ll ask you to try it out.”

“I hope so. You smell good enough to eat.”

“All I need is a man.” She shoots me a wink, and I nod.

“Same, girl.”

When the waiting room fills, the double doors leading to the art studio open. A twentysomething woman greets everyone with a grin. She’s wearing paint-splattered clothes, and her hair is tied back into a messy bun with a scarf around it. A few bracelets on her wrist clink together as she moves.

“Hi, everyone! I’m Tessa, your fearless leader for today. I’m gonna ask everyone to pick up a green, yellow, and red brush from the far side of the room. Get a clean paint palette while you’re there.” She points with one hand and holds the brushes in the air with the other—blank canvases lean on the mini easels on the table. We find two empty stools in the middle of the room as we listen to the instructions.

“I’ll grab yours for you,” I tell Remi.

“I’ll get us some cups for our booze! Divide and conquer,” she says.

We go our separate ways and navigate through the crowded room of people. After I reach the supplies and snatch what we need, I return to my seat. Remi returns with the cups and pulls a wine opener from her back pocket.

“Prepared, I love that.” I take it from her.

She winks. “Ain’t my first rodeo.”

“We’re waitin’ for one more person,” Tessa says, looking out the opening of the double doors that are not in my view. There is one empty stool next to me. As everyone chats among themselves, Remi turns to me.

“So I heard a rumor.”

I lift my brows as I swallow my sip. “Yeah? Is it juicy?”

“It’s about you.”

“No,” I whisper. “I’ve made it back to the gossip mill?”

“Apparently, people say Hayden is back in town to get back together with you.”

This has me laughing out loud, and a few people glance in my direction and then return to their convo. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am! Is it not true?”

Before I can answer her, I see broad shoulders behind my sister. Then I meet his golden-brown eyes, and he smirks, causing my smile to fade right before he plants his sexy but irritating ass right next to me.

I keep my back facing Hayden and look at her mouth. “Did you invite him?”

She shakes her head, then clears her throat before leaning back. “Hey, Hayden.”

“Hey! Gosh, it’s been so long,” he says. He stands and opens his arms, and Remi gives him a hug. “You’re basically grown now. Makes me feel old.”

I roll my eyes.

“Yeah, you too.” Then my sister squeezes his bicep, and I’m mortified.

“Okay, how about we get started?” Tessa looks around the room.

“Great idea,” I mutter.

Remi giggles.

“Alright. There is one rule here: no saying your artwork sucks. Everything else is fair game...but please keep your clothes on.”

Everyone chuckles.

She holds the final painting of the orange pumpkin in a patch. “This is what it should somewhat look like. You’re not trying to replicate it exactly; make it your own. Some pumpkins will be taller, some will be fatter, and I’ve had some that weren’t even orange. Take creative liberties where you see fit, and remember, you’re the only one who can see your mistakes. Most people don’t notice them. Repeat after me; my painting is amazing!”

The entire room repeats the positive affirmation. I'm already loving it, except for the fact that I can smell Hayden's cologne, and he's sitting too close to me.

As Tessa shows us how to create the pumpkin base, I focus on my canvas. "What are you doin' here?" I ask in a hushed tone.

"Paintin'. What are *you* doin' here?"

I clench my teeth. "Tryin' to have a good time with my sister."

"Who's stoppin' you?" He makes several paint strokes and is already three steps ahead of me.

"You are. You know this is how rumors get started." I'm still whispering.

He laughs out loud. "Behind every rumor is some truth."

I turn my head and glare at him. "Not this one. Trust me. There's no way in hell it's true."

"Kins. Shh. I'm tryin' to concentrate on my masterpiece." Hayden glances at me.

Kins. He called me by my nickname, the one he used to moan when we'd make love under the stars.

When he's near me, concentration might as well be a unicorn, a fable, something that doesn't exist. I glance around the room and take inventory of who's here. From working on the paper, I'm acquainted with most people. I know things about some of them I probably shouldn't, and Hayden sitting beside me only helps confirm a lie. If Remi heard this, it's been spreading like wildfire all week. And honestly, after I got reamed by Mr. Anderson about the bookstore article today, Hayden is the last person I want to be around. Hayden's lack of cooperation is why I'm not further than I could've been.

So I do what I'm used to doing—ignoring his existence. However, it's hard when he's so damn close.

"Okay, my beautiful pupils, now we're gonna add shading to our pumpkin like this." Tessa dips her green brush into the brown paint, and she makes it look easy.

Remi glances at me with her bottle of wine raised, and I give her my empty cup. She fills it and hands it back. I take a sip, needing it to calm the anxiety streaming through me.

An hour passes, and after I add the final touches to my pumpkin, I stand and step back, proud of my creation. I wrote Happy Fall, Y'all across the top in black paint. Remi looks at hers too.

“It’s so cute!” she nearly squeals. “I have the perfect place to hang this in my living room.”

“I think I’m gonna put it in my dining room.”

“That’s an amazing idea.” Remi begins complimenting my shading.

“Yeah, but look, I did mess up right here,” I say, and I hear Tessa stop talking.

“Wait a second, hold on, everyone. Who said that? Who talked about their mistake?”

Hayden points at me.

“So you’re a tattletale traitor now?”

He shrugs. “Shouldn’t have been a naughty little rule breaker.”

Tessa walks over with a paintbrush in her hand. “Those who disregard the golden rule get a mustache.”

“What?” I snicker, then she draws on my face with the paint on the end of her brush. The room bursts into laughter, and when she shows me in the mirror, I do too.

“I look ridiculous!” I howl.

“Anyone else?” Tessa asks, searching around the room, grinning ear to ear. Several other people tell her their mistakes so they can get a mustache, too. It’s one of the silliest things I’ve seen in a long time, but it puts me in high spirits.

Tessa tells us to use the blow-dryers on our canvas so we’re not driving around with wet artwork. “Remember, not too close with the heat! We have thirty minutes before the next class comes in, so make it snappy.”

Once our canvases are dry to the touch, we thank Tessa for all the fun, then go to the parking lot. From the corner of my eye, I watch Hayden set his painting in his trunk as I talk to Remi. We hug each other goodbye, and as I walk toward my truck, Hayden comes over.

“I didn’t know you’d be here.”

I set my painting in the back seat and then shut the door. “Don’t worry about it. Hope you had fun.”

As I reach to open the door, Hayden grabs my hand. I pull it away. “Haley was supposed to be here, but we changed shifts, and she couldn’t get a refund, so she told me to take her spot and not waste it. She never mentioned you’d be here, too.”

“Look.” I swallow. “I don’t need an explanation from you.” I’m half tempted to tell him about the rumors swarming Valentine, but I don’t.

Because I know the truth of why he's here, so, to protect his dad, I'll bite my tongue instead of proving to everyone I'm right. I don't need to be right; time will prove I am. Hayden will go back to Houston to his gorgeous fiancée and not return until another tragedy happens. Maybe he'll bring his family to town and show off his beautiful kids.

He takes a step forward and searches my face. We're in a dark area of the parking lot, and I'm thankful that most left directly after the workshop. Another class starts at nine, so the lot is still full of vehicles. I glance at his kissable lips, wondering what I'd feel if I pressed mine against his. Would the sparks reignite? A part of me wants to find out, to know if what we had is still there. The attraction is.

Then I remember he's engaged, and I'm not a home-wrecker.

I'm swiftly brought back to reality, the one where Hayden doesn't live here and practically has a wife at home.

There's a zero percent chance for us.

One day, I'll find the right man to sweep me off my feet and treat me like a princess. If Summer and Hayden can find love, so can I.

"Good night, Hayden." I reach for the handle again and tug the door open.

He nods and gives me a half smile. "Night. I'm sure I'll see ya 'round."



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I wake refreshed. I write several pages in my journal, and for some reason, Hayden's name is sprinkled throughout the paragraphs. After I do a twenty-minute meditation and stretch, I grab my keys and drive to the B&B to hang out with Summer.

As soon as I walk in, I spot her pushing brown hair out of her face with the back of her hand, but she's smiling. This was always her dream, owning a bed-and-breakfast that served Valentine and had a hometown family feel.

"It's gorgeous in here," I say, looking around. The place looks lived in now that people have been booking their stays.

"I know. I love these wooden floors. I think I'm gonna tell Beckett I want them put in our build for the house."

"You totally should. Have you decided where you're puttin' the foundation yet?"

She shakes her head. “There are so many amazing places! It’s hard. At the rate we’re moving with this, we won’t have our dream home until our kids are old enough to graduate. Beckett is so indecisive with it. You’d think he was planning the construction of a skyscraper.”

I snicker. “That’s my big brother.”

Summer walks to the kitchen area, and I follow her. She turns to me. “I heard a rumor.”

“Oh God, not you, too.”

“How do you know what I’m gonna say?” She puts her hand on her hip.

“I painted with Remi last night at that new place, and she told me a rumor was going around town about me.”

“Well, spill the tea, tea, tea, honeeey.”

“You first.”

“Hayden’s back in town because—”

“He allegedly wants to get back with me,” I finish. “Who started that rumor?”

She shrugs. “I’m not sure. Beckett told me he heard it.”

“And this is how it begins.” I groan, and my stomach growls. I snag a butter biscuit off the hot tray and take a bite. I have to chew with my mouth open so I don’t burn myself.

“Patience.” She shakes her head and hands me a napkin so I don’t have to keep bouncing it around my hands like a hot potato. “Whatcha gonna do about it?”

“Deny it if someone asks me. That’s all I can do. You know the real reason he’s here.”

She meets my eyes. “I do, and I’ve not mentioned it to anyone, as I promised. But I think there could be more than one reason. Maybe that’s the second part. Who could he have told that to for it to get around?”

“The only person I could think of is his sister. They used to be close. I’m sure if it was in his plan, he’d tell her. Ya know, I didn’t ask Remi who she heard it from. I wonder if it was Haley.”

Summer nods. “Yes, you’re right. You should text her to see if she remembers who told her.”

So I do. I pull my phone from my pocket and shoot off a quick message.

She instantly responds—*Harrison*.

I turn my phone around and show Summer.

She bursts into laughter. “Do you think he started the rumor?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me a tiny bit. I’m gonna kill him! He’s dead meat.” I lock my phone and shove it into my pocket, then count to ten. “I am calm. I am in control of my emotions. I won’t murder my brother.”

When I open my eyes, Summer’s watching me. “Harrison’s a jerk.”

“He is! But I’ve seriously saved his ass more times than he can count. Right now, I have four favors banked with him. Four!”

“Hold on, let me text Beckett.”

Her phone dings. She flips it around. *Harrison.*

“*Asshole!*” I yell, then apologize because I know guests are around.

“Don’t worry about it. I’d probably react the same way. Well, that problem is solved. What else is on your list to tackle today?”

I explain how pissed Mr. Anderson was and then tell her how Hayden agreed to do my interview if he could interview me in return.

“So do it. What’s the worst he could hear from you? The truth? Maybe he needs a dose of reality to understand the hell you went through when he moved on directly after your relationship.”

I think about it for a minute. “You know what? You’re right. But I need to develop a list of alternative questions to ask with the ones I need for work. Mix it in, play hardball.”

“Absolutely. You know he’s at the bookstore all day today.”

“Yeah? How do you know?”

“He and Haley switched shifts or something, and she’s going to the football game tonight with Emmett.”

“I swear you know more about my family now than I do! I’m seriously losing my magic touch of being in the know of it all.”

Summer squeezes my shoulder. “You’ve not missed much. And you’ve been going through some shit. So whatcha gonna do?”

I exhale. “I’m going home to clean my energy, then heading to the bookstore for my damn interview.”

“That’s the spirit.” Summer gives me a high five. “But first, let’s have breakfast.”

HAYDEN

I've thought about Kinsley and that cute little mustache drawn on her face all day at work. Then I think about the moment we shared at her truck. I wish I could read her mind to know what she was thinking as her eyes slid down my lips. I've had her on my mind lately, and I know she doesn't want anything to do with me. However, her words were not lost on me yesterday.

I know rumors are spreading around town right now. I don't care what anyone has to say about me, and living in a big city and being away from all this reminded me of that.

In Houston, I'm no one. Here, people talk. No matter what's said, if it's not the truth, it doesn't matter. The truth always prevails.

Now that my dad has been in the hospital for a week, people have begun to ask where my parents are. They've started to suspect something, and I've been telling a half truth—they're out of town. I keep the conversation short, and when people press me for more information, I ignore it and say they're having the time of their lives together. It's really that simple.

While it's a Saturday, it's slow as hell in the shop because of homecoming. Earlier today was a parade, and tonight, the Valentine Eagles are playing their rivals—the Van Horn Buccaneers. After homecoming, the high school will have a dance, and all the girls will be wearing their mums, which are corsages as large as the front of their shirts. With all the beads and bells attached, anyone wearing one can be heard from a mile away. Because of the game, I'll be the only employee here until close. Haley is meeting her old friends from high school at the stadium. That's why she was so happy to switch shifts.

After I help a teenager find a young adult fantasy he was searching for, I open my manuscript from the cloud. I read through the words I wrote on the plane ride back to El Paso yesterday, and they're damn near perfect. Then, I start writing. An hour passes, and since no one walks in to purchase anything, I write the entire time. The words pour out of me like a flood, like the dam holding my creativity back has finally failed. My life might not be perfect, but it all disappears when I'm writing.

A gentleman who's about ten years older than me enters. I try to recall his name, and then it comes to me—Scott. It's funny how the same people who shopped here when I was a teenager still come in. Return customers are great to see.

As he's browsing the shelves, I go back to typing my heart out. He gently sets down a few paperbacks when he comes to the counter. "What are you doin', writin' a book or somethin'?" His tone is light and friendly.

"Actually, yeah."

"Really?" He seems shocked as I switch screens, then grab the scan gun to ring up his items.

"I used to write a lot before I moved to Houston. Bein' back home has inspired me to start again. I've realized that I'm not gettin' any younger." As he snags a cookie, I place a few bookmarks with the store's logo inside each book.

I nod and give him his total, and he pays.

"You gonna try to get it published?"

I shrug. "Right now, it's more therapeutic than anything. Once I finish it, I'll see. I'm not sure how it ends yet, though. It could be an epic love story or a tragedy."

"Well, there's enough space in the world for either. You never know what could happen if you don't try. Also, I want a first edition signed copy. That way, I can tell my friends online that I was in the store when ya were writin' it."

That makes me laugh as I put his books into a bag and hand them over. "That's a deal, Scott."

"Oh, you remembered my name." He snags another cookie. "I'm sure I'll be back once I finish these."

"Sounds good."

He leaves, and I return to my Word document. A few more hours pass, and five hours before close, a woman enters and beelines to the counter.

“Can you please recommend a book to get me out of a reading slump? I have to attend this football game because my nephew is playing, but I couldn’t care less. I need to get lost in a story. Otherwise, I’ll lose my mind.”

I come out from behind the counter. “What type of books do you like?”

“I’ll read anything interesting.”

“Favorite genre?”

“Romance. Suspense. I also enjoy nonfiction. Ooh, the books like puzzles where you have to try to figure something out.”

“I have the perfect thing.” I lead her to a display in the middle area.

As she reads the synopsis on the inside sleeve, the door swings open. I glance over my shoulder, ready to say hello, when I see Kinsley.

The woman turns and looks, too, then meets my eyes before returning to the book.

“’Scuse me, ma’am.” I give the lady a smile, then walk over to Kinsley, who’s zeroed in on me. Her hair is in a ponytail, and she’s wearing tight jeans and a baggy shirt that hangs off her shoulder, showing her bra strap.

I quickly glance at the clock hung on the wall, and it’s just past three.

“You here for your interview?” I’m being cheeky.

“Actually, I am,” she snaps, clearly in a mood.

It’s not the response I expected, considering she’s been so damn adamant about not speaking to me. I look over my shoulder at the customer who’s still browsing.

“Come back at eight when we close,” I tell Kinsley.

“That’s hours from now.”

I take a step closer. “I don’t wanna get interrupted. Oh, and don’t think I’m gonna take it easy on ya. I’m not.”

She grits her teeth. “Same. I’ll be back.”

Then just like that, she walks out of the store.

The woman glances over at me. “Your girlfriend?”

I chuckle. “Ex.”

“Ahh.” She reads the first few pages of the book. “Okay, I’m sold. I’ll take it.”

“Great.” I scan her purchase, hand her the book, and she’s out the door, leaving me to my Word document and thoughts once more. Instead of happily typing away, I open a notepad on my phone and start pounding out the questions I want to ask Kinsley, along with a few rules I know she probably won’t follow. She’s always marched to the beat of her own drum,

and from what I can tell, that hasn't changed.

The hours fly by, and five minutes until close, Kinsley enters. "On time. How professional."

"Funny." She doesn't smile, which makes me second-guess wanting to do this.

"I need to finish closing first, so feel free to make yourself at home."

She walks to the oversized chair in front of the gas fireplace and sits. I close the register as she shuffles through notebooks and scrolls through her phone. Once I wipe down the counters, I sweep up the chunks of dirt someone tracked in on their shoes. Afterward, I take the trash out back, then I lock the front door.

She sits with her legs crossed and looks at me with her sea-blue eyes. I sit in the chair opposite her, keeping my gaze locked. Kinsley opens an application on her phone and clicks a button. She says the date, the time, and the location. "I'm here at Main Street Books with Hayden Shaw. Can you spell that for me?"

I glare at her. "This is being recorded?"

"Yeah. I need it for the article."

I force a smile. "Fine. Hayden. H-A-Y-D-E-N. Shaw. S-H-A-W."

"Can you tell me what your position is here?"

"Bookseller. Future owner."

She swallows. "Have you spoken with my brother Harrison?"

I nod. "A few times."

Her eyes go wide. "What did you talk about?"

"That's none of your business. Please continue."

Kinsley stares at me like she's unsure what to say, so I speak. "You've officially asked me three questions if you don't count the name one. My turn."

"Okay," she mutters.

"Are you still datin' that guy?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"That's personal, and I don't wanna discuss it with you. So next question."

"How many people have you been with since we broke up?"

She narrows her eyes at me. "Are you only gonna ask me things about my datin' life?"

“Is that off-limits?” My eyes land on where her pulse throbs in her neck. “Because whatever is off-limits for me is off-limits for *you*.”

She pauses. “No, nothing is off the table.”

I smirk. “Great.”

She holds up her finger. “Only if you can get me a drink. I can’t have this conversation with you completely sober.”

“Today might be your lucky day. Be right back.” I walk through the storeroom and step into the office. On the top shelf are a few bottles of whiskey from when my parents threw an after-work party to celebrate some sort of sales goal. I grab the bottle of honey whiskey and the carton of orange juice from the fridge, then return to the sitting area.

Kinsley’s shoes are on the floor, and her legs are tucked under her body. She looks comfortable, but she’s not relaxed.

“This should help.” I hand the bottle to her.

“Do you have a cup?”

“All out. Bottles up.”

She unscrews the top and takes a big swig, then chases it with some orange juice. Some spills on her chin, so I grab her a napkin.

“Whose turn for questions?” I sit, leaning forward, watching her.

Kinsley laughs. “How ’bout we start over? You first.”

“Why did you and that guy end things?”

After a deep exhale, she closes her eyes. “We weren’t officially together. He’s moving back to New York.”

“And long distance is a hard no,” I mutter, knowing that from firsthand experience. It was one of the reasons we didn’t work out. Love wasn’t enough. The distance was too much, and we were in the same state. New York is across the map.

“Actually, we’d discussed it from the beginning. We were never exclusively together, just having fun.” She grabs the bottle of whiskey and takes another swig. “When are you marrying your princess bride?”

Now I’m the one chugging the booze. “I’m not.”

Her mouth falls open as she studies me. “What? Why not?”

I chuckle. “You asked more than one question.”

“Are you kiddin’ me? You dropped a bomb like that with no information to follow it.”

A smirk plays on my lips. “I’ve missed you.”

She ignores my words and glances away before meeting my gaze again.

“Your turn.”

“Ah, right. Do you regret how things ended between us?”

Silence draws on for a minute as if she’s contemplating my words. “Sometimes. You were my best friend, Hayden. We did a lot together. It’s why it hurt so badly when you moved away. I thought I was enough for you. That you didn’t need Houston and that accounting job to make you happy. Then you started dating someone else and got engaged very quickly. It made me feel like our relationship meant nothing to you. There was never a ring on my finger. I felt used and played like I didn’t even know the person I’d dreamed of spending my life with. Other times, I’ve hated you and wished I could erase every memory we made together. It’d be easier living without remembering you.”

My heart thumps hard in my chest, and no amount of whiskey can cover how her words affect me. “I deserve to hear that. I’m sorry for hurting you.”

“Sorry?” She laughs. “The past ten years of my life have been hell because no one will ever be you. Well, the *you* I thought you were. I’m not sure that person ever existed.” She looks me up and down. “You’re like a stranger to me now.”

“You’re absolutely right. Now to answer your question about why Penelope and I aren’t together anymore...” I hesitate, then open my mouth and close it. “I realized she’s a manipulator and has been cheating on me.”

Kinsley’s eyes are as wide as saucers. “Whoa.”

“I dunno why I proposed to her. She pretended to be someone she wasn’t, and I wanted desperately to get over you and what we had. She took my mind off my heartbreak for a little while, but then the mask fell, and I was in too deep. Somethin’ hasn’t felt right between us for the past year and a half. When I was gettin’ ready to break it off, she told me she was pregnant.”

Kinsley rolls her eyes. “But she wasn’t.”

“No. So when I came home, I hired a private investigator. She was dating three other men. I flew to Houston on Thursday and ended things with her. My business partner was in my bed with her.”

Kinsley gasps. “This doesn’t sound real.”

“I know. It all inspired me to start writing again.”

“You stopped?” She searches my face.

“I couldn’t. I was broken after the breakup because it was our thing—writing our first novels together and readin’ the same books. Plus, I worked so much to make Penelope happy. The more money I made, the more things

she needed. I realize now I was nothin' but a paycheck for her. Nearly eight years of my life with a player."

"I wished some pretty bad karma on ya, but damn. That's intense."

All I can do is nod. "Have you been writin'?"

"Only for work. Creatively? No, not anymore. The words haven't flowed for me since, well, us. Anytime I'd try to write, I'd think of you and us. It was better to quit. I trashed my manuscript and that dream."

"Kins," I whisper. "You're too talented for that."

"Speak for yourself. You were always more creative than me. It's why no one understood why you were so dead set on movin' to Houston. To this day, I still don't know why. You got that degree to help the bookstore manage finances."

This time, I'm swigging the whiskey. "Truthfully? I was scared of becomin' my parents. I was scared that I'd found the perfect woman and we'd get married and have kids before twenty-five. Then I'd be stuck runnin' the bookstore and raisin' a family with no idea if there was more for me out in the real world, away from home where everything is comfortable. I was young and stupid, and now, I long for that life with someone who loves me, a stable job with no stress, and a family. I was too immature, and I see that now."

She laughs, but her eyes soften. "Took a decade. Also, I have a confession to make."

"Yeah?"

"I know your dad is sick."

My jaw nearly hits the floor.

"I haven't told anyone," she says quickly.

"How'd ya know?"

Kinsley tucks her lips into her mouth. "I followed you. *I'm sorry!* I had to know where you were goin' because it's weird as fuck that you're here right now. There's a rumor spreadin' 'round that you came back to win me back or somethin' stupid, but I know the truth. I called the hospital."

"Investigative journalism at its finest. Yeah, Dad had a stroke. He's doin' okay, more stable, but he's lost some mobility in his hand and foot. They've put him in physical therapy for the next six to eight weeks, but then he should be good as new and back at the shop."

She reaches over and places her hand on mine. "I'm so sorry."

"Thanks. Also, what if I did come back to Valentine to win you back?"

Would that be so bad?”

A roar of laughter escapes her. “Please, don’t flatter me,” she deadpans.

I shrug. “Alright then.”

“Is that what you told Harrison?” She lifts her brow. “Knowing he’d spread it around town?”

I grin.

“Oh my God, you did. You’re absolutely awful!”

“Maybe it’s the truth. Maybe it isn’t. I’m not confirming anything.”

Her mouth quirks as she tries to hold back a smile, but instead, she rolls her eyes.

“I don’t do long distance, Hayden. You know that. If I’m with someone, I’m with them. And I’m not leaving my family and my job. I actually love it here. It’s home. It makes me happy. And one day, I wanna raise my family here on the same ranch I grew up on. Teach them to ride. Share my love of books. Be around all of their aunts and uncles.”

“And what if I moved back to Valentine?”

She licks her lips. “Are you?”

“You can’t answer a question with a question; that’s not how this works. But I would for the right reasons.”

She turns her head, staring at the empty fireplace. “That *might* change things.”

The silence draws on, and Kinsley stares off into the distance. Then she meets my eyes. Her voice is a whisper. “Will you kiss me?”

I chuckle as a fire ignites inside me, and I’m unsure I heard her correctly. “What?”

Kinsley’s heated gaze meets mine. “Kiss me.”

KINSLEY

Standing, Hayden grabs my hand, then pulls me close to him. He runs his fingers through my hair and leans in. His lips are millimeters away, and his hot breath brushes against my cheeks. Instinctively, my eyes flutter closed as his mouth slides across mine. I don't expect to feel anything, but emotion floods me as our tongues twist together. My body instantly responds to his touch, and a moan escapes me. I feel as if I'm free-falling as the kiss deepens, and I lose my grip on reality.

Hayden Shaw. The love of my life. The man I hate. Kissing me like no time has passed.

Hayden groans, then pulls away, creating much-needed space.

I'm breathless as I meet his eyes, feeling something I can't explain. "Did you...?" I dunno what I'm tryin' to ask.

"I felt it, too," he whispers. "Fuck this."

Hayden steps forward, and his mouth crashes against mine.

Someone passes by the front windows, and he laughs, kissing me as he leads me to the back. I grab the whiskey in case I need more courage. I feel like a teenager again, fooling around in the bookstore.

The big brown couch we've made love on countless times is still in the storeroom, and I push him onto the springy cushions.

I climb onto his lap, my mouth crashing against his. The control I had has vanished.

"What are we doin'?" My lips are swollen, and my heart sprints in my chest.

He pulls away. "We can stop. We don't—"

"No." I tug on his bottom lip with my teeth. "I have to know."

It's as if he understands. Maybe he needs to know if something deeper lingers between us, too. His strong hands grip my hips, creating more friction as I rock against his cock. He's hard as hell and feels so damn good beneath me.

I pull my shirt over my head, and Hayden unclasps my bra as I slide my tongue inside his mouth. Then I tug off his polo and throw it onto the floor. I stand, giving him access. I need to know if...if the buried emotions remain.

He scoots forward and sits at the edge of the seat, then undoes the top button of my jeans and unzips them. Carefully, he hooks his fingers under the material and scoots them down, taking my panties with them. I'm bare in front of him.

Reaching around my hips, he pulls me forward to kiss my pussy.

"Let me see that ass." His brown eyes meet mine before he turns me around.

He runs a hand across one cheek, then the other, as if he's memorizing my curves. His firm hands cause goose bumps to trail over my traitorous body. My head says no. My heart says no. My body says fuck yes.

I need this, but maybe it's the whiskey talking? That's an excuse.

Bending over, I give him a better view. I'm so damn wet for him.

"Mm. Kins. Is this a jewel in your ass?"

I turn and look at him over my shoulder with a brow popping. "It's a butt plug, Hayden. Ever heard of it?"

He leans forward and bites my ass cheek, causing me to yelp.

"Fuck. You've always been so sexy." His voice nearly comes out as a growl. "Still are, sweetheart."

Hayden slides his jeans and boxers down, showing me his thick cock.

I'm brought back to our past when we were insatiable for each other. The attraction has always existed between us, and it's still alive and well today. He watches me as I study him, needing him, wondering if I'm living in one of my fucked-up fantasies again. His eyes seem to darken as that sexy smirk plays on his plump lips. Hayden Shaw is beautiful with his monster cock. I wish I could say I'm scared, but instead, I'm nearly dripping wet.

"I want you to break me, Hayden."

He swallows hard as I reach over and grab the bottle of whiskey I brought with me, then I chug. A simple touch and my body surges to life. We could never get enough of each other, which never changed over the years we were together.

Here I am, face-to-face with my drug, and I crave him so fucking bad it hurts.

Leaning over, he takes the booze from me and places his lips on the bottle. I grab his dick, my grip firm as I bend over and lick the warm precum from him. Then I take him into my mouth. His hands thread through my hair as groans escape him. The alcohol has taken over, but I don't care. It's not a stupid drunk decision; it's something I've secretly wished for since we ended things. I have to know if I still feel the flutter, the raw emotions, and if the orgasm is still as earth-shattering as it once was.

If I feel nothing, I'll finally have the necessary closure. Based on how we're acting, it's closure we *both* need.

"Fuck," he hisses. "Kins. You sure?"

"Abso-fuckin'-lutely."

Hayden stands, his cock pressed against my stomach as he grasps my cheeks in his palms and kisses me. Except it's hot and heated and messy. Dangerous. We're savages for each other, our tongues, teeth, and lips all fighting together. I groan out as his fingers slide between my pussy lips, and he massages my clit. I grab his shoulders, steadying myself to stand because the sensation of being here with him is overpowering. My emotions are overwhelmed by the intensity of it all.

It's not supposed to feel this fucking good, is it?

As he kisses me, I peek, wanting to truly see him. He looks so damn delicious, pouring his emotions into me as he slides two fingers inside my pussy. His thumb continues its clit play, and if he keeps this going, I'll be a puddle on the floor in mere seconds.

"Hay," I rasp. "I need you inside me. I need to feel you again."

"Music to my goddamn ears," he mutters, laying me on the couch. My back presses against the fabric, and Hayden positions himself between my legs, hovering above me. I'm transported back to the past, and he softly kisses me. His dick settles right outside my entrance. Then, with one swift movement, he slams all the way inside me. I see stars as I adjust, my pussy stretching around him.

I look him straight in the eyes. "Don't hold back. I wanna feel you tomorrow, so I'll know this wasn't a dream."

Hayden's mouth slams against mine as he pulls out and pounds inside my pussy again. I scream out in pleasure. My nails scratch his back, and my head falls back as a moan escapes me. The plug in my ass makes sex much more

intense, but it's almost too much of a good thing with him. He's the epitome of sexual sensation.

"Yes, Hayden." His name releases from my lips like a prayer when only weeks ago it was a curse. With a heavy gaze, he watches me as he continues his deep and steady rhythm, nearly splitting my body in two as he impales me.

I look up into his eyes and grin mischievously. "Have you missed me?"

"Fuck yes," he seethes.

My body begs for release as the world shifts, almost as if I'm being transported to another reality. As I long for more of him than he can give me, I feel like I've moved into an alternate reality. It's almost easy to pretend all the heartache isn't attached to this man when we're like this, kissing, fucking, and giving ourselves to each other like nothing happened.

I push the thoughts away as the heat builds in my tummy.

His lips trail along my ear, and I can hear his ragged breaths as he pumps deep inside me. We're connected at this moment, on the same wavelength; we're as one, and we're both so damn close our muscles shake in anticipation.

"Hayden," I say, teetering on the edge. My body is so tense I can barely speak. "I'm..."

"Yes, sweetheart. Say my fuckin' name as you come," he whispers in my ear, giving me long, hard strokes.

And that's when I fall completely apart, screaming, "Hayden, Hayden, Hayden," or at least that's what I'm trying to say. The orgasm rages through me as if it's ripping my body into shreds and deep, guttural grunts release from my mouth. I don't recognize the sound.

"So tight," he grunts, his stamina undeniable. Hayden moves my hair from my face, slowly kissing me, his tongue softly sliding against mine, and I feel the immediate shift in energy.

This is...different. He peppers kisses down my neck and back up to my mouth. I run my fingers through his thick dark hair, then tug before he places his forehead against mine.

"I'm so close," he says, searching my face. "Do you want me to...?"

"Inside me, Hay. I have an implant. I want all of you tonight, even if it's only this once," I tell him as his eyes slam shut.

When he finally permits himself to let go, his muscles tighten, then he fills me. The warmth spreads throughout my body, and we lie there,

connected, as our hearts thump in unison. Once we've regained some composure, Hayden and I clean ourselves up and get dressed. I pretend to walk away, and I turn and meet his heavy gaze.

"If you wanna go, I won't stop you." He looks so damn delicious with abs like they've been carved from stone.

"Not yet." I laugh and turn back to him. He holds me tightly in his arms and kisses my hair.

"Where do we go from here?" he asks. "Is it still...?"

"Supposed to feel that way?" I search his face, and he nods. We always used to complete each other's sentences. Seems that hasn't changed either.

"Yeah." He runs his fingers through his hair and nervously chuckles.

"I dunno. But..."

Hayden dips down and kisses me, and it feels so natural and right when it absolutely should not. "I'm not ready for this night to be over, not yet. You can go back to hatin' me tomorrow."

He lies on the couch with his arms open, and I fall into them, satisfied. My body shudders as my heart races, and I try to come down from my high. Being with Hayden isn't like anything I've ever experienced. My body only responds to him like this, something I've been searching for.

He encapsulates me, then grabs the small blanket and throws it over us. I'm comfortable with his warm body against mine. As his fingertips lightly brush against my arm, he places a chaste kiss on my lips, and we fall asleep holding each other.

If this is wrong, I don't want to be right. It's something future Kinsley can worry about because right now, I'm living in the moment.



"AHEM."

Once I wake up and open my eyes, it takes me a minute to realize where I am. Hayden's still holding me, and I can hear his soft breathing.

"Good mornin'!" a voice says behind me. I look over my shoulder and roll completely off the couch before hitting the floor with a thud.

"Shit!" I mutter, looking into Haley's eyes. Scooping the butt plug off the small coffee table, I shove it in my pocket. *Great.*

She smiles wide with her brows raised. "Well, well, well. What do we

have here?”

Hayden sits up. “Nothin’.”

“Nothin’? You two look pretty cozy.” She picks up the bottle of whiskey. “And this helps.”

I place my hand on my head. “What time is it?”

“Eightish.” Haley smirks. “Y’all have a long night?”

“Mind your own,” Hayden tells her, buttoning his jeans. Then he reaches out and helps me up. We quickly look into each other’s eyes, then glance at Haley.

“It’s not what it looks like,” I say even though that’s exactly what it is.

“So that rumor I heard was true? Are you two finally back together? I mean, I’ve been waiting for the day because I love Kins.” She’s playing hardball, and I love it. He deserves to have his balls busted.

“It’s too early for this. I need coffee.” He runs his fingers through his brown hair. That’s a sexy mess on top of his head. “Wanna join me for breakfast?”

“Oh, I’m busy. I have to work,” his sister says.

“I was talkin’ to Kinsley.” He turns to me. “It’s on me.”

I give him a smile, my body heating thinking about last night. “I shouldn’t. I have some things to take care of this mornin’. Plus, I don’t want everyone talkin’.”

Hayden places his hand on my shoulder and tilts his head. “They’re already talkin’, though. Who cares what anyone says?”

“You’re right. But I can’t. I have chores and work to do.” I think about my clothes sitting in the washing machine and how Mr. Anderson wants more than two shitty sentences on his desk by Monday morning.

Haley grabs the cash register drawer and carries it up front, leaving us alone.

“Can I see you again?” he asks.

“I’m sure you’ll see me around, considering you still owe me a real interview.”

He nods, not pushing me for a direct answer, which I appreciate. Right now, I need to process what happened and what this means. I grab his hand and pull him close, then kiss him on his cheek. “Thanks for a good night.”

“Let me walk you out,” he says. We make our way through the store.

“Have fun, lovebirds!” Haley yells at our backs when we pass her. I laugh, and so does Hayden as he opens the door for me. My truck is still

parked on the side of the building, next to his car. I have a feeling the rumors have only just begun.

Hayden gives me a chaste kiss on the lips. "Have a great day."

"You too," I tell him when I pull away and climb into my truck. I'm a blubbering mess of excitement and confusion when I head home. Last night was mind-blowing.

As I get ready to pass the Horseshoe Creek Ranch, I veer off the main road and pull into the driveway. There's no way I can go home. I need to talk to someone, and I know Summer is at work. Looking in my rearview, I realize I'm driving so fast that I'm kicking up gravel and dust, so I slow down.

After I park, I take the sidewalk up to the big farmhouse that they converted. Beautiful plants and flowers line the sidewalk, which is almost shocking to see.

Summer has a brown thumb and kills anything with a root, so she hired my little sister Vera to help. Vera is the only reason these plants are alive right now.

As I rush up the steps, Summer bursts out the front door carrying a watering pail. It's green with white hand-painted flowers on the outside.

"Oh, Jesus." She grabs her chest, looking me up and down. "You scared the shit outta me. What're ya doin' here?" She pauses. "Are those the same clothes I saw you wearin' yesterday?"

"I need to talk to you, like right now!" I step back to move out of her way as she carefully waters the plants hanging from hooks on the porch.

"You good?" She looks at me over her shoulder.

"Yes and no. Gosh, I sound like a hot mess. Maybe I am a hot mess?"

"Yeah, you're talkin' too much, and I know what that means. Go ahead. I'm listenin'!"

So I start from the beginning and explain what happened. Him being at the painting class with Remi and me on Friday and how pissed I was on Saturday after processing how my boss had treated me about that damn interview.

"He proposed that he would let me ask him any questions, but for each one I asked, he got one, too. His questions were personal, though. He wanted to know about me and Luca."

"Why?"

"Right? That was my thought, too. Then he told me he broke up with

Penelope.”

Summer’s eyes are as wide as a full moon. “Whoa! They broke up?”

“Girl, yes! She was a cheater. He hired a private investigator. It’s a wild story that should be a book. She sounds like a psycho. He didn’t tell me everything, but I could tell that she hurt him pretty badly. Seemed like a manipulative narcissist who was super selfish. She was cheating on him with three other men! *Three!* That he *knows* of!”

“Jeez. Looks like karma got him good.”

“You know, I thought the same thing, but I’d never wish that kind of hate on him. I just wanted him to be as miserable as me, but I kinda feel like he got it worse. I’ve at least had fun, even if I’ve been lonely. I could tell it hurt him to talk about the situation. Also, he stopped writin’ at the same time I did. I couldn’t believe it. I was completely shocked.”

She moves down the line and waters the plants hanging on the other side. “Seems like it was a productive conversation.”

“Then we had sex.”

“What?” Her voice goes up an entire octave. “Kins!”

“I know. I know. I started it, though. I had to know if the spark was still there, so I asked him to kiss me.”

She drops the water pail and comes over, then hugs me tight. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Don’t be happy! It means nothin’.”

Summer takes a step back and studies my face, trying to read me. “Liar.”

“Gosh, you’re right. It *can’t* mean anything. That’s what I’m tellin’ myself. I can’t put myself back in this situation with him. It was amazin’, though. Bein’ with him felt good. But it was emotional. Somethin’ I didn’t expect. It’s never felt like that with anyone, just Hayden. And I had to know if what we once had was still there.” I pause, then whine. “It is.”

Summer finishes watering the flowers. “Do you know how long he’ll be in town?”

“No. I forgot to ask that, along with a lot of other things. I didn’t get to my interview questions, either. And that was the whole point of me visitin’ the damn bookstore.”

She lifts a brow. “You sure that was the real reason?”

“It was. But he started off with personal questions, so I took my opportunity. Whiskey helped.”

“It usually does.” She snickers. “What are you thinkin’ about?”

“My mind is all over the place. Oh, and Haley caught us on the couch this mornin’.”

Summer snorts. “It won’t be long before everyone knows, then. She’ll tell one of her friends, no doubt.”

“Not to mention, my truck was outside in the parkin’ lot all night.”

She glances my way. “You’re so screwed.”

“The rumors!” I cover my hands with my face and almost cry. “And tonight is our family dinner.”

“Hopefully, they won’t spread that fast. You know my lips are sealed.” Summer pretends to zip her mouth closed.

“You’ll be there, right?”

She nods. “Early. Because I am not washing those dishes.”

I snicker and yawn. “You can say that again.”

“This is gonna get interestin’,” Summer says.

“Ugh. I know. But anyway, I’m goin’ home to take a nap, I think. Get my mind right before facin’ the fam.”

“Sounds like a plan. If you’re bored later, ya know where I’ll be.” She holds her hand out toward the B&B.

We say our goodbyes, and I get into my truck, relieved that I chatted with Summer. Then I find myself smiling.

When I get home, I move the clothes from the washer to the dryer, then sort through my mail from yesterday. Most of it’s junk mail, and on the bottom is a fancy envelope. I slide my finger under the flap and rip the orange paper. Out comes a bright-green invitation with a witch.

HEY WITCHES! YOU’RE CORDIALLY INVITED TO A SPOOKY BARN PARTY. COSTUMES ARE REQUIRED. BYOB. 21+ ONLY. INVITE YOUR FRIENDS. RSVP BY TEXT.

AT THE BOTTOM is Beckett’s number and the address to the training facility. I send him a witch emoji.

BECKETT: I already had ya down as a yes. You’re gonna love what I have

planned. Don't be late tonight!

Kinsley: Oh, I won't be. Ya think I'm a big dummy?

Beckett: It's a friendly reminder!

Kinsley: Ya know I'm not missing this. No way am I adding myself to Mom's shit list.

Beckett: See ya there.

MOM TAKES our once-per-month family dinners very seriously. It's the only time we get together other than during the holidays. She prepares our favorites. Some rules come along with it, though—well, just one: show up on time. The kid who arrives last has to wash the dishes, and it's a lot of work. It's actually created contention between my siblings.

Remi once tripped Sterling in order to make it inside first, and Emmett turned on the childproof locks and left Harrison inside his truck without a way to get out. My younger siblings play dirty, and I'm too old for that.

Tonight will be no different. That's why I'm always early.

HAYDEN

I watch Kinsley drive away, then realize I don't have my phone. I go back into the bookstore, where I find my sister grinning like the Cheshire cat.

"I should've taken Remi's bet when I had the chance," she says, looking me over from top to bottom.

"Pfft. Not sure what you're talkin' about."

"She wanted to bet me a hundred dollars that you and Kinsley wouldn't get back together, and I told her she was wrong. I know you and her way too well, and you've both never been the same since the breakup. Another reason I was more than happy to give you my paintin' ticket. Kins bein' there was a bonus."

"Ahh, yeah, forgot to thank you for that one. Kinsley nearly died when I walked in and sat next to her. But we're not back together, so you would've lost money. Don't make bets you can't guarantee you'll win."

"Hmm. You sure looked like you were together, wrapped in each other's arms all night after God knows what. Also, don't you have a fiancée waitin' for ya at home?"

"Nah, I broke up with her."

"Thank God!" Haley points upward. "Prayers answered."

"She wasn't that bad," I say, then correct myself. "Actually, no, you're right. I'm so used to making excuses for her horrible behavior and rudeness. She was a nightmare to be with."

"Well, I'm glad you woke up."

"Yeah, me too. You want me to bring ya anything back to eat? I'm starving and a little hungover."

“I’m good. Glad you had fun.”

I roll my eyes, then go to the back and look for my phone, which is shoved between the couch cushions. Must’ve fallen out of my pocket last night.

After I eat breakfast at the deli, I go to the hospital and hang out with my parents. Dad is in good spirits, sitting up and smiling. It makes me happy to see. The doctor said he still needs to rest, but he’s been working hard during his physical therapy. I fill them in on the bookstore and how everyone is asking how they’re doing.

“Did you talk with Kinsley about the story the paper wants to do?” Mom asks.

“A little,” I tell her.

“Well, a little birdie told me you two stayed overnight at the bookstore.”

“We did a lot of talkin’, but not about that...yet.”

Her brows lift. “Are you two getting back together?”

“That’s the million-dollar question everyone wants to know. Now that I’m single...”

“What?” Dad asks. “You broke up with Penelope?”

“Yeah. No one liked her anyway,” I say because it’s true. Penelope wasn’t the friendly type.

“What about her text?” Mom asks. I know she’s talking about the pregnancy.

“She wasn’t pregnant. She was cheating with three other men. It’s why I flew to Houston. I needed to end it,” I admit. “I wasn’t happy. I haven’t been for years, and being home reminded me there’s more to life than working and having a trophy wife.”

“Then yes, you did need to end it,” Dad confirms. “Life is too short to be with someone who makes you miserable. It’s why I married your mama as soon as I could. I knew she was the one.”

Mom gives him a smile. “Thanks, sweetie.”

“Funny. I’ve been home for a week, and my life feels like it’s taken a one-eighty.”

“Sometimes that’s how it happens,” Mom says.

When lunch is delivered, I take it as my cue to go. During the forty-five-minute drive home, I think about Kinsley. I think about her soft pants, the way it felt to be inside her again, and how her nails scratched down my back. When she came, I felt like I’d died and gone straight to fantasyland. I don’t

know how it happened, but I knew the moment I kissed her that I wouldn't be able to walk away. Not after I kissed her, tasted the whiskey and orange juice on her lips, and felt that old flame inside me ignite. Nothing had changed, but I didn't expect to feel so much being with her. It was as if we picked right back up where we left off, and when I closed my eyes, I almost imagined she was mine again.

Before last night, I'd said there was no way we'd have another chance of being together. Now, I have an inkling of hope.

As soon as I get home, I shower and get dressed, then start writing. Hours pass, and when the alarm I set on my phone goes off, I write another paragraph, then force myself away.

I check the time and grab my keys. Then I change into a dress shirt and leave because I can't be late.

KINSLEY

When I walk into my parents' house, my grandma gives me a hug. "Sweetie, so glad to see you. Is it me, or are you glowing?"

I laugh. "Am I? Must've been the meditation session I had earlier. Helped clear my mind."

"Kins!" My youngest sister, Vera, interrupts, walking over to me. She's sixteen, still in high school, and started driving over the summer. There's a thirteen-year age difference between us, and when I was in my earlier twenties, people would ask if she was my daughter.

I smile wide. "Hey! How's work at the nursery? Still selling all the plants?"

She has a green thumb and could grow plants in hell.

"Yes! It's been great now that it's not so hot on the weekends. Anyway, I heard a rumor about you."

"God, not you too."

"I heard something, too," my grandma adds.

Dad yells from the kitchen, and so does Mom.

Sterling, my eighteen-year-old brother and the most recent graduate in the Valentine family, walks in, typing on his phone. He lifts his free hand as he finds a seat. "Hey, Kins."

I give him a smile as he sits, then I turn back to the small crowd that's glaring at me. "Oh my gosh! So what is it now? Go ahead. I can handle it."

Mom walks in carrying a big pot, and Dad has a ladle in one hand and a round cork mat in the other. He sets it on the table, and Mom places the pot on top. They both turn and face me. Right now, I'm the center of attention, something I usually love, but not when I'm under their microscope like this.

“Heard you and Hayden were back together,” Vera says.

“I heard Hayden was moving back to Valentine to be with you,” Grandma adds.

“I heard you stayed the night together at the bookstore,” Mom says, which shocks me.

Dad laughs. “What they said.”

“Why do you keep staring?” I look among them.

“We’re waiting for a confirmation!” Vera lifts her arms impatiently.

I turn to her. “We’re not back together. He’s not moving to Valentine to be with me. However, I did stay at the bookstore last night.”

Mom shakes her head as she returns to the kitchen. “Yep, they’re back together.”

“No, we’re not! I swear!”

Grandpa comes from the living room. “Might as well start admittin’ it ’cause the guilt is written all over your face.”

“You’re all impossible.”

Moments later, Harrison and Emmett enter.

Harrison whistles. “Y’all, look what the cat dragged in!”

When I see Hayden enter behind them, my mouth falls open. Everyone in the room seems to disappear when our gazes lock, and all the chatter vanishes, then quickly reappears.

“You invited him to dinner?” Vera says to me, then shakes her head. “I can’t believe you almost had me.”

“I didn’t invite him!” I try to explain as Harrison laughs *at* me. “This is already a mess.”

Hayden walks over to my mom and dad and wraps his arms around them. “I missed y’all. How have you been? Oh my goodness, VV! You’re all grown up!” He hugs Vera, calling her by the nickname I always thought was so adorable.

“You knew he was comin’?” I turn to Mom, and she shrugs but shoots me a wink.

I clench my jaw, realizing I’ve been set up, and no matter what I say, no one will believe me. And it doesn’t make it any easier when heat rushes through me every time I think about him.

Summer’s and Beckett’s faces transform into confusion when they see Hayden.

“What a surprise!” Summer says, hugging Hayden. Beckett shakes his

hand.

Summer walks over to me and grabs my arm. “Did you invite him?”

“No, I didn’t. I have no idea how he knew,” I whisper.

“I did,” Harrison admits, wearing a cheeky grin.

“You’re an asshole!” I snap. “And I know you started that rumor.”

“I didn’t start shit. Also, it’s only a rumor if it’s not true,” he rebuts.

“It’s not!” I confirm.

He laughs, then opens the lid to the pot and steam releases. “You’re such a bad liar. Mm. Chicken and dumplings.”

“Hayden’s favorite,” Mom says.

“You remembered, Mrs. V.” He grins wide.

I shake my head as Emmett sets the table with bowls and spoons.

“How could I forget my other son’s favorite meal? You only asked for it every time you saw me,” she says, and I groan, then find my seat at the table.

Summer sits on the other side of me and saves a seat for Beckett at the end. But he’s too busy chatting with my ex about life and his new training facility. Harrison takes the chair in front of me and watches. He wears a cheeky grin splashed across his face, and his arms are crossed.

When my sister London enters, she gasps, “Am I the last one here?”

We look around, trying to do a head count as she plops down in an empty seat. “No, you’re not. Still missing several people,” I say.

“Thank God. I got tied up,” she says, brushing brown hair out of her face, looking flustered. She’s lucky. Otherwise, she’d be washing all the dirty dishes alone.

Harrison clicks his tongue, grabbing my attention. I glance over at him, and he leans forward, blocking his mouth where no one can see what he’s saying. “No one will believe you’re not still in love with him.”

I flip him off, and Remi laughs. Vera sits next to Harrison, and he wraps his arm around her. “Hey, little sis. How’s it hangin’?”

She makes a face. “You smell. Like horse shit.”

“Did you curse?” He gasps. “I’m tellin’.”

“You wouldn’t,” she says. They continue their argument as I watch Hayden. He fits in so well with everyone, maybe better than I do. Remi and Fenix arrive together, and how they’re dressed makes them look more like twins than Remi and Colt. However, it’s very obvious we’re all related. We have that Valentine look with dark sandy-colored hair and light eyes.

They’re as shocked to see Hayden as I was. They both turn and give me a

what the fuck look. All I can do is shrug. Remi sits on the other side of Harrison. “Why is he here?”

“Because I invited him,” Harrison says proudly, and I kick my foot forward and hit his shin.

“Owwweee!” he yelps, bending down. “That fuckin’ hurt!”

“Language!” Dad says. A reminder we always get when we’re together.

“Seriously, that’s gonna leave a bruise,” he whines.

“Payback is a bitch,” I mutter.

“You shouldn’t mess with Kins,” Fenix warns Harrison. “She basically owns you right now.”

“Is everyone here?” Beckett asks as he walks toward his chair.

There are two open seats, one beside my grandmother and one beside me. Hayden takes the one right next to me.

Harrison smirks and waggles his brows.

I shake my head at him. “Piss me off, and I’ll make every favor you currently owe me a livin’ hell.”

He shrugs. “Your threats don’t scare me, sis. I’m invincible.”

“I’m actually glad I’m not your favorite sister,” Remi states. “Especially if that’s how you treat your fave.”

“Colt is goin’ to be late,” Mom interrupts as she sits. “He texted me and let me know. He got stuck on a job, but he’ll be here. And he said he’d do the dishes.”

Poor Colt. I kinda feel bad for him.

“Great!” Harrison obnoxiously claps. “Enough talky talky. I’m starvin’.”

I kick him under the table again.

“Stop!” he growls.

“Sorry. Was a reflex,” I explain with a sly grin.

“Bullshit,” he mutters.

Hayden’s firm hand rests on my bare thigh, and I tense. His warm touch distracts me from everything that’s going on. All I can do is focus on the way he feels. My grandma says grace, and my mind is tangled as everyone scoops chicken and dumplings into their bowls.

“Make sure to save room for dessert! I made chocolate pumpkin pie!”

“Mrs. V., You spoil me,” Hayden tells her. It’s also his favorite. Goose bumps cover my body when he rubs his thumb gently across my skin.

“Hayden, do you expect to move back to Valentine?” My dad is genuinely curious.

He glances at me and then meets my dad's eyes. "Not sure yet. I've only been back for a week. But I can tell you I missed a lot here. Has me rethinkin' some things, actually."

"Like what?" Vera asks.

He lifts his hand from my thigh and grabs his napkin. How he treats her like she's his little sister is cute. "My job. My love life. My future. A lot. I think being away from Valentine for a decade did me some good. Makes me not take the small-town life for granted."

"I wanna move away one day," Vera explains. "But of course, I'll come back," she says directly to my parents.

"No one truly stays away," Memaw confirms. "They always return. There's something special about this place."

"She's right," Hayden agrees. "It's good to get away sometimes. But there's no place like home."

"I can agree with that," Fenix says. She went away to college and then returned to do online classes. She hasn't talked about what happened while she was away and has explained it as her being homesick. I don't fully believe her, though. When she returned, a sparkle was missing in her eyes, but when I asked, she kept to her story.

"Are you still engaged?" Summer leans forward and meets his eyes. The room quiets, everyone waiting on edge. She already knows the answer, but I love that she's pressing him because it's the elephant in the room.

"Nope, I'm not. Called it off this week. I'm single."

"This week?" Mom looks between me and Hayden.

"I am not a home-wrecker!" I finally say. "I had nothing to do with that decision. I swear."

Hayden laughs. "She didn't. It's a long story, but she was cheating."

Everyone gives him sympathy.

"Don't feel sorry for him," I finally say. "Karma can be cruel sometimes."

"That's true," he says. "However, I have racked up some good karma points over the years, so I'm hoping I'll be able to cash them in soon." He shoots me a wink, and I hate how my heart flutters.

"So you two are dating? I'm confused," Emmett states. He's been quiet, listening to the conversation while we eat.

"No," I explain.

"Not yet," Hayden corrects.

I glare at him. “What’re ya talkin’ about?”

“I’m not givin’ up on us,” he whispers, and I swear a butterfly is trapped and fluttering inside me.

“Aw,” Summer and Remi say in unison. I think I see Sterling roll his eyes, but he’s eighteen and couldn’t care less about anything but his phone.

I wipe my mouth and set the napkin down on the table. “I’m done.”

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Memaw says. “It’s cute.”

“I don’t need or want this pressure. I get it. You’re all Team Hayden. However, I’m not.”

Hayden chuckles.

“Why are you laughin’? Actually, don’t answer that.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“I’m not on anyone’s team,” Beckett tells me. “I’m Team Summer.”

“Oh hush,” she says, playfully bumping her shoulder into him.

When we’re halfway through our bowls, Colt shows up. He’s drenched in sweat and looks exhausted. He’s been doing a lot of handyman work around town, helping with honey-do lists for all of Grandma’s church friends.

Mom meets his expression and stands, grabs a big glass of ice-cold water for him, and makes his bowl. “Here you go, sweetie.”

“Thanks, Ma.” There’s defeat in his tone. “Hayden, whoa. Hey, man.” My brother looks between us and then glances at everyone else at the table. “They together?”

The room fills with yeses. Hayden is silent, and I shake my head.

“Uhh. You know what? Never mind. Forget I asked.”

Grandpa talks to Colt as I sit back in my chair, ready for this night to be over. I don’t want to stay for dessert, but I do. The last time Mom made chocolate pumpkin pie was for Hayden. I told her I never wanted it again, and she knew exactly why.

When everyone finishes eating, I excuse myself to the bathroom to break away from the attention. I step inside, put the lid on the toilet, and sit on it. Even though I’m down the hallway, I can still hear the faint voices of them chatting. I run my fingers through my hair and hear a soft knock on the door.

I expect to see Summer or Remi, but it’s Hayden. I close the door, but he speaks into the crack.

“Kins, come on. Open up.”

“No! You’re literally givin’ them somethin’ to talk about by followin’ me.”

I think I hear him laugh.

“It’s not funny!”

“I know. Come on, open up.”

I stare at the thick wood, knowing he’s on the other side, waiting.

“You’ll have to come out eventually,” he says. “So I guess I should just make myself comfortable.”

I open it and step aside.

He glances around. “It’s exactly the same.”

“The only thing that’s changed here is you.”

Hayden grabs my hands and tugs me toward him. I’m pressed against his chest, looking up into his brown eyes. “That may be true, but the part of me that fell in love with you the first time still exists here.” He pats his heart, then places his palm on my cheek.

I swallow, trying as hard as hell not to lean into his touch, but I fail.

“I can’t have this conversation here, Hayden. But if you keep playin’ games, this will get out of hand.”

As his mouth moves closer, mine parts in response. “This isn’t a game to me.”

When his mouth softly brushes against mine, I nearly melt into him.

“Come to my house after dinner,” I blurt out when I pull away.

“Okay. I’ll be there. Don’t be too much longer,” he tells me before reaching behind him and opening the door. When he walks out, I look at myself in the mirror, take a deep breath, then make my way to the kitchen. Most of the family are in the living room, chatting with plates of pie. Summer and Beckett are nowhere to be found, but I can hear them in the kitchen. I join them instead.

Beckett has the sprayer pointed at Summer, and her hands are up in the air. She’s laughing.

“Oh God,” I say, and he points the nozzle at me, but he moves his gaze back to Summer.

“Take it back, or your bestie gets it.”

I place my hand on my hip. “Summer, you better take back whatever it is you said.”

She’s snickering. “I don’t want to!”

Beckett points it back at her. “You’ll both get it!”

“What did she say?” I take a step forward, loving their antics.

“I’m not repeatin’ it,” Summer says. “It’s ridiculous.”

Beckett starts counting down. “Tell her. Five. Four. Three. Two.”

“Okay. I told Beckett he was sleepin’ on the couch tonight because he volunteered me to wash dishes with him,” she finally says when he barely pushes the sprayer.

“Oh, well, I agree with that. You should sleep on the couch, bro. She’s been busting her ass at the B&B.”

Beckett looks at me. “We’ve all been bustin’ our asses. But Colt needed a break. He’s workin’ himself to the bone fixin’ up all those houses.”

Summer reaches forward and rests her arms on his hip, pulling him toward her. “You know I wouldn’t be able to sleep without your leg on top of mine.”

He leans in and whispers something in her ear, and she laughs. They’re cute.

“Welp, you two have fun.”

“Kins, you can come help if you wanna,” Summer says.

“Ha, I’m good.” I cut a slice of pie and make my way to the living room, listening to everyone chat. When finished eating, I stand and take my plate to Summer and Beckett, who can’t seem to keep their hands off each other so much that they’ve only made it halfway through the dishes before others start piling.

Instead of chatting, I tell everyone I’m heading out.

“Already?” Mom asks.

“Yeah, I had a long night,” I tell her, trying my damndest not to look at Hayden.

“Okay, be careful. Love you!”

“Love y’all,” I say with a wave. I tuck my head into the kitchen where Summer and Beckett are making out again.

“Bye, lovebirds! I’m headin’ out!”

Summer gives me a wave, and Beckett pulls her closer. I laugh and then make my way to my truck. The clear sky means the stars shine bright. Countless nights, I wished upon many, though I’m not sure any of those things came true. But timing is everything.

It doesn’t take long for me to make it home since I live in a house on the ranch. I kick off my shoes, plopping onto the couch, and wait for Hayden to arrive. We need to talk.

HAYDEN

*S*tay and visit with the Valentines forty minutes after Kinsley leaves. We laugh and talk about the good ole days. It's amazing to catch up, and it feels like old times. At first, I was nervous about showing up, but once I walked in, all the worries vanished. Kinsley's parents and family acted like no time had hardly passed. Though, I did find it hilarious that they kept giving Kinsley shit.

Harrison walks out with me when I leave.

"Hey, man, I'm glad you came. Kinsley's probably pissed, but she'll get over it. She usually does."

I laugh. "Yeah. I'm about to go to her house so we can talk."

"I knew it," he whispers. "So you two are together?"

"Nah. It's only been a week. Can't repair years of hurt, but I'm willin' to try."

"If anyone can win her over, it's you." His phone buzzes, and he reads the text. "But anyway, gotta jet. I'll see you 'round."

I drive the short distance to Kinsley's house, and she's left the porch light on for me. When I park and turn off my lights, a tinge of nervousness streams through me. This conversation can go one of two ways, and I have no expectations.

Before I can lift my hand to knock, Kinsley opens the door and steps aside.

"You're telepathic now?"

"God, I wish," she says.

On her coffee table is a large purple rock and a deck of tarot cards. There are a few short pillars of candles, too.

“Make yourself at home. Do you want somethin’ to drink?” she asks, and I shake my head. She sits on the opposite end of the small couch, leaving half a cushion between us.

“I think we need to talk.” Her tone sounds serious, and no smile plays on her lips.

“Sure,” I say.

She stands and starts pacing. “Ugh. I don’t even know how to say this.”

“Blurt it out, then. I can handle it.” I study her, and she stops moving before turning to me.

“I’m not sure if I can do this,” she admits. “I don’t think I’m ready.”

I smirk. “I’m not askin’ you to marry me, Kins.”

“I know. It’s just...here you are, all single, lookin’ good, and smelling amazin’, and you’re everywhere I am. An apology doesn’t heal the deep rivets you left in my heart. Only time does.”

I nod in agreement.

“I know it’s been nearly a decade, but I’m scared of getting hurt. As it stands, I have some major abandonment issues after the breakup. I can’t do that again. I can’t. Not a second time. I barely survived it the first time.” She moves to the couch and sits down again, laying her head back on the cushion with her eyes closed. “It’s too much at once.”

“Kins.” I reach over and squeeze her hand. “There’s no rush for anything.”

“No? When do you go back to Houston?”

I shrug. “When my father’s released. At minimum, six to eight weeks, though.”

“A lot can happen in that time,” she whispers. “And then you’ll leave me again.”

“You’re right.”

“I’m not sure we should’ve crossed the line yesterday,” she says, sitting up straight.

“Do you regret it?” I ask.

She meets my eyes, and I feel like I’m melting under her gaze. It’s intense, heated, and no matter what she says, her body gives her away. The attraction that streams between us is undeniable. I’ve always thought Kins was gorgeous, and she’s only grown more beautiful with time.

“No,” she says breathlessly. “No. And that’s what scares me. I could imagine my life with you again, a future I one day believed would happen.”

“I’m not sure where we go from here, Kins. Last night was like a dream, and it changed things for me. No other woman on this planet makes me feel the way you do. I thought time would’ve changed that. I thought I’d kiss you and feel nothing and wake up from fantasyland and maybe we could work it out.” I swallow hard. “But when I kissed you, it felt right. It felt like I’d found that part of me I’d been missing all these years. But maybe I’m crazy. What do I know?”

She blinks hard. “I don’t think you’re crazy. I felt something, too, and that scares me. Do you know how hard I tried to get over you, only for you to kiss me and it all to flood back? I’ve been afraid of dyin’ alone for the past decade because I don’t want to pretend with my partner. I’ve never been with anyone who made me feel like you always did. Always *do*. You broke me, Hayden.”

“I can’t erase the past, but I wanna be the man who puts you back together again, Kins. If you’ll let me.” I look at the clock on the wall and notice a crystal ball on a shelf next to some books. It’s adorable how woo-woo she is, but she’s always been like this. “Do you still believe in magic?”

She tilts her head at me. I’ve piqued her interest.

I reposition my body to face her. “Back in the day, you used to tell me that the universe always righted itself, and when it did, it was like magic. You would constantly tell me that the impossible was possible. If you truly believe something can happen, it’s yours.”

A smile plays on her lips. “Manifesting is magic. I still believe that.”

“Ahh, yes. Manifesting. So did you do this?” I point between us, and she understands what I mean.

Kinsley snorts, and she slightly relaxes. “I did complete a love spell that week.”

“Oh, that explains it.” I smirk. “How long does it take to wear off?”

“Until my true love finds me,” she says, holding back a grin.

“Well, shit.” I shake my head and then look at her. “But seriously, I want you to be happy, Kins. I was in a loveless relationship for too long to jump back into another one with you.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

I shake my head and stand, knowing that if I don’t leave now, I’ll kiss her, and I can’t do that again. “I don’t need an answer right now. I’d wait a lifetime for you. But I need to know if we actually have a chance of being together. If there’s no chance, I’ll leave and never bring it up again. We can

both go on pretending the other doesn't exist if that's what you want. I already know what it's like not to be wanted, Kins. That's not the kind of forever relationship I'm searching for."

I give her a moment to say something, anything, and when she doesn't, I move to the door. I wait for a few seconds, then open it and walk out.

Rejection fucking hurts, and I feel deflated as I step off her porch and walk toward my car. I glance up, looking at the Milky Way, something that's not visible in Houston. The stars are like sparkling diamonds hanging in the dark sky. I tried. It's all I could do. And at least I won't regret that.

KINSLEY

*M*y heart pounds so hard I can hear the beat in my ears. The room feels like it's closing in on me as Hayden walks out the door. I don't know why I don't speak up, but I know time is ticking. I jump to my feet and rush outside.

"Hayden, wait!" I say breathlessly.

He's looking up at the Milky Way, and a symphony of stars splashes across the sky. His head turns, and I rush down the steps. Walking on gravel hurts, so I nearly play hopscotch across the rocks.

When I'm close enough to wrap my arms around him, I take advantage.

"I was manifestin'," he tells me before our lips crash together.

"I pulled a tarot card," I admit between kisses. "The lover's card."

He grabs my ass cheeks, and my legs instinctively wrap around his waist as our mouths wage war on the other's. I tug on his hair, hoping I'm not making the biggest, stupidest mistake of my life. I guess only time will tell.

"The card made you change your mind?" He chuckles.

I nod. "Do you think it's a mistake?"

"No. But it must be my lucky day." He carries me into my house like a damn caveman. He kicks the door behind him and walks straight to my room. I'd moved in here right before we broke up, so I was happy it was empty of his memories and the ghost of him hadn't lingered.

Hayden lays me down on the bed, and I watch this beautiful specimen of a man undress. He unbuttons his shirt, and it falls from his body, displaying the array of muscles I wanted to trace with my tongue last night. Two days in a row, I nearly pinch myself to ensure I'm not dreaming.

His cock bulges in his jeans, and the material looks like it might burst

open. I nod toward it. He glances down and shrugs. “You’ve always done that to me.”

“Yeah, but we’re a lot older now.”

“Doesn’t change how you’ve always made me feel, Kins.”

Hayden drops to his knees and grabs my ankles, pulling swiftly until my ass is on the edge of the bed. Slowly, he slides his hands up my thighs and pushes my skirt up to my waist. Then he parts my legs.

“Fuck, baby, you’re so damn wet,” he says, his finger moving over the material that I’m sure is drenched. Kissing and grinding against his hardness does that to me.

Leaning forward, he presses his mouth against me over the fabric, and my eyes flutter closed. I grab the fluffy white comforter with my fists, giving me more leverage to grind against his face. “Shit,” I hiss, loving how good it feels.

His strong hands slide under my ass and pull my panties down, then he tosses them over his shoulder.

“I love this cute little cunt,” he says, kissing the insides of my thighs before he devours me. As his tongue flicks across my clit, I nearly lose myself. He didn’t forget my body and what I like. No, he has me memorized like the back of his hand.

I rock my hips, creating more friction before he pulls away.

“Nah, baby girl, you’re coming with me inside you tonight. But I wanna get you close.”

“I’m basically already there.” It sounds more like I’m begging because I am. I’m teetering on the edge, knowing one touch could send me over it. My pussy throbs for him, and he smirks like a devil before tapping my clit once with his fingers.

“You’re evil,” I mutter.

“I kinda like the sound of you beggin’, though.”

I smirk. “Two can play that game.”

“Oh, and you’re a pro at it. I know from experience.” Standing, Hayden slides his boxers down, releasing his delicious dick. I remove all my clothes, then drop to my knees and tease his tip.

His fingers thread through my hair as his head falls back on his shoulders. I massage his balls as I shove the rest of him down my throat. One thing about me is I don’t have a gag reflex, so I nearly take him all in. His groans only encourage me to keep going, and as soon as I add my hand in to stroke

as I suck, Hayden takes a step back. His cock convulses, and he holds it in his hand. “Shit, I almost came.”

“Mm-hmm,” I tell him, wiping the corners of my lips. “That was my goal.”

He smirks, lifting me to my feet, then bends down to suck one of my perky nipples and tweak the other with his fingers. Then his hand slides down, and he glides two fingers inside me. I moan, grabbing his shoulders so my legs don’t fail me. Hayden lays me on the bed, and I scoot up the mattress. Then he hovers above me, wiping my hair from my face before softly kissing me. His tip rests at my opening, and while I’m still sore from last night, I want him.

I wrap my legs around him, digging my heels into his ass as he slams into me. We kiss and make love, him filling me so full that I might explode. I pant and huff, not wanting to come down from this ecstasy.

“Hayden,” I whisper, my eyes rolling to the back of my head, and then I lose control. My back arches as the orgasm shreds through every ounce of flesh that I am.

“Fuck, Kins,” he groans out, fucking me deep and hard as he comes. “I love you, forever and always,” he barely whispers, and I swallow hard.

We’re falling too fast, too hard, and I can’t say those words because they scare the shit out of me. The last man I said I love you to was him. And while I’ll always love him, I can’t go there right now.

We lie in bed, and he wraps his arm around me, allowing me to rest on his chest. I listen to the steady thump of his heart, remembering how I used to fall asleep to this sound. As his fingers gently brush my skin, I lay my arms across his stomach.

“I lost control,” he says. “I didn’t mean to... Actually, no, I’m not apologizing for that. I do still love you, Kinsley. I’m not gonna deny it. You don’t have to say it back. I just want you to know. It is what it is. The heart can’t choose who it loves.”

“You’re right about that.” I grip him tighter as he holds me. My emotions are in overdrive because he’s saying the things I have wished and hoped and wanted for so damn long. It feels right—I want it to be right—but it’s fast.

“I’m scared,” I admit. “Scared that I’m falling for you, losing you, or waking up from this.”

Hayden kisses my forehead. “There’s no rush, Kins. If you give me a second chance, I’ll never let you go, so think about it. Make sure I’m what

you want, and if not, I'll understand."

"Thank you," I whisper, knowing time is exactly what I need.

"The ball is in your court. I'm along for the ride."

"And what about Houston?" I ask.

"We'll come to that bridge at some point, but I can't make a decision before you make one. If you say no, I'll probably return because I don't think I could live here and see you, knowing you're not mine. It would be too hard."

"Yeah." My eyes feel heavy; I'm too relaxed with him. "I don't wanna be your rebound, Hayden."

He laughs, causing my head to bob. "You're the original, babe. No amount of time could erase you from my heart."

"Why are ya so good at sayin' and doin' the right things?"

"If I were, I'd have never left you the first time."

I swallow, squeezing him. "I dunno what'll happen between us. But if we're doin' this, I'll need some time. It's a lot."

"I'll be here waitin' for ya when you're ready," he says, placing another kiss on my forehead. "But we have some reacquainting to do in the meantime."

I nod. "You're right about that. And I need ya to provide me with as much history about the bookstore as you can find so I can finish this article. A lot is riding on it."

He chuckles. "Consider it done."

"Did you get an invite to the Halloween party?"

"Is there anyone in a hundred-mile radius who didn't?" he asks as I look up into his chestnut-brown eyes.

"Give me until then to think about all of this? We can hang out and stuff, but I'd rather us avoid the hookups. I love havin' you buried deep inside my pussy, but it's distractin'. I have to make sure this is what I want, and I need time to get to know you again."

"Deal," he tells me. "I'd love that, Kins."

HAYDEN

ONE MONTH LATER

Over the past four weeks, I've hung out with Kinsley a lot. We've been trying the hands-off, no-kissing, no-touching, no-fucking rules she created. It's definitely made things interesting and difficult at times. She's warned me that she's not the same girl I fell in love with all those years ago, but I've seen glimpses of her. The heartbreak she experienced changed her, especially regarding her outlook on love. I'm to blame, but I'll make it up to her if she lets me.

Sometimes she looks at me as if I could save her world, and I want to be the man who rescues her if she needs it. However, Kinsley is the type of woman who saves herself. It's how she's always been, and I know that.

It's the day before Halloween, the day before Kinsley's supposed to decide on whether we'll continue seeing each other or stay friends. The spark is alive and well, but I don't know if the attraction is enough. We share so many beautiful memories, and when I think back to the times I was happiest, she was always there.

I write a few more paragraphs, then call it a night. I'm supposed to open the bookstore tomorrow because my sister and the other employees wanted to work the second shift to give the trick-or-treaters candy. Considering Beckett is throwing that party and costumes are required, I need a few hours to get dressed. Apparently, there is a contest, and the grand prize winner will win an

all-inclusive romantic weekend getaway at the B&B. I'm not always this competitive, but Kinsley has been trash-talking that she'll win. She probably will, but I'll also give her a run for her money.

As I'm sliding between the sheets in my bed, my phone buzzes. I lift it and see it's a text from her.

KINSLEY: I can't sleep.

I SMILE, wishing she were here in my bed with me.

HAYDEN: Come over. ;) My parents aren't home.

I SNICKER, thinking about how many times I've told her that in the past.

KINSLEY: What if I did? What would you do?

I REACH DOWN, having to adjust myself thinking about it.

HAYDEN: I'd kiss your neck and slide my mouth down your jaw before sucking on your bottom lip.

Kinsley: And then what?

Hayden: Then I'd remove your shirt and suck on your beautiful tits, pinching your nipple between my teeth.

Kinsley: Will you FaceTime me?

MY HEART RATE thumps as blood pumps through me. I'm so fuckin' turned

on that I can't say no. I flip out of my texts and find her contact, then press the button. She answers. Her room is dark, and the screen of her cell phone, combined with the TV, lights her face.

"Hey, baby." My voice comes out rough.

"I'm so turned on," she says. "I wish you were here. But..." Her mouth falls open, and she gasps. "I got started already."

"You're touching your pussy, thinkin' about me?"

She nods and bites her bottom lip.

"Show me."

She swallows, bringing her phone down between her legs. I have the perfect view.

"Rub your clit, baby. Imagine it's my tongue on you."

Kinsley pants, slowly rubbing her fingers over her cunt.

"Fuck," I groan, tugging at my cock. "I'm hard, Kins. So fuckin' hard."

She brings the phone back to her face. "Please show me. I wanna see you."

I move my screen to my dick, my hand roughly tugging up and down. I groan. "I'd fuckin' break your little pussy if it was here right now."

"Oh," she moans. "Yes, I wish you would."

"Slide a finger inside. Don't come until I give ya permission, okay?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Give me two, sweetheart. Finger fuck yourself, and pretend it's me slamming inside you. Mm, I hear how fuckin' wet you are." I grunt, still stroking myself.

She starts moaning out.

"Baby, don't come yet. Show me your hand."

She keeps going.

"Don't make me come over there and teach your pussy a lesson."

The way she pants tells me she's close. Then she pulls away, and her breasts rise and fall. She grabs one and licks her nipple. "You love my titties?"

"Yes. Shit. So beautiful."

She reaches over and slides her drawer open. Then she clicks the button on the bottom of her pink toy, and it vibrates to life. She repositions her phone on her nightstand and twists her body around, showing me her ass and pussy. "Can you see me?" she asks, looking over her shoulder.

"Yes, baby, you're pure fuckin' perfection."

She pops her ass into the air, then reaches around and gives me a full view as she slides the vibrator inside her before clicking it up to a higher speed. “Oh, you don’t come until I do.”

“Fuck. You play dirty, don’t ya?”

She gives me a devilish grin. “I wish this were you.”

Kinsley moves it between her legs and works herself up. Then she flips over, putting pillows behind her so she can lean against them. She’s breathing hard and panting.

“If I were there, I’d flip you over and fuck that tight little ass of yours. Then I’d eat your sweet pussy and lick you from the inside out as you rode my fuckin’ face.”

“I want your big dick inside me. Yes, please,” she begs. “I’m so wet, Hayden. I need to come more than once tonight. This...this usually happens when I think about you.” She gasps. “But having you watch me is... Oh God, it’s sexy.”

“Fuck, baby. Show me. Show me how you come when you think about me.”

“Are you close?” she asks.

I nod, stroking from the top all the way to the bottom as Kinsley fucks herself. She takes her other hand and teases her clit as she thrusts her hips, allowing more friction for the vibrator. Her body tenses like she’s about to lose it.

“Yes, baby,” I encourage her. “I see you. I love watching you. Fuck. You’re a goddess.”

She’s no longer coherent as she rides out the orgasm on her vibrator. I watch her, wishing it was my cock making her scream with pleasure, and then I lose control. White-hot cum flies from my tip onto my bare stomach as my cock throbs in my palm. I groan. My body feels as if it might completely shut down.

She lies there, watching me, and smiles. “Show me. I want to see.”

I move my phone down my body, showing her my cock, then the orgasm splattered on my stomach.

“I wish I was there to lick it up,” she says, returning to her clit. “I love the way you taste.”

“Mm. I wish you were, too. How’s your clit?”

“Sensitive. But I need more. I’m so horny.”

I’m still rock hard and reach over to grab a towel to clean myself up, then

I lie back in bed.

“Are you always like this?” I ask, loving how open she is.

She nods. “I love sex. A lot. It feels so good when you’re with the right person or watching the right porn.”

Kinsley slides a finger inside and then returns to her clit. I love to watch her tease herself.

“You watch porn?”

“Oh yeah. All the time. We should watch it together one night,” she suggests. “I’ve never done that with anyone. It’d be interestin’.” She pants slightly, her body shaking.

“Tell me what you like to watch.”

She laughs. “I love me some girl on girl. Or two guys and a girl. I’ve gotten off to some masturbation videos, imagining the guy was coming to me, touching myself to him.”

“Mm. So we lived out a fantasy of yours? Is that what you’re tellin’ me?”

“Yes,” she whisper-hisses. “So. Damn. *Guilty.*”

“You tried any real voyeurism? None of that back seat in the car shit.”

“No,” she moans. “But I’d like to.” Her breathing increases. “The thought of being watched is such a turn-on.”

“You’re a sight to see, baby.”

“Yes, yes, yes, oh God. It’s building, but it’s slow. Fuck. I just...” Kinsley works the vibrator in and out, her muscles tense. “So. Damn. Close,” she pants out.

“Say my name as you come, sweetheart.”

“Hay, Hay, Hayden. Hayden. Yes. You own this pussy,” she screams as she spills over the edge, her moans filling the space.

“Yes, I do, baby. Ride it out. Enjoy it.”

She eventually turns the vibrator off and catches her breath. “I think...I’m done.”

“Damn. You’ve got me hard as fuck still.”

Kinsley smirks. “Shoulda recorded it with screen capture.”

I lift a brow. “Who says I didn’t?”

She grins. “I hope you did. Add it to your personal spank bank—me moaning out your name while I come.”

“There was a point in my life when I didn’t think you could get any sexier. Then you prove me wrong.”

“Babe, there’s a lot you don’t know ’bout me.” She repositions herself in

bed and pulls the sheet up to her breasts. “Like I sleep naked every night.”

“No one would complain about that.”

She hums and lets out a yawn. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“I’ll be there.”

“Can’t wait to see your costume,” she says.

“Can’t wait to see you,” I tell her and smile softly.

“Good night, Hayden.”

“Night, Kinsley.” I hang up and look at the phone. “I still love you,” I whisper, wishing I could tell her, but I don’t want to scare her away again.

“Always have.”

I roll over, turn off the lamp beside my bed, then fall asleep thinking about Kinsley.



MY SHIFT at the bookstore flies by, and Haley relieves me early. She is dressed up like Minnie Mouse, and Remi is Little Red Riding Hood. The basket she carries is full of candy.

After I sign out of the register, I grab my keys and head to the door.

“Y’all have fun tonight. Ya goin’ to the barn party afterward?”

They shrug in unison. “Maybe. We haven’t decided yet.”

“Alright. I’ll be there.”

“Yeah? Whatcha gonna be?”

“You’ll see if you come.”

Haley waves me off. “Bye, Hayden! Tell Kinsley we said hi!”

I hear them laugh as I walk to my car. After I reverse out of the parking lot and head down Main Street, I call my mom and check on Dad. She’s been coming home more often now that he’s doing much better. We were told yesterday that Dad might be released as early as next week, which is amazing news, but when he is, I’ll have to return to work. Not something I’m ready for yet.

Gia approved family medical leave, so I didn’t have to use my vacation, which I appreciate, but it ends once my dad is released. Ralph hasn’t checked on me once, and that’s probably for the best. Fuck him.

When I return to Houston, it’ll be...*interesting*. I haven’t fully decided what I’m going to do yet. I’ll figure it out when I return. Right now, I’m

living in the moment with the girl who taught me how to live in the damn moment.

As soon as I walk into my room, I see my Star-Lord costume from *Guardians of the Galaxy* hanging in the corner. Needing to finish a chapter, I take advantage of getting home early and open my laptop. Before I start, I set an alarm, knowing that I can't get caught up in the story, which has been happening a lot lately.

I work at the bookstore, read, and write. Occasionally, Kinsley will call or text me, or we'll have coffee or watch a movie. And I'm happy. Happier than I've been in a very long damn time. It's almost as if the clouds that once lived above my head have finally dissipated.

I'm typing away, losing myself in the story. I'm at the part where the two star-crossed lovers finally meet up after being apart for years. She's sneaking away from her parents, who are keeping her captive, to escape with him even though she's been taught that he's bad for her. The hero promises to keep her safe, and she decides to take a chance.

Will it be a tragedy or a love story? I still don't know.

I slip out of my bookstore clothes, then put on the red leather jacket, black jeans, and arm and leg armor. I grab the helmet mask and put it over my head, then look at myself in the full-length mirror, almost forgetting my plastic gun and faux Walkman. Hands down, I'll have the coolest costume. I'm smiling as I remove the mask and make my way downstairs.

When Kinsley and I first kissed, we were watching *Guardians of the Galaxy*. It was right then that I knew she was something special to me. I'm sure she still remembers it. It was unforgettable. My mama was okay with girls being in my room as long as the door was open. We sat on the floor next to each other, our bodies so close I could feel the warmth of her arm against mine.

I had a blue Jolly Rancher in my mouth, and she said it smelled like it tasted good. I asked her if she wanted some, and when she nodded, I held it between my lips. Leaning forward, she kissed me, then swiped it from my mouth with her tongue. She smiled, pressed her back against the side of my bed, and finished the piece of candy while watching the movie. I never expected her to cross the line, but I knew I wanted to kiss her again.

My phone vibrates, and I unlock it.

KINSLEY: Ready to lose?

Hayden: The only one who's going down tonight is you.

Kinsley: I'd love to go down on you.

Hayden: I think I can help make that happen.

Kinsley: See you soon.

THINKING about it has my dick growing thick, but I push the thoughts away and grab my keys.

Fifteen minutes later, I turn into the Horseshoe Creek Ranch, and I'm shocked by how many cars are parked in the grass. I continue driving past the B&B and try to find a place closer up front but end up having to turn around. Eventually, I squeeze between two big-ass trucks, put on my full-helmet face mask, and walk toward the party.

A large group of people sing along to the blaring music. I pull my phone from my pocket to check the time. Fog drifts on the ground from the machines pumping into the barn.

Beckett stands at the entrance dressed as Thor, making sure no one enters without a costume. He gives me a nod, but there's no way he knows who I am with my face covered. Too many of us around here have the same build.

Tables of food line one side of the building, along with several kegs, even though the invite said BYOB. A lot of tables are covered in alcohol bottles, too. Crossing my arms, I find a place on the side of the room, watching the seventy people dancing in the middle of the barn. That's when I spot Kinsley...painted green, dressed as Gamora—Star-Lord's girlfriend. Maybe Beckett did know who I was when I walked in.

Regardless, I stand out of view and watch her dance. She's laughing with Summer, her hands lifted in the air as she dances to a remix of the "Monster Mash." I could watch her all night. Because she shines like a light in the darkness with her bright smile. Summer is Princess Leia, the modest version, and her hair is in big buns. The two of them have been inseparable for years, and I can only imagine Summer's opinion of me. I make a mental note to ask her.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out.

KINSLEY: Where are you?

Hayden: Here.

Kinsley: Are you?

Hayden: Watching you right now.

SHE LOOKS up from her phone and looks around the room. It's too dark with too many flashing lights and fog. Plus, she's surrounded.

KINSLEY: How do you like my costume?

Hayden: It'd look better on the floor.

Kinsley: No denying that. Where ya at, Batman? Did I guess right?

Hayden: Nope. Damn, you're sexy.

I WATCH AS SHE SMILES, then stands on her tiptoes. Summer whispers in her ear, and Kinsley laughs.

The song changes to something slower, the baby-making kind of music. Kinsley puts her arms around Summer, and they dance together. I grab a drink and continue watching them. A minute later, someone dressed in a Freddie Krueger costume moves up behind her. Kinsley lifts her arms and leans against them. I swallow hard, watching her with someone else. I try to play it cool, but my jealousy flares.

Then I notice her facial expression change as she turns around, and she looks alarmed. The guy removes the mask, and Kinsley tries to push him away from her, but he towers over her. When he grabs her wrists and tugs her toward him, I fucking lose it.

Quickly, I shove through the crowd. Most don't even realize there's an issue.

Kinsley screams at him. "I don't care! That doesn't give you the right to touch me anywhere you want."

He laughs and reaches for her again. "You liked it, bitch. Come here."

Kinsley tries to fight him off, and Summer yells for him to let her go.

As soon as I'm close to the guy, I grab his red-striped shirt with my fists. I'm fucking livid as I push him backward with all my strength. He falls down

but pops back up, removing one of his plastic-bladed gloves before swinging. I duck, then thrust my fist forward, knocking the guy in the nose. He wobbles before crashing to the ground. At this point, we're surrounded by those watching the fight. However, the guy doesn't stand again.

"Star-Lord just KO'd Krueger!" someone hollers and points.

I remove my mask and turn to Kinsley. "You good?"

Her eyes widen, then she smiles. "I am now."

We hold a silent conversation. People are staring at us. Then Beckett rushes over, and Summer explains what happened.

I don't take my eyes off Kinsley. She stays quiet, searching the room, and begins to dissociate. "Come on, let's get out of here."

She nods, and I take her hand, leading her outside. We walk to one side of the barn, away from everyone. It's quieter out here, though I can still hear the chatter inside. A minute later, the music blares and the overhead lights go off.

"How'd you know my costume, Star-Lord? I kept it hush-hush." She relaxes.

"I didn't," I admit. "I thought about us and our relationship, and it felt right."

"Me too. Our first kiss."

I smirk. "Was pretty unforgettable."

Kinsley opens a small pouch on her utility belt and pulls something out. She unwraps a Jolly Rancher and pops it into her mouth. It's tucked into the side of her cheek. "Wanna taste?"

I lift my brows as she holds the candy between her lips. I dip my head down and suck it out of her mouth, then slide my tongue against hers. She moans, wrapping her arms around my neck as I grab her ass cheeks.

Next thing I know, a very mad Mario and Luigi round the corner.

"Kinsley, what the fuck happened?" Harrison asks, adjusting the red hat on his head.

"Cute." She looks at Emmett. "You let him be Mario?"

He groans. "He beat me at Rock, Paper, Scissors. Anyway, what the hell happened back there?"

"Yeah!" Harrison adds, crossing his arms over his broad chest, his mustache seesawing on his upper lip.

She exhales as we wait. "He was grinding on me, then he reached around and tried to slide his hands between my legs. At first, I thought it was Hayden, but then he started whispering shit in my ear, and I realized I didn't

know this guy.”

Harrison shakes his head as Grace walks over to us. She’s dressed as Princess Peach. Of course she is.

“Beckett told Freddie to leave after almost beating his ass for talkin’ shit. Apparently, he’s from Alpine. And a total creep. That’s so scary,” she says, leaning closer to Harrison.

He wraps his arm around her. “You know I wouldn’t let anything like that happen to you.”

“Yeah, we know,” Kinsley says. “You nearly went to jail on the Fourth of July.”

Harrison shrugs.

Emmett clears his throat. “If these men woulda been raised differently, these things wouldn’t keep happenin’. You never treat a lady like that. This party isn’t some sleazy-ass bar scene, and even there, it’s not okay.”

“That dude should be glad I didn’t knee him in the dick. I was tryin’ to be calm, but then he called me a bitch, and all bets were off. Then Star-Lord saved the day.” She wraps her arm around my waist and tugs me close, laughing.

“We’re glad you’re okay,” Emmett says, hugging Kinsley. “But we’re gonna get back to the party. Y’all stayin’ for the costume contest?”

I shrug.

“Not sure yet.” Kinsley runs her hands down her long leather jacket.

“Good, the two of you together would probably win. So maybe you should get the hell outta here.” Harrison barely gets his words out before he cracks up laughing.

Kinsley rolls her eyes. “We’ll see. Anyway, y’all go have fun. Just gettin’ some fresh air.”

Grace nods and grabs Harrison’s arm to tug him away. Then Emmett pats her on the shoulder and follows him like he’s the third wheel.

Harrison lifts his arm in the air and makes a *boing* sound before he goes out of view.

We both burst into laughter.

“He’s ridiculous,” I say.

“Yeah, but gotta love him. Would you be okay with leavin’?”

“As long as I’m with you, I don’t give a shit what we’re doin’.” I shoot her a wink.

She grabs my hand and starts walking. “Perfect. Let’s get the hell outta

here. We have some things to talk about.”

KINSLEY

*A*fter my time was ruined, I didn't want to stay. It's not the first time someone has gotten handsy with me, but this is my family's property. It's supposed to be a safe space. Next time, Beckett should consider by invite only.

No invite? Fuck off. At least, that's my vote.

Hayden walks me to his Mercedes, and I climb inside. It still has the new-car smell, and the soft leather hugs my body. As he drives, I pull out my cell phone and text Summer to let her know I'm leaving.

SUMMER: I'm so sorry, Kins. I hate this.

Kinsley: It's not your fault. Don't worry about it! Have fun!

HAYDEN GLANCES over at me as I lock my phone and smiles. Over the past month, we've been taking it slow and trying to get to know each other again. As hard as it's been, we haven't crossed the line, though I've wanted to every time we've hung out. Having him touch me and be intimate only complicates emotions, and I want to be sure when I give him my answer. He told me I could have all the time I wanted to decide, and I asked him to give me until Halloween. Tonight.

We arrive at my house, and I'm thankful for the quiet.

No drunk people yelling. No loud music to scream over to hold a simple conversation. No creepy men touching me.

I slide off my jacket and set it on the back of the couch, then remove all the accessories clipped onto my waist.

Hayden watches me, and I love having his full attention.

“You know, that costume is sexy on you,” I admit, loving how it fits him like a glove. “Shoulda brought the helmet in.”

He chuckles. “So you could pretend Chris Pratt was in your house?”

“As long as he didn’t talk,” I admit. “He’s great to look at. Once he opens his mouth? Nah. I’m good.”

Hayden takes a step forward and rests his hands on my waist. “Glad to hear it, honestly.”

“Want a drink?” I kick off my boots and go to the kitchen barefoot.

“That’d be great.”

I grab a bottle of wine from the fridge and unscrew the cork, then pour two glasses. We sit on the couch.

“Damn. This is sweet.” He makes a face. “Tastes like pure sugar.”

“I love it. Cranberry wine is my favorite adult beverage during the fall. I have blueberry and blackberry, too. When I visited Montana a few years ago, I tried a huckleberry one.”

“I’m your huckleberry.” He smirks.

I shake my head, not getting it. “What does that mean?”

“Oh God, please tell me you’ve seen *Tombstone*?” He looks offended.

I smile over the rim of my glass. “Sounds familiar. Maybe I watched it as a kid?”

“Doc Holliday. Wyatt Earp. Those names aren’t ringing a bell? It’s based on a true story.”

“A little.” I take a sip of my wine, trying to remember.

“No, if you’ve experienced it, you’d remember. But it means I’m the one or the right guy for the job.”

“Oh, so you literally *are* my huckleberry,” I say.

Hayden nods. “Some people believe it has a different meaning, though. There’s a scene when Doc says it to the bad guy Johnny Ringo. And so it’s kinda said in an ‘if you wanna fuck around, I’ll help you find out’ kind of way. It’s Southern slang from the 1800s and has this medieval folklore around it, too. But anyway, the movie is great. It’s a classic, especially if you like Old West shit.”

“We’ll have to watch it someday with a bottle of huckleberry,” I tell him. “That would be fun.”

“Yeah, I agree. We should do it.”

I kick my feet up onto the edge of the coffee table, taking a few more gulps, thinking about this green makeup I need to take off. I hadn't even gotten the opportunity to have any of the ghoulish punch or mummy shots. It's probably for the best, though. I'd planned tomorrow to be a hangover day, but now I'll be able to get some things done. Will be nothing but a lazy Sunday.

Hayden takes a deep breath. “I'm probably going to return to Houston next week.”

I meet his eyes. “For good?”

“I dunno. Dad might be released, and I have a lot of unsettled business to take care of at the firm. I've been avoiding it, but I need to face it head-on to move forward with my life. You said you needed time to think about us and that you'd have your answer tonight, but I don't need one.”

“What are you sayin'?” I ask.

“I don't want to leave with an ultimatum, Kins. Where you have this big decision to make as the clock ticks down. I love you. I always have, and I always will. Being here in Valentine's been a whirlwind, and I've enjoyed spending so much time with you. It's felt like old times again.”

A lump forms in my throat. “I love you, too, Hayden.”

“I know you do. But is loving someone enough?”

I reach over and interlock my fingers with his.

He continues. “You deserve to be with someone who you're *in love* with, Kins.”

I try to open my mouth to say something, but Hayden places his fingers on my lips.

He studies me, smiling softly. “*Loving* someone and being *in love* with them are two very different emotions, sweetheart. Only you know the answer to that. I'm a bit broken after being in a loveless, toxic relationship for so long, and I've decided to start therapy because of it. I realize Penelope caused some trauma, and I need to work through it. My first session is next week.”

“You are? I'm proud of you, Hayden. I support you.”

“I don't want you to settle down with me because it's convenient or because we have a history. Ultimately, no matter how I feel about you, we will never work if it's not reciprocated. It's something I've realized over the past week. It was a damn hard revelation to come to terms with, but it's reality. It's the truth. I've put pressure on you, and I'm sorry. What will

happen, will happen, right?”

My heart pounds in my chest, and I feel myself growing emotional, but I try to tuck it away. I understand where he’s coming from.

“I guess what I’m sayin’ is there are pieces of my life back in Houston that I need to take care of, and you need time, too. You didn’t wanna rush into another relationship after your *fling*. You said so yourself. While I’m gone, it’ll give us the time we both need. A second chance with you is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I don’t wanna leave and fuck this up again.”

I stand and go sit on his lap, and he holds me in his arms. Having him this close is comforting; I’ll miss him while he’s gone. The terms he’s leaving on differ from the first time.

HAYDEN LEANED AGAINST HIS TRUCK, an unamused expression playing on his lips as I looked him straight in the eyes and told him to leave.

“I’m not going anywhere until you calm down.”

“Calm down? Hayden, you told me you wouldn’t apply for jobs outside the area. Now you’re telling me you accepted a position in Houston? That’s on the opposite side of the state. You know how big Texas is.”

“Then come with me,” he suggested.

“I can’t uproot my entire life and career. My job at the newspaper is important to me. You know how hard I worked to get that position. Not to mention, all of my friends and family are here. I just moved into my house and finally got everything unpacked. This is home, Hayden. Why would I wanna leave all of this when everything in my life is going great and move to a big city?”

“To be with me.”

“Give it all up for you?”

He nodded. “Yeah, you won’t have to work. You can stay at home and finish your debut novel.”

“I need a man who takes my life, my career, and my comfort into consideration when making huge life-changing decisions like this. Sorry, but this is the worst surprise I’ve ever had.”

He shrugged, his nostrils flaring. “Then I guess it’s over, isn’t it? This is the end.”

I look at him, tears filling my eyes. “You’re breaking up with me?”

“You won’t consider a long-distance relationship. You’re not moving with me. I think the best solution is to take a break for a little while. I start in two weeks, and I should be home for the holidays. Maybe we can talk then?”

I refused to let my tears fall as I glanced down at the mood ring on my finger. It was as black as night. I took it off and threw it on the ground, then turned around and walked toward my front door. Hayden didn’t run after me, and he didn’t ask me to stop as I turned the knob. When I walked inside, I shut the door and leaned against it, sliding down to the floor as my heart broke.

As I cried, I waited for him to knock, to take it back, to say he didn’t mean it. Instead, I heard the roar of his engine as he backed out of my driveway, then drove away. It was over.

“WHAT ARE YOU THINKIN’ about?” Hayden asks, rubbing my back, bringing me to reality again.

I look into his eyes. “When we broke up the first time.”

“Ahh.” He gently kisses my nose. “It’s a day I’ve replayed many times.”

“Would you do anything differently?” I ask.

“I wouldn’t have left,” he tells me. “I would’ve stayed and continued to do the bookstore’s accounting and finished my novel. Had that happened, I’d probably be a published author and married to the love of my life with a few kids. Sometimes it’s sad to think about the life I could’ve had and what I chose.”

I smile. “When I think about the paths I chose and how they turned out, I try not to regret them. There’s a lesson to be learned in every situation, and sometimes we have to realize what we had so that we can cherish and appreciate what we lost. Ya know? Sometimes it takes time and perspective. A little meditation and journaling always help, too.”

“You’re still journaling?” he asks, almost shocked by this revelation.

A laugh leaves me. “Yes. Of course. One day, when I’m ninety and don’t give a shit about my personal life anymore because I’ll be too ancient to care, I’ll publish them all. The Spill the Sweet Tea Chronicles. I’ve written every rumor in them that I’ve heard since I was in sixth grade.”

He chuckles. “I thought of a memory. Do you remember when you were a freshman in high school, and you wanted to start a gossip newspaper?”

I tuck my lips into my mouth. “No, there was no *wanted*. I actually started

one and even printed them out. Then I was threatened with detention if I kept doing it because some of our classmates were upset. My mom told me that if I got into trouble one more time, she'd have me on shit-shoveling duty until I moved out."

"Oh yeah. Wow. I didn't realize that."

"The truth sometimes hurts!"

Hayden smiles, watching me. "You're beautiful."

Leaning forward, I slide my lips across his parted mouth, then dart my tongue inside. A wave of emotions washes over me, and when I push away, he has green paint on his face. I burst out laughing.

"I'm green, aren't I?"

I wipe it from his cheek and turn my fingers around for him to see. "Want to take a shower with me?"

He nods.

"Carry me there, Star-Lord!" I laugh as Hayden scoops his arms under my body and lifts me with him as he stands.

HAYDEN

I hold on to Kinsley as I carry her into the bathroom. When I set her down, she smirks. Kinsley grabs a package of matches on her counter, then lights a candle in the corner. When she turns it around, I read the words **LOVE SPELL** on it before she flicks the lights off.

Bending over, I scan over the small blocky print on the side.

Before lighting this candle, think about your one true love. Visualize your relationship. Your love spell will be fully cast by the end of this wick, and the universe will receive your message. Trust your spirit guides to deliver.

“Uhh. Is this a real love spell candle you just lit on Halloween?” I lift my brows.

“Did you feel it with your hand and see it with your eyes?”

I reach forward, tickling her. “Smart-ass.”

She laughs, wiggling out of my grip, but she quickly returns to my arms. The room glows gold, casting enough light for us to see each other. As I hold her in the quiet, the mood shifts. I feel it, and I think Kinsley does, too.

“And so what if it is a love spell candle? You don’t believe in that stuff anyway, Star-Lord.”

Leaning in, I whisper in her ear, “You’re gonna fuck around and find out, Gamora.”

“Mm. Kinda like the sound of that.” Kinsley slides her hands up my leather jacket and grabs the zipper, then pulls it down. She pushes it off my shoulders, and it falls to the floor. Her warm fingers trail across my stomach, and I close my eyes, reveling in her touch as she smooths her hand over my cock. The leather of my pants is ready to burst open from how hard she’s already made me.

“Feel good?” she whispers, unzipping my zipper and shoving them to the floor. Then she drops to her knees, moving my boxers to my ankles.

I smirk as she teases my tip with her tongue, then takes me down her throat. I run my fingers through her hair as she bobs on me.

“Nerd fantasy come true.” I groan.

Kinsley pulls away, and her mouth makes a popping noise when she releases me from her lips. “I should probably take this makeup off before your dick looks like an alien. No little green men for me, if you know what I mean.”

“Just gonna leave me hangin’?” I ask, grabbing myself as she stands.

“You’ll survive.” She lifts her brow and unzips the black leather vest. That’s when I realize the white underneath isn’t a shirt but a small piece of fabric sewn in. Her beautiful tits are on full display, and I reach forward to tweak one of her pebbled nipples.

“How ’bout I give you a little show first?” she suggests.

After making sure I have no clothes or shoes on, she drops the lid of the toilet seat down and has me sit. Then she hums as she grabs her titties and rolls her hips. The black leather pants she’s still wearing hug her body like a glove. Kinsley plays with the button and zipper, teasing me. She turns, showing me her perfect ass in those tight pants, then she glances at me over her shoulder, enjoying the attention. Hooking her thumbs on the waistband, Kinsley slides them down and bends over to step out. When she does, a sparkle from her ass glints in the candlelight. She’s pantyless, too.

“Mm,” I say, looking at the jeweled butt plug.

She touches her toes, wiggling her ass only inches from my reach like the temptress she is.

“I love watching you, Hayden. Show me.” She turns and smirks, moving back to the counter as I grab myself. Her eyes constantly dart between my cock and her task at hand. “So hot. Almost finished. Then we’ll get dirty in the shower.”

I stroke up and down my shaft as she wipes the makeup from her face, neck, and hands. She’s naked, her body casting long shadows in the candlelight, and I want her more than I want air, but I know what our agreement is—no sex until a decision has been made. But as far as I’m concerned, that shit is out the window.

“So we’re breakin’ the rules tonight, then?” I need to hear her say it, hear her confirm that she wants this—*me*—just as much as I do.

She nods, looking at me in the reflection as she finishes removing the last bit of green on her skin. “If this is one of the last times we’ll be together, I’m not taking it for granted. I don’t know what the future holds, and neither do you. I’d rather just live in the moment and figure everything else out when the time comes. No rules. Not this time.”

“Thank fuck,” I moan out as Kinsley struts over to me and slides down onto my cock. Her pussy is so tight and slick. “The same girl I fell in love with is still in there, but I’m falling in love with you all over again, but with a different version of you. It’s the best of both worlds.”

She leans in, moaning and whispering in my ear as I palm her breast. “I could never forget you, Hayden. Never.”

“You’re so damn sexy as you ride me.”

Our breathing increases as she bounces up and down on my dick, which aches for more. “Watching you lust over my ass as you jacked off has made me so damn wet.”

A dangerous sound of porcelain rattling grabs our attention. She stops moving, and we both laugh.

“Maybe we shouldn’t break your only toilet?” I give her a puzzled look, then she stands.

“I guess you’re right.” She grabs me while simultaneously reaching over and turning on the water in her fully tiled shower. The stream bursts to life, and she bends down and kisses my cock. “Be a good boy.”

“Why, when I’m with a bad girl?”

“If by bad girl, you mean someone who’s about to fuck your brains out, then yes, I’m a very, very bad girl.” She growls, grabbing my hand and leading me into the shower with her. I reach behind me and close the glass door.

“Damn, your shower is bougie,” I say, as water falls on me from overhead. We take a step apart so we can still talk without being drenched.

“I used to spend a lot of time in here thinking, so when I got my first bonus from the newspaper, I spent it on a remodel. This is my dream shower. A seat for shaving my legs. Two showerheads. And a removable sprayer with several different settings.” She waggles her brows.

“You’ve...”

“Gotten off to it? So many times.”

“I love Kinky Kinsley so fuckin’ much.”

“Guess that makes me your wet dream,” she whispers, then smiles. “And

for years, you were my nightmare.”

I nod, my face softening as I step closer, allowing the stream to fall down my back. “I guess we’re both facing our fears, then.”

“And how am I your fear?” she asks with a tilt of her head.

“Because you’re everything I’ve ever wanted, but I’ve never believed I’m good enough for you. Facing my fear is seeing what happens anyway, with all the risks involved. Lately, I’ve been trying to unpack a lot of shit. I think my insecurity is why I moved to Houston in the first place. I wanted to be someone who could impress you and take care of you. I wanted the ability to buy expensive jewelry and go on Bali vacations. And all I did was lose you.”

She presses her palm against my chest and looks into my eyes. “You didn’t need to impress me, Hayden. I didn’t need anything but you because you were enough for me.” Kinsley smiles and places her hands on both sides of my cheeks, pulling me in for a kiss. “I’m here now.”

“Yes, here you are. And if I’m dreaming, I don’t wanna wake up yet. I need to stay like this a little bit longer.”

She slides her lips down to my nipple. “You’re gonna wake up in the mornin’ next to my naked body, and then you’re cookin’ me breakfast,” she purrs, reaching down and massaging my balls as she tugs my bottom lip into her mouth and sucks.

“Hell, yes.”

“I want pancakes. Bacon. Eggs,” she says between kisses.

“Gah, you’re so good at takin’ my mind off things.”

“We’re living in the moment. Not the past. Right now.”

I run my fingers through her wet hair and slightly pull as her tongue slides into my mouth. Kinsley grips my cock, stroking me until I’m solid, and all I can think about is right now, being with her like this. I was a lucky man to have one chance with her, and I should probably start playing the lottery if I get two.

Moments later, she reaches over and grabs a pink bottle from her shelf. I lift a brow.

“I want you in my ass, baby.” She pops her booty toward me and reaches back, slowly removing the plug. Then she hands me the bottle.

“What is Sassy Juice?”

With her palms pressed against the wall. “Waterproof lube, you dummy. Rated a top pick by Oprah’s magazine.”

“Oprah sells lube?”

She turns around and clicks the bottle open. “If you don’t put it on your cock and fuck me, *you’ll* be selling lube.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I burst into laughter, doing what she demands and pouring some of the slippery liquid into my palm. I coat my length, and I’m surprised by how thick it is. She returns to her position with her palms up against the wall and her back arched, giving me full access to her tight hole. I love seeing this mature, grown-up, sex-positive woman Kinsley has become. She had it right when she mentioned being my wet dream.

I swallow hard, knocking at her back door, but I’m hesitant to enter.

She chuckles and looks over her shoulder at me. “Have you never...”

“No,” I admit. “You’ll be the first person I’ve *ever* fucked in the ass.”

“Great.” She smiles. “Then I’ll have all of your virginities. Go slow. Let me adjust to you, babe. It’s going to feel so fuckin’ good, I promise. Trust me?”

I nod, and she reaches behind her, slowly gliding me in. Her hole is so goddamn tight that my dick feels like it might break off inside her. Kinsley lets out a moan as I take another inch, then another until I’m fully in. Gripping her hips, I slide in and out of her, my vision nearly blurring because it’s so fucking good.

“Yes,” she growls. “You fill me so full.”

“Fuck,” I hiss, and it’s followed by inaudible grunts and pants because I’m unable to form other words while I ride out this ecstasy. Reaching around, I part Kinsley’s pussy lips and massage her needy little clit.

She screams out, her head hanging between her shoulders as she tries to steady herself.

“Your ass is so damn tight, baby.”

“Yes, yes, yes.” Her voice nearly goes up an entire octave. “Your cock is so big. Shit. It’s...” She doesn’t finish her sentence but instead comes. Her entire body convulses, and her ass pulses, too, squeezing me so damn hard as I pound her that I can’t hold back any longer. Two more pumps and I lose myself inside her.

I rest my palms above hers on the wall as we stay connected, trying to come down from outer space. I lean down and smell her hair with my eyes closed, and all I can hope is that the damn love spell candle works and the man she thought of when she cast her spell was me.



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, we wake up twisted together like a pretzel in sheets that hang halfway off the bed. After the shower, we brought it to the bedroom. By the time we finished fucking and lovemaking, there was no hope for the comforter. We were so tired that neither of us wanted to get up to remake the bed. So we figured it out.

“Mornin’,” I say, pressing my lips against Kinsley’s forehead when her eyes slowly blink open.

She snuggles into my body. “Mm. You’re still here.”

“Did you think I’d disappear?”

She pulls the sheet over her breasts, though I can still see her pink nipples through the material. “Making sure I wasn’t dreamin’ about last night.” Her brown hair sticks up in the back from where she slept with wet hair.

“Not a dream,” I tell her. “However, I believe you did say you wanted pancakes for breakfast?”

Kinsley nods. “And coffee, too.”

I smile against her lips before I get up. “You got it. First breakfast, then dessert.”

“I love the sound of that.”

KINSLEY

It's been a week since Hayden and I decided to let things between us be. I've tried not to get attached to him for the past six weeks, but that doesn't mean I'm prepared for him leaving tomorrow. However, today is a happy day, and I'm trying to focus on the good.

Mr. Shaw is being released from the hospital, and Hayden invited me to help welcome him home. I'm a nervous wreck about it even though his parents were like my second family at one time.

As soon as I show up at Hayden's house, he greets me at the door with a kiss. "They should be arriving in the next two hours."

I lift a brow. "So you're tellin' me we have time for a quickie?"

He chuckles, pulls me inside, and pushes me against the front door. The cool wood presses against my back, and I shiver. I'm unsure what causes it, the November temperatures or Hayden's touch. I long for his closeness when he leads me upstairs to his bedroom.

He pushes open the door and steps aside.

I look around. "Whoa. Did we go back in time?"

Posters from twenty years ago still hang on the wall. His laptop is closed on his desk, and there's a notebook with a few scribbles on the top page.

"That's what I said when I came home. Apparently, this is the guest room, and I'm the only person who's slept in it since I left."

I glance around at the different places we've made out—the desk, the floor, and his bed. One weekend, when his parents traveled for a conference, I snuck over and gave Hayden my virginity. It happened right there.

I'll never forget how careful he was as he hovered above me, kissing me. I've read horror stories on the internet, but mine was special. It meant

something. It played out like a first-time love scene in a movie.

I take a few steps forward, then sit on the edge of the mattress and bounce. It still squeaks, and I laugh. "Is this the same bed?"

His head falls back with laughter. "It is."

"Aren't you supposed to replace mattresses like every ten years or something?"

"Not sure, but that one might be old enough to drink at this point." He sits beside me. Hair falls from behind my ear, and he tucks it back and places his warm palm on my cheek before painting my lips with his. We don't exchange words as we undress each other, the intensity of the moment growing with each fluttering heartbeat. It almost feels like I'm a teenager again, brought back to our first time together as we make out on the bed.

HAYDEN GUIDED me up the stairs into his bedroom, which he decorated with twinkle lights. On his desk were small tea light candles he stole from his mom's craft stash. The flames flickered from the ceiling fan.

"You're positive your parents won't burst through the door?" I asked him, worried we'd get caught. I knew Mrs. Shaw would call my mama in a heartbeat and tell her if she caught us. I'd have a chastity belt slapped on in two seconds, and my daddy would throw away the key until I was forty.

He shook his head. "No way. Haley is stayin' at my aunt's. We're alone, sweetheart. Just me and you."

"Forever and always," I whispered as I stood on my tiptoes to kiss him.

He threaded his fingers through my hair as his tongue darted into my mouth. I grabbed his hand and led him to the bed. When I sat, the mattress squeaked, and I laughed. "Hope that won't be a problem."

Our mouths crashed together, and soon, we fell back on his small bed, which was barely big enough for the both of us. I swung my leg over his hips, straddling him, feeling how hard he was. We'd made out like this before, with me on top, rocking myself against him as his hand slid under my bra. But we'd never gone further. I'd lost control, grinding harder, needing and wanting more of him. When I removed my lips from his, he knew what I was thinking.

"Will you take my virginity?" My voice was a whisper.

He searched my eyes. "Are you sure?"

"I want you to have it, Hayden." A person knew when they'd found the

one, regardless of their age. "I'm ready."

I'd just turned sixteen. Hayden was a year and a half older than me, a senior getting ready to graduate. I was only a junior. He'd dated other girls, but they'd never gone all the way, only fooled around.

"Okay," he said. "Lie down."

I rolled over to the side of him and closed my eyes as his fingertips barely touched my stomach. I wore a skirt, and he slid it down, revealing the pink panties I'd put on. His strong hands grazed over my pussy, and my body burned hot. A whimper escaped me when he pressed between my legs, touching me over the fabric.

"Have you ever touched yourself here before?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Never." But it'd always felt good when I was on top of him, grinding against him as we made out.

He smirked. "Is it okay if I slide your panties down?"

I nodded, trusting him, appreciating how he asked for permission even though I'd already given it.

Taking his time, Hayden removed my panties. His long fingers slid down my slit, and I writhed under his touch.

"You're so wet," he mumbled, lifting his fingers to show me. I was almost embarrassed, and he noticed. "It's sexy, Kins. So fuckin' sexy that you're this turned on."

He gently returned them between my legs, rubbing slow circles. My breathing increased, and my heart rate picked up. Something was happening inside me, and whatever he was doing felt like nothing I'd ever experienced.

"Yes, baby," he encouraged as he watched how much control he had over my body. "How does that feel?"

"So. Good." I moaned, my whimpers filling his room. My hips bucked up, and I wanted him to keep going so I could discover what was at the end of this tunnel. I didn't want him to stop. Every muscle in my body tightened as heat spread through me. Whatever it was felt amazing and was building slowly, gradually, and when I couldn't take it any longer, I tipped over the ledge as my entire body convulsed with pleasure I never knew existed.

"Mm, I love watching you come," Hayden whispered.

I looked at him with hooded eyes. "That was amazing."

He smirked. "I can't believe you've never masturbated. Glad to have given you the first orgasm of your life, though."

I snickered and sat up. "Me too. But I want you inside me, Hayden. I

want to go all the way.”

When he stood, I saw the bulge in his jeans. I couldn't take my eyes off him as he undressed. It was the first time I'd seen him completely naked and his cock at full attention. My eyes were as wide as saucers.

“We'll go slow together.”

I nodded, almost afraid of how big he was. I took off my shirt and bra, then lay naked on his bed. He climbed between my legs, and the tip of him waited at the edge of me. My pussy clenched as he barely entered, kissing me.

“Are you okay, baby?” he asked, and I nodded, feeling so full already, just trying to breathe as my heart raced with anticipation. He continued to inch inside me slowly, giving me enough time to adjust to him as he told me how beautiful and sexy I was. Our tongues slid together, and my fingers tugged at his hair until he was fully in. We stayed that way for a few minutes, making out.

“Fuck,” he hissed in my ear. “You feel so damn good, Kins.”

“You do, too,” I told him as he slowly slid out and back in.

“Tell me if I'm hurting you.” He sprinkled kisses on my neck.

“It's okay,” I whispered, loving that we could share something like this. Being with him was ecstasy. Hearing his low growls in my ear as we had sex drove me wild. His mouth slid down to my ear, and he sucked on my lobe, then my neck. I moved my hips, creating some friction, not caring I'd probably have a hickey to cover up tomorrow. When it came time for him to come, he'd pulled out. White slivers shot from the end of his dick and landed on my stomach. Hayden grabbed a towel that was on his floor and cleaned me up. We held each other for a long time, not saying anything.

Then I dropped my arm over his stomach and listened to his heartbeat. “I love you, Hayden.”

The three words we'd exchanged a million times felt like they finally held weight.

“I love you too,” he repeated, pulling me tighter. “Forever and always.”

“DID YOU HEAR ME?” Hayden says against my lips, bringing me back to the present.

“Just lost in your touch.” I shake my head and laugh. Knowing he's leaving has caused all these old memories to flood—memories I'd buried away. Or so I thought.

“I’m gonna miss you,” he repeats.

“I’m gonna miss you, too.”

He moves to the end of the bed and scoots me to the edge before falling to the floor and devouring my pussy. My entire body aches for more of him, and after I come, I move my head to the pillow, and he positions himself between my legs. When his eyes meet mine, we’re teenagers again. His thick cock slams into me, filling me full. He leans down, kissing my neck and sucking as I moan with satisfaction. I graze my fingers over my clit, needing and wanting to come again.

“You’re so fuckin’ sexy, Kins,” he tells me. “I love it when you play with that beautiful pussy.”

“Mm-hmm.” I suck on my bottom lip as he pounds inside me, working my hard little bud. “Shit. I’m so close already.”

I’m nearly panting, knowing I can’t hold back any longer. My vision blurs as I clench around him.

He grabs the comforter with his fists beside my head, teetering on the edge.

“Harder, Hay.” I dig my heels into his ass. He pumps a few more times, my titties bouncing with each stroke until the orgasm releases its hold on him. Warmth fills me full, and he kisses me as we stay connected. I want to tell him that I love him and that I’m still in love with him, too. But I can’t. Not now. Not when he’s returning to Houston to take care of his life. At one point, I wanted to beg him to stay, and now, I’m willingly letting him go.

“Hayden!” a voice calls from downstairs.

Our eyes are wide as we stare at each other.

“Shit, shit,” Hayden says, pulling out and standing. “It’s Haley. She’s early!” The door to his bedroom is wide open, and he rushes over to shut and lock it.

“Where are you?” she hollers.

I look down at my naked body, knowing my lips are swollen. “Give me something to clean up!”

I go into panic mode as footsteps climb the stairs. Hayden throws me a T-shirt.

“This?”

He laughs. “It will be fine! Get dressed.”

I do the best job a girl can in this situation, then slide my panties on and rush to finish dressing. Hayden is hopping around, trying to pull his jeans up.

Then he swipes his shirt off the floor and smooths it down as knocks ring out. Running his fingers through his hair, he cracks it open enough to see her.

“Whatcha doin’ in there?” she asks. “Kinsley with you?”

“What do you want?” Hayden keeps his foot behind the door so she can’t burst in. Something siblings learn early on in life.

Haley starts laughing. “Are you two in your room with the door closed? I’m telling Mom!”

Hayden shuts the door and locks it.

“Oh, come on!” She waits for a few seconds. “Hey, Kinsley!”

I cover my mouth, but it’s useless because I laugh, and she hears.

“I knew you were in there! Anyway, Mom and Dad will be home in about twenty minutes. Givin’ you two a heads-up. Apparently, you need it.”

“Bye, Haley! Mind your own business,” Hayden says.

“Okay, meet you downstairs.” Haley walks away.

After a few minutes, Hayden checks to ensure the coast is clear. Then he turns to me. “How do I look?”

I study his swollen lips and tossed hair. “They’re gonna know.”

He pulls me into his arms and glances at my neck. “Yeah, especially because of that.”

I move to the mirror above his dresser, and my mouth falls open. With my hands on my hips, I turn to him. “Hayden! Look what you did!”

“I know. Uh, sorry?” He gives me a shrug.

“Oh my God, now I’m really gonna be the talk of the town! This thing is the size of Mars! Shit! What a great impression I’m gonna give your parents the first time visiting with them in nearly a decade.”

After taking a step forward, he snakes his arm around my waist and pulls me toward him. “You’re already the talk of the town, Kins. The tea has been spilled.”

He kisses me, and I playfully swat at him, then try to situate my hair so no one can see it. Now I’ll be self-conscious—lots of makeup on it for the next few weeks for me.

“You’re bad.”

“Givin’ you a present to remember me by,” he says playfully. “But anyway, guess we should go downstairs and wait with Haley.”

“Probably a good idea.”

Hayden grabs my hand and leads me into the living room, where Haley plays on her phone. She barely looks up at us when we enter. When she

finally does, she smirks.

“Look at those faces. Guilty as sin.”

Hayden rolls his eyes, and we sit on the couch, making small talk.

“How’s your book goin’?” she asks.

I turn to him wondering the same.

“It’s been great.” A small smile plays on his lips as he meets my eyes. “Being back home has inspired me.”

“I’m so proud of you,” I say.

He glances at his sister. “I’m almost done with it, actually.”

“Finished?” My brows rise. “Oh my gosh. We have to celebrate.”

Hayden shakes his head. “No big fanfare needed. At least until I type the end. Dad asked me to start writing after he’d been admitted. I did it for him and because I wanted to finish a project.”

“Hellloooooo?” Mrs. Shaw says from the door. We turn to her, grinning wide and standing as Mr. Shaw walks in with his cane.

“Kinsley? Well, I’ll be,” he says, taking his time. “Are y’all tryin’ to make me have another stroke? Bringing one of my favorite bookworms to the house.” He pokes at his situation.

“No more of that.” I giggle and hug his parents. His mama embraces me tight like she used to when she considered me her second daughter.

“How’re you feelin’?” I ask as he situates himself in his recliner. Hayden’s mom sets a duffel bag on the floor and joins us.

“Like a million bucks. Glad to be home.” I can tell he’s tired but happy. “Will have to continue home therapy through the holidays, but the doctor said that if I do what I’m supposed to, I should be able to get back to work right after the new year.”

Mrs. Shaw lifts a brow at me, then glances at him. “I’ve told him he should consider retiring and read for a livin’. Won’t listen.”

Hayden chuckles. “That’s Pops.”

“What are you two up to?” his mama asks, looking between us. Her eyes flick to my neck and then back to my gaze. I move my hair, hoping she doesn’t see, but I think it’s a lost cause.

“We’re thinkin’ about drivin’ to Alpine to catch a movie,” he explains, and I nod. “Need to get to bed at a decent time, though. Got a long drive ahead of me in the mornin’.”

The reminder that he’s leaving makes my stomach lurch, but I force a smile. “I suggested we go bowling, but this old geezer said no.”

Haley bursts out laughing. “He has been actin’ like that lately.”

He rolls his eyes but doesn’t deny it. We continue making small talk until Mr. Shaw says he’d like to take a nap, which means visiting time is over.

“Thanks so much for stoppin’ by, Kinsley. Tell your mama and daddy I said hello. Don’t be a stranger, ya hear?”

I nod. “It was real good seein’ you. Take care of yourself.”

“I will. I will.” He lifts his cane high as Hayden’s mom follows him down the hallway where their bedroom is.

When the three of us are alone in the living room, Haley takes a long breath. “I’m so glad he’s home. It’s such a relief.”

Hayden agrees. “Yeah, now maybe things can start going back to normal. Whatever that is.”

“Gotta roll with the punches,” I add.

“I’m gonna stick around for a little while. Y’all headin’ out?” Haley asks.

“Yep. I think so. Wanna spend the rest of the day relaxin’,” he tells her.

She puts her fingers in her ears like a little kid. It makes me snicker because she used to be so grossed out when we kissed. “Y’all stay out of trouble. And no more hickeys. You’re too old for that.”

“Pfft.” He shakes his head, interlocks his fingers with mine, and leads me to the car.

When he gets inside, I shiver, and he turns on the heat. The temperature has dropped, and it’s only the second week of November. “Did you really wanna go watch a movie?” I’m up to do whatever he wants.

He smirks. “What if we *make* a movie instead?”

I’m intrigued. “Are you suggestin’ what I think you’re suggestin’?”

“Abso-fuckin’-lutely.”

KINSLEY

I wake to an empty bed and cold sheets where Hayden was hours ago. Saying goodbye was too hard, so we agreed we wouldn't. He left sometime after I'd fallen asleep. Yesterday felt like a final hurrah, something to be treasured, even though we said we'd see how it goes.

I roll over, my body sore from the inside out, and I cover my head with my blankets. They still smell like him.

I'm glad it's Sunday because I'm unsure I could handle being around anyone today.

I feel...empty. It's the only way to describe it. Like I've lost something I can't replace.

After visiting with his parents, Hayden and I had lain around, spent the entire afternoon fucking, making love, napping, and doing it all over again. And yes, we *did* record it. Knowing he'd watch it later while stroking himself only encouraged me more. I made him promise on his Pawpaw's grave that he'd never show anyone. I trust him, but I also made him AirDrop me a copy.

So much has changed over the past six weeks. It took us a while to get here, and things aren't perfect between us, but it's a start.

For the first time since May, I'm single with no one lined up on the sidelines. The panic of being alone hasn't settled in yet, but I'm sure it will. It always does.

I've not heard a peep from Luca, which is okay. I'd thought when he left, I'd be destroyed. Then Mr. Distraction showed up and whisked me off my feet.

The first time Hayden left, I was happy we hadn't made many memories in my house. Looking around now, I see all the places we've christened.

We've fucked in every damn room. I plop the covers down and stare at the ceiling before forcing myself out of bed. I shower, then grab my journal to write down how I feel.

When I walk into the living room, a large stack of papers with a teal ribbon tied around it sits on the coffee table. On top is an envelope with my name scribbled across the front. I slide out a card that has a heart on the front.

KINS,

You've always supported my writing, so I printed out the book I've been working on for you to read. There's no rush. I know you're very busy. But I did use your favorite font.

Remember that no matter what happens, I'll love you until the day I die. Forever and always.

H

I BLINK AWAY A FEW TEARS, then slide the ribbon off the pages. Slowly, I smooth my hand over the title, feeling the thick paper under my palm, and start reading.

The Story Of Us

DEDICATION: This is for the goddess who will always hold the key to my heart. And for my dad, too!

I SWALLOW HARD, unable to continue. My heart gallops forward as emotions flood me. I'm too sober for this, but it's too early to start drinking. So I step away from it, then crawl into bed to journal. Every once in a while, as my gel pen glides over the lined pages, I glance out the window. The sky is gray, and it's supposed to start raining. The grass has turned brown, and leaves have fallen off most trees.

An hour passes before I finish putting my thoughts onto the page, but I

feel relieved when I finish. I grab my phone and open my meditation app and randomly pick one. After that, I snag a slice of leftover pizza from my fridge, then return to the living room as I eat.

The manuscript might as well be a snake coiled on my table, waiting to strike.

As I'm chewing, my phone buzzes. I grab it and answer.

"Hey, bestie," Summer says. "Whatcha doin'?"

I speak up around a mouthful. "Eatin' pizza."

"Eatin' penis?"

"Pizza!" I say louder before swallowing down the bite.

"Just kiddin'. I heard ya. Remindin' you 'bout Thursday and to see how you're holdin' up."

"What's Thursday?" I ask, sounding puzzled.

"We're supposed to go dress shopping! Me, you, and Remi. Remember?"

I giggle. "Just pullin' your leg. I've been countin' down the days since your engagement."

She huffs. "I was about to say, did Hayden fuck you so hard you got amnesia?"

This makes me snort. "I wish. I mean, not to forget your thing, but to forget him. It's going to be fine, though. I've survived all these years without him."

"That's the spirit," she encourages. "You said you wanted time to be single after your summer fling. You manifested this."

I make a face but realize she's right. "And that's because I'm a powerful goddess."

"Yes, yes, you are. Now, manifest good weather for Thursday. Oh, and a winning lottery ticket if it's not too much trouble."

"I'm on it! Also manifesting twins for you."

Summer gasps. "God, please no. Keep that magic to yourself."

"Triplets?"

She growls. "I'm tellin' Beckett what you said."

"Sister, he's wanted kids for a long time. Better start poppin' 'em out."

Summer laughs. "I'm hangin' up now. If you start feelin' down, call me or come hang out. I'm sittin' at the B&B reading trashy gossip magazines. Speakin' of, how are things going at work?"

"Thanks, friend. It's okay. Mr. Anderson approved my first article about the bookstore. It's getting printed in the Sunday run. Mr. Shaw gave me

permission to talk about his stroke because the whole town has been asking where he is. Hayden suggested it, and he agreed. Should get a lot of reads and hopefully stop a lot of the rumors.”

“That’s fantastic news. Is he doin’ okay?”

“Yeah, he’s doing great. I saw him yesterday, and he was in high spirits. Moving a little slower, but for the most part, he seemed very happy.”

“Oh, and about the rumors. Can you even consider it fake news? You two have been seen a lot together. Then the matching costumes at the Halloween party.”

“You know that wasn’t planned!”

She giggles. “Mm-hmm. Star-Lord and Gamora. Give me a break.”

“I swear, Summer!”

“Not to mention all the hot sex you’ve been having.”

I sit on the couch and lay my head back on the cushion. “Ugh, don’t remind me about what I’m missin’ out on.”

“Are you goin’ to call him?”

“No,” I say softly. “I think we both need time apart to make sure this is the right decision. I don’t wanna make the same mistake twice, and neither does he.”

“That’s respectable.”

“It is, but it’s also hard.”

“Crap, I gotta let you go. A guest is walkin’ up,” she whispers in the receiver. “Come over if you need company, okay?”

“Great chat, talk soon, or see you Thursday.”

The call ends, and I set my phone down next to me. Sucking in a deep breath, I force myself to get up to keep busy, avoiding Hayden’s truths like the plague. I can’t predict what’s on those pages, but I’m not ready to face them yet.

I’m not sure when I will be.

I grab my tarot cards and shuffle them. Immediately, a card flies out.

JUDGEMENT

I NEARLY LAUGH and cry at the same time because it represents second chances.



MONDAY MORNING COMES EARLY, but I'm prepared. I float through my routine, and I stuff Hayden's manuscript into my laptop cross-body bag before I leave. It's so beefy I can't zip it closed. After I grab my signature coffee from Grinding Beans, I go to work an hour early.

When I enter, Mr. Anderson pokes his head out from the break room. "Why are you here? You sick?"

"Good mornin' to you, too!" I set my bag on the floor and power on my desktop.

My boss carries his gross coffee mug over and sips from it. "Somethin' goin' on?"

I glance up at him. "Nah, I'm fine. I need to get ahead of my deadlines before my vacation."

"Vacation?" He looks dumbfounded, and I stop typing.

"Yeah, I requested Thursday and Friday off back in September. Now it's November."

"I'll have to check my calendar and ensure it's been approved."

My mouth falls open, and I shut it and grind my teeth. "I won't be here Thursday or Friday. I'm leavin' town to shop for my best friend's weddin' dress."

He shakes his head and goes to his office. As my email loads, I search my archive to see when he approved my days off. This is why I've learned to get everything, and I mean everything, in writing. Rule number one of covering your ass. It takes me a few minutes to find it, and I let out a sigh of relief. Quickly, I forward it to him.

"I found it, Kinsley," he yells from his office. I roll my eyes.

As I sip my delicious coffee, I see the manuscript out of the corner of my eye, taunting me. I pull it from my bag and set it on my desk. After taking a deep breath, I begin reading chapter one. That's when I realize it's a modern-day Hades and Persephone retelling.

David sits at his desk and then Grace enters. She's only been here for a month and is still in training. She passes by and greets me. "Good mornin',

Kins.”

My eyes are glued to the page as I flip to the next one. “Mornin’.” I smile up at her.

“Whatcha readin’?” she asks.

“I dunno,” I say truthfully. “A love story. Maybe a tragedy. Hades and Persephone retelling.”

“Ahh, a tragedy then.”

“No, don’t say that. It needs to have a happy ending.”

She looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. “And what if it doesn’t? It’s not like you could rewrite it.”

I glance up at her, understanding why my brother finds her attractive. She’s the type of girl who should be an elementary school nurse because she’s great with kids. “If it doesn’t, I’ll contact the author and demand it’s changed.”

Grace laughs and shakes her head. “That’s a good one.”

“Yeah,” I say, but she doesn’t realize I’m serious.

HAYDEN

When I returned to Houston, I had my first therapy session online. It was a get-to-know-you discussion, but there was a fuckton to unpack. It was healthy to lay it all out on the table, and it felt good. I'm not sure why I've never given it a chance before, maybe because I've been so used to compartmentalizing how I feel about things. Something I'm working on. We're meeting again next week, but I was given homework. He asked me to look at different things in my environment and decide what works for me and what doesn't. Then write down any triggers I found.

I glance around my condo, and it doesn't feel like home. The bright-red furniture that cost thousands of dollars sits in front of a large TV. The stark-white walls have artwork Penelope bought from an art gallery downtown.

I stand before the three large canvases nearly covering the long wall behind the ugly couch. Splatters of red splash across the front of what looks like scribbles. It reminds me of a D-rated slasher movie. From the rug on the floor to the light fixtures from above, this isn't somewhere I'd ever imagined myself living. All of these things carry high price tags and were purchased to impress those who come over. Impress the men my fiancée fucked in our house.

I pull the paintings down and lean them against the wall. Then I grab the glass bowl full of weird balls in the center of the crystal coffee table and drop it into the trash. It shatters, but I don't care. My complacency and my need to make my partner happy erased my identity. Continuously agreeing with what Penelope wanted took away my individuality and gave her the control over me that she craved. I'd work more hours for her. I'd spend more money on her. I'd have done anything for her. Until I saw the mask fall. Until I saw her

for what she was—a spoiled brat playing grown-up in designer clothes.

My phone buzzes on the kitchen counter. It's Gia, so I answer.

“We're scheduling a meeting for two this afternoon. Do you think you can make it since you're in town?”

“Yeah, sure. I'll be there,” I tell her. We usually have a shakedown meeting around this time to prepare for the upcoming tax season.

“Great, see you then,” she says, and the call ends. I wonder if Ralph told her what happened or if he continued pretending he was not cheating on his wife. However, today, I'll make it known.

I won't be Hayden Shaw, the nice guy, anymore. Fuck that.

Going home reminded me who the hell I am, and there will be some big changes in the future. Standing in the kitchen, I scroll through my phone. When I see a few pictures Kinsley and I took together, I can't help but feel a flood of emotions. Her blue eyes shine bright as she smiles wide at the camera.

Since I left Valentine, I haven't heard from her. Not a quick check-in. Not about my book. It's been radio silence. I'm trying not to read into it too much and continue forward with my plan. I hope it's not a mistake.

KINSLEY

On the way to El Paso, Summer and Remi tell me about the crazy shit they've already seen at the B&B.

"Sis, he was naked!" Remi tells me. "I don't know how he got locked out of his room without his clothes on. I didn't ask any questions!"

Summer giggles. "Harrison caught someone takin' a big nasty shit out by the barn. The guy asked him if he had any toilet paper handy."

"Oh God." I shake my head. "Let me guess...my brother brought him a roll?"

Remi and Summer are in stitches over it. "He did."

"Well, I heard some juicy new gossip spreading around town," I say, piquing their interest.

"Yeah? Is it the one where Hayden is moving back to Valentine to propose to you?" Summer asks as we pull into the bridal boutique.

I jerk my head toward her as she parks. "Please tell me that's not spreadin' around."

"It is. I swear on our friendship."

That's when I know she's serious. I groan. We look at the large building and lean forward to read the sign.

"This is the place?" Remi asks. "Looks expensive."

"Appointment only," Summer explains. "But they're serving us mimosas while we wear fluffy bathrobes in our private dressing room as dresses in different styles are delivered to us by a concierge."

"Damn," I say. "This is awesome."

"Was Beckett's idea, honestly. I was gonna order a dress from Amazon." She snickers. "My mom kinda freaked out about that one. I told her I could

marry Beckett in jeans and a T-shirt and be happy. All this ceremony stuff is a lot. Stupid rules everyone is supposed to follow.”

We get out of her Jeep and walk inside. The receptionist who greets us looks like she should be a model in a bridal magazine. A few minutes later, we’re led down a hallway. The crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling cast rainbow reflections on the wall. The door to our private dressing area swings open, and inside are our bathrobes with name tags. Remi gasps as she glances around.

“We’ll leave you to it,” the woman states. “Bridal dresses are on this rack. Bridesmaid on that one. They’ve all been chosen based on your measurements and heights. However, they may still need adjustments before the big day. If you need anything, press this button on the wall.”

“Sure thing,” Summer tells her and smiles wide, then we’re left to ourselves.

The three of us squeal, ripping off our clothes and putting on the robes.

“Mimosa?” Remi asks, holding up the champagne.

“Yes!” Summer says and rushes over to her. Once our glasses are full, we *tink* them together and drink. It’s sweet and delicious.

“So you gonna leave us hangin’ or tell us about that rumor?” Summer tilts her head.

“Oh yeah, I forgot. It’s about Cash.”

Cash, Beckett’s best friend, is building a veterinarian clinic on the Horseshoe Creek Ranch property.

Summer’s face contorts. “He’s not moving home until the facility is finalized. I think February.”

“His ex, shit, what is her name again?” I look up as if I’ll be able to pull it from the sky.

“Cora,” Summer finally says.

“Yeah, she’s already devising a plan to win him over again,” I explain.

“That’s ridiculous.” Summer waves it away.

“Is it?” I lift my brows. “She’s recently divorced and moved back to town. Apparently, she asked about Cash’s business to find out when he’d be returning.”

“I can’t wait to tell Beckett,” Summer says. “Cash needs someone easygoing and not too high-strung. If I remember correctly, she’s the one who had the meltdown at the deli when they stopped serving corned beef hash.”

Remi snorts. “Y’all remember the weirdest shit. I also heard something too.”

We both turn our heads to meet her eyes.

“I heard you haven’t spoken to Hayden since he left.”

Summer’s mouth falls open. “Why?”

I hold up one hand and shake my head. “Look, I’m letting the universe work it out.”

“Kinsley!” Summer glares at me. “That’s not a good enough reason. I thought you two were gettin’ along when he left and that you were goin’ to try to stay together while he was in Houston.”

I down the rest of my mimosa and go for a refill. “I never said I’d date him long distance. That’s still a no for me. I’m giving him space. He’s been away from his place for nearly two months. I’m sure he’s busy as hell trying to get resettled. I don’t want to seem needy.”

“I don’t understand you sometimes,” Summer tells me, and she smiles.

“Oh, I never understand her,” Remi says.

“I don’t need you two gangin’ up on me. I have it under control. But...”

“Spill it,” Summer urges.

“He did write a book and gave it to me before he left,” I say.

“He did what?” Remi is shocked. So is Summer.

“What’s it about?” my sister asks.

“Me and him. We’re the main characters, just with different names. The relationship is eerily similar to our story, but not. Sometimes, people are metaphors for different events that happened. I can’t explain it, but there is a lot of truth in the pages, and he knew I’d get it.”

They’re both silent.

“How does it end?” Summer asks.

I shrug. “I haven’t finished it yet. But so far, it’s...I don’t have any words to describe how well-written it is. The storytelling is top-notch. It’s beautiful how he strung his words together, and I can feel how much raw emotion he poured into each sentence. But I had to stop reading because I got too emotional.”

“You better finish it. Don’t you wanna know how it ends?” Remi asks, setting her empty flute glass on the table.

“At the rate it’s goin’? And with how many tears I’ve cried? I don’t think it has a happy endin’.”

Summer walks over to the beautiful white dresses and pulls one off the

rack. “Pinkie swear and promise me that you’ll finish it tonight.”

“Oh, come on, don’t make me.” My voice comes out as a whine.

She walks over, darting out her pinkie, waiting for me to take it. I do, but not without groaning.

I look at my sister. “Don’t shake your head at us, little miss.”

She shrugs. “You’re both ridiculous and stubborn. Totally made for each other.”

I wrap my arms around Summer and squeeze her tight. “Besties for life. Now, let’s help get you into these dresses.”

She squeals, handing me the mermaid one.

For the next three hours, we take dresses off and put them on, talk about town gossip, and laugh a lot.

“I think that’s the one,” I say as Summer spins around, smiling.

“It has pockets, Kins!” She stuffs her hands inside and gives us another twirl.

“Oh wait, let me take a pic of this one. Almost forgot!” I grab my phone and snap a shot, and then we get carried away with the selfies.

“So I’ve narrowed it to five choices.” She snickers.

Remi laughs. “Technically, you could pick two. One for the ceremony and one for the reception.”

“I didn’t even think about that!” Summer turns and touches the soft fabric on the rack.

“I vote for pockets!” I shrug. “You were glowin’, and your boobs looked great.”

“She has a point.” Remi steps forward, pulling up an elegant dress that hugs Summer’s hips. “However, this one looked classic on you. I think it was my favorite.”

Summer glances at it, and I can tell she likes that one too. “This is hard. So choosing five dresses is a no, right?”

“Right,” Remi and I say together.

“Babe, you don’t have to make a decision today. We have tons of photos from all different angles. Take a week or two and think it over. You’re going to look stunning no matter which one you pick. Seriously, you can’t go wrong.”

“It’s like you knew I had decision fatigue,” she tells me.

“I could feel your energy shifting,” I explain.

“It’s as exhausting as shopping for a new car. But I know these photos

will haunt me for the rest of my life. When Beck and I are wrinkly, celebrating our seventieth wedding anniversary with all our little great-great-grandkids running around, pictures from our wedding will be everywhere.”

I burst out into laughter. “That’d make you a hundred, and at that age, I don’t think you’re gonna give a shit about what dress you wore at your wedding. You’ll be farting dust at that point.”

“Okay, okay, you’re right. I guess I’m nervous, that’s all.”

“That’s normal. I mean, you are joining our crazy family,” Remi says.

“Truth.” I laugh.

There’s a knock on the door, and Summer tells the woman which dresses she’d potentially like and will call in a few weeks with a decision. I’m proud of her.

“And for the bridesmaids?” the woman kindly asks.

Summer nervously laughs. “I need more time on those, too, please.”

“No problem at all. It’s hard to decide when presented with so many good choices,” she says.

Summer agrees, thanking her, then we get dressed and leave. On the way home, we stop for lunch. Then the three of us talk nonstop on the way back to Valentine. I think about Hayden, wondering if Summer is right and I should text him. But wouldn’t he reach out if he wanted to chat?

She pulls into my driveway to drop me off, and Summer turns to me. “Kins. Don’t forget about our pinkie promise.”

“I won’t.”

“Call me after,” Summer demands.

“Fine.” I laugh and tell Remi bye.

Knowing Summer won’t let this rest, I do what I’ve avoided since Tuesday and grab the last fifty pages of Hayden’s book. I pour a glass of wine, grab a blanket, and settle onto the couch. Then I start reading.

Tears fall onto the pages, saturating them as Hades and Persephone are pulled apart. He returns to the underworld, leaving her alone because that’s what he believes she truly wants. She thinks he’ll never return to her, that she’s fated to be alone for the rest of her eternal life. I read faster, crying over Hades’s pain and how much he cares about Persephone. Instead of taking her to the underworld with him, he selflessly left her in the sunshine, where she was happiest, as he tried to find a way back to her.

I squeeze my eyes closed and get up to grab some tissue. When I glance

at myself in the reflection of the TV, all I can do is laugh. Hayden has always had a way with words, but he's outdone himself. After a quick break, I return, unable to read the last ten pages fast enough.

When I get to the final sentence, the story ends with a cliffhanger.

"Are you fuckin' kiddin' me?" I say out loud, my voice almost sounding foreign.

On the bottom, Hayden left a note.

KINS,

Thank you for reading this. I'm sure you noticed how much of our story was written in this book. Writing it was therapeutic. It's left on a cliff because I don't know where we go from here. Will our story be a tragedy or a love story? The question has haunted me since you walked into the bookstore asking for an interview. It already feels like a lifetime ago. Without you, I might as well live in the underworld, like Hades, because it would be hell. I'll give you as much time as you need, but I'm allowing you to decide how our story ends. Will it be a love story or a tragedy? The ball is in your court.

FOREVER AND ALWAYS,

H.

I DON'T CRY as I call Summer. I sob crocodile tears, the kind that makes my bottom lip quiver.

"Oh my gosh, are you okay?" she asks when I'm barely able to get her name out. "Do you need me to dial 911?"

"I'm...I'm fine. I finished. I...I...I called you and kept my promise."

"How did it end?"

I blow my nose with a tissue because snot is running. I'm a damn mess. "On a fucking cliffhanger!"

She howls with laughter. "You do hate a cliffy."

"Right! I've *always* hated them." I laugh and snuffle. "But I know what I need to do."

"What's that?"

“I have to write the proper ending for this story.”

“Yes.” She almost sounds giddy. “When are you going to start?”

“Right now.”

KINSLEY

Last night after I spoke with Summer, I opened my laptop. I wrote until my wrists ached, pounding away as the sun rose. When I typed the end, I shut my laptop and silently sat there.

With a yawn, I make a cup of Sleepytime tea and watch the early morning fog roll in. The chill in the air nips at my ankles as steam rises from the hot liquid. When my mug is empty, I open the travel app and book a direct flight to Houston for the morning. After I get some sleep, I'll pack.

I'm happy that I took Friday off. Past Kinsley must've had some divine intuition to make this weekend a long one. Or is the universe doing what it does and is taking care of me? Probably both.



SATURDAY MORNING COMES EARLY. I leave around six and drive to El Paso. All I bring with me is a small duffel bag and two changes of clothes. As my plane touches down in Houston, I get a text from Haley confirming Hayden's address. I asked her not to mention it to anyone, and she swore she wouldn't. I think she understands how much is riding on this.

The airport in Houston isn't as large as I thought it would be. There is no sky train to take, only an escalator leading to the rental car area. The crystals in my pocket click together. I reach in and rub them, hoping they give me the strength and power I need to have this conversation. Once I'm given the keys to my vehicle, I plug my phone in and then type his address into the GPS. I don't know if he's home, but I don't want to text him. What I need to say has

to be delivered face-to-face.

I'm an hour from his place, and the traffic is horrendous. People pass me and cut me off like they're driving for NASCAR. Why even have blinkers here? It's not like anyone uses them as they swerve in front of me, nearly sideswiping the front bumper. When I take the exit off the five-lane freeway, I let out a sigh of relief. Houston sucks. I'm so glad I didn't move here.

My destination is five minutes away, and my heart races so rapidly that I pull over to take a few deep breaths. I've rehearsed what I want to say to him all day and go over it one more time.

Once I feel a bit calmer, I continue forward.

I park on the side of the street and look at his place. I check the address Haley sent me to make sure I'm in the right location because this seems like a lot. It's a ritzy neighborhood. Every condo has a luxury car in the driveway. When I spot his Mercedes in the garage, I smile, knowing he's home. Hopefully.

"You can do this," I whisper, trying to give myself a pep talk. "No matter what the outcome is."

Then I grab my phone and get out. I carefully make my way up the sidewalk, and my nerves get the best of me when I ring the bell.

On the other side, I hear footsteps, and I smile wide.

The door swings open, and I'm faced with a beautiful blond woman with hazel eyes. This is Hayden's ex-fiancée—Penelope. She lifts her hand to brush the hair from her face, and the gigantic engagement ring sparkles in the sunlight.

"Can I help you?" She looks me up and down, annoyed that I don't immediately answer.

I'm at a loss for words seeing her here after everything Hayden had said about their relationship. I clear my throat, feeling played. "Sorry, I have the wrong address."

A sneer of a grin meets her lips, and I turn, rushing to my car. My emotions threaten to spill over. My vision blurs, and my head pounds because none of this makes sense. Unless Hayden was playing me.

I unlock the car, rushing to the driver's side, when I hear him yell my name.

"Kinsley!" Hayden is at the doorway, rushing across the sidewalk. I hurry and press the button to start the car. I can barely look at him as he waves me down, screaming my name, asking me to stop.

When I press the gas, he runs in front of the car, and I brake hard. Tears stream down my face as he stands barefoot in the street beside the driver's side window. "Kins, wait. Please. I can explain everything. Please."

"I'll run you over, Hayden!" I angrily meet his eyes.

His palm presses against the glass. "She's only here to get the rest of her shit. I promise."

"I saw her ring!"

He holds out both of his hands and laughs. "She's engaged to someone else. Look."

He points at a Jaguar parked on the other side of the street, where a man is inside typing furiously on his phone.

"That's her new man. Please don't leave."

I put the car into park, covering my face with my hands, feeling absolutely ridiculous as the rush of adrenaline courses through my veins. All I can do is laugh and cry. A truck drives behind us and waits, so I move out of the way to the side of the street.

When I get out, Hayden rushes over and pulls me into his arms, sliding his tongue into my mouth. We're desperate and greedy for each other, making out in the street.

"Fuck, I missed you," he says against my lips, grabbing my hands.

"I missed you more. Also, I'm pissed."

He smirks. "You came all this way to tell me that?"

I nod and look down, noticing he has no shoes on. Penelope walks out of the house and leans three horrendous paintings against the wall as she slams the door. She struggles to carry them across the street, but Hayden doesn't offer to help. He grabs my hand, leading me down the sidewalk, and when I pass her, she rolls her eyes at me. I hold back a chuckle, not wanting that karma.

Once inside, Hayden locks the door before placing his palm on my cheek and returning his lips to mine. I moan against him, holding his shirt in my fists. When we pull away, I notice moving boxes stacked against the wall, and the place is empty.

"Where is all your furniture?"

"I sold it," he tells me.

"Why?" I don't fully understand.

"Because I hated it. I hated everything about this place."

I give him a puzzled look as he slides his arm behind my back, pulling me

close. “Wait. Before you say anything else, I have to give you something.”

Now he’s confused. I rush out to the car, grab the twenty-five pages I wrote, then return. I hand them over to him.

“What’s this?” He flips through it, glancing up at me.

“Hades and Persephone didn’t have a proper ending, so I wrote one.”

“You started writin’ again, Kins?”

I nod, biting my bottom lip. “The words came out of me.”

Hayden runs his fingers through his hair, searching my face. “I can’t believe you finished it. What did you think?”

“It was...beautiful. I cried so damn much. It’s the best story I’ve ever read.”

His breathing grows ragged. “Really?”

“I wouldn’t lie. If it sucked, I’d say nice try. It’s amazing, Hayden. But... it wasn’t complete.”

“A text would’ve worked.” He smirks.

“No, because it’s deeper than that, and you and I both know it.”

He nods, swallowing. “I have to tell you something before you finish because right now, I dunno what you’ll say. You’re unpredictable, babe.”

I reach inside my pocket, holding the amazonite, waiting patiently. It’s known as the lucky hope stone.

After a few seconds, he blurts it out. “I’m moving back to Valentine. I sold everything in my condo. I resigned from my job yesterday.”

My mouth parts slightly. “What?”

He laughs. “Sounds crazy, doesn’t it? I was trying to be someone I wasn’t. Bein’ with you made me realize who I am at my core. I’m a man who is so ridiculously in love with you still, and I can’t think about anything else. And I love the bookstore and writin’ and readin’. This place isn’t me. And you knew that all those years ago. I was too stubborn to see my truth. You’ve always known me, Kins. Fuck, I love you so much.”

“Hayden,” I whisper, wrapping my arms around his waist, then looking into his eyes. “I’m in love with you. I can’t deny it anymore. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life looking for someone who makes me feel like you always have. I’ve done that, and it got me nowhere. I can’t imagine you not in my life, not anymore. I didn’t expect this...for you to leave it all behind.” I look around at the empty condo.

He smirks. “The universe works in mysterious ways, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.” The papers I clipped together flap in his hand, and I point at them.

“You have to read what I wrote.”

“Right now?”

“Right now.”

“Okay, I have the perfect place we can go. You’re gonna love it.”

Hayden leads me to his car and drives us to a cupcake shop, where they serve coffee and every flavor of cupcake imaginable. We find a table in the corner, and as he reads, I sip my coffee, eat a chocolate cupcake, and watch his expression. Every once in a while, his eyes meet mine, and he smiles before returning to my words. When he finishes the final page, he turns it over and covers his mouth with his hand, studying me. I swallow hard, unable to read his reaction as he stares at me.

“Well?” I finally say.

“It’s...*incredible*, sweetheart. A proper love story with a happily ever after.” He reaches forward, grabs my hands, and rubs his thumbs against mine. “I *will* fucking worship you for the rest of our lives.”

“Thank the gods,” I say as Persephone would. “I love you so much, Hayden.”

“I love you, too.” He leans forward to kiss me, and I nearly melt into him.

“Move in with me.”

Hayden returns to his chair, laughing. “You’re serious?”

“Fuck yes, I am. Unless you have a place to stay?”

He shakes his head. “Was gonna move back in with the folks and figure it out later. Mom was stupidly happy.”

“I bet she was. But there’s no pressure if you don’t wa—”

“Yes, Kins. I wanna wake up with your naked body pressed against mine every damn mornin’. Need to make up for lost time.”

I let out a relieved sigh. “I was thinking the same. I’m so damn happy.”

“Yes, babe.” He takes a sip of his coffee.

“So there’s a new rumor floating around town about us.”

“Of course there is.”

I smile. “I think I’m going to start some rumors about myself. See how far it goes. A social experiment.”

“Sneaky. So what are they sayin’ now?”

“That you’re movin’ back to town to be with me.” I snort.

“Well, that’s not a rumor, Kins. That’s reality.” He winks.

“There’s an additional part to it, though. Something about a proposal.”

“Sounds like someone’s playin’ fortune teller and is predicting the

future.”

I chew on my bottom lip. “You’d make me your wife?”

“In a heartbeat. And if your mother wouldn’t murder me, I’d take you to the courthouse right now and make it official.”

I allow his words to sink in fully. “Don’t make me call your bluff.”

“I wish you would.” Then he laughs. “However, the courthouse is closed on Saturday. But if it was a weekday, you better bet your ass we’d be on our way.”

The fact that I even considered it has me blushing.

“When are you flyin’ back to El Paso?” he asks as we leave the cute little bakery.

“Tomorrow mornin’.”

“Can you cancel your flight and drive back with me tomorrow instead?”

I gasp. “Whoa, you’re coming back that soon?”

He laughs. “No reason to wait any longer.”

“I’d love that.”

“I rented a hotel for tonight since I don’t have any furniture. Join me?”

“Hell yes.”

On the way back to his condo, I call the airline and cancel my flight. Instead of refunding me, I get a credit and make Hayden promise we’ll take a week away somewhere fun once he’s settled. We go inside his place, and he interlocks his fingers with mine as he makes one final walk-through.

“You okay?” I ask once he’s gone through every room.

“Good riddance.” Hayden wraps his arm around my shoulder and leads me out. “The movers are coming on Monday to grab all these boxes. The real estate agent will put it on the market next week, then all of this will be behind me, once and for all.”

He follows me to return the rental, then I climb inside his car. Relief floods through me. He holds my hand as he drives us downtown. When we pull up to a five-star hotel, I turn to him. “This is too much.”

“I need a good night’s sleep. This past week has been shit.”

I lift a brow at him. “Oh, I’m not lettin’ you get any sleep.”

He kisses my knuckles and looks into my eyes. “I actually love the sound of that. You think you can keep up?”

“Pretty sure I can outlast you.”

The valet opens my door and allows me to step out. Hayden grabs his bag and mine, and we check in. Our keys are slid across the desk, and we’re on

our way. Once inside the elevator with the mirrored walls, our mouths slam together. Hayden presses me against the cold glass, and as my tongue slides inside his mouth, his hand palms my breast. I moan out, hoping we make it to our floor without stopping, needing the elevator to hurry the hell up.

The doors slide open, and we're so lost in each other we barely notice. As they start to close, Hayden darts his arm out and pulls me with him. We laugh and kiss down the hallway, then Hayden struggles to pull the key from his pocket as I touch him.

"Shh," I say when he growls loudly.

Finally, he scans the key, and the door opens.

I gasp, looking out the large windows that give us the perfect view of downtown. "This is gorgeous."

"I agree," he tells me, but he's watching me, not looking out the windows. "Wait until you feel the bed, though."

I lie back on the mattress, and it feels like a cloud. Hayden crawls on top of me, and I prop myself on my elbows to kiss him.

"Thank you," he whispers.

"For what?"

"For givin' me a second chance."

"I'm not lettin' you go again," I admit, wanting him to know how serious I am about that.

"I'm forever and always yours, Kins."

"Forever and always," I repeat.

Hayden stands, and I sit on the edge of the bed. I hook my fingers in his jeans and remove them from his body as he removes his shirt. He takes his time undressing me, kissing my naked body as I lie on the fluffy blankets, enjoying every second of his electric touch. Then Hayden does what he promised and worships me *all* night long.

HAYDEN

TWO WEEKS LATER

Living with Kinsley has been a dream come true, and every day I ask myself if this is real. Dad is doing great and has been itching to get back to work, but Mom has stood her ground and not allowed it. However, she's started covering part-time shifts as I get settled. Life has been wild and unpredictable, and if anyone told me at the beginning of the year that this was where I'd be now, I wouldn't have believed them.

Penelope already married the new sucker.

The accounting firm already replaced me.

And my condo sold yesterday.

That part of my life is officially over and behind me, and I've already started my healing journey to live a healthier and happier life with the woman I've loved since I was a teen.

"Hey, babe. I'm 'bout to leave," I say from the bedroom as I slide on some jeans. Then I grab a plaid shirt from the closet and button it up, knowing it's cold outside.

I quickly walk into the bathroom and run my fingers through my hair. In the corner on the counter is the love spell candle. Completely burned. I pick it up and carry it into the living room, holding it. "Did you leave this thing a review?"

She sits on the couch with her laptop on her legs, typing away. Kinsley

started working on her debut novel once I moved in and has let me read the pages she's written each night before bed.

"Hold on. One sec, please. I must finish this sentence before I lose my train of thought." She continues, not taking her eyes off the screen when I come into view.

Half a minute later, she looks up at me and glances at my hand, seeing the glass jar. The wick is burned away, and a small layer of red wax lies at the bottom. A bark of a laugh releases from her. "Oh gosh, no, but I probably should. Seems to have worked, didn't it?"

"I'd say so." I read the back of the candle and laugh. "Five stars."

"Surprised to see it made a believer out of you."

I chuckle as she closes her laptop and sets it next to her. "Gettin' ready to go?"

I move closer, then lean over to kiss her quickly before putting on my boots. "Yep, gonna head over there now."

Her brothers asked me to meet them at the barn at Horseshoe Creek Ranch.

"I think I need a break." She sets her computer beside her and grabs the deck of tarot cards on the table.

"Probably be there for an hour or so. Not sure."

She starts shuffling and smiles. "Okay, have fun."

"I'm sure it'll be a blast." I give her a wink, then leave.

Coldness surrounds me, and I'm glad remote start exists. I slide into the smooth leather of my Mercedes and drive the short distance to the ranch. It's next door to Kinsley's parents' land, so it's close. When I arrive on the property, I pass a state-of-the-art building that will eventually be Cash Johnson's veterinary clinic.

I pass the bed-and-breakfast. It's decorated with white Christmas lights since it's only three weeks away, and wooden cutouts of snowmen and reindeer decorate the front. When I arrive at the large training facility, the Valentine brothers' trucks are parked on the side of the barn. I slide in next to them.

After cutting the engine, I grab my phone and make my way inside.

"Hello?" I walk in and look around. The next thing I know, I'm being yanked up and suspended in the air by my feet.

Beckett, Harrison, Colt, Emmett, and Sterling surround me with their arms crossed.

“Okay, okay, great prank. You can let me down now.” I glance around at them.

Beckett crosses his arms over his chest and shakes his head. His focus stays narrowed in on me, and I’m not sure I like his serious demeanor. “No can do, Hayden.”

“Not until we have a little chat and we’re on the same page,” Harrison adds, pushing me a little so I swing. He smirks, watching me swing, but I don’t give them the satisfaction of losing my shit.

I glance at Colt and Emmett, who are usually levelheaded, but now they’re accomplices. Sterling tries to hold back laughter, but he’s eighteen, so I’m sure this is hilarious to him.

“I’m listenin’.” I keep my tone flat, not giving them any reason to continue.

Harrison clears his throat and steps forward, looking directly into my eyes. “If you break Kinsley’s heart again, we will break your arms, legs, and dick.”

This makes me laugh, and a look of confusion spreads across their faces. “If I break her heart again, I give you full permission because that shit ain’t happenin’.”

“That’s the correct answer,” Beckett says.

Colt sighs. “You have no idea what she went through after you two ended things. She can’t go back to that place.”

My expression softens. “She’s told me, and it’s not somethin’ I’m proud of. But I can promise you, I don’t plan on lettin’ her go ever again. I’m going to make your sister my wife after I speak with your daddy, of course, and get his permission. I love her more than life itself.”

“My sister has been different since you came back to town. She’s genuinely happy,” Sterling admits. When we broke up, and I left the first time, he was still a kid.

“And if Kinsley decides to kick you to the curb? Then what?” Beckett asks.

“Then I’ll leave. She’s callin’ the shots. I don’t want to be with someone who doesn’t want to be with me. Period. Now, can you let me down?”

“What’s the magic word?” Harrison states.

“Fuckin’ now?” I glare at him.

He nods at Emmett, who grabs a ladder from the storeroom, then Harrison pulls a knife from his pocket. He climbs up, and while it takes him a

few minutes, he eventually severs the rope, and I fall to the ground with a hard thud, nearly knocking the breath out of me.

Beckett reaches out his hand to help me, a hypothetical olive branch, an acceptance of our relationship.

I take his offered hand, and he pulls me to my feet, then pats me on the back. “Nice chat.”

“Sorry I had to do that to ya,” Harrison says, giving me a brotherly hug.

Colt reaches out for a firm handshake. “Welcome to the family.”

Sterling and Emmett shake my hand, too.

Harrison returns with an expensive bottle of bourbon and takes a shot, and then we pass it around the circle.

“You’re one of us now,” Beckett tells me. “Brothers for life.”

I smile for the first time since I stepped foot in the barn, and I realize this was an initiation, a welcoming to become a part of their family.

“Nothin’ like gettin’ hazed by the Valentine brothers.” I dust the dirt off my jeans.

“Now this stays between us or—” Beckett doesn’t have to finish.

“You don’t have to worry about it.” I interrupt. I don’t plan on telling anyone.

Harrison walks out into the pasture and waves us on. We follow, and I notice wood stacked with chairs around it. He lights a match, and the fire catches. The wood crackles and pops as we sit around the flames, warming ourselves in the cold. The bottle of whiskey is passed around as we talk about life in Valentine.

“So you want kids?” Beckett asks.

“One day,” I say.

“You know, when I was little, Kinsley used to tell me she wanted to have eleven—one more than Mama had,” Colt explains.

“Uh, that’s news to me.” I try to imagine having that many kids, especially coming from a small family.

When I swallow down the lump that formed in my throat, Harrison laughs. “You shoulda seen your face.”

“So it was a joke?” I glance around.

“Oh, it wasn’t,” Colt confirms.

“I guess we’re gonna have to talk when I get home.” I take another swig of bourbon.

The fire burns for a few hours, and when darkness begins to fall, Sterling

sprays the fire down with a hose we leave.

When I walk through the door, Kinsley's in the kitchen eating a cookie. As soon as she sees me, her expression changes. "Oh God. What did they do to you?"

"Nothin' at all." I move toward her and rest my hands on her waist, kissing her softly.

She pulls away, smelling the fire on my clothes. "Why don't I believe you?"

"We sat around and drank and talked. It was nice." I purposely left out the part where they threatened to break my dick off.

"With the way you smell and that plaid shirt, you're givin' me lumberjack vibes." She waggles her brow.

"Before I pull out my axe and start chopping your wood, is there a specific number of kids you want to have one day?"

Kinsley bursts into laughter and is nearly wheezing. I grin, watching her, but I'm not kidding.

"It's an important question," I say.

She composes herself and places her hand on my chest, staring up into my eyes. "Whatever happens, happens, Hayden."

"So there's not a magic number?"

Resting her palm on my cheek, she looks into my eyes, grinning. "Eleven."

"Shit," I gasp out. "Guess you better get that implant removed, or you'll be knocked up until you're fifty."

She snickers. "First comes love. Second comes marriage. And we'll worry about the rest later. However, you're gonna be one sexy daddy."

Our lips magnetize together, and I run my fingers through her hair, my cock growing hard. "And you're gonna be a hot-as-fuck MILF. Wanna go practice?"

"Can we start in the shower?" she asks, peeling her shirt off and revealing her beautiful breasts.

I reach forward and tweak her nipple. "Hell yeah."

EPILOGUE

HAYDEN

“*I* have the champagne!” I tell Kinsley, grabbing the two gigantic bottles and carrying them to the truck. It’s New Year’s Eve, and we’re going to the bed-and-breakfast for a party Summer is throwing. After the mishap at the Halloween celebration, they decided to keep it to friends and family. However, considering how many Valentine children there are and how many friends they have, it’s expected to be a full house. Nothing is small when it comes to them.

Christmas was wild.

When I walk back inside, Kinsley’s wearing a silver dress that hugs her like spandex.

“Babe, you look amazin’. Glad you’re mine. Otherwise, you’d be hit on nonstop.”

Her ruby-red lips turn up into a sly grin. “I’m not wearing any panties either.”

“I expect nothin’ less.” I close the space between us and run my hand up the back of her thigh until I grab her bare ass. “I’m tempted to throw you over my shoulder and carry you to bed.”

“Oh gosh, we can’t be late. Summer has a whole-ass itinerary planned or something with cocktails and hors d’oeuvres.”

The real reason is that Kinsley can’t be late anywhere. She arrives early, or she doesn’t go. There is no in-between with her.

“Shit, I almost forgot.” Kinsley goes to the bedroom and rushes back. In her hands, she has party favors and hats. “Here ya go!”

She reaches forward, her heels nearly putting her eye to eye with me, and places a top hat on my head. The year is written across it in gold glitter. Then

she gives me a noisemaker and places a crown on hers.

“Now we can go?”

“Not quite,” she tells me, wrapping her arms around my neck. “I have a secret to tell you.”

I meet her gaze, unable to predict what she’s going to say.

With raised brows, I lean forward and kiss her. “Tell me.”

“Actually, I want you to guess.”

I chuckle. “You know I’m bad at this game. At least give me a hint?”

“It’s a dream come true,” she says.

I search her face, trying to read her. “Are you pregnant?” I whisper.

Her face softens. “No. My birth control is good, silly. But that was sweet and made my ovaries flutter. God, I love you.”

“I love you more,” I say as she gently kisses me.

“I submitted your book to an agent.”

My mouth falls open. “Babe, what?”

She’s grinning wide, happiness radiating from her. “Yes, she wants to have a talk with you next week. Like, she’s super interested. Said it was the best thing she’s read in a very long time and she’s offering representation. Hold on, let me show you.”

Kinsley grabs her laptop and opens her email. “Here, read it for yourself.”

I quickly scan the message, and I’m so elated. “I’m dreamin’, right? She said it could potentially go to auction. I’m speechless. Sweetheart, I didn’t even know you’d submitted it.” I kiss her, then spin her around and start dancing.

She’s laughing. “So you’re not mad?”

“No, babe. Thank you. This is the best news.”

She wraps her arms around my neck and hugs me tight. “You deserve the world, Hayden. Dreams are coming true.”

“They already have. I’ve got you.” I boop her nose. “Everything else is a bonus.”

I kiss her again and again until we nearly lose track of time. “Oh, I forgot to tell you. Mr. Anderson mentioned me gettin’ my Dear Kinsley column if my final article about the bookstore does great in February.”

“That’s amazin’, sweetheart! I guarantee you it will be incredible.” I kiss her neck and nibble on her earlobe.

“Shit, we gotta go,” Kinsley urges with a smile. “But I’m excited I’ll be datin’ a famous bestselling author.”

“Datin’? We’ll be married, baby.”

She wiggles her fingers. “This is what we call manifestin’.”

“You’re adorable. I guess we better get outta here.” I lead the way to the car and open the door for her. She slides in, and I shut it before going to the driver’s side.

“Damn, you smell good. Good enough to eat,” I tell her. It’s a sweet scent, almost like gardenias.

“Fenix gave me this body spray she’s been working on. All organic with no harsh chemicals. I told her she needed to start an online shop. She even started making body butter.”

“Does she make it for men?”

Kinsley snickers. “No, but that’s an idea. Might suggest that when I see her tonight.”

We pull up to the ranch, and it’s packed. I glance at Kinsley. “It was invite only?”

“Yeah, it was. We should know everyone inside. But see, this is why I wanted to come early. Otherwise, we’d be parkin’ in the boonies, and you’d have to carry me the whole way. These heels and gravel are no bueno,” she says.

“I’d do it, too,” I admit. We find a place to park close to the front.

“It’s our lucky day!” Kinsley does a fist pump. Her eyelids sparkle with each blink.

We get out laughing. I place my hand on the small of her back as we walk up the steps. The bass of the music bumps, and a smile meets my lips. I can’t believe this is my life, and I get to spend it with the woman I love.

Summer rushes us with champagne flutes as soon as she spots us. “These are for the happy couple.”

“Thanks, babe. This upcoming year is ours,” Kinsley tells her, hugging her tight. Summer’s already a little tipsy.

There’s a DJ booth in the corner of the room taking suggestions. When Remi enters, she rushes back to the small bar area she has set up and greets her the same way.

Kinsley looks around, sipping the champagne. “The energy in the room is amazin’. Feels light and fluffy.”

“It does.”

Kinsley greets everyone by name and compliments them as she passes. It’s one thing I appreciate about her. She can find the good in anyone and

isn't afraid to be kind. It's helped her with her career at the newspaper, and it's why she's so loved around town. Something about the way she makes people feel important is special.

As she chats, I admire her little quirks, like how her nose scrunches when someone says something almost funny. When she finds Fenix, she's overly excited for me to pitch my idea.

"Man smells," I say like a caveman.

Fenix laughs out loud. "Oh gosh, I had no idea what you were talkin' about. I get it now. I've been working on some shaving cream, trying to get the consistency right. Want to be a test subject?"

"Sure, I'd love to. However, Kins loves the scruff."

She giggles and grabs my hand, squeezing it. "That's true."

When I see Beckett, he waves me down. I excuse myself as Kinsley chats with Remi and Fenix, then make my way across the room, where Beckett's eating a few pretzels.

"Did you bring it?" I ask, and he gives me a nod. He slips it into my hand, and I drop it into my pocket. "Thanks, man."

"Anytime. Wasn't easy hidin' it. So..." He pops a pretzel into his mouth. "How do you think tonight is gonna go down? You're not nervous, are you?"

"Nah. It's gonna be a trip."

He smirks. "Lookin' forward to it."

"Are y'all talkin' about drugs?" Harrison asks.

"Shut up," Beckett tells him, then turns back to me. "Ya nervous?" He pulls a flask from the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

I take a swig and hand it back to him, then scan the room, noticing all the familiar faces. Some people I know, others are either older or younger than me, but most are locals.

He pats me on the back. "I'm rootin' for ya, man."

"Thanks," I tell him, then I return to Kinsley. I run my hand across the small of her back as I pass her. We continue walking around, chatting and drinking, and when the party is in full force, I decide it's time.

I lean in and whisper in Kinsley's ear. "I'll be right back."

She gives me a nod as she talks about how amazing it was to spend Christmas with her family with Grace. The DJ takes off his headphones when I approach him.

"You ready?" he asks. When I nod, he hands me the microphone and turns down the music.

“Attention, everyone. Hello? Nod your head if you can hear me.”

All the bodies in the room turn to face me, but the only person I see is Kinsley.

“Okay, great. Hi. I’m Hayden.”

“Hi, Hayden!” Beckett yells from across the room.

I shake my head. “Do you see that woman right there? Kinsley, raise your hand.”

She gives me a look, playing along and raising her hand. Right now, I’m so damn thankful the microphone is wireless because it allows me to walk toward her.

“She is the most caring, beautiful woman I’ve ever had the pleasure of calling my girlfriend. Yes, she may charge her crystals by moonlight and probably has one tucked somewhere on her body at this very moment. Yes, she may know all the tea that’s in town, but it comes with her position at the newspaper. This woman has given me a second chance at happiness, and I want everyone here to know how much I love her.”

Awws fill the room. She grins and blows kisses my way. Everyone yells and applauds, but when I drop to one knee, the space falls quiet and Kinsley’s jaw falls to the ground.

“Kinsley Valentine. I can never thank you enough for being you and accepting me how I am. I know what life is like living without you—it’s hell. And I don’t wanna go back there ever again. Hades and Persephone were made for each other, and I know for a damn fact you were made for me. I love you with all my heart, forever and always. Will you marry me?”

EPILOGUE

KINSLEY

I look at Hayden, down on one knee and holding the black box in his hand. When I glance inside, I see the mood ring that I got from the fair when I was fifteen. I gasp.

“Is this my...?”

He chuckles and nods as I cover my hand with my mouth. “I kept it all these years.”

My brothers and sisters hold cell phones, recording. My heart races, and I imagine waking up to this gorgeous man every single day and loving him with all my heart until I take my last breath.

“Kins?” Hayden says, stealing my attention back as my emotions take over.

“Yes. Yes, oh my God.” Tears spill down my cheeks as he slides the mood ring onto my pointer finger, where I used to always wear it.

Then I laugh and nearly cry as he proceeds to place a beautiful princess-cut diamond on my ring finger. When he stands, I wrap my arms around him, sliding my tongue into his mouth.

“Get a room!” Harrison hollers as the crowd *hoorays*.

Everyone in the room disappears as I hold his cheeks, kissing him, telling him how much I love him. His sister gives me a tight hug and tells us congratulations. For the next few hours, people chat with us, look at the ring, and squeeze me as tightly as possible. I’m all smiles, happy that my dreams have come to fruition.

I lead Hayden to the center of the room, where several people dance. Harrison twirls Grace around, and she’s laughing. They look so damn good together. Beckett and Summer sway beside us.

Hayden holds me close to his chest and whispers in my ear. “I love you so much.”

The smooth jazz plays in the background, and I try to live in the moment, in the right now, enjoying being on cloud nine.

“I love you, too,” I tell him, nibbling on his earlobe. “Oh, I manifested this, too.” I suck on his neck, not leaving a hickey but contemplating it.

His fingertips press into me, and I feel him growing hard. We’re insatiable for each other, never able to get enough.

At the beginning of the year, I was in a completely different place—single, going on dates, searching for the type of love I’d never be able to find in someone else. A part of me fears that I may have settled if I’d found a nice guy, but I’d never have been complete. The song ends, and the music stops.

Summer eventually takes the microphone. “Listen up, everyone! Listen up! We have two minutes until midnight. Grab your champagne and your kissing partner, and get ready to welcome in the new year surrounded by friends and family!”

People try to navigate through the space. When I get bumped into for the umpteenth time, I grab Hayden’s hand.

“I’ll be right back. Gonna get us some bubbly,” he says.

Harrison turns on the large television in the sitting area of the B&B and puts on the news coverage from Times Square. I’m pretty sure my smile is permanent as I scan the room. I look down at the mood ring on my finger, which is deep purple—passion. It makes me chuckle.

I twist the diamond around while dreaming about our future together. Everything happens for a reason. I’m grateful we found our way back to each other.

Summer is wasted, laughing as she holds the microphone while watching the clock. Beckett stands close, keeping his arm firmly around her so she doesn’t fall over. “Sixty seconds!”

Hayden returns with new glasses. He sets them down on the bookshelf beside us and grabs my hand.

“Ten. Nine. Eight,” we yell together, keeping intense eye contact.

“Three. Two. One. Happy New Year!” Summer says, then drops the mic as Beckett’s mouth crashes into hers.

Hayden’s lips find mine, and our tongues twist together. We’re greedy, hungry, and desperate for each other as “Auld Lang Syne” blares. Half the people sing, holding up their flutes, while the other half are too busy making

out.

“Happy New Year, fiancée,” he says.

“Happy New Year, babe. You surprised me.” It’s so loud I can barely hear him.

I grab my glass of champagne, and he swipes his. Lifting a brow, I lead him through the crowd and up the stairs. I need him so damn bad I can’t wait any longer. Summer told me no guests were staying at the B&B tonight because she reserved it for this. When we’re at the top of the stairs, Hayden’s lips slam against mine. I pull him toward one of the rooms.

“Fuck,” he hisses, grabbing my ass as I push the door open. When he flicks on the light, I gasp when I make eye contact with a half-naked Harrison with someone.

He sits up with swollen lips, looking guilty as the girl sits upright.

“Sorry,” I singsong as I flick the light off. I pull Hayden out of the room and slam the door shut.

We stare at each other, not saying a word. I open my mouth and then close it, trying to process what I witnessed. I’m positive I saw my brother making out with...

“Am I imaginin’ things?” I whisper, pinching myself.

He shakes his head. “Definitely not. I don’t even know what to say.”

“Me neither,” I admit, shocked.

“You wanna get outta here, future wifey?”

I laugh. “Yes, I do, future hubby and bestselling author.”

As we make our way to the stairs, Summer and Beckett walk up toward us.

“Ooh la la, where have you two been?” Summer waggles her brows.

I smirk. “Where are you two goin’?”

“None ya business,” Beckett tells me, and I watch him palm Summer’s ass.

“Um, don’t go into that room.” I point at the one we awkwardly left.

Summer giggles. “Who’s in there?”

I shake my head.

“Oh, come on, spill the tea, Kins. Or I’m gonna bust up in there and find out for myself.”

“Shh.” Beckett holds his finger over his mouth because she’s being loud. Sometimes when she drinks, she gets like this.

Summer looks at Hayden with her eyebrows raised. “Will you tell me?”

He glances at me, then shakes his head. “My lips are sealed.”

I set my hand on Summer’s shoulder. “You have to promise you won’t go look, and you won’t say shit.”

She nods her head once and holds out her pinkie. “I pinkie swear.”

I hook my finger with hers, and we seal it with a shake.

“Harrison,” I whisper, which isn’t surprising to anyone. Then I clear my throat. “And Grace.”

Beckett and Summer both gasp.

Want more of Hayden and Kinsley?

I wrote an exclusive bonus scene just for you!

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Want to find out what happens with Harrison and his best friend, Grace?

Continue their story in

[BUTTER MY BISCUIT.](#)

BUTTER MY BISCUIT

Harrison Valentine is the cowboy hero of *every* woman's fantasy.

He's funny, smart, and so damn sexy that he can have anyone he wants. And as his bestie, I've watched him collect phone numbers like postage stamps.

Friends are all we've ever been because he's a Southern playboy with commitment issues. I'd never survive him breaking my heart, which is one of many reasons we've never crossed the line.

But sparks flew when the clock struck midnight on New Year's Eve, and he slid his perfect lips against mine. Pretending I felt nothing is the fastest way out of this predicament, so I bury my emotions...and pray he's not the death of me.

Losing my friendship with Harrison would be my biggest regret. But having him as my lover is no longer an option, especially *now* that he's *engaged*.

GRAB YOUR COPY TODAY

Butter My Biscuit is a childhood friends-to-lovers, small-town Southern romance with steaminess that will keep readers turning the page. This book features a plus-size heroine and a cowboy hero with a big heart. Each book in the Valentine Texas series is a stand-alone with a happily ever after. This book is a slow burn, but the spice is worth the wait! Fade to black and cheating are not included.

AUTHORS NOTE

Spill the Sweet Tea is my fifty-third book published. And let me tell you...it was magic to work on! Sometimes books are a struggle, and it's like bleeding on the page, but this one seemed to write itself. The characters were always so vivid in my head.

A year ago, I would've never thought I'd be publishing under Lyra Parish again. The last three years have been the twilight zone for me, TBH. But like Kinsley, I keep telling myself that everything happens for a reason. The universe is showing me how good it gets.

I appreciate all the new readers who have discovered my books, and who constantly message/tag me on IG and ask about the Valentine Series. My heart is whole. I'm living my dream life, and that's thanks to some hefty manifesting and you guys.

Now, I know there is a lot of woo-woo in this book, and my friends tend to make fun of me when I'm woo. However, I don't care. I love my crystals and tarot cards. Mood rings were also my jam, too. In every book I've ever written, there is a sliver of myself in there. I'm honored to be able to share authentic moments of my life with you.

Bless Your Heart blew past my expectations, and I know we've just gotten started with this series. Spill the Sweet Tea will, too! I cannot wait for you to read about Harrison and Grace and for you to meet the rest of the Valentines. Woohoo! Hope you enjoyed it!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is gonna be quick, so let's go! Super big thank you to Rachel Brookes for loving Kinsley and Hayden as much as I do. It seriously means the world to me. Thanks to my hubby, Will Young/Deep Sky Dude, for always lending an ear and pretending to care when I talk about my characters. Love you. Romance is still alive, y'all!

Thank you to my INCREDIBLE team: Dee Garcia at Black Widow Designs for creating a special edition cover that seems way too cute to be mine, and to Wander Aguiar for taking the perfect picture of Andrew. Thanks to my editors and proofreaders: Amanda Cuff, Jenny Sims, and Rosa Sharon. Thanks to Candi Kane PR for helping promo Spill the Sweet Tea and for always being so kind! Thank you to Brittney Cottingham, my lovely audiobook producer who keeps me on schedule, and the rest of the team at Lyric. Also, a big thank you to my narrators, Vanessa Edwin and Aaron Shedlock.

Also, super big gigantic thanks to all the readers, bookstagrammers, booktokers, bookfluencers, and to the cool kids who hang out in my reader group! Your willingness and creative ways that you share my books always blows me away. I love y'all so much and appreciate every second you spend reading my words. Life is precious, and I know how valuable time is. I hope I at least made you laugh once.

Now, I'll end this with a big umbrella thank you to everyone who has continued to stand by my side throughout this season in my literary life. I appreciate your enthusiasm and support so dang much. Let's do this!

KEEP IN TOUCH

Want to stay up to date with all things Lyra Parish? Make sure to join her newsletter. You'll get special access to cover reveals, teasers, and giveaways.

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ABOUT LYRA PARISH



Lyra Parish is a hopeless romantic who enjoys creating characters who eventually find love. She likes to write Texas small-town romances (because she's a fifth-generation Texan) and romantic suspense. When she isn't immersed in fictional worlds, you can find her on YouTube chatting about her self-publishing journey or podcasting about romance books. Lyra's a Virgo who loves coffee, the great outdoors, authentic people, and living her best life with her hubby. You may or may not know her from when she co-wrote under the USA Today Bestselling pen name Kennedy Fox.